



‘Betty’ Review: Sisterhood of the Traveling Skaterats

HBO’s half-hour series follows the hazy misadventures of an all-female skateboarding crew, and scores a low-key victory for the matriarchy

By **David Fear**



If you’re a girl who hangs around a skatepark, you’re considered a “Betty.” It doesn’t matter if you’re sitting on the sidelines watching, or if you’re actually grinding out there right next to the guys — the malecentric, bro-heavy law of the ollie-friendly concrete jungles dictates that any young woman within proximity

to a skateboard is a Betty. The term is reductive at best, and dismissive and downright sexist at worst. Take a peek at the Urban Dictionary definition of the term, and that should give you an idea of the general attitude. It's not an out-and-out insult. It's not a compliment, either.

Writer-director Crystal Moselle could have named her [HBO](#) show about an all-female skating crew, which starts its six-episode run tonight, anything she wanted; given the project is an extension of her previous collaboration with these real-life Manhattan thrashers, the stellar 2018 indie-sleeper *Skate Kitchen*, you're surprised she didn't just stick with that. (The movie gets its title from the loose XX-chromosome collective these women belong to, and yes, we know it sounds like a high-concept cooking show hosted by Tony Hawk.) And no matter what the series is called, it would be essential viewing for anyone who still believes that the it's-not-TV-it's-HBO notion of alternative viewing and risk-taking didn't die after *Game of Thrones* scorched the premium-cable earth. But the fact she chose that particular handle speaks volumes. She's aiming for a reclamation, a flag planted in the sand. Yes, these young female nonconformists, the freaky ones and the butch ones and the socially awkward ones and the aggro ones — go ahead and call them a Betty. They each have a story worth telling. And they will outskate and out shit-talk every one of you ass-backwards dudes.

A bit of background: A Bay Area native, Moselle had made a name for herself as a documentarian with her 2015 debut *The Wolfpack*. She was on the New York subway when she overheard two teenagers talking, both of whom happened to be part a group of girls who skated together in the Lower East Side. Moselle eventually started to tag along as they roamed downtown and elbowed their way into a boys-club scene. An offer to make a short film as part of an ad campaign led to *That One Day*, a semifictionalized portrait which ended up generating chatter at the Venice Film Festival. The plan was for Moselle to then make a full-length documentary on these women. According to the filmmaker, when she'd mentioned the plan to Sundance's director of programming Kim Yutani, the reply was: Why not do a broader version of the short instead? The result, *Skate Kitchen*, offered a window into the spaces these multiethnic, queer, radical young women inhabit better than any strictly nonfiction account ever could.

Betty replicates the free-form structure, the on-the-fly rawness and the street-level vibe of its predecessor to a tee; it's as much a spiritual sequel as it is a TV spin-off. And while you don't need to have seen *Skate Kitchen* to enjoy the further half-hour adventures of Kirt (Nina Moran), Honeybear (Kabrina "Moonbear" Adams), Camille (Rachelle Vinberg), Janay (Dede Lovelace) and Indigo (Ajani Russell), a previous tour of duty with these young, restless citydwellers will help

get you up to speed. Moselle & co. takes great pride in simply dropping viewers *en media thrash* and without a map into the story, all the better to immerse you in the ladies' insular world.

Maybe "story" is quite the right word for the I-can't-believe-they're-scripted vignettes here; "an ebb and flow of incidents" is more accurate. The first episode kicks off with an attempt to hold a "girls' sesh" at the downtown skate park that never quite happens, and morphs into the gang running around Chinatown looking for a stolen backpack. There are stakes — Camille's phone is in there, and to be a teenager without a phone in 2020 is to be the equivalent of the walking dead — but whether or not they end up retrieving it almost feels like an afterthought. It's more of a chance to hang out with this sisterhood of the traveling skaterats and the various knuckleheads, hustlers, stoners, creeps and fellow boarders hovering on their periphery. Think of it less as a pilot and more of a meet-and-greet marinating in weed smoke.

Shit happens, kind of, over the quintet of eps that follow: romantic connections sometimes spark up, sometimes sputter. A #MeToo accusation regarding an ally leads to processing a personal trauma. Good guys turn out to be not so good, bad guys turn out to be surprisingly sweet and sympathetic, and one dude who seems to potentially be a manipulative douchebag confirms that, yup, he's a manipulative douchebag. There are fallouts, a fight that gets several of the ladies thrown in "the Tombs," a.k.a. New York's House of Detention, and forgive-and-forget make-ups. Mushrooms get consumed. A downtown model shoot brimming with uptown classism ends in a Heisman gesture. A lot of stuff is left unresolved, because a lot of stuff *is* unresolved in real life, but the overall feeling is lazy, hazy positivity, teen shenanigans filtered through a lot of Instagram likes. It's Larry Clark's *Kids* without the rebel fetishism and suffocating nihilism.

Mostly, though, *Betty* is a tribute to these women who Moselle adores, and who wants you to adore as much as she does. Which isn't hard once you've spent time with them; it's their collective charisma in addition to the serious skating chops, that keeps the show from just feeling like subcultural anthropology. You could categorize them if you needed to. Moran's Kirt (sometimes called Kirk) is the tomboy trash-talker who acts before she thinks, an id that's all middle fingers and the show's likable resident fuck-up. Lovelace's Janay is the natural-born leader and the closest thing to the group's conscience. Vinberg's Camille is a wide-eyed deer who can't seem to avoid blinding headlights around every corner, Adams' Honeybear is the shy, semi-closeted artist hiding behind her protective videocam and Russell's Indigo is the gang's new recruit, learning the

ropes and peering at this still-testosteronized world under bleached-blond eyebrows.

Because Moselle and her co-conspirators have set everything to the rhythms of actual urban skater life, however — with spikes of OMG life-or-death urgency characteristic of genuine adolescent drama instead of manufactured outrage, no Sunday-night-HBO-teen-show names mentioned — you never feel like you're watching archetypes. You feel like you're riding shotgun with real people, and not even a few wink-nudge moments can break the spell (non-skaters will recognize the namebrand celebrity who makes a cutesy cameo, while a quick glimpse of someone from a *simpatico* series on the network suggests a future crossover episode). *Betty* gives you the privilege on skating a mile in these womens' shoes and letting you into their experience, the good and the bad and the sexist and the unfair and the ugly of it all. It's ambling, whateverstowne pacing and structure isn't for everyone, but everyone's still invited to join in. And should you think the show is just making things up as it goes along, the season ends with a double callback that earns the uplift. "I want to stop fighting the patriarchy and just start helping the matriarchy," one character says after a stoned epiphany. The show enlists you in that endeavor. We're all Bettys by the end of it.