



Scott Walker: 30 Century Man

Jonathan Romney in London 05 November 2006

Dir: Stephen Kijak. UK. 2006. 90mins.

A great enigma of modern music sheds a few layers of opacity in Stephen Kijak's revealing documentary *Scott Walker: 30 Century Man*. With a challenging new record recently issued, the reclusive, sporadically active American-born singer is seen at close quarters, while collaborators and assorted music notables, including executive producer David Bowie, attest to Walker's enduring influence.

Obsessive fans – some of whom have stuck with their hero since the 1960s - will be in clover, while non-initiates will be fascinated by a man for whom the term 'maverick' could well have been invented.

Slated for UK release in early 2007, the film is likely to have modestly healthy theatrical life, although Walker's obscurity in his own country may cloud US prospects. A must for the festival circuit, the film should also flourish on DVD, with a promised plethora of extra interview footage attached.

Narrated by Sara Kestelman, the film follows Ohio native Walker, born Scott Engel, from his early days – photos show him as a 14-year-old aspiring bobbysoxer idol in 1958 – through his stint with crooning trio the Walker Brothers, whose career in the mid-1960s made the band UK idols on a par with The Beatles.

When their grandiose balladeering - built around Walker's dramatic baritone – was eclipsed by psychedelia, Walker launched a solo career, mixing his own distinctive songs with covers of Jacques Brel, then little known in the Anglophone world. After the commercial failure of his ambitious album *Scott 4*, Walker entered a fallow period of inactivity mixed with substandard releases.

Since the early 1980s, however, Walker's solo work has come increasingly close to modern classical music in its sombre, often frightening orchestral impressionism. As well as interviewing his subject, Kijak films him during the

sessions for new record *The Drift*, revealing Walker's painstaking and unusual methods: percussion instruments used include a slapped side of pork. Any suggestion of self-conscious solemnity, however, is undermined by glimpses of Walker's genial good humour.

While his mystique as an invisible man is rivaled only by Howard Hughes and Thomas Pynchon, Walker comes across in interview as an intelligent, serious-minded, lucid and altogether down-to-earth character. Although admirers paint him in exalted colours – he's variously compared here to TS Eliot, Samuel Beckett and Francis Bacon – extracts from Walker's daring and intensely individual music show that the enthusiasm is deserved.

In terms of interviewees, Kijak's thorough approach strikes gold. While the other erstwhile Walker Brothers are notably absent, Kijak tracks down collaborators past and present including Angela Morley, née Wally Stott, Walker's arranger in the 1960s. Admirers featured include Jarvis Cocker, Alison Goldfrapp, Brian Eno, members of Radiohead and even singer Lulu, who admits to having had a crush on Walker in the 1960s, but who looks a little alarmed by his recent work.

Kijak has also unearthed some archive gems, including 1960s footage of Walker performing on BBC variety shows. Recent songs are accompanied by Graham Wood's impressionistic digital animations, which while handsome, inevitably evoke comparisons with hippy-era BBC TV music show *The Old Grey Whistle Test*.

Still missing, however, is an insight into how Walker spent his extended periods of silence, which have lasted up to a decade at a time: as for their causes, the singer himself only makes one discreet passing reference to his "imbibing". But while his reticence precludes too much open self-revelation, Walker emerges as a far saner, more modest figure than many in the music world. Kijak's film may demystify Walker as a man and an artist, but the mystique of his powerful, unnerving music remains intact.