



THE INSPIRATION SESSIONS



CLICK TO WATCH, LISTEN AND SHARE ▶

Features | Columns | Blogs | News | Music | Film | TV | DVDs | Books | Comics | Multimedia | Events | Moving Citations
 about contributors submissions book series advertising contests tour dates Mixed Media PopMatters Picks



CALL FOR PAPERS: *PopMatters* seeks feature essays about any aspect of popular culture, present or past.



Short Ends and Leader The PopMatters Film Blog

Film / On DVD

20 January 2010

'Identity' Confirmed: X-ray Spex - Live at the Roundhouse London 2008 (CD/DVD)

Share Print Comments (0) Feeds



NOW ON POPMATTERS

Today Blogs Popular Commented

FEATURES

- Slipped Discs 2009
- The Best of Books 2009

COLUMNS

- FIELD STUDIES: [Barrelhouse Words: A Blues Dialect Dictionary](#)
- MARGINAL UTILITY: [Designing Consent](#)

BLOGS

- MIXED MEDIA: [David Byrne and Fatboy Slim - Here Lies Love \(new album / stream\)](#)
- SOUND AFFECTS: [Medieval/Modern: An Interview with the Dry Spells](#)
- MARGINAL UTILITY: [Nonplaces redux](#)
- SHORT ENDS AND LEADER: [SAG = Standard Award Season Givens \(with One Exception\)](#)
- PERIPATETIC POSTCARDS: [Which Who What?](#)

MUSIC

- The Magnetic Fields: [Realism](#)
- The Red Krayola with Art & Language: [Five American Portraits](#)
- Various Artists: [Ghana Special](#)
- Various Artists: [Kitsune Maison Compilation 8](#)
- Bobby Birdman: [New Moods](#)
- Ben Frost: [By the Throat](#)

TELEVISION

- Girls on the Wall
- La La Land: [Series Premiere](#)

DVDS

- Kingdom of the Spiders
- Chuck: [The Complete Second Season](#)
- Blackfield: [Live in New York City](#)

BOOKS

- A Heartbeat and a Guitar: [Johnny Cash and the Making of Bitter Tears by Antonino D'Ambrosio](#)
- The Tyranny of E-mail by [John Freeman](#)

MULTIMEDIA

- Worldshift
- Dark Void

NEWS

- Once thought of as the future of music, the [Birotron](#) attempts to make a return
- INTERVIEW: [Jackie Earle Haley says his return to the Hollywood scene is 'mind-boggling'](#)
- INTERVIEW: [After a long break, bruised but unbroken Mel Gibson tests himself and the public](#)
- The young at art: [Grammy nominations sidestep older performers](#)

PopMatters Feeds

- PopMatters**
All PM content, except news
- Think**
Features, columns and essays
- Blogs**
All PM blog posts
- Listen**
Music reviews/news
- Watch**
Film, TV and DVD reviews/news
- Read**
Book and comic reviews/news
- Play**
Video game reviews
- In Person**
Live event articles
- News**
PopWire news/commentary



It remains one of the great moments in an otherwise factually questionable film. As the members of the Sex Pistols (or in this case, Alex Cox's interpretation of the band) stand around in a local bar, acting bemused, a raucous band with what looks like a little girl as frontwoman takes the stage and blows the roof off the place. As the aggressive lyrics argue for this quirky adolescent's desire to be a "slave for you all", the cinematic audience erupts in a maelstrom of unbridled pogo passion. If you didn't know your punk history, if you failed in following the mid '70s eruption of musical DIY in England, you'd never know this was *Sid and Nancy's* dolled up representation of one of the era's greatest acts - X-ray Spex, and their amazing songwriter/singer, Poly Styrene.



X-ray Spex
Live at the Roundhouse London 2008
 (YEAR ZERO; US: 1 DEC 2009; UK: 1 DEC 2009)
[Amazon](#)
[Lala](#)

Before she abandoned the three chord snarl for the equally daring life of a Hari Krishna, the group's de facto leader (actually named Marian Joan Elliot from Bromley, Kent in the UK) was also the movement's main spokesperson. She had only one other lyrical equal - and even he (the Pistol's Johnny Rotten) couldn't keep up with her superb youth in retail revolt spirit. With sentiments that both mocked and embraced the shallow, consumerism in which she lived, the lax country she came from, and the dead-eyed kids she communicated with everyday, she became the poet laureate of the lacking. Combined with a drive that only comes from being young (18) naïve, and unafraid, Styrene created the era's most enduring statement (the amazing album *Germ Free Adolescents*) before purposefully pulling herself from the limelight.

my Touch 3G
Fender
 LIMITED EDITION



Some images are simulated.

It's not just a phone,
 it's a collector's item.

check it out now

T-Mobile

Even today, songs like "Art-I-Ficial", "I'm a Cliché", "Warrior in Woolworths" and "The Day the World Turned Day-Glo" remind us that punk wasn't all anger, aggression, and anti-royalty screeds. In Styrene's perfect couplets, Lydon's blatant "no future" pronouncements found pragmatic illustration. Indeed, there is such a matter of fact truthfulness to a line like "I'm a poseur and I don't care/I like to make people stare" that it's almost impossible to take the political prostylitizing of band like The Clash seriously. To put it bluntly, X-ray Spex was the voice of those everyday story of smalltown rebels, the kids who congregated outside the local shops and pubs whose only ideology came from how more (or little) they got from the dole. They should still be considered the people's band, even with an output was extremely limited (five singles and an album before breaking up).

And yet today, few outside the faithful recognize X-ray Spex as anything other than a curiosity. That's why the new CD/DVD release of *Live at the Roundhouse London 2008* is so important. Not only is it a fantastic overview of the band's entire career (including material from their 1995 reunion LP, *Conscious Consumer*, as well as stuff from Styrene's solo career as well), but it's a chance to see one of rock's mythic mainstays doing what she does best - fronting a fantastic punk outfit and tearing it up. From the opening sonic salvo - a rip snorting reading of the classic "Oh Bondage, Up Your!" to newer tracks like "Melancholy" and "Bloody War" X-ray Spex sound as vital, as volatile, as they did more than 35 years ago.

Now in her early 50s, Styrene is still the emblematic center of attention. Her voice has barely changed, a few faltering high notes the only indication of the passage of time. Her onstage presence and banter may be more subdued, but her words - and more importantly, the ideas behind them - are as challenging, or even more so than in the '70s. In fact, the more you listen to the songs Styrene penned, the manic materialism and phony social policies she ranted against before seem just as viable - and vile - today. In fact, the advertising tenuousness of *Germ Free Adolescents'* title track is as pertinent now as it ever was.



Surrounded by a collection of former bandmates and new supporting players (sadly, original guitarist Jak Airport died of cancer in 2004), the saxophone infused bravado of this otherwise infectious pop art is undeniable. The audience responds with expected reverence, really letting loose when songs like "I Can't Do Anything" and "Genetic Engineering" rev up. There is no denying the musicianship - after all, the songs are simplistic in their pure punk aesthetic. Yet Styrene found a way to turn the limited chord structure into the backing for one brilliant melody after another. Combined with her insights and all around proto-feminist philosophy, each X-ray Spex tune is like a call to arms, even if the battle each time around is one of self-reflection, degradation, and/or improvement.

This is not the most cinematic concert ever offered, to be certain (the accompanying CD sounds excellent, however). The angles are more or less restricted to backstage shots, full on middle of the theater perspectives, and the occasional 'up skirt' point of view. In fact, this is more of a souvenir than a true representation of what X-ray Spex are capable of. Indeed, there is a real feeling of being part of some casual communal celebration, Styrene and several hundred of her closest friends getting together to spin hits and reminisce. They love the band and she loves them. Yet the moment she let's loose with a set ending savaging of "The Day the World Turned Day-Glo", you're reminded of the group's place in punk's history. Anthemic just doesn't begin to describe its



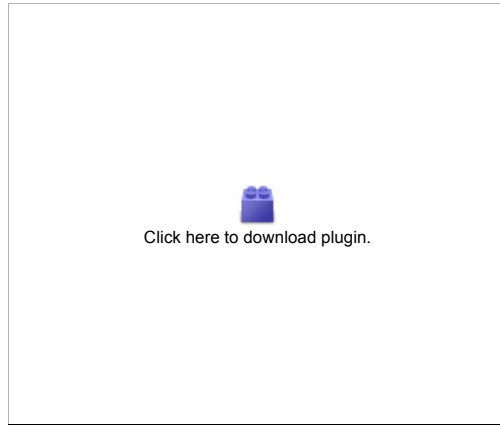
Please donate to the
**International Response
 Fund at redcross.org**



impact.

In fact, *X-ray Spex Live at the Roundhouse London 2008* stands as one of the best documents of a criminally underrated group ever. As an artifact, it stands alongside the so-called punk-poseurs of today, while illustrating the importance of Styrene's contribution to the genre. Sure, there were other famous female icons from the time period - Siouxsie Sioux, Ari Up and Palmolive from The Slits - but the naïve teen with the mouth full of braces and an equally abrasive attitude stands head and shoulders above the rest. Though their output was minor, X-ray Spex's greatness and influence remains massive. This reunion package proves why.

—[Bill Gibron](#)



X-ray Spex on Top of the Pops

SHARE

0 tweets

Digg submit

submit to reddit

Share

Stumble It!

2:26 pm | [ShareThis](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#)

RELATED ARTICLES



[X-Ray Spex: Germ Free Adolescents](#)

By Adrien Begrand
10.Aug.05

This reissued, oft-overlooked punk classic has never sounded more relevant.

COMMENTS

Add a comment

Please enter your name and a valid email address. Your email address will **not** be displayed. It is required only to prevent comment spam.

Name:

Email:

Location:

URL:

Remember my personal information

Notify me of follow-up comments?

[advertising](#) | [about](#) | [contributors](#) | [submissions](#)
© 1999-2010 PopMatters.com. All rights reserved.
PopMatters.com™ and PopMatters™ are trademarks of PopMatters Media, Inc.