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## X: The Unheard Music - Landmark 1986 Rock Concert Film



A quintessential L.A. punk rock band that scorched through the Hollywood scene, they put their brand on the musical landscape with one letter: **X**. Founded in 1977 by vocalist/bassist John Doe and guitarist Billy Zoom, they were soon joined by Doe's then girlfriend Exene Cervenka, whose poetry and vocals sparked a chemical fire. Drummer DJ Bonebrake sealed the wax on the envelope. Ex-Doors keyboard player Ray Manzarek helped deliver the whole package to a wider audience when he produced their debut album titled *Los Angeles*, in 1980 (Manzarek also produced the next two albums, *Wild Gift* and *Under the Big Black Sun*). Around this time director W.T. Morgan gets involved and then spends five years working on a film, which is not just about the band, but also about an era. It is released in 1986 as **X: The Unheard Music**, an innovative documentary that would eventually get archived by *Sundance* into their UCLA collection. It also, recently, finally got the Blu-Ray treatment (the film had long been plagued by legal problems that had otherwise kept it from being easily seen). Several recent screenings of the film preceded live shows with the original lineup of **X** as they played

at various stops in the U.S.

After the title sequence for the film we see a woman in a car, listening to a handheld radio, and reading *The Power of Positive Thinking*. She is narrating her own letter to the band, during which we cut to live scenes onstage of X as a clapboard is positioned in front of Cervenka's face. *Scene: L.A. Take: 2. Sound: Sync. Angel City Prods. 7247 "Unheard Music" Dir: Morgan May 4 '81.* Gentle guitar chords build up to something noisier as the musicians take their place. We cut back to the narrator as she leaves her parked car and walks off toward the L.A. cityscape in the background, and then we see X ripping into their song *Los Angeles*. As the song plays, we see footage of the band intercut with homeless gamblers, helicopters, flashing neon signs advertising "Bail Bonds," a shoeless drunk passed out in front of a Savings and Loan Hollywood branch, a Los Angeles Police Dept. van, and a blur of other images evoking the messy humanity of its time.

Not much has changed with that messy bit of humanity. The same scenes are with us now, if not more so. Unsurprising for any documentary shot during the early '80's, Reagan is referenced several times during the visual collages. To some of that time it was obvious that an auspicious new form of televised class warfare was being elevated to new levels that simultaneously glorified trickle-down-economics while demonizing a mythological welfare queen. Here we are now, almost 30 years later, and the complaints leveled against Reagan that the rich were getting richer while the poor were getting poorer are quaint by comparison. Thank God for music. It's what's left for the rest of us.

Guitarist Billy Zoom's life changed in '77 when he saw The Ramones at the Golden West Ballroom in an L.A. suburb. Soon thereafter he met John Doe via a want-ad in a local music rag. Doe, originally from Baltimore, but familiar with the CBGB's scene, connected with Zoom, and from there the ripple effects spread further.

B&W footage of a nuclear test bomb footage. Our protagonist returns, still in the car as she flips through her handheld radio. A collage of ads illustrate "Western Civilization at its most hideous." Cut to: Wolves. Then: more shots of L.A., and again the band. Interviews. A bit of history. This is followed by some home footage. We hear Exene's voice as she talks about meeting John at a poetry workshop in Venice. There's a scooter. Color. Could this bohemian vibe be an extension of the Beats? Close enough. The home movie footage continues and we suddenly see Zoom talking about how his dad was into jazz. Next up: drummer, whose roots go into both big band music and Captain Beefheart. Cut to: a live performance of X playing their song "Year One."

The band reminisces about playing at *The Masque*, alongside many others - The Plugz, the Germs, the Go-Gos, etc. Graffiti-covered walls give way to the song "We're Desperate," played over a quick montage of mostly black-and-white photos to chronicle the club's glory years, punctuated by strong colors, destitution, unexpected skulls, scenes from the mosh pit, 'zine covers, leather boots, and all of this hits your retina at a Bonebrake pace. We're only three songs in, with 13 more to go. It's not a chore. It's a thrill.

Coming up: "Because I Do", "Beyond & Back", "Come Back to Me", "Soul Kitchen", "White Girl", "The Once Over Twice", "Motel Room in My Bed", "The Unheard Music", "Real Child of Hell", "Johnny Hit & Run Paulene", "I Must Not Think Bad Thoughts", "The World's a Mess"; "It's in my Kiss," and... "The Have Nots."

By now it should be clear that **X: The Unheard Music** will not be a straight-up doc with trained cameras only paying attention to either musicians or their audience. Morgan's film aims for something bigger. By mixing in photographs, found footage, news-clips, and much more, he is aiming for a cinematic form of cubism that captures more than the musicians themselves. He wants the time in which they lived, their scene, and their place within a fuller context as covered from as many angles as possible. X was more than a spot marked out in Los Angeles. It helped map a generation.

The "Xtras" on **X: The Unheard Music** include: "John & Exene Dialogue," "Interview with Angel City," "Some Other Time (Live Outtake)," "Original Theatrical Trailer," and "The Unheard Music Songbook."

To order **X The Unheard Music**, go to [TCM Shopping](#).

by Pablo Kjolseth

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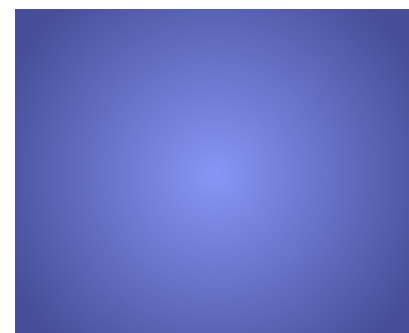
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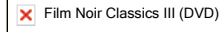
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