Vancouver's punk pains in focus at DOXA documentary fest

A long time in the making, but a story worth telling

BY TOM HARRISON, THE PROVINCE   MAY 7, 2010

The legendary poet of Canadian punk, Art Bergmann, and Susanne Tabata on location in Alberta during the shooting of Bloodied But Unbowed.

Photograph by: Handout, DOXA

DOXA DOCUMENTARY FILM FESTIVAL

Where: Vancity Theatre, Pacific Cinematheque, Granville 7 When: May 7 to May 16

Tickets: Various prices at doxafestival.ca, Videomatica, Biz Books and Bibliophile

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Making the movie took almost as long as punk rock lasted and to do it director Susanne Tabata took out a second mortgage on her home.

But she felt it was a unique movement that had to be documented and so was worth the financial risk.

"I don't feel like I own the story," Tabata explains. "I'm just a conduit. But you gotta do what you gotta do and I felt this was an important story."

Calling the film Bloodied But Unbowed, which is also the title of a DOA album, the finished product will be premiered May 13 at the Vogue as part of the DOXA Documentary Film Festival.

However, as Tabata tells it, the movie had to overcome resistance, oddly similar to the original resistance to punk. Nearly 35 years have passed since the first shows by The Furies, Dishrags and The Skulls (soon to be DOA). Many of the people Tabata met in TV, postproduction or in Toronto weren't even born then and couldn't appreciate the relevance. To them, Vancouver punk happened briefly between 1978 and '81 in a place where there was nothing to complain about, if all the punks were doing was complaining.

They'd know differently if they'd been here. For one thing, there was no music industry from which to fashion a career, unlike Toronto, and the few who were in control understandably didn't want to relinquish it. Nascent punk bands such as Active Dog or Art Bergmann's Schmorgs or Tim Ray's AV had to make their own way against stubborn mainstream conservatism. The punk deluge became a tangle of influences, dogma and self-destruction and, by the time DOA metamorphosed it by calling punk Hardcore in 1981, the scene had changed. Bloodied But Unbowed attempts to sort it out.

"It's a story about a scene told by the main people who drove it," says Tabata. "The ones driving the story had the sharpest memories. The personalities are driving the story and consequently are funny. The music speaks for itself.

"We had some of the most interesting characters. We certainly weren't slick.

"By 1981-82, we talk about how the centre of punk had shifted from the U.K. to the U.S. southern California bands. Hardcore 81 was a turning point.

"Vancouver was so off the map at the time," she continues. "We're not laying claim that it was the only scene, nor are we claiming that it was better than, say, the U.K."

Yet it was unique and filled with self-made personalities, from Joe Keithley to Buck Cherry to Jade Blade.

Tabata came into it as an ardent fan, deeply swayed by the music of UBC's radio station. She once stormed into CFOX with a UBC playlist only to be patronized by the station's then program director, Don Shaefer. She then became a regular on Cablevision's Nite Dreams, a TV program that indirectly led to a career in documentary filmmaking, tackling topics such as racism, rough trade, drug addiction and one about the Barenaked Ladies. This is what she has been doing for 25 years.

"I came to this with an acquired skill set," she says, pausing to reconsider. "Maybe not skill set, but

experience in making documentaries.

"I was convinced making the movie would take six months. I was wrong."

"The film touches on many different levels," Tabata adds. "Rebellion! Every generation has its own rebellion. They want to make a statement whether they're into hip hop or skateboarding. I hope they can find something to call their own."

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