

Anarchy, Pop and Violence: Punk Rock Subculture and the Rhetoric of Class, 1976–78

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The punk subculture and its music helped change the way people talked about social stratification in Britain in the late-1970s. Punk reintroduced working-class and youth values of rebellion into British culture, exposing the wider public to the privations of youth in the economic climate of the era. Punk values were promoted through rhetoric both old and new – for example, with the repeated use of words like ‘anarchy’, ‘pop’ and ‘violence’. Other texts included political affiliations, connections to older art movements, fashion and attitude. These texts acquired attention through the outrageous songs and actions of bands like the Sex Pistols, which were covered widely in the tabloid and music presses. But the subculture’s efforts to protest the professionalisation of British society were doomed to failure because the musicians involved could not help becoming professionalised themselves. Young people came to appreciate less iconoclastic versions of punk, especially ‘new wave’ music. Thus the punk subculture, for all its rhetoric, ultimately failed to create a ‘revolution’ in British culture.

The punk subculture in Britain was the most outspoken effort to restore working-class values in British rock and roll in the late-1970s. Punk rock articulated the frustrations of working-class British youth in an era of unemployment and inflation, through the development of a new subculture, manifested in music, fashion and attitude. The ability of punk musicians to challenge the boundaries of class culture through these texts – a ‘rhetoric’ of class culture – was fundamental to the subculture’s success, and they subsequently created the most stimulating, exciting and culturally significant music of the 1970s.

For all this, however, punk music was still possible to assimilate into the mainstream of British culture. The workings of the music industry, punk’s antecedents in earlier twentieth century art movements, negative publicity and especially the interpretation by less extreme musicians of what punk meant as culture and as music limited punk’s vague ‘revolutionary’ moment.¹ Critically, words like ‘revolution’, ‘anarchy’,

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'violence' and the like had no definition, other than as terms to make the average adult squirm. But in general, punk was more coherent as an attack on the professionalisation of music. At first, because of its amateur values and outré presentation, the ability of punks to shock their audiences into recognising the routines of professional society was a success. But the longer trend of professional values dictating British social stratification and culture in the post-war era could not be avoided. Eventually, what it meant to be a part of the punk subculture became common knowledge, and thus its rhetoric was watered down, in the texts of language, business, even musical sound. In other words, punk became a professionalised music itself, and musicians who made it were required to meet certain standards in political rhetoric, manner of dress, musical sound and the like, the same way any lawyer or doctor had to meet certain credentials to be accepted by the wider public.

As music, punk was an effort to recreate the original rebellious nature of rock and roll. At one time, that rebellion had been manifest in the music's presentation of newer, more egalitarian cultural values, derived from the social frontiers of class, race, and to a lesser extent, gender. As a result, rock music had already done much to upset the language of social stratification, particularly in the 1960s.² In Britain, class was based only partly on the socio-economics of Marxism – it was based even more on the basic visual, empirical distinctions between people. Class was a cultural concept, found in clothing, dialect, collective and individual values, leisure, taste and attitudes.³

Punk, however, developed as a musical genre in response to the increasing irrelevance of these cultural categories in the corporate climate of 1970s arena rock. It reacted especially against the increasing detachment of rock musicians from their audience and social reality.⁴ Bands that had once been great rebels against popular convention – the former Beatles, the Rolling Stones, the Who – had become pillars of respectability.⁵ Rock stars were now rich and far removed from their audiences. Eric Clapton toured Europe in 1977 in a customised train attached to the Orient Express, while at home, amongst the readers of the newspapers in which Clapton's tour was publicised, about one in ten adults were out of work.⁶ *New Musical Express* correspondent Mick Farren considered this a problem in the opening days of 1976.

There seems to be a kind of rule emerging that when rock and roll gets wrapped up in too much money, it begins to lose its guts. The kind of insulation that the corporate salesmen wrap around the musician tends to shut him off from the kind of essential street energy that is so vital to the best of rock and roll. ...We are going through

the worst depression since the 'thirties. In global terms, the fear of civil war is probably greater than it was even at the height of '60s paranoia, and in quieter moments I tend to wonder just how long the food, water, air, etc., are going to last. Do we hear any of this reflected in rock and roll? Not often. Most of the time it seems as though all either musician or audience want to deal with is pure escapism.⁷

Change came through the auspices of a pair of fashion designers with a shop called Sex, at World's End on the King's Road in Chelsea.⁸ Malcolm McLaren was an art school student who had been fascinated by the politics of the Situationist International. The Situationists engineered 'situations' designed to provoke an audience into confrontation with itself and society, with all its attendant social repressions. McLaren and his fashion designer girlfriend, Vivienne Westwood, set out to create similar situations in London.⁹ At first, they thought the best way to be provocative was by designing outrageous fashions. They were fascinated by the images that had given birth to rock and roll fashion in the 1950s, especially that of the Teddy Boys subculture, with the danger it represented. They also liked fetish gear for the shock it represented on the street. Together they opened a clothing store called Let It Rock that catered to what was left of the Teds, and they even managed to provide clothing for the motion pictures *That'll Be the Day* (1972) and *Mahler* (1973).¹⁰

On a marketing trip to New York, McLaren and Westwood's clothing attracted the attention of a rock and roll band, the New York Dolls. Seeing an opportunity to put a situation into practice, McLaren became the Dolls' manager. He dressed them in red leather with soviet flags draped behind them on stage, in an effort to attract intense media attention. But McLaren's efforts were wasted on a band that was rather wasted itself – the Dolls were renowned drug addicts at the end of their careers. McLaren's efforts were a failure, but he did not give up on the idea of managing a rock and roll act.¹¹ Another interesting figure to him was Richard Hell, a bass player and singer in the band Television, who dressed in torn T-shirts held together with safety pins and had his hair chopped short and spiky. McLaren decided to form a band of his own in Hell's image, an image described in New York music circles as 'punk'.¹²

At home in 1975, many working-class teenagers had a hard time finding their first jobs because of the recession. Eight million people, 15 per cent of Britain's population, were between ages 13 and 21. Two thirds of them were working class, and a quarter of their total were on the dole. Many left school early with no qualifications for a job, which only reinforced the hopelessness they felt in the current economic situation. In

some places, there was an average of ten school leavers – graduates or otherwise – for every available job. Not surprisingly, then, many teens were gloomy and fatalistic. It seemed there was little hope of a future in 1975 if you were young and working class, and there was little question that the rock music they listened to did nothing to reflect their plight.¹³ Like just about every entertainment medium, rock music was more about escapism than reflection, but to a core group of working-class youth, the economic privations of 1975 demanded that their music reflect their values more exclusively.

From this nexus of music, class, cash and politics, McLaren conceived what he eventually called the ‘great rock and roll swindle’ to exploit these circumstances. By getting a subversive rock band signed to a major label and releasing songs about cultural revolution onto the pop charts, the Situationist message would be spread to the widest possible audience. What that ‘revolution’ would involve was difficult to say – punks and Situationists alike seemed to use the term to describe changes in everything from the pop charts to the overthrow of the monarchy. Regardless, the punk band McLaren wanted to form would propose an alternative social system (youth domination) and alternative politics (‘anarchy’, another vague term that essentially meant little more than chaos) designed to destroy the very society that produced major record labels like the one the band would be signed to. Essentially, a rock and roll band could swindle the established order into bringing them into the system, then violently overthrow it. It was a ridiculously naïve idea, but one which McLaren decided to pursue at home in London with a pair of unemployed working-class teenaged musicians who had been hanging around Westwood’s shop for several months.¹⁴ Dozens of other bands and musicians would also contribute to the definition and redefinition of punk terms over the next three years.

The two musicians, Steve Jones and Paul Cook, were in the process of forming a rock and roll group, so McLaren decided to use them to create his image of a pop group. McLaren recruited a shop assistant, Glen Matlock, to play bass, and John Lydon, an impoverished, green-haired Irish teenager, became the lead singer. Lydon took the stage name ‘Johnny Rotten’ in deference to the decayed state of his teeth. McLaren named the band the Sex Pistols, and even renamed Westwood’s shop Sex to capitalise on the name.¹⁵ Matlock wrote the music, and Lydon wrote the lyrics, often assisted with phrases from McLaren, who gave Lydon Situationist slogans to insert in the songs. He also encouraged Lydon to insert his class circumstances in the words.¹⁶

McLaren wanted his new band to fuse avant-garde art with commercial culture. The Sex Pistols accomplished this, and inspired numerous aspiring musicians to do the same. At its artistic and popular height, punk rock

matched the artistic avant-garde's desire to be revolutionary in the changing of society through art. Like avant-garde artists of the past, punks saw no boundary between art and life; they provoked their audiences and felt that spontaneity in performance and a lack of training were assets in artistic production.¹⁷ Amateurism especially inspired the audience, as Subway Sect lead singer Vic Godard noted – 'The Pistols don't play great and, as such, a kid in the audience can relate to that ...he can visualise himself being up there on stage.'¹⁸

Artistic rebellion, to the punks and to many artists, was social rebellion. Like the Russian futurists, punks espoused ugliness, loved to be offensive and detoured traditional symbols of deviance such as the swastika or fetishist clothing. Punks declared the society around them to be nonsensical, and the performer was expected to confront the audience with this fact, like the Dadaists. Punk was German expressionist in its espousal of sado-masochism and anarchy. The only major differences between punk and avant-garde art movements were the nationality of the ordinary street kids who adhered to such ideals and the medium they chose to express them in.¹⁹

McLaren's new band was also supposed to be a billboard for Westwood's shop. Like Richard Hell, the Sex Pistols wore ripped T-shirts, safety pins, leather trousers and spiked hair, and numerous other bands also contributed to punk style. Most fans learned to do-it-themselves, as opposed to buying the expensive styles on display at Sex. Punk fashion became an escape from conventional personalities and roles; a measure of its authenticity was for it to be completely impossible to copy. In McLaren's cosmology, such resistance to the dictates of commercial influence would destroy the power of commerce from within – 'we wanted to create a situation where kids would be less interested in buying records than in speaking for themselves'.²⁰

But Lydon's working-class background provided an agenda too, as did the backgrounds of the dozens of musicians inspired by the Pistols. The lyrics Johnny Rotten sang were interpreted mainly as a reaction against the detachment of rock stars from their social backgrounds, but they were also an effort to provide symbolism for Britain's economic recession.²¹ Johnny Rotten meant punk to be the voice of working-class youth, calling on them to have fun and rebel against a society that had ignored their interests for too long. Certain buzzwords were particularly useful in declaiming his philosophy, and were also coincident with McLaren's ideals. 'Anarchy', 'pop' and 'violence' were a few of the many terms thrown around in opposition to the concepts of 'authority', 'rock' and 'middle-class society', and in support of the notion that Britain was in the midst of a broad political, economic, social and cultural crisis. Such terms shocked the general public

and the wider rock music audience that had noticed this new musical movement.²² According to McLaren, punk was supposed to be a return to consciousness of working-class kids, and the vanguard of a new youth movement meant to change the existing society, or at least the pop charts.

Writing a song like 'Anarchy in the UK' is definitely a statement of intent – it's hard to say something constructive in rock these days. It's a call to arms to the kids who believe very strongly that rock and roll was taken away from them. And now it's coming back. 'Anarchy in the UK' is a statement of self-rule, of ultimate independence, of do-it-yourself, ultimately.²³

Yet the connection between punk and the avant-garde also represented the first challenge to the subculture's authenticity. Most of the punk musicians who understood the connections between punk as a subculture and European art movements were art students. They saw the music as a vital new artistic statement on the problems of British society, found in the parallels between punk lifestyle and the art movements the schools exposed them to. Meanwhile, working-class street punks saw the music and the rebellion it represented as primarily fun instead of revolutionary. The working-class punk was unemployed because he could not find work, and punk was his angry protest against his lot in life. Middle-class punks claimed that they understood the capitalist values behind work and that they would not adhere to them.²⁴

Both statements shocked public opinion. But the ability of middle-class kids to adopt the mantle of the punk subculture removed the music from its roots in working-class anger. Of course that anger was exaggerated and somewhat mythical – there was no chance that McLaren's revolution would ever occur through music. But to expose the myth so blatantly divided the punk subculture between its working-class and art school elements.²⁵ The Sex Pistols were perhaps the greatest punk band because they married these two ideals briefly – the bitter and bilious anger of Johnny Rotten and Steve Jones coupled with the intellectual art school rebellion of Glen Matlock and manager Malcolm McLaren. But other bands, the Clash in particular, understood and espoused these values as well, on stage, on record and in image. So long as the punk subculture presented a united social front in rhetoric and attitude, it could become a force for agitation, and perhaps change.

Much of the rhetoric and attitude that all punks espoused was borrowed from reggae, the music of a socially outcast population that also prophesied doom for British society in an era of economic decline. Especially important was reggae's overtones of Rastafarian religion. Rastafarians expected a battle with whites to take place with the fate of the world at

stake, after which all victorious black men would return to Africa to live in peace and harmony – and significantly, it would take place in ‘the year when the two sevens clashed’, 1977.²⁶ Punks easily picked up on Rastafarian rhetoric, seeing modern British society as the ‘Babylon’ that Rastas castigated. The punk answer to the Rastafarian assault on Babylon was the espousal of anarchy, a white version of Rastafarian ideology. The safety pins, clips, chains, ripped shirts and the like all represented the damage that a culturally barren professional society had foisted upon their bodies and their lives. By adopting such language, punks could launch their own attacks on middle-class culture. The feeling of oppression that blacks felt in a white British society mirrored the sense of oppression that punks felt in a bankrupt society determined to impose its cultural authority on them at all turns. By 1976, with the economy in a shambles, oppression by the white man easily translated into the authoritarian cultural dominance of the middle classes.²⁷

Punk was a rebellion not just against the rock establishment, but against the establishment at large. It was clearly the most focused political challenge rock had yet produced; many punk musicians became known for their explicitly left-wing politics. The punk subculture also addressed sexism; young women became heroines of the subculture, as fans and as musicians, and sexual politics was a popular topic in the lyrics of female punks.²⁸ The punk movement was a major release for women in British pop music. In punk, amateurism was a virtue, and since anybody could be incompetent on an instrument, women found an opening into the rock world beyond simply singing in front of a bunch of men. Plus, musicians such as Poly Styrene of X-Ray Spex took the opportunity to expand lyrical concerns to sing songs about body odour, being fat and the pressures on adolescent girls from advertising, television and other media sources. She was a revelation, and she inspired numerous similarly minded girls to follow her lead. The seventies were a period of political ferment in the UK in regard to women’s issues, and punk was one of the major beneficiaries in this change in political intent. Abortion laws were relaxed, squatters argued for their right to decent housing, and opposition to racism and sexism was militant. Such issues united men and women, and punk proved to be a useful artistic outlet for such unity. The Slits were amongst the top heroines of the punk era, an all-female band influenced by reggae and uninhibited on stage.²⁹

Thus, punk was never a respectable working-class movement in the Victorian sense, but rather representative of a new vision of what being working-class meant – to be angry, politically focused and violent in rhetoric. Punks accurately represented the feelings of disenfranchised working-class youth in 1976 and 1977, if they represented

them in an extremely radical fashion that not all working-class kids were comfortable with.³⁰

How that radicalism would take effect beyond music was, of course, a very different story. Punks themselves often identified their politics as anarchic, if not socialist. The music's heart was certainly anarchic, especially as seen in the ubiquitous phrase 'no future'. Its intentions were socialist, as manifested in its constant rhetoric about the failures of the British government and economy to go further in bringing working-class youth and minorities into the system of employment and sociocultural equality. But its practices never went far beyond the rhetorical.³¹ Punk was about protest, not change – and since it was primarily represented by music, perhaps that was enough. As one commentator put it, 'truly punk rebelliousness is ambivalent, symbolic and rather well founded and expressed. It is time that rock became political, as befits a mass art-form; it hardly matters that it[s politics] is also confused.'³²

On stage, the Sex Pistols soon built a reputation as one of the most exciting bands playing the universities and clubs of London. Their alleged frustrations as working-class teenagers were taken out on the audience, and often returned in kind. Whatever McLaren's original intent, he clearly had no control over the artistic statements his band made on stage. 'You're all so fucking boring! You make me fucking sick!' Rotten would howl at his audience; they would spit back at him in affirmation.³³

The music press began to notice the band in February 1976, and the rest of the year saw a series of reviews of the band's gigs marking them as The Great Working Class Rock and Roll Hope. The announcement that 'We're not into music – we're into chaos!' in *New Musical Express* was too provocative to miss. The generation gap began to reopen, between parents and older siblings who despised this new music and younger kids, especially working-class kids and art students, who heard the most exciting sound of their young lives. Charles Shaar Murray described the atmosphere at a September gig in Islington:

[The Sex Pistols] have [an] air of seething just-about-repressed violence ... and watching them gives that same clenched-gut feeling that you get walking through Shepherds Bush just after the pubs shut and you see The Lads hanging out on the corner looking for some action and you wonder whether the action might be you.

The Pistols are all those short-haired kids in the big boots and rolled-up baggies and sleeveless T-shirts. Their music is coming from the straight-out-of-school-and-onto-the-dole deathtrap which we seem to have engineered for Our Young: the '76 British terminal stasis, the modern urban blind alley.³⁴

The Sex Pistols inspired imitators, some of whom adhered to their allegedly political agenda, others of whom loved punk for its iconoclasm. The most prominent and talented of them were the Clash, who took their fashion inspiration from Jackson Pollock and the abstract expressionists, and their musical inspiration from the pub rock groups with whom band member Joe Strummer had originally played. The Clash were the most politically committed of the punk bands, featuring songs angrily denouncing the United States, dole queue politics, racism and the apathy of people in opposition to these problems. Managed by an associate of Malcolm McLaren, Bernard Rhodes, they quickly became darlings of the London music critics' set.³⁵ On the opposite end of the spectrum was the Damned, an entertainingly sloppy band that saw punk mainly as obnoxious fun, and thus irritating to their social superiors. Their lead singer, Dave Vanian, was hired merely because he looked and dressed like a vampire. They took on pseudonyms like Rat Scabies and Captain Sensible, often wore dresses on stage, and hung dead rats from the drum kit. Their only concession to a sociopolitical agenda was the often-repeated admission that Ray Burns (Captain Sensible) had once been on the dole.³⁶

In an effort to combine forces and present a unified front to the media – to create a situation – McLaren organised the first and only 'Punk Rock Festival' at the 100 Club on Oxford Street in late September 1976. It featured the core of punk music for the next year: the Sex Pistols headlined the first night with Subway Sect, Siouxsie and the Banshees and a French band, Stinky Toys, backing them up. The second night featured the Damned with the Vibrators and the Buzzcocks.³⁷ The different bands represented the range of punk culturally, musically and socially. Subway Sect was amongst the more avant-garde of the punk bands; they represented the art school end of punk, middle-class pub rockers who caught onto the new sound.³⁸ Siouxsie and the Banshees were members of the 'Bromley Contingent', basically walking advertisements for Westwood's fashions and McLaren's attitudes. They played the 100 Club as their first gig, having only learned to play instruments the week before. They did a long, cacophonous version of 'The Lord's Prayer' set to something approximating music, interspersed with any lyrics Susan Dallon – rechristened Siouxsie Sioux – could remember. The band then retired to practise and learn to play properly.³⁹ The Buzzcocks were a Manchester band, representing the provincial version of punk. Despite their hurricane of powerful chords, the songs of Howard Devoto and Pete Shelley were about love, as traditional a subject as there was in rock and roll.⁴⁰ One writer compared Devoto to Samuel Beckett in his obsession with 'the absurdity of existence'.⁴¹

The festival brought punk to the nation's attention, as McLaren wanted,

but not for the reasons he expected. A young girl was blinded when a glass was smashed during the Damned's set, thrown by one John Beverley, who had just adopted the punk alias Sid Vicious. The incident was highly publicised, and turned most of the public that was paying attention against punk. Punk became immediately identified as violent, an unfair association but one that lone individuals like Sid Vicious would keep alive through the period of punk's popularity in the seventies. Working-class subcultures like the Teddy boys, the mods, the rockers and the skinheads had all been associated with violence, and the music attached to them gained all the more in reputation as a result. Punk proved to be no different.⁴²

For the moment, though, the incident at the 100 Club did not keep bands from being signed by major and independent record labels. The Pistols signed with EMI in October 1976, receiving a two-year contract and a £40,000 advance. The Damned signed with a growing independent label, Stiff Records, in November 1976, with their records to be distributed by the much larger independent label, Island Records.⁴³ The Clash signed a record contract with a major American label, CBS.⁴⁴ Many fans and sympathetic critics believed that the signing of punk groups to established record labels was a sure disaster. It seemed that the music's original rebellious energy was about to be dissipated in a hurricane of pounds and pence.⁴⁵ Small independent labels lost out on all of the most popular punk bands, and the music papers did not fail to pick up on the idea that money talked just as loudly to the punk bands as it did to any other rock acts of the seventies, regardless of their sociocultural politics.⁴⁶

Suddenly punk was presented with a paradox as old as the sixties bands they hated: the music was fundamentally anti-commercial in principle, but its bands sought commercial success. To overcome this paradox, punk musicians claimed that they played 'pop' music, a term meant to sound ironic. 'Pop' music had long been considered corporate claptrap designed merely to make a pound and pander to the public taste. By the mid-1970s, even consistent hit-making acts like Gilbert O'Sullivan or Leo Sayer, without a rough number in their entire catalogues, would sooner be labelled 'soft rock' than 'pop' acts. By placing a single in the pop charts – EMI printed the Sex Pistols' first single, 'Anarchy in the UK' (1976), soon after signing them – the band expected to bring anarchy to the radio airwaves and into the streets too. Pop music, the most prominent cog in the wheel of the corporate music establishment, would become the engine of social and political change, or at least – and more likely – a source of irritation to middle-class sensibilities.

Such was McLaren's intention. He spelled out his philosophy in an interview with the *Daily Mirror*.

Punk is the gross enemy of apathy. The Sex Pistols created a spark of life and energy which has now turned into a forest fire. The everyday lives of the street kids were poverty-stricken garbage – financially and spiritually.

Punk action then turns into an outright frontal attack on the system.

Don't forget this was a generation brought up on distant pop stars who sang about sex and love from their tax havens. ...Long established stars are frightened. We constitute a basic challenge to the whole way the record business is organised.⁴⁷

Yet McLaren was less the revolutionary id, and more the rhetorical ego. He was not the final arbiter of the band's actions on stage or on record – Johnny Rotten held that role. Rotten had little sympathy with McLaren's Situationist objectives, even while he played them out to the letter. He was far more interested in what he considered the traditional working-class joys of rock and roll – rebellion, wildness, shocking the establishment and getting paid well to do it. He too outlined his strategies in the *Mirror*.

Do not think I am for violence. ...[Rather] what we produce is a climate of controlled frenzy. ...Our songs are anti-God, anti-the Queen, anti-the palsied values of present day society. I am a revolutionary. ...An anarchist. I want to stir people up to think for themselves. That's all.

Yet all of the excitement of his actions came from being a dirty-toothed Irish kid who might soon be rich and dominate the music world. In the same interview he swore off McLaren's artistic programme and admitted that he had exactly the same aspirations as any of his forebears in British rock music.

I am against the whole of the middle-class bit: tellies, cars, possessions. But that don't mean I won't get corrupted by middle-class values too. I've just bought a pad near Chelsea football ground. I gotta live somewhere. I was living in a place with water running down the wall not that long ago. I gotta have a washing machine too. I'm sick of going to the launderette. I've had my teeth fixed. That costs money and was middle class. But I'd knocked the whole bloody lot out one day biting the microphone in a fit of excessive enthusiasm.⁴⁸

The punk project, then, was just as compromised by wealth as that of any previous efforts made by British rock musicians to change their society through music. But at least for a short time longer, punk would have the effect of making an anarchic youth rebellion against society, class and

culture seem somewhat real – or at least, real enough to have an impact in British mass culture in 1977 and 1978.

After recording 'Anarchy in the UK', the Sex Pistols went off on a tour of England, where their stage antics quickly got them banned from nearly every venue they had booked – and also got them into the tabloids.⁴⁹ Looking to ride the wave of publicity, EMI managed to get the band a last-minute interview on Thames Television's *Today* show with Bill Grundy on 1 December. Obviously disgusted with the band's appearance and attitude, Grundy prodded the Pistols with provocative and occasionally insulting remarks until Steve Jones used the word 'fuck' while castigating Grundy for making a sexual innuendo toward Siouxsie Sioux, who had been invited to join the Pistols in the studio. The Sex Pistols thus became the top story in the nation's tabloids for 2 December 1976. Tabloid newspaper reports described men kicking in TV sets, elderly women having strokes, and children repeating dirty words they had heard on television the other night.⁵⁰ Thames TV suspended Grundy.

The other voice of the working classes expressed itself when staff at EMI's pressing plant refused to press any more copies of 'Anarchy in the UK' as it climbed the national charts. The Transport and General Workers' Union had meetings with EMI to ask them to drop the band. Concert bookings were scrapped in Bournemouth, Preston, Lancaster and Newcastle.⁵¹ Soon after the interview, ITV postponed the airing of a documentary series on teenage violence, fearing that 'violence was being made attractive and glamorous' – as if the Pistols had beaten Grundy with clubs.⁵² The BBC imposed a blanket television ban on the Pistols, the director of variety programming claiming that 'people do not want to see such things'.⁵³ Punk had become a cultural phenomenon literally overnight.

At first EMI sprang to the Pistols' defence. The managing director of EMI, Leslie Hill, agreed with a number of people who believed that Grundy had egged the Pistols on to prove his point about these 'foul-mouthed bunch of yobs', as he termed them.⁵⁴ But the development of the Pistols' second single proved too much for the company. 'God Save the Queen' (1977) was the band's response to the Queen's upcoming Jubilee, a mockery of everything the monarchy stood for. After issuing a warning, chairman Sir John Read decided that the offences the group caused were too outrageous.⁵⁵ The record company cancelled the Pistols' contract in January 1977 and allowed them to keep the £40,000 advance.⁵⁶ Numerous record companies lined up to sign them.⁵⁷ Finally, they landed with A&M Records, who had them sign their contract outside Buckingham Palace in March 1977, as if they sympathised with the band's cultural project. However, A&M were a middle-of-the-road company, founded by jazz bandleader Herb Alpert to produce and market safe, family-oriented acts.

Signing the Pistols was probably an effort to improve their image with younger record buyers, but it was an effort doomed to a short life.⁵⁸ The press reception following the signing degenerated into a hailstorm of abuse and squabbles between the band and record company representatives. Within a week, A&M dropped the Pistols as well, and they left with another free advance of £75,000, without recording a single thing for A&M.⁵⁹ By March 1977 the band had recorded one song, made a free £115,000 from two multinational record companies, and the tabloids believed they were heralds of the coming youth armageddon. So far, McLaren's Situationist project looked to have some merit.

The fact that they had not disappeared was an irritation to media critics. As the *Daily Express* noted of the signing bonus the band received from A&M, 'The little beasts have gone from strength to strength.'⁶⁰ The *Mirror* called for readers to send them jokes about the punks, claiming: 'The prize for the best jokes will be a Sex Pistol record. The worst ones will win TWO Sex Pistol records.'⁶¹ The *Evening Standard*, meanwhile, printed prominently a definition of 'punk' from Partridge's Dictionary of Slang – 'Worthless, decidedly inferior, displeasing, rotten'.⁶² The public clearly responded to this sentiment too. When Bill Grundy was suspended by Thames Television for his on-screen antics with the Pistols, many people wrote letters to the *Mirror* applauding Grundy for showing up the Pistols as best he could, and for bringing parents to see the dangers of punk rock for their children.⁶³

Suddenly punk was everywhere; the most frightening subculture to arise since rock and roll had shown up at the London doorstep. Punks were categorised as dole-queue kids, bored and frustrated and taking out their aggressions on their guitars, on themselves and on their audiences. Captain Sensible of the Damned and Johnny Rotten were the exemplars of the movement, both renowned for haranguing their audiences and accepting limitless abuse in return. It seemed but a matter of time until they turned on the respectable public as well. The mother of Dee Generate, the 15-year-old drummer of Eater, was quoted as saying, 'I can see what they're trying to do', making herself the archetype of poor parenting throughout the land. Above all, the bands horrified the average consumer, which was exactly what agitators like McLaren wanted. A select few took the punk call for anarchy very seriously. One *Melody Maker* reader saw the punks as a fifth column for the coming Red Chinese invasion.

Has anybody really asked themselves honestly what these punks are part and parcel of? ... With the gradual infiltration of Trotskyites and left-wingers of all sorts into our Labour Party, bands of the Sex Pistols' ilk are all very welcome. After all, what better creation in

existence is designed to bring about the normal downfall of the teenage warriors of England than the Sex Pistols at the moment?

...[The] Utopia of Pistolery seems to be one of anarchic bliss, but of course it's little more than a false euphoria cunningly set up by subversives. Of course 'they' want youth to revolt and smash the hated so-called capitalistic dogs, as they are termed. They want all our traditions broken, our democracy toppled. ...

Of course, when the majority of our revolutionary youth are all in the phony state of advanced karma lolling on their psychiatric couches, copulating in the streets, pumping themselves with as much dope as they can lay their hands on, and anarchy is in its prime, the little yellow men from the East will cross the English Channel and with outstretched fingers push us all over.

I wonder what sort of music they'll be playing then?⁶⁴

Such responses seemed ridiculous both then and now, but the punk message of anarchy, pop and violence occasionally seemed very literal due to the few incidents where anarchy and violence were made explicit. In February 1977, the Sex Pistols' bass player, Glen Matlock – the group's major songwriter and most talented musician – left the band. He was succeeded by John Beverley, aka Sid Vicious, the Sex Pistols' most visible and outrageous fan. Vicious was inclined to mindless aggression, directed against himself and other people. He had thrown the shattered glass that put a girl's eye out at the 100 Club festival, and he had also assaulted members of the press at other Sex Pistols gigs. He also mutilated himself on a regular basis, cutting his body with glass and looking to get into fights where he would come away bruised and battered.⁶⁵

There was always plenty of aggression at punk concerts, with audience members bouncing around doing a dance called the 'pogo', slamming into one another and the band, and both sides spitting on each other copiously. But thus far, it was confined to the concert hall, and to punks themselves, and rarely did anyone get hurt. In the person of Sid Vicious, the punk subculture made what had been implicit violence explicit, random and often frightening. Universally acknowledged by cronies as an intelligent person, Vicious clearly cared only about the opportunity to vent his own aggressions and the excesses that a rock star's life afforded him – aggressions and excesses that other punks were trying to expose as evil, bloated and hedonistic. Vicious was a prime example of the ability for anyone to find anything they wanted in the punk subculture. 'Anarchy', 'pop' and 'violence' were useful in scaring up a reaction from a complacent music audience, but when interpreted on the street or in the studio, the results were at first dangerous, then debilitating for punks.

Also problematic was the flaunting of swastikas in punk fashion. Most punks were interested in the swastika as a symbol, an image that retained its ability to alarm people. They would go to great lengths to state that they did not adhere to the ideas behind the swastika; wearing them was meant to be a way of upsetting the sensibilities of the average person on the street, to wake them up to more recent and more real horrors of an affluent society gone awry. But at a time of high youth unemployment comparable to the 1930s, and the resurgence in popularity of the National Front, the swastika could not help but be taken as a statement of punk political principles.⁶⁶ It did not help that a few punks used the swastika specifically to terrify people into believing they were Nazis, merely for a laugh. Sid Vicious was the worst offender, as he strolled through a Jewish neighbourhood in Paris while wearing a swastika T-shirt in the film *The Great Rock and Roll Swindle* (1978). Punks used Nazi imagery because it brought attention to social problems, but no punk knew how to handle the righteous backlash such imagery elicited from people.⁶⁷ There clearly came a point at which the detournment of texts in the punk project went too far.

The dangers of such symbolism were made manifest with the revival of another, older working-class subculture, the skinheads. Skinheads wanted to reassert 'traditional' working-class values in British culture, as they read them. To a skinhead, resorting to violence against other races was a conscious political act, and even worse, their embracing of the National Front and the British Movement gave their politics a violent coherence that the punks did not have. They identified what they thought were 'deviant' groups amongst the British working classes – Asians, hippies, homosexuals – and targeted them for abuse, in what they saw as an effort to preserve their sense of community and their traditions.⁶⁸ The worst assertion of the skinheads was the mistaken notion that violence was a working-class virtue and a working-class reality, rather than the rhetorical instrument of the punks.

In general, punks were anti-racist. The founding of Rock Against Racism became a central unifying factor bringing art students and street kids together in large outdoor concerts to declare their opposition to problems of racism in Britain.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, use of the swastika had already caused much of the damage to the reputation of punks, damage that the wider public had been looking for in the subculture since it had become well-known publicly.

In spring 1977, the Sex Pistols were signed to Virgin Records, a growing independent label at the time, and they recorded their first album. The single 'God Save the Queen' was released as a protest against the Jubilee and reached the number two spot in June 1977 – with virtually no airplay, since the BBC and most of the independent radio stations banned

the record. According to Virgin Records, the song actually reached the number one spot in the singles chart, but was kept out of the top spot to avoid embarrassing Queen Elizabeth II.⁷⁰ Their third single 'Pretty Vacant' (1977) became a top ten hit in July, and their album, *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols* was released in October 1977 and sold well.⁷¹ But by the end of 1977, the band was coming apart. Rotten did not want to pursue McLaren's idea of doing a movie about the band (later released as *The Great Rock and Roll Swindle* in 1978). Hoodlums assaulted the band on stage in Stockholm, egged on by Vicious. Clubs were regularly shut down when the Pistols were scheduled to play at them.⁷² And without Matlock to write for them, the band had lost its creative energy.

Other punk acts likewise saw their unity fragment. An intense rivalry had grown between the various groups, spawned by managerial one-upmanship, provincial prejudices and the growing divide between art school students and working-class punks. A punk tour in 1977, the White Riot Tour, broke down quickly. The police harassed the headliners, the Clash, at many stops. The Jam, a second-line act, left the tour halfway through to promote their first album. Beyond the tours, bands like the Pistols and the Clash derided acts like the Damned for lacking any political intent in their music, and the Buzzcocks and other provincial acts were considered outsiders by the London mainstream.⁷³

The punk subculture these bands represented, however, grew in energy throughout 1977, particularly as new enterprises developed beyond the making of music. If punk was mainly a rhetorical exercise in the transformation of social stratification, there were many efforts to start alternative businesses to cater to the potential reality behind the rhetoric. For example, hundreds of independent record labels were set up to press and promote punk records and preserve punk values. Stiff Records was one of the great success stories of the punk era, despite its reputation for promoting the label itself over its own artists. Between Stiff's founding in 1976 and the slow death of punk and new wave in the mid-1980s, Stiff released 200 singles and saw almost 50 of them reach the UK charts, an outrageously successful percentage that was four times the rate of the majors at the time.⁷⁴ Independent labels became the life's blood of punk music. The creation of an alternative music production system and an alternative music industry highlighted the opposition between art and business.⁷⁵ As one of the co-founders of Stiff, Jake Riviera, put it: 'For far too long, there has been a gap between the million quid advance and scuffling about in a cellar. There has to be a middle ground. I believe Stiff is it.'⁷⁶

Likewise, thousands of punk fans started alternative music magazines, disgusted with the lack of coverage of their favourite bands in the censored

national press. A fan named Mark Perry started the most famous punk magazine, titled *Sniffin' Glue*. He took on the pseudonym Mark P. so he would not have to answer to the authorities about the profits he made off the magazine, since Perry was on the dole.⁷⁷ John Sage, a London law student, produced a magazine called *London's Outrage*, which focused on the dangers of punk and the punk lifestyle in a climate of hostility.⁷⁸ Fanzines captured the nature of punk and its adherents in Britain. They were generally rough and crudely produced, and meant to be read by young working-class kids as opposed to art school students. They emphasised community, especially in the fans' oneness with musicians who usually could not play instruments any better than they could and were self-effacing as a result. Fanzines only enhanced the punk reader's sense that it was 'us vs them', and the constant attack on punk by the mainstream media contributed to this attitude as well.⁷⁹

But by the time of the Jubilee in 1977, punk music was fast becoming mainstreamed as the sound of the moment. Any number of acts began to change their songs, their fashion style and their attitudes to try to catch on to the wave and capture an audience, not to mention a record deal. In the process, punk was interpreted and reinterpreted by dozens of new musicians and new fans, and could not help but become a more acceptable music to a wider public. The result came to be referred to by journalists and musicians as 'new wave', the most prominent rhetorical term used to defuse the radical elements in punk music.

Few people had ever been happy with the term 'punk', which had once been the term used to refer to a pubescent male prostitute. As an adjective to convey decay, disease, and worthlessness, it seemed more appropriate, but it lacked political intent.⁸⁰ 'Dole queue' was preferred, but as bands became more popular and wealthier, the term lost its meaning. Furthermore, the bands were made up more and more of the same art students who had driven British rock since time immemorial, and their motivations did not come from the frustrations inherent in the dole queue. Therefore, 'new wave' was used to describe bands that were classless, artless, and who thrashed their guitars and professed a hatred for the Rolling Stones.

Furthermore, as opposed to the punk acts, the best 'new wave' acts were all singles chart mainstays of 1977.⁸¹ For all their tabloid publicity in 1976 and 1977, the punk bands had not captured the majority of people's ears. The 'Turkey of the Year' band in the *New Musical Express* Readers' Poll of 1976 was the Sex Pistols.⁸² The winners of *Melody Maker's* Readers' Poll Awards in late September 1976 were Yes, Genesis, Kiki Dee, Thin Lizzy, Rick Wakeman and Mike Oldfield – not a punk in the bunch.⁸³ Punk was never dominant on the British popular charts at any point.

Numerous singles did make a large splash, but at no time was the music popular enough to drive Wings, ABBA, or any number of disco or easy listening acts off the charts. The real popular phenomenon of 1976 was the Bay City Rollers, whose tours of Britain inspired scenes of Beatles and Stones-like frenzy on the part of teenaged girls.⁸⁴ At the end of 1977, neither the Pistols, the Clash, nor the Damned made a single dent in the *Daily Mirror*'s readers' poll of the top performers of the year.⁸⁵ None of the year's best-selling singles were by identified punk bands. Their albums sold better; the Pistols' *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols* (1977) made number twelve in the list of the year's best-selling albums, but neither the Clash's or the Damned's debut albums made a similar showing.⁸⁶

New wave, in contrast, was the sophisticated alternative to punk, the 'progressive' – and thus professional – version of punk that could be more easily assimilated and accepted by kids of all social persuasions. It took punk challenges to middle-class politics, gender and sexuality, and made them seem glamorous in a way that punks never intended them to be. Though bands like the Jam positively seethed with political intent, they were far less controversial than their punk predecessors, and thus easier on the consciences of major music critics. Critics in general had never responded to the Sex Pistols' bating of the middle-class establishment, though a select few celebrated them in print. But there was almost universal approval of 'new wave', one critic calling it 'the healthiest event in popular music this decade'.⁸⁷ By 1977, music critics were able to separate all versions of this new pop music from the social implications involved in its creation. They also began to distinguish between the more 'respectable', experimental, art school elements in the punk and new wave movements, and the working-class rebels whom they eventually came to ignore.⁸⁸ Without massive chart successes, such detachment did not bode well for the continued impact of punk on the consciousness of British society.

The Jam were the paradigm for new wave acts arriving in the wake of punk. They revamped the old mod look and sound of the early 1960s, exemplified by the Who. The band was also overtly political. Paul Weller, the band's front man and songwriter, had spent his earliest years in Woking in a council house with no hot water and no indoor bathroom.⁸⁹ His songs about working-class life were about anger and repression, and he clearly thought of his band's espousal of mod values as original and in congruence with punk ideals. But the Jam were unwilling to slay the influences that had built their music, a crucial element in being a punk band. If punks had no future socially, they were also supposed to have no past musically. Mod was similar to punk, but it was not the same, whatever Weller's values. The Jam, a truly terrific and politically committed act, were still a step away from punk rebellion and into new wave respectability.⁹⁰ Their retro sound

and values placed them squarely in the professional tradition – you had to know and master the mod sound to make it acceptable to a new pop audience. The Jam thus represented a death knell for punk's efforts to make a revolutionary sociocultural impact on British life.

Other acts added to the sense that new wave was the classless and professionalised face of punk. Elvis Costello had all the anger and cynicism of British punks with an added measure of literacy to boot. He was lumped in with the punk movement with the release of his debut album, *My Aim is True* (1977). But he lacked the anarchic nature of the Damned or the Sex Pistols. His next effort, the album *This Year's Model* (1978), included the brilliantly dangerous song 'Radio Radio', a scathing attack on the broadcasting establishment in Britain and its efforts to shape the public taste.⁹¹

The Stranglers were fast lumped in with other punk acts by the press when they signed a record contract in December 1976, just days after the Pistols had appeared on the *Today* show. The band's attitude at gigs seemed to back up that assessment.

The Stranglers get up onstage at the Marquee and rant about its obsolescence and tell the audience to smash the place up after the gig. ... [They] see the Marquee as a major stanchion of the system which they reckon has repressed their talent. Like most of their punk/dole-queue/new-wave rock cohorts, they are martyrs and rebels.⁹²

But the Stranglers were really a pub rock act, and their misogynistic lyrics set them far apart from the rest of the punk acts they were associated with. Yet such outrageous lyrical attitudes gave them a certain pre-eminence as rebels in and of itself, and they had a tough sound honed in the bars of London. It served them well enough on the pop charts throughout 1977 and 1978.⁹³

In January 1978, the Sex Pistols crossed the Atlantic to play an American tour. Punk was returning from Britain to the place where it had begun, now under an entirely different guise. The social and cultural circumstances that inspired its beginnings and its intents now lent London punk an aura of authority in comparison to its New York predecessor. In New York, punk was born of affluent boredom; in London, punk sprang from truly desperate economic circumstances. Both saw rock and roll, a musical genre that should have been reflective of the self-expression necessary to voice such emotions, as artistically bankrupt.⁹⁴ But in London, the subculture had a much truer social resonance. As one New York journalist noted, 'the discontented over here are PhDs who can't find jobs.'⁹⁵

The Sex Pistols were booked into as many country and western clubs as McLaren could find in the American south, for maximum offensiveness.

They played Atlanta, Memphis and Baton Rouge in succession, but the reaction was less than expected; a Memphis police lieutenant tagged them as 'run of the mill' in terms of the crowd reaction.⁹⁶ The British working-class youth revolution was less than exportable in a country where class was less of an issue. Vicious spent most of the tour covered in blood from his own continually battered nose and cut body. Rotten and Vicious finally left the band after the last date in San Francisco; McLaren took Cook and Jones to South America to record some songs with Ronnie Biggs, the escaped Great Train Robber. The entire Sex Pistols enterprise, once truly rebellious and frightening in its intensely accurate commentary on England's decline, descended into farce. Rotten went on to form a new band, Public Image Limited. Vicious was accused of murdering his girlfriend in New York and died of a heroin overdose while out on bail. McLaren went on to record albums of his own, detouring world music and opera.⁹⁷

Eventually, all of the actors in the last great rock and roll cultural rebellion were professionalised and brought to heel. Punk turned out to be the greatest subculture, the one that lasted the longest without being entirely assimilated into the mainstream of British youth culture. But its music had been recodified as new wave, which dominated the pop charts in Britain in 1978 and beyond, especially with the rise of ska, a combination of punk and reggae. Fashion designers mainstreamed punk fashions, and Vivienne Westwood became a lasting celebrity and innovator in British fashion circles. By 1978, the punk look was essentially uniform – spiky hair, jeans or bondage trousers, leather jackets with slogans on them, T-shirts, studs and chains. By the 1980s a punk in London was no more a standout than a mod, a Ted or a skinhead.⁹⁸

Some new wave bands in the late 1970s began to emphasise the use of a relatively new instrument, the synthesiser, in their songs. The synthesiser was the perfect punk instrument: a musician did not have to know how to play an instrument at all in order to get into a band. It cost approximately the same amount of money as an electric guitar, and you could get innumerable more sound effects to work with on a synthesiser, without years (or weeks, as the case might be) of painstaking practice.⁹⁹ But the sound was infinitely less harsh and abusive, and thus abandoned the sound by which punk had been proselytised. The synthesiser was also the ultimate way for kids of all social persuasions to get into music, and thus effectively killed the punk subculture's spirit in Britain.

By 1982, five years after the original punk heyday, the old punk idols – Siouxsie Sioux, the Clash, Johnny Rotten and the like – were now rock's biggest stars, the new 'aristocracy of rock'. They had achieved respectability, and now they wanted to keep it. Younger bands considered some of the older punks their heroes (particularly John Lydon in Public

Image, Ltd), but most of the old punks now seemed hypocritical. Punk was just another idea to be recycled and exploited once again by the rock and pop music machine in the future.¹⁰⁰ In the same year, a band named Reflex released ‘The Politics of Dancing’. A catchy synthesiser workout, its chorus described the politics of dancing as ‘the politics of – mmmm – feeling good’. The single was a top-twenty hit in both America and Britain.¹⁰¹

NOTES

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