

DOA: A Rite of Passage

By John Holmstrom

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D. O. A.: A Rite of Passage is the vision of two people: Tom Forcade (the founder of *High Times* magazine) and filmmaker Lech Kowalski.

Everyone was against this movie. First and foremost Warner Brothers Records: The music empire that released the first Sex Pistols album hired a “security crew” of redneck, biker gang members for the 1978 US tour. Their main objective almost immediately became barring the *D. O. A.* film crew from all concerts. Next up, the *High Times* magazine staff: Tom Forcade was on a manic-depressive high when he decided to destroy his infamous hippie magazine by pouring all of their profits (and then some) into producing the ultimate film documentary starring his favorite punk rock band. Third, the mainstream media: They heckled, mocked and undermined the Sex Pistols in a failed attempt to reduce a great rock 'n' roll band to a bad joke. Fourth, the mainstream film industry: For example, Robert Evans (famous producer of *Love Story*, *The Godfather*, *Chinatown*) told Forcade after a private screening: “Who cares about a band that broke up six months ago? But, can you score me more of this amazing cocaine?” Fifth, the U.S. government: Our “beloved” intelligence agencies harassed and surveilled Tom Forcade because he was “The Most Dangerous Man in America” at the time. He was a prominent member of the White Panthers, The Weathermen, The Yippies, The Zippies (which he founded after the Yippies became too tame), and every other counterculture group in the late 1960s-1970. He funded and ran the Underground Press Syndicate, which involved hundreds of radical publications representing a spectrum of alternative viewpoints: gay liberation, drug legalization, communism, Native American rights and every other progressive platform on Earth. And... He was also a drug smuggler. Finally, there was that massive, complacent *Rolling Stone* magazine-brainwashed rock audience who hated punk, the Pistols, and anything thought-provoking or different. In the 1950s and '60s parents hated rock 'n' roll, now kids were acting like their parents.

I sometimes wonder how things would be different today if punk rock music wasn't rejected by audiences at the time and we all made a lot of money. However, that rejection by the mainstream is why punk is still an outlaw culture today, and in my opinion, *D. O. A.* is therefore The Ultimate Outlaw Movie.

Not everyone in the world was opposed to the film. Although the band disliked the idea of a film crew making an unauthorized concert film, Sex Pistols' manager Malcolm McLaren was, like Tom, a visionary/anarchist. He was frustrated that Warner Brothers' security thugs prevented him from extending much influence over the U. S. tour. As a result Malcolm was intrigued by Forcade's plans to film the tour as an underground movie, so he and some of his crew reportedly leaked hotel locations and helped sneak film crews into concert venues.

Once the tour ended in San Francisco and the Sex Pistols broke up, Forcade and

Kowalski realized they needed to make this a punk rock doc instead of a Pistols concert tour film, so they dispatched a crew to England. They now had permission to shoot punk bands, and you have to wonder how great *D. O. A.* could have been if Warner Brothers and their security thugs had allowed Forcade, Kowalski and crew to shoot the live Sex Pistols concerts, and even given them backstage access. In hindsight, it seems strange that Warner Brothers didn't hire their own film crew to document the tour. The Sex Pistols were the biggest rock 'n' roll story in the world at this time, and the fact that a film/music company actively worked to prevent filming, rather than encourage it, seems ridiculous now that digital technology enables all concert-goers to make their own videos of live concerts and post them on the Internet instantly to worldwide audiences.

Kowalski and company shot celebrated bands like the Rich Kids (starring Glen Matlock, the Ex-Pistol who wrote all of the Sex Pistols' songs), Billy Idol/Generation X, Sham 69, and X-Ray Spex in some of the best film footage of 1970s English punk rock. Of course, the infamous interview with Sid and Nancy inspired the celebrated Alex Cox film *Sid And Nancy* that stars Gary Oldman, Chloe Webb (with cameos by Iggy Pop, *Punk* magazine ex-publisher Spacely, and Courtney Love). Then there's the totally obscure and untalented Terry And The Idiots, meant to be the credible street punk telling the truth, who instead spends most of the film living up to his band name.

Punk magazine once published a story about the Bay City Rollers, the most famous boy band in the world at the time. Thanks to Bernard Brooke-Partridge you can see why: He claims they were even worse than the Sex Pistols. That is one of the many comments that Lech Kowalski included that sets *D. O. A.* apart from so many rock docs: These different voices from the 1970s punk scene gives the movie a lot of different perspectives.

Not long after filming ended, Nancy Spungen died on October 12, 1978. There is a lot of debate about whether Sid killed her, or if it was a local psychopathic drug dealer. Tom Forcade took his own life a month later on November 16, 1978. A few months later, Sid died under mysterious circumstances a day after he was released from prison on February 2, 1979.

To honor Tom Forcade after his death, *High Times* magazine picked up the editing bills as director Lech Kowalski and editor Val Kuklowsky spent the next two years developing a rough cut, screening it to selected people, then recutting it many times over. They hired yours truly to create the hand-lettered graphics. The high point for me was "shooting" the *D. O. A.* title frames. After carefully painting them on panes of glass, Lech used a 22. caliber rifle to destroy them. I wish we had used a shotgun, but we didn't have the budget.

At one point *D.O. A.* ran out of money and was in limbo. *High Times* magazine, crippled by Reagan's War on Drugs, could no longer fund the film. Fortunately a financial "angel," Tom Norman, put up the money to finish the film, buying all film rights for 8 years. No film distributor would touch it, so Norman "four-walled" it (rented the room) for the "world premiere" at New York City's Waverly Theater in April 1981. The film arrived

late for the premiere and was plagued with incomprehensible production mistakes while an audience of rowdy punk rockers disrupted the screening. Obviously, the initial theater-goers were the hardcore punk fans who wished they could have seen a live concert, and behaved as if the Sex Pistols were playing live. Of course, the month-long residency at the Waverly was a commercial flop, but it did good business as a Midnight Movie (which was how films like *El Topo* and *The Rocky Horror Show* became successful in the 1970s). Norman toured the USA in an attempt to recoup his investment, showing the film at punk rock clubs in the early 1980s, grabbing a few hundred people per gig most of the time. Ultimately the film lost a lot of money.

D.O.A., the original 1950 film noir and *A Rite of Passage*'s namesake, was about a dead man walking who wanted to get revenge on his killers. This aptly describes *D.O.A.: A Rite of Passage*, which was made by a man who killed himself a few months later, who wanted to get revenge on his tormentors: corporate and government control of rock music and youth culture. This Bluray/DVD release that you hold in your hands is his ultimate revenge from beyond the grave. Anarchy in the USA.