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## **X: The Unheard Music**

by

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5 Comments 

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**Director:** W.T. Morgan

**Cast:** John Doe, Exene Cervenka, Billy Zoom, D.J. Bonebrake

### **The Film:**

The first time that I heard X was during a late-night viewing of "*The Decline of Western Civilization*". It would be accurate to say that they didn't make much of an impression on me; my mentality was fuelled by a new-found love for hardcore punk, and X's brand of aggressive rock 'n' roll didn't cut it. Although they were head and shoulders above other featured bands like The Germs and Alice Bag, I was much more a fan of FEAR, The Circle Jerks, and Ron Reyes-era Black Flag. Content to dismiss X as irrelevant, a band who wouldn't stay the course, I soldiered on with hardcore naivety.

Well, shut my mouth. Flash forward more than 20 years, and most of those hardcore groups that I loved are dead or disbanded, and the original lineup of X soldiers on, playing to solid crowds of fans of all ages in countries all over the world; still managing to evade the massive success that they most definitely deserve, a story told in the 1985 documentary X: The Unheard Music.

Whereas Spheeris' *Decline of Western Civilization* provided a snapshot of a few musical groups and a lacklustre attempt at social commentary through interviews with the bands (that went from uninteresting to hilarious to annoying), *The Unheard Music* is a well-conceived display of cinematic art that scrutinizes the idea of the American Dream and other idealistic philosophies by pulling back the skin of Hollywood and letting the viewer peek inside. Central to this piece is a somewhat unsavoury look at the people running the show; the record companies, the advertising agencies, the demographic analysts, and the city council members who close down the clubs in the name of urban gentrification. By pulling together not just clips of the band, but also stock and novelty footage, W.T. Morgan and the rest of the Angel City crew have created a visual assault that is lacking only in the area of dull moments.

What's that, you ask? Where does X fit into all of this? If politics and the Hollywood scene aren't your thing, there's also plenty of music in the form of X songs from their first four albums. The film starts off with a letter from a fan to Slash Records, thanking X for making the Los Angeles album, and proceeds from there, giving a history of the band from the group members themselves, and featuring a number of live performances. The concert segments are all tastefully done, with no rapid-fire editing dominating the screen to simulate energy; the energy is in the music. The audio mix is almost perfect (though the different tracks will be discussed in the Audio section) with good representation from all of the players. Breaking up the performances are some more "intimate" interviews, with Billy Zoom sitting on his couch playing clarinet before talking about his father's musical influences and how music in the family perhaps influenced him, which then leads into some tasty fingerpickin' on a big ol' Gretsch. Drummer DJ Bonebrake hangs out in his kitchen and demonstrates how a coffee percolator inspires unique drum patterns and busts out some other percussive tricks as well, and later we're treated to some more moving stuff like John Doe and Exene Cervenka duetting on Hank Williams, and Exene talking about the loss of her sister.

There are also a few surprise cameos to be found; X Producer and Doors keyboardist Ray Manzarek talks about how he came to discover the band and realized immediately how relevant and cutting edge they were, later joining the band onstage for a cover of "Soul Kitchen". Rodney Bingenheimer of Rodney on the (K)Roq also shows up with Jello Biafra to comment on "Broadcasting Today", and sadly, not much has changed in popular radio. As a sort of companion sequence, two interviews with executives from MCA and Slash Records are juxtaposed (along with a well-placed clip of the Edsel), illustrating exactly why a solid band like X will probably never find a spot at the top of the popular music charts.

All in all, there's too much to cover in this review; despite the proliferation of boring, one-sided music documentaries put out to support undeserving bands, *X: The Unheard Music* defies simple explanation and has earned the title of documentary *film*.

### **Video/Audio/Extras:**

MVDVisual brings *X: The Unheard Music* to DVD with a 1.78:1 anamorphic transfer that

looks great considering the age and source materials. Being that a number of the clips were stock footage and more than likely in less-than-ideal condition, a fair amount of dirt and scratches can be expected, but definitely adds to the character. Likewise, some of the at-home segments shot with the band are a little soft, but not out of place. The concert segments are better, but still on the soft side. This will not detract from the enjoyment of seeing them.

There are two audio tracks on the DVD; the Dolby Digital 2.0 track is my preference, with surprisingly good dynamic range and bass response, without being over the top. The Dolby Digital 5.1 definitely opens things up, but the separation gives the concert segments a somewhat disjointed feel. Both tracks are mastered well, though, and will more than likely have their equal admirers.

Angel City has also brought a number of extras to the disc. The first supplement, John and Exene Dialogue, is probably the most interesting, featuring X members John Doe and Exene Cervenka in a modern interview, talking about the film being made, the fan letter that opens the movie, and life back in the day. Both participants have a lot of good stories and are engaging speakers, and the 18-minute running time goes by too quickly.

Next up is an Interview with Angel City, the company behind the film. Writer/Director W.T. Morgan, with colleagues Christopher Blakely, Everett Greaton, and Alizabeth Foley discuss their interest in telling the story of X, and how they put the film together against the odds. Clips from the film and footage of Angel City making the film are spread throughout the 15-minute running time.

A live outtake of the band performing Some Other Time is included, as is a Theatrical Trailer.

Rounding out the extras is The Unheard Music Songbook, a slideshow featuring John and Exene's artwork.

**The Final Word:**

Seeing X: The Unheard Music was an enjoyable and enlightening experience. Even the casual fan of the band or the music scene in the 80's will find something to take away with them.