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History Lesson Part 1: Punk Rock in Los Angeles In 1984

Derailroded: Inside the Mind of Larry “Wild Man” Fischer

One of the problems caused by bad acoustics and inadequate sound engineering is that, when they're combined, any rock musician can appear to be demented. On DVD, these deficiencies often require viewers to continually turn down the sound of live performances and increase the volume of interviews. Otherwise, you'll wake the baby and the neighbors will think you're demented.

To untrained eyes and ears, expressions of anger often resemble the ravings of a lunatic (hence, Glenn Beck) and punk rockers were nothing, if not angry. Los Angeles cult icon Larry “Wild Man” Fischer is angry, too, but his rage has been diagnosed as paranoid schizophrenia, mixed with a bipolar disorder. Constructed largely from material recorded a quarter-century ago, or more, “**History Lesson Part 1**” and “**Derailroded**” both suffer from the inadequacy of then-available technology. Watched today, extreme patience is required to fully appreciate the intentions of the documentaries' makers. It is rewarded, though.

With all due regard for London, Detroit and New York, L.A. proved as comforting an incubator for punk rock as the scenes from which sprung the Sex Pistols, Ramones and Stooges. X, the Germs and Black Flag may be the most fondly recalled of L.A. ensembles, but, in 1984, the Meat Puppets, Minutemen, Twisted Roots and Redd Kross also were making names for themselves. The genre had also been subdivided to include “psychedelic punk rock,” a form favored by musicians in SoCal and Phoenix. “History Lesson Part 1” is comprised of performance videos made by Dave Travis in 1984 and interviews conducted a dozen years later, with Mike Watt (Minutemen), Jeff and Steve McDonald (Redd Kross), Cris and Curt Kirkwood (Meat Puppets), Paul Roessler (Screamers, Twisted Roots, DC3) and Hellin “Killer” Roessler. They're interesting, but keep a tight grip on the volume control.

“Wild Man” Fischer may seem to be completely off his rocker most of the time, but he easily qualifies as a survivor of the various 1960s scenes. Committed to a mental institution as a teenager, Fischer was discovered on the streets of Hollywood by Frank Zappa, who would record his first album of “outsider” music. He had been making a fragile living, performing impromptu songs, which he would conceive on the spot for dimes. When they made sense at all, the lyrics reflected an overriding dissatisfaction with the status quo, parents and capitalism that was shared by tens of thousands of other long-haired “freaks.” And, when he wasn't angry, Fischer was capable of writing the kind of “peppy” novelty songs that, years later, might have found a place on Pee-wee Herman's TV shows. He appeared on “Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In” and collaborated with Linda Ronstadt, Tom Waits, Jim Morrison, Janis Joplin, Rosemary Clooney and Mark Mothersbaugh, of Devo. “Derailroded” first hit the festival circuit in 2005 and contains much archival footage and interviews, as well as fresh material shot in the early 2000s. Because of the Fischer's condition(s), the documentary isn't always a pleasant experience. It is, though, a reminder of time when eccentrics were respected for what they brought to the table, not what they were worth in the marketplace. –
Gary Dretzka

