

D.O.A. Directed by Lech Kowalski (1981) MVD Entertainment Blu-ray/DVD combo

Lech Kowalski's 1981 punk documentary *D.O.A.: A Rite of Passage* has a long history of midnight screenings and VHS versions of questionable origin, with a pricey 2003 Japanese DVD being the only official release. This two disc special edition is the inaugural release from the MVD Rewind Collection, highlighting films that haven't been properly released domestically on Blu-ray.

Armed with a handheld 16mm camera and a single light, director Kowalski (accompanied and bankrolled by *High Times* magazine founder Tom Forcade) followed the Sex Pistols on their one and only U.S. tour. It was an absurd and provocative journey through a succession of wildly inappropriate redneck venues. During a typical riotous San Antonio show, Pistol's singer Johnny Rotten was pelted with whipped cream (or mashed potatoes, depending on whose story you believe), while a blood-soaked Sid Vicious struck an audience member in the head with his bass, an iconic moment captured on film. It's hard to imagine the tour was intended as anything but an elaborate media prank looking to generate headlines and scare parents.

The DNA of *D.O.A.* can be seen in many other films that followed in its wake. Julien Temple's slick Sex Pistols documentary *The Filth and the Fury* made heavy use of snippets of *D.O.A.* (more on that later.) Alex Cox's 1986 film *Sid and Nancy* features scenes that seem like virtual recreations of events documented by Kowalski. Gary Oldman's depiction of Sid Vicious is almost certainly heavily informed by Kowalski's frightening post-Pistols interview with Vicious and Nancy Spungen. Vicious is barely conscious as he sits beside Spungen as she rambles on about Sid's health problems. At one point she sprays an asthma inhaler in his mouth, oblivious to the lit cigarette that he inevitably drops in his own lap. It's an ominous and tragic bit of cinema that foreshadows the duo's demise less than two years later. (Vicious was charged with Spungen's murder in 1978. He died of an overdose in February 1979.)

Not unlike Albert and David Maysles' 1970 Rolling Stones documentary *Gimme Shelter*, Kowalski's film benefits from the rough, cinéma vérité shooting style and the suitably grainy look and feel of 16mm film. While the Maysles film was made with the cooperation of the Rolling Stones, Kowalski had no such agreement with the Sex Pistols or their record company, a situation that led to *D.O.A.* being unseen for years, entangled in a very un-punk rock web of music rights.

The complicated legal mess is addressed by *Punk* magazine founder John Holstrom in the included documentary about the making of the film: *Dead On Arrival: The Punk Documentary That Almost Never Was*. According to Holstrom, the various warring factions of the defunct Pistols steadfastly refused to grant the music rights that would allow the release of *D.O.A.* But when *Filth and Fury* director Julien Temple appropriated scenes from Kowalski's film without permission, a conciliatory settlement with Warner Bros. was reached, finally clearing the way for an officially-sanctioned release of *D.O.A.* (The still active Kowalski is conspicuously absent in the lengthy "making of" for reasons unexplained.)

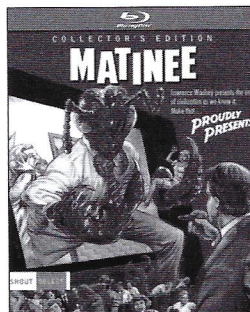
Kowalski was a perfect candidate to document the nascent punk scene. Born in London to Polish parents, Kowalski was raised in Utica, New York. After an accident thwarted his plans to become a competitive speed skater, Kowalski found himself attending The School of Visual Arts in New York in the early 1970s. Kowalski spent time in a series of menial jobs before embarking on a film career that included forays into the New York art world, documentaries and pornography. In 1978, the NYC punk scene was in full bloom, and he found himself drawn to CBGB, the epicenter of all things punk. Around that time, Kowalski met drug-smuggler-turned-publisher, Tom Forcade. Forcade's slick marijuana-themed *High Times* magazine was generating plenty of cash and he agreed to bankroll Kowalski's movie in exchange for help with his own film, the quasi-autobiographical *The Smugglers*.

Forcade and Kowalski were considered an unwelcome presence by the Sex Pistols and their management, yet they persisted, surreptitiously shooting all seven shows on the doomed tour. In January 1978, the Sex Pistols imploded, performing their last anarchic show in full meltdown mode at San Francisco's Winterland Ballroom. By the end of the year, Forcade had committed suicide and Kowalski's punk epic was in limbo.

Kowalski headed to the United Kingdom to gather slightly more controlled performances from X-Ray Spex (A vibrant and jubilant "Oh Bondage Up Yours"); Billy Idol and Generation X ("Kiss Me Deadly") and original Sex Pistol bassist Glen Matlock performing an energetic, if slightly defanged version of "Pretty Vacant" (penned by Matlock) with his post-Pistols band, the The Rich Kids. Kowalski inexplicably devotes a bit too much screen time to the truly terrible Terry & the Idiots, a teenage basement band that played one gig before disbanding. Equally strange is the inclusion of a tedious performance (reportedly cut from the original theatrical release) spotlighting the Sex Pistol's opening act in Atlanta, a local "party band", Cruis-O-Matic who appear decked out in a laughable approximation of punk rock regalia right down to a hippie vocalist sporting a comically oversize safety pin through his nose.

But it is the live footage of Sham 69 that portends something much darker to come in the punk world. Sham 69 (deservedly or not) attracted a large contingent of skinheads and hooligans, often drawn from decidedly incompatible positions on the political spectrum. Their gigs were constantly marred by violent outbreaks and turmoil. A frustrated Jimmy Pursey pleads with the crowd to settle down with apparently little effect. A bit more than a year after *D.O.A.* opened in New York, Penelope Spheeris's *The Decline of Western Civilization* would offer a similar take on the darker side of punk halfway around the world in Los Angeles.

Kevin Dougherty
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MATINEE Directed by Joe Dante (1993) Shout Select Blu-ray

Director Joe Dante delivers a slab of early 1960s nostalgia that explores the nexus of low-budget horror movies and Cold War-era fears of nuclear war with *Matinee*. It's a fun (but flawed) love letter to high-concept schlock movie promotion and the director's own monster-obsessed upbringing.

John Goodman is Lawrence Woolsey, a William Castle stand-in who arrives in Key West to promote his new film *Mant!* Woolsey has pulled out all the stops, rigging the theater seats with buzzers, firing flares and smoke, vibrating the entire theater, stationing a nurse in the lobby (Cathy Moriarty, who is also Woolsey's acerbic leading lady/girlfriend), and even hiring a local juvenile delinquent to run though the theater dressed in a Mant costume—all tricks that were utilized in real life by Castle and others during the period.

Woolsey also hires a pair of actors (screenwriter John Sayles and veteran Dick Miller) to pose as anti-violence bluenoses who lead a fake organization to protest the release of the film. Again, this was a real-life tactic sometimes pulled by low-budget filmmakers to get free press coverage—H.G. Lewis and David Friedman notoriously filed injunctions against their own movies in some markets to drum up publicity.

But this is not a movie about Woolsey, it's a coming-of-age story about teenage Gene (Simon Fenton) and his little brother (Jesse Lee Soffer), military brats whose father has been called into duty during the Cuban Missile Crisis (which unfolds throughout the film via vintage TV news clips).

While the boys' mother (Lucinda Jenney) frets at home, monster fan Gene (whose bedroom is decorated with Dante's personal collection of magazines and posters) volunteers to help Woolsey prepare the theater for the big premiere. He also meets burgeoning peacenik Sandra (Lisa Jakub) while helping his friend (Omri Katz, from the *Eerie, Indiana* series) hook up with dream girl Sherry (Kellie Martin from *Life Goes On*).

Creepy *Howling* werewolf Robert Picardo is on hand as the nerdy theater manager whose bomb shelter plays a key role during the film's climax. Jesse White appears as a cigar-chomping theater chain owner, and we see brief appearances by Belinda Balaski, Naomi Watts, and *Matinee* screenwriter Charlie Haas.

Matinee was the last film of Dante's peak period (pardon the pun), which lasted roughly from *Piranha* in 1978 to *Gremlins 2: The New Batch* in 1990. Universal attempted to open the film wide, and it quickly flopped—in part because the studio wasn't really sure how to market the quirky comedy.

But the film itself also falls a little flat. The type of manic comic energy that Dante brought to his *Gremlins* films and *The 'Burbs* is sorely missing in *Matinee* (at least until the climax, when Woolsey's special effects, the looming threat of nuclear annihilation, and a termite-eaten theater balcony all converge). *Matinee* is more of a misty-eyed, Spielbergian nostalgia trip that would've benefited from a little more hysteria. Some of this may have been due to the evolution of the script, which Dante describes in the extras as start out as a different type of story.

While *Matinee* is somewhat sub-par Dante, the *Mant!* film-within-a-film is a well-crafted homage, shot in sharp black-and-white and featuring a monster that looks believably like similar critters from period monster pictures. *Mant!* also features appearances by genre veterans William Schallert (*The Monolith Monsters*), Kevin McCarthy (*Invasion of the Body Snatchers*), and Robert Cornthwaite (*The Thing*).

Dante also created a great fake trailer for *Mant!* and other Woolsey productions, as well as hysterically awful footage for a film called *The Shook-Up Shopping Cart* that spoofs the type of sub-Disney family comedies released during the period.

The bonus features include new onscreen interviews with Dante, actress Cathy Moriarty, Mant designer Jim McPherson, actress Lisa Jakub, production designer Steve Legler, editor Marshall Harvey, and director of photography John Hora.

There are also some extras that originally appeared on the previous release of the film, including an older interview with Dante, the entirety of the *Mant!* sequences edited together, a making-of featurette, behind-the-scenes footage, deleted and extended scenes, a still gallery, and a trailer.

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