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## Blu-ray Review: X - THE UNHEARD MUSIC



by [J Hurtado](#), February 8, 2012 2:09 PM

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Full disclosure: X is one of my favorite bands, and I've seen this film a number of times, so I will gush about their importance in the world of music and my life. This is a band, formed before I was even born, that has managed to meld all of my influences, both musically and philosophically in a way that no other group has done since. Their affection for pure rock 'n roll, 50's culture, art, literature, and the power of music continues to move me to this day. *X - The Unheard Music* is a documentary that takes those elements and puts them on display for the layman, and I believe it helps to explain why I hold them so dear. This is no ordinary *Behind the Music* styled documentary, but more of a meditation on the genesis and art of X, with brilliantly expressive direction from WT Morgan, a definite winner.

X formed in 1977 in the immediate aftermath of The Ramones bringing punk rock to the world. Inspired by *Da Bruddas* dedication to three chord rock and roll and short bursts of intense energy, bassist John Doe and guitar player Billy Zoom found each other via the want ads in a Los Angeles music mag. Doe's affinity for beat poetry and Billy Zoom's affinity for rock 'n roll and jazz mixed together to create some of the most energetic, intense, and introspective music of the '70s and the early '80s. Shortly after Doe and Zoom got together, John met Exene Cervenka in a poetry class and the two began dating and later married, but before all of that, he brought her in to try out as a singer, which turned out to be part of X's fantastic unique sound. After trying out several folks in the burgeoning LA punk scenes behind the drum kit, the band settled on multi-talented percussionist DJ Bonebrake, who is among the great rock drummers of all time, as well as contributing vibraphone to several early X tracks.

*The Unheard Music* takes its time exploring all of the divergent characters that make up this band of

misfits. Doe and Cervenka, as the main songwriters, get the most screentime, but they also prove to be the most compelling figures, so it kinda works out. Much of X's aesthetic is courtesy of Exene's artistic taste, which ranges from early '20s fashion, to religious iconography and everything in between. Doe is the main songwriter, but shares credit with Exene on lyrics in a lot of cases. That being said, the normally very quiet Billy Zoom gets several brief, and now rare, interview segments detailing his history and pedigree. In the early '70s, Zoom played guitar for legendary rockabilly artist Gene Vincent's touring band in their waning years, and he is also a multi-instrumentalist who has been wailing away on the guitar since he was six. His laid back rock stance on stage and immovable smile is a trademark of X's live performances, so it's nice to see the machine come to life a little. Bonebrake also gets his time in the spotlight, demonstrating his magical grasp of percussion and the ways in which it can contribute to rock 'n roll that are rarely explored. Overall, Morgan spends a decent amount of time with everyone, and this avoids becoming the John and Exene show, as is often the case with X related media.

Morgan's direction is as kinetic and energetic as the band's live performances, many of which are thankfully preserved for posterity in the film. He helped to create a fantastic music video for the song *The Marrying Kind*, shot as a black and white silent film with Exene playing a ghost that is just stunning. There is also a lot of collage and montage in the film, which also reflects the band's aesthetics, just check out the cover of *Wild Gift* and you'll see what I mean. Footage has been culled from all manner of sources, and Morgan mixes it skillfully, never allowing the film's educational mission to become burdensome. There is archival TV interview footage, new interview footage, stock footage from Hollywood B-movies, as well as a wealth of awesome live performance footage. There is never a dull moment, and by the end of the film, you'll definitely understand who the band is.



Much to my chagrin, as well as thousands of fans around the world, X's path after this film was not as smooth as the one riding up to its release. Morgan clairvoyantly hints at the music industry's inability to place X in a niche, and that ultimately ended up being a small part of the band's ultimate dissolution. There are numerous discussions with record company execs about how to market this band, and it really is nearly impossible. X's lack of commercial success led to tensions in the band, which eventually led to a number of calamities that brought them to their knees in the late '80s. John and Exene's divorce, Billy Zoom leaving the band, and their attempts at crossing over (they performed Wild Thing for the Major League soundtrack), all took their tolls, and the band broke up around 1990. They've since come back with the original line up, they still tour and play the hits, but they haven't released a new album since the disastrous *Hey Zeus!* in 1993. Thankfully they still put in the energy of a bunch of twenty-something kids when they play live, and finding X remains one of my formative experiences. This film captures the reasons beautifully, and in more depth than their brief segment in Penelope Spheeris' *The Decline of Western Civilization*, however, both films are crucial to understanding the journey of X, and I recommend them both. Unfortunately, *Decline* hasn't been available on home video since the VHS days (my copy is well worn), but we have *The Unheard Music* to comfort us, we can take solace in that.

The Disc:

I didn't have high hopes for this disc, to be honest, ultra low-budget documentaries aren't usually the kind of films that get top notch treatment on Blu-ray. However, I came away very satisfied with what I saw. As I mentioned above, the film is culled from numerous different video sources, so the elements don't all match in terms of quality. The material that was shot for the film, however, is beautiful! It isn't always tack sharp, but that seems to be more a failing of the source elements, but several segments sport beautiful rich colors, and even a bit of depth here and there. The video for *The Marrying Kind* looks particularly spectacular in black and white, as well. I'm very happy with the way the image has been treated on this Blu-ray disc, it is certainly an improvement over my old DVD, and I'm happy to have it. The audio, which is understandably crucial to a film like this, makes an even bigger jump forward in quality, with booming bass, and electrifying live performances to test your home theater. There isn't anything in the way of surround activity, but the music makes this absolutely worth checking out.

MVD and Angel City Media have provided a few great extras for this 25th anniversary edition of the film. There is a 20+ minute segment featuring separate interviews with John and Exene about the film and that time in their lives that is very edifying to see. They talk about what the film reminds them of, and the process of making it, as well as where they were at that time in their lives. There is also a deleted live performance of *Some Other Time* that still rocks, even with its audio faults. There is also a great teaser trailer included that really sell the film well.

I can't say enough good things about this film, and the disc is definitely worth upgrading. Highly recommended.

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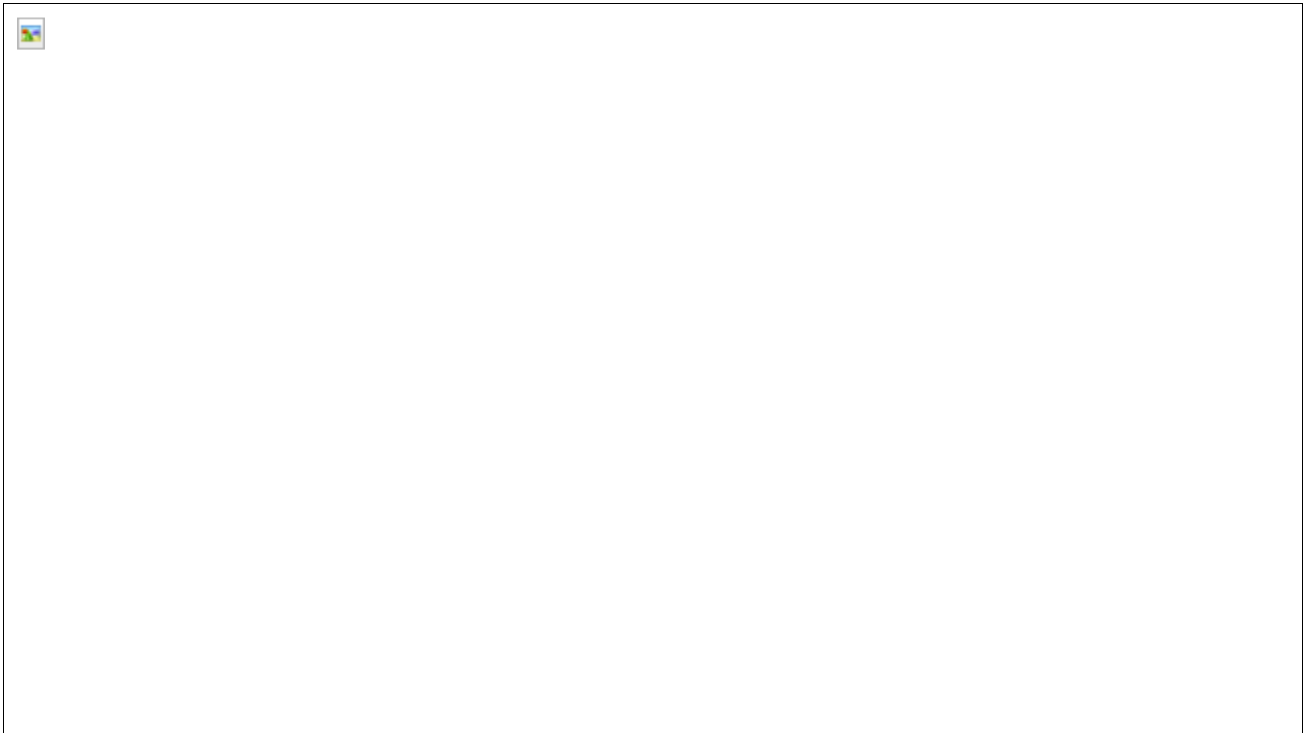
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Special Features:

- Interviews with the John Doe & Exene Cervenka
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by [Kurt Halfyard](#), March 23, 2012 7:53 AM

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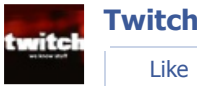
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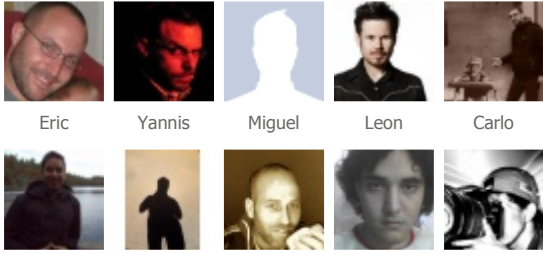
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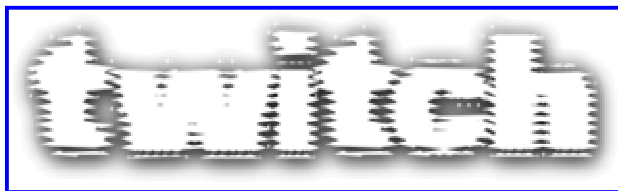


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