

Interviews: Keith Morris (Off!, The Circle Jerks, Black Flag)

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Keith Morris is a man of many words- that is to say, he doesn't stop talking. But, who would want him to? A founder member of Black Flag, The Circle Jerks and Off!, Morris is basically an avatar hardcore punk. A man who was there in very, very, very beginning who now, thirty five years later, is putting out what might his best work to date.

Because Morris is a living history book, and because the Circle Jerks might not ever play again, filmmaker David Markey has put together an in depth retrospect of the Circle Jerks in the documentary *My Career as a Jerk*. To fully understand the lessons, staff writer John Gentile recently phones up Morris where they covered the end of the Circle Jerks, the beginning of the Circle Jerks, and the story behind Morris' famous dreadlocks.

Are you sad that the Circle Jerks are not currently an operating band?

Well, I'm on a whole different situation. I'm with a group of new guys. The energy is way happening. The problem with the Circle Jerks is that we were pretty much milling it for whatever we could. We could go out and play and there would be a lot of people and the guarantees were good, but we were locked into the same old, same old.

I'm raising my hand because I would be one of the main parties responsible. But also, as we were growing older, I was getting to watch these guys. I was getting closer to their personalities and see what they were about. We had the one guy who wanted 300 for three. That means, he wanted to work for three hours and get paid for 300 [dollars]. That's a horrible work ethic.

Granted, I was the guy they were prodding and trying to set a fire under my ass to get together to write songs. But, I knew what the outcome would be. I heard bits and pieces, and people playing a riff or whatever... We eventually had Dimitri Coates who is in Off!, approach the band and say, "You guys need to record a new album" and I knew, with him- because I worked with him and his band while I worked at V2. I knew what he was capable of doing. He's a happening songwriter. He knows what he's doing. He knows a happening song when he hears one.

One of the excuses for firing him was that he, "wasn't punk rock." Well, boo-doodley-boo-hoo. That was a statement made by the newest member of the Circle Jerks, who also was not punk rock. I'm not punk rock. Greg Hetson is not punk rock. Zander Schloss certainly isn't punk rock. No, we're all beyond punk rock. We're punk-punk rock or hardcore punk rock.

I knew what was going to happen. It doesn't make me a know it all. It makes me aware of the mentality. Dimitri started cracking the whip. They didn't like the sound of the whip. They didn't like the young guy telling the old guy what to do. They didn't like the guy saying the songs weren't good enough to be on a Circle Jerks album. Dimitri was trying to get the greatest Circle Jerks record that this group of guys could

do, instead of settling on whatever anyone wrote. We've always had this prevalent concept of, "save it for your solo album." They wrote a bunch of songs they should have saved for their solo albums.

Eventually, they fired Dimitri. I quit. I came to the realization, "why would I quit a band that I started? I'll start a band and play with those guys." I'm certainly not going to drop what I'm doing to go running back to play in another band. I'm having such a great time and I'm going to all these other places. We're going to New Zealand. We're going to Japan. We've played in Europe twice! The Circle Jerks went over there once for a week, a week and a half. "Get in, get out, see ya later." Now, I have all these really great opportunities.

I find it telling that both you and Greg Hetson get teary eyed when talking about the end of the band.

I think Greg was more teary eye than I was. I'm not sad in the least bit that it was over. We, as a band, should have been over a long time ago. Greg quit in the middle of a tour. When you're in a band and you've been around these guys for as long as you have, you're supposed to be like brothers, the four musketeers, "One for all and all for one," and it's not always that way. There is a part in the documentary where Greg Hetson talks about making a decision and he made the decision and maybe at the time I was upset about that decision, but I have gone way passed that decision. *[Ed- in the documentary, Hetson talks about the difficult decision to join Bad Religion, thus relegating The Circle Jerks to a part time band.]*

One of the things that started happening in our organization, our unmanageable organization, was, "Oh, we've already been there, we know what to do." There were a lot of really horrendous decisions being made. I've had enough of this. I don't need to be surrounded by all these terrible decisions. I don't need to be around people making these cruddy decisions. I'm having a great time, the time of my life. It would be ridiculous for me to blow off what I'm doing. What for?

Do you think that the Circle Jerks have received their proper due?

You know, I don't really sit around thinking about stuff like that. I've been doing quite a few interviews because this media that is coming out and because Off! is going on tour. This, "being appreciated" or, "people loving you for what you have done," I don't allow that to weigh on me. When we started Black Flag, we didn't know what we were doing. Our mentality is that we just wanted to play. We didn't choose who showed up. We just want to go and play.

We just didn't want to be weighed down with the stuff that comes along with it. The popularity thing- are we supposed to be jealous because Green Day sold tens of millions of albums? We could be jealous, but why waste that energy? People love them, more power to them. We just never paid attention to that.

I was happy to get in the van and go out and play and get in the rehearsal space and bang out a bunch of noise. It's more fun than punching the clock and being somewhere from nine to five or being strapped down to a day job, having some boss grind on you. I'm not dissing that, but we had a whole different lifestyle. We're part of what could be the greatest job a person could ever have. Being able to go out and play, being able to have people show and make the club owner happy and the promoter happy and all the other people come to see what you're doing. How could you not want to be a part of that?

Getting back to mentality, when I first started playing music, it was just do it and let it take you where it's gonna take you, and try to have as much and to have a lot of fun and not get weighed down by thing like, "why are we not more popular?" Like, our music alienates a lot of people. It's not for everybody, and that's okay. This isn't *American Idol*. This isn't ultra-mega-conservative giant record label. "We'll find young people, get your hair designed up like this. We'll put you on this thing with sponsors painted all over it, and all it's all

that swell stuff." That was never us. Just briefly. Just long enough to understand that we didn't really want to be a part of that.

I'm glad that you mentioned hair. Your dreadlocks are something of a trademark for you, but really, you didn't get them until the 1990's or so, when they suddenly seemed to appear. Rastafarians have dreadlocks for religious reasons. Is there a reason behind your hair style?

The reason that I have dreadlocks is because I'm a lazy white guy. I didn't wash my hair for six months. It has nothing to do with religion. To dispel the rumor, I'm not the guy that you come score weed from and I don't have any rolling papers and I don't have any information for you to tell you where you can go to get the herb and I'm not feeling, "irie" and I'm not a hippie and I'm not gay- I'm sort of happy- I'm starting to like my musical scenario and the guys I'm playing with. I think some of my newfound happiness- I'm no longer surrounded by people who one day we would be friends and the next day we would be wanting to bite our heads off.

I'm not strapped down to any schedule that I think is unnecessary. I'm in a new band and three of the guys are dads, and there are blackout dates and that's fine, so they can go to Disney Land and the petting zoo, and I understand that. Our bass player is in Red Kross and they just released a new record that is really, really cool called *Researching the blues*. Our drummer plays in like five other bands. But whenever we get together, we're having a great time. We argue, we fight, but for the most part, I'm enjoying what I'm doing and this is getting back to my job. All I have to do is go to sleep, wake up, eat breakfast, get in the van and drive to the next city, and play and jump around and get angry and red.

You know Keith, you're still as fiery as ever. Why do you think so many of your contemporaries have slowed down but you're still a firecracker?

Do you think there's a possibility that someone dropped a cherry bomb in my pants? I'm 57. I don't know how much longer I will be doing this. While I'm doing it, I might as well as be as energetic and excited about it as possible.

I know there is a large musical landscape. When you talk about a landscape, you're usually talking about something that is fairly horizontal. Let's talk about Green Day. I went to a Green Day concert. There is like 4,000 people there. The Queers opened, they were a lot of fun. The Muffs played, they were a lot of fun. I dig them as people. Green Day played and I really liked what they did. I was impressed. I was seriously impressed. But, between each band, I couldn't discern one band from another. It was like an American Idol version of punk rock. Everything was padded and sad. There just wasn't a lot of color being tossed around. Too much horizontal and not enough vertical.

When you're horizontal, you are sleeping. When you're horizontal, they fold your arms over your chest and bury you in a suit and I'm not into that. I'm all about the energy and being angry and screaming and yelling and jumping around trying to stir some shit up. So, I was at this concert, this rock performance, the bands performing were happening, but the music in between was not. It was indiscernible. I don't have time for that.

In the documentary, you talk about your "dark ages" were you were drinking an insane amount and doing a lot of drugs. Strangely, however, after you stopped doing that stuff, your creativity was not affected, and in fact, you're more creative now than ever. Why do you think drugs didn't hamper your creativity while so many other artists have lost their spark after doing heavy substances?

Maybe I had some kind of an epiphany. Now, I quit drinking and doing drugs quite awhile back. There were real long periods where the creativity... maybe that was the reason the Circle Jerks were able to survive. They

flew under the radar and were never a mega-ultra-popular band.

I don't know how to explain it. Sometimes, your imagination gets fired up by the people around you, or the situations happening to them or yourself. I hooked up with Dimitri and Dimitir is very determined. Dimitiri has a couple of kids and a wife. That means he has to go out and work. Part of his work experience is being creative. Since I've been working with Dimitri, I've had friends that have paid attention to everything I've done and have been blow away.

Pete from Thelonus Monster was blown away. He's seen all of that and he's like, "your new, new band, it was relentless, you just kept coming and coming and coming and you didn't stop."

Well, we stopped to catch our breaths and have a swig of beer or water and lot of people are impressed with this band. I've had people who said, "Keith, you were in Black Flag and the Circle Jerks and now you're in Off!. You've been in three incredible bands. There are great people creating music that can't say that. They might be in two or three bands and one band is cool."

I don't know how to explain it. I'm surrounded by a whole new vibe. I'm surrounded by people who have musical instincts to jump in and not wait around to find out what it is about.

That goes back to where it started in the janitorial supply room at the Baptist church in Hermosa beach. That vibe was, "Let's go for it and not stand around and figure it out." it was being surrounding by skateboard guys and surfers and world class hang-glidors and future snowboarders. It's this gung ho mentality. Dimtiri has that. The guys in Off! have that and I appreciate that. It's not standing around saying "we have to figure this out." That doesn't happen. There's a flow to the universe as hippy-dippy as that may sound, I've always been one to go against the flow and that works at times. I go against the flow in my lyrics. I'll go against the flow in my anger and my energy. I want to do it, like Henry Rollins would say, "Let's just do it."

In the documentary, there is a section about the Black Flag Polliwog park gig that inadvertently led to both the creation of the Circle Jerks and Off! let me hear it straight from the source. What happened at the infamous Polliwog park gig?

It was a picnic on a Sunday afternoon in beautiful park in Manhattan beach and the Director of Parks and Recreation had the air-force big band/jazz band cancel a couple of weeks before the show. Apparently, there was an outbreak of the flu- when you have a big group, all of sudden those people pass it on to five people and those five who pass it onto five people who pass it onto twenty people.

[Black Flag's guitarist and sole constant member] Greg Ginn had managed to lie to the director of Parks and Recreation and told them we were a Fleetwood Mac cover band that also played jazz. The director of Parks and Recreations was excited by that and he allowed us to put together a bill that included Eddie and the Subtitles, who were actually the headlining act, who didn't play because Black Flag created the riotous atmosphere.

That opening band was the Tourist who had Steven McDonald [who would join Off! some 30 years later] and Jeffery McDonald and Greg Hetson who would go onto the Circle Jerks and would go onto Bad Religion and that's where we all met. That's where the seeds for the Circle Jerks were planted even though Black Flag was on a roll.



OFF!



Black Flag



Circle Jerks



Green Day



The Queers