

DAILY

VARIETY

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The Decline Of Western Civilization (Music docu—color)

A Spheris Films Inc. production. Produced, directed by Penelope Spheris. Executive producers, Jeffrey Prettyman, Gordon Brown; camera (uncredited color), Steve Conant; additional photography, Bill Muerer; Penelope Spheris, editors; Charles Mullin, Peter Wiesel; documentary sound, Kevin Williams; music recording and engineering, Alan Kutner, Gary Hirsilus. Reviewed at the Sherwood Oaks Experimental College, Hollywood, Feb. 1, 1981. No MPAA Rating. Running time: 100 min.

With: Alice Bag Band, Black Flag, Catholic Discipline, Circle Jerks, Fear, Germs, X.

The best rock music docu over the years have always managed to complement the presentation of live performances with an acute sense of the sociological moment, and so it is with "The Decline Of Western Civilization." A bracing, stimulating and technically superb close-up look at the L.A. punk scene, pic is pitched at a perfect distance to allow for simultaneous engagement in the music and spectacle, and for rueful contemplation of what it all might mean. An advertised preview is set for Mann's Hollywood at midnight tonight, and film's quality and unusual content indicates a bright b.o. future in specialized venues.

Artistic strategy here is to combine provocative performance footage with "at home" interviews with punk group members and talks with club owners, managers, critics and hardcore fans. While not aspiring to the comprehensive, film nevertheless constitutes a 100-minute total immersion in the indigenous California punk world and will probably prove satisfying to those involved in it as well as the curious onlookers who have thus far resisted first-hand exposure.

While a few of the rockers come off as artificial poseurs, many more surprise through revealing articulation of whys and wherefores of their lifestyle, and what comes through most strongly is purity of their dedication to their music. As most local bands are without major label affiliation and several on view here are considered too disruptive to book by most clubs, musicians exist on a subsistence basis and speak of how they make no money from their gigs.

Perhaps of special interest to insiders will be kitchen table interview with Darby Crash, late lead singer for the Germs, who was obviously living on, if not over, the edge as he takes his pet garatula out for a walk on his arm.

Lensing of the club dates leaves nothing to be desired, as essentials of the acts themselves are well captured and incessant slam-dancing of the spectators provides a frenzied background. Film's soundtrack album has already made a strong impression on the charts,

FILM REVIEW

The Decline Of Western Civilization

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and while recording quality is excellent, pic also has the wit to provide written subtitles of certain songs of which delivery allows for no comprehension.

Given top-notch craftsmanship, it's hard to believe effort was made independently for \$100,000, and well-nigh impossible to detect that 35m print is a 16m blowup.

Producer-director Penelope Spheris made several shorts for "Saturday Night Live" and produced "Real Life" for Par and Albert Brooks before embarking on this project in 1979. Pic

manages to bring insight and unity to an anarchic, not-easily-explained scene and delivers the musical goods at the same time.

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