

DON'T YOU WISH THAT WE WERE DEAD:



a documentary about
THE DAMNED

An **EXCLUSIVE** interview
with director **WES ORSHOSKI**

Like Rock 'n' Roll in the '50s and the British Invasion of the '60s, Punk rock changed everything. It began as a musical movement in 1976, yet it became something much bigger. Punk infected every aspect of pop culture - from fashion to art. Punk became a badge of honor for the younger generation and a punchline to bad jokes told by their parents. Bands like **Sex Pistols**, **The Clash**, **The Jam**, **UK Subs**, **Buzzcocks** and so many others climbed to the top of the charts in England and caused a stir around the world. The sudden rise of Punk inspired thousands upon thousands of amateur musicians to rise up and create a racket. It was a glorious thing. However, it is often forgotten that one particular British band was the first to release a single in England, the first to release an album, and the first to tour the U.S. If you guessed **Sex Pistols**, then you'd be wrong and should be sent to the back of the queue. The correct answer, if you paid attention to the title of this feature, was **The Damned**.

The Damned was formed by **Brian James** (guitar), **Captain Sensible** (bass), **Rat Scabies** (drums) and **Dave Vanian** (vocals). Uncompromising and entirely unpretentious, **The Damned** were great musicians out to have a good time. Armed with a load of great songs (mostly penned by James), **The Damned** became one of the most popular Punk outfits in the UK. Signed to Stiff Records, they beat all the other bands to the record shops with their "New Rose" single and **DAMNED DAMNED DAMNED** album. Their popularity and desire to have a good time didn't mix well with the other serious, politically-charged Punk acts, and they were essentially ostracized from the 'Punk Club' by various legendary managers who felt **The Damned** were over-shadowing their own acts (i.e. **The Clash** and **Sex Pistols**). The band soldiered on, but James threw in the towel after the second album. With Sensible moving to guitar and the band switching gears musically, **The Damned** fought back with a string of singles and albums that expanded upon their musical roots while still retaining the Punk energy and attitude. Sadly, with so many

line-up changes and musical detours along the way, they began to confuse all but their faithful followers. The most surprising thing is that the band's desire to explore these new musical avenues is what made them **BETTER** than many of their contemporaries. It seemed to work for **The Clash**, but not so much for **The Damned**.

Now celebrating their 40th Anniversary, **The Damned** remain the most under-appreciated of all the original Punk bands. The current line-up of the band includes Vanian and Sensible, both of whom are still as charismatic and entertaining as they've ever been. However, it hasn't always been easy for the band. From old record label contract issues that drove Rat and Captain apart, to a constant stream of great musicians who have come and gone, **The Damned's** story is a long and convoluted one. **THE DAMNED: DON'T YOU WISH THAT WE WERE DEAD** is an absolutely brilliant documentary that sheds light on the band's history and offers an inside look at a band that deserves far more attention than they have ever received. It doesn't matter if you prefer "Neat Neat Neat," "Smash It Up" or "Grimly Fiendish" - this revealing film by photographer/director **Wes Orshoski** (**LEMMY: 49% MOTHERF**KER, 51% SON OF A BITCH**) is as honest and funny as any music documentary you'll ever see. By the time the credits roll, you'll be cursing the screen and wishing it was longer. It's heart-breakingly sad and soul-stirringly joyful. Toss in some insight from contemporaries and fans like **Fred Armison**, **Chrissie Hynde**, **Lemmy**, **Dave Gahan** (**Depeche Mode**), **Mick Jones** (**The Clash**), **Nick Mason** (**Pink Floyd**), **Steve Diggle** (**Buzzcocks**) and many others and you've got one of the best **Damned** documentaries you'll have the pleasure of watching. See what I just did there?

Stephen SPAZ Schnee was able to chat with director **Wes Orshoski** about making the film, the band's reactions to it and much more...

STEPHEN SPAZ SCHNEE: THE DAMNED: DON'T YOU WISH THAT WE WERE DEAD is now available. How do you feel about how the film turned out?

WES ORSHOSKI: I did my best on very limited means. I spent nearly five years of my life making this. But at some point, you have to disconnect and just know that you did your best. You could do a Part Two with *The Damned* because their story is so complicated – so many different line-ups, so many different genre changes. I don't think I realized what I was getting myself into when I started it, once you think about all those things. My previous film on *Lemmy* – it was much easier to focus on one guy. The story is much easier to tell. But *The Damned* cast such a wide net that it was a real challenge trying to distill that. There's so much that I couldn't talk about. There's so much more – the film would have been four hours long!

SPAZ: How are you feeling about the reaction to the film so far?

WES: I did some Q&As when I took the film on a tour in England. There was this guy who came to the screening in Leeds who said, "Anything after 1977, I don't care about!" (Laughs) It's funny that there are people that are only fans of the original line-up, only fans of the *Paul Gray* line-up, and so on... In the UK, especially. But there were two places in particular that I was really knocked out by the audience's reaction. In Long Beach, there was like four hundred people and they were rowdy – it was exciting. The most emotional one was in Edinburgh. It was a sold-out screening. Punk Rock was very important to people in Scotland in the bleak 1970s. The movie was about to end and I was about to do a Q&A, so I'm just standing there, waiting as the credits start to roll. And the second the first credit came on, there was this roar in unison from everyone in there. I was moved to tears – it was so beautiful. It was real. You could tell it was genuine. It wasn't like one guy started the clapping – they all roared together. That was awesome. That, to me, was a perfect moment.

SPAZ: Along with *999*, *The Vibrators* and *The Stranglers*, *The Damned* is one of the most underrated original UK Punk bands of all-time. Is that what inspired you to make this film?

WES: To a large degree, yes. Here in America, nobody knows who they are. When I was making the film about *Lemmy*, people knew who he was. When I told someone I was working on a film about *The Damned*, their eyes would just glaze over. Either you know and love them or they mean nothing to you, which is mostly the case in America. Here is a band that's been a part of history – they were part of something that changed music and culture forever – and they have this great story. I think these guys are unsung heroes and that was one of the hopes of this film – to right that wrong a little bit.

SPAZ: I love the way the film is rooted in the present yet keeps cutting back to classic clips and stories from the past. In a way, I thought that mirrored the band's ethic of always moving forward while still embracing their musical history. Was that your intention when putting the film together?

WES: I wanted to shine a light on the realities of being in a band. The realities of these teenagers who didn't know who they were as people then, or any idea of who they were going to be, but now they are joined at the hip for life. A lot of Punk rockers have gone on to do other things, but they (*Vanian* and *Sensible*) didn't choose that. They stuck with music and they are stuck together. I wanted to illuminate the fact that it cannot always be the easiest life.

SPAZ: *Dave Vanian* has always been this mysterious figure and you seem to learn a little more about him in the movie, but not much. Do you feel that you, as the filmmaker, understood him a little more?

WES: I wanted to debunk that mystery entirely but he didn't give me an opportunity to. There are some hilariously mundane things about *Dave*. For example, when we were on the road in the States, he loved to go to *Cracker Barrel*. They have these huge gift shops with all these antique-y items...and *Dave* loves that place. He'll spend an hour in the gift shop! (Laughs) There are a lot of things he does that are not really Rock 'n' Roll. I tried to hide cameras around and he'd find them and block them or turn them around. I chased him over four continents and it was only when I told him I was done shooting that I got an interview with him. In the UK, he travels separately – he doesn't travel with the band on the bus. As a result, he shows up 10 minutes before a gig and leaves 10 minutes after.

SPAZ: It seems like *Dave* and *Captain* get along well. Do you feel that it is a working relationship or is there a deep friendship there?

WES: It is a working relationship, absolutely. It's not like they go hang out. They are not brothers. I tried to show that a little bit. The one thing that is fascinating about those two is that they used to room together when they were teenagers. Think about that – they have the goods on each other. When it comes to a film like this, they could have dished the goods...but they didn't. With *Captain*, it was probably self-preservation. But I think *Dave* is too polite of a gentleman to ever reveal personal details about

someone. *Dave* is the complete English gentleman – he could have been on *Downton Abbey*. He's so proper. He doesn't curse and he's very polite. When you get in a band when you're a teenager, you don't know who you're going to be – you only know who you are at the moment. Then that Punk Rock big bang moment happened and their future was pre-determined for the rest of their lives. I'm fascinated by that. I talk to my best friend from high school and that's it. I don't think I could be traveling the world and be completely financially dependent on three other people from high school!

SPAZ: Was it difficult to get all the members involved?

WES: When I started the film, I started with the current line-up. It took me a very long time to get *Brian* and *Rat* involved with the film. *Brian* was very warm but kept me at arm's length. *Rat* was frosty – he saw me as a representative of the current line-up camp. I eventually won his trust. I had *Captain's* trust until I had *Rat* involved, and then he became indifferent towards me. Because of his own insecurity, *Captain* doesn't realize that he is the star of the film – he's the hero of the story. But I think he feels exposed and I think it makes him feel uncomfortable.

SPAZ: I think the film offers a well-balanced approach to all the issues between the current and former members. Was it difficult to present those issues without making any of the members seem like a villain?

WES: I'm not trying to judge anyone. I'm trying to present each side and let the audience decide. I could have made a film just based on the ins and outs and complications of the contract issues. I didn't want to spend five minutes of the film talking about contracts. I just had to touch on it, give *Rat* and *Captain* the opportunity to present their side of things and keep the story moving.

SPAZ: How did each band member react to the film?

WES: When I world premiered the film at *SXSW* I was fortunate to have the whole current line-up out to perform. It was a huge coup for me to get the financing together to pay for that. And I owe that all to *Vans*. None of the band had seen the film beforehand because I didn't want them to – I didn't want them trying to pick it apart. I had final cut. *Vanian* flew all the way to Texas and didn't even leave the hotel... and I have no idea why. As far as I know, he hasn't even seen the film. *Sensible* and the rest of the band showed up and I told him, "There's going to be stuff that *Rat* says that you aren't going to like. Don't feel that you have to apologize. You don't owe anyone an explanation. Be defiant – you are a Punk Rock hero. You are an icon." He just looked at me and said, "I'm going to react the way I react." He ended up walking out a few minutes into the film after yelling 'Rubbish!' at the screen. Then he came back in with a backpack and was making all sorts of noise – playing with candy wrappers in the middle of the movie. He created a big stink and stir and handed out candy and tried to distract people when *Rat* was speaking on screen – he was like a publicist going on a damage control mission. It was uncomfortable. *Rat* and *Brian* are happy with the film. They both told me that it gives them closure.

SPAZ: What do you hope the viewer will walk away with after watching the film?

WES: Maybe *The Damned* will be this discovery for people now. There's all that music waiting to be discovered by people who don't really know much about them.

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THE DAMNED
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