

Brainwashed - "Live at The Smell" DVD

Written by Anthony D'Amico

Saturday, 21 November 2009 02:12 - Last Updated Sunday, 22 November 2009 23:52



This ten-band concert DVD celebrates the weird, sweaty entropy of LA's unique all-ages DIY club. There are some fairly well known bands included here, such as High Places and the reliably excellent No Age, but the most memorable performances are generally delivered by those that lurk in the most aggressively uncommercial shadows of the lunatic fringe (like Captain Ahab and Foot Village).

[ColdHandsVideo](#)

The DVD begins with a frenzied set of sloppy art-punk by The Mae Shi, who very closely resemble a band of meth-addled hobbits. I have never been a big fan of them myself, but that might just be because I am old and boring and no longer understand "the kids." Regardless, they were entertaining to watch anyway, despite oft-grating group vocals and splintered sound-structures. Notably, The Mae Shi (who are from LA, like most of the bands collected here) are quite representative of the scene's central aesthetic: kind of annoying, not too focused on writing great songs, but very creative, intense, and given to explosive performances. Which, of course, sounds quite similar to punk during its wide-eyed, anything-goes infancy.

Another similarity to the birth of punk is the strong "Island of Misfit Toys vibe" that pervades the whole scene. Many of the bands are multi-gender and multi-ethnic and display a wide array of non-traditional configurations: No Age is a drum/guitar duo, Foot Village has four drummers and nothing else, Gowns are a cerebral spoken-word/guitar/drum/violin trio, High Places combine electronics with African/Eastern-influenced percussion, and Captain Ahab and BARR pretty much just use backing tapes or MP3s. Also, high-brow and low-brow aesthetics seem equally at home, though the ballsy, half-baked acts are often much more fun to watch than their artier, more intellectual counterparts. Correspondingly, the crowd itself is just as eclectic and heterogenous. Obviously, twenty-something hipsters are rampant, but so are awkward high school kids, genuine weirdoes, the fashion-damaged, some very misplaced normal-looking people, and embarrassing kid brothers.

Naturally, there are a couple of boring performances and spectacularly unlistenable bands included, but the bulk of the material is largely compelling. Foot Village, as expected, delivered an incendiary and anarchic set of thunderous drumming and primal caterwauling. Another highlight was HEALTH, whom I had not heard before. I am not sure quite how to categorize them, but their performance was an insanely intense (yet surprisingly tight and deliberate)

Brainwashed - "Live at The Smell" DVD

Written by Anthony D'Amico

Saturday, 21 November 2009 02:12 - Last Updated Sunday, 22 November 2009 23:52

hurricane of jagged, angular guitars, roaring noise, and brutally heavy drumming. Captain Ahab, on the other hand, just left me extremely confused. While there was an intriguing hip-hop/Gregorian chant mash-up in the middle of their set, much of their performance consisted of a long-haired shirtless guy shouting along to maddeningly repetitive early '90s rave pastiches that he cued up on his laptop. Also, there was another guy in the band that just leapt around and screamed, dressed only in a speedo. The crowd danced whenever possible, which was fascinating, as the music was absurdly fast and sometimes interrupted by stutters, odd tempo shifts, and blasts of white noise.

"Live at the Smell" certainly documents a rather unique time and place, as the scene's eclectic and congenial atmosphere of freewheeling creativity, idiosyncrasy, and exuberance is not one that is quite found anywhere else on earth. Perhaps a bit *too* congenial, as it seems unlikely that such an uncritical and accepting milieu can be fertile ground for great bands. I suspect club owner hostility and beer-bottle throwing skinheads may have been a necessary ingredient the last time LA was the epicenter of the underground music world. Bands have to try much harder to be noticed in the face of adversity- Greg Ginn, Henry Rollins, and Darby Crash were some single-mindedly focused guys.

This scene also raises some unexpected questions about the nature of music, as a number of these bands would send me diving for the off switch if they were playing on my stereo. Nevertheless, the performances are so visceral and unhinged that it works quite well as a visual spectacle: the music is merely another sensory dimension and the actual specifics are somewhat trivial (as long as they are loud). Perhaps things like "songs" and "talent" are utterly irrelevant in the right environment. Regardless, this DVD provides a great opportunity to witness some of America's strangest bands in their native environment, so I am certainly glad that it exists. The scene is a bit too spazzy and melodically hostile for me to embrace personally, but it is definitely thriving and inspiring to the kids that are a part of it. I suspect a number of the teens at these shows will go on to form great bands or make brilliant art (or, at the very least, form the next Go-Go's).