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Revenge of the Mekons

a film by Joe Angio

95 min., 2013

Rated TBD

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Music Box Films Marketing & Publicity

Brian Andreotti: bandreotti@musicboxfilms.com

Rebecca Gordon: rgordon@musicboxfilms.com

312-508-5361/ 312-508-5362

Distribution Contact:

Andrew Carlin

acarlin@musicboxfilms.com

312-508-5360

NY Publicity

Adam Walker

Film Forum

212-627-2035

adam@filmforum.org

SYNOPSIS

REVENGE OF THE MEKONS chronicles the unlikely career of the genre-defying collective notorious for being—as rock critic Greil Marcus notes—“the band that took punk ideology most seriously.” Born out of the 1977 British punk scene, the Mekons progressed from a group of socialist art students with no musical skills to the prolific, raucous progeny of Hank Williams. Joe Angio’s exuberant documentary follows their improbable history – a surprising and influential embrace of folk and country music; forays into the art world (collaborations with Vito Acconci and Kathy Acker); and consistent bad luck with major record labels. Among the celebrated fans who appear on screen to testify to the power of their music and artistic innovations are authors Jonathan Franzen (*The Corrections*) and Luc Sante (*Low Life*), musician/actor Will Oldham, film director Mary Harron (*I SHOT ANDY WARHOL*), comedian/ musician Fred Armisen (*Portlandia*), and critic Greil Marcus (*Mystery Train*). REVENGE OF THE MEKONS reveals how, four decades into an ever-evolving career, punk’s reigning contrarians continue to make bold, unpredictable music while staying true to the punk ethos.

ABOUT THE FILM

Keeping a collective together for 37 years is difficult under any circumstances, more so when the endeavor won’t even pay the bills and its eight members are scattered across six cities on three continents. Toss in a history of miserable fortune with record labels—fueled in part by the band’s own mistrust and rejection of the music industry—and almost comical bad luck, it’s a wonder that the Mekons have persevered. How they’ve managed to do so—and why they bother to carry on—are the questions that drive REVENGE OF THE MEKONS.

Near the film’s outset, on the first stop of a recent U.K. tour, the band learns—on stage—from an audience member that the following night’s gig has been canceled. They respond with the kind of improvisatory, self-deprecating wit that Mekons fans have come to regard as much as the music itself. “Perhaps it’s sold out,” yells a voice from the crowd. “*Sold out* is a term that never comes into our lives,” replies singer SALLY TIMMS, the double entendre cutting sharp as a blade. The band’s response to setbacks such as this reveals the collaborative process that underscores the film’s primary themes of community and collectivism, notions borne from the Mekons’ punk-rock inception as politically engaged socialists.

Rewinding to Leeds, 1977, the film establishes its twin structural tracks: interspersing original vérité footage shot on three continents between 2008 and 2012 with interviews and archival footage that explore the band’s history within the socio-political milieu of Thatcher-era England. We learn how neo-Nazi mobs clashed with left-wing groups from the University of Leeds, home to future members of the Mekons and their friends and art-department classmates from Gang of Four. Inspired by the DIY attitude of the Sex Pistols—and undaunted by their own conspicuous lack of musical ability—the Mekons made an instant splash. Signed to a record contract after their second gig, their first single, “Never Been in a Riot,” was a sly riposte to the Clash’s “White Riot,” and immediately marked the Mekons as a band that had no use for punk orthodoxy. When that record was named Single of the Week by *NME*, it prompted one admiring journalist—better known today as the filmmaker MARY HARRON—to write an article extolling the band’s “spontaneous amateurism.” In a tone of amused bewilderment—she can’t believe she’s still talking about the Mekons more than three decades later—Harron poses the now compelling question that seemed ludicrous at the crux of their semi-fabled history: “How do you have an amateur band as a career?”

Cofounder and singer/guitarist JON LANGFORD provides a clue when he tells a radio interviewer, recalling a time when the band was routinely ignored after the initial furor over punk rock had subsided, “We were universally hated and derided, so we thought we’d have our revenge on the world.” But the answer is more complex than that. By retracing the band’s wildly improbable history—its early embrace of traditional English folk music; its reinvention as a country-influenced band to support striking miners; its forays into the art world, including

collaborations with VITO ACCONCI and KATHY ACKER; its recurring bad fortune with major record labels; and the band's restless exploration of diverse musical genres—we understand how and why this band grew to be so admired by fans and critics. Along the way, we come to know what it truly means to be an artist in a culture debased by materialism, selfishness and greed.

Original footage of the Mekons living together while they compose songs for their new album reveals the group's unique collaborative process. Unlike most bands, in which one or two songwriters provide the material, the Mekons are proudly leaderless. Scenes ranging from the quotidian (the octet taking a break to prepare and eat dinner together) to the ineffable (when we witness each member's organic contributions to the creation of new music) speak to a social responsibility that begins at home. It's a captivating window into the working methods of a band unlike any other.

The Mekons long ago stopped playing punk-rock music but, as the film shows, they've stayed true to the punk ethos: to create something of value and that has meaning, without compromising your ideals. The band members' lives outside the Mekons underscore this point. Violinist SUSIE HONEYMAN makes a case for the value of older artists—in a culture that's obsessed with the "new and emerging"—by drawing parallels between the Mekons and the artists she exhibits at her Grey Gallery in London. We accompany multi-instrumentalist LU EDMONDS to Tajikistan, where he spearheads the construction of a low-budget recording studio for third-world musicians in Dushanbe. And we witness the boundless creative energy of Jon Langford: painting in his studio, greeting visitors at his art opening, hosting his Chicago radio show, performing at benefit concerts with his numerous side bands. The Mekons may be avowedly leaderless, but Langford proves to be the engine that keeps the train running.

As befits a group that remains fiercely committed not only to its art but also to each other, the film reaches a stirring conclusion: the eight Mekons affirming their vows to one another during a pagan wedding ceremony at a stone circle in the English Lake District. Part alt-history lesson, part reflection on the role of artists in society, REVENGE OF THE MEKONS is an intimate, revealing and entertaining portrait of a one-of-a-kind group—with killer music, to boot!

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

I'm drawn to artists who work on the fringes, whose work is not tailored to or compromised by prevailing trends or the dictates of "the market." Melvin Van Peebles, the revolutionary filmmaker and Renaissance man who was the subject of my previous film, *How to Eat Your Watermelon in White Company (and Enjoy It)*, certainly fits this bill. So, too, do the Mekons, a band that continues to confound over the course of its unlikely and unpredictable 37-year career.

Yet it was only during the early stages of pre-production on REVENGE OF THE MEKONS that the affinity of these two films became apparent. As I often do when I'm devouring the music of a particular artist, I consulted the indispensable *Trouser Press Record Review Guide* to read about the records I was listening to. I'd read the entry on the Mekons, written by *Chicago Tribune* critic Greg Kot, countless times, but this time a passage jumped out at me: "The Mekons have continued to put out records of bewildering variety, erratic musical quality and enormous heart. These function almost without exception as a critique of power and the abuse of power—whether in government, the record industry or, less frequently, the bedroom." That's when it hit me: This statement could just as easily have been describing Melvin Van Peebles!

The more I thought about this description of the Mekons, the more I realized that this film would engage many of the thematic concerns that interest me: artists who create work on their terms, who remain committed to their values, and who persevere almost in spite of themselves. We see lots of films documenting the lives of the so-called winners. I'm more interested in those who elect to forego the limelight and personal fortune. By focusing on artists who create singular, socially responsible work that stands the test of time I aim not only to introduce them to a wider audience, but also to inspire viewers by their lives and work.

—Joe Angio, September 2013

BIOS

Joe Angio, producer-director:

Joe Angio is an award-winning documentary filmmaker and magazine editor. His previous film, *How to Eat Your Watermelon in White Company (and Enjoy It)* (2005), screened at numerous international film festivals, including Tribeca, Los Angeles, Chicago, Melbourne and the Biografilm (Bologna) Festival, where it received both the Jury and Audience awards for best film. Angio also co-produced and -directed (with Joel Cohen) the short docs *More than a Game* (1991; SnagFilms) and *A Feast of Fools* (1987).

He is the former editor-in-chief of *Time Out New York* magazine, nominated for three National Magazine Awards by the American Society of Magazine Editors and awarded a gold medal for cover design by the Society of Publication Designers. Prior to *Time Out*, Angio was the articles editor at *NBA Inside Stuff* (1996–98), the managing editor of *Vibe* (1995–96), and an associate editor at *Men's Journal* (1993–95).

Angio was born in Chicago and graduated from Marquette University. He lives in Brooklyn, NY.

Jessica Wolfson, co-producer:

Wolfson is a producer of many acclaimed documentary films and series. *Radio Unnameable* (Kino Lorber), which she co-directed with her husband, Paul Lovelace, won a special jury award at the 2012 Sarasota Film Festival and is currently screening throughout the U.S. Wolfson also produced *A Girl and a Gun* (DOC NYC, 2012), *Trust Us, This Is All Made Up* (SXSW, 2009) and co-produced *Crazy Sexy Cancer* (TLC, 2007). In 2008, she produced and directed the award-winning Web series *Girltalk*.

At IFC Original Programming, Wolfson developed and produced the documentaries *This Film Is Not Yet Rated*, *Wanderlust* and *The Bridge*, as well as the series *Greg the Bunny* and *Dinner for Five*, which was nominated for an Emmy in 2005.

Jane Rizzo, editor:

An editor of both fiction and documentary features, Rizzo cut the recent, critically acclaimed Sundance hits *Compliance* (Magnolia Pictures) and *Ain't Them Bodies Saints* (IFC Films). Rizzo's credits include the award-winning films *Great World of Sound* (Magnolia), *How to Eat Your Watermelon in White Company (and Enjoy It)* (IFC), *Road* (Showtime) and *See Girl Run* (Visit Films), along with *Frontrunners* (Oscilloscope), *Henry May Long* and *Silver Jew* (Drag City), all of which screened at film festivals around the world.

Rizzo shared an Emmy award for her work on *Judy Garland: By Myself* ("American Masters;" PBS). Among her TV credits are the "American Masters" production, *Joni Mitchell: Woman of Heart and Mind*; *Tanner on Tanner* (Sundance Channel) and numerous PBS documentaries.

A native of Italy, Rizzo graduated from the North Carolina School of the Arts.

Jean-Louis Schuller, cinematographer: Schuller moves easily between fiction and documentary film and art projects. He is the director of the documentaries *The Road Uphill* and *High/Low* (both from 2011) and *Chungking Dream* (2008). As a cinematographer, Schuller has shot 25 films, including the aforementioned titles and the festival hit *Personal Best* (2012).

Schuller is a native of Luxembourg and received degrees from the Institut des Arts de Diffusion in Brussels, and the National Film and Television School in London, where he resides.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Mekons

JON LANGFORD: cofounder, singer, guitarist. In addition to work with the Mekons, Jon plays in numerous bands, including the Waco Brothers, the Pine Valley Cosmonauts and Wee Hairy Beasties. A respected artist who exhibits internationally, Jon also hosts the popular radio program, "The Eclectic Company" and lives in Chicago.

TOM GREENHALGH: cofounder, singer, guitarist. The father of four young children, Greenhalgh is a visual artist who works in the Department of Work and Pensions in Exeter. He lives in the Devon countryside near Tiverton.

SUSIE HONEYMAN: Violinist. Joined Mekons in 1983. Runs the Grey Gallery with her artist husband Jock McFadyen and lives in London.

SALLY TIMMS: singer and the Mekons' unofficial road manager. Full-time Mekon since 1985, she lives in Chicago.

RICO BELL (ERIC BELLIS): Singer, accordionist. Joined the Mekons in 1985. In addition to a solo career, Eric is a well-regarded visual artist and lives in Los Angeles.

LU EDMONDS: Multi-instrumentalist, singer. Joined the Mekons in 1985. A founding member of the Damned, Lu travels frequently to Central Asia, where he records and archives indigenous folk music in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Lives in London and Kyzyl, Siberia.

STEVE GOULDING: Drummer. Joined the Mekons in 1985. A former member of Graham Parker and the Rumour, Steve was the house drummer for Stiff Records, where he played drums on Elvis Costello's "Watching the Detectives." Lives in New York City.

SARAH CORINA: Bassist. Joined the Mekons in 1992. Also plays bass with Striplight.

Associate Mekons

KEVIN LYCETT: Mekons cofounder Lycett still contributes lyrics and “inspiration” to the band, as well as contributing to the band’s art projects. He lives in Leeds.

MARK “CHALKIE” WHITE: Mekons cofounder and original lead singer who prides himself on possessing “no musical ability whatsoever.” Teaches art and lives in Cranbrook, Kent.

ANDY CORRIGAN: Mekons cofounder and other original lead singer, Corrigan runs a company which provides technical and logistical support for touring bands. Lives in Stowmarket, Suffolk.

ROS ALLEN: Mekons’ original bassist. Left the Mekons to become bass player for Delta 5. A former Disney animator, she currently teaches art at Sunderland University, near her home in Tynemouth.

DICK TAYLOR: Guitarist who played in the Mekons from 1985-1992. Founding member of the Pretty Things and original member of the Rolling Stones. Lives on the Isle of Wight.

ROBERT WORBY: Mekons’ recording engineer and keyboard player, primarily in the 1980s. An electronic composer and sound artist who has collaborated with John Cage, Peter Greenaway and Michael Nyman, Worby hosts the BBC Radio 3 program “Hear and Now.” Lives in London.

Plus (in order of appearance)

GREG KOT: Rock critic for the *Chicago Tribune*.

TERRY NELSON: Chicago radio DJ who introduced the Mekons to country music.

LUC SANTE: Author/historian/journalist. His article, “Getting By and Making Do,” for the *Village Voice* is an oft-quoted analysis of the Mekons and their music. Lives in Kingston, NY.

JONATHAN FRANZEN: Novelist. *The Corrections*, which won the National Book Award, was inspired by music of the Mekons and characters in his latest book, *Freedom*, are based on the Mekons. Lives in NYC.

MARY HARRON: Filmmaker. The director of *I Shot Andy Warhol*, *American Psycho* and *The Notorious Bettie Page*, Harron was a rock critic for *Melody Maker*, where she wrote a seminal article on the Mekons in 1979. Lives in Brooklyn, NY.

HUGO BURNHAM: Drummer, Gang of Four. Lives in Gloucester, MA.

ANDY GILL: Singer, cofounder of Gang of Four. Leeds University art-school classmate of the Mekons. Played drums in first-ever Mekons gig. Lives in London.

BOB LAST: Founder of Fast Records, legendary punk label/art project. Issued Mekons’ first single, which was also the label’s first release. Lives in Scotland.

ROB MILLER & NAN WARSHAW: Cofounders of Chicago’s Bloodshot Records, a country- and roots-inflected label for which Jon Langford releases albums for many of his side projects, including the Waco Brothers. Live in Chicago.

MARTY LENNARTZ: Chicago radio DJ; producer of WXRT’s “The Eclectic Company”

MARY DELANEY: Wife of the Sundowners’ late bassist, Kurt Delaney.

MARK KEMP: Journalist. Former editor of *Option* magazine, where he ran monthly “Mekons Watch” column. Lives in Charlotte, NC.

GREIL MARCUS: Journalist, pop-culture critic. Original music editor of *Rolling Stone* magazine and the author of *Lipstick Traces* and *Mystery Train*, among others. Lives in Berkeley, CA.

PATRICK BRILL: Artist who uses the *nom de plume* Bob & Roberta Smith.

ED ROCHE: Touch and Go Records, Chicago.

THOMAS MASTERS: Chicago gallery-owner who exhibits Jon Langford’s and Rico Bell’s work.

TONY FITZPATRICK: Highly respected Chicago-based artist.

FRED ARMISEN: Comedian. Former *Saturday Night Live* cast member and co-star of *Portlandia*. Former husband of Mekon Sally Timms. Lives in NYC.

CRAIG FINN: Singer/guitarist of the Hold Steady. Finn cites the Mekons’ music and long-standing career as inspirations for his band. Lives in Brooklyn, NY.

WILL OLDHAM: Musician/recording artist. Oldham, who records as Bonnie “Prince” Billy, has performed on stage with the Mekons as well as composing the song, “For the Mekons, et al”. Lives in Louisville, KY.

LOUIS KAHLERT & DENNIS ANDERSON: Better known collectively as “Dennis & Lois,” these Mekons super-fans are a fixture on the NYC concert scene.

VITO ACCONCI: Video-/performance artist; architect. A highly regarded conceptual-art pioneer, Acconci wrote and performed in *Theater Piece for Rock Band*, with the Mekons. Lives in NYC

About Music Box Films

Founded in 2007, Music Box Films is a leading distributor of international, American independent, and documentary content in North America along with the best in international TV series and mini-series.

Releases in 2014 included Roger Michell's LE WEEK-END, written by Hanif Kureishi and starring Jim Broadbent; the Emmy Award winning French-language series "The Returned"; Pawel Pawlikowski's IDA, the official Polish submission to the Academy Awards®; and the Sundance Audience Award-winning documentary THE GREEN PRINCE.

Upcoming releases include award-winning documentary WATCHERS OF THE SKY, Dominik Graf's BELOVED SISTERS, Germany's official submission to the Academy Awards®, and Shlomi and Ronit Elkabetz's GETT: THE TRIAL OF VIVIANE AMSALEM, Israel's official submission to the Academy Awards®.

Music Box Films is independently owned and operated by the Southport Music Box Corporation, which also owns and operates The Music Box Theatre, Chicago's premiere venue for independent and foreign films.