

REVIEW

DVD Review: Bad Brains - *Live at CBGB 1982*

October 11, 2006

Pete Blackwell

Much has been made about the fact that Bad Brains were a one-of-a-kind band. They were black Rastafarians in the otherwise lily-white world of early-80s hardcore, after all. But that's beside the point. Simply put, they rocked harder, louder and faster than anyone else. Period.

Bad Brains formed in Washington, D.C. in the late 70s, taking the marriage of reggae and punk rock — then all the rage in England thanks to, amongst others, the Clash — to the extreme. They quickly gained a reputation for scintillating live performances; the kind that got them banned from playing in local clubs (immortalized in the classic song "Banned in D.C.").

Live at CBGB 1982, recorded over three nights in New York City, catches the band at the absolute height of their powers. H.R. flails himself all over the tiny stage, wrenching impassioned if incomprehensible lyrics from both gut and soul while guitarist Dr. Know remains remarkably composed as he riffs and solos at breakneck speed. Earl Hudson is the picture of concentration and intensity behind the drum kit and, sadly, bassist Darryl Jennifer is hardly on film at all thanks to the camera positions.

The band is sloppy at times, but their frenetic stage presence is infective and it's easy to see what all the fuss was about. Since the CBGB stage was about two feet off the floor, there are stage divers and slam dancers galore, knocking into H.R. and joining him on the mic to bellow a choice line or two.

In fact, watching the audience is half the fun of this DVD. It's worth a look if only to see what a hardcore gig looked like back when there was still a pretty good chance of the cops cracking some skulls after the show and before mohawks were merely ironic. There's also something to be said for watching hulking mosh pit denizens nervously bob their heads to one of the band's reggae numbers, waiting for another hardcore onslaught to begin.

The video quality on *Live at CBGB 1982* is pretty good, but the sound quality varies greatly from night to night, ranging from awful to so-so. Part of that is the recording itself, but CBGB was a notoriously crappy-sounding club as well. Highlights include incendiary versions of "Right Brigade," "Banned in D.C.," and "How Low Can a Punk Get," and an excellent rendition of the reggae jam "The Meek Shall Inherit the Earth."

Live at CBGB 1982 shouldn't necessarily be anyone's first introduction to the power and glory of Bad Brains, but it's virtually indispensable for a fan. First-timers might want to check out their 1982 self-titled debut on ROIR, which has been reissued on CD. It more faithfully captures the top-notch musicianship and genuinely unique vocal stylings that set Bad Brains apart from their more straightforward power-chords-and-anger contemporaries.

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