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'Hardcore' honors punk music pioneers

Dan Nailen / The Salt Lake Tribune

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Old punk fans giggled when "SLC Punk!", a movie about Salt Lake City's "underground" music scene in the mid-'80s, premiered at Sundance in 1999.

The violence was comically over-the-top, no doubt for dramatic effect. And why did the main characters have to drive through the Bonneville Salt Flats to get to Evanston on a bootlegging run?

But there was truth, too.

The misfits gathering in a slamdance pit to the sounds of obscure, aggressive punk music was a scene that played out day after day in Salt Lake City in defunct venues like the Speedway Cafe, The Painted Word and the old Indian Center. There was plenty of underage drinking in alleys and on street corners near such venues and no shortage of drugs, particularly psychedelics.

There was also the distinct air of being part of an unabashedly "alternative" community to Utah society at large, one that included the long-gone Cinema in Your Face, the Blue Mouse theater, Raunch Records and the Salt Lake Roasting Company when it was essentially the only coffee joint in town where teens could smoke cigarettes with their cup of joe.

Those little communities, based around the self-sufficient punk and indie-rock scenes, dotted the landscape of America in the pre-Internet '80s. They are the subject of "American Hardcore," a documentary premiering today at the Sundance Film Festival.

Back in the day

Musician Keith Morris remembers touring in the early '80s as a primal thing, when rock bands could cross the country with no money to speak of and deliver their music to the masses.

Well, not quite masses. Morris, the original singer for SoCal punk legends Black Flag and then the Circle Jerks, notes that sometimes when his bands showed up in a town, there would be six people in the audience. Other times, it was 300. Either way, as long as a vanload of six or seven guys could sneak into a one-man room at the local Motel 6, and "bathe" in the pool in humid towns like Houston, a band could stay on the road.

"A lot of it was just based on survival," said Morris, now in his 50s, who works at a record label and still performs. "It was, 'Let's get there. Let's hope the promoter doesn't stiff us for our couple-hundred-dollar guarantee. And let's hope that we find somebody in the crowd who will let us sleep on their floor.'"

Morris is among the voices featured in "American Hardcore," which traces punk's remarkable pollination from big scenes in Los Angeles, Minneapolis and Washington, D.C., to smaller, thriving music towns.

That this nationwide "underground," supported by all-ages venues, independent record stores, college radio stations and insanely devoted fans, survived in the pre-Internet world is even more impressive; the music chronicled in "American Hardcore" is "roots music" in the

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truest sense.

"I believe people loved these bands because everything is so commercialized in our society," Henry Rollins of Black Flag in a scene from "American Hardcore." said Steven Blush, author of the 2001 book that spawned the film. "Everything's been so picked-over, and this is one of the few things that hasn't been picked-over and still reads as real."

"These bands, they got their ass in a [expletive] van and would drive around for a few months of the year in totally hostile environments of townies and cops and jocks and rednecks. Just this litany of horror getting from [expletive] venue to [expletive] venue with eight-hour drives in between, or 14-hour drives between every one. These guys were true pioneers and they deserve their due."

Their due comes with "American Hardcore."

Rewind

Blush was raised on the outskirts of New York City, but it wasn't until he left for college in Washington, D.C., that he dove into the punk scene. At George Washington University, Blush played American hardcore punk on the college radio station, booked shows by bands like San Francisco's Dead Kennedys into the school's cafeteria and propelled himself into a writing career after returning to New York.

"American Hardcore" director Paul Rachman got caught up in Boston's punk scene as a college kid, and started toting a Super 8 camera to shows. He went on to a career in Los Angeles making music videos, directed a feature film and eventually helped start the Slamdance Film Festival.

The duo knew each other vaguely from moving in similar underground circles, albeit a couple hundred miles apart. As Blush puts it, "Like anyone in the hardcore scene, you weren't necessarily close with them, but you all knew each other, and whenever you ran into each other, it was like old times."

Rachman moved to New York around 2000 and, as luck would have it, he and Blush did run into each other.

"I bump into him on the street and he told me he was working on this book, American Hardcore, and that it should be done in about a year," Rachman said. "Instantly, I just had the vision, I just knew this was a film to make. 'It's perfect. He and I, I'm a filmmaker, he's a writer. He's finishing up the book and we both know everybody. This could be great.' "

From 2001 to 2003, Rachman said, the duo conducted "maybe 20 interviews" and cut together a work-in-progress version of "American Hardcore." They screened it at a New York theater in September 2003, hoping some buzz might help get them funding to continue with the project. The screening was a hit, which equated to exactly zero dollars.

"The response was positive in terms of energy and interest, but nobody came forward with thousands and thousands of dollars to go make the film," Rachman said. "That was a challenge, but it was also a turning point because that really told me, as a filmmaker, that this film needs to be made the same way these bands made their first records. It needs to have that kind of energy. If we make it that way, it will resound. It will reflect that same energy."

During the next two years, Rachman and Blush logged about 115 hourlong interviews with various players from the early-'80s punk underground. Those interviews, combined with archival footage, old photographs and music, added up to about 250 hours of material Rachman and Blush edited down to the 98 minutes of "American Hardcore."

Crossing over

"The scene, it's still sort of this hidden secret. It's still subculture, still underground 25 years later," Rachman said. "People need to really understand the value of this six or seven years of subculture in America."

Tony Cadena was lead singer of Orange County's Adolescents at the time documented in the film. Now 42 and living in Pasadena, Cadena has been a teacher for 20 years after going to college and studying history. He said it wasn't until years later that he realized the music he was making was spreading across the country, and eventually the world, through the American hardcore network.

"I don't really sit around and try to intellectualize or get all heady and think-tank about it," Morris said of American hardcore music's place in history. "It was what it was, and it influenced a lot of kids, a bunch of people to go out and do certain things. That's totally cool. To try and read into it any deeper than that . . . you know, it's just music."

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