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Dead Boys Resurrected — The 1970s American Punk Rockers Are On Tour

A supposition: The Dead Boys were America's Sex Pistols. And very few people knew it.

The Dead Boys came from New York via Cleveland; the Sex Pistols hailed from London. Both groups kicked up dirt during the same era, roughly 1976 to 1978, sputtered and fumed spectacularly and blew apart. Both played ferocious, antagonistic punk rock — caustic, confrontational and far from politically correct — and their debut albums, “Young, Loud and Snotty” from the Dead Boys and “Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols,” are pinnacles of the genre.

The Sex Pistols, everybody knows. The Dead Boys, not so much. But 40 years after the release of their debut album, the Dead Boys have risen from the dead, in a manner of speaking, to stake a claim, coming to the Somerville club [ONCE](#) on Monday, Sept. 18. The current band includes two of the founders, guitarist-songwriter Cheetah Chrome and drummer Johnny Blitz, both 62. Original lead singer-songwriter Stiv Bators died in 1990, hit by a cab in Paris.

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Cheetah Chrome

Chrome, on his cell phone leaving New Orleans for another gig, entertains the Pistols comparison for a moment, but shrugs it off.

"I don't think we were America's anything, really," Chrome says. "If you're looking for an angle on a story, well, that's one. But in my eye, we weren't the Sex Pistols at all. We played a lot better than the Sex Pistols. We had better songs. I don't think we were America's anything" — and here's where he does posit an accurate comparison — "except we got kind of screwed in the music business. I don't think anybody handled us well at all or that anybody understood us at all."

And the Pistols/Dead Boys twinning (if you choose to accept it) diverges here: In their heyday, the Dead Boys were virtually unknown in America. In the U.K., the Pistols were splashed all over the tabloids and went to No. 1.



The Dead Boys were one of many CBGB-spawned bands — as were more popular Sire Records label-mates Ramones and Talking Heads — but remain a footnote still to most, a band that burned bright and noxious and then faded from view.

Here's where the Dead Boys started for me. They were the first punk rock band I ever saw. In November 1976, I came down to Boston from Maine — I was attending college there — and tried to catch gigs. It so happened the Dead Boys, who had yet to record their debut album, were at the Rat one night and that's where I ended up with about 50 other people. It was my good fortune. Punk was starting to gain strength.

I'd heard about shows like this — Iggy and the Stooges were infamous for them — but at age 20, I'd never seen anything like it. Bators was all over the stage, caterwauling and sneering. He cut his bare chest with a broken beer bottle, put his head inside Blitz's kick drum, pretended to hang himself with the mic cord — all while the band churned out this nasty, catchy, furious punk rock, songs like "Sonic Reducer," "Down in Flames" and "All This and More." The songs — angry, raw and oddly empowering — were new to me and sucked me in immediately.

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"People weren't used to that sort of thing," Chrome says now, looking back at those days. "In a way, it was a lonely existence. We had kind of a rough time because of it. People thought you were weird every place you went. We kind of carried it with us."

Chrome says they never talked about what the Iggy Pop-inspired Stiv was going to do or what his game plan was for the night's show. "Some nights he'd lose it," says Chrome, with a slight laugh. "He did some things that didn't work quite so well, and he was like, 'Well, I won't never do that again!' Like he'd pull my guitar cord over and the amp would come with it across the stage. Sometimes he would go crawling through the drums and knock them out of the way so we couldn't play and we'd have to stop and fix them. We'd all be standing around for five minutes."

Following up their killer album, "Young, Loud and Snotty," was the not-so-great 1978 record "We Have Come for Your Children." Then, as their own song said, they went "down in flames."



It's a situation where Chrome squarely puts the blame on Sire Records boss Seymour Stein. "He decided to break us up and he did," says Chrome. "I've talked that issue to death and I've written about it in my book. I'm not feeling that great today and I want to feel better, not worse."

The players went separate ways. Bators, notably, formed the psychedelic-rock band Lords of the New Church. Chrome fell apart, became addicted to drugs and alcohol, and spent a couple of years in Boston on the streets.

That was then. Chrome, who now makes Nashville his home, is a father, has been sober for decades and published a memoir in 2014 called "Cheetah Chrome: A Dead Boy's Tale: From the Front Lines of Punk Rock." He also runs a small record label, Plowboy, and has recorded some sizzling songs on his one studio album, a 2013 release called "Solo."



With the 40th anniversary of “Young, Loud and Snotty” approaching, Chrome and Blitz re-recorded the album, but did not go back to fetch surviving alumni. Guitarist-songwriter Jimmy Zero, Chrome says, lives in Cleveland and plays some music, but has “health issues.” Bassist Jeff Magnum, who lives in New York, “is just not the right guy for this bunch of people,” says Chrome. (Magnum has expressed disappointment and anger on his Facebook page for not being asked aboard, especially after the 2005 reunion at CBGB that he was a part of. He did not respond to a message sent requesting comment.)

The three new players are singer Jake Hout, who used to be in a Dead Boys tribute band called the Undead Boys, guitarist Jason Kottwitz and bassist Ricky Rat, the latter two having played with Chrome’s band Rocket from the Tombs.

The idea of a new Dead Boys came about, says Chrome, earlier this year when he and Blitz were playing gigs in Japan. “We were talking and Jason, who’s been my guitar player for about four years, started talking about doing ‘Young, Loud and Snotty’ because it was the 40th anniversary,” says Chrome. “Ricky Rat, we’d known for ages. We ended up getting Jake, who was out in California, and he fit in perfectly: ‘Oh my god, this guy sounds like Stiv, but he’s much

different than Stiv and he has his own stage show!’ We were thinking ‘Why not call it the f----- Dead Boys?’ I own the name and none of the other guys were interested in being involved with any of this stuff except for getting checks.”

They’ve just begun an exhaustive U.S. club tour that goes through mid-November. They wowed ‘em at South by Southwest this year with [Paste magazine](#) raving, “The group played the entire LP with sweat and fire, wiping away all four decades of the past in the process.”



Is there a big black cloud of punk rock nostalgia wafting about the Dead Boys? Even if it’s so, Chrome says the music feels as fresh and alive to him today as it did in 1977.

“Totally, just as intense,” Chrome says. “And we’re playing to a lot more kids now. For a while, we were playing to the gray hairs. There’s a few gray hairs, but not as many as you’d think. They actually tend to stay out of the way because there’s a mosh pit now.”

How extreme the Dead Boys music is depends on context. Certain rappers, death metal bands and hardcore punks have gotten into dark

and violent lyrical territory that far surpasses what the Dead Boys were doing 40 years ago. Still, there were songs about rough sex on the floor, about punk rock groupie gratification — or, alternately, being unable to have sex because you're too high on drugs — punching out a random old man on the street or maybe an ex-girlfriend, and one about infamous New York spree killer David “Son of Sam” Berkowitz, with Bators singing from the killer’s point of view: “I am a son of Sam/ I got death breathing from my hand.”



“I’m surprised we got away with some of it,” Chrome admits, “but we were just being funny. I mean, we never wanted to see anybody get beat up or hurt or anything like that — unless they pissed us off. The whole thing had a sense of humor. I think we could have been a little bit more political; we don’t have much of that in there. We didn’t have to be so sophomoric, I guess.”

So, what about legitimacy? Can the Dead Boys of 2017 reclaim the Dead Boys throne, several generations down the line?

“Go see us,” says Chrome, laying down the challenge.

For him, “it’s just like the old days. It’s unbelievable. But I wish I was a lot younger because I would enjoy it more. Now, by the time I play the set, I’m ready to go [to bed] and watch TV.”