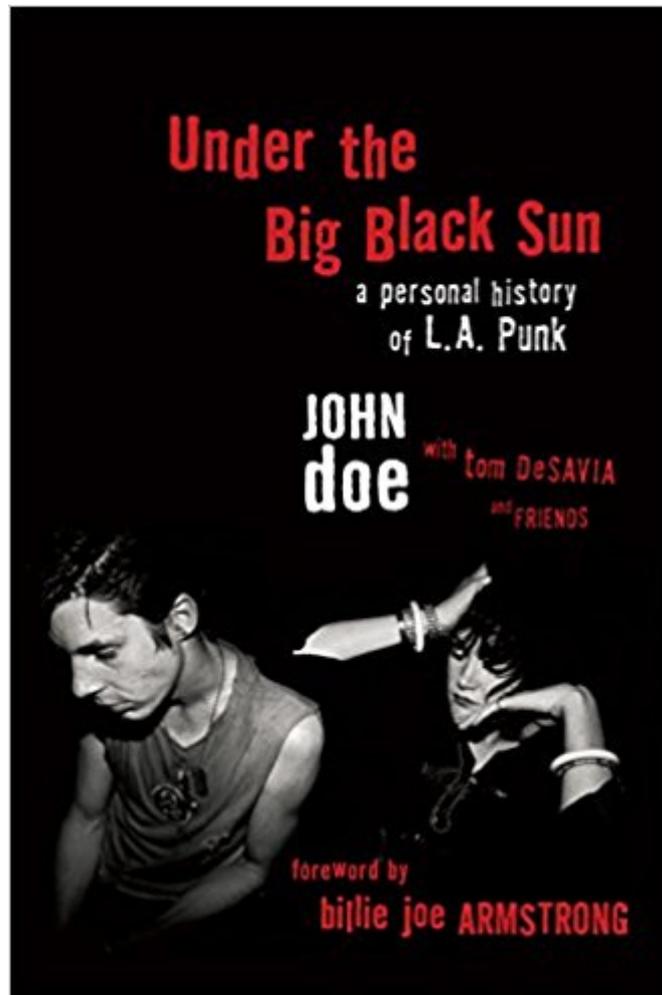


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Under The Big Black Sun: A Personal History Of L.A. Punk



Synopsis

Under the Big Black Sun explores the nascent Los Angeles punk rock movement and its evolution to hardcore punk as it's never been told before. Authors John Doe and Tom DeSavia have woven together an enthralling story of the legendary West Coast scene from 1977-1982 by enlisting the voices of people who were there. The book shares chapter-length tales from the authors along with personal essays from famous (and infamous) players in the scene. Additional authors include: Exene Cervenka (X), Henry Rollins (Black Flag), Mike Watt (The Minutemen), Jane Wiedlin and Charlotte Caffey (Go-Go's), Dave Alvin (The Blasters), Chris D. (The Flesh Eaters), Robert Lopez (The Zeros, El Vez), Jack Grisham (T.S.O.L.), Teresa Covarrubias (The Brat), as well as scenesters and journalists Pleasant Gehman, Kristine McKenna, and Chris Morris. Through interstitial commentary, John Doe "narrates" this journey through the land of film noir sunshine, Hollywood back alleys, and suburban sprawl, the place where he met his artistic counterparts Exene, DJ Bonebrake, and Billy Zoom and formed X, the band that became synonymous with, and in many ways defined, L.A. punk. Focusing on punk's evolutionary years, Under the Big Black Sun shares stories of friendship and love, ambition and feuds, grandiose dreams and cultural rage, all combined with the tattered, glossy sheen of pop culture weirdness that epitomized the operations of Hollywood's underbelly. Readers will travel to the clubs that defined the scene, as well as to the street corners, empty lots, apartment complexes, and squats that served as de facto salons for the musicians, artists, and fringe players that hashed out what would become punk rock in Los Angeles. L.A. punk was born from rock 'n' roll, from country and blues and Latin music, the true next step in the evolution of rock 'n' roll music. It was born of art, culture, political, and economic frustration. It spoke of a Los Angeles that existed when regionalism still reigned in the USA. It sounded like Los Angeles. For the first time, the stories and photos from this now-fabled era are presented from those on the front lines. Stories that most have never heard about the art that was born under the big black sun.

Book Information

Hardcover: 336 pages

Publisher: Da Capo Press; First Edition edition (April 26, 2016)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0306824086

ISBN-13: 978-0306824081

Product Dimensions: 6.2 x 1 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (65 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #15,965 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #5 in [Books > Arts & Photography](#) > [Music > Musical Genres > Punk](#) #6 in [Books > Arts & Photography > Music > Biographies > Punk](#) #15 in [Books > Humor & Entertainment > Sheet Music & Scores > Forms & Genres > Popular](#)

Customer Reviews

Full disclosure: I'm a lifelong X fan. Good, now we've got that out of the way. I purchased both the Kindle edition and the audio book CD. Having been on the fringes of the L.A. punk scene since '82, I've always imagined what I'd missed by not diving in head-first into the scene. Now I know. And I can add more to my "look what you missed" file. Who better to narrate the world of underappreciated L.A. rock than John Doe? In my opinion, X (John Doe, Exene Cervenka, DJ Bonebrake, Billy Zoom) still haven't received the appropriate amount of accolades they deserve. John Doe and company (Jane Weidlin, Henry Rollins, Exene and many others) provide a unique perspective on a genre only they could comment on. They lived it. And I'm damn glad they lived to tell the tale (so many others did not). This isn't sentimentality, it's remembrances from first-hand participants. The wonderful thing about it all? They were each other's fans. It's gratifying to know that I'm in such good company. Even from the fringes of the fringes. Thank you, John!

By the time news of the LA Punk scene reached me, it was long over. Technically, it was only about five years over, but it felt like it was ages gone and I had missed something truly unique. As John Doe's book handily illustrates in the form of personal narratives by the West Coast's main punk instigators, I certainly had. Back in 1986, I watched the film *Decline of Western Civilization* and listened to Black Flag and X relentlessly, wishing I could reanimate that vibrant scene. I was seventeen years old, a drummer in a punk-influenced garage band, but there was no way to travel time. Living in a white, middle-class suburb, perhaps more than anything else, I wanted authenticity. I wanted desperately to be desperate. I was magnetized by the images and sounds of punk. Though I managed to catch a few great bands such as D.O.A. and the Effigies, I knew these shows were vapor trails of a fading scene. The screaming jet had already flown over. Despite the fact I am rapidly approaching the half-century mark, this excellent book brought back adolescent longings for a music or societal revolution. Apparently I still haven't shaken the urge to chuck the job, disconnect from square society and give the world the artistic equivalent of

my middle finger. However brief, there was a period where a primal scream emitted from the West Coast and highly original art was produced by brave and restless souls who had the audacity to reject all the lies and stupidity society asked them to swallow, to do things their way and never take no for an answer. I'm glad this book is here to hammer down a bit more of this important time period in musical and cultural history. The band names may be unfamiliar to future generations since most of them were gone in the blink of an eye, but here is a document of some true pioneers who committed art with the ruthlessness of career criminals. They should be celebrated as much for their unique contribution to music as for their uncompromising and often intentional maladjustment to the norm.

Great read straight from the typer of the single greatest songwriter since Roy Orbison. Brisk, compelling, chock full of anecdotes one would've had to pry loose with boilermakers in years past, this one never succumbs to the myriad lulls or stumbles so many other rock-memoirs fall prey to. Not even close. Definitely worth the shekels. Little known fact: John Doe and fellow punk-rock author Tiger Moody of 'HEART of BRASS' infamy share the same birthday, February 25th. (But, then again, so does Carrot Top...)

I have been looking forward to reading this book. The LA punk scene has been under-represented. Many people were not aware of it until 1981. Most of this multi-faceted book focuses on the golden age of the Masque and the early scene, roughly the years 1976-1981. Hollywood had a glam rock and groupie scene going on in the early part of the 1970s. That soon morphed into the new punk thing when everyone got a leather jacket. In NYC, they had the clubs Max's Kansas City and CBGBs and a lot of movies and books and documentaries. London had almost too much hype and coverage. London has often been mistaken as the birthplace of punk rock. Los Angeles was always a third city with an equal force of creativity and importance, ahead of San Francisco, Chicago and DC. Back at the start, LA had the clubs: the Masque, The Whiskey, and The Starwood were all the main locales for the early scene; plus new clubs were opening up all the time. This book pays attention to the Canterbury Hotel, a block away from the Masque, as LA's dingy answer to the Chelsea Hotel. Most of the scene's original 100, or original 200, it's not clear who's card carrying member or not, are people who are no longer with us. For those dozen people or so who are still with us, some have detailed accounts and others have vague memories that seem general. There was a lot of drug and alcohol abuse back then. I am sure some people have blacked out most of the time. I know that I have. There is an

introduction by Billie Joe Armstrong. He's not from LA and he came along ten years too late. I guess the editors of this book wanted to include a big name to attract the millennials? It turns out that most of people in this book are not from LA and came out west when they were young adults. A third of the book is written by John Doe, so it becomes X-centric. Some of the best LA bands of the time like The Weirdos, The Screamers, and The Alleycats, are there in the background. The book starts out slow. The intro by Armstrong and the forward by Tom DeSavia are generic punk outlines. Instead I suggest that the reader only recall the first time they heard The Ramones or The Germs. Because these two sections are general reminiscences by music fans. In the first real chapter John Doe remembers playing The Whisky and recalls his first impression of the Masque. Exene Cervenka doesn't add much with her vague history report. Where are the personal tales? John Doe returns in the next section with an impressionistic piece about living on Genesee Avenue, and banging Lorna Doom of The Germs. The first part of the book drags. The best part of the book comes next: there are two long chapters by Jane Wiedlin and Pleasant Gehman. Jane Wiedlin talks about growing up in the valley and going to fashion school. She discovers the LA punk scene and moves into the Canterbury Hotel. She reminds us that the Go-Gos started out as a punk band. They were the only band to achieve success and tour internationally. While most of the others turned to heroin. Orange County punks didn't kill the original scene, heroin did. And lack of any success outside of the scene. Pleasant Gehman links the original scene with The Germs and The Gun Club: some of the best bands to come out of it. Her view of the LA scene is the most cinematic. Her story about how her friends went to meet the Sex Pistols on tour in the south to lose their virginity was pretty hilarious. The hardcore scene came in and Pleasant went rockabilly. John Doe has a few more chapters that fill in the blanks. Chris Morris talks about his experiences with working at a movie theater and Slash Magazine. Tom DeSavia focuses on the photographers of punk, the best ones being Ed Colver and Jenny Lens. Robert Lopez talks about growing up in San Diego and being in a teenage punk band. The focus turns on how east LA punk and Latino punk bands became involved with the original movement. Of course, Henry Rollins chimes in and was a little late to the LA scene. By this point of the book I notice how few original native Los Angeles people are represented here. Henry Rollins doesn't really add much color to what has been said better before. But it is interesting that he mentions how he was followed by the police and the FBI. The question remains: was punk seen as a threat by the FBI at the time? Chris D. speaks about his experiences with Slash Magazine. Mike Watt goes on for a few pages about growing up Pedro. John Doe speaks about what is punk and not punk. Charlotte Coffey writes about not being cool and not very punk, but being in the Go-Gos, which were the only band from the original scene to

have any success and play stadiums. There is a lot of anti-OC sentiment in these pages. Most of this is refuted by Jack Grisham of TSOL. TSOL is still one of the current bands still offering their brand of punk today. While many lament the end of punk around 1982, due to the OC invasion, in reality the OC punk scene had been boiling for years. Sandy West of The Runaways was from Huntington Beach. There were backyard house parties with The Crowd and The Outsiders. There was more of a punk uniformity and gang element post 1981 and that was unfortunate. But it's a little sad when people in the original scene are still trying to be the king of the high school when they are 25. Whether punk had died or not, one thing was for sure post-punk had started. There was goth, rockabilly, electronic music, ska, and new wave. Most of the old punks had put their cards in the rockabilly/Americana movement. Dave Alvin of the Blasters addresses much of this in his chapter. Kristine McKenna mourns the death of the scene artfully in her section. John Doe then wraps it up nicely. It's a compelling read and a fresh looking back on the complicated scene. The band X had been in two documentaries. Still LA feels under-represented in punk rock retrospectives. There is always New York and London, and Los Angeles is a strong third city, although you might think it's an equal to DC, Boston, Chicago and San Francisco. Some of the LA bands don't really seem as punk as we would like them to. They would play with The Knack, 20/20, and The Plimsouls at the Starwood, although no one talks about those bands being punk. Punk music is at heart a folk movement. Anyone can start a band. The bands become more successful and move on to the bigger mainstream stage, like the Go-Gos, or they stop after one album and become a legend, like The Germs. Lack of success, and money, and experiences on the road, force bands to hang it up after a few years. Or you can change your tune, or start a new band. Punk didn't die in 1982. It just got predictable and old. Due to lack of support and recognition, many bands turned to drugs. Heroin in the early 1980s killed the scene. The OC kids didn't ruin the scene. The scene became ugly and violent overall. Those younger kids of the 1980s didn't relate to society and older bands that were too cool for school. And musicians heading towards 30 and playing for five or ten years didn't want to be spit on by a 15 year old with nothing to lose. See you at the Go-Gos farewell concert tour. It will be fun.

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