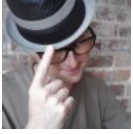


High Times With The Sex Pistols In The U.S.A.



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I've just finished reading *12 Days on the Road*, the book detailing the Sex Pistols' American tour in 1978. It was written by tour manager Noel Monk and some other guy. There were a few factual errors that bugged me, but that's to be expected in an anecdotal

retelling of events that happened over a decade before the book was published (1990).

Reading it got me thinking about the historical significance of that particular tour, so I decided to re-watch the film *D.O.A.* which captures the (mis)adventures of the Pistols in the U.S.A. that winter. And at the same time I finally got around to reading a few reprints of *Punk* magazine. After looking at these various media sources documenting the same events (*Punk* published a Sex Pistols tour diary) I started to draw some interesting conclusions. Things began to come together in a new way altering my view and understanding of early punk rock; the punk rock I did not directly experience.

Punk magazine was first published in early 1976 and featured an interview with cranky old Lou Reed who had just released “the first punk record” called *Metal Machine Music*. As a matter of fact the word “punk” was coined by that magazine to describe the new music then coming out of New York (although rock journalists had used the term as early as 1970).

The magazine was founded by John Holmstrom, a Harvey Kurtzman disciple who decided to produce something that was a cross between *Mad* magazine and *CREEM*. He hired on a “house punk” named Legs McNeil who was the one responsible for lifting the term from an episode of *Kojak* (“You lousy punk”). The magazine was funny, irreverent and featured informative,

historical interviews. And cool artwork by Mr. Holmstrom who went on to draw the covers for a few seminal records by The Ramones.

Now, the thing about this magazine was that it needed financing and the kids who were putting it together had no capital. But they knew someone who did: Tom Forcade. The founder of *High Times* and Underground Press Syndicate had a lot of money as it turned out. And how Forcade made his fortune is hard to ascertain as he was a mysterious figure who went under a few pseudonyms and liked to have bodyguards around.

Tom Forcade was very active in the 1960s leftist underground with ties to the Yippies and SDS, yet he was denounced by some in the movement as a government agent. By 1974 he had become the Hugh Hefner of dope when he began publishing *High Times* magazine. John Holmstrom worked for *High Times* and when he decided to launch *Punk* Forcade was there with the funds to back it.

What drew Forcade's interest to the punk movement in the first place was its anti-authoritarian stance. And he believed this new cultural movement could be the next wave of political radicalism to sweep the country. So when the Sex Pistols planned a tour of America, Forcade saw an opportunity to film the concerts for a proposed movie that would expose this new breed of radical to the world. And perhaps give the band a platform to espouse it's

situationist political theater. In this sense Forcade was pinning his hopes on punk rock being the new revolution for the 1970s. And he aimed to capture its impact on America.

According to *12 Days on the Road* Forcade was a thorn in the side of the band's tour management and record label (Warner Bros.). The presence of his film crew only added to what was already a difficult and possibly dangerous situation (the band were getting threatened with violence and even death). The tour manager believed that Forcade, his director Lech Kowalski and the film crew following the band (which included *Punk* co-founder Holmstrom) were involved in something nefarious; maybe even CIA controlled. Thus management steered the band away from the film crew as much as they could and even tried preventing Forcade from filming at all.

D.O.A. and *Punk* magazine are both fine documents of 1970s first wave punk rock in general, and the Sex Pistols in particular. But the fact that *High Times* and Tom Forcade sought to foment (usurp?) some sort of political or social revolution in the United States of America using the Sex Pistols seems misguided. Then again many in the music industry at the time thought punk rock was going to be the next big thing-like Beatlemania-so it's not surprising the vanguard of the underground put all their eggs in that basket. But America didn't understand or tolerate the Sex Pistols back then so that was never going to work out for them.

Tom Forcade took his own life with a shot to the head late in 1978 before the post production of *D.O.A.* was complete. And the film languished for a few years before being released in 1980. It probably didn't do that well theatrically because by then punk had imploded and been re-branded as "New Wave". So by the time of the film's release it was more historical document than breaking news. It's likely *D.O.A.* was overshadowed by *Decline of the Western Civilization*, also released in 1980, which successfully captured the then-current third wave American punk zeitgeist known as "hardcore".

The grainy 16mm footage that Forcade's crew captured turned out to be a goldmine of behind the scenes and front of the stage chaos at tiny clubs and dive bars in the American hinterland of the laid back 1970s. If they had not persisted in their single-minded pursuit of capturing this moment in time it is likely that the world would have about 10 minutes of live footage of the Sex Pistols in America (Bill Graham's Winterland set not withstanding).