



REMEMBERING THINGS

The Notorious Documentary That Accidentally Killed Hair Metal

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Remembering Penelope Spheeris' 'Decline of Western Civilization Part II' 30 years after its release.

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In 1988, director Penelope Spheeris' *The Decline of Western Civilization Part II: The Metal Years* premiered at LA's Wiltern Theatre, six miles but a world away from the Sunset Strip hair metal scene it chronicled. The film was ostensibly a followup to her first documentary, 1981's *The Decline of Western Civilization*, which focused on an earlier Los Angeles scene, the punk of the late 70s and early 80s. It was an unlikely career trajectory for a director who got her start producing short films for Albert Brooks, but Spheeris soon found her niche, and in 1974 formed Rock 'n Reel, the first Los Angeles-based music video production company.

In between *Decline I* and *II*, Spheeris made several feature films about punk and/or juvenile delinquency, including *Suburbia*, *The Boys Next Door*, and *Dudes*. (She would also go on to direct *Wayne's World* in 1992). Ironically, Christopher Guest asked her to direct his 1984 mockumentary, *This Is Spinal Tap*, which she considered but ultimately couldn't bring herself to tackle. "At the time I had started getting into heavy metal...I was really into a lot of the bands and really seriously listening to a lot of it all and enjoying it. It was clear they were really making fun of it and putting it down and I couldn't do that. I liked the music so much that I couldn't take it..." she explained in a 2011 interview. But things didn't necessarily go according to plan. Though Spheeris had expressly turned down the chance to helm a movie making fun of this scene, with *Decline II* she accidentally made one that showed a scene mocking itself.

As a teenager in the late 80s and early 90s, my friends' older siblings hauled out often-pirated VHS tapes of her feature films, along with the original *Decline*, as examples of cool movies featuring cool characters. *Decline Part II*, on the other hand, was always something we brought out to poke fun of. When I first saw it in 1992, I immediately felt ashamed of the Whitesnake and Poison tapes that I'd bought with my allowance and loved just a year before.

Despite this, I love *Decline II* and rejoice in its 30th anniversary this month. In [a 2014 screening and panel on *Decline II*](#) at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, glam metal scenester/host of MTV's *Headbanger's Ball* Riki Rachtman describes discovering the joy of metal when a bunch of girls he knew told him they were going to see Quiet Riot. He later started the Sunset Strip club the Cathouse with his roommate, Faster Pussycat's Taime Downe, specifically with the goal of "meeting hot chicks." Hair metal, in spite of its goofy, gross sexism, didn't just attract and encourage female fans; like the glam rock of the 70s, it co-opted feminine clothing, makeup and hair styles. When Poison's seminal debut *Look What The Cat Dragged In* came out in 1986, no one knew what to make of this band that looked like four extremely well-contoured, pouty women who wore lots of pink and purple lace and feathers. "They're gorgeous!" proclaimed both my friends' horny older sisters who would occasionally let me sit on their waterbeds and look at their Bret Michaels posters *and* my friends' horny older brothers who would follow it up with "What?! They look like four hot chicks!"

I'm from extremely rural New Hampshire; I didn't know about young David Bowie, Marc Bolan, or the New York Dolls until I was much older. I was also just

a little bit too old for New Kids on the Block. When I started puberty, the pin-ups and the pop music laid out for me were all hair and guitars and lipstick and I was there for it. Apparently I wasn't alone. One *Decline II* interviewee claimed "if I look more feminine I get laid easier" and several men make the same claim. Some of the women wax poetic about "having all that hair over you [during sex]" and claim that men dressed like women "bring out the bisexual tendencies."

Music about partying and sex is fun. Pre-glam, metal was heavy, serious and angry. I liked Black Sabbath, Iron Maiden, Judas Priest, and Metallica in 1986, but their music also felt inaccessible and very much not for me. When I heard *that* metal, I pictured men and men alone, fighting or rampaging the land or brooding and snarling, nary a woman in sight. When I heard Def Leppard's "Photograph" for the first time, I was roller skating at the YMCA and immediately started pretending Joe Elliott was singing directly to me. In my fantasy, somehow he had a photograph of me in my baggy acid-washed jeans and my paint-splatter-print sweatshirt and wanting to touch me had turned him into a rock 'n' roll clown. A lot of the love I (and lots of other women in their late 30s-early 40s) feel for hair metal is directly related to the fact that I was eleven to thirteen years old during hair metal's reign, which, [according to a recent New York Times article analyzing Spotify data](#), is the most important time period for women in terms of forming our musical DNA. Poison was our Frank Sinatra, our Beatles, our Bay City Rollers, our Backstreet Boys, our One Direction.

[Note: There's also a Noisey article that discusses that article:

https://noisey.vice.com/en_uk/...]

The sexism of the scene is undeniable, but Penelope Spheeris' *Decline II* literally gives viewers the chance to see the bands via the female gaze, flipping the concept of objectification on its head. There are lots of shots that run up and down rockers' leathered and lycra'ed bodies as they writhe and arch in ways that give infamous Whitesnake muse/video vixen Tawny Kitaen extremely stiff competition. In the director's commentary track, recorded in 2014, Spheeris

admits that she found many of the musicians attractive, specifically naming Poison's Bobby Dall and London's Nadir D'Priest, who is in fact recording the commentary track with her! (D'Priest, unfortunately, ruins the moment by replying that he found her then-17-year-old daughter attractive...there are certainly parts of this that have not aged well.)

Spheeris was well aware of sexism within the music scene in general. At that [2014 *Decline II* panel and screening](#), she recounts being told by musicians in her Rock 'n Reel days that "no chick is going to do our videos." But she also describes the inherent power that came from being the *Decline II* director, saying "behind the camera, I am GOD." Spheeris was the boss and if anyone couldn't handle a chick being in charge, they were going to miss out on the publicity and attention they so desperately craved; they had to take her direction or remain in obscurity. Spheeris' aim as a documentarian was *always* to shine a light on those musicians working in obscurity. At the same 2014 LACMA panel, she says that for "all three *Decline* movies...I wanted people that were unknown. That's where the real deal happens. I always want to feature, as players, the unknown bands." This gave her another level of power; she was quite possibly their only shot at fame.

Spheeris was in her early 40s when she made *Decline II*, which probably gave her gravitas and a semblance of authority that served her well. In [a 1988 interview](#) with KNAC metal DJ Tawn Mastrey, she declares that she'll consider her film a success "if kids would just look at it and learn what it's like to try to make it and get some insight into how difficult it is. Maybe years from now, parents could give their kids a cassette of the film and say "if you wanna be a rock star, just watch this first." Perhaps this is another reason the movie ended up mocking the scene it sought to celebrate; Spheeris' view of the film as a cautionary tale and her decision to go below the surface of a scene that was so dependent on flash, image, debauchery, and excess revealed that there was much less substance than style, regardless of how fun the style was.

We can slag on hair metal as portrayed in *Decline II* as the easy target it is and laugh at the posing, the swagger, the fringed scarves, and the unmitigated, glossy *id* of it all, but we can't deny its influence on music and culture in general. Hair metal was part of mainstream rock 'n' roll's necessary rebellious adolescence. Baby Boomers were the first generation to grow up with rock 'n' roll. Songs like W.A.S.P.'s "Animal (Fuck Like a Beast)" and Motley Crue's "Bastard" were so **shocking** to Baby Boomer parents that they led to Tipper Gore's **Parents Music Resource Center's Filthy Fifteen**. The generation that coined "don't trust anyone over 30" were so horrified by their own children's music that they sought to label it and control it. It made them look ridiculous, out of touch, and *old*.

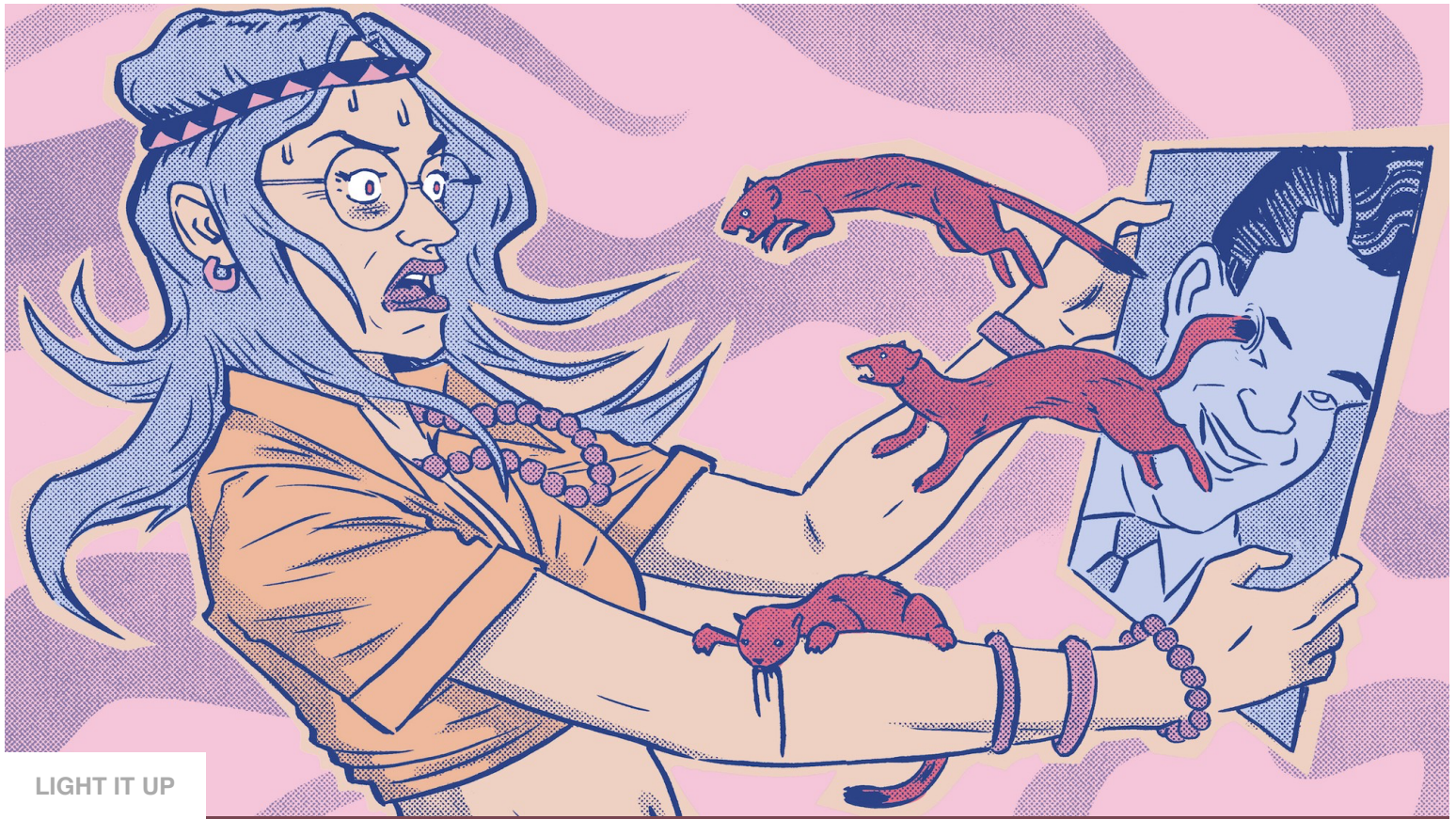
Generation X was also the first generation whose popular music was inextricably linked to visuals via music videos, a format pioneered and refined by Penelope Spheeris. Hair metal's style may have been covering up a lack of substance, but it was a powerful, provocative cover, so much so that it shielded the fact that Spheeris' interview subjects weren't actually concerned about "selling out" or remaining true to any artistic or political stance beyond "fuck you, Tipper Gore." Unlike the punk kids of the immediate past and the grunge kids of the immediate future, they were Reaganites, *eager* to become as rich and famous as possible. In one of the most memorable moments of *Decline Part II*, Spheeris edits together **a string of 15 unknown metal musicians** answering the question "What if you don't make it?" with "I will."

I don't recognize a single one of them, but I recognize that late 80s bravado, that belief in the power of wanting it enough and working hard enough. "If you just came and saw our band, you'd understand," says the lead singer of Wet Cherry, a name that in 2018 sounds so ridiculous and over the top that they should have opened up for Spinal Tap in *This Is Spinal Tap*. But for a brief moment, thirty years ago, I thought a bunch of dudes that looked like ladies just might be singing about me and Wet Cherry thought success was just around the

corner. We were both wrong, but like Poison said, I won't forget you, baby... even though I could.

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