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**American Hardcore**

(Documentary)

An AHC production. Produced by Steven Blush, Paul Rachman. Directed, edited by Paul Rachman. Written by Steven Blush, inspired by his book.

**With:** Adolescents, Bad Brains, Black Flag, Circle Jerks, D.O.A., Flipper, Gang Green, Jerry's Kids, MDC, Minor Threat, Poison Idea, 7 Seconds, SS Decontrol, TSOL, Zero Boys.

By **DENNIS HARVEY**

Excellent documentary "American Hardcore" chronicles the short-lived but influential musical moment when a defiantly anti-commercial underground put a distinctive U.S. stamp on the hitherto Brit-driven punk movement. Mirroring in propulsion and visual aesthetic the music (and poster/album cover art) itself, sharp survey brings an insular, now largely forgotten scene back to vivid life. Just as in the early '80s, however, hardcore remains an area of fervent interest to a few, esoteric at best to everyone else. Limited theatrical outreach focusing on campuses and urban arthouses looks apt, with a long shelf life ahead in home formats and cult/midnight bookings.

Inspired by Steven Blush's 2001 nonfiction tome of the same name, pic posits genre as a direct reaction to the inflation, homelessness, materialism and conservatism of the Reagan years.

After making its initial Stateside impact, punk had largely receded into the more escapist, apolitical forms of "skinny-tie" New Wave and danceable synthpop. Hardcore was aggressive, angry, sarcastic and anarchistic, its crude sonic assault both deliberate and unavoidable given the inexperience of frequently teenaged musicians.

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Blush and director Paul Rachman ("Four Dogs Playing Poker") structure narrative in geographic terms, as self-contained scenes in Los Angeles, then Boston, Washington, D.C., and New York City spread the gospel via touring bands to ever-more-remote enclaves. While drinking and drugs were seldom completely absent, Minor Threat song "Straight Edge" coined the phrase to define a living philosophy that eschewed all substance-abusive escapism in favor of a fierce asceticism.

Overwhelmingly male-dominated milieu (Black Flag bassist Kira Roessler is sole female player interviewed here) had more than its share of excess in other arenas, with stage-diving, slamdancing, performer-bashing, and fights between audience members soon becoming expected elements at each show.

That violence soured many on the scene, with musicians getting fed up at fans' unwillingness to let them evolve past the most purist, rama-lama blare. (The Replacements, Red Hot Chili Peppers and Beastie Boys are just a few of the acts that emerged after members broke with hardcore orthodoxy.)

By 1986, the movement's energy was in steep decline. But its influence would be felt in everything from the subsequent "grunge" era to today's pop-punk bands, whose flagrant commercialism many original hardcore stars bitterly resent.

Large roster of interviewees are a colorful, still-outspoken lot; as one notes, anyone looking for evidence of an organized radical left in the complacent '80s can hardly overlook this ultra-grassroots subset. The wealth of mostly vid-shot archival footage is often very rough in quality, but that suits hardcore's defining do-it-yourself doctrine. Jon Vondracek's graphics amplify aesthetic of the cut-and-paste Xerox art hardcore claimed as its own, while Rachman's editing is dynamic.

Camera (color/B&W, various formats-to-HD), Rachman; motion graphics, John Vondracek; music supervisor, Anthony County. Reviewed at Sundance Film Festival (Midnight), Jan. 20, 2006. Running time: 100 MIN.

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