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REVIEW

DVD Review: *Bad Brains Live At CBGB 1982 Too Wild For Nostalgia*

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Richard Marcus

I'm sure you've all met old farts who tell you "ah that's not how I remember it being" when they see or hear something celebrating a time they lived through. The problem for people like me who talk like that was there's never been any proof that the eighties weren't all Duran Duran and bad synthesiser music sung by guys with hair hanging down in their eyes and posh public school accents.

But now our heart's pain can be eased and we can stand up proudly and exclaim, "You see, this is what it was like, this is what I was doing on Friday and Saturday nights through the early eighties!" The good folks at MVD Video have released a disc that is sure to have you caught between happy reminiscence and amazement that you came through the times unscathed and your hearing relatively intact.

Bad Brains Live At CBGB 1982 won't make you all warm and fuzzy inside from sentimental nostalgia but it will make you feel like you can trust your memories again as compared to what corporate music wants people to think was happening in the eighties. Of course I doubt if Bad Brains ever intended to be warm and fuzzy or were considered music by the Industry. They would have been more apt to cause the machine to blow a gasket than be a cog in the smooth running of its operation.

First of all, who'd ever heard of a thrash hardcore punk band made up of four Rastafarians? Then again who'd ever heard of a thrash hardcore band that would play a reggae tune extolling the virtues of Jah every fourth or fifth song, then go right back into speed rock that makes Anthrax look like a stroll in the park? Even the music industry isn't that tolerant of people's drug habits and any A+R guy walking into corporate headquarters trying to sell his bosses on a band with that description would have been shown the door as being dangerously unstable.

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Which was the point after all. You were peeled back to raw emotion at one of those concerts. So much raw energy confined in a small bar area makes it pretty damn hard to think rationally. If you had spent three nights, Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, and Boxing Day crammed into CBGBs for a hard core festival headlined by the Bad Brains you'd probably end up looking seriously fucked up, down, over, and sideways.

Not the best way to show up at a big shiny, glass and metal, office building where you're trying to scale the ladder of corporate music America. Especially back in the early eighties when the first whiffs of what it meant to be under the thumb of Ronald and Nancy was just making itself felt. There was no room in Fortress Amerika for that kind of behaviour anymore.

Everything was being buttoned down under suits and ties and swept under carpets. That oh so brief burgeoning of musical freedom and anarchistic energy that marked what really frightened the straight and narrow about Rock and Roll was being brought to heel again. With nothing to sustain its initial outburst the vitality that burst out in the 1970's in small pockets in New York City, London, and a few other major metropolitan areas, burnt into ashes from which no Phoenix would ever arise.

Back to the concert DVD, over those three days Bad Brains played around four hours of music and from those hours have been culled the footage that's made it onto disc. Absolute chaos has been crammed into 60 minutes of screen time. Walk into the room where this is being played unaware of what is being watched and you could be forgiven for thinking that it's outtakes of either a Jerry Springer show gone bad, or footage of a riot.

But then you notice how a clear space is formed around the man with the microphone and the bodies recede like an ebb tide as he begins to sing. Whenever each song begins the crowd (young males) swarm on stage and fling themselves with abandon into, onto, and over each other. Chaos you think, but watch carefully and see them pick up the microphone stand each time it's knocked over, give another person a hand up, and responding to some unseen signal magically vanish from the stage when the vocalist steps forward to screech, err sing.

What I remember and what I see is a complete absence of violence. Not once when I was in those bars did I ever have fear of being an intentional victim (unintentional yes, accidents do happen) of someone's anger or drunken rage. Not like today where I refuse to go into the bars where at least one fight every weekend in my small city's bar district seems to result from the music and atmosphere.

The Bad Brains appear to be a reggae band; what else would you call four dreadlocked men who have a "Lion of
permission of the author.

Judah" (referring to Emperor of Ethiopia Haile Selassie) sticker affixed to their bass drum? So when they wind up and hit you with the power of hard-core thrash and the lead vocalist screams an incomprehensible stream of raw energy passing for lyrics, the shock of appearances being misleading is pretty severe.

But where their real talent shines through is the fact that every fifth song or so, they play a reggae tune. I'm not a musician, but I've watched enough of them play over the years to see them have difficulty adjusting in mid-gig from playing at one tempo to another one. Whenever they've switched from a high speed to a slower beat they will invariably have accelerated by the end of the song.

But not Bad Brains, they are able to catch their breath and step into a completely different groove barely missing a beat. From the bassist and the drummer to the lead guitar player and the vocalist, they sound like they've been playing reggae all night long. Even looking at the audience you couldn't tell; guys who had one moment been pogoing away, happily flailing limbs in all directions, are now standing docilely by the stage rocking back and forth to the reggae beat.

That in itself is a testament to the band's abilities - to be able to exert that much control over your audience that they can be brought from a high pitched frenzy down to calm almost instantaneously shows their impact as performers. Some of that is of course lost on the transition from live show to tape, but moments like those help to illustrate it.

If you go into watching this expecting incredible sound and visuals, well you're at the wrong end of the decade to start with, and the wrong side of the music business to end with. There were exactly two cameras filming this and the sound was probably what they could get from the mixing board at the club. The fact that the sound has any clarity at all is absolutely amazing considering the atmosphere in the club and the attendant ambient noise.

Wisely, I think, the version I saw in stereo (there is a 5.1 surround option but I live in an apartment and didn't think a sub-woofer for this disc would have been fair to the guy living below me) edited out most of the club's noise and focused on the playback of the band only. In fact the sound was good enough that even amid the noise of thrash I could hear each instrument distinctly enough to tell that these guys knew how to play. When they slowed down for the reggae the sound quality was confirmed, with its lack of distortions and only the occasional feedback that used to plague club shows in the early eighties.

What I especially appreciated about the camera work was they made no attempt to change the event to suit the

shot. There would be shots of the vocalist through a maze of thrashing legs and arms as he was singing in his small oasis of calm. Occasionally he would retreat to the high ground of the drum riser and we would all sit back and watch the stage become a seething mass of bodies.

Instead of trying to pick out individuals in the heaving mess the cameras would zoom right in so all that you'd see would be unconnected arms, legs, feet, and hands flailing on the screen in front of you. It was one of the best visualisations of a mosh pit dance scene that I've seen on screen, because it wasn't staged.

There is a short interview section with some fans in the extra bits, which doesn't amount to much, save for one excerpt where a guy is trying to describe what it's like to completely abandon yourself to the music. He can't articulate it completely, but you can see in his eyes how much it means to him, and that's what matters.

For those of you used to the highly choreographed posturing of rap stars, and their pretence of threat, or the fake sexuality of Britney Spears and her ilk, the raw unbridled dancing of the mosh pit must have looked like violence. Forget the mosh pits they have now at the mega concerts where you'll be shot if you get within a yard of the stage, they have as little in common with the one at CBGB's that night as Britney does with Patti Smith. With no real connection to the music, there is no point in them except the testosterone-induced one-upmanship that can produce violence.

I know I sound like the typical old fart saying that's not the way it was when I was young, but at least I'm not saying you have it better. As far as I'm concerned we had it far better than you'll ever have. Watch the DVD *Bad Brains Live AT CBGB 1982* and you might get what I'm talking about. But be careful, it's been know to induce independent thinking.



Richard Marcus is a long - haired Canadian iconoclast who writes reviews and opines on the world as he sees it at [Leap In The Dark](#) and [Blogcritics](#)

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Author: Richard

Marcus

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