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The Secret History of Hardcore Ain't So Secret Anymore

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Although largely influential, the history of hardcore punk of the early to mid-1980s, like the music itself, has remained virtually unknown to the general public. Bands like The Adolescents, Teen Idles and SS Decontrol don't get their stories told on VH1, so only bits and pieces of hardcore's story were told until Stephen Blush compiled the book *American Hardcore: a Tribal History* (2001). Previous to this large undertaking, no one had attacked this topic and this movement with such in-depth coverage. Focusing on the hardcore movement from 1980 to 1986, Blush's goal was to hone in on what this revolutionary music scene was really about: the filth, the fury and the honesty.

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Taking the telling of this history even further, Stephen Blush partnered with filmmaker and Slamdance co-founder Paul Rachman to create a documentary inspired by Blush's book. Stephen and Paul drove all over the country compiling interviews and footage for this movie, spending the last four years creating a documentary made with the very same ethic as its subject matter.

"Paul was not looking to cash in on anything, he just wanted to make a great film," says Blush of his partner. "People use that word 'indie' a lot, they've really co-modified the word 'independent' for independent film. I don't know about other independent films, but I can tell you that this film was Paul Rachman and I, a digital video camera and his version of Avid Pro to cut it – and that's the whole film. He would show up with the camera and I would carry the lights, and that's the whole package; we did it punk-rock style ... we got in the car and drove. I think that's why people will like it, because it doesn't reek of anything commercial. I know everybody says that sort of thing, but I'll tell you, it's here in this film."

Hardcore punk was a genre of music unlike any other. While it took a lot of inspiration from the first wave of punk rock, its objective was not advance the genre, but to strip it down even further, leaving only the basic elements. Some called this regression, but hardcore removed the bullshit that had been attached to punk, pushing those core ideals to their limits. While the book tells the story of every hardcore band that made a large impact in the scene, the film doesn't spend as much time on the specifics of each band.

"While the film is certainly about the music, the people and the history of hardcore punk rock, in the end what our film really is, is just the story of being a misfit kid growing up in early-80s America," says Blush. "What I'm saying is, on one hand you're seeing all the music and all the flashes, but it's really not about the minutiae of the bands. This is really just people talking about what it was like to start a punk-rock band, and what it was like to be on the outside of this very mainstream period that we all grew up in."

Passionate about the scene that meant so much to both of them, Blush and Rachman submitted their work to Sundance, expecting inevitable rejection when the call came and American Hardcore had been accepted. Blush, who had spent years documenting this scene, was surprised, to say the least.

"I think it's more shocked," states Blush. "I just thought it was too ugly of a subject for Sundance and thought there was nothing in it for them, financially. There are no big sponsors, we're not tied in with any big movie stars and we're not tied in with any agencies. But I have to say, when we got the phone call and the festival told us how much they loved it ... that's where I want to be ... with somebody who loves what we did. Ian Gilmore mentioned American Hardcore and he said, 'even if you hate punk rock, you'll understand the phenomenon after watching this film.' And that came from someone who obviously does hate punk rock – but who 'got' it after watching this film. To me, that's the highest compliment. I love hardcore, I love the fans, I love the scene and everybody who's into it, but I'm not worried about convincing them. I want people who don't even know what this is to understand what we did. "

Filmmaker Paul Rachman, who has shot videos for Pantera, Joan Jett, Bad Brains and Alice and Chains, was not as shocked as his partner about the film's acceptance into the prestigious festival.

"I'm not surprised that Sundance took it," says Rachman, "because they try to take what they see as 'important films,' and as far as I'm concerned, as a piece of American cultural history, this is an important film. I think that they recognized the value of this movement, where the stories haven't been told, and they realized that this is almost a missing link in American musical history. American hardcore punk is very much like American jazz; it's an American type of music – it's not English punk, it's not New York punk, and it's not anything that happened in any other country – it's very different. It wasn't ripped off from blues; it wasn't ripped off from rock. It was

short, fast, dissonant, loud and abrasive."

Both Rachman and Blush participated in the early hardcore scene; Blush promoted shows in D.C and Rachman shot footage of hardcore outfits like Gangreen in Boston. The hardcore movement was unlike anything seen before its time. Empowering its participants, hardcore grew into something more than just nasty punk.

"A lot of people have the perception that we were just a bunch of loud, abrasive, drunken knuckleheads," says Keith Morris of the Circle Jerks. "A lot of fighting, a lot of violence – that happens anywhere where there's a big group of people who are drinking and getting over-excited. A lot of people have this idea that there wasn't a lot of intelligence behind it, that it was just basically a muscular, hormone-driven, very-stupid very-angry type of thing. A lot of us didn't fit that category, like Greg Ginn [Black Flag/SST Records] who graduated from UCLA – he was a business major. Jello Biafra [Dead Kennedys], of course, studied acting at the University of Colorado."

"Hardcore's not a beautiful story," states author and filmmaker Stephen Blush. "I think when I wrote the book, some people who weren't there got the impression that it was this really unified fun, you know, 'we're all in it together,' and there was definitely an element of that, but we were all fucked up in some way. We were alienated, drugged-out, abused or just dissatisfied with everything around us. That's what we were living. It was like an umbrella group for all sorts of various misfits, and we all just lived in it together. I could be with some shit-kicking skinhead, some weird guy trying to figure out his sexuality or some woman who felt like a tomboy. We all just hung out together, and we were all just part of the same thing, and it wasn't a big pat on the back like, 'welcome, you're part of our gang,' it was just an implied thing that if you showed up at the show, you were generally accepted."

Being a hugely important part of these people's lives, not everyone, including people who were interviewed for the movie, were happy about the way Stephen Blush went about certain things in his book.

"I thought that it was an insensitive and un-insightful attempt to try to speak on some of the things that went on in the lives of Bad Brains," says Daryl Jennifer of Bad Brains. "There was no real substance or truth, for that matter, in any of the stories that I read. I can't say that I'm happy about the things I've seen Mr. Blush insinuating. I can't even remember seeing him around, and if I did, it wasn't on a grassroots level. A lot of the things that were said about Bad Brains in that book were not accurate and were insensitive to what Bad Brains meant."

All discrepancies aside, Blush and Rachman have made an attempt to document this radical time in American youth culture. When it comes to this subject, there is much that has been left unexplained or vague – so there's a lot to expect from this film.

"I would like to see a clear line drawn between what was considered punk rock and what was considered hardcore," says Daryl Jennifer. "I was never a hardcore dude. I always thought that hardcore was something else, a term that came around when I was more like, punk rock."

"I would hope people would see the film in a wider light," says Joey Shithead from D.O.A. "That the hardcore movement was not just a musical one, but a generational movement. It may seem like it was merely loud and noisy to the mainstream public, but the spirit of hardcore reflected the politics and uncertainty of the time. Think about the arms race, Reagan, environmental degradation ... hey, wait a minute, that's just like today. But back then, the music really responded to the issues of what we were doing."

"I would like them to see it as more than just a rough thug kind of music," says Tony Cadena of Orange County's The Adolescents. "That there were actually some foundations of a really great idealism, and whether it stayed that way later on isn't really the point, but it just started off as a really great youth movement."

Whether the movie accomplishes what the purveyors of hardcore want from it or not, it's important that this time period be documented so that people can see what really went on – they can determine for themselves if this movement had any substance to it. "Well, I think hardcore is the sleeping giant," says Blush. "Because it was never on the radio, because it was never on television, because it was never in Rolling Stone. I think that's why people like it. I talk to kids today and I have a lot of friends who are 25, 27, 31, and they know this stuff implicitly, they know MTV isn't playing this stuff. They're finding out about it through a very grassroots way. That's the secret about this music, and I'm not going to say it's the most important moment in music history, but I lived through it."

Hardcore has not been completely ignored, yet time and time again when other documentaries on rock n' roll pop up, they barely touch on the scene or they skip it like nothing happened at all.

"There were two documentaries on the history of rock n' roll. One on PBS and one of them is by the BBC," says Blush, "and they're a ten part series. They tell the story of the rise of rock n' roll, the story of Elvis, the story of Woodstock, they take you through the 70s, they take you through the Sex Pistols, and then it goes straight to Nirvana as if nothing else had ever happened. That's when I decided to write the book, because somebody had to say this stuff before we all died or got too old."

The legacy of the hardcore punk-rock movement is undeniable. It's all around in popular music and in underground music. The idea of kids putting out their own records and putting on their own shows came from this scene.

"Of course, that was not the intention of hardcore punk rock," says Joe from D.O.A. "I don't think hardly any of the first wave of hardcore punks (1981-85) thought that we would become "rock stars." The whole movement was very anti-star, anti-fashion – unlike a lot of successful "punks" today. But that is not to say that the early generation would not have taken a ride on the "rock n' roller coaster," it's just that the politics were so important, the idea of stardom never occurred to most. Yes, there still is a ton of the real spirit in the underground punk scene; it's the kids that love the music and the same anti-establishment attitude that punk attracted in 1977. There's tons of people who realize that hardcore punk is more than just hoping your wannabe, copycat emo/pop/punk band gets on The Warped Tour one day."

That is the legacy of the hardcore scene: empowering kids today to make a difference in a world that they hate, with their bands, record labels, tours and all-out warfare on the status quo.

Make sure to check out the screenings of American Hardcore:

Jan 20, Fri. @ 3:15pm
Holiday Village Cinemas III, Park City

Jan 21, Sat. @ 7:30 pm
Broadway Center Cinemas VI
111 E. Broadway, Salt Lake City

Jan. 24
American Hardcore Party with bands from the film- Starbar

Jan 25, Wed. @ 7:30 pm
Press & Industry Screening
Yarrow Theater 2, Park City

Jan 27, Fri. @ 11:59 pm
Egyptian Theater, Park City

Jan 28, Sat. @ 6:15pm

Holiday Village Cinemas III, Park City
SLC after party- TBA

Log onto www.slugmag.com for info on winning a pair of tickets to the SLC screening and after party!

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