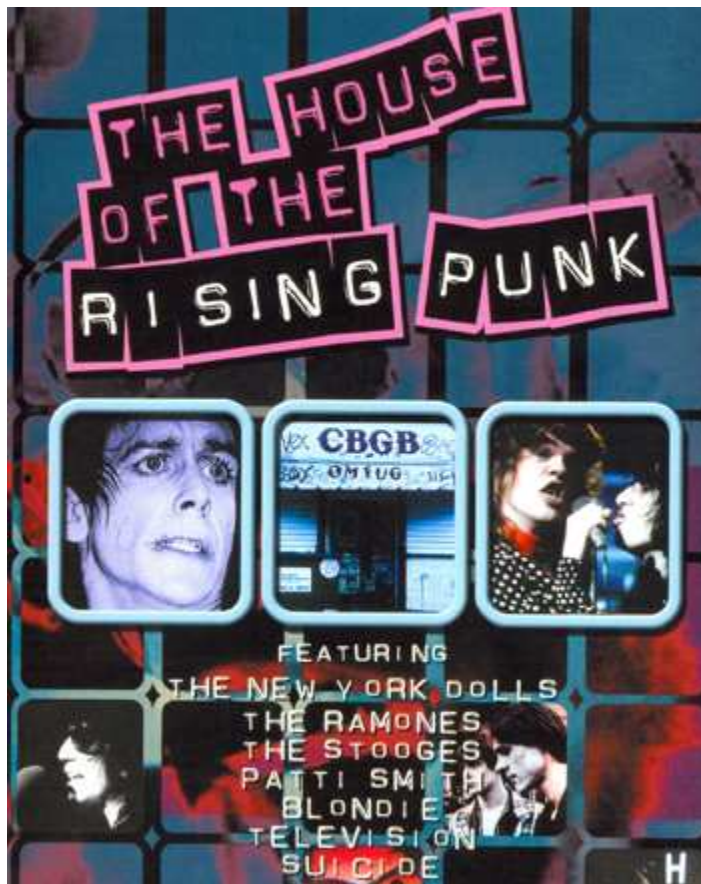


girl about town

March 14, 2009

House of the Rising Punk



There's a famous saying that "only 2000 people bought a Velvet Underground record but every one of those people started a band". This is the main exploration behind this German TV documentary from 1998 *House of the Rising Punk*, which is finally available on DVD after achieving cult status with punk fans around the world. Yet another source for unfolding the New York punk scene of the 70s, this documentary is rich on intimate detail while only being a short 60 minutes. The DVD starts with vintage footage of hysterical fans from different eras, and then launches into precious interview clips with luminaries such as Richard Hell, Tom Verlaine, Patti Smith, Lenny Kaye, Legs McNeil of *Punk Magazine*, Thurston Moore, and Jim Jarmusch. While filled with fantastic footage, much of it rare, the film doesn't cover much of the no-wave scene that spawned from the scene around CBGBs other than Martin Rev's *Suicide*. What it does focus on is the birth of the CB scene, starting with the Hell and Verlaine's joint love of Baudelaire and their feelings of separation from the social circles in New York City of the early 70s. Coincidentally, Patti Smith was languishing in the New Jersey countryside, feeling like an oddball and dreaming about her departure to the big city. She talks about how "New York is Freedom", and for her and others, they shared a "common purpose, and saw each other every night at CBGBs". They forged a community of misfits that found common ground not in musical style or fashion but in ideals and purpose. The musicians and artists of the scene were drawn to New York for its seedy nature and sense of danger, all while finding their own place to create while embracing city life. As Smith explained, they had "joyful abandon, unprecedented, making it up as we went along". This is apparent with the street language of Smith's poems set to music, the "Blank Generation", and nexus of bands that lived at CBGBs. The documentary reveals the context from which this all evolved, including the presence and influence of Andy Warhol and the Velvet Underground. Also important were the Stooges, The Ramones, and The New York Dolls in setting the tone for this new age of American music, each looking to their gritty surroundings for inspiration as opposed to the pomp and grandeur of rock music at the time. Legs McNeal was a scenester around CBGBs, founding *Punk magazine*

to document his observations and creating the buzz that became known as the punk scene, which in turn attracted other misfits and observers alike. Everyone involved got lumped under this umbrella of punk, musical styles not critical for the association. Even Malcolm McLaren (manager of the Sex Pistols) was enthralled with the New York music circuit, enough to be a liason of sorts between the New York and London scenes. Come 1978 and the NY punk scene is over, but leaving a huge legacy in its wake. This documentary offers some additional insight and footage into a much discussed era - favorite footage includes the off-stage antics of Debbie Harry, be it starring in Amos Poe's underground films or Punk magazine's fantastical comic plot lines along side Joey Ramone. It's these kind of glimpses into the scene along with interview clips, photos, and live footage (including rehearsal footage of Television) that makes this a welcome addition in the canon of punk history.

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