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The Meat Puppets

Loud & Fast, Quick & Dirty: 'A History Lesson: Part 1 Punk Rock in Los Angeles in 1984'

By **W. Scott Poole** 23 March 2011

Skronky, scrunchy, fast and loud, early '80s LA hardcore was much more than an American imitation of the Ramones and the Pistols. Bands like the Minutemen and the Meat Puppets proved that you could unleash searingly fast and dirty guitar fuzz bombs while blending the noise with lyrical innovation that favored the brief, the political and sometimes the mystical. The Meat Puppets even showed that country and Americana music could go punk in *Meat Puppets 2* one of the best albums in any genre produced in the decade dominated by hair bands and power pop.

Fans of hardcore, and those who want to understand it, are in for a treat with *A History Lesson Part I*. Filmmaker (and punk oral historian) Dave Travis has assembled an otherwise impossible to see side to the rise of '80s punk, a treasure trove that he plans to continue to unleash on us in subsequent DVD's. Footage of early '80s LA punk combined with interviews reveal some of the loud and angry roots of the alternative/indie wave that has swept across the world.

Travis certainly understands the importance of a history lesson since he has spent last decade teaching social studies in the LA school system (mostly in South Central). Knowing a bit about the background of Travis, very likely the coolest middle school teacher in the entire world, is really necessary to appreciate what's going on with this DVD. Travis made this film with the same DIY aesthetic that informed the early punk bands who sometimes even made their own records. He has made it his mission to explain to a newer generation what exactly was going on in the '80s underground.

In every respect he is the perfect historian for this movement. In the late '80s, Travis apprenticed with David Markey, the legendary music documentarian responsible for *1991: The Year Punk Broke*. This incredibly important film followed Nirvana on a European festival tour with Sonic Youth just before they became the biggest band in the entire world.

Travis goes back to an earlier period in his love alternative music to the hardcore and Oui! world of his teenage years in LA. What we get in a *History Lesson* is more or less his home movies from these years (right before he went to work for Red Kross and began his pretty astonishing odyssey through the world of American underground music). There are some incredible treats here, including a very early Pasadena performance by the Meat Puppets of "Lake of Fire", a song made famous when Cobain performed an acoustic version at Nirvana's classic *MTV Unplugged*



A History Lesson Part I: Punk Rock in Los Angeles in 1984 (Historical Films; US DVD: 22 Mar 2011)

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performance.

Spliced into the concert footage are short insider interviews. Mike Watt of the Minutemen talks about the stream of consciousness song-writing techniques that he and D. Boone employed, including Boone leaving random phrases lying around on scraps of paper that Watt then assembled into verse-chorus-verse. We hear the Kirkwood's of the Meat Puppets trying to define punk and explaining just how high they were when that first album was recorded.

There are no extras here and that's a shame (although not surprising given the nature of the project). You get the impression that Travis has hundreds of hours of stuff on these bands. A chance to see more of the interviews would have been welcome.

I also found myself wanting to hear more about Travis himself and, by extension, something about who the fans were and what the scene was like in the earl-'80s. This is always a discussion in American punk vis-à-vis British punk. Were American punk kids largely the children of privilege rather than the children of working class London, Manchester and Birmingham? What does this tell us about the punk scene and its meaning? Having started collecting this material at just age sixteen, Travis could have provided extraordinary insight into American punk fandom on the west coast.

Be aware that *A History Lesson Part I* is very different from the outstanding documentary film *American Hardcore: The History of American Punk Rock, 1980-1986*, the place to begin if you want to see a thorough investigation of this era. Travis has put together an introduction to the unvarnished primary sources of punk and if you like your music documentaries glossy, this one is not for you. But if you are interested in the raw footage of American music history, Travis is your teacher.

Rating: (10 circles, 8th filled)

W. Scott is a writer and an associate professor of history at the College of Charleston. He is the author of several books dealing with race, religion and popular culture in the American South. His latest is *Satan in America: The Devil We Know*, a cultural history of the concept of the Devil in American history that explores the dark side of popular religious movements and pop culture. He has worked with several documentary film projects, including the acclaimed PBS series *Slavery and the Making of America*.

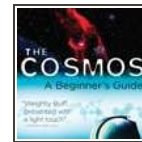


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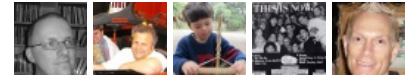
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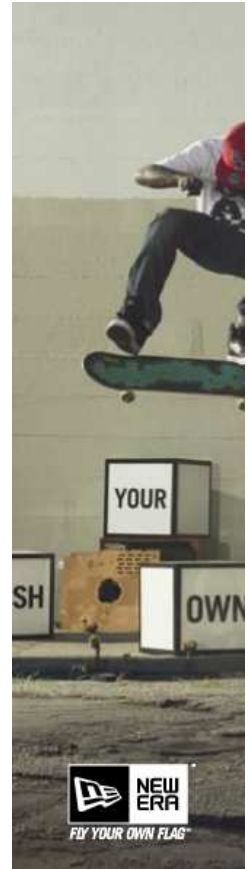


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- 10 - The Best of the Best
- 9 - Very Nearly Perfect
- 8 - Excellent
- 7 - Damn Good
- 6 - Good
- 5 - Average
- 4 - Unexceptional
- 3 - Weak
- 2 - Seriously Flawed
- 1 - Terrible



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