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CBGB - Punk From The Bowery

Picture: D Sound: D Extras: C- Main Program: C

We are always happy to see material about CBGBs, but this title from Music Video Distributors is littered with problems throughout. The amateurish video production seems to stem from the use of a cheap webcam to shoot the concerts. There's no exaggeration by me saying that - it really looks that bad. The poor video truly bogs down the quality of this release dramatically and makes it a difficult watch. Some of the worst spots come whenever a lot of movement is happening onscreen; the image then suffers from slowdown and heavy pixelation. The fault of all this can't be pinned on the distribution company, but rather those responsible for selecting the video equipment used in the club.

I do give some small credit to the camera layout - it seems to be a permanently fixed setup - but it's effective and brings those watching at home directly into the show. You almost get the feeling of being just outside of the pit with everyone else. The camera zooms and pans through the action well enough, without too bad of a transition, though the cutaways between songs aren't exactly as smooth. Had higher quality equipment been used, I'm sure that this release would have been much more bearable - but there are even more problems that viewers will have to contend with.

The audio is available in 5.1 surround sound - but the recording quality is so bad overall that I'm not sure how they could have salvaged anything to make surround sound worthwhile. The music continually fades out across most of the performances - this can be attributed to the performers themselves who are moving around too much for their voices to get picked up properly. It's not as bad as it could have been... though I'm a big fan of Danzig; he's never used a microphone very well throughout much of his live career. Even when I got the chance to see him recently, his voice still drifts in and out as he always prematurely moves the mic away before he finishes singing. That problem isn't really rampant with the performers seen here, but it may add dislike for certain viewers.

The bigger problem with the audio, though less frequent, is less bearable. This again is the fault of the recording equipment used. The cheap equipment will give out in a couple spots, causing the music to be interrupted for a second or two. Even the video is affected in these spots, as it will distort or wipe out the image completely during that time. This is annoying, but it's not common enough here to shatter the performances any more than some of the other factors do.

As for the bands themselves, it's a mixed bag. I'm not too big on many newer acts - especially in the world of hardcore and punk. Of the 15 bands on this disc, I liked only 2 - U.K. Subs and The Vibrators. Both of these are older acts though, and don't try to just generate noise. Tastes differ though,



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and there is a great audience for the other bands included here.

As a bonus feature, the owner of CBGBs takes you on a guided tour of the venue. This half hour long featurette isn't very simulating and it suffers from the same audio and video problems seen elsewhere on the DVD. If you've never been to the club, this might be an interesting feature, but it's not crucial material overall.

CBGB: Punk From The Bowery might be worth purchasing for some people, despite its major flaws. I could see purchasing it as more of a sampler if you want to expose yourself to some new bands, but a primer like this should at most cost about five bucks. If you love the spirit of the music enough, you should be able to look past all of the problematic areas in the various departments. Most people will probably still be disappointed though, as most bootlegs look and sound better than this release manages at its best.

- David Milchick