



The Ask

Music Film Maker David Markey: My Career as a Punk

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Circle Jerks co-founders Keith Morris (left) and Greg Hetson, back in the day.

[David](#)
[Markey's](#)

latest music documentary, [My Career as a Jerk](#), features Super-8 footage of the Circle Jerks he shot for his first, the 1982

punk collage [The Slog Movie](#). It's a fitting bit of recycling: for three decades Markey has been one of the premier chroniclers of American punk, primarily the Southern California hardcore scene of the early '80s and its seismic impact on indie music and culture. He was a key participant in that scene, not just as a budding filmmaker but as a writer/photographer (for the zine *We Got Power!*) and musician (drumming for the bands Sin 34 and Painted Willie).

Since then Markey has directed close to a dozen, mostly music-themed docs and narrative features, including *Reality 86'd*, an impressionistic travelogue of Black Flag's final tour in 1985 (never commercially released but widely viewable online, with the filmmaker's blessing); the cult/trash comedies *Desperate Teenage Lovedolls* and *Lovedolls Superstar*; and, most famously, [1991: The Year Punk Broke](#), which followed Sonic Youth headlining a European festival tour that also featured a cusp-of-global-stardom Nirvana.

His new film details the history of iconic LA punks the Circle Jerks, splicing a trove of stinging live footage from throughout

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the band's run (much of it shot by the young Markey through a sea of slam dancers) and deep-digging accounts of its multiple rises and falls from founding Jerks Keith Morris (now with Off!) and Greg Hetson (Bad Religion) and other key members of the group's frequently revolving lineups.

My Career as a Jerk premieres next week at the [Don't Knock the Rock](#) music film festival in LA and comes out on DVD in September from [MVD Entertainment](#), roughly coinciding with the release of *We Got Power!*, a book of photos and essays on the SoCal punk scene by Markey and longtime collaborator Jordan Schwartz, and a [related exhibition](#) at LA's Track 16 gallery. With all that activity swirling around him, Markey took time out for a Skype chat with MFW on a life in punk filmmaking.

I've been immersing myself in your oeuvre. You have a lot of stuff online, and a lot of it has been put there by you or your distributor, which is unusual.

I don't put up any of my features for free, but MVD has put up some stuff. They usually put it up with the director commentary, so people get that sort of information along with it. There's tons of ways to come at it. Some some people think it hurts, some people think it helps. I've never in my life downloaded a film from the net. That's just my own belief. But honestly, I don't mind if someone does with my work. I think Henry Rollins summed it up best when he said, "I'd rather be heard than paid."

Is it particularly an issue for you because a lot of your stuff is either unavailable or not widely available through the usual channels?

Exactly. It's a simple case of, do I want people to see it or not? And I'd much rather people see it than not. If someone's bootlegging it and making money, that's another story. But that's the cool thing about the internet: it totally killed bootleggers and their profiteering and made it all democratic. You just put it out there, and if anyone has a specific interest, they're one search or one click away from immersing themselves in this film work or music or whatever. That's pretty much my take on it.

Other than your own, what are your favorite punk rock documentaries?

[The Decline of Western Civilization](#), part one, was really a crucial film. I think that really had everything to do with me getting involved in music in Los Angeles at the time, and me wanting to be a documentarian – just being so impressed with what could be done in 90 minutes or a couple hours on film. It seemed to me what I was suited to do, what I wanted to do. That to me was quite a lesson. You couldn't really purchase that. It's something that affects you personally, motivates you, strikes you, and pulls you in.

Talk a little bit about your relationship with Circle Jerks. It's obvious from the film that it goes back a long way – you were there with a camera when they started.

Yeah! You see stuff that I shot in 1981 in the film. Actually my work even goes back before that, because I started making films in Santa Monica in the neighborhood where I grew up as an 11 year old. By the time I got immersed in the LA music scene in 1980, I had a good idea of how to shoot film, and how to splice film. It all sort of timed out for me. It just so happened that in Los Angeles at the time there was this incredible music scene exploding, this really amazing underground. I was going out to shows, a 16, 17 year old kid, and one of my favorite bands was the Circle Jerks.

Do you feel like getting involved in the hardcore scene is what set you on the path to becoming a filmmaker as a career?

It all just worked out the way it worked out. I would've probably eventually gotten there. The thing about this music was, early

on it gave me something to really immerse myself in, and it was a great subject to document. It was an incredibly amazing learning experience for me, and really dense – stuff you could not get in film school. Doing is learning, right? That's the best way.

The amazing thing about hardcore was, it was really an underground scene, it stayed underground, and then other musics came along, like speed metal, or just real kind of aggressive rock, or later in the '80s this alternative thing – it all really came out of the energy of this hardcore thing, which really started in Southern California and spread nationally, through bands like the Circle Jerks and Black Flag, and the Dead Kennedys up in San Francisco. These bands created this touring circuit across the United States of America, and eventually that led the way into the future of music, through to the late '80s and early '90s. Looking back at it now, I can see a direct correlation and a link. There is a narrative there, telling this much larger cultural story. And that's where My Career as a Jerk comes in.

How did you decide to do this movie and get them involved?

Keith and Greg were trying to make a film on their band for many years. I remember Keith first asking me about it around 2005, 2004. I had Keith come in and record an audio commentary track for one of my earlier films, The Slog Movie, which the Circle Jerks are in. At that point in time he mentioned it. At a certain point a couple of years ago Keith just asked me outright if I wanted to take over the project. A couple of different people had started, and stopped. I think Keith just knew that I would be the man to finish the job.



Was there anything in this process that you learned that you didn't know, that you were surprised by?

There were quite a few things. The real intense personal politics that went on within that band, that wasn't quite apparent to me. There's quite a dramatic story there. The two founding members, Keith and Greg – Greg goes on and signs up with

Bad Religion, and that ends up taking away from Keith over here with his concerns about Circle Jerks. Then Bad Religion blows up in the early '90s, Circle Jerks get signed to a major label, and all this drama is there. I had really fallen away from those guys in the '90s, I didn't know all those details at all. I learned a lot about all of it as I was making the film.

They had that brief period where they signed with Mercury and went into the belly of the beast. You've spent your whole career in and around Hollywood. Have you had a similar experience or been offered a similar experience?

I guess my big moment of that happened to be 1991: The Year Punk Broke. By the time the film wrapped shooting, a couple weeks after it started, within a few months time [Nirvana] would be the biggest band in the world. You could say that was my experience with the belly of the beast. Before you know it you're in the eye of the storm of this pop culture moment that you could never even imagine being a part of it. Being a kid and being a fan of music and being a fan of bands and being a fan of, you know, Led Zeppelin's The Song Remains the Same or whatever, I could never imagine myself being in that position, and then boom, there I was.

It's an irony with that film in that obviously a big part it is about the emergence of the alternative culture of the early '90s, the alternative rock scene, and it was a reaction to that. At the same time just about every band in that film was on a major label. Sonic Youth was part of corporate rock at that point, Dinosaur [Jr.] was, Ramones were.



David Markey

That's the whole thrust of that film, it's thesis statement on down the line: how do you render your place in the world now that you're part of this much larger world that you were never a part of before? You worked your whole life, you worked 10 years doing what you do, producing your own band's music, or, in my case, producing music and making films and all this

other stuff. And then it gets to a point where you do have an opportunity to work with a much larger company. I think any artist that spends any amount of time doing anything eventually would like to see their work get to more people and have that opportunity. That's all the plus side of it. But the bad side of it is, you're dealing with the multinational corporations and you realize very quickly that you can be just a cog in a wheel too.

I'm not discounting any of it – I think it was an amazing ride. Now I think I'm in a really good place to tell all these stories, having been on the front line in a very intimate way. All of it becomes invaluable to my work and to what I do. Those are my rewards: producing these documents that I think will be around a lot longer than I will, and that will be looked at in the future when people are trying to make sense of all this stuff.

My Career as a Jerk screens at 7:30pm Pacific at Hollywood's Silent Movie Theatre to close the [Don't Knock the Rock](#) festival (of which MFW is a co-sponsor), with David Markey and original Circle Jerks Greg Hetson and Lucky Lehrer in attendance. It's [due out on DVD September 25](#).

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