

The Music Report

Bad Brains' legend still grows below the radar

By Dan DeLuca

INQUIRER MUSIC CRITIC

In the YouTube '00s, taking a gander at your favorite band in action is never further than a few mouse-clicks away. Not so in the pre-Nirvana, pre-cameraphone '80s, when hardcore punk bands toiled in converted VFW halls and dingy rock clubs, and face time on MTV was reserved for pop acts like Michael Jackson and Men Without Hats, not underground heroes such as Bad Brains and the Minutemen.

But if beneath-the-radar obscurity doesn't pay the bills while a band is still together, it can help the legend grow after everything falls apart. And in the realm of mythic rock ensembles that never got their due, it's hard to beat Bad Brains, the roaring, African American foursome from Washington that fused hardcore punk, metal and reggae, and earned a reputation as an incendiary live act.

How deserved that reputation was is revealed on *Bad Brains: Live at CBGB 1982* (★★★), a new DVD released by MVD Entertainment, of Oaks, Pa. It will be shown free at the Khyber, 56 S. Second St., tomorrow at 8 p.m. (For those 21 and up; for information call 215-238-5888.)

The 60-minute, 19-song blast of fury — intercut with a handful of slow-paced reggae numbers that allow lead screamer H.R. and the moshing

crowd to catch their collective breath — is a suitably low-tech affair. Recorded at the Manhattan rock club over three days, beginning on Christmas Eve 1982, the disc's sound mix isn't great, and the static camera rarely gets bassist Darryl Jenifer in the frame.

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Despite the less-than-optimal conditions — or, perhaps, because of them — everything that made Bad Brains unique is apparent, even if the DVD provides no background about the band's place in the scene. (For that, fans will have to wait for the documentary *American Hardcore*, which also covers such bands as Minor Threat, Black Flag and Hüsker Dü, and is due in theaters here Nov. 3.)

Doubly marginalized as black Rastafarians in a scene of white punk-rock outsiders, Bad Brains were the band that made their peers' jaws drop in awe. The Beastie Boys' double B moniker

was born, in part, as a tribute to Bad Brains. Along with Jenifer, the frighteningly intense H.R. (who was credited as "throat" on the 1986 masterwork *I Against I*), guitarist Dr. Know and drummer Earl Hudson were expert players whose music was noteworthy not so much for their songs as for their precise, brutally physical rhythmic attack.

The band's 2003 best-of collection, *Banned In D.C.*, is aptly subtitled *Bad Brains' Greatest Riffs*. And even at the chaotic CBGB shows, where the players are always in peril of being harmed by flying audience members — watch out for that fat guy in the Mohawk! — the musicianship is always spot-on. As Greg Tate has written about the band: "Like the Roots are doing today with hip-hop, they brought instrumental prowess, precision and virtuosity to a form of music that could care less about such stuff."

The Brains weren't the only punk-rockers around who were capable musicians with a fondness for funk licks. The same could be said for the Minutemen. And it is, in *We Jam Econo: The Story of the Minutemen* (★★½), the music doc about the San Pedro, Calif., trio consisting of bassist Mike Watt, drummer George Hurley and late, great guitarist and vocalist D. Boon, who died in a 1985 auto accident.

Like the Brains, the Minutemen —



PETER GRUCHOT

Bad Brains was known as an incendiary live act and "Bad Brains: Live at CBGB 1982," a DVD with vintage footage, shows why.

whose lyric "Our band could be your life," gave critic Michael Azzerad the title of his 2001 history of the era — made music whose rawness could not conceal its ambition. The parade of talking heads who show up to praise the band attest to its influence, from Thurston Moore and Flea to John Doe and *Get Your War On* comic-strip author David Rees.

Unlike the Brains' documentary, *We Jam Econo*, directed by Tim Irwin, takes pains to put the Minutemen's story together. It runs from the day Watt and Boon met in a San Pedro park — Boon jumped out of a tree onto Watt — to their 1984 double-album magnum opus *Double Nickels on*

the Dime.

That album, like everything the Minutemen did, was marked by Watt's P-Funk-meets-punk bass playing, Hurley's furious drumming, and Boon's singing of impressionistic, often politicized, smart-and-funny lyrics over his jagged guitar lines. On *We Jam*, that's caught on concert footage from Washington's 9:30 Club, as well as on a video clip for "This Ain't No Picnic" which is included as an extra and features a cameo by Ronald Reagan.

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