

6. the screamers

LIVE IN SAN FRANCISCO, SEPT. 2ND 1978
(TARGET VIDEO/MUSIC VIDEO DISTRIBUTORS)



If ever a band needed a DVD, it's this one! As singer **TOMATA DU PLENTY** confirmed in our interview just before he died, the biggest reason L.A.'s (by way of Seattle) Screamers never released a record, despite being the most popular punk-era L.A. band along with the much different Weirdos, was because they didn't believe a mere audio recording could even begin to capture what it was they did. And he was right: the well-named Screamers were *that* profoundly visual. The affable, artistic, intelligent du Plenty described how he would emotionally collapse after concerts because being the lead screamer character was such psychotic theater for him. As I watched this 1978 Target Video **JOE REES** footage again (available for 20 years previously on VHS), I was transfixed by du Plenty's animalistic, visceral, searing performances. You can't look away from those stabbing eyes, bigger and crazier than even Johnny Rotten's, the square forehead giving way to that provocative, pointy, straight-up haircut, the loopy robot dances, or the whole demented character. He doesn't so much sing as *hurl* his voice at the microphone in a low, guttural, primal bark that made him seem half Dick Tracy villain, half your own soul turned inside-out. And since the band never released their amazing songs and sound on vinyl, but only on the Target videos, this footage really is the *only* place to experience this electrifying group as they really sounded, let alone looked. (A double CD finally released in 2001, the 140-minute *In a Better World*, has scratchy sound on its live and demo renditions.)

And what a group they were! We've said before how unique it was for a band with no guitar or bass to be heralded as a premier punk group of their time. Du Plenty's aural assault and drummer **K.K. BARRETT**'s inexhaustible rhythmic pound made them fierce, but the two keyboardists, **TOMMY GEAR** and **PAUL ROESSLER**, turned their synthesizers into harsh stun guns, with their left hands providing the bottom end and their right hands the cutting riffs. Whereas other bands used synths and organs to sound skinny-tie-nerd quirky or new wave cute, this one used them

as bludgeons. This DVD shows it all, in all its raw fury.

The footage of the concert at San Francisco's Mabuhay Gardens is good enough. Much like The Screamers' New York shows then, you can see the dichotomy in the band's psychopathic brutality combined with their parodistic sense of extremes and societal send-up that was simultaneously so acerbic and amusing. And you can see how an audience at the time reacted to that with a mixture of thrilled horror and small awe. But the real prize in this package is the bonus footage of the foursome at Rees's Target Video studios, granting us the closest thing to real audio-quality Screamers we know of and matched with the even better, more controlled visuals. Start with this footage first. This band had a look, a sound, and a presence that still have never been copied. The absolutely insane "122 Hours of Fear" (one of the greatest and most disturbing songs of that whole wondrous 1977-1978 primal generation), the perverted "Magazine Love" (porn over real-human sex!), and the martial goose-stepping of the black "Punish or Be Damned" made the otherwise brilliant early Devo look like Mr. Rogers or H.R. Pufnstuf. The Screamers were as exciting and liberating as they were intensely aggressive and kind of frightening.

The greatest band in U.S. history to go unrecorded is actually best heard here, where you can see them. Like Bad Brains, you really had to see 'em to believe 'em. But unlike Bad Brains, who birthed a thousand crappy imitators, you'll never see anything like this again. (Chicago's equally chaotic Manaconda, who cover "122 Hours," take the inspiration somewhere else instead.) This DVD is a huge don't-miss that will put the biggest lie to anyone who said that early punk was a formula. It was a living, breathing tiger, and this band was always poised to spring. R.I.P., du Plenty. You're immortal here. And kudos again to Rees, who, along with *Search and Destroy's* Vale and L.A. mag *Slash*, did the yeoman's job of preserving the amazing, underdocumented S.F. and L.A. punk scenes' revolt.

... through a dark nightclub in a new and all its up-and-down possibilities. ... illips has a way with holding on to her s until the last possible second, ... on them in an old-timey, almost way ms to heighten each word like a good se novel does, making you want to what happens in every song. By the reach the knowing realism exhibited p ls Coming) One Day Late," you've nder the enchantress's spell, letting lighting and martinis lead you to con- oping things you might not otherwise record as unadorned and basic as this

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