

On Screen



The Elephant 6 collective, Athens, Georgia, 1988

Films & DVDs

The Elephant 6 Recording Co CB Stockfleth (Director)

Greenwich Entertainment 2023, 92 mins

There was another New Weird America taking shape at the end of the 1990s. While musicians up the East Coast were reanimating old time cosmic music, in Athens, Georgia a bunch of dropouts, record heads and studio nerds retreated into a private world of psychedelic pop. The two movements had much in common: an embrace of experimentation in the wake of corporate rock, preference for analogue recording, scholarly concern for record shop knowledge, love of free jazz and drone, and an apolitical disengagement from Fukuyama's triumphant America. But the Anglophilia (particularly for The Beatles) and embrace of the childhood imagination in the South was all their own.

From the mid-1990s to the early 2000s, the old home of REM, Pylon and The B-52's saw a new wave of albums, collaborations, happenings and bands blurring the line between the real and the imaginary, all taking place under the umbrella of The Elephant 6 Recording Company. As CB Stockfleth's long-gestating film details, a group of artists came together around Robert Schneider, Jeff Mangum, Bill Doss and Will Hart after they had relocated from Ruston, Louisiana in search of a cost-effective place to play gigs. They became not merely friends but constant companions: bands lived communally in 100 year old houses, and at one point in Schneider and

Mangum's relationship, they talked together in their sleep from their adjacent rooms. Any history of Elephant 6 is unavoidably a chronicle of kinship and shared lives.

Early in the documentary, the interviewer asks why so many Elephant 6 groups used four-track recorders. "Because it sounds like this," replies Doss, as a chewed-up mass of ghostly voices spews from the speakers. Part of the mystery of Elephant 6 was how personalities dissolved into the whole. Groups such as The Olivia Tremor Control, Apples In Stereo and Neutral Milk Hotel shared members who also shared instruments, and recordings made by one artist would sometimes emerge years later buried in the background of someone else's album. Fold in the use of tape collage and the Burroughs-inspired cut-up lyrics found on The Olivia Tremor Control's *Music From The Unrealized Film Script: Dusk At Cubist Castle and Black Foliage: Animation Music Volume One*, and Elephant 6 could seem like an ongoing social experiment in dissolution of the self, Brian Wilson's *Smile* as a way of life.

The tangled lives of the Elephant 6 crew, and their private jokes and personal mythologies, have made their story hard to tell from the outside. But they documented themselves with the zeal of teenage diarists, making Stockfleth's film a valuable window into a previously hidden world. We see Polaroids of squalid shared houses and videos of communal potlucks intended to "get starving musicians fed", as Scott Spillane of *The Gerbils* puts it. Julian Koster of *The Music Tapes* tells how a hallucinatory daydream

of a human-sized percussive metronome became magically real when someone made it for him. Perhaps most strikingly, there's video footage and recordings of Elephant 6's little known all-female performance art group Dixie Blood Moustache, who contact-miked domestic appliances and held their own tape-splicing parties.

The film expertly chronicles this era of experimentation, but it underlines how the carefree 1990s feels a long way away. Elephant 6 artists looked inward for fulfillment and wisdom, through psychedelics and the childhood imagination, but dropping out is not an option available to all. The way the social fabric of the US has frayed in the new millennium underlines how such freedoms could sometimes be taken for granted.

The cultural impact of Elephant 6 dwarfed its sporadic commercial hits. Mangum stepped away from the limelight after the word of mouth success of Neutral Milk Hotel's *In The Aeroplane Over The Sea*; Doss died suddenly in 2012; Hart has suffered health problems and struggled to keep his art in the public eye. Meanwhile, Animal Collective took on Elephant 6's mantle of naive psychedelia, and indie rock as a whole entered a new phrase of self-absorption.

But the Elephant 6 story has uncanny echoes of Los Angeles Free Music Society's celebration of the teenage imagination two decades previously, and for a brief period in Athens, it seemed like anything was possible. All senses were open in this late, great explosion of lo-fi psychedelia.

Derek Walmsley