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Too Punk For TV: Positive Force Documentary To Premiere In D.C.

By [Ally Schweitzer](#)

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Once [Jenny Toomey](#) opened the door to MTV, her days at Positive Force's headquarters were numbered.

Toomey and Kristin Thomson ran the independent record label [Simple Machines](#) out of the punk-rock house in Arlington, Virginia, in the early 1990s. The label shared space with Mark Andersen, the co-founder of activist group [Positive Force](#) and several other lefty activists involved in the collective. Inside the house's walls, most alcohol, drugs and

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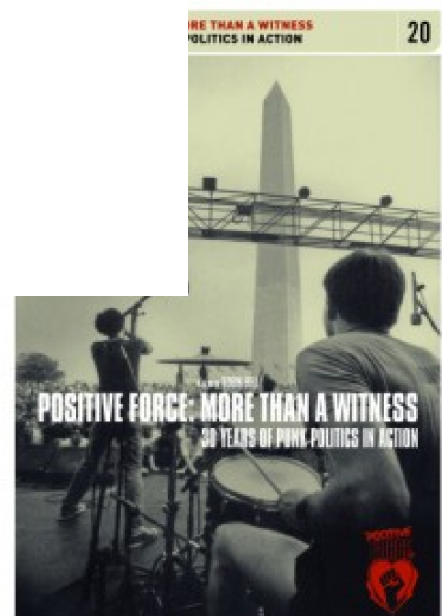
[preview at Mount Pleasant Library Thursday night](#) and formally [premieres Nov. 14-15 at St. Stephen's Church](#).

“All of a sudden, I come home to discover MTV’s in my house,” Andersen says in the film. He tells the tale with a faint smile, but at the time, it was a death blow. According to *Dance of Days*, he and Toomey stopped speaking almost entirely after the incident. “There was something about what we were doing that I think felt too commercial to Mark,” Toomey says in the film. She and Thomson soon moved out and started their own spot, the [Simple Machines House](#).

Similar ideological clashes pock the story of Positive Force, the activist collective that has put on more than 500 benefit concerts for local organizations in its 29 years. Another rift came in 2005, when a faction of Positive Force volunteers arranged [a march down Columbia Road NW that resulted in violence and more than 70 arrests](#). Some people in that group later split from Positive Force and redirected their attention toward the expressly anarchist [Brian MacKenzie Infoshop](#) in Shaw. For some, Positive Force seemed too traditional. For others, like Toomey, it seemed too uncompromising. But it still exists to this day—a testament not only to Andersen’s dedication, but also its mission’s ongoing relevance to volunteers and local musicians.

Positive Force’s operating procedure could be another reason it’s stuck around this long: In the film, Bikini Kill singer Kathleen Hanna seems a little surprised by the hoops she had to jump through to host a riot grrrl meeting at the Positive Force house, which shut its doors in 2000.

“We had to go to a Positive Force meeting first,” Hanna says. “I’d never had a pitch meeting before. But I was doing a pitch meeting for why they should let us use their house for this all-women’s radical feminist community organizing meeting.” The house’s residents eventually gave her the green light—a decision that made Positive Force one of the earliest advocates of what would become a global feminist movement.



Robin Bell has spent five years working on “Positive Force: More Than A Witness.”

[Kathleen Hanna – DC Punk Scene](#) from [Bell Visuals](#) on [Vimeo](#).

Bell, a 37-year-old filmmaker who has taught at the Corcoran, calls himself a Positive Force ally. He developed a relationship with the organization while putting in hours at the [Washington Independent Media Center](#), which [shared the Arthur S. Flemming Center](#) in Shaw with the Infoshop, Positive Force and other nonprofit groups starting in 2003. Encouraged by Positive Force members and Fugazi's Ian MacKaye, Bell began assembling *Positive Force: More Than A Witness* in 2009. Two years later he ran [a successful Kickstarter campaign](#) that grossed more than \$16,000, and he kicked in money from a hefty settlement he won after [successfully suing the D.C. government](#) after police arrested him while he was covering a 2002 protest.

To produce the film as affordably as possible, Bell turned his Mount Pleasant bedroom into a studio and conducted most of his interviews there. With Andersen's help, he recruited an impressive array of musicians who had played Positive Force shows in the past, including Dead Kennedys' Jello Biafra, The Foo Fighters' Dave Grohl, Bratmobile's Allison Wolfe, Chumbawumba's Danbert Nobacon, Anti-Flag's Justin Sane and Trophy Wife's Katy Otto. Bell traveled to interview indie rocker Ted Leo, Kathleen Hanna, Against Me!'s Laura Jane Grace and notably Crass founding member Penny Rimbaud, whom Bell filmed at [Dial House](#), the artist's famous rural commune in Essex, England. (Rimbaud whipped up an amazing pasta dish, Bell says.)

To channel the grimy intensity of a typical Positive Force show in the 1980s and '90s, Bell included remarkable concert footage (much of which he helped funnel toward [the D.C.-themed episode of Dave Grohl's HBO series, *Sonic Highways*](#)). Among that footage, some of which is online: visceral scenes from Bikini Kill and Fugazi protest concerts

downtown and a particularly raucous Nation of Ulysses gig at Columbia Heights' Sacred Heart Church in 1991. In the latter, singer Ian Svenonius is seen tossing himself like a flour sack into an undulating crowd—whose ticket money that night benefited the victims of the Latin American debt crisis.



To Bell, part of the point of making *Positive Force: More Than A Witness* was to show people from all over the world how music and activism can intersect, and in this case, under the banner of Positive Force. He describes the collective's ethos as, "Let's not just talk about the problem; we're actually going to try to find a creative solution to it."

But in today's D.C. scene, we don't see many of the charged, angsty punk protests that Bell spotlights in his documentary. Andersen now spends most of his time working with local organization [We Are Family](#), a group that provides food, services and companionship to D.C. senior citizens. Meanwhile, Positive Force benefit shows seem fewer and farther between.

Is Positive Force winding down? "I don't think it's over," Bell says. "I think it's just changed." Protest movements ebb and flow, he says, and young idealistic people—the folks Positive Force has traditionally appealed to—face an ever-climbing cost of living in D.C. and its suburbs. "Now, with just how expensive it is to live in the city, pretty much everyone who's young is under the gun," Bell says.

Andersen says Positive Force’s benefit shows can happen as often as local bands want them to. “The musicians who played for us... we couldn’t work nearly as effectively without them,” he says. Fugazi—who only played free shows, protests and benefits in D.C., many of them connected to Positive Force—was the group’s greatest gift. But Fugazi last performed in 2002. Other local bands have stepped up to play Positive Force gigs, but it’s hard to match the draw Fugazi had in its peak years.

Nevertheless, Andersen says Positive Force is less about self-preservation than its ideas.

“If the vehicle wears out, then you find another one,” he says in the documentary. “The energy, the idea, the attitude, the spirit is what counts. I think the spirit’s still there... whether Positive Force is there or not.”

Mark Andersen is scheduled to appear on WAMU’s Kojo Nnamdi Show Thursday at noon. Robin Bell discusses Positive Force: More Than A Witness [Thursday evening at Mount Pleasant Library](#). The film premieres Nov. 14 and 15 at St. Stephen’s Church.

Due to a reporting error, the original version of this article misidentified Penny Rimbaud as the singer of Crass. He co-founded and contributed vocals to the legendary punk band, but Rimbaud mostly played drums in the group. The article has been corrected.

🔖 [Bikini Kill](#), [Crass](#), [Dave Grohl](#), [Dead Kennedys](#), [Jello Biafra](#), [Jenny Toomey](#), [Johnny Temple](#), [Kathleen Hanna](#), [Mark Andersen](#), [Penny Rimbaud](#), [Positive Force](#), [Punk](#), [Riot Grrrl](#), [Robin Bell](#), [Simple Machines](#), [Sonic Highways](#)

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