

## TRADEMARK OF QUALITY

THE REV. KEITH A. GORDON STUMBLES MINDLESSLY THROUGH THE SORDID FLOTSAM AND JETSAM OF ALTERNATIVE CULTURE TO FIND SUBJECTS TO WRITE ABOUT THAT POSSESS THE ELUSIVE "TRADEMARK OF QUALITY." MP3 FILES ARE POSTED HERE STRICTLY FOR THE PURPOSE OF MUSIC CRITICISM AND THEREFORE FALL UNDER THE "FAIR USE" GUIDELINES OF U.S. COPYRIGHT LAW.

### California Punk Rock

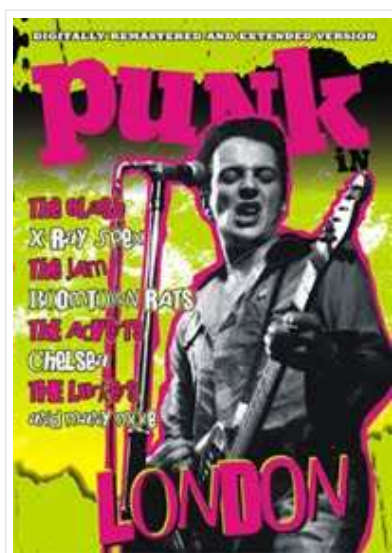
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SUNDAY, OCTOBER 4, 2009

### U.K. Punk Daze Revisited

German filmmaker Wolfgang Büld made somewhat of a name for himself in the late-70s with a trilogy of music-related documentaries that captured the energy and creativity of the British punk scene and its aftermath. Recently reissued on DVD by our good friends at Music Video Distributors, the three films – *Punk In London*, *Punk In England*, and *Reggae In A Babylon* – were the German music fan's attempts to share his apparent excitement over what was going on in England with a wider European audience.



Let's get something straight from the beginning – Wolfgang Büld is no Michael Moore, or even Ken Burns. Both *Punk In London* and *Punk In England* are flawed, middlin' efforts where decent camerawork is marred by the atrocious crimes that were committed in the editing room. Sure, there were technological drawbacks of filming in the late-70s that contemporary documentarians aren't forced to suffer, but my main problem is in these films' lack of cohesion or narrative.

It would also have been nice if Büld had spent a quid or two on titles, as anyone not intimately familiar with British punk circa 1978 would be completely lost by interviews with mumbling, barely-articulate musicians without indentifying titles. Yeah, I know that *Punk In London* was made by a German filmmaker, but did he really have to

TMQ REVIEW INDEX

### TMQ Review Index

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provide narration in his native tongue, thereby keeping most of us in the dark?

What Büld did right was in letting his camera capture the raw youth and reckless energy of the various bands' live performances. This is something he does better with *Punk In England*, allowing longer and more stylistically varied performance clips, but there are several priceless, one-of-a-kind appearances of merit on *Punk In London* as well.

*Punk In London* opens up with several interviews where the young punk rockers are trying to define the concept of punk, stuttering yabbos claiming to have re-invented the wheel while putting down the music of the 1960s as "irrelevant," even if several high-profile punk artists would later claim the era's influence on their own music. The manager of the Damned and Generation X speaks of the difficult economies of booking punk shows at London clubs, and the camera also visits the influential retail watering hole, Rough Trade Records.

As stated before, though, it's with the live performance clips and not with the scattershot and mostly incomprehensible artist interviews that *Punk In London* shines. From the well-known (The Clash, Boomtown Rats) to the barely-known (Chelsea, the Lurkers), and quite a few in between, the film provides each band with an invaluable onstage forum to shine. The obscure (in the U.S., anyway) band Chelsea kicks out one of its better tunes, the politically-charged "Right To Work," with a muscular performance rife with spitting vocals and heavy riffs. In one of the better interview segments, the band's singer waxes eloquent about the plight of unemployed British youth and the lack of jobs.

X-Ray Spex was always an acquired taste, a band that I could take or leave depending on the song. Their performance here of their signature "Oh Bondage, Up Yours," however, is loud and obnoxious, frontwoman Poly Styrene spinning 'round the tiny stage while the band makes a lot of noise while standing still as mannequins. The song is crass and "in your face," and a perfect example of punk's manic energy at work.

An interview with the bassist of the Lurkers, another underappreciated band from the early punk era, is a real hoot, the young punk sitting in the living room of his parents' house with mom and pop in attendance. As the TV blares in the background, and his parents sit with arms folded, he explains the political nature of punk. Another obscure group is the Killjoys, featuring a pre-Dexy's Midnight Runners Kevin Rowland, delivering a lively, guitar-driven spit-n-vinegar style of rock with a sexy female bassist, dual



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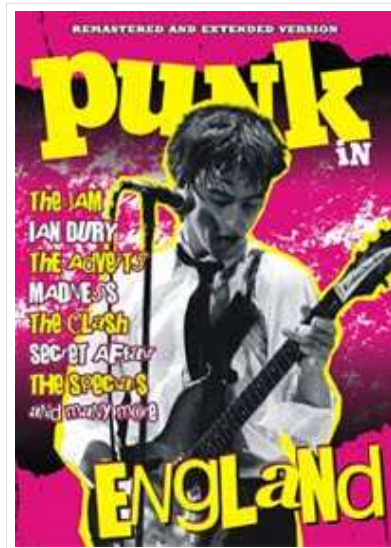
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male/female vocals, and an interesting sound that, unlike many of their peers, is both complex and textured...a stiletto, if you will, rather than a bludgeon.

The highlight of *Punk In London*, though, is the early footage of the Jam and the Clash. The former are shown performing at the 100 Club, rocking "Carnaby Street" with reckless aplomb, clad in spiffy shirts-n-ties. The jackets come off for a raucous take of "In The City," the band working up a sweat on one of their best tunes. As for the latter, the Clash are shown performing in Germany, in a better-lit club with a stage more spacious than the dank, dark black holes that were London clubs at the time. "Police & Thieves," in particular, has a nice sonic resonance to the band's performance.

There are a number of other bands interviewed/performing on *Punk In London*, including the Adverts, Subway Sect, and the Boomtown Rats. DVD bonuses include an interview with the director, and the Clash's entire performance in Munich, which is a real treat for early punk fans.

*Punk In England* is the better of the two films, however, Büld taking a more expansive view of the musical culture of the U.K. to include ska, new wave, and other post-punk sounds. Filmed, I believe, a year or more after the initial 1978 documentary, *Punk In England* is still edited without an overall narrative, but rises above the first film not only because of the inclusion of better talents (the Pretenders and the Specials, along with the Jam and the Clash), but also because the musical segments are longer and more entertaining.



An opening interview with blowhard Bob Geldoff (showing, even at this early date, the preening sense of self-importance that won him his knighthood) is used as a pretext to "catch up with" the class of '77, an English-speaking narrator accounting for the fates of the first wave of British punk bands. Jump to the Clash, the band talking about bringing a greater subtlety to their music before delivering a live version of "Police & Thieves" that is much more mellow, syncopated, and dub-like than that on the first film, a performance more befitting of the song's Jamaican roots.

Büld obviously likes the Jam, but so do I, so no gripes here when he brings 'em back for this second film. Sporting different hair, different suits, and even better music, the band's bombastic "Eton Rifles" blows out the rafters and rattles the audience with an electric performance. Their cover of the Kinks' classic "David Watts" connects the Jam to its musical ancestry, and proves for once and for all that Paul Weller was the Ray Davies of his generation.

The Jams' success in the U.K. would lead to a revival of the Mods in England. During the 1960s portrayed by *Quadrophenia*, the suit-and-tie Mods would often clash with the leather-jacket-clad Rockers, but the "new Mods" of the 1980s...who would prefer to be called by the dubious moniker of "Glory Boys"...also liked to "suit up" and perform '60s-styled pop/rock in the vein of the Who and the Small Faces. The Mod revival had its own fave bands, and here Secret Affair kicks out their "Time For Action," the band pursuing a garage rock sound with horns blasting like a R&B revue on the Jersey shore.

*Punk In England* visits Coventry, a "boring industrial town in the middle of the U.K." where ska was re-born for the decade of the '80s. The Specials were the best-known of the new ska revivalists, called "2-tone" (also the band's indie record label) because of the radical multi-racial make-up of the bands. In many ways, the 2-tone pairing of ska's R&B influenced rhythms with the ferocity of punk and the racial aspects served to make bands like the Specials, the Selector, and English Beat more political than their punk rock colleagues.

There are a number of great ska performances here, including the Specials' haunting "Guns of Navarone" and the Selector's studio jam on "Too Much Pressure," the band full of life, the minimalistic lyrics contrasting with the song's rhythmic backdrop. In an interview, Madness, best known stateside for their minor MTV hit "One Step Beyond," talk about replacing the "computer records" of disco with live bands for people to dance to, their lively performances ranking full-stop on stage. In the interview, a band member accurately describes the ska-punk sound as "like white reggae, but faster."

Ian Dury was one of the era's more unlikely stars, his music a curious mix of pub rock, punk, and new wave sensibilities...a drunken, rockin' mess, in other words. His performance with the Clash of "Sweet Gene Vincent" displays the diminutive rocker's rowdy onstage charisma. Performing with his band the Blockheads, "Hit Me With Your Rhythm Stick" remains one of Dury's best-known and enduring songs, his course talk-sing vocals slurring the nonsensical chorus as cacophonous, icy blasts of sax and a vaguely disco backbeat propel the song forward. Amazingly, the sax player wields two horns at once, albeit briefly, creating a truly otherworldly

effect.

The high point of *Punk In England* is the appearance of the Pretenders in some of the first video footage shot of the band. For a long-time fan of the band, it's great to see all four original members rocking the sassy, swaggering "Brass In Pocket," displaying that even at this early date the band shared an undeniable chemistry. The Pretenders' live cover of the Kinks' "Stop Your Sobbing," which was a big hit in the U.K., is pure magic here, Chrissie Hynde's trembling vocals spot-on while the dual guitars and bass ring clearly above the rumbling sonic boom of Martin Chambers' drums.

A bonus feature on the *Punk In England* DVD is Büld's documentary "Women In Rock," which seems to be an edited version of his 1992 film *Girls Bite Back*. With a similar mix of interviews and live performances, the filmmaker expands his vision to include such diverse distaff rockers as Girlschool (heavy metal), Siouxi & the Banshees (Goth), and the Slits (art-punk). Although the first two bands deliver a number of inspired performances, the female members of the Slits spend too much time complaining about the misogynist conceit of the project focusing exclusively on women, while trying in vain to explain their "art."

Truth is, the punk and new wave movements circa 1978-82, opened the doors for female artists in a way unlike anything previous. Because of the barriers that were broken down by Poly Styrene, Gaye Advert, Honey Bane, and other women, a number of fresh, exciting female voices would move to the forefront of pop culture at the dawning of the 1980s. There are other artists that Büld could have included in his documentary – Toyah Wilcox, Lene Lovich, and Kate Bush come to mind – but I'll take it for what it is and be happy with the rare live performances the documentary features.

In the 30+ years since punk-rock first broke with the Damned, the Clash, and the Sex Pistols, the genre has become so rote, so ingrained in our musical culture, that it's easy to forget how edgy, how controversial, daring, and blasphemous the music once was. With *Punk In London* and *Punk In England*, Wolfgang Büld provides a reminder of why many of us found, in punk-rock, something to believe in.... (Music Video Distributors)

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