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## [A History Lesson, Part 1: Punk Rock in Los Angeles in 1984](#)

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By **Less Lee Moore**



My interest in this documentary on some of the bands in the mid-80s L.A. punk scene was piqued by the inclusion of Redd Kross, which, as anyone who knows me will attest, is my all time favorite band. Not because they are necessarily the best band in the world, or the most famous, or the most infamous, but because they forever changed my life for the better, a topic too lengthy to get into here, but which is, unsurprisingly, completely relevant to a discussion of *A History Lesson Part 1*.

This is not your standard glossy, let's-explain-why-punk-rock-is-so-important documentary. It's comprised of old footage shot by Dave Travis, a fan and friend of the bands featured—The Meat Puppets, The Minutemen, Twisted Roots, Redd Kross—interspersed with current interviews from members of those bands. The immediacy and importance of all the bands is captured in the grainy footage, and rather than coming across as embarrassing, it's completely invigorating.

The contrast between the “then” and the “now” aspects is not as great as one would expect from some typical nostalgia wankfest, which just shows that this isn’t one. Except for the fact that the participants are older, little about them seems to have changed. Even if you aren’t a fan of these bands and know what they’re up to these days, it’s still quite obvious they are miles away from the calculated, faux-punk mascots today’s young-uns admire. (Not mentioning any names to avoid some sort of flame war, but I’m certain you can think of a few.)

All of the participants come across as articulate, but not in an “entertainment news” fashion. They are passionate but not polished. And this is a good thing. Travis’s bare-bones style is not trying for sound bites (although there are so many good quotes to be found here, I had to stop myself from writing everything down). The titles are in a simple Courier font and there is no fancy editing, except for some antiquated video effects, some of which are possible leftovers from the time period and others that seem to have been utilized in order to create a sense of tension. Surprisingly, this actually works in Travis’s favor.

Additionally, there isn’t a lot by way of introduction or exposition, despite the fact that interview subjects are listed in the credits as “Teachers.” Again, this isn’t *Behind The Music*. Those who already know what’s up will be able to follow along; those who don’t will either be fascinated and want to know more or will simply not care. The latter camp is not the intended audience, anyway.

There is so much goodness and inspiration to be found in the 57 minutes of this documentary: Curt Kirkwood talking about “the feeling of what it was like to be depressed or stupid;” Hellin (Killer) Roessler describing kids who “never fit in anywhere and couldn’t get along with anybody;” Paul Roessler promoting “musical anarchy not political anarchy;” and Mike Watt detailing the Minutemen’s songwriting process and pulling over to a library while on tour to settle an argument with (sadly deceased) singer/guitarist D. Boon over some historical issue.

Yes, this was before the Internet when you couldn’t just hit up Wikipedia. This reveals that there is some contrast between the “then” and the “now” to be found in *A History Lesson*, but it’s not necessarily done on purpose: the most obvious is the shot of a big-ass camcorder in the audience during the Minutemen live footage. To think of the enthusiasm and dedication it took to bring that equipment out to a punk show is impressive. It’s not like now where every eight-year-old has his or her own camera phone at all times. In that respect, this concert footage, fuzzy as it may be, is even more thrilling and powerful. This is not just some YouTube upload battling for the most hits.

If you’ve wondered why I haven’t yet mentioned the contributions of Redd Kross to *A History Lesson*, it’s because, as a fan, I feel they deserve special mention. Not because their segment is the best or the most outrageous, but because it means the most to me. (And okay, fine. I’m biased.)

Steve McDonald sheds light on the band’s aesthetic and appeal when recalling that people were “anti-dinosaur rock but they weren’t necessarily anti-rock star.” Jeff McDonald talks about the impact of bands like the Meat Puppets on them and how even though they got along with the democratic element of other bands, they were never “of the people.” The best part is when he explains not wanting to sign with SST because he’s “always been really afraid of communities,” a statement that sums up so much of my life it’s kind of amazing and terrifying at the same time.

The three live songs Redd Kross performs—“Annette’s Got The Hits,” “Janus, Jeanie, and George Harrison,” and the iconic, brilliant “Linda Blair”—are also noteworthy for featuring an extremely rare, brief Redd Kross lineup: the brothers McDonald, Vicki Peterson (The Bangles) on guitar, and her brother Dave on drums. If you watch this footage, particularly “Linda Blair,” and don’t get why I love Redd Kross so much, then you’ll

probably never understand me as a person.

This is not to take anything away from the other amazing performances of the bands featured. The Meat Puppets are shown in all of their “Charles Manson or John Waters” scary glory, while The Minutemen come across as not only light years ahead of their time, but pathetically underrated. Twisted Roots is a band that I only know slightly from their association with other bands of that time period which I like, but they are mesmerizing here, and Roessler’s description of them as “PiL meets the Beatles” except not as skilled is both funny and true.

All of them, despite ostensibly being part of the same “scene” could not be more different. What *A History Lesson Part 1* shows that punk rock is not some paradigm to which you can aspire: you either are or you aren’t. There are no rules for “fitting in” with punk. In fact, if you fit in, you are probably NOT a punk. It’s not clean and sanitized and “edited for television.” It’s messy and crazy and fucked up.

It’s not pretty, but it is beautiful. *A History Lesson Part 1* is both vital and essential for understanding why.

*A History Lesson Part 1* was released by Historical Records on March 22 and is available from [See Of Sound](#). You can watch the trailer [here](#). For more on the documentary and the participants, I urge you to visit the film’s [website](#).

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