

Where punk rock met art

JAMIE WETHERBE

The early SoCal punk scene wasn't all guitars, mosh pits and visions of chaos — although there was a good dose of that, thanks to bands such as the Germs and Black Flag. Rather, the music was experimental, arty and all over the map.

"Everything from hardcore punk, electro-punk and new wave music all fit together; there weren't those genre distinctions," says Adam Hyman, executive director of the Los Angeles Filmforum, who curated "Strange Notes and Nervous Breakdowns: Punk and Media Art, 1974-1981," a program of rarely shown films from the early scene premiering Thursday at 7 p.m. at the Museum of Contemporary Art.

The shorts, part of Filmforum's Alternative Projections exploration of experimental film in L.A. and MOCA's show "Under the Big Black Sun: California Art 1974-1981," look back at L.A.'s punk roots with a 100-minute collection of rarely and never-screened performances.

Works capturing influential bands include "Never Mind the Sex Pistols, Here's the Bullocks," a 30-minute black-and-white capsule shot mostly in 1977 documenting performances by the Avengers, the Bags, the Dead Boys, the Screamers and the Weirdos. There are also clips from the early 1980s cable access show "New Wave Theater" featuring Black Flag and performance artist Johanna Went, known for wild, transgressive works involving elaborate costumes, punk music and often lots of fake blood.

The frenetic rock energy



BRIAN FORREST MOCA

MOCA'S "Under the Big Black Sun" exhibit looks at the period from 1974-81, when punk took root in L.A.

'Strange Notes and Nervous Breakdowns: Punk and Media Art, 1974-1981'

Where: MOCA Ahmanson Theater, MOCA, 250 S. Grand Ave., Los Angeles

When: 7 p.m. Thursday

Price: Free, reservation required

Info: (213) 621-1736, moca.org

in "Strange Notes" is spliced with playful early video manipulation as a generation explored the new visual medium that was taking off at the same time.

"The original wave of punk tends to be rooted in a lot of art students who were working with music that was hip at the time, and the music that was hip at the time was punk," says Hyman. "If it had been done five years earlier, they would have been filming folk rock bands."

UCLA students in the '70s and early '80s captured bands on campus and in

clubs, including Eugene Timiraos' 1979 video of the X song "I'm Coming Over," shot for a course. Classmate Bradley Friedman directed an 11½-minute video of the Screamers in 1981 performing "Eva Braun," a synth-punk song named for Hitler's mistress, in front of TV monitors. He also shot the stern and synthesized Anti-Sex League in 1980 playing a song, with an unpublishable song title enhanced with blurred-out images from a porn film.

"It directly related to the name of the band and the lyrics of the song and the performance, and the video was a response to perceptions of sexual restrictions at the time," says Hyman. "Film-makers were [manipulating video] to add to the music or add political commentary with the alternative imagery they were bringing."

"The period between Nixon's resignation and Reagan's inauguration is unique for more than artistic experimentation, but for an overlap between visual arts and music not seen since the Dada movement of the '20s," says MOCA chief curator Paul Schimmel. "I think the punk generation and the art-

ists came through the Vietnam War and Watergate having a very different relationship with the government. There was this antiart art and that was also true with the punk bands ... it wasn't intended to be stylish, but to capture raw energy."

"Strange Notes" has a three-minute comic interlude with a Jonathan Demme-directed pre-MTV music video of the Suburban Lawns' single "Gidget Goes to Hell," last seen on "Saturday Night Live."

The screening also includes what Hyman has dubbed DIY documentary — no-frills, no-budget media art — including UC Irvine student-turned-artist Richard Newton's "I'm Going Out in the RAIN."

"I didn't find as much of this as I would have liked, but I'm sure most of it ends up in closets and falling to pieces," says Hyman. For the most part, each video of the nearly 20 works featured in "Strange Notes and Nervous Breakdowns" follows a simple punk premise. "It's energetic; it's somebody young," says Hyman. "It's short and right to the point and combative and anti-establishment."

"Under the Big Black Sun" is at the Geffen Contemporary at MOCA through Feb. 13 and focuses on experimental art in California from 1974 to 1981. Activities also include a show by the punk bands X, the Dead Kennedys and the Avengers on Jan. 28. The exhibit even borrows its name from an X album: "I wanted a title that would capture the political dystopia of the late '70s and the punk movement," says MOCA's Schimmel.

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