

What We Do Is Secret

By [Edward Havens \(./feedback.php\)](#)

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When a filmmaker has been working on their dream project for more than a decade, quite often the final product is a nightmare for audiences, filled with fragmented ideas that have festered in the director's mind for far too long, depending upon their mood finishing that thirty-seventh draft in the mad hope that this will be the one that finally connects with someone, anyone, who can finance this thing once and for all.



Rodger Grossman's feature debut "What We Do Is Secret," which the nascent filmmaker has been working on for twelve to fourteen years (depending on which Grossman family member you're speaking to), is one of the rare passion projects that projects a strong and united idea, unencumbered with the typical schizophrenic storytelling that accompanies these types of long-imagined undertakings. "Secret," which tells the story of the fast life and early death of Darby Crash, the leader of one of punk rock's early influential bands, The Germs, hits quick, hits hard and never lets go.

Now, if you have never heard of Darby Crash, that's perfectly okay. Chances are, if you were a teen in the 1980s, you've heard of him. You just don't remember him all that well. You may have seen him in Penelope Spheeris' seminal 1981 documentary "The Decline of the Western Civilization," if you were lucky enough to even live in a town with a progressive arthouse theatre which would give the documentary a fighting chance to find an audience, or have a progressive, family-operated video store which may have had one of your buddies from school working for them on nights and weekends, working for someone who would listen to them about alternative titles that might bring in an untapped market looking for something new and edgy and raw. Darby Crash might not have been the scariest punk rocker out there (Henry Rollins or Lee Ving were far more quake-inducing) or the most charismatic (which, sadly, would also be either Rollins or Ving), but he was able to build a small cult of fans and groupies through his philosophies about life.

As with many other bio-pics, Shane West, the "E.R." and "A Walk to Remember" co-star who plays Crash, is far more magnetic and appealing than the real person, as are his co-stars Bijou Phillips (bassist Lorna Doom) and Rick Gonzalez (guitarist Pat Smear), yet it is West's infectious charm that helps us make a quick connection with his doomed character. Elucidation is brief in "What We Do Is Secret," which is far more interested in showing what Crash was about, rather than bogging itself down with too much ten-cent psychiatry as to how he came to be or why he did the things he did (for the record, he never knew his father, his mom ended up with a bunch of dead-end jerks and, most presciently, his brother died of a drug overdose). Darby was a highly intelligent young man who loved Nietzsche and Bowie, wrote provocative songs about sex and death, and came up with a five year plan to become a legend before committing suicide. If you want to gauge how spot-on West is as Crash, all one has to do is look at what happened after the film was completed: the actor so immersed himself in the role, and so impressed the surviving members of the band, that he has become an official member of the newly reunited Germs. It's clear that the film went through fits and starts in its production, but West's performance stays steady throughout, a testament to both actor and director for keeping the vision going.

But despite the performances, what blew me away most about the film was how completely the sound enveloped the audience. I'm not talking about the choice of songs (including Bowie's classic "Five Years," which really sets the mood for the film and for the tragedy which will become Darby Crash's short life), but how the sound mix made sure you felt like you were right there in the room with the characters as they went through their lives. Very few mainstream Hollywood films, with budgets a hundred times the size, put as

much thought into their sound mix as Grossman and his team did here. Even during some of the loudest songs blasting through the main speakers, distinct and clear voices could be heard through the surround speakers, as if you were in the middle of a mosh pit with all the craziness which would encase you. It's the little but important touches like this which make the movie going experience so special.

As I write this, it's been two months since I screened the film during its world premiere at the Los Angeles Film Festival. As of yet, no distributor, large or small, studio specialty division or truly indie, has picked this up yet, and this is bothersome. Sure, releasing a movie about a cult punk icon dead for more than a quarter century is not likely to put a major positive spin on some company's bottom line. But, with the proper handling, it could find enough of an audience to both keep a quarterly report in the black and add a worthwhile title to a library. But hey, not many people had faith in "Once" after it premiered at Sundance earlier this year, and look how well that turned out for Fox Searchlight.

Heck, If I had enough working capital, I'd find a way to get this film into theatres myself, I have that much confidence in this film finding an audience, if it could only get seen. I'd hate to think I might be writing about it again in a couple years as one of "The Best Films of the Decade You Never Got the Chance To See."

My rating: A

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