

Better Than Something: Jay Reatard | Three Imaginary Girls

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Better Than Something: Jay Reatard

{*Better Than Something* is screening at the [Grand Illusion Cinema](#) March 2-8}

My angry youth had passed before Jimmy Lee Lindsey Jr., better known as **Jay Reatard**, dropped out of high school in Memphis and began pumping out punk albums as fast as he could play them. So I missed out on this charismatic and talented artist until after his death, when I got to know him via the documentary [Better Than Something](#).

Like many rock docs, *Better Than Something* is short on facts. The chronology of events in Jay's life is vague, discographies are absent, and if you didn't know the names of all his many bands and side projects before watching it, you still won't afterwards. What the film does, though, is assemble interviews with Jay and the people who knew him, together with archival concert footage, into a **mosaic portrait of the artist**. The film gets out of its own way, and places the focus squarely on Jay himself. If you didn't know who Jay Reatard really was before watching *Better Than Something*, you'll have a pretty good idea afterwards.

Better Than Something reveals Reatard as a real punk, in both the authentic and the "asshole" senses of the word. A self-taught musician, Jay played a five gallon bucket on his earliest records because he couldn't afford drums. He invented new recording techniques in his garage sale-stocked home studio because he didn't know or care how other people got the job done. He also routinely stormed offstage, abruptly ending his fevered performances, or even continued performing while assaulting members of audience -- or his own band. He managed to be **simultaneously smarter and more messed up than most of the people around him**.

Few artists in any genre are as prolific as Jay Reatard. When they even come close, it is usually the result of hard work and discipline. Jay worked hard, but had absolutely no discipline at all. His work was the result of drive and passion. That unmoderated energy kept his music from sounding derivative even though he wore his influences on his sleeve. It's possible to tell what he was listening to when he made each recording, and **his taste grew more sophisticated and varied over time**. While his live performances remained frenzied, his last recordings were more notable for their pop melodies than their punk roots. Many early fans assumed a sellout, but the truth was far more interesting: early in the film, as the camera follows Jay as he prepares for an in-store performance, he says, "I picked up acoustic guitar about a year ago and started using it at shows. It's like aesthetic terrorism against punks."

Jay wasn't only interested in scaring the squares. He was just as pleased to piss off the punks. His complete disregard for what others expected of him was **both his genius and his downfall**. Only a few months after that in-store performance, Jay's reckless use of cocaine and alcohol killed him. And that pisses me off.

Thursday, March 1, 2012

by [Imaginary Gemma](#)

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