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African Punks

Documentary examines rock in opposition

By David Lührssen

Punk rock thrived on opposition, and in Apartheid-era South Africa, there was much to be opposed to. The documentary *Punk in Africa* is mostly about the emergence of punk rock in '70s South Africa and its evolution into a contemporary "alt" music scene not unlike that of most other countries.

The Soweto uprising of 1976 is the backdrop, a revolt by young blacks that coincided with the first stirrings of punk in faraway London and New York. Boredom, that easy target for punks in the U.S. and U.K., was just one problem in South Africa. Interviewed today, veterans of that scene recall their country as an artistic wasteland. But more importantly, it was also one of the last nations with an overt institutionalized system of racism enforced by an authoritarian police state. Rock in opposition? Where did you start?

The earliest bands to emerge in 1978 and '79 (seen here in rare concert video) were decent approximations of their Anglo-American models in style and sound, infused by undeniable urgency and supported by a DIY network of indie singles, cassette albums and fanzines. "You could disappear or be seriously hassled," one musician says. You could also be detained without trial under the country's security regulations, but apparently, no one in the punk scene was arrested. Vague threats are recalled, along with pervasive paranoia and the tear-gassing by police of a street festival. Punk may have energized small circles of youth against oppression, but the authorities probably regarded them as too marginal to warrant a clamp down.

As *Punk in Africa* follows the scene's evolution into the '80s, things got more interesting. Bands became multi-racial, two-tone ska arrived in force and absorbed the local rhythms. Young Afrikaaners formed bands and according to one veteran player, looked for inspiration to the dissidents of the Soviet East Bloc rather than the fashions of America or Britain. Little wonder their music sounded distinct from the growing crowd. With the release of Nelson Mandela and the end of Apartheid in the '90s, the music represented in *Punk in Africa* came to focus increasingly on partying.

The documentary's side trips to neighboring Zimbabwe and Mozambique seem to indicate that alternative music has a shorter history in those countries. Interviews are confined to young, contemporary multi-racial bands whose members grew up after white-minority rule ended. In Mozambique, a culturally tolerant but oppressively corrupt Communist regime becomes the subject of lyrics on bribery and insider influence. However, Zimbabwe has become a dangerous place for musicians opposed to the status quo of a bullying government that lashes out hard against critics.