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Bad Brains Live at CBGB 1982

[MVD Audio; 2006]

Rating: 6.5

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Bad Brains' *Live at CBGB 1982* is the audio counterpart to the recently released DVD of the same name, a sight to behold: The Bad Brains at the height of their power, HR shaking hands in the crowd, dancing like a madman, seething and stalking the stage. In the crowd are black folks and white; women and men; old and young; Rasta and otherwise. Vintage CBGB, vintage Bad Brains.

The audience for this kind of creaking document is clear: Those who wish they'd been there, those who were and want to look back, and those who just really, really love the Bad Brains. There are those of us who always wanted to believe there was something *different* about this band, that every show they played was like an army marching to war; that they really did play that fast; that there was so little quit in their sound you could believe the four of them were invincible. And the recording bares witness in spite of (or because of) a soundboard that is, as befits a raging punk rock show, barely functional. Drums are no better than banging on a desk; the bass sounds like the lower half is missing; vocals are barely pronounced, let alone pronounced into a microphone.

Some contest that Bad Brains were a hardcore band first and a second-rate reggae outfit second; with this release, those people may be in for a surprise. By 1982 the band had already become a full-fledged split personality, equal parts dub-reggae and searing punk rock, and the two sit aside one another with neither explanation nor any real effort to mitigate the shock of the switch. On the DVD, you see the crowd take the band's two heads in stride, but it's jarring. Robert Christgau wrote in the *Village Voice* in 1986, that, "As a reggae band, they were a hardcore band with a change-up," but that's understating it: Maybe a hardcore band with an eephus pitch?

Check out this site's own archives and you'll find this gem, which says it well: "By the time they released their artistic milestone, *I Against I*, and reggae influences had spread deeper and deeper into their sound, the Bad Brains had already forgotten more about hardcore than most of their successors would ever learn." *Live At CBGB 1982* comes at the dead center turning of the tide, nearly equidistant between the masterpiece hardcore of their debut tape and the nearly full-on reggae of their most accomplished effort in that genre, 1986's *I Against I*.

The criminally under-compiled "Supertouch" appears here, three years after being left off their most recent best of; there's no "Pay to Cum", but "Banned in DC" and "Big Takeover" fill that gap. "I And I Survive", "Jah the Conqueror", and "Joshua's Song" step in as Bad Brains dub-reggae at its most evocative. In 1982, HR, their mercurial lyricist, was still looked upon as a prophet and near god, and his proclamations of "Real unity-not just talk about unity" get at the reason why.

Of course, those lines are also colored by the band's now known future, in which misogyny and alleged-homophobia, demons that dogged HR through clashes with gay hardcore bands, prison officials, and even the Beastie Boys, loom large. Soon "real unity" would be replaced by more esoteric loyalties; peeks at the past are complicated this way. These are not particularly intelligible versions of these songs, nor are they very well recorded. So what we're left with is the raw, screaming moment. And that, for all its discomfort, is best left for the many who would, when transported back in time, be happy to be there.

-Zach Baron, December 04, 2006

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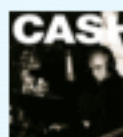
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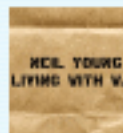
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