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ENTERTAINMENT

Punch-punk love

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 Jeffrey M. Anderson, The Examiner
 Oct 13, 2006 5:00 AM (6 hrs ago)
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SAN FRANCISCO - Doc 'American Hardcore' overwhelmed by its subject

If you're going to make a movie about hardcore punk, make a movie about hardcore punk. Make it look like a Xeroxed, collage flier and sound like a tinny, bootlegged cassette tape. Try something — anything. Sadly, the new "American Hardcore" — which focuses on the American hardcore punk scene of the early 1980s — looks more like the same old PBS documentary, with alternating talking heads, archival clips and photos. That's fine, but why ask people to go to the theater and pay \$9 for something that should be on TV?

Even after "American Hardcore" begins rolling, it steps into a quagmire. It focuses more on certain bands and less on others, and very few fans will walk away satisfied. For example, when the movie gets around to the innovative San Francisco punk scene, it spends a few fleeting moments on Flipper, and totally ignores groundbreakers such as The Avengers and the Dead Kennedys. Indeed, there's not much "American" going on here; the film mainly stays in New York and Los Angeles.

Additionally, it glosses over several of the movement's very best bands, such as the Minutemen (covered so well in last year's documentary, "We Jam Econo"), X, the Meat Puppets, Hüsker Dü and the Replacements.

The bulk of the movie instead focuses on two bands, Black Flag and Bad Brains. Led by Henry Rollins, Black Flag acted as a sort of unofficial leader for the hardcore movement. When it came to marketing an image and a sound, Black Flag were the pioneers. Rollins, now known as a writer-actor-bodybuilder, appears in the film (much humbler than we're used to seeing) and tells the story almost as if he were not a part of it.

But the meat of this film has to be Bad Brains. As many of the interviewees point out, this was the band that all the other bands went to see. With their all-black lineup, their precision speed and musicianship and their tendency to break out into a reggae number in the middle of a set, they were a true showstopper. If director Paul Rachman had noticed this, he may have chosen to scrap the rest of the footage and make Bad Brains the film's primary subject.

Fortunately, a new DVD, "Bad Brains: Live at CBGB 1982," from Music Video Distributors rights this wrong. Filmed at the band's legendary Christmas concert (some footage of which is included in "American Hardcore"), it presents 60 minutes of impossibly clean video and sound, capturing the band at their ferocious peak. No talking heads, no clips. Pure hardcore.

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Movie review

American Hardcore ???½

Documentary with Henry Rollins, Flea, Dave Markey, Moby, Gary "Dr. Know" Miller, Jerry Williams, Tommy Stinson, Steve DePace, Bruce Loose, Ted Falconi and Christine McCarthy

Written by Stephen Blush, based on his book

Directed by Paul Rachman

Rated R

Running time 100 minutes

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