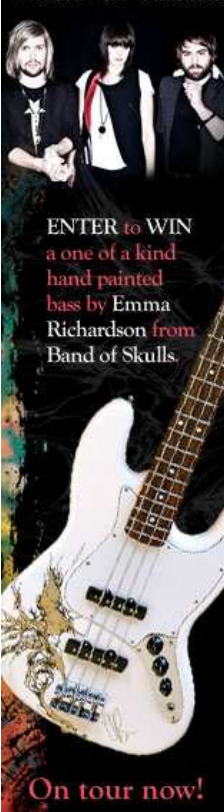


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DVDS > REVIEWS > LECH KOWALSKI > HISTORY IS ON MY ARMS



History On My Arms

Director: [Lech Kowalski](#)

Cast: Ryan O'Neal, Shelly Long, Drew Barrymore, Sam Wanamaker, Sharon Stone, Hortensia Colorado

Rated: not rated

US DVD release date: 16 June 2009 (MVD)

By [Jeremy Estes](#)

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We all know people, both men and women, with some squiggly blur on their arms, their shoulders, the small of their backs. "It was spring break and I was totally into frogs." Then there are waitresses, stepparents, crazy aunts or uncles with tattoos visible on their wrists, the image faded and spotted with age.

A tattoo shouldn't be a thing to regret, but for many people it's exactly that: a tribal band sagging with the weight of years, a Chinese character that loses its meaning.

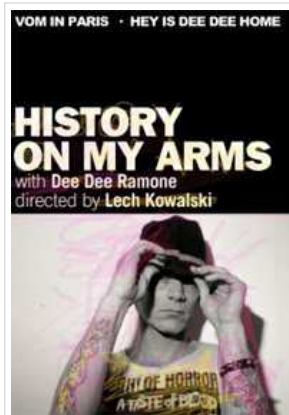
When a person doesn't regret it, then a tattoo is more than just an expensive rite of passage or a drunken decision. For the serious tattoo collector, each piece is a document, like stamps in a passport. Tattoos are marks along the way.

Lech Kowalski's 2003 film *Hey is Dee Dee Home* is a collage of interviews, performance and still photographs of Dee Dee Ramone, original bassist and songwriter for the punk legends the Ramones. This DVD features the original film, plus two bonus featurettes, *History on My Arms* (2008) an interview with Dee Dee conducted for Kowalski's Johnny Thunders documentary *Born to Lose* and *Vom in Paris* (2008), an interview with Die Toten Hosen drummer Vom Ritchie, an eyewitness to Dee Dee's misadventures with Johnny Thunders in France in the late '80s.

Hey is Dee Dee Home was made with obvious affection for Dee Dee, but lacks a narrative to make it compelling. Editing effects and still photos come and go on-screen while Dee Dee talks and noodles on a slightly out-of-tune guitar.

Better is *History on My Arms*, the unedited interview with Dee Dee that comprises the bulk of Kowalski's earlier film. This is a mixture of fly-on-the-wall footage and a monologue about copping heroin with Richard Hell, playing music, and the beginnings of the New York punk scene. Kowalski gets out of the way and lets Dee Dee loose, and it's riveting.

Dee Dee was the kind of person who needed to be seen and heard in an interview. His voice and his phrasing color his stories with more detail than could be conveyed by reading a transcription. The camera is mostly static, but Dee Dee remains visually interesting due to his animated personality



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and his huge array of tattoos.

When Dee Dee begins to tell the story of how he got his first tattoo, he recounts an argument he had with his mother over her dead dog, then he segues into traveling to London and, as with many of the stories, circles back around to shooting heroin, copping heroin, or kicking heroin. "I got my history on my arms," he says, and his journey through that history is as haphazard and interesting as the placement of his tattoos.

His stories are mixed-up and confusing, each featuring a rotating cast of junkies and rock stars, but they feel like recitations of ancient myths. One imagines 1970s New York as a cold, gray place filled with sick people wearing leather and ripped t-shirts, fighting and fucking and stealing each other's stuff for drug money. If they just happened to write great rock and roll songs along the way, well, that's a good thing. Dee Dee brings this world to life in his rambling, spoken word-like performance.

Dee Dee was never great friends with Johnny Thunders, but their lives intersected through a passion for both drugs and music in the form of "Chinese Rocks", the signature song of Thunders' band the Heartbreakers. The authorship of the song, about a popular strain of heroin, is disputed. Dee Dee claims to have written it then given it away after Johnny Ramone refused to let the group perform it (though they later would, as "Chinese Rock", for the album *End of the Century*). For his part, Thunders is quoted as saying, "Everybody in New York says they wrote that song."

Despite the tense relationship, Dee Dee agree to join Thunders and the Dead Boys' Stiv Bators in Paris in 1989 to form a punk supergroup. Dee Dee's recollection is jumbled and strange, filled with back stabbing and drug-induced menace, but what it lacks in coherence it makes up in emotion. The band was done for well before they even began.

Vom in Paris is drummer Vom Ritchie's account of the failed supergroup. Ritchie doesn't contradict Dee Dee so much as tell a completely different story. Though quite brief the film drags, like watching the home movies of a stranger.

A bonus CD included with the DVD features lo-fi recordings of Dee Dee playing guitar. There's some riffing and noodling that's charming in small doses, but much of it is like sitting in a room with your guitar playing friend who won't stop while everyone around him is just trying to talk.

Getting tattoos, Dee Dee said, is like shooting dope. "If you want to be outlaw forever, go get 'em." He fought drug addiction for years, and that was what finally did him in on 6 June 2002. Despite the outlaw status he gave them, Dee Dee's tattoos never betrayed him. They stayed with him, all the way to the end.

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RATING: 
 EXTRAS RATING: 

— 11 August 2009

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