

HUGH HEFNER'S AFTER DARK: SPEAKING OUT IN AMERICA

(dir. Brigitte Berman, 2018 – 101 mins)

Hugh Hefner splits opinion like a Wonderbra cleavage. His perennial two-finger-salute to censorship and lifelong crusade for sexual freedom won him money, power and respect – built on the foundations of launching a dirty magazine. What Hefner's empire culturally represents often leaves me considering where I stand on feminism and structural power, as he veers in and out of my coming-of-age experiences, and Brigitte Berman's documentary *Hugh Hefner's After Dark: Speaking Out in America* brought me to another personal checkpoint, and on-the-fence regarding Hefner's legacy.

I remember buying a vintage copy of *Playboy* magazine for a once-upon-a-time boyfriend. I was trying to be 'the cool girl' with a blasé approach to what I presumed was an innate male need to enjoy the female form. He would buy *Nuts*, and *FHM* and in the way I've always tried to raise the bar of my boyfriends' lifestyle choices, I believed *Playboy* would add a touch of class to the otherwise crass act of objectification.

A vintage copy seemed to legitimise the gratuity. The sepia tones creating a force-field from critique; the ear-marked pages commanded a nostalgic, romanticised respect. The gratitude I received from aforementioned boyfriend, and – full disclosure – the ambiguous enjoyment I got from scrutinising these scantily-clad women, led me to buy a hardcover edition of *Playboy At 50*, complete with some of the publication's most lauded editorial content, including interviews with an array of the most politically-influential people operating throughout the magazine's 50-year run. The book gave porn some great PR. It intellectualised titillation and gave me assurance that willingly shoving naked ladies under my boyfriend's nose was an intelligent thing to do. 'Sure, she's got no clothes on – but turn the page and there's a guy with a PhD who digs recycling!' It was like making a smiley face with a plate of vegetables in the vain hope that your kid eats its greens.

Playboy At 50 trolled through its revolutionary roots of being the first magazine to feature black nudes – and as a woman of colour myself, I gave kudos to this liberal attitude that placed black women in the same arena of sexual appreciation as their Caucasian counterparts. It was an odd thing to be grateful for and another reason I didn't mind giving it to my boyfriend who was otherwise – poor thing – subjected to looking at women who didn't look like me. In-depth interviews with Frank Sinatra, Snoop Dogg, Steve Jobs, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. (who granted writer Alex Haley his longest-ever interview), were the thinking men that sublimated *Playboy's* lecherous core.

I later developed more traditional feminist beliefs, deciding images of women with their tits out stunted female progression when placed under the greasy lens of the male gaze. With this realisation came the ideological quandary of whether women choosing to have their nudity salivated on was a feminist and empowering choice. If a woman decides she wants to wear a bunny tail, then fine. But what about the women who are consequently disrespected when the epidemic of female objectification is normalised? And when socio-economic inequalities leave pornography (and sex work in general) as the sole industry where women make more money than men, is this vocation so aspirational when the work serves to please men?

Feminism was complicated, and as I soul-searched, Hugh Hefner and the legacy I once breezily accepted drew shade. The tight ship of the Playboy Mansion – with its 9pm curfews, regimented group-sex and daily polaroids to ensure the Bunnies maintained an appearance that suited Hefner's taste – didn't much sound like the sexual revolution band I wanted to march in. The Mansion was a glorified rabbit hutch.

But there was more to Hugh Hefner, and like any good documentary I was illuminated to new dimensions of a complicated subject. Berman's film relishes the history of his TV show *Playboy After Dark*. The production, which ran from 1969 – 1970, had Hef inviting us to his house where he happened to be throwing a cocktail-swilling soiree. He would awkwardly shimmy around his cushy pad with a uniform of pretty girls threaded into each elbow. Some of the greatest musicians in the history of American music would jam by the fire, taking time to be interviewed by Hefner about politics or exchange witty jokes. Think *Later With Jools Holland* meets *Love Island*. The show humanised Hefner. *Playboy After Dark* presented the avuncular tycoon as a normal bloke with friends in high places.

And everyone was invited. When TV shows and music venues across the nation were upholding racial segregation laws and banning Sammy Davis Jr. from entering through the same door as his (white) Rat Pack pals, Hefner told him to pull up a chair – not only to sing, but to intellectually yap over cigarettes and liquor. Nina Simone, Geoffrey Holder, Dick Gregory, Smokey Robinson, Sarah Vaughan, Tina Turner, Ray Charles and Sam Cooke were given dimension beyond their musical or comedic talents, and through the Playboy platform, marginalised voices were tuned in and turned up.

"He gave me an opportunity to say all the things I wanted to say about being black, about fairness, integration, about movie stars and Raquel Welch", Jim Brown – NFL star and *100 Rifles* actor who appeared in one of Hollywood's first interracial love scenes – tells the Oscar-winning Berman. Archive footage of Brown casually discussing how "black people will always play a secondary role in America" proves his point, as a young Hefner diligently nods. Brown joins a team of other black American sports stars such as Bill Russell (Celtic Boston All-Star) swapping locker-room chat for discussions on politics and civil rights.

Actor Leon Isaac Kennedy tells Bridget how his mother would call his grandma to say Nat King Cole was going to be on 'the Hefner show' with the same excitement I remember my own household adopting when *The Desmonds* was on. "Where would you see them or hear them other than their music? He brought them alive; [gave them] a human side", states comedian and activist Dick Gregory solemnly.

Again, Hefner's legacy gets complicated, especially for a thoroughbred feminist. Can we ignore his sexism because of his fight for civil rights? Rights built on his terms, which discounted sexual discrimination under the veil of sexual empowerment? We learn a lot about some of the most catapulting figures in the environmental, sexual and free-speaking revolution of the 1970s who, without *After Dark*, would be on a soapbox in the park. But it's hard to concentrate on intellectual banter when a sexy lady wearing a napkin is silently sitting on the stairs, literally caged behind bannisters.

The fact this is Berman's second film to tackle Hefner's influence, her first being *Hugh Hefner: Playboy, Activist and Rebel* (2009), proves it's impossible to capture his controversial buzz in the hive of one film. Maybe there's a third or fourth to be made exploring further alcoves to the tycoon's life and times. Berman has certainly found herself a rich subject matter, exploring it with an impressive amount of material. But consciously or not, one thing *Hugh Hefner's After Dark: Speaking Out in America* does, is re-establish the embodiment of power; what you need to look like to have it, and who you need to control to own it.

- **Corrina Antrobus**