



Bad Brains

Live at CBGB's 1982

The furious, blistering, hardcore assault that was Bad Brains lit up the east coast punk rock scene of the early '80s like a Molotov cocktail. Already well past its burgeoning stage, D.C. punk and hardcore was flipped on its ear by the African American band that never shied away from unloosening its Rastafarian and metal fixations in a genre dominated by white faces – a brave and innovative move, even in the supposedly racism-free scene that comprised hardcore music in the early '80s. The quartet was a veritable rock powerhouse: HR's vocals shifted dramatically from nasal squeal to lush, melodic vocalizing on songs like the dub-stepping "I" and the straight reggae of "I and I Survive." Dr. Know's guitar playing, definitely a precursor of metal to come, was light on the upbeat one minute and a block party of raging power chords the next. And one of the best punk rock rhythm sections ever, bass player Darryl Jenifer and drummer Earl Hudson, held down the low end with a taut, rumbling snarl that ranged from wall of sound to reverb-y springboard.

Bad Brains were not only one of the most innovative bands of their time, but also one of the most ferocious in a live setting. The band's dominating feeling is captured well on Live at CBGB's 1982, a companion soundtrack to the DVD of the same name. Though the audio quality does vary from track to track, even the muddier numbers from these live Christmas and Thanksgiving shows of 1982 still bring to life the amazing intensity of the band. It's really amazing to hear the band go from the raging, indecipherable thrash-punk of "Destroy Babylon" and "Joshua's Song" right into the authentic "Unity Dub," the band sounding completely comfortable and competent in both styles. Dr. Know's guitar playing can be an acquired taste for some, as this former fusion guitarist can delve deep into free jazz chord progressions and cacophonous note combinations when unleashing one of his trademark solos. The same can be said for HR's vocal style, which as mentioned before varies from growling menace to spry melodies, sometimes within the course of one song.

Since the years of seminal recordings like "Banned in DC" and "The Regulator," Bad Brains has parted ways with singer HR several times, gone through various metal and reggae incarnations, jumped from label to label, and even undergone a name change (Soul Brains) for a time. Though they persist to this day, resurfacing every now and then for shows and/or rumored reunions, this release is an important time capsule in the band's storied history, and an essential listen for fans new and old.

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