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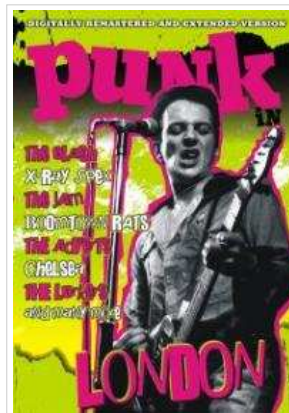
By **Chris Barsanti**

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At a very early point while watching Wolfgang Bld's fascinatingly empty-headed 1977 documentary *Punk in London*, you might start thinking that it would have been helpful had the director bothered to include titles on the screen to identify any of the people that he's interviewing. Then later on, after one has heard just a few too many spotty-faced gits blather on about the glories of punk, the inestimable sins of "all that old crap", and engaged in some extremely spurious theorizing about the musical insurrection they're currently enacting, you could well consider that it was best to not have much of an idea sometimes about who's talking. After all, once you hear a kid spout on about how supposedly "nobody's ever sung political songs before" (blithely ignoring the entire tradition of musical agitprop, from Irish revolutionary ditties to civil rights protest songs), it's probably best not to have a name to pin to the ignorance.

As a filmmaker, Bld does little to edit his gangly documentary into much of a coherent shape. He prefers to stab in long passages of pulsating concert footage with these interminable interstitial interviews with those making the scene in the roiling cultural cauldron that was late-'70s London. There's little rhythm to what's thrown up on screen, just a lot of lucky-to-be-there scenery occasionally interrupted by the director's German mumbling (untranslated, also, probably for the best).

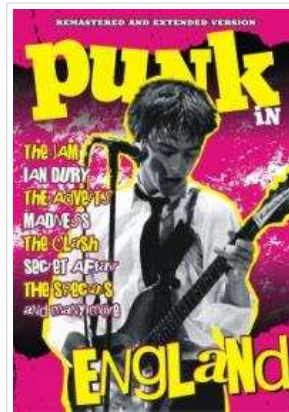
But fortunately for the audience, what Bld was able to capture has the kind of electricity that doesn't make frequent appearances. There is an energy here specific to this particular cultural moment, the sense of being right on the hinge of something, which has rarely been captured on celluloid before. Bld was most likely not the greatest director to capture the scene—and certainly not the only one, given the work that



Punk in London

Director: [Wolfgang Bld](#)
(ODEON; US DVD: 23 JUNE 2009; UK DVD: 19 JANUARY 2009)

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Julien Temple and Don Letts were doing at right around the same time—but he did happen to be in the right place at the right time. And sometimes that's all you need.

Yes, *Punk in London* is a giant mess. Without much organization, Büld chops together his interminable interviews with little rhythmic sense, mixing live concert footage with staged performances and throwing the occasional song on the soundtrack (The Jam's "Carnaby Street" makes for a nice opener). The color is cheap and washed-out, and the words of wisdom from all these knotty-haired punks looking like they've outgrown their school uniforms are less than memorable.

But what he captures is something else, indeed. X-Ray Spex do a great rendition of "Bondage, Up Yours!" The Jam (clearly a favorite of the director) perform a rip-your-eyelids-off version of "In the City" to a jam-packed and sweaty gaggle of kids in full musical ecstasy. A member of The Lurkers lazes around with mum and dad, shouting at the Boomtown Rats on the telly, "Corrupt! Sold out!" Some frustrated older teddy boys, their pompadours swaying over beer-sozzled eyes, gripe about how punks were really just copying *their* back to basics rock and roll, *and* their rebellious attitude, after all.

Several mentions are made of how punks deserve "a good 'iding" whenever the teddy boys run into them (and given how the dockworker-looking teds seem to outweigh the average rail-thin, glue-sniffing punk by a good 50 pounds, the odds would seem to be in their favor). One of The Stranglers displays some good old-fashioned anti-authoritarian paranoia, refusing to take part in Büld's film because "I'm not a prostitute," later elaborating, "I'm very suspicious of your German motives."

Cultural touchstones are notched off, groundbreaking zines like *Search & Destroy*, the record store / punk community center Rough Trade, and the bleak brick wasteland of the London streets that spawned all this pent-up fury and anomie. Büld is also there, even right at the real start of punk, to capture how quickly things had become formulaic. Already the idea of a standard and conformist look is setting in, with some complaining about punk being made over into a "commercial carnival" before any real change had sunk into the culture at large.

For the most part, though, the bands included here—from lesser-knowns like The Killjoys to greats like The Clash, who end the film with a blazing take on "Garageland"—and their hangers-on are too busy making and enjoying brilliant music to care so much about the why and how. Or why the Sex Pistols don't make an appearance.

Punk in England, the afterthought of a film that Büld released not long after, is pretty much more of the same, only slightly better packaged and with less of a discernable reason for its existence. Subtitled "British Rock Gets Ready for the '80s", the film—released by MVD simultaneously with its predecessor and a tangential follow-up, *Reggae in a Babylon*—has a couple of things going for it which the first film did not.

First, there's the helpful addition of an English-language narrator to introduce some of the interviewees. It also broadens the scope somewhat, bringing in a whole sidebar on the ska scene, focusing mostly on The Specials and the jokier and uptempo kids in Madness (who helpfully describe their music as "like white reggae, but faster"). There's also just more music in general, including not just the expected outfits but a few rather forgotten ones like Spizzenergi, who do a plinky and techy kind of skiffle-punk that probably deserved a bigger historical profile than they've received.

On the down side, the film again jumps from one interview to the next with not so much as a hint to the direction it's heading. Oddballs like Ian Drury make an appearance to little effect, and an (admittedly solid) performance from The Pretenders just before they broke out with "Brass in Pocket" is nice enough but seems more than a little out of place. And there's more Bob Geldof than one can generally take in a single sitting. Unlike the first film's extras (including The Clash live in Munich), this DVD's extras (in this case, a so-called *Women in Rock* mini-feature, which really just showcases a few particularly grating numbers from The Slits and a halfway decent performance from Siouxsie Sioux) don't add much to the overall package.

What *Punk in London* and *Punk in England* provide is an addlebrained and occasionally droning but nevertheless vital window onto a revolt while it's in progress. The first film shows the first burst of energy, those first bands to snarl across the stage at the Roxy and horrify or entrance everyone in their path. In the second, you can see many of the same bands still performing with the same level of freakish energy but moving in newer and more exciting directions. The Jam are turning into a more

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solidified unit, wearing suits and being more open about their modish influences (a fast paced version of "David Watts" sounds like it could be straight out of *Quadrophenia*), while The Clash are mutating into the reggaeified post-punk unit that would soon be barnstorming through the hit radio playlists and sports arenas of the world.

At this point in punk, its revolutionaries that Bld captures are flying fast away from the Big Bang that created it all. They're far enough away from the explosion that they can't quite feel the heat anymore, but it's still propelling them outward at blazing speeds. At the end, Bld just cuts it off, almost as though he expected to pick his camera up in another year or so to see where everyone had gotten off to, what punk had turned into by then, but that film never came. A frustrating end, but perhaps appropriately jagged and unexplained.

Punk in London

RATING: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

EXTRAS RATING: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Punk in England

RATING: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

EXTRAS RATING: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

— 25 September 2009

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