



Music Documentary Monday

My Career as a Jerk

Posted on December 3, 2012 by Sean Caldwell

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Directed by David Markey
USA, 2012

Genre: Punk

The formation of the Circle Jerks, the highly influential hardcore band at the center of director [David Markey's](#) music documentary [My Career as a Jerk](#), is outlined within the first minute or two of the film by vocalist Keith Morris, guitarist Greg Hetson, and drummer

“Lucky” Lehrer. After he and Hetson had left Black Flag and Red Cross, respectively, Morris says, he simply had an epiphany: “Well, I’m a vocalist. Lucky’s a drummer. Greg’s a guitar player. All we need is a bass player and we could be a band.”

Composed of interviews and live footage, *My Career as a Jerk* details the Circle Jerks’ rise to prominence as an undisputed force in Los Angeles hardcore. Without relying too heavily on outside commentary, Markey – a longtime punk chronicler best known for [1991: The Year Punk Broke](#) – mainly concerns himself with the band’s members, presenting each as they correlate with the film’s timeline and the band’s ever-changing lineup. In addition to Morris, Hetson, and Lehrer, bassists Earl Liberty and Zander Schloss are interviewed, and performances with deceased founding member Roger Rogerson, drummers Chuck Biscuits and Keith Clark, and Red Hot Chili Peppers bassist Flea are featured. (Additional insights are provided by Henry Rollins, J Mascis, Brian Baker of Minor Threat and Bad Religion, Greg Graffin of Bad

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Religion, and Lisa Fancher, founder of the key LA indie label Frontier Records.)

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For the uninitiated, the performances, many of them filmed by Markey in the '80s, offer a very comprehensive overview of how chaotic those early shows were and interestingly reflect the changes the band experienced as musical climates evolved. Morris and Hetson, the two founding members who remained permanent fixtures throughout the Jerks' 30-plus years, offer compelling testimony, their mostly corroborative expository contributions either enhanced by exuberant reminiscence or marred by unmasked bitterness and disappointment (much of it centered on Hetson eventually spending more time, and finding greater commercial success, with Bad Religion).

As the success of their first LP, [Group Sex](#), affirmed the Circle Jerks' importance to the LA scene, the pressures of touring, issues with drug addiction, unending lineup changes, and the dissipation of hardcore as a national force affected the band's dynamic and led, after various breaks and returns, to their current, two-years-and-counting hiatus (which has seen Morris enjoy a reinvigorated career fronting hardcore revival band [OFF!](#)). Details are divulged with a greater sense of dissatisfaction as the film progresses, and you get the sense that old, mostly healed wounds were slightly reopened. In the same way the Circle Jerks would open themselves up to their audiences through performance, this intimacy and honesty translates through their story. There's a moment toward the end of the film when Morris, with an unmistakable look of defeat in his eyes, says this about the band's future: "I will say that I've closed the door, but I've not locked the door. I'm not

going to walk away from something that I helped start.”

It’s a point when the film transcends the simple act of storytelling, and you are grateful for the high level of trust that must exist between the band members and Markey. But with the Jerks seemingly in limbo, Schloss’s doc-closing summation seems more apt: “Legends are based on their absence. So it’s no wonder that the Circle Jerks have legendary status.”

Sean Caldwell blogs about music at [Letters from a Tapehead](#) and writes for the online magazines [No Ripcord](#) and [Kicking Against the Pricks](#).

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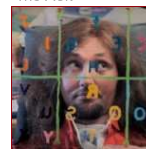
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