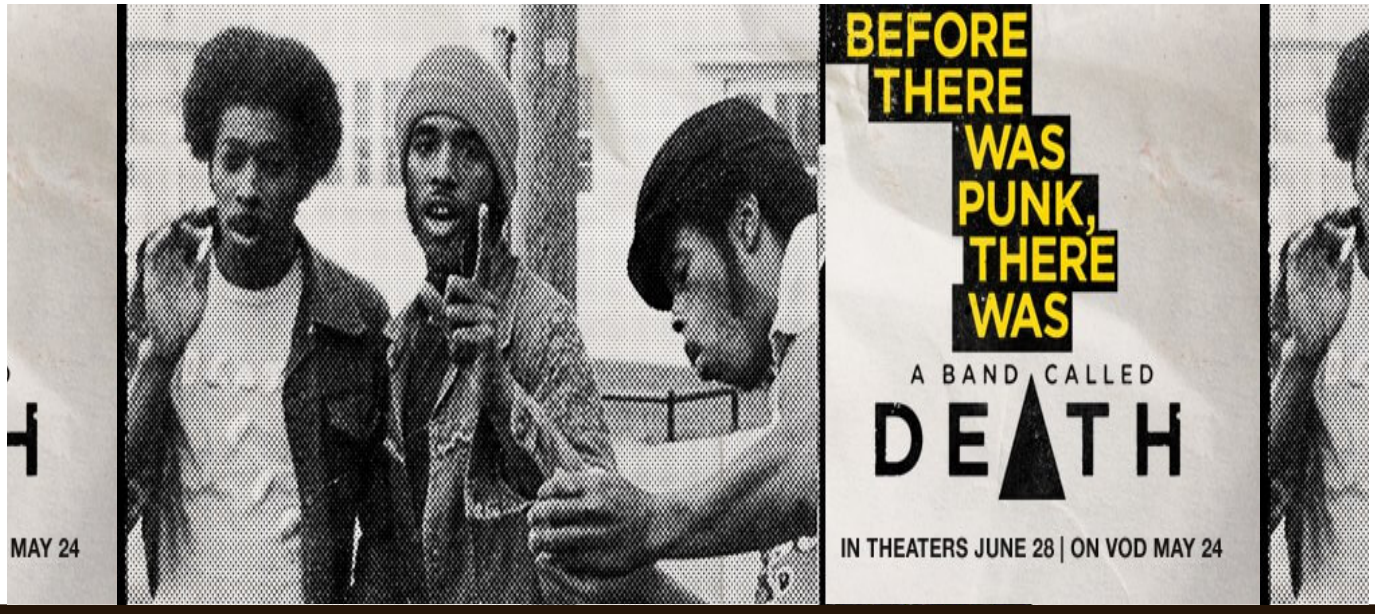

A "Death" the Whole World Should See

Posted on May 19, 2013 by Clarence Lang

I saw a fascinating documentary recently at a local film festival. The name of it is "A Band Called Death," and it is scheduled for a wider release this summer. Directed by Jeff Howlett and Mark Covino, the film traces the early 1970s emergence, quick demise, and recent rediscovery of a proto-punk band, Death, founded by three African American siblings from Detroit: David, Bobby and Dannis Hackney. In the contentious, still-evolving history of rock n' roll, the group is now regarded, at least from the perspective of one *New York Times* article, as "a remarkable missing link between the high-energy hard rock of Detroit bands like the Stooges and MC5 from the late 1960s and early '70s and the high-velocity assault of punk from its breakthrough years of 1976 and '77." (Mike Rubin, "This Band Was Punk Before Punk Was Punk," T*he New York Times*, March 12, 2009) This puts Death years ahead of Bad Brains – perhaps the best-known black punk band among those of us with only a casual familiarity with the genre – and even supposed pioneers like the Ramones.

That one of the early progenitors of punk would be a group of "brothers" from the urban-industrial Midwest did not take me by total surprise, given the music's origins in working-class disaffection and social critique. Admittedly, I'm an outsider in this conversation, and Death's place in the punk canon is a matter that I am happy to leave to other, more

knowledgeable observers. What most intrigued me as an historian of black labor politics and culture was the Hackney brothers' upbringing in a solidly black working-class community and home, one in which their parents possessed both the resources and wherewithal to invest in their musical aspirations. This included not only outfitting their sons with drum kits and guitars, but also allowing them the freedom to hone their skills by jamming in their room every day from 3 to 6 pm. It brought to mind the long history of black working-class self-development, cultural literacy, and cosmopolitanism created in the "home sphere" beyond the point of production – spaces like Wayne State University and similar urban universities and community colleges, churches, the black press, barbershops and beauty salons, not to mention the more mundane forms of exposure through radio- and record-playing in extended households.


Death was formed in 1971 by the brothers Bobby (bass, vocals), David (guitar), and Dannis (drums) Hackney.

As the film explores, even the group's morbid-sounding name was intimately informed by patterns of blue-collar life. While driving an injured co-worker to the hospital following an on-the-job accident, the bandmates' father was hit and killed by a drunk driver. As the film suggests, David Hackney – who gave the band its name over his brothers' misgivings – struggled hardest with what his father's sudden, traumatic passing meant in terms of the vagaries of life and death. Interpreted from the standpoint of black workers' culture, and the strong religious faith that permeated the Hackney household, the name Death did not reflect nihilism. Far from it. Rather, it manifested the blues-tinged existentialism explored in the work of such writers as Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Albert Murray.

Outgrowing their bedroom and garage (where their loud and fast playing tested the patience and good will of the neighbors on the block), the Hackneys landed a deal in 1974 with Don Davis's Groovesville Productions, one of the many thriving rhythm and blues labels dotting Detroit's musical landscape at the time. They recorded a genre-defining, seven-song

demo in 1975, but a long string of rejection letters followed when they shopped for a distribution deal among the major record companies. The band's name, which many executives found off-putting, was an obstacle. David, the group's main creative architect, refused to even consider a different moniker, and he notoriously sent word to music industry titan Clive Davis – then at Columbia Records – to go to hell for asking him and his brothers to do so. But Death's name was only an aggravating factor in the Hackneys' inability to launch a career. More to the point, a scrappy black garage rock band did not fit easily in a predominantly white rock scene, nor did it suit the tastes of black audiences more culturally attuned to the Temptations, the Dramatics, the Ohio Players, and Earth, Wind and Fire than "white boy music."

Released from Groovesville around 1976, the members of Death took their masters, as well as matters into their own hands, and self-released the single "Politicians in My Eyes" (The track, by the way, is as furiously relevant today as it was in the Watergate era when it was recorded.) However, at a moment of expanding corporate consolidation, declining homegrown labels, and narrow niche marketing in the recording industry, the song attracted only erratic airplay. By the mid-1980s, Death was defunct, Bobby and Dannis were living in Vermont, and, reminiscent of the bleak Gil Scott-Heron song, David battled both the bottle and unemployment in a declining Detroit (He succumbed to lung cancer in 2000.)

Ironically, while the corporate-driven subdividing, and stultifying radio formatting, of the music industry buried Death in the '70s, one of the industry's offshoots – namely, the marketing of rare and obscure records to vinyl-hungry hipsters – resurrected the band among collectors and indie music enthusiasts. The contradiction of capitalism here is that Death's previously shelved demo has been newly released under the title . . .For the Whole World to See, giving the band the mass exposure it deserves, and which had eluded it all these many decades. Hopefully, the new documentary will contribute further to Hackneys' belated introduction to a broader music-listening public.

The film is not without its shortcomings, though. First, the filmmakers are so captivated by their subjects' musical novelty that they miss the opportunity to more explicitly root the project in the everyday texture of post-World War II black Detroit. Specifically, the story could have benefitted from a clearer sense of place and time, as revealed through considerations of the good employment, homeownership, diverse musical heritages, public schools known for their music programs, and institution building that included black-owned record labels like Berry Gordy's Motown and Davis's Groovesville. Isn't this context, in its fullness, important to understanding the Hackneys' background, their structure of opportunities, their development, and what they subsequently became? Consider, further, how David Hackney's later life experiences diverged sharply from his brothers' after the

latter relocated east. Were David's travails the result of his individual traits, an irreparably damaged ego, or as the film seems to propose, a tormented genius? Or were his personal hardships also partially attributable to the circumstances of Detroit's postindustrial descent, which have eroded the life changes and opportunities of many of its residents since the 1970s?


Death performing live.

One of the documentary's most arresting scenes occurs when the camera follows Bobby and Dannis Hackney back to the Detroit home where they were reared, and the viewer sees that it is one of the only houses still standing on a virtually empty block. Though no mention is made of this sight, the image is in stark contrast to the brothers' nostalgic memories of a vibrant black neighborhood. The Hackney brothers exude real joy in these present-day scenes at the family home, and understandably so. Yet, the visual isolation and loneliness of the house speaks to the dramatic abandonment of the city amid its many fiscal crises, and it signifies the deteriorating socioeconomic conditions and prospects that black Detroiters born since the '70s have encountered.

Second, the film implicitly, and incorrectly, frames black (working-class) mass culture as reflexively insular. That the Hackney parents' musical diet consisted of Patsy Cline and the Beatles as well as Motown and gospel is certainly noteworthy, but such eclecticism was not exceptional. Similarly, black audiences' musical choices, especially in the late '60s and early '70s, did not begin and end with blues, R&B, jazz and soul. Instead, their horizons enveloped genre-dying acts like Jimi Hendrix, Sly Stone, and Shuggie Otis; Funkadelic, another idiosyncratic Detroit group that shared recording studio space with Death; Junie Morrison, Funkadelic's label mate at the Detroit-based Westbound Records; Rotary Connection, a Chicago-based psychedelic outfit that featured singer Minnie Ripperton; and Betty Davis, whose brief marriage to trumpeter Miles Davis reportedly influenced his adventures in jazz fusion during the period. Moreover, as James Spooner's 2003 documentary, "Afro-Punk," and Lev Anderson's 2010 film about Fishbone ("Everyday

Sunshine") make plain, African Americans have had an active, if underexplored, presence in the punk scene.

These faults notwithstanding, "A Band Called Death" is a documentary worth seeking out. See it for the music and the fair tale-like third act, but view it critically for what it says, or doesn't say, about black urban community and culture in the transition from an industrial to a postindustrial U.S. society.

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