



# 'Looking for Johnny': Film Review

2:24 PM PDT 5/27/2014 by Roy Trakin

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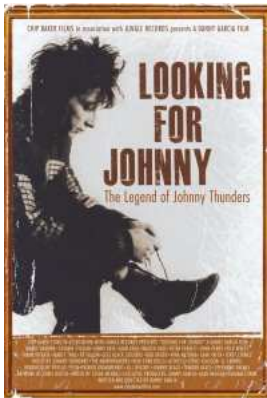
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## The Bottom Line

*This independent documentary goes with the legend, revealing some inadvertent truths about the punk icon who played with the New York Dolls and the Heartbreakers.*

## Venue

*Downtown Independent Theater, Los Angeles*

*(Chip Baker Films/Jungle Records)*

## Director

*Danny Garcia*

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**The short, unhappy life of infamous punk guitarist Johnny Thunders is related by those who knew him.**

Punk-rock is now going on 40 years old, if you take as its birth New York City circa 1976, when venues like CBGBs and Max's Kansas City opened their doors to a group of bands that included the Ramones, Talking Heads, Television, Blondie and Suicide. Many will now see it as the last gasp of rock 'n' roll vitality, leading directly into the Seattle grunge era, where it broke through to the mainstream thanks to groups like Nirvana and Pearl Jam, who maintained the ideals of anti-corporate, do-it-yourself punk back when the music and lifestyle still had socio-political-cultural significance.

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As **Danny Garcia**'s low-budget documentary, *Looking for Johnny*, reveals, its subject, New York Dolls guitar-slinger **Johnny Thunders** (John Anthony Genzale Jr.), the Queens-born working class Italian was perhaps the quintessential punk icon of his day, the bridge-and-tunnel from the boroughs as the link between early '70s glam and the incipient punk movement, equal parts Brill Building girl group pop, **Chuck Berry** rock and heavy metal parody. A would-be baseball player who got hooked on music (and, eventually, hard drugs), Thunders was a pocket **Keith Richards** to lead

singer **David Johansen**'s smart-talking, cross-dressing, low-rent **Mick Jagger**, with teased-up hair that crossed the Stones' guitarist with **Ronnie Spector**, who would eventually record her own touching version of Johnny's "You Can't Put Your Arms Around a Memory."

Garcia, who raised about 30 percent of the film's purported \$100,000 budget from crowd-funding site Indiegogo, basically sticks to the rudiments of what has become a cautionary rock 'n' roll fable, the rise and fall of the Dolls, from their beginnings as a cause celebre at the Mercer Arts Center through the tragic death of drummer **Billy Murcia** on their fledgling U.K. tour to the two albums released by Mercury in the '70s before they were unceremoniously dropped amid a torrent of outrage. It's hard to believe, in this era of **Lady Gaga**, that a bunch of thrift-store wearing, gender-bending rock 'n' rollers could so alienate the record-buying audience of the time.

The surviving narrators offer a brutal reminder of the ravages of time – from surviving Doll **Syl Sylvain**, bloated, one-time pretty boy Television guitarist **Richard Lloyd**, an ancient **Alan Vega**, kindly **Patti Smith** guitarist and *Nuggets* curator **Lenny Kaye**, Heartbreakers punk rocker-turned-stockbroker **Walter Lure**, shockingly toothless bassist **Billy Rath** and photographer **Bob Gruen** to those no longer with us, including some of the last interviews given by Dolls manager **Marty Thau** and Thunders' confidant **Lee Black Childers**, who both passed away since the film was completed. Conspicuously missing from the interviews are such prominent, still-active figures as Johansen, Patti Smith, **Debbie Harry** and **Richard Hell**.

Garcia keeps the music bubbling in the background, and underlines Thunders' role as the link between the glam-rock Dolls and the punk-rock Heartbreakers, complete with footage of the latter band's adventures in the U.K., where they were welcomed with open arms, and just as quickly became enmeshed in a series of bad business deals -- and dope cravings -- that sent them reeling.

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It's clear that the punk scene took its toll, on both those who didn't make it, as well as those who did, though Garcia doesn't shy away from the fact that Thunders and band mate **Jerry Nolan** were perhaps single-handedly responsible for turning the U.K. punk scene onto smack.

After the demise of the Dolls, Thunders' demise is relatively swift, and while his solo acoustic work showed his talents as a songwriter, his bad habits led to a decade-long descent into addiction that doesn't let up until he's found dead in 1991 at the age of 38 in a New Orleans flophouse, his death shrouded in mystery and neglect on the part of the local authorities. That Johnny Thunders' legacy still remains, look no further than groups like Parquet Courts, who have emerged with the same swagger from the same downtown New York streets, upholding a punk ideal that is now going on four decades. In many ways, director/writer Garcia, who directed a similar documentary on *The Rise and Fall of the Clash*, which can now be seen on MTV's Palladia channel, at once glamorizes the myth, though isn't afraid to point out the downsides. When the legend becomes truth, print the legend, says **John Ford** in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. To Danny Garcia's credit, in filming the truth, he tries to capture the legend also, but the real Johnny Thunders somehow slips through the cracks and eludes his, and our, grasp.

The film, whose two local L.A. screenings at the Downtown Independent Theater were promoted by downtown retail store Lethal Amounts and Amoeba Records, was produced by Chip Baker Films in association with Jungle Records, the label which released many of Johnny's later recordings.

*Production company: Chip Baker Films/Jungle Records*

*Director: Danny Garcia*

*Producers: Danny Garcia, Johnny Black, Patrick Grandperret, Alan Hauser, Tomoko Keats, Stephanie Rachel, Phyllis Stein Jill Wisoff*

*Executive producers: Graham Combi, Frank Crossen*

*Director of photography: Rene Perez, Caleb Phillips, Rick Seefried*

*Editor: Cesar Mendez*

*Music: Jc Carroll, Johnny Thunders*

*No rating, 90 minutes*

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