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V BLU-RAY REVIEW

By Pete Roche

Brothers Jeff and Steven McDonald Reminisce in *Born Innocent: The Redd Kross Story*

They don't throw hands as often as Liam and Noel Gallagher (Oasis) or bicker as much as Ray and Dave Davies (The Kinks), but Redd Kross rockers Jeff and Steven McDonald didn't always get along like Matthew and Gunnar Nelson (or the Bee Gees' Gibb brothers), either.

Indeed, it was the West Coast kids' fraternal friction - their genetic telepathy and juvenile dysfunction - that steeled them against failure and fatigue at times when most bands would've thrown in the towel. Yes, the camaraderie Redd Kross cultivated as LAX "airport rats" in Hawthorne, California (just like the Beach Boys!) prospers to this very day, but it was those differences of opinion that protected and pigeonhole-proofed these hirsute headbangers for their 45-year (and counting) rock 'n' roll crusade.

Directed by Andrew Reich (Arrow, Riverdale, Containment), *Born Innocent: The Redd Kross Story* chronicles the McDonalds' ascent from tract housing punks to Hollywood hitmakers, Seattle trendsetters, and unlikely global icons. Where else in rock are you gonna find an act whose Venn diagram overlaps Black Flag, The Germs, and Circle Jerks, with David Cassidy and The Cowsills?

Now on Blu-ray - and something of a video companion to the brothers' recent biography (*Now You're One of Us*) - the film follows Jeff and Steven from their old Harbor Freeway haunts and Hermosa Beach hangouts to Black Flag's punk enclave at "The Church." They become Atlanta Records upstarts (signed by the A&R guy behind the California Raisins), B-movie bad boys (*Spirit of '76*), and Conan O'Brien guests...but never quite garner the fortune and fame warranted by their infectious, wondrously off-the-wall music.

We discover how Jeff and Steven synthesized their love for The Runaways, Ramones, Beatles, and KISS with campy '70s television (The Brady Bunch, The Partridge Family, Sid & Marty Krofft) and kitsch culture heroines (Linda Blair, Annette Funicello, Elizabeth Montgomery) into a startlingly original repertoire that stimulates eyes as well as ears. Lead vocalist / guitarist Jeff serves as the band's "diva peacock," while baby brother Steven took up bass - and suffered Jimmy Osmond insults until his maturity. The sibs experiment with pot and acid while honing their chops in garages and at graduation parties. There, we meet charming Redd Kross alumni Greg Hetson, Tracy Lea, and Robert Hecker, and visit with perky pianist Gere Fennelly. The rate at which the McDonalds

burn through drummers becomes a running gag, a la *This is Spinal Tap*, and their inability to gain lasting mainstream attention fosters a resentment they don't quite overcome until their thirties.

"I wanted to play arenas long before Kurt Cobain strummed his first G chord," confesses Steven.

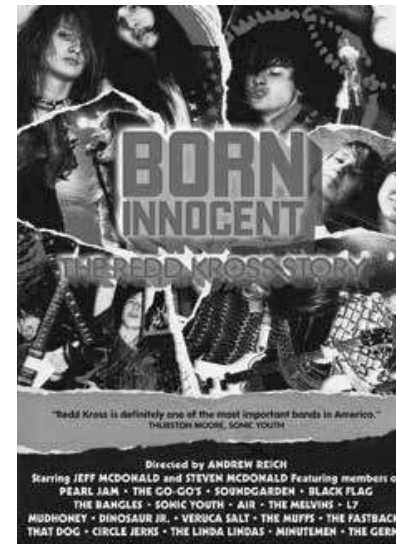
"We made ourselves vulnerable by publicly saying what we wanted to achieve at a time when it wasn't cool to be so open about it. Sell out? Hey, the devil never even came knocking. It didn't happen for us."

Members of Soundgarden, Sonic Youth, Pearl Jam, Melvins, The Minutemen, and Dinosaur, Jr. salute the persistent, pioneering brothers, offering anecdotes and insight on the dynamic duo's many milestones...and missteps. Former record execs and childhood friends chime in on the McDonalds' growing pains and commercial gains: A couple associates theorize that Motley Crue and Poison borrowed their spandex aesthetic from the guys, that Axl Rose stole their now-familiar stage shimmy, and that Stone Temple Pilots requisitioned their throwback sound ("Big Bang Baby") when grunge took a downturn.

Each brother endures life-altering personal crises whose retellings bring both drama and discomfort. Jeff isn't eager to rip any band-aids off his "boring" '80s drug addiction ("It wasn't like Keith Richards or Johnny Thunders"), but eventually comes clean. In a separate interview, Steven surmises that Jeff's reluctance to revisit past mistakes stems from his embarrassment for having caused career hiccups at the most inopportune moments. Jeff insists he wasn't the only one who sometimes "choked." Ex-girlfriend Vicki Peterson (The Bangles) recounts shooting a cringeworthy antidrug PSA with Jeff for TV, while Jeff himself remembers how rehab rewired his brain for the 1987 comeback album *Neurotica*.

Steven relates how an older girlfriend abducted him to Las Vegas when he was just a preteen, covering her trail to start a surrogate family with the hapless boy bassist. Parents Janet and Terry McDonald are visibly shaken when discussing Steven's missing months, and reveal how they hired a private investigator to track down the tike and bring him home - where he reconnected with Jeff for the turbocharged 1984 covers set *Teen Babes from Monsanto*.

Wives Charlotte Caffey (Jeff) of The Go-Gos



and Anna Waronker (Steven) of That Dog say hello, as do Redd Kross kids Astrid and Alfie. Like many rock docs, *Born Innocent* succumbs to the impulse to fast-forward through its subject's later years: Reich spends ample time covering the albums and tours from 1980 EP *Red Cross* (pre-name change) through 2012's post-hiatus project *Researching the Blues*, but only briefly mentions 2019's *Beyond the Door* and 2024's eponymous *Redd Kross* during the epilogue (where we meet "drummer #75, of Red Hot Chili Peppers fame).

If you dug any of Banger Film's excellent music docs (*Global Metal*, *Iron Maiden: Flight 666*, *Rush: Beyond the Lighted Stage*) or rooted for Canadian underdogs Lips and Robo in Sacha Gervasi's *The Story of Anvil*, you'll enjoy getting acquainted with the McDonalds and company for ninety minutes. *Born Innocent* is the funniest, most fascinating and lovingly assembled rock doc since Edgar Wright's magnificent *Sparks Brothers* - and therefore deserves an audience as much Redd Kross' killer tunes ever did.

A second disc includes hours of extra footage - including an hour-long band jam at the "Naz Pad" in 1989, a forty-minute chat with lovely singer Kim Shattuck (Muffs) about the McDonald brothers' influence, a half hour with Steve discussing every Red Kross album, and twenty minutes pillaging Jeff's record collection / closet. There's also an interview with Ron Reyes (Black Flag) and Dez Cadena (Black Flag, Misfits), a Tourists (pre-Red Kross) rehearsal and reunion show, a featurette on the 1984 low-budget David Markey film *Desperate Teenage Lovedolls*, a forty minute "Unplugged" style jam, and a movie screening Q&A with the bros (and director Reich) at a Santa Monica showing of *Born Innocent* in November 2024.

www.reddkross.com www.reddkrossfilm.com