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AN INTERVIEW WITH MIKEY BEAN OF PHANTOMS: THE RISE OF DEATHROCK FROM THE LA PUNK SCENE

Interviews

Mikey Bean curated a deep dive into the deathrock scene emerging in Los Angeles with his book Phantoms: The Rise of Deathrock from the LA Punk Scene. He captures the story of the deathrock through an exhaustive oral history with the people who were there along with photos and ephemera from the scene. Mikey Bean is a DJ, a writer, a fan, a friend, a collaborator, a curator, a photographer, a graphic designer, a tattooed dude with both of his sleeves and the scene he has come to know as deathrock. According to Mikey Bean, his book only begins to tell that story. We spoke with the creator of Phantoms to get a closer look at the process of creating this expressive tome and the accompanying book launch party celebrating Phantoms at Lethal Amounts.

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Where were you during the time period detailed in this book? What is your connection to the alternative scene(s) of that era?

I live in the OC and grew up in Southampton but was only in my early teens when the scene was happening in LA. I had some awareness of UK punk but so my musical knowledge progressed over time, so did my awareness of, and interest in, other scenes. I was a goth in the mid-80s and then late 90s I was introduced to the Puff Crowd in Tony Moore compilations if I still began learning even more about the LA scene.

Describe the process of putting this book together, from inception to completion.

I've always enjoyed reading music biographies and wanted to read one on this scene, but there seemed to be nothing substantial available. This was in the Myspace days and I was able to chat to some of the original screamers, suggesting that one of them write up the book. Paul Roesler (Christian Death) said he was in the process of writing his autobiography and suggested I contact Rikki Rachtman (Voice of the Beehive, "L.A.M") back a rough idea of what the chapters would be and began contacting more people. When they saw that I was prepared to fly to LA, that I was a genuine project and that I was genuinely interested, more people came forward, some putting me in contact with others. Interviewing was the easy part! The key being a good listener and finding a good means for conversing date. Transcribing the interviews took the most time. The book took on a life of its own as I learnt more about the scene. One comment or memory could totally throw a section I had already worked on and occasionally I had to move whole chunks from one chapter to another if I felt it made more sense there.

How did individuals like Darby Crash and Ross Williams come to have such a central figure in the deathrock scene, regardless of how their music would be categorized?

Although both Darby and Ross were essentially just a part of their scenes, something about both of them made them just that little bit more special, becoming more central figures. I don't know whether it was charisma and personality or their talent in writing, which they both were accomplished at. Interestingly Ross was a huge Darby fan and the book covers a lot of Nesbitt-Darby.

You credit yourself as "Editor" instead of "Author" for Phantoms. What distinction do you see between these titles and how do you see the roles differently as it pertains to this book?

I felt that, because I was doing an oral history, it wasn't me who was actually writing the book, I was editing and compiling pieces of interviews that I had done. The interviewees were telling their stories through me. Interestingly, when I applied for international copyright they actually suggested I change the category from author to compiler too.

As you gathered material for this book, how did you draw a boundary line to maintain your focus on the subject matter? At over 600 pages and 10+ years of research and interviewing for Phantoms, you've surely accrued a large amount of data and stories.

Really, and truly Phantoms was the tip of the iceberg, and I could fill another 600 pages on tangential artists. Like you say, I had to draw a line on what was essential and what was due to fill the book. There is a long list of bands and artists that should be documented but where do you say "enough"? I included a stage where I felt happy with the content and anything else was just bonus material, plus I'd been promising the finished product for a couple of years and really needed closure.

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