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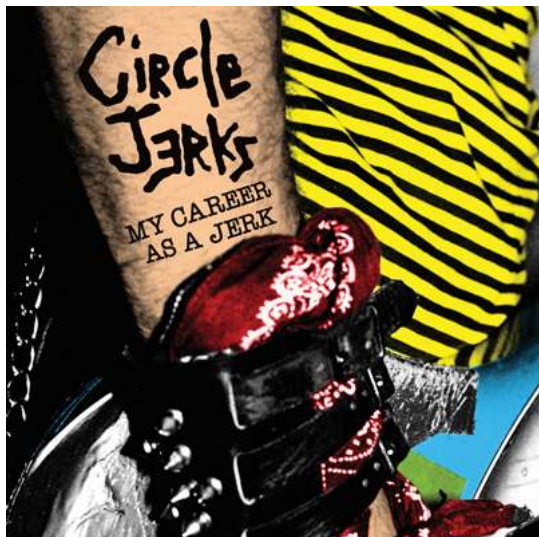
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By Pete Roche

The future of California hardcore legends the Circle Jerks is questionable.

That's both bad and good.

Bad because the world could use another dose of the vitriol only a band like the Jerks could provide. Good because the side projects pursued by a couple key members have taken up the torch. Guitarist Greg Hetson's Bad Religion has been around for nearly twenty-five years, and singer Keith Morris' new group, OFF!, is churning out short, serrated songs like those made famous by Black Flag, Minor Threat—and the Jerks themselves—in the early 80s.

A new film by SoCal film journalist David Markey (*The Year Punk Broke*) takes viewers on a journey through the Circle Jerks' entire history, from inception to apparent disintegration. *Circle Jerks: My Career As a Jerk* isn't a one-sided affair; rather than tell one band member's story, it collects oral and visual puzzle pieces from everybody who was ever a Jerk.

The 95-minute film assembles plenty rare live footage of the Jerks in action, documentary clips from television, and interviews (old and new) with Jerks musicians into a cohesive, compelling narrative on one of the L.A. punk scene's most influential bands.

Formed by Hetson, Morris and drummer Lucky Lehrer (ex-Red Kross) in 1979, the Circle Jerks melded the best aspects of their former groups into a cudgel-heavy, cheetah-quick, sarcastic sonic stew they could call their own. The new mix was edgy and confrontational without being overly political or pugnacious. Morris was finally able to his point across while having a good time doing it, and the Jerks forced other acts—including their old bands—to take

notice.

The band's nascent months had already been captured in Penelope Spheeris' *Decline of Western Civilization*, which incorporated a now-classic live Jerks performance in its examination of the Darby Crash-led Germs and their colorful following. *My Career As a Jerk* picks up there, focusing solely on Morris on company as they sign a [record deal \(#\)](#) with the fledgling Frontier label and issue the masterful *Group Sex* LP. We're treated to VHS outtakes of the band slamming through tracks like "Beverly Hills," "Wasted," and "Live Fast, Die Young" between one-on-one chats with Hetson, Lehrer, and Morris as they wax nostalgic about the old days.

Only bassist Roger Rogerson is given short-shrift, but it isn't intentional—his tenure with the band ended in '83 and he died in 1996. Markey compensates nicely by having the other guys reminisce about their fallen comrade, discussing both the good and bad aspects of Rogerson's personality and stage presence.

The rockumentary follows the Jerks' path into their second album, *Wild in the Streets*, with detailed coverage of Lehrer's departure for—don't laugh—law school and the acquisition of new members. Drummer Chuck Biscuits (DOA, [Social Distortion \(#\)](#), Danzig) adds his two cents, along with towering bassist Earl Liberty (Saccharine Trust). There's even archival footage of Fear's Michael Balzary (aka Flea of Red Hot Chili Peppers) filling in with the band on bass.

1983 saw the punkers releasing their third effort, *Golden Shower of Hits*, on Allegiance. In 1984 they contributed to the soundtrack for the Emilio Estevez cult film *Repo Man* and hired "Kevin the Nerd" actor Zander Schloss as the Jerks' permanent four-stringer. Hard-hitting Keith Clark replaced Biscuits on drums, effectively retooling the quartet's rhythm section.

The Jerks' fortunes became dicey in the mid to late 1980's as glam rock and hair metal a la [Mötley Crüe \(#\)](#) pervaded the Sunset Strip. *Wonderful* and *VI* arrived courtesy Combat Records, bestowing Jerks gems like "American Heavy Metal Weekend," "Killing for Jesus," and "Beat the Senseless" upon the world. Markey juxtaposes live clips of the fellows storming through "Casualty Vampire" and "I'm Alive" with candid chatter from the band about how their success (and lack thereof) ate at their insides.

"I had the beer-bonic plague," admits Morris—whose predilection for alcohol and "any white substance" nearly killed him.

The band took an extended hiatus in the early 1990s to address personal problems and ride out the grunge wave. Morris sobered up after being diagnosed with adult diabetes. Hetson forged ahead with old chum Greg Graffin in Bad Religion. Schloss dabbled in various projects with members of Thelonus Monster, Pogues, and Stone Temple Pilots.

"The wheel kept spinning, but we weren't going anywhere," Morris recalls. "My creative spark died."

Clark stayed on long enough to participate in a reunion effort, 1995's *Oddities, Abnormalities, and Casualties*, but abdicated the drum throne to Kevin Fitzgerald. The Jerks supported original new tunes like "Sinking Ship" and covers like the Soft Boys' "I Wanna Destroy You" on the road, but more downtime followed.

Hetson and Morris are both frank in their explanations of why plans for another Circle Jerks record fell apart in the late 2000's. The guitarist acknowledges much of his time was taken up with Bad Religion—to Morris' consternation.

"Bo Jackson tried to play both football and baseball," Hetson remarks. "You can't really do it. Not well, anyway."

So Morris brought in an outside producer for the first time in the group's history. Burning Brides guitarist Dimitri Coats placed exacting standards on Hetson, Schloss, and Fitzgerald. They didn't appreciate the stranger's heavy hand—but couldn't whip up new material fast enough for Morris, who decided perhaps it was time for something different. Hetson returned to Bad

Religion while Morris worked on fresh music with Coats. With a couple phone calls to bassist Steven Shane McDonald and drummer Mario Rubalcaba, OFF! was born.











Featured guest commentators include Henry Rollins, Brian Baker (Minor Threat), and J. Mascic (Dinosaur, Jr.). And if that's not enough, check out the half-hour's worth of bonus content, wherein Hetson remembers playing with Chuck Berry, Schloss opens up about drug addiction, Liberty describes a harrowing motor vehicle accident, Rollins explains how "moshing" was imported from L.A. to D.C., and Morris speaks on finding "positivity in negativity." Frontier Records' Lisa Fander provides a behind-the-scenes look at how the *Group Sex* cover sleeve was created.

Even if the Jerks never perform together again, *My Career As a Jerk* stands as a thoroughly entertaining—and sometimes enlightening—look back at the triumphs and travails of one of punk's greatest groups.

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