



Bloodied but Unbowed traces Vancouver's punk history

By Mike Usinger

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Entirely appropriately, if you think about it, more than one pioneer responded in a way that was totally punk rock when asked to be a part of the documentary *Bloodied but Unbowed*.

“I got told to fuck off a lot,” director Susanne Tabata says bluntly, interviewed at the *Georgia Straight* offices. “But I expected that—I really did. In other words, it was like, ‘I’m not interested.’ People have moved on with their lives, and to ask them to recapture, relive, rethink moments of their youth can be an emotional experience. And it was an emotional experience for people.”

The “it” that the independent filmmaker is referring to is the late-’70s birth of the Vancouver punk-rock scene. At a time when the world was fixated on feathered hair, flared jeans, and coke-dusted discotheques, the West Coast spawned a musical movement every bit as important as high-profile ones in Los Angeles, New York City, and, arguably, London, England. Vancouver bands like D.O.A., Pointed Sticks, Young Canadians, Modernettes, Braineaters, Dishrags, and Subhumans seemingly exploded out of nowhere, overnight. And, just as quickly, an alienated generation embraced them.

Bloodied but Unbowed takes a loving—and long overdue—look at one of the most fertile scenes in North American music history, with Tabata mixing rare archival footage with modern-day interviews with those who were on the frontlines. Among the many things the director gets right is making it clear that Vancouver punk was about more than just D.O.A.; lesser-known acts like Rabid, U-J3RK5, and Active Dog also get their due. As stylistically varied as those bands were, Tabata says, they had one thing in common: back when they were planting their flags at ground zero, they had no idea what they were creating.

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[Watch the trailer for *Bloodied by Unbowed*](#)

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“From my point of view, when this musical thing was happening, I don’t think anyone, for a second, stopped to consider what it was,” she says. “I don’t think there was a sense of ‘This is important. It’s going down and happening right now.’ It was something that was very transitory. But as time goes by, you can look back at that era in Vancouver, and it becomes more and more mythical.”

And with good reason. As much as the likes of D.O.A., Subhumans, and Pointed Sticks seemed to gig every other weekend at the long-defunct Smilin’ Buddha, punk was actually underground in a way that’s almost unfathomable to the Internet generation. You didn’t discover bands on MySpace, Facebook, or Pitchfork, mostly because computers were something you only saw in science-fiction films. And you sure as hell didn’t hear classics like Pointed Sticks’ “Out of Luck” or the Modernettes’ “Barbra” on commercial radio,

which completely ignored every important local record released during Vancouver punk's golden era.

Tabata knows all this because she was there as a player. Her résumé includes, but is hardly limited to, the skateboarding documentary *SkateGirl* and a producer's credit on the Jason Priestley-directed Barenaked Ladies doc *Barenaked in America*. But long before moving into film, she was a teenage correspondent on *Nite Dreems*, a pre-MTV, DIY Vancouver cable show that spotlighted local music. Involved at the time with UBC's CiTR, she also recalls making the rounds at commercial radio, only to find that its power brokers had no interest in underground music.

In some ways, Tabata wonders how much the mainstream media's interest in vintage punk has changed since those times, noting that she's worked for three-and-a-half years on *Bloodied but Unbowed*.

"The funding came together and fell apart three times," she says. "There have been some really lean times and some trying times in trying to put this together. What I found quite surprising was that, even though I had solid production experience and good credentials, the powers that be—the people that control the purse strings at major networks—didn't think that this was a story worth covering."

Bloodied but Unbowed proves them wrong. Making it clear that Vancouver punk was a big deal for more than those who lived here, luminaries such as Henry Rollins and Guns N' Roses' Duff McKagan pop up to pay tribute to our city. Tabata—who credits B.C. public broadcaster Knowledge (formerly Knowledge Network) with helping get *Bloodied but Unbowed* made—may have been told to fuck off more times than she can remember, but she also managed to secure interviews with many of the scene's key players. What she excels at in the movie is getting great stories, whether it's members of D.O.A. and the Subhumans recounting how they met in grade school, or Paul Hyde of the Payolas remembering how he learned that you don't show up to a punk house party in a cab.

Ultimately—and fittingly—it's the characters who made Vancouver's original punk scene so vibrant who make *Bloodied but Unbowed* so watchable. There are moments of total surreality (ex-Modernette Mary Jo Kopechne's postmusic existence in rural Alberta), moments of serious reflection (Subhuman Gerry Hannah ruminating on Direct Action), and moments of painful poignancy (ex-Young Canadian Art Bergmann trying to make sense of where it all went wrong).

What makes *Bloodied but Unbowed* more than ancient history is the legacy that Vancouver's first-wave punks left on these shores. They laid the foundation for a Vancouver music scene that has since given the world the likes of the New Pornographers, Black Mountain, and Japandroids. Quite rightly, Tabata thinks it was important to make her documentary for another reason.

"In defence of doing this now, and not later, well, people aren't going to be around for much longer," the director says. Pausing, she adds with a laugh: "Right now, there are still people who are able to recount, with clarity—and some with no clarity—this period in history."

Susanne Tabata will attend the world premiere of *Bloodied but Unbowed* at a DOXA festival special presentation at the Granville 7 Cinemas next Thursday (May 13) at 8 p.m.

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