

## DVD Review: *History On My Arms* - Dee Dee Ramone In Words And Music

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Documentary movies about individuals can be tricky things, as you either have to rely on your subject for the required information to make it interesting, or third parties who may or may not have their own particular agenda. Most individuals want to present themselves in the best light possible, so even when they talk about their flaws they'll come across as being heroic for talking about how screwed up they are. However, there are those few individuals who have no agenda and are merely content to tell their story as honestly as possible. When you see them on camera you can't help but liking them and wanting to hear more of what they have to say,

When director [Lech Kowalski](#) was making his film about the late New York Dolls guitarist Johnny Thunders, *Born To Lose*, one of those he interviewed was the late Dee Dee Ramone, former bassist with the seminal New York punk band The Ramones. Shot back in 1992 the footage was compiled into a 63-minute film in 2003, the year following Dee Dee's death of an apparent heroin overdose, called *Hey Is Dee Dee Home*. Now, six years latter, [MVD Video](#) has released the DVD/CD package, [History On My Arms](#), which contains not only the documentary *Hey Is Dee Dee Home*, but a short feature showing Kowalski and Dee Dee preparing for the shoot called *History On My Arms*, and a third piece, *Vom In Paris*. As originally the Dee Dee footage was shot to discuss Johnny Thunders, Dee Dee spends part of his time on camera talking about his experiences trying to form a "super-punk" band with Johnny and Stiv Bators in Paris. Vom Ritchie was going to be the drummer in that supergroup and in his piece he gives his version of the same events.

The title of the DVD/CD package, and the short film about Dee Dee, *History On My Arms* comes from reference Dee Dee makes to his tattoos and "tracks" (the marks left by collapsed veins caused by intravenous drug use) being his history on his arms. He traces the history of his tattoos for us at one point, telling us when and how he had them done, and at the same time giving us a taste of what his life was like at those points in time.



You began to get an even clearer idea of how things were for him though when he starts talking about doing drugs and he says, words to the effect of "What else was there for us to do but get stoned"?

A typical day in the life of

Dee Dee Ramone from the time period in question -- which is never really made clear by the way, but I have to assume was late 1970s early 1980s -- revolved around acquiring the means to score drugs, scoring drugs, and either doing gigs or going to gigs. Either way, there would be more drugs and booze involved. The usual cast of characters who Dee Dee was hanging out with in those days were Richard Hell and a couple of others, with Johnny Thunders sort of deigning to hang out with them now and again. This was one of the first indications that Dee Dee wasn't all that thrilled with Thunders when he talks about those times. He felt that Thunders didn't treat him as an equal, for in spite that the Ramones were at the time doing really well, Thunders still played the Rock and Roll Star, wanting Dee Dee to score him drugs and acting like he was doing them a favour by hanging out with them.

While the overall impression we get of Dee Dee is of an almost child like naivety when it comes to certain aspects of the world, there's also an element of immaturity as he sounds like a petulant child when he talks about various aspects of his relationships with other people. While the impression we get of him in the short *History On My Arms* is that of someone who we want to like as he's genuinely having fun with the film crew as they're setting up for the shoot, what peaks through in *Hey Is Dee Dee Home* changes that some what. Especially after he gives his version of what happened in Paris between him, Stiv Bators, Johnny Thunders, and the others involved in that project.

While the accusations of theft against various people can be understood, as he'd already described how he used to steal from his roommates when he was hard up for cash and needed a fix, so you can see how he could easily believe other people capable of doing the same thing if he thought they were using heroin. However, when he started rambling on about how the apartment that Stiv and his girlfriend had in Paris where he was staying was possessed by the devil, and there was something evil about it, you began to wonder about his reliability as an impartial witness to events. (On the [Wikipedia](#) entry for the Ramones there's a brief mention of Dee Dee suffering from bipolar illness, which would explain some of his more outrageous claims about Paris.)

As a point of comparison in *Vom In Paris*, Vom Ritchie, who has obvious and genuine affection for Dee Dee, is embarrassed by some of the accusations that Dee Dee had levelled against Stiv and his girlfriend Carol. According to Vom, Stiv had paid for Dee Dee and his girlfriend to come to Paris, had bought Dee Dee a bass to play for the sessions as he had shown up without any instruments, and was supplying them with room and board in his apartment. The real problem, according to Vom, was an old animosity between Dee Dee and Thunders based on Thunders taking credit for the song "Chinese Rocks" (slang for heroin) which Dee Dee wrote..

What the three movies capture, which very few documentaries about an individual very rarely do, is the essence of Dee Dee Ramone. This was just an ordinary guy from Queens who ended up in the spotlight as a rock and roll star. He had no idea what to do with himself when he wasn't making music and turned to drugs to pass the time and fill the hours. On the one hand we see a guy who is honest enough to not make any excuses for his drug use and self destructive behaviour or to make out like it was some great romantic

adventure. Yet, he also has the emotional maturity of a child who desperately wants to be liked, who lashes out when things don't go his way.

Perhaps Kowalski was able to create such an honest portrait of Dee Dee Ramone because he wasn't supposed to be the subject of the film. When he talked on camera there was none of the self-consciousness usually so evident when people talk about themselves, and perhaps that's because everything was being told in reference to someone else - in this case, Johnny Thunders. Although it's quite possible that Dee Dee would have been as candid even if he was the subject of the film, because at that point in his life he seemed willing to talk as honestly as was possible for him about any subject that the director wished. In the end, there's something quite sad about Dee Dee, and you wish for his sake that things could have turned out better for him than they did.

While the bonus CD is basically nothing more than extended versions of the the soundtrack of the two short films, it -- along with the three short movies that make up *History On My Arms* -- all contribute to forming this very complete portrait of Dee Dee Ramone. He may not be the tragic figure so many want him to be, but the man we meet in these films would only have laughed at that notion anyway. This is a very real, warts and all portrayal of one of punk's pioneers, that reminds us that there were human beings behind the noise and confusion trying to find there way through just like the rest of us.