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Pistol Camera - "X The Unheard Music" and Other Great Punk Documentaries

by [Paul Gaita](#) on December 20, 2011



On March 13, MVD will release a new edition of the 1986 documentary [The Unheard Music](#), which profiled the seminal Los Angeles punk band **X**. The new "Silver Anniversary Edition" disc, which commemorates the quarter-century since the film's original release, offers a new transfer and 5.1 surround sound mix, as well as new interviews with founding members **Exene Cervenka** and **John Doe** along with outtakes and behind-the-scenes footage.

More than just a snapshot of the L.A. underground music scene in the 1980s, *The Unheard Music* is just one of a handful of documentary features that attempted to chronicle the development of punk - both music and lifestyle - during its seminal years in the 1970s and 1980s outside of the frequently uninformed coverage of the mainstream media. Following are 10 great punk docs that preserve the sound and passion of the period.

Sadly, such exceptional efforts as **Lech Kowalski's** *D.O.A.: A Rite of Passage* (1980) and **Penelope**

Spheris' *The Decline of Western Civilization* (1981) and *The Decline of Western Civilization III* (1998) are excluded from this list, as all are, as of this post, unavailable in legal DVD releases.

[Urgh! A Music War](#) (1982) The music does the talking in this who's who of punk and New Wave in concert. Performances by major players like **the Police**, **Dead Kennedys**, **X**, **DEVO**, **Go-Gos**, **Cramps**, **XTC**, **Pere Ubu** and **Joan Jett and the Blackhearts** are paired with footnote figures like Magazine, Surf Punks and Skafish, which (intentionally or not) underscores the democratic intent of the scene. The film's showstopper/curio piece is performance artist **Klaus Nomi**, whose soaring falsetto and alien presence were later detailed in the 2004 doc *The Nomi Song*.

[Another State of Mind](#) (1984) This harrowing account of **Social Distortion** and **Youth Brigade's** tour through Canada and the U.S. in 1982, should be required viewing for all aspiring punk musicians. Not only does it detail the highs and lows of live performances, from dedicated fans to dilapidated vans and unscrupulous club owners (Youth Brigade drummer **Mark Stern** displays a fistful of penny rolls offered in payment for a San Francisco show), but

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also the hazards inherent to playing music outside the mainstream, from disdain to threats of arrest and outright violence. While aspects of punk has gained some respect in 21st century society, the hardships faced by the bands here, which are joined by **Ian MacKaye** and **Minor Threat** near the end of the film, are still a reality in corners of the world, making this cautionary tale still relevant after nearly three decades.

[The Clash - Westway to the World](#) (2000) / [Joe Strummer: The Future is Unwritten](#) (2007) The UK's mighty **Clash** and its singer and chief lyricist, **Joe Strummer**, are paid proper respect in these two retrospective features. Director **Don** (*The Punk Rock Movie*, *Punk: Attitude*) **Letts'** Grammy-winning *Westway to the World* is a capable introduction to the band's history via footage from their heyday (1977-1982) and interviews with its members post-breakup, while **Julien Temple's** *The Future is Unwritten* digs deeper to present a warts-and-all bio on Strummer, with detailed focus on his life pre- and post-Clash.

[The Filth and the Fury: A Sex Pistols Film](#) (2000) Julien Temple attempts to place the **Sex Pistols** into a context far removed from the hysteria and shock that erupted during their emergence in late '70s Britain. The result, which combines period footage with new interviews with the surviving members and a dizzying array of visual non sequiters, is neither a canonization nor a dismissal of the Pistols, but rather an effort to preserve the righteous indignation of their music in the face of a country and culture in mid-collapse, which draws uncomfortable parallels to the present-day global economic situation.

[Instrument: Ten Years with the Band Fugazi](#) (2001) An exhaustive overview of Ian Mackaye's highly influential, post-Minor Threat outfit **Fugazi**, this two-hour-plus effort by **Jem Cohen** is a collection of live performances from the band's lengthy history along with interviews that detail the development of their fan-oriented ethics (low ticket prices, all-ages shows, label allegiance). Those looking for a historical document may be thwarted by the film's loose construction, but fans will be rapturous over the wealth of live material spanning Fugazi's 16-year history.

[End of the Century - The Story of the Ramones](#) (2003) The history of the **Ramones**, from their status as rock and roll's saviors in the early '70s to their fractious, messy end in 1996, has been detailed in countless books, magazine articles and films, but this long-gestating project, launched in 1994 and completed nearly a decade later, details both the joyful and ugly aspects of their myth in the words of the band members themselves. What results is a honest depiction of the Ramones as history makers who ignited the conflagration of punk rock for the generations that followed, but ultimately were themselves unable to keep warm by it.

[New York Doll](#) (2005) A bittersweet story of downfall and redemption, this award-winning feature details the life of **Arthur "Killer" Kane**, bassist for the glam-punk pioneers the **New York Dolls**, who endured decades of substance abuse and emotional turmoil before finding solace in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. When a opportunity to play with his former bandmates arises in 2004, the fragile Kane must weigh his own self-preservation against a chance to reclaim his legacy. Alternately enthralling and heartbreaking, *New York Doll* is a moving testimony to the perils of rock and roll, as well as its power to reinvent and revive.

[We Jam Econo: The Story of the Minutemen](#) (2006) San Pedro's beloved and fiercely independent **Minutemen**, who railed against political injustice in their tightly wound blend of punk, jazz and roots rock, receive a loving tribute in this recollection about their under-the-radar but potent influence on alternative music. The fraternal relationship between singer **D. Boon** and bassist **Mike Watt** - now an elder statesman of the indie scene - and their attempt to make intelligent, passionate music in the grisly pop/rock scene of the early '80s are detailed in interviews with Watt, drummer **George Hurley**, and an all-star list of punk admirers, from **Henry Rollins** and **Flea** to critic **Richard Meltzer** and future Watt cohorts **Joe Baiza**, **Nels Cline** and **Ed Crawford (FIREHOSE)**.

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[American Hardcore - The History of Punk Rock 1980-1986](#) (2006) Summing up punk rock in a single film is a daunting prospect that invariably leaves one or more factions of fans feeling slighted, and both this documentary, inspired by **Steven Blush's** [book of the same name](#), and the following pictures, have earned brickbats for their omissions (here, it's the Dead Kennedys and **Husker Du**, undoubtedly for legal reasons). But for its wealth of interviews and vintage clips, *American Hardcore* is a worthwhile addition to any punk aficionado's collection.

[Punk's Not Dead](#) (2008) and [Punk: Attitude](#) (2005) Both features have their merits, with Don Letts' *Punk: Attitude* offering a historical perspective via interviews with veteran performers, and *Punk's Not Dead* taking the genre's pulse in the 21st century. Again, neither presents the Compleat Punk Picture, but serve as competent and often invigorating elements of a vast, unruly and still-vibrant punk portrait.

Also worth seeing: [Hated: GG Allin and the Murder Junkies](#) (1994), **Todd Phillips'** profile of the doomed, nihilist rocker, who took punk's transgressive qualities to self-destructive lengths; [Afro-Punk](#) (2005), which examines issues of race within the punk community, with performances by and interviews with black and interracial acts like **Fishbone**, **TV on the Radio** and **24-7 Spyz**; [The Gits](#) (2008), a moving look at the life of the Seattle band and their frontwoman, **Mia Zapata**, whose 1993 murder cut short a promising career; and [Taqwacore: The Birth of Punk Islam](#) (2009), which examines the rise of punk culture among Islamic youth in both the U.S. and abroad. --
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