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TELEVISION REVIEW

'Heavy Load'

Three of the band's five members have disabilities, but it's the rock that matters.

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"Heavy Load," which gets its American television premiere at 10 tonight on IFC, tells the story of a band from the south of England, three of whose five members have learning disabilities. (The other two had worked as support staff.) Subtitled "A Film About Happiness," it's framed by director Jerry Rothwell's own midlife and career crisis; the band members seemed to him the embodiment of pure joy, of the pleasure that had gone out of his own work. Rothwell -- who looks like irascible TV chef Gordon Ramsay with a dye job but does not share his disposition -- has made as lovely a film about a punk band as will ever be made.

When Rothwell met Heavy Load, they had already been playing for nine years, and "legend had it that their music had neither improved nor deteriorated in all that time." (They are utterly shambolic but not significantly worse than some of the groups I paid money to see back in the old local punk rock days or some of the music I have made myself.) They were playing primarily at events that targeted the disabled community, and it's probably not entirely coincidental that the presence of a camera in their lives impelled them to try mainstream gigs, record an album, write their own songs (instead of the three-chord covers in which they specialized) and become politically active. (The band spearheaded a "Stay Up Late" campaign, to encourage later scheduling of nights out for people dependent on support staff.)

In the course of the film, which benefits at every turn from Stephanie Hardt's gorgeous cinematography, the band visits EMI Records for permission to record a Kylie Minogue cover for a fundraising single (and gets a personal response); meets with government officials; and plays its first rock festival, Wychwood, alongside the likes of the Levellers, Badly Drawn Boy and Robyn Hitchcock. (The group did well enough there to be asked back this year.) They also experience new interpersonal stresses and come close to breaking up; Rothwell, romanticizing a little, wonders whether his attentions are to blame.

Like all good bands, Heavy Load is the sum of its mixed personalities. Rhythm guitarist Jimmy is the Quiet One, a nature lover and gardener; singer Simon is the group's raucous id. The most conflicted, articulate and ambitious disabled member of Heavy Load is Michael -- who goes through a midlife crisis of his own, to the point of losing his love for the drums, and becomes the film's dramatic focus. He's the group's Deep Thinker, "a straightforward, serious man" as he describes himself. Clearly he is: If "Heavy Load" has any point in particular to make about the disabled, it's that, whatever degree of assistance they need to get through a day, they live in the same world and culture as everyone else, and make their own peace with it.

And yet, while the disabilities of some of the characters are what make this distinct from other rockumentaries, at bottom it's the story of any and every band. Anyone who has ever played in one will recognize these dynamics, from the discrepancies in ability and taste to how seriously each member takes the project, the exhilaration when it works and the pain when it doesn't, and how ambition can fuel discontent. What's clear is that the band is not something the non-disabled members -- bassist Paul and guitarist Mick, who is the more experienced and keeps the music together -- "do for" the disabled members. They all get the same things from it, the heightening of life that comes from standing on a stage making a loud noise. "In my head, you know, we're a great rock band," says Paul.

In the end this really is a film about happiness, the ways it's there for the asking, and the ways in which it must be earned.

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