

## SF Film Festival: This is Novem — no, really

By DAVID PRINCE | The New Mexican

December 9, 2006

*Novem; mock rockumentary; 106 minutes; The Film Center; 5:45 p.m. Friday, Dec. 8, and 3:15 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 9*

Part documentary, part music video, part soap opera, part whodunit, and part social commentary, *Novem* is a stunning piece of cinematic sleight of hand.

Working with a slim budget and a cast of unknown — and probably amateur — actors, Brad Kimmel produced and directed this terribly engaging and deadly serious 2005 mockumentary. Unlike *This Is Spinal Tap* or the outrageously bitter Belgian mockumentary *Man Bites Dog*, there are no unspoken jokes between filmmaker and viewer in *Novem*. Indeed, there are precious few jokes of any kind. But the original pop-rock soundtrack that is the movie's centerpiece (and *raison d'être*) should prick up your ears and make you smile.

*Novem's* fictional plot, written by Kimmel and Pat O'Connor, begins in 2004, when an Indiana college student buys a box of old LPs at a yard sale and discovers it also contains reel-to-reel master tapes and 16 mm film footage of a 1973 recording session by a group called *Novem*. Energized by the music and video, the student and his pals research *Novem* and learn that the group's nine members (who belonged to their parents' generation) went to the same university and died in a car wreck shortly after their first, and last, recording session. Broadcast over the campus radio station and posted on the Internet, these "lost" sessions become an overnight, underground sensation. The inevitable lawsuit over ownership of the music and the potential profits is left unresolved at the picture's end.

Kimmel's genius lies in the meticulous way he interweaves these two narrative strands from two different eras. We're drawn in by the archaeological aspect of discovering something from the past and the parade of cleverly drawn cameos of circa-2004 talking heads — the Dennis Hopper-like psychology professor who waxes philosophical about the meaning of the group's name, and the former friends and girlfriends of band members who reminisce about their anti-establishment pasts. But a film like this stands or falls on the quality of its music, and here *Novem* is a definite winner. The songs we hear were written by the people we see singing and playing them — the on-screen names are fictional but actual names flash past as the credits roll — and they are appealing. The music sounds like it really was made 30 years ago. The Beatles are an obvious and unavoidable influence, from the background harmonies to the raspy, Lennon-esque lead vocals on a few tracks. The Band and, to a lesser extent, the Monkees are other influences.

But after a succession of fawning critiques — college DJs saying how "far out" and "timeless" they find the music, music professors noting the advanced harmonies — we might feel we're listening to propaganda or being programmed to love a band we've never heard of. The Web site mentioned in the film, [www.novemsongs.com](http://www.novemsongs.com), perpetuates the film's mythical conceit by insisting the music was made in 1973 by musicians who played and died together. That's a downer, but otherwise, *Novem* leaves you feelin' groovy.