



B.I.K.E., ★★★★★1/2

Directed by Jacob Septimus and Anthony Howard.

Produced by Fredric King.

Documentary. Not yet rated.

Running time: 89 min.

There are documentaries about issues (Michael Moore comes to mind) and documentaries that introduce unknown subcultures (like last year's brilliant hip-hop testament "Rize") and documentaries that are detailed character studies (the rock-themed "Dig" or Terry Zwigoff's "Crumb" are two great examples), but very few movies successfully combine all three. With "B.I.K.E.," filmmakers Jacob Septimus and Anthony Howard have hit the trifecta by creating a film that manages to present a largely unknown movement in terms of vivid real-life characters, and the results are great.

Beginning as an explication of the militant anti-corporate bike protests that have taken root in American cities in the past decade, "B.I.K.E." appears at first to be a typical if stylishly directed leftist rant against big oil and consumer conformity. But gradually, the film reveals a radical subculture within a radical subculture: the tallbiker gangs of New York, who ride double frame bicycles of about six feet in height, and engage in punk rights of heraldry, ritualistically jousting each other on the night-shrouded streets of the city. Heads break, necks crack, drugs are consumed in mass quantities, and the inherent contradictions of radical individualists attempting to maintain a group identity implode, reform and implode yet again, in an absolutely fascinating tour of a modern netherworld.

To document this subculture, the filmmakers had to become a part of it. Co-director Howard goes completely native and builds his life around attempts to join the New York chapter of the Black Label Bicycle Club, widely accepted as kings of the movement thanks to member and "world champion" tallbiker combatant Doyle.

Howard's own life spins out of control over the course of the shoot. His junkie girlfriend deserts him, sending him deeper into his own addictions, and his quest to join Black Label obtains obsessive, self-destructive dimensions.

"B.I.K.E." offsets Howard's harrowing downward spiral against the more calculating Doyle, who emerges as a covert careerist, able to talk about maintaining authenticity while using his celebrity status to assemble his own cult of personality (there's even Doyle merch, including a Doyle rag doll, replete with trademark Ahab whiskers). It's an effective plot device, though it makes a viewer a bit uneasy that Howard, as one of the filmmakers, is also one of the people making the argument that ultimately presents his own messed-up way of life as the more authentic. But "B.I.K.E." doesn't sentimentalize Howard's kamikaze existence; if he symbolizes anything, it's the lost, fumbling, empty quest for values that manifests itself in radical movements like tallbike combat -- the "Fight Club" mentality that it's better to wind up broken and bruised than it is to feel nothing at all.

Like Doyle, "B.I.K.E." is also smart and careerist enough to combine elements of nearly every successful documentary of recent years except "March of the Penguins," ultimately mutating into yet another variation on "Spellbound" by arranging its climax around a major jousting event. Here Tony, who was never admitted into Black Label, introduces his "Happy Fuck Clown Club," a covert tallbike clique of his own which proceeds to dominate the competition, and Doyle reveals his own secret project, a jet-propelled tallbike that is as far from the movement's roots as a rejection of the combustion engine as it could possibly be. It's a somewhat shambolic ending, perhaps because Doyle (who likely assumed his new invention would dominate the evening before Tony's crew showed up) is intelligent enough to realize he's in the process of being had, and he evades the one-on-one combat to the death between himself and Howard that would have been the film's logical climax.

Reaching for a mainstream device to end such a radical journey is a rare misstep though, and it's perhaps fitting that a film with such a dark and troubling but liberated viewpoint ends in ellipsis rather than a period.

- **Ray Greene** | Box Office Magazine

SOMIA

Volume 20.3, April 2006

In slow motion through the fog of grainy night-footage, a girl named Alison races on her bicycle towards another girl as a crowd cheers on the curb in a new documentary called *B.I.K.E.* Predictably, the two collide roughly and are thrown to the blacktop. When the ambulance arrives a few minutes later to load Alison onto a gurney, there is some concern for her safety in the crowd and some cautiously optimistic speculation about her condition intercut with scenes of a raspy singer screaming into a disconnected telephone while strangling himself with the cord.

There's nothing that says "fuck you" to society like becoming obsessive about a totally irrational and dangerous stunt and tying your existence to others who have a similar death wish. Oh right, of course by "death wish" I mean "desire to create political change by jousting with other art-school grads on double tall bicycles helmetless while consuming large quantities of beer and heroin." *B.I.K.E.*, which is about the New York chapter of the Black Label Bike Club (BLBC), might just be destined to be a cult classic for no reason other than the fact that it glorifies the kind of bone-head, adrenaline-rush daredevil stunts that every kid in the suburbs with a skateboard and some angst wants to make their own.

Set against the backdrop of the 2004 Republican Convention in New York City, the film by Anthony Howard and Jacob Septimus a first seems to be about the contentious Critical Mass bike rides and the anti-corporate, anti-consumerist message that many of the bikers espouse. However, it becomes evident that *B.I.K.E.* is a Fight Club-like paean to the stunt-bike-riding members of the BLBC and their punked-out, underground version of courage and family.

"It's easy to be once-removed, to sit in a fucking movie theatre and watch people blowing each other up and killing each other," says one biker in the middle of the film. "It's another thing to put your life on the line. I mean, yeah, enjoying pain is one thing...but it makes you feel alive, it's like sex that way."



B.I.K.E. also depicts a curious underground social dynamic as viewers follow Howard in his own attempts to be admitted to the club and his lapses into drug abuse and a mental breakdown. As we see hierarchies form and dissolve among the members of the club, it becomes evident that politics isn't as important to the bikers as their own social posturing and petty internal dramas.

Finally falling into a trope of traditional storytelling, the film wraps itself together as Howard, rejected by the club, trains a ragtag team of bikers that he dubs the Happy Fuck Clown Club to challenge BLBC, effectively creating a counterculture to what already seems to be the ultimate in countercultures.

"What's more important, the [presidential] election or Bike Kill?" Septimus asks Howard, as the two events approach side by side.

For Howard, the answer is easy. "Bike Kill."

- **David S. Hirschman**

Orlando Sentinel | MOVIES

B.I.K.E.



(4 out of 5 stars)

Now here's a documentary about something most of the world knows nothing about, a slice of sociology arrestingly filmed, daringly cut and vividly revealed.

B.I.K.E. is about the "tall bike" underground, big-city bicycle anarchist/artists who live their lives in near open rebellion against the conventions of auto nation. Mostly white 20somethings in groups like the Black Label Bicycle Club party, create, joust their tall bikes and take no guff off anybody in an SUV or at the 2004 Republican convention.

Filmmakers Jacob Septimus and Anthony Howard show misfits whose bikes are too tall, their love lives too confrontational, their world too Road Warrior-ish for polite society. But darned if they don't look like people with something to believe in. After you've watched these "animalistic" thugs, with their face painting, their tattoos, public urination, uninhibited sex and testosterone-drenched jousts, there is but one conclusion you can come to.

Skateboards are for sissies.

- **Roger Moore** | Sentinel Movie Critic



B.I.K.E.

Directed by Jacob Septimus and Anthony Howard

B.I.K.E. is that rare picture that should appeal to fans of extreme-sports docs and political invective alike. The film documents the leftist counterculture of Black Label, a national hard-core bike collective built on an anti-establishment ethos. The members face off against rival Yber-cycling groups in intense bike-jousting wars, a gladiatorial throwback that also acts as Black Label's initiation routine.

We see the bikers extract scrap metal to build their unique "tall bikes," get their (mostly vegan-approved) food from restaurant dumpsters and hold mass anti-automobile protests on the busy streets of New York. These scenes, so illuminating of an underground society, are interesting, but the movie really finds its calling when turning the camera on Tony Howard, a loose-cannon artist/filmmaker who has been attempting to join Black Label for a year and a half.

Knowing that the film was co-directed by Howard makes its warts-and-all depiction of the fiery antihero that much more admirable. We see him burst into tears on numerous occasions (as when his girlfriend of seven years leaves him for a Brit she met in rehab), and we witness his unfortunate descent into drug addiction and subsequent ascent toward self-actualization by forming his own rival bike gang to confront the group that so often rejected him.

At first, *B.I.K.E.* seems to be about people who are nothing like us, but it's these moments of relatable sincerity that make the film far more than a dissection of a movement. Its central conflict between individual need and group comfort is something we can all understand.

- John Thomason