



SCREAMERS

YEARS OF EXISTENCE: 1975-1981

CRUCIAL RELEASE: *Screamers Live In San Francisco Sept. 2nd 1978* DVD
(TARGET/MVD VISUAL, 2004) No official recordings exist.

WHY THEY MATTER: Even if you've never heard Screemers' music—and considering they never made a proper studio recording, you'd be excused—you likely have some connection with the band's work. The Los Angeles synth-punk legends' Gary Panter-designed logo—a stylization of spiky-haired frontman Tomata Du Plenty, mouth agape—has been appropriated countless times (it even morphed into a banner for the AIDS activist group ACT UP), and original Dead Kennedys singer Jello Biafra admits that his band wouldn't have been the same without Screemers' influence. (Screamers keyboardist Paul Roessler appears on the DKs' *Fresh Fruit For Rotting Vegetables*, whose "Drug Me" Biafra calls "my attempt to write a Screemers song for the Dead Kennedys.") More importantly, though, Screemers' sound—a striking, guitar-free amalgam of vocal-cord abuse, amped-up *motorik* drumming (the band worshiped krautrock pioneers like Neu!), synthesizer and distorted piano—prefigured everything from industrial rock to synth-wielding screamo, even if the bands who followed didn't realize it.

Formed in Seattle under a slightly different lineup—one that included a teenage El Duce from the Mentors on drums—Screamers jelled when co-founders Tommy Gear (synth) and Du Plenty relocated to L.A. and met with keyboardist David Brown (who, after leaving to launch the seminal punk label Dangerhouse, was replaced by Roessler) and drummer K.K. Barrett. During their run, they were one of L.A.'s hottest tickets, generating huge regional press (brilliant self-promoters, they landed magazine coverage *before* solidifying a lineup) and routinely packing L.A. clubs like the Roxy and Whisky A Go-Go. Yet despite being primed for a monumental recording session, the band made a number of questionable personnel and creative decisions (including, at one point, plans to do an all-video debut album) that eventually brought about their dissolution. Some poor-quality demos circulate today, but to get your head around the manic energy that made Screemers magical (and Du Plenty one of the most electrifying singers in punk history), you need to see the band on video.



AND THEN WHAT? Du Plenty, also an accomplished mime and visual artist, succumbed to cancer in 2000; Roessler, who went to play with L.A. punk icons like Nervous Gender and 45 Grave, remains a producer and solo artist; Gear and Barrett (the latter an award-winning production designer with credits in films such as *Lost In Translation* and the upcoming *Where The Wild Things Are*) both dropped out of music. [AB]

WITNESS STAND: "I saw [Screamers] and they totally blew me away: One Arp Odyssey synth on a stack of milk crates, fuzzed-out electric piano, drums and a trained mime for a singer who had so much stage presence he could lift one eyebrow and the whole audience would jump. I was immediately drawn to everything from their stagecraft to their unique approach to constructing their songs, and even the songs themselves didn't sound like a keyboard-punk band trying to imitate a guitar band. They were coming from somewhere else."

—Jello Biafra, DEAD KENNEDYS