

documentary Spotlight

ALIVE AND WELL {PUNK'S NOT DEAD}

BY WILLIAM JONES

To anyone who follows the scene it may seem to be an obvious statement, but Susan Dynner set out to make sure the whole world knows one thing with her directorial debut documentary, and that message is contained in the film's simple title—*Punk's Not Dead*.

"It's still very much alive," Dynner says. "Bands that formed 30 years ago are still touring and selling out venues; and new bands are starting every day."

Again, it may seem apparent to anyone following the scene, but with punk in and out of mainstream notoriety and its own followers often engaging in debate about whether modern radio pop-punkers like Good Charlotte are punk or not, the obviousness of the situation becomes marred. Then there is that notion of the "punk revival," or rebirth of a dead punk scene. But according to Wattie Buchan of Exploited in Dynner's film:

"There's never been a punk revival, because punk's never been away."

It was infamous Southern California radio station KROQ's Inland Invasion festival in 2002 that Dynner says brought her to this very realization and inspired the film. With bands ranging from The Buzzcocks and The Sex Pistols, to Social Distortion and The Offspring, to New Found Glory and Blink 182—bands all billed as "punk"—the fest's 80,000-seat venue sold out in 10 minutes, according to Dynner.

"I was like, okay, this has gotten really big," she recalls. "This is crazy."

But Dynner was far from an awestruck fan at her first punk show. Growing up in D.C., the 15-year-old Dynner used to sneak out after curfew to see the midnight screenings of *Rocky Horror Picture Show* in Georgetown. The theater was next door to a Roy Rogers, a hangout for the D.C. punks, and Dynner says they often urged her to skip the movie and come to a concert.

"One day we took them up on it and we went to a show," says Dynner. "Minor Threat was my first show."

She was hooked immediately and started going to shows regularly with her camera since she was taking a course in photography at school. In her teens, Dynner had already shot the likes of Black Flag, The UK Subs and GBH while documenting the D.C. scene. Bands nationwide and overseas slept on the floor of her home while on tour (and still do, albeit now in California) and encouraged her to do something with her photos.

"They always say that punk rock is white men. From where I came from in D.C., that was definitely not the case," Dynner says of being a woman in the scene. "There were a lot of women who were the documentarians at the time. Most of the photographers were women."

After going to film school at the University of Wisconsin, Dynner made a career in film by working at a number of studios on production, and co-produced the award-winning *Brick* in 2006.

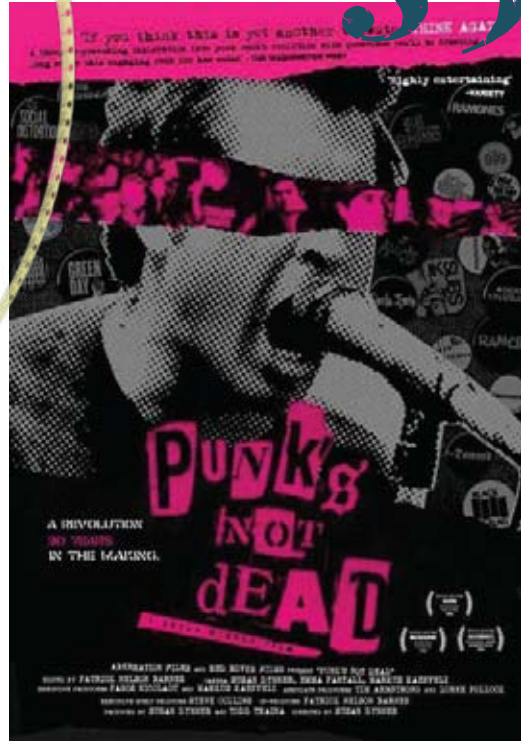
She then decided to make a documentary using her old photographs to put a different spin on the punk history a number of other films had explored, and she decided to do it in the true punk DIY way.

"Sometimes people think we're this big, corporate machine making this film," she explains. "Nobody got paid anything."

Dynner and a team of three other filmmakers, with help from a revolving door of interns, spent more than four years creating their film. The primary goal was to entertain, but the vision changed along the way. The release of *Punk Attitude* in 2005 was a big turning point for the documentary, she recalls, after it made her realize how many films had already covered punk history well. Not interested in repeating what had already been done, she decided to relegate history to the opening credits and early portions of the film.

Instead, *Punk's Not Dead* focuses on documenting the punk scene, the veteran bands still rocking since the '80s and today's up-and-comers, as well as the everlasting argument about what constitutes "punk."

And the handling of that argument is where Dynner's plays it smart, taking an unbiased journalistic approach and letting the argument come out of the interviews she conducts. Sure, she



compiles a video to classical music poking fun at bands with choreographed jumps after one of her subjects makes a statement about said jumps, but its all done in good humor and as part of the film's entertainment factor. Dynner also respects those very bands by featuring them in serious interview segments and giving their arguments credibility via placement in the film.

It amounts to quality filmmaking that is equal parts funny, serious, entertaining and journalistic, but Dynner admits that such an unbiased approach wasn't always in the plan.

"I thought I was going to trash them," Dynner says of new radio-punk bands. "But to be honest, they were so sincere, and I started thinking—punk is about not making judgments; it's about thinking for yourself. So I decided, let everyone think for themselves. My opinion has definitely changed. I think they're not necessarily punk bands—and Sum 41 comes out and says they're not a punk band—but they're influenced by it."

Getting most of the bands in the film turned out to be the relatively easy part, as Dynner's longtime friendships created a domino effect of interest. Dynner said bands like Sum 41 and My Chemical Romance gave her a surprising amount of access considering they had no clue how she would portray them in the film. Many of the bands even donated personal images and video, and Tim Armstrong joined the team as an associate producer.

It was financial issues that were the biggest problem, says Dynner. The cameras were initially purchased on her personal credit cards, while another member of the team financed the sound equipment. Song licensing is also very expensive, Dynner notes. But after nearly five years of work, everything came together and the response has been great.

"That's gratifying to know that people enjoy something you spent so much of your time working on because it's definitely a labor of love," she says.

For more info, go to: punksnotdeadthemovie.com

ASTHETIC FREQUENCIES