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# A History Lesson Part I: Punk Rock In Los Angeles In 1984

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By Noel Murray March 16, 2011

There's no better way to encapsulate the divine madness of the Los Angeles punk scene in the early '80s than the way the Meat Puppets' Cris Kirkwood talks about how his long-haired, acid-fried country-punk band was invited to join the SST Records stable. "I think Greg Ginn got us in there just to fuck with people," Kirkwood says, describing the Black Flag guitarist's rationale as "I like this, and the punks are gonna hate it." Dave Travis' hourlong documentary *A History Lesson Part I: Punk Rock In Los Angeles In 1984* combines footage shot in '84 with interviews shot in '96 and '09, covering just four bands: the Meat Puppets, the Minutemen, Twisted Roots, and Redd Kross. All four defied the original L.A. hardcore ethos of simplicity and nihilism. Redd Kross dressed in rock-star clothes and played glam-rock guitar solos only semi-ironically. Twisted Roots featured former members of the Screamers and the Germs, but aimed for a more poppy, positive sound than the bands that spawned them. The Minutemen loved jazz, funk, and classic rock, and tried to relate to their audience as comrades, not adversaries. And as for the Meat Puppets, as Cris' brother Curt says in *History Lesson* about his early impressions of punk: "I mistook it for psychedelic music. I thought everyone was into peace and love."

Travis wasn't working with top-of-the-line equipment in '84 (at least not by today's standards), which means that while his performance footage has a nice fans'-eye-view perspective, the picture quality is poor and the sound is soupy. By no means should *History Lesson* be taken as a definitive document of any of these bands, none of whom come off looking brilliant in these lo-fi video shoots. But for fans who know how the music is *supposed* to sound, *History Lesson* has a lot to offer, in particular in the interviewees' casual reminiscences about how they got involved in the punk scene, and where they saw their place in it. The Minutemen's Mike Watt describes how he wrote songs using the scraps of notes frontman D. Boon left lying around, and says the band structured some of its short, disjointed songs just so they could catch a breath during their high-energy live show. Jeff and Steve McDonald from Redd Kross talk about being pals with the populist-minded members of Black Flag and the Minutemen, but say their own band consciously avoided mixing with the public, to maintain a faux-rock-star mystique. And Paul Roessler breaks down the tumultuous history of the short-lived sensation that was Twisted Roots, a band that polarized the scene simply by daring to be catchy. Making punks mad by not playing punk? How punk.

**Key features:** None.

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