**Jukka Kärkkäinen and J-P Passi's documentary gets up close and personal with an unusual Finnish four-piece.**

by Neil Young

WROCLAW, POLAND - Unusual subject matter and strong personalities elevate Finnish fly-on-the-wall documentary The Punk Syndrome (Kovasikajuttu), observing a fractious foursome who don't let various degrees of mental disability stop them from rocking out

The engaging debut collaboration by directing duo Jukka Kärkkäinen (2009's The Living Room of the Nation) and J-P Passi (that film's DP) is proving a popular pick at non-fiction and documentary festivals alike, with audiences and juries responding to its no-nonsense treatment of potentially sentimental subject matter.

Its Wroclaw prize in the well-contested Films On Art sidebar followed news that it's been picked up for U.K. distribution in November (Finnish release was May 4). Success along the lines of Sacha Gervasi's well-traveled Anvil! - The Story of Anvil(2008) is indicated, with additional interest from events focusing on disabled and human-rights subjects.

In terms of TV, brief full-frontal male nudity and intermittent strong language might require trimming in certain territories or, preferably, late-evening slots. Bowdlerization would, of course, be entirely at odds with the much-fabled 'punk ethos' which Pertti Kurikan Nimipäivät ("Pertti Kurikka’s Name Day") wholeheartedly embrace.

Pertti himself is the oldest and most ornery of the four, a guitarist and occasional vocalist whose diaries feed directly into his lyrics: "I can release my anger," he notes. He has no shortage of targets for his ire, his songs making clear how much he prizes "dignity, equality and respect" - things not to be taken for granted even in a country like Finland, where provision for the mentally and physically challenged is, as we see here, at a high level.

Specific details about practical arrangements are a little vague in a film which, in classic verité style, eschews commentary and explanatory captions. It seems, however, that some if not all of the band members live in "group homes" and issues of independence and responsibility are a recurring theme.

"I think everyone has the right to make a decision about where and how they would like to live," says swaggeringly charismatic frontman Kari. "That's why I wrote a song about it. I don't want to live in a group home. I don't want to live in an institution."

The most outspoken of the four, Kari is engaged in a simmering personality-clash with bassist Sami, a squabble of unspecified origins. Its rancorous eruptions recall the similar frictions that seemingly bedevil all bands at some stage, from the Rolling Stones down.

Keeping a lower profile - but nevertheless managing to steal all of his scenes - is drummer Toni, an easy-going younger lad with Down Syndrome whose sweet nature and winning smile provide invaluable counterpoint to his more morose and spiky bandmates.

Kärkkäinen and Passi don't break any new formal ground with their style, following the lads as they strut their stuff on stage (including a quick trip to rainy Hamburg, in the footsteps of the Beatles), explore various extracurricular activities, and with the help of caretaker-cum-manager Kalle, work toward the release of their debut album.

Along with editor Riitta Poikselkä, the directors keep the tone generally upbeat and energetic and predictably end on a high note with a triumphant music festival performance. And while the bare bones approach pays dividends, some context-setting and/or external perspectives might have been welcome - it's hard to know how well known the band is becoming in its homeland, for example, or if members have any prospects of turning what's evidently a time-consuming hobby into a potential source of revenue and thus greater independence.

As with the Anvil movie, of course, the international exposure The Punk Syndrome affords will hopefully translate to further success for the outfit. And even if their preferred meat-and-potatoes style won't be to everyone's tastes, the troupe deserve credit and admiration for their Ramones-like adherence to the basics of punk's abrasive sound and uncompromising ideals.