

Title:

Ramones Forever

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Summary:

The Ramones made their name as cult punks with a searing sound. They made history as a major influence in modern rock. Now, a larger audience has a second chance to find out why.

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Article Body:

Immortality is so much better when you can stay around long enough to realize it ...

In that respect, the Ramones endured to at least have a hint it was being bestowed upon them.

Once again, you've got a chance to see why. If you were among the many who missed them in their heyday, you can now relish their legend --- in sound and sight --- with a cleverly-packaged collection entitled 'Weird Tales of the Ramones.' If you have any favorable inclinations toward rock music or pop culture, this is an essential item for your edification and enjoyment. Not only does the set contain 85 Ramones songs and 18 videos, it features an impressive array of works from top pop comic artists, such as 'Simpsons' creator Matt Groening and 'Mad' magazine's Sergio Aragones (there's even a 3D comic, glasses included).

The band probably had an inkling of their icon status in the late 1970s when Rolling Stone magazine named them as one of the seven most important groups in Rock-&-Roll history. However, even then, the relative squalor of their daily existence was threatening to put them in the ironic company of Mozart and van Gogh, two titans of their art whose earthly rewards fell far short of their legacies.

Actually, all the Ramones ever wanted was a hit. They were New York misfits who grew up humming to the Top-40 charts, so perhaps that yearning was

understandable. It was yet another irony of their careers, as their ultimate impact on rock music was that of being iconoclasts. They ultimately didn't need the Top-40 to make their presence felt.

A recent movie scene hit this nail right on the head. When Jack Black's faux-teacher character in the wonderful 'School of Rock' diagrammed the influences of virtually every esteemed band of this era on a blackboard for his elementary-school students, the name at the center of that chalked universe was, rightfully, etched in all capital letters: RAMONES. Another indicator of their impact is the lineup of artists who covered their tunes on a 'tribute' album compiled by the late Johnny Ramone and Rob Zombie (if your musical tastes are merely mainstream, he contributed 'Dragula' to the 'Matrix' soundtrack). The album was produced to generate proceeds for lymphoma research, which claimed the life of Joey Ramone. Those who paid homage with their performances were a veritable Who's Who of today's rock industry:

- Pearl Jam's Eddie Vedder (who was a close friend of Johnny Ramone),
- U2
- Metallica
- Marilyn Manson
- Tom Waits
- The Pretenders
- Red Hot Chili Peppers
- Offspring
- Garbage

Even glam-rockers Kiss made an appearance, perhaps as a subtle acknowledgement that their own style-over-substance circus act has been well and truly outlasted by the stripped-down sound of the Ramones. Kiss' contribution to the cause, though, may have been to first establish that a group didn't really need a Top-40 hit --- their only noodling of note that made the hit list was a ballad, 'Beth' --- to become financially independent. Merchandising was their meal ticket and years later, that was the route that finally served the Ramones so well. Their first roadie, Arturo Veja, designed a distinct logo and hawked a ton of clothing and posters at their concerts. The logo imitates seal of the USA's

Defense Department, which in a sense, embodied the essence of the group:

- They were proudly American,
- Their sound was aggressive, and
- Their compact compositions seemed to defend the roots of Rock-&-Roll.

To this day, items adorned with the Ramones logo can be found everywhere in the world. A further show of the band's ever-growing effect on current consciousness is seen in sports, as hockey arenas all over North America have turned the seminal 'Blitzkrieg Bop' ('Hey, ho, let's go!') into an anthem that raised the song's mainstream familiarity to such an extent that it now provides the 'zeitgeist' attitude portrayed in Pepsi-Cola commercials and elsewhere.

In a way, the Ramones finally have their hit. With the third passing of the original four band members --- bassist DeeDee Ramone --- only drummer-cum-producer Tommy Ramone has survived to completely bask in the belated glory.

Besides the release of the boxed anthology, the other reason to wax poetic about the Ramones right now is the announcement that the Sex Pistols have finally been accepted into the Rock-&-Roll Hall of Fame. To many, they were the clarions of punk rock, but both the Pistols and The Clash owe their origins to the Ramones, who were inducted in 2002, when all but lead-singer Joey were still alive.

The Pistols and Clash were in attendance for the first Ramones concert to rock the UK. Both met the group, who encouraged them to forsake perfection and embrace energy and get their sounds recorded as they were. Even the term 'punk rock' was created in New York by underground diarist Legs McNeil to describe the Ramones (and Iggy Pop's Stooges) as well as the genre that was emerging from the dark shadows of disco, appealing to the disaffected and disenchanted who clung to the late-60s ideal that music still mattered.

One pleasant surprise on the boxed set is the inclusion of a song the Ramones only released in the UK, 'I Don't Want to Live This Life Anymore.' It's DeeDee's melodic projection of the last moments in the drug-engulfed murder-suicide of Sex Pistol bassist Sid Vicious and girlfriend Nancy Spungen. This concise, haunting opus, composed late in the group's career, served to further illuminate the torch being passed, from the influence the Beatles' early songs had on the Ramones --- the band took their name from an alias Paul McCartney commonly used when registering at hotels --- to their own influence on the British scene that grew from their presence.

The Pistols substituted anger for the Ramones' wit, but they still had the

artistic 'edge' that all great rock acts possess. They, and so many groups after them --- including Nirvana and Green Day --- took their cue from the Ramones that the music was more than just a catchy tune. Much more. The Ramones returned the music to its adulators by making it accessible again. They hit the raw sensations that powered Rock-&-Roll in the first place.

And that may have been the Ramones' greatest 'hit' of all.