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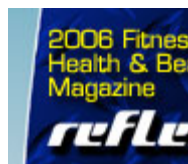
Utopia in the Bowery

~ By MATTHEW SINGER ~

If punk was an egalitarian movement, one with no class system onstage or off, then there is perhaps no better visual representation of that ideal than Bad Brains: Live at CBGB 1982. Here are four black Rastafarians — outcasts on those points alone — playing righteous, hyper-speed hardcore for a mixed audience of shaven-headed white kids, mohawked African Americans, weirdoes of all shapes and stripes. And there's the crowd, flooding the stage at the most beloved dingy piss-hole in the country, crawling over each other, commandeering the mic, sometimes obscuring the band altogether. No barriers, no security guards — no separation, physical or metaphorical, between the group performing and the people watching. It's a small, sweaty vision of utopia.

At the same time, the thing about Bad Brains was, unlike most of their peers, they did stuff that was pretty much untouchable to the average fan; no one could hear the bullet-train charge of "Pay To Cum" or the muscular stomp of "Right Brigade" or any of the blistering leads provided by guitarist Dr. Know and seriously think, "Hey, I can do that." Before discovering the liberating recklessness of punk, these guys were jazz fusionists, and they took their chops with them when they crossed to the other side. With their considerable skills, they upped the ante on the meaning of "hardcore," executing the genre's key elements — speed, aggression, barely controlled chaos — with a taut precision none of their contemporaries could hope to match. So while the Brains may have been the ultimate symbol of punk's inclusiveness, they also ripped the music from the hands of the happy amateurs playing it and tossed it light years ahead of them.

It's the collision of that duality that makes Live at CBGB such a stunning document. The DVD draws from a four-night residency by the group at the legendary New York rock club, sewing together the highlights into a single, incomparably explosive hour-long set. Crudely shot on two cameras, the film captures the feeling as much as it does the sights of sounds of traveling deep into the Bowery in the early '80s. By then, the idea of punk as a sea-changing social revolution was long dead; what remained at that point was simply a freak subculture festering below the surface, full of geeks and misfits. From the moment Dr. Know's squealing pick scrapes and drummer Earl Hudson's tension-building toms announce the beginning of "Big Takeover," those misfits are out in force, goose-stepping across the stage and competing for screen time with manic



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frontman H.R. True to the form, director Richard Oretsky lenses the crowd with as much fascination as he does the band, occasionally focusing on one audience member for an entire song, sometimes filling the frame with a tangle of arms and legs. (The audience is certainly given more attention than bassist Daryl Jenifer, who's the Where's Waldo of this DVD.)

But, honestly, there's no mistaking the fans for the musicians, and not just because of their flailing dreadlocks. The band barrels through each song with furious propulsion, instrumental demigods among lowly punks. And then there's H.R. On record, his voice is an elastic wonder, capable of leaping from sonorous bellowing to high-pitched shrieking to rabid, feral growling, often in a single phrase. Live, on barnburners like "Attitude" and "How Low Can a Punk Get," you mostly just get the latter. It's on their mellow, straight-forward reggae tracks, used here as buffers for the pandemonium, that he really gets to show off his instrument. When they all light back into scorchers such as "Riot Squad" and the "Anarchy in the UK"-aping "Redbone in the City," the effect is jolting.

Utopian? Eh, not really. Like most things, the notion of equality within punk was mostly illusory. But it does look like a hell of a lot of fun, and that's just as important. ★

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