

DVD Review: *Punk In London*

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In the summer of 1980, London, England was close to a war zone with race riots and battles between police and demonstrators breaking out all the time. Then Conservative Party Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher had created such a divisive atmosphere that the anger of the disaffected, the poor and people of colour, boiled over onto the streets routinely in June and July of that summer. For a while it looked like the song "London's Burning" that [The Clash](#) had written a couple of years earlier had every chance of coming true. While there were punk scenes in North America—most notably in New York City, Toronto, and Los Angeles—in comparison to what was going on in England, and specifically London, that's all they were was scenes, not the politically charged calls to action that were soundtracks for running battles with the police.

In an interview he gave in 2006, German film director Wolfgang Buld describes how news of punk had reached Germany. So when the film school he was attending demanded he do some documentary features as part of his course work, he set off to England in 1978 with a film crew to see what all the fuss was about. One of the films he made during that trip, [Punk In London](#), has just been released in a re-mastered form on DVD by [MVD Entertainment](#). The interviews with various musicians, and the footage of bands like [The Boomtown Rats](#), [The Jam](#), [The Lurkers](#), [Chelsea](#), [Subway Sect](#), [The Adverts](#), and The Clash not only capture the energy of the music and the time, but also the anger constantly simmering just beneath the surface. In the film the anger comes across as general dissatisfaction and frustration with the way things were shaping up in England at the time and make you realize the events of 1980 weren't just a spur of the moment thing, but a long time in the building.

The interview with Buld is one of two special features included on the DVD, the other being a concert given by The Clash in Munich in 1978, and while it's interesting enough for establishing a context for the movie and describing how it came about, what makes *Punks In London* fascinating is its subject matter. Shot with one camera and portable sound equipment, Buld and his crew go everywhere from the clubs, the old warehouses

bands used for rehearsal halls, to the storefront label/record store Rough Trade which played a key role in giving bands exposure.

Unlike today when these things would have been arranged by a band's management or label, Buld would show up with his crew on location sometimes having phoned in advance and other times not. This resulted in the interesting scene of them being basically told to piss off by The Stranglers; "I'm not a prostitute" one them responded when asked why they didn't want to be in the film by Buld. However, because of that spontaneity it also means this is one of the best up close and intimate looks at the people and the music involved in punk I've seen. A couple of the more interesting moments that occurred because of this were an interview with Kevin Rowlands, who would go on to fame as the lead singer and founder of Dexy's Midnight Runners but at the time was fronting a band called [The Killjoys](#), and following Bob Geldof onto stage with the camera to film the Boomtown Rats from behind their drum kit performing "Do The Rat".

Aside from the music there are also some interviews with people who were on other sides of the scene. Rough Trade was, and for all I know still is, a small independent record store/label which was one of the first places people could go to get information on bands, buy independently produced singles, and talk about what was going on in the world at the same time. The interview with two guys working at the store gives you some idea as to how the punk scene was being politicalized and hints somewhat at events to come in the future. There was also an interview with a reporter from the London music magazine *Sounds* where he takes credit for the magazine being one of the first music papers to take punk seriously. While I can't argue with him on that point, I did snicker a bit listening to the guy. Back in the late 1970s and early 1980s *New Music Express (NME)* was the magazine my friends and I all bought when we wanted to find out about what was going on in British music, while we considered *Sounds* a bit of a joke. So it was funny to see this guy taking himself so seriously and making out how important they were.



However, the music is what was really important, and while some of the footage is a bit grainy and some of the sound isn't the best, what *Punk In London* captures like no other film I've ever seen shot from that era is the experience of watching one of these bands perform. If you ever went to some small, hole-in-the-wall of a club where far more than the legal limit of people have crammed into the space and felt the way the music connected audience and band, then you'll understand that feeling, and how rare it is to see it caught on film. I've seen other footage taken during the same era, but I've never seen anyone manage to capture the spirit of the time on film quite like this.

The real highlight as far as I'm concerned is the special features section containing the full footage of The Clash concert. For those of you who may have only heard songs from later on in the band's history - say from *Sandinista* and after - and wondered why they were called a punk band, watching this film from a gig in Munich in 1978 will explain everything. Yet, no matter how loud, how fast, or how intense they were, they also dispel the myth of punk bands not being musical as they harmonize on their vocals and are as tight a band as any you're liable to see anywhere or anytime. It turns out these weren't ideal conditions either, for as we learn in an interview the tour of Germany had been a shambles as they haven't eaten in three days and were thrown out of their hotel by the police.

While there's no way to capture the feelings generated by the music and the times, and punk really was a product of time and place, this movie comes the closest to doing that of any that I've ever seen. So if you've ever wondered what old farts like me are going on about when we rave about how great punk used to be, this movie will give you some idea of what we were talking about. The revolution may never have happened, but you can see

why we might have thought it possible. With energy like that as your soundtrack, you really could believe in your power to change the world.