



## The Unheard Music Review

by Anders Nelson

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Despite at least one seminal documentary (*The Decline of Western Civilization*) and a few good books (*We Got The Neutron Bomb* being one), Los Angeles punk largely lives in the shadow of its New York counterpart. Its modern fandom (though vociferous) is substantially smaller, and is regularly overlooked in the critical hosannas doled out by critical institutions like *Rolling Stone*, whose blinders generally obscure anybody who wasn't a mainstay at CBGB. In that context, *The Unheard Music* is a valuable document, and presents as raw, unfiltered a look into that period of greatest productivity as you're likely to ever see. It's a shame that it isn't stronger as a stand-alone film.

X's *Los Angeles* is as revered an album as punk ever birthed, and contains the song for which this documentary is named. Though they certainly didn't slack off after that (they produced another three critically successful albums), their reputation is built upon it in the same way that William S. Burroughs's is built off of *Naked Lunch*, as a towering work among lesser but compelling entries in the catalog. When *The Unheard Music* starts to cover its release, it feels more like a documentary than it does at any other point, partially because it deals with it in the most conventional way possible: spinning newspaper headlines gushing accolades. It's the most coherent part of *Music*, but also the least inventive.

The rest of the film therefore presents something of a devil's bargain: exciting and freeform, but difficult to really ingest if you're not already familiar with the L.A. punk scene and its figureheads. Perhaps half could be seen as straight-forward documentary, with most of that being concert footage and interviews with the band (being John Doe, Exene Cervenka, Billy Zoom, D.J. Bonebrake), all of which is strikingly straight-forward. While most notable music documentaries feature established performers with an image to protect, these guys are more than comfortable simply playing the xylophone for a little while, whether or not you're watching. But in contrast to these moments of great placidity are the concerts themselves, which are exactly the raucous affairs that oral history would have you believe. That they are presented with such little commentary reinforces *Music's* virtues as a documentary; Morgan himself makes virtually no inferences about the scene not drawn from members of the band or their contemporaries (most notably Ray Manzarek).

The other half, however, is an odd mixture of art pieces and found footage that isn't necessarily stock, but is thrown together so seemingly at random that its purpose is rarely clear. Some of it is time-setting (there's a lot of footage of Reagan), but it usually gives the impression of channel-surfing. The contrast between the two is jarring, and *The Unheard Music* rarely feels like a cohesive film as a result.

But in that way, it's probably more valuable than if it were. Punk is nothing if not a statement of defiance against authority in all its forms, be that conservative government, the record industry, or the societal insistence that everything look and feel the way they want it to. A

primary ethos of punk is that, with a little invention and elbow grease, you can sustain a creative lifestyle for yourself without anyone else's assistance (let alone the approval of anyone in a suit), and *Music* is reflective of that. Even if it doesn't show the fine-tuning that would come with years of practice (or studio-backing), it's defiant enough in its originality to document the spirit of a movement too frequently overlooked.

### **SPECIAL FEATURES**

There is some cut raw footage (including an interview with Angel City and a live performance), a theatrical trailer, and an interactive look at their scrapbook (viewable in PDF form in a computer drive).

*"The Unheard Music" is on sale December 13, 2011 and is not rated. Concert-Film. Directed by Wt Morgan. Written by W.T. Morgan. Starring John Doe, Exene Cervenka, Billy Zoom, Dj Bonebrake, Ray Manzarek.*

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