

TVO's Teenage Head doc is Some Kinda Fun

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9 Nov 2020 [+4 more](#) JOHN DOYLE

Look at the face on the byline with this column. Would you think that guy got escorted out of a Teenage Head show for being obstreperous? Nah? Well, it happened.

When I arrived in Toronto, back in the day, it seemed like a quiet place in some ways. I had come from Dublin and spent the summers of 1977, '78 and '79 in London. The punk revolution unfolded before my eyes; the music, fashion, politics and anarchic heft of it. There was a tiny punk scene in Toronto and some of it was pos-turing nonsense and some of it had bared-teeth, raw anger. But Teenage Head, though, that band was the business. Pop, punk, fun and inspired in part by the New York Dolls, the Head epitomized everything that was admirable and enthralling about the revolution. The band was, as one of its great songs says, Some Kinda Fun.

Picture My Face: The Story of Teenage Head has already aired to acclaim on TVOntario, and is now available everywhere at tvo.org and TVO's YouTube Channel. It's a wonderful, nuanced, fun and moving story. And it fills a huge gap in the chronology of pop culture in the country. Teenage Head mattered and its outsized importance has never been celebrated.

The band members' story is at first common. They formed the band in high school in Hamilton. They were inspired by the sheer weirdness and pop-pith of the Dolls, MC5, and Iggy and the Stooges. They wore lipstick and looked wickedly different. Mostly, though, they made you want to dance and smile. Singer Frankie Venom was all charisma and sarcasm, a born rock 'n' roll star.

The documentary opens with the band playing at the Heatwave festival at Mosport Park, north of Bowmanville, Ont., in 1980. There were bigger acts on the bill, but they just nailed it with a glorious sense of something local and fiercely confident. The band was headed for the big time. "We were ready then," bassist Stephen Mahon says in the doc. "All cylinders were firing.

You saw it on stage at Heatwave. There was nothing stopping us that day." A few months earlier, there had been a riot at Ontario Place in Toronto when people couldn't get into a Head concert. The band was notorious and notoriously good. U.S. record companies were paying close attention.

A few months after Heatwave, guitarist Gord Lewis was seriously

injured in a car accident. The band was on hiatus for a year. The mercurial recording industry had moved on by then. They kept going, these guys, a phenomenal and legendary bar band in Southern Ontario with a rabid following. But they seemed, in a way, doomed.

"Our first manager was a crook," one band member says. And then there was Frankie, who was on a downward spiral: "You'd pick him up for a show and he was drunk already."

Frankie (Venom) Kerr died in 2008 of throat cancer. This had a terrible impact on Lewis, who began to suffer from depression and anxiety. This group of guys, who had come together at a high school in Hamilton, had been shattered.

There are deeply moving scenes in the doc, made by Toronto filmmaker Douglas Arrowsmith. There was the release of a double album, on vinyl, of Teenage Head's big hits, and an audience re-emerged. The guys are near-baffled by this. But they are also filmed back at that high school, remembering the early days of just being teenagers forming a band. They meet Frankie's son and in a very poignant scene they just look at him, this kid in Grade 12, and remember his dad.

Picture My Face is an excellent, eloquent account of a bunch of Canadian guys who rose, fell, rose again and now they gaze at the camera and each other and recall so much fun, solidarity and pain, as middle-age guys whose aches

are unknowable to others. Highly, highly recommended.

And recommended as a related streaming pick – Vinyl (HBO/Crave) is considered a disastrous series from 2016. But it isn't entirely—the epic two-hour opening and second episode are extraordinary. It's about the music business in New York in the late 1970s. Central character Richie (Bobby Cannavale), a record exec, is sick of all that progressive rock. He raves excitedly about a band he heard the night before. Let's say it was something like the New York Dolls. He shouts, "Rock'n' roll! Like the first time you heard it! It's fast, it's dirty – it smashes you over the head!"

This is a world in which PR guys deliver a new record to a DJ armed with a bag of cocaine and the promise of a sex worker later. A world in which radio-station owners stage parties that are orgies of drugs and sex, and bill the record label. Mick Jagger is an executive producer and Martin Scorsese directed the opening episode. For a while it seethes with the sheer energy of punk. It's plenty obstreperous before it settles into something else.

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