

PROTEST AND SURVIVE: A BRIEF HISTORY AND  
ANALYSIS OF THE POLITICS OF PUNK

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# PROTEST AND SURVIVE: A BRIEF HISTORY AND ANALYSIS OF THE POLITICS OF PUNK

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## ABSTRACT

Politics are an important aspect of most punk music, and many authors, avoiding concrete description, paint the genre with a nebulous left-ish brush. This, however, is insufficient at explaining how and why the genre has adapted to (as well as helped shape) geographically and culturally disparate communities across the globe over the last half-century. Moreover, most academic treatment of punk rock comes from a cultural and sociological perspective, lacking a theoretical and analytical discussion of the music itself. This document will synthesize the evolving genre's musical and cultural entanglements with politics. To this end, the document will focus on landmark bands, albums, and locations around the world in a mostly chronological order with occasional overlap, documenting cultural development of the genre with supplemental musical analysis. With rigorous primary-source analysis of punk rock zines, this document will also recognize punk rock communities and transmission of ideas outside of the bands themselves. The elusive intertwining and occasionally paradoxical stances of the punk subculture are precisely why creating a single definition of punk rock is a difficult endeavor. Thus, it is important to recognize and enumerate these areas of conflict to better understand the music and the communities it serves.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my family: I am forever indebted to your continued, unwavering support.

To all of my former band mates, without whom I would have never discovered the majority of this music, nor appreciated it so intensely.

To Stuart Hinds, for your wisdom, guidance, and (occasional) chop-busting.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Historical Background**

Punk rock's initial burst into the public eye was violent but brief, coinciding with the rise and fall of the Sex Pistols, from roughly 1976-1978. Cultural changes and the musical artists that shaped and catalyzed the punk movement, however, had much earlier begun bubbling under mainstream society's surface. The Velvet Underground, formed in New York City in 1965, is cited, along with the Stooges (formed in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in 1967) and the New York Dolls (formed in New York City in 1971) as cornerstones of what has retroactively been dubbed "proto-punk."<sup>1</sup> These groups are less alike in sound than they are in attitude, in their conscious subversion of polished, formulaic pop and rock, and in how they embraced marginalized music and culture. La Monte Young was a primary influence on the Velvet Underground, for instance, and the New York Dolls stirred up controversy by performing frequently in drag. Iggy Pop, front man of the Stooges, was known for writhing violently on stage, bare torso exposed, not infrequently under the influence of hard drugs.<sup>2</sup> The idea of conscious and at times aggressive subversion of musical and cultural norms would become indispensable to the subsequent decades of punk musicians.

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<sup>1</sup> For a recent primer on the subject, see Daniel Kane, *"Do You Have a Band?": Poetry and Punk Rock in New York City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> This is chronicled extensively in Paul Trynka, *Iggy Pop: Open Up and Bleed* (New York: Broadway Books, 2007).

As punk musicians would come to react to their own cultural surroundings, so these proto-punk groups did before them. Musicologist Richard Witts frames the Velvet Underground's emergence in its cultural context: the Lower East Side, where the group coalesced, had seen manufacturing jobs leave in droves. Cockroach-infested apartments were dark, dank, and crumbling from lack of upkeep. Immigrant populations with limited finances moved in, only to be displaced later by gentrification.<sup>3</sup> The post-World War II generation in New York saw little of the liberty, equality, and opportunity that America was supposed to represent. Similar circumstances across the Atlantic were a catalyst for a young Joe Strummer, squatting in abandoned houses in neglected, lower-class neighborhoods, to found the Clash.<sup>4</sup>

Born from these proto-punk economic woes, disillusion with the false promises of a post-WWII era, and the countercultural attitudes of the 1960s, punk rock was ripe to develop in disparate hotbeds across the U.S. and the U.K. Its ideals, both musical – with quick tempos, harsh vocals, and general abrasiveness – and philosophical – anti-authoritarian, anti-oppression, and a Do-It-Yourself (henceforth “DIY”) attitude – has had a lasting presence in society, occasionally mainstream and always lurking somewhere beneath the surface. The genre warrants continued examination to untangle its place in the popular music canon as well as its complex relationships with sociocultural movements and politics, local and worldwide.

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Witts, *The Velvet Underground* (London: Equinox Publishing, Ltd., 2006), 2-6.

<sup>4</sup> Chris Salewicz's *Redemption Song: The Ballad of Joe Strummer* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007) is a thorough and engaging biography that goes into great detail about Strummer's miserable state of existence while creating and struggling to break through with the Clash.

When issues in equality, justice, and hegemonic cultural standards are explored and prodded, as they are so frequently in punk music, politics are inexorably linked. Political expression in punk rock, as with other art forms and modes of expression, is not always overt, espousing or opposing a specific political party, candidate, or ideology. This expression certainly can be,<sup>5</sup> but more often it is not. It is in the differences in manner and content of expression that a world of subtlety and nuance in the political nature of punk rock is constructed. Moreover, these differences are what stir heated debate among listeners, performers, and scholars alike on what is and is not “true” punk rock.<sup>6</sup>

To understand this debate, and to adequately assess the far-reaching punk subculture, one must recognize and embrace the genre’s wildly different, at times contradictory, views, which result from its separate communities with a lack of any central authority (which should come as no surprise, given the ideological punk struggle against authority in myriad forms). The widespread umbrella notion of punk espousing vaguely left politics is woefully simplistic and incomplete. While this could ring true for a number of artists, the assumption still runs into a host of problems with bands who embrace other elements crucial to the genre (screamed vocals, abrasive distortion, and quick tempos) but have staunchly different political or apolitical values. There are, for example, avowedly apolitical street punk and “Oi!” bands of the U.K. from the 1980s, as well as fascist punks who sport brazen Nazi tattoos and paraphernalia. The nebulous leftist categorization of punks also comes under fire when one examines issues of racism and sexism in punk communities. This is to say nothing of the fact

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Fat Wreck Chords’ *Rock Against Bush* compilations from 2004, or the non-subtle name and artistic output of Reagan Youth.

<sup>6</sup> Dick Hebdige’s *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1979), recognized as one of the first substantive academic works to address punk rock, is still a catalyst of argument and discussion of the genre and is referenced below.

that what is perceived as “leftist” can vary greatly by location and dominant cultural attitudes, and punk has made its way around the globe in completely disparate societies.

This work will not attempt to pinpoint what is and is not punk rock with a strict, codified set of characteristics. Instead, it will examine the work of artists frequently associated with the genre, noting the varying ways that punk artists espouse and embody political messages. The emphasis therefore is not so much to define what is or is not truly “punk” as it is a survey of how fast, loud, snotty, DIY musicians propagate their own political views through a network of local communities that share some common ground, in spite of sometimes contradictory core values. It does not aim to be comprehensive: the Sex Pistols and the Clash for example, are the subjects of endless written and visual treatments, and their contributions will be noted only in passing. Rather, this document will be far-reaching, marking comparisons and finding contrasts between punk music from the late 70s to today, in different pockets of the U.K., the U.S., and around the world.

### **Review of Literature**

Fortunately, there is a decent amount of research on punk rock spanning different academic fields, along with non-academic but just as valuable sources. Dick Hebdige’s *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* remains the go-to entry point for punk discourse. Published in 1979, it offers a contemporary analysis of freshly emerging British subcultures, including mods, skinheads, and punks. Later scholars have critiqued it extensively, but its primacy makes it an important, albeit imperfect, source. Beyond Hebdige’s *Subculture*, a swath of resources exists on the topic of early British punk. Some of these are contemporaneous with

the scene while others were written in retrospect, each with their own level of utility. *The Boy Looked at Johnny: the Obituary of Rock and Roll*<sup>7</sup> by Julie Burchill and Tony Parsons actually precedes *Subculture* and lives up to its ostentatious subtitle, eviscerating rock and punk artists with reckless abandon. It is heavily biased, but like *Subculture*, its primacy is valuable, and even the palpable bias proves useful in regards to reception history.

Some writings on punk plot a trajectory among artists, genres, and popular consumption and reception. In this respect, Clinton Heylin is a key contributor. *From the Velvets to the Voidoids: The Birth of American Punk*; *Babylon's Burning: From Punk to Grunge*; and, *Anarchy in the Year Zero: The Sex Pistols, The Clash and the Class of 76* all plot teleological musical arcs involving punk, its precursors, and some of its progeny.<sup>8</sup> Occasionally the connections are tenuous, but such is the case when discussing a genre so dynamic and so quick to duck from the public eye.

Finally, disc jockey George Gimarc's *Punk Diary 1970-1979* and *Post-Punk Diary 1980-1982* put early punk recordings in context and illustrate a sort of evolution of both punk music itself and of radio audience consumption. As Gimarc spun these discs himself with KNTU and KZEW, one feels his depth and breadth of knowledge on an astronomical number of bands and albums.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Julie Burchill and Tony Parsons, *The Boy Looked at Johnny: the Obituary of Rock and Roll* (London: Pluto Press, 1978).

<sup>8</sup> Clinton Heylin, *From the Velvets to the Voidoids: The Birth of American Punk* (London: Penguin Books, 1993); *Babylon's Burning: From Punk to Grunge* (New York: Canongate U.S., 2007); *Anarchy in the Year Zero: The Sex Pistols, The Clash and the Class of 76* (London: Route, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> George Gimarc, *Punk Diary 1970-1979* (New York: St. Martin's, 1994); *Punk Diary 1980-1982* (New York: St. Martin's, 1997). These books, from the days before instant online streaming, were initially sold with CDs as well. Unfortunately, as these books are not currently being reproduced, the only avenues of acquiring them are through public lenders (i.e., libraries) and third-party sellers, usually sans CD. This is unfortunate, as the idea of

A number of sources, particularly those regarding American hardcore, narrow the focus to specific cities and scenes. James Stark's *Punk '77: An Inside Look at the San Francisco Rock & Roll Scene*, Mark Anderson and Mark Jenkins's *Dance of Days: Early History of the Washington D.C. Punk Scene*, and Sean Carrillo and Exene Cerveka's *Forming: The Early Days of L.A. Punk* are examples of this.<sup>10</sup> All are geared toward a more casual audience, but their inclusion of direct quotes, photographs, and inside information make them reputable and valuable.

There are also a number of books that, like this document, strive to form complete and cogent philosophical and political analyses of punk music. Lars Kristiansen's *Screaming for Change: Articulating a Unifying Philosophy of Punk Rock* is particularly valuable. As the title implies, this book attempts to set clear, universal boundaries that define punk. While I remain unconvinced such a definition can exist that would satisfy everyone, Kristiansen achieves successful results. He traipses through punk history while anchoring his positions with chronological case studies of albums he sees as monumental. He analyzes these albums for their content and connects them to each other as well as to the overall narrative arc he crafts outside of these case studies. His choices are somewhat suspect and imply a personal bias (for example, choosing *Wolves in Wolves' Clothing* as exemplary of NOFX's musical and political philosophy is unusual and arguable), but the fact that the genre itself thrives on a level of obscurity means that, to a certain extent, personal bias is unavoidable. The book is

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directly providing audio resources to accompany a text can be of great use to the reader/learner.

<sup>10</sup> James Stark, *Punk '77: An Inside Look at the San Francisco Rock & Roll Scene* (San Francisco: Re/Search, 2000); Mark Anderson and Mark Jenkins, *Dance of Days: Early History of the Washington D.C. Punk Scene* (New York: Akashic Books, 2003); Exene Cerveka, *Forming: The Early Days of L.A. Punk* (Los Angeles: Smart Art Press, 2000).

nonetheless an excellent and comparatively concise resource on the overarching philosophical ideals that punk embodies.

David Ensminger's *The Politics of Punk: Protest and Revolt from the Streets* is an even more recent addition to the discussion of punk, focusing, as this document does, on the relationship between punk rock and politics.<sup>11</sup> Ensminger's intimate familiarity with his subjects is unquestionable, as the majority of the photos in the book were taken by the author himself. Rather than a chronological or regional survey, Ensminger picks a few key tenets and movements; within those broad categories, he references and correlates different bands and their relation to one another, creating an often dizzying web of information. The result is a book that does not give the reader a close-up look at any specific artist or its output, but that instead focuses on political ideas themselves and the ways in which different artists engage with them.

Some sources come from members of the punk scene themselves. Ian Glasper is a veteran of the U.K. anarcho-punk scene and has written exhaustively about punk in the U.K. in a series of books: *Burning Britain: The History of UK Punk 1980-1984*; *The Day the Country Died: A History of Anarcho Punk 1980-1984*; *Trapped in a Scene: UK Hardcore 1985-1989*; and *Armed with Anger: How UK Punk Survived the Nineties*.<sup>12</sup> For the aficionado (or the curious and brave amateur), these tomes elaborate at length the gritty day-in, day-out lifestyle of the time. Glasper writes band by band, providing a selected discography for each, which enables readers to skip and skim, given their own leisure and

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<sup>11</sup> David Ensminger, *The Politics of Punk: Protest and Revolt from the Streets* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> Oakland, CA: PM Press; 2004, 2006, 2009, and 2012, respectively.

interests, which is a blessing given the sheer length of this series. The tone is conversational and Gasper's prose is not the sharpest, but these factors are endearing, given Gasper's track record and clear breadth of knowledge. Additionally, the books are full of photographs and direct quotations from band members, breathing life into a topic that, in academic analysis, can be rendered stiff.

Objectivity must be in play when scouring these sources, however, and finding what is useful and truthful versus what is fabricated requires an exercise of judgment. NOFX's *Backstage Passport* DVD, made by and featuring the band itself, is an entertaining portrait of the band's touring lifestyle.<sup>13</sup> However, as it exists primarily for serialized entertainment, many troubles the band faces in the series' episodes seem exaggerated, if not entirely fabricated. There is material of value, but one must be judicious in deciding when to give credence and when to give an eye roll.

The largest range of written sources on punk music comes from journals. These run the gamut across eras and disciplines, mostly with an intense and narrow focus. While some sources may seem obvious, like the *Journal of Popular Music Studies* and *Popular Music and Society*, one must broaden horizons to find the bulk of journalistic writing on punk. Ondřej Císař's "Include 'em All?: Culture, Politics and a Local Hardcore/Punk Scene in the Czech Republic" appears in *Poetics*; Joachim Williams's "Why 'Punk'? Religion, Anarchism and Feminism in Pussy Riot's Punk Prayer" appears in *Religion, State & Society*, and Alan O'Connor's "Punk Subculture in Mexico and the Anti-globalization Movement: A Report from the Front" appears in *New Political Science*. To have a more nuanced perspective on punk and its practitioners, perspectives such as these, while not earth-shattering, are

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<sup>13</sup> Mike Burkett, *NOFX: Backstage Passport*, DVD (San Francisco: Fat Wreck Chords, 2009).

important to consider. The lyrics and the acts of punk musicians and their fans transcend musical discussion and must be considered in their broader cultural context. Because of this, journals on varying subjects seemingly unconnected to punk may still yield fruitful results for the punk scholar or connoisseur.

Black Hawk Hancock and Michael J. Lorr flip the traditional narrative with a crowd-centered approach in “More Than Just a Soundtrack: Toward a Technology of the Collective in Punk Rock,” from the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*.<sup>14</sup> Rather than focus on the musical and lyrical matter of punk artists, they survey crowd members at underground shows in Chicago to uncover underlying mechanisms at play in the experience of a punk show. They examine ways in which the intimate yet chaotic nature of an underground show can foster collectivity and solidarity within a community. Andy Bennett’s “Punk’s Not Dead: The Continuing Significance of Punk Rock for an Older Generation of Fans,” from a 2006 issue of *Sociology*,<sup>15</sup> also explores the punk consumer, rather than the artists themselves. Bennett interviews middle-aged and older veterans of punk scenes, most of whom have given up on the rebellious streaks of their youth and have settled down with families and careers. Through these interviews, Bennett highlights the nuances of finding meaning and joy in a genre that one may no longer be in active participant in, or even ideologically support.

While the existence of the above sources is beneficial for research and analysis, perhaps most importantly, increased scholarly interest in punk has led to the creation of *Punk & Post-Punk*, a journal devoted entirely to punk-related research. The journal published its

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<sup>14</sup> Black Hawk Hancock and Michael J. Lorr, “More Than Just a Soundtrack: Toward a Technology of the Collective in Punk Rock,” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 42 no. 3 (2013): 320 – 346.

<sup>15</sup> Andy Bennett, “Punk’s Not Dead: The Continuing Significance of Punk Rock for an Older Generation of Fans,” *Sociology* 40 no. 2 (2006): 219-235.

first issue in 2012 and is now in its sixth volume. To quote the journal's website: "Placing punk and its progeny at the heart of inter-disciplinary investigation, it is the first forum of its kind to explore this rich and influential topic in both historical and critical theoretical terms."<sup>16</sup> This is an accurate description, as the journal features contributors from different fields and backgrounds, with punk at its nexus. It also features interviews with punk icons and reviews of gigs and contemporary zines, making it a robust and nearly all-encompassing resource.

What most analyses of punk lack is dissection of the music itself. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that even most professional punk artists are perceived as amateur musicians. Further, analysis of punk still lies mostly in areas of social and cultural studies, with further forays into areas like communications studies, gender studies, and ethnography. Even from a musicological perspective, emphasis falls on the music's effect and meaning more than on its notes and chords. Each perspective is fruitful, of course, but there remains ample room for exploration and discovery by occasionally approaching the music with a theoretical ear. While lyrics are arguably the easiest and most direct way for a musician to make a political statement, music itself can be radical.<sup>17</sup> This is not a document on punk music theory (though such a document would be welcome), but my hope is that some amount of theoretical analysis provides clarity and adds a new and vital dimension to understanding this music, its construction, and its impact.

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.intellectbooks.co.uk/journals/view-Journal,id=200/> (accessed April 29, 2018).

<sup>17</sup> See, for instance, censorship and harassment of Dmitri Shostakovich and other Soviet composers under Stalin's regime, or the reaction in Boston after a performance of Igor Stravinsky's arrangement of "The Star-Spangled Banner!"

An additional potential strength of this document is its section on zines, written after considerable personal research with primary sources. Doing archival processing in LaBudde Special Collections afforded opportunities to discover and then study rare, often ephemeral materials.<sup>18</sup> Collections in LaBudde include an extraordinary number of zines on topics from COINTELPRO to witchcraft and pagan sigils. Punk zines make up a portion of these, and they come from all over North America and Europe. The dissemination of punk music and ideals in the pre-internet age is itself a cultural phenomenon that is not adequately addressed in the majority of writings on the genre. These zines serve members of various punk bands and communities, as they contain comics, articles, and reviews (of bands, shows, and even other zines). Zines are of critical importance to understanding extramusical ways in which the scene survives, spreads, and informs underground communities.

As mentioned, any attempt to summarize an entire genre – especially one that has persisted for nearly half a century with hundreds of unique artists – will be incomplete and imperfect. Thankfully, this means there remain various facets to research, analyze, and highlight, and notable work has already been made, with fresh, insightful, and positive discourse still occurring in myriad platforms and disciplines. My hope is to acknowledge and reference this discourse and to contribute to it my own perspective and insight, through thorough historical, cultural, lyrical, and musical analyses. There is still much to be said, and many more blistering, aggressive, and snotty two-minute songs to be digested and analyzed.

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<sup>18</sup> LaBudde Special Collections is located in Miller Nichols Library at the University of Missouri – Kansas City (UMKC). Along with rare and first edition books, LaBudde houses thousands of zines, currently in four separate collections: the Rita Brinkerhoff collection donated in 2016 and featuring materials from 1984-2007; the Kansas City Zine Collective collection, donated in 2015 and featuring periodicals from 1976-2015; the Kansas City Zine Con collection, initially donated in 2016 but with additional items donated after each annual Con; and the Rachel Kauffman collection, donated in 2015 and featuring zines from 1994-2000. Further information about LaBudde (including finding aids and digitized items) is available at its website: <https://library2.umkc.edu/labudde>

## CHAPTER 2

### POST-PISTOLS PUNK IN THE U.K., 1977-1985

The cultural importance of breakthrough punk acts the Sex Pistols and the Clash, as well as their iconic place in the early punk pantheon, has been widely documented and requires little expansion here. The Sex Pistols may not have been the first British punk band to release an album,<sup>1</sup> but *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols* was crucial in catapulting punk's popularity to a wider audience. Following the Sex Pistols' breakup, and the Clash's turn away from punk and increasing mainstream popularity, differing strains of punk began to coalesce in the U.K. underground in the late 1970s to mid-1980s.

Punk music of this new "generation," while containing unifying tendencies of heavy distortion, offensive lyrics, quick tempos, and general disillusion with society, demonstrates that bands assert themselves in myriad ways with varying messages. Some bands embrace anarchy and nihilism, while others avoid direct political commentary in a celebration of the downtrodden, working-class life. Some bands wade back and forth, at times harshly railing against authority, while other times singing jaunty hymns to juvenile debauchery.

The nihilistic, anarchy-driven strain of punk manifests itself convincingly in the band Crass, formed in Essex County, England, in 1977. Crass's first album, *The Feeding of the*

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, the Damned's *Damned Damned Damned* (London: Pathway Studios, 1977) predates *Nevermind the Bollocks* by eight months.

5000, is provocative from the start.<sup>2</sup> “Reality Asylum,” the album’s opening track, is a spoken-word piece that minces no words. Eve Libertine recites the track’s text, which begins:

I am no feeble Christ, not me.  
He hangs in glib delight upon his cross, above my body.  
Christ forgive. Forgive? I vomit for you Jesu.  
...  
Down now from your cross.  
Down now from your papal heights,  
from that churlish suicide, petulant child.<sup>3</sup>

The lyrics criticize the figure of Jesus, claiming that he wrought the wrongs of the world:

You dug the pits of Auschwitz, the soil of Treblinka is your guilt,  
your sin, master, master of gore, enigma.  
You carry the standard of your oppression. Enola is your gaiety.  
The bodies of Hiroshima are your delight

Musically, the recitation of text begins unaccompanied. After a full fifteen seconds of speech-like declamation, a guitar makes a feeble entrance, with the sound of an amplifier turning on, followed by a softly plucked note. The feedback of this note grows into a violent cacophony, intensifying along with the recitation of the text. Crass asserts an independence from religious ideology in a blasphemous and visceral manner, aiming to provoke, and the track concludes with a nihilistic absolution: “Jesus died for his own sins, not mine.” The amorphous sound of the droning guitar feedback and spoken word call to mind the

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<sup>2</sup> Crass, *The Feeding of the 5000*, Crass Records, 1978. Originally released on 33rpm LP, but as of the time of this writing can be found on CD or streaming on YouTube or Spotify. I will provide information for artists’ recordings in further footnotes, but all timestamps here and elsewhere will correspond to timings on Spotify from the bands’ official artist pages. This is not to assert any superiority of Spotify, but simply for convenience: Spotify recordings are somewhat authoritative (as bands manage their own pages) and easy to use. Unfortunately, online streaming services have a fleeting nature, and it is a matter of time before Spotify is obsolete. Original LPs, cassettes, and CDs are all more authoritative media, and the amount of discrepancy between Spotify recordings and physical recordings should be negligible.

<sup>3</sup>I chose not to display the most vulgar and blasphemous excerpts from this track, as the current selection is necessary to make an argument and I do not wish to indulge in provocation that may seem insensitive to readers. A cursory internet search will yield the full lyrics for those interested.

minimalism of La Monte Young more so than the short, fast, punk songs of the Sex Pistols or the Clash.

Such a minimalistic track displays a musical nature of punk music beyond common perception of three-chord bursts, and this extends to the opening of the album's side B: "Fight War, Not Wars." This is less a song than a chant, as the song's titular words are its only lyrics. They are yelled, not sung, in strict rhythm. In a chaotic appropriation of the march genre, there are no chords or melody, but rather the indistinct sounds of unpitched, muted guitar strums over the top of the sporadic ringing of a single bass note, a bass drum strike on every beat, and a march-like rhythm in the snare. At a tempo marking of 150, this track is substantially faster than a typical march tempo of 100-120. The track begins softly with a slow crescendo to build intensity, and the studio faders are pushed dramatically for a final sonic burst as the track ends, after just 35 seconds.

"They've Got a Bomb" is also march-like, invoking the military in sound and lyrical content, but in a twisted manner. The bass line is dissonant and repetitive with a vague D modality, and, as in "Asylum," heavy guitar feedback is used to produce an atmosphere of chaos. Departing from typical song structure, after the line "Twenty-odd years now waiting for the flash," in reference to a nuclear explosion, Crass inserts a substantial segment of silence into the song [1:16-1:32]. This reflects the reality of the devastatingly quick and widespread force of an atomic explosion: in one, unsuspecting moment, an entire city could be vaporized. The music reenters in the form of a single strummed E-flat, a jarring departure from the repetitive notes in a D modality that define the song's main thrust. After this note rings and is enveloped in feedback [1:32-1:51], the band returns to the same musical material as before, centered again around D, pushing the listener back into the song's original

modality and atmosphere. This song, without silence or segue, immediately bleeds into the album's next track, "Punk is Dead."

Such a declaration initially appears ironic— a punk song proclaiming "punk is dead," especially on the heels of the Sex Pistols and the Clash, but the lyrics elaborate:

Yes that's right, punk is dead  
It's just another cheap product for the consumer's head  
Bubblegum rock on plastic transistors  
Schoolboy sedition backed by big time promoters  
CBS promote the Clash  
But it ain't for revolution, it's just for cash  
Punk became a fashion just like hippy used to be  
And it ain't got a thing to do with you or me.  
...  
The scorpions might attack, but the systems stole the sting

The insinuation here is that the true essence of punk is not in its musical style, but rather its place as a countercultural movement. Once this existence is usurped and branded as a commodity, even if the music remains the same, and the "scorpions" – i.e., the bands and the members of the punk community – attack, the initial power no longer exists. Punk's absorption as a marketable lifestyle, along with its normalization, destroys its essence and its ability to enforce change. This plunges Crass further into the depths of nihilism, as they continue to produce punk music, in spite of their own declamations.

The band Discharge, formed in 1977 in Stoke-on-Trent, England, also expresses bleak and nihilistic frustration and energy in their music. Their first album, *Hear Nothing See Nothing Say Nothing*, released in 1982, is a brutal and relentless tour-de-force. Guitar riffs with heavy distortion are repeated over and over, as the drums blast pounding rhythms, making prominent use of the crash cymbal (as opposed to hi-hat) for added aggression (Example 1). Unlike Crass, Discharge makes no use of vocal melody: every lyric is screamed

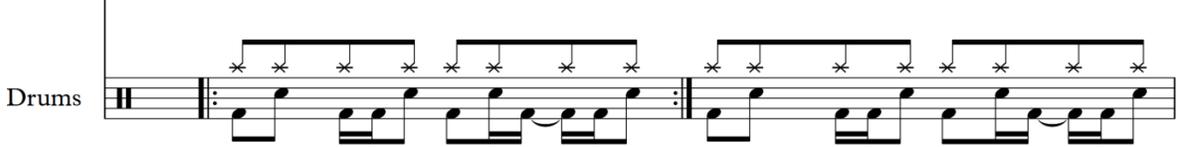
Example 1 "Meanwhile" [0:06-0:25]. © 1982 Clay Records. Transcription by the author.

$\text{♩} = 160$

Voice  $4x$  

Guitar 

Bass 

Drums 

Voice 

Guitar 

Bass 

Drums 

Voice 

Guitar 

Bass 

Drums 

Example 1 (continued)

The musical score consists of four systems, each with four staves: Voice, Guitar, Bass, and Drums. The key signature is three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat). The time signature is 4/4. The lyrics are: "World mil-i-tar-y ex-pend - i - ture" and "in - crea - ses". The guitar part features a complex, rhythmic pattern of chords and single notes. The bass part provides a steady, rhythmic accompaniment. The drums play a consistent pattern of eighth notes.

with no regard for pitch. Of the album’s fourteen tracks, eleven have a quarter-note pulse faster than 150 BPM. Two tracks are slower, and one track, “Cries of Help,” ends not so much as a punk song as a *musique concrète* collage, à la Pierre Schaeffer.<sup>4</sup> Over an overwhelming acoustic collage of screaming children and ominous noises, the band samples

<sup>4</sup> Listen to, for example, his collaboration with Pierre Henry, *Symphonie pour un homme seul*. It is a discomfiting collage of musical and non-musical sounds, including a fist angrily pounding on a door, accompanied by screaming in German. The fact that the piece was completed in 1950, with memories of World War II still fresh around the globe, renders it even more perturbing.

text from *The War Game*, a fictitious 1965 documentary about nuclear war [beginning at 2:01]:

At seven-tenths of a millisecond after the explosion, and at a distance of 60 miles, the light from the fireball of a single megaton thermonuclear device is 30 times brighter than the midday sun. This little boy has received severe retinal burns from an explosion 27 miles away. [Narration pauses as screaming continues at 2:33, narration resumes at 2:59] The blast wave from a thermonuclear explosion has been likened to an enormous door slamming in the depths of hell.<sup>5</sup>

Starting the second side of the album with such an ominous and uncomfortable collage of sound and narration is similar to the opening of Crass's *The Feeding of the 5000*: Discharge uses elements atypical to rock music (collage, spoken word, and lack of melody, harmony, or rhythm) to evoke an emotional response and to provoke thought on a political issue, in this case, the real threat of nuclear war.

Lyrics across the album are aggressively bleak and often only a handful of lines long, repeated as needed to fit the songs' minimal time spans. "A Hell on Earth" is the only track longer than three minutes, and nine tracks clock in under two. The text to the song "Meanwhile" is a single, four-line stanza: "half the world is starving, dying of disease / world military expenditure increases / half the world is living in poverty / world military expenditure increases." The lyrics to "I Won't Subscribe" are also a mere four lines: "kept in line with rifle butts and truncheons / beaten up behind closed doors / I won't subscribe to the system / the hands that tighten around my throat." These songs are violent bursts that seek not to make a pointed argument for a cause, but to enrage and provoke the listener. Discharge, like other punk bands, creates an opposition between the poor, the starving, the dying, and the global military industrial complex. "Protest and Survive" declares: "the savage mutilation

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Watkins, *The War Game*, BBC, 2006 (DVD), 1965.

of the human race is set on course / protest and survive / protest and survive / it is up to us to change that course / protest and survive / protest and survive.” The glum implication here is that action is imperative, but even this action is no guarantee to prevent doom.

Not every British punk band active around the turn of 1980 presented music and lyrics so politically charged. Bands often labeled as “street punk” focus more on snottiness and shock value that come from a working-class upbringing. The Macc Lads (formed in 1981 and named for their place of origin, Macclesfield, England), who called themselves “the rudest, crudest, lewdest, drunkest band in Christendom,”<sup>6</sup> is a band precisely in this mold, as their lyrics revel in alcohol abuse, homophobia, and misogyny. They seek to subvert cultural norms, not through political discussion, but in extolling ways of life that are often looked down upon as juvenile and profane, with lyrics glorifying violence, sex, and debauchery.

The opening track of the Macc Lads’ second full-length, *Beer & Sex & Chips & Gravy* (1985) is an anthem of sorts, titled “The Lads from Macc.”<sup>7</sup> From the start, it sets a tone miles apart from that of Crass and Discharge. There is no extra-musical insertion of gritty feedback with spoken text, no espousal of nihilistic or anarchic ideology. Rather than generate an instant feeling of aggressive and nihilistic anxiety, this music sounds comparatively fun, lively, and catchy. It is up-tempo, but not frenetic. It begins with unison rhythmic hits on A, the song’s tonic note, embellished with a brief melodic guitar riff. Already the music is substantially different from that of Crass and Discharge, where the

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<sup>6</sup> An initial source of this quote proves difficult to trace, but it has been reproduced in various outlets (PopMatters: <https://www.popmatters.com/the-rudest-crudest-lewdest-drunkest-band-in-christendom-2496146679.html>; The Guardian: <https://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2015/jun/23/cult-heroes-the-macc-lads-satirists-not-knuckle-draggers>). See note 27 for further information regarding the Guardian article.

<sup>7</sup> Not available on Spotify, but available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=00ABz6FLIis> (accessed June 13, 2018).

guitar lines consist mostly of power chords, with little emphasis placed on the guitar as melody. After three iterations of the rhythmic hits and riff, the phrase is balanced with the rhythmic strumming of an E power chord, actually functioning cadentially. The lyrics, devoid of any notion of systematic oppression or imminent threat of a nuclear apocalypse, proclaim:

We're the Macc Lads, we were born in a pub  
We like our ale, we like our grub  
We're the Macc Lads, and we hate poofs  
We're the lads from Macc, and we want some crack<sup>8</sup>  
Before we go out shagging the night,  
We drive around insulting every bugger in sight

The rhythmic hits and melodic riff reappear as the music behind the song's refrain: "We're the lads from Macc, and we want some crack" (Example 2). Additionally, these lyrics are screamed by a group of gang vocals. The gang vocals encourage audience participation, something that would be screamed by a presumably drunk, mostly male audience at a small, local show.

Other songs on the album (e.g., "Sweaty Betty" and "Saturday Night") are degrading rants about drinking heavily and attempting to seduce women. Numerous songs, like the above "Lads from Macc," make reference to "poofs," a derogatory term for a male homosexual.

While nihilistic and anarchic punk bands stress the dangers of societal structures, and that they exert control over the average person, street punk bands like the Macc Lads embrace their society and local culture, glorifying it, warts and all.<sup>9</sup> The music and lyrics still

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<sup>8</sup>"Crack" (also spelled "craic," in Gaelic) in this context refers not to the drug, but is a slang term basically meaning "fun" or "a good, exciting time"

<sup>9</sup>*Guardian* music critic Ian Gittins reappraised their work in 2015, refusing to believe the sincerity of the band's vulgar and juvenile lyrics, calling them "near-the-knuckle satirists," and describing their music as "a subversive

Example 2 “Lads From Macc” [0:27-0:38]. © 1985 Hectic House. Transcription by the author.

♩ = 200

The musical score is arranged in three systems, each with four staves: Voice, Guitar, Bass, and Drums. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the tempo is marked as ♩ = 200. The first system contains the lyrics "We're the Lads from Macc! We want some crack!". The second system contains the lyrics "We're the lads from Macc! All". The third system contains the lyric "right!". The guitar and bass parts feature a driving, rhythmic accompaniment, while the drums provide a steady, energetic beat.

parody of unreconstructed macho bigotry.” Lead singer Muttley McLad responded that that was “probably the worst thing that’s ever been said about us,” and bluntly stated: “we were every bit as bad as we seemed.”

offend the sensibilities of the uninitiated listener, but for different reasons. Street punks embrace testosterone-driven fun, as some listeners “criticized anarcho punk for introducing a more serious, politically correct element to punk... creating a ‘holier than thou’ attitude amongst some anarcho punks.”<sup>10</sup>

It would be reductive to compartmentalize British punk in the late 70s to mid-80s as an either/or situation between political nihilism and jovial juvenility. Charged GBH (for “grievous bodily harm,” now referred to as simply GBH) formed in Birmingham, England, in 1978. Their music toes lines of politics, working-class life, and juvenile offensiveness with the aggressive violence and energy of bands like Discharge, as well as U.S. hardcore bands like Black Flag and the Dead Kennedys (to be discussed in the next chapter). The band’s 1982 debut album, *City Baby Attacked by Rats*, is frantic, hectic, and loud. The opening track, “Time Bomb,” immediately evokes the same sense of anxiety and doom of nuclear war as Crass’s “They’ve Got a Bomb.” The song (and thus, the album) begins with an ominous clock ticking; erratic guitar chords; bass and drums noodling; and growling feedback, before a lightning-quick count-off on the drumsticks and the full band’s entrance at [0:22]. The drums set the pace with a relentless boom-chuck pattern at a tempo of 160, bolstered by guitar and bass strumming in rhythm. [1:11-1:22] Later in the song is a guitar solo, which is not the melodic and technical showmanship of a virtuosic performer at only 11 seconds long, but rather embellishes the underlying and unyielding B5-F-sharp5-C-sharp5 chord

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<sup>10</sup> Michelle Liptrot, “‘Different People with Different Views but the Same Overall Goals’: Divisions and Unities Within the Contemporary British DIY Punk Subcultural Movement,” *Punk & Post-Punk* 2 no. 3 (February 2014): 2017.

progression of the verse.<sup>11</sup> The chord progression in the chorus – D5-B5-C#5-B5 – butts heads with the verse’s C-sharp focus, creating an opposition between one progression that implies C-sharp minor and one that implies D major. The end of each chorus rings out an E5 power chord, a chord common to both modal centers. At this chord, the frantic beat stops, allowing for a “reset” back to the verse (Example 3). This cycle of C-sharp stasis, D tension, and E suspension allows the song, with such basic and repetitive material, to repeat without losing its energy or its aggression. “Time Bomb” is a purposeful start to the album that makes a statement; the symbolic image of a time bomb creates anticipation and indicates a coming explosion, as the song’s simple chorus states “we got a time bomb, 5-4-3-2-1 go!”

Example 3 “They’ve Got a Bomb” [0:28-0:48]. © 1982 Clay Records. Transcription by the author.

The musical score is presented in two systems. The first system covers the Verse and Chorus. The tempo is marked as ♩ = 160. The guitar part is written in treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The Verse consists of four measures of power chords (D5, B5, C#5, B5) with a repeat sign and a '3x' multiplier. The Chorus also consists of four measures of the same power chords with a repeat sign and a '5x' multiplier. The drums part is written in a simplified notation with asterisks for accents and stems for the rhythm. The second system shows the end of the Chorus and the beginning of the Verse. The guitar part ends with a final power chord (E5) and then returns to the Verse power chords. The drums part continues with the same driving rhythm.

<sup>11</sup> Punk music does not function in the typical ways of Common Practice Period repertoire. The music often behaves modally, rather than tonally, and the addition of “5” to a capital numeral implies a power chord, i.e. a chord with only a root and a fifth (and sometimes an octave). The lack of a third and the parallel movement of roots and fifths enhance the perception of this music as modal. Further, this parallel movement of fifths serves no contrapuntal purpose. Rather, it provides weight to the root of the power chord.

The song is not nihilistic, but rather implies agency. The third person plural “we” implies the listener and the community who engage with the music and its meaning. The “you” in the song is an outside force, an oppressor, as in the third verse: “It’s in our hands, above your head / think carefully or you’ll be dead.” The song’s last line is threatening: “... we control the detonator.” The punk scene, to GBH, is an explosive force that could eradicate current social and economic injustices.

While other songs on the album (“War Dogs,” “Prayer of a Realist”) condemn the military industrial complex and organized religion, respectively, most of the album’s tracks are apolitical. Unlike the Macc Lads, who glorify debauchery, GBH’s lyrics are more often bleak, bordering on deranged and grotesque. The album’s titular track has the lyrics:

The memory lingers on when you were the same as us  
Three months old a child, still you lived off love and fuss  
City baby, city baby, city baby attacked by rats  
Residing in a squalid place, it can't be too much fun  
Your brain is getting eaten away by the rat living in your skull  
A mutant at the age of one, a human rodent cabbage  
It’s hard to think a tiny thing can do that much damage

Perhaps this could be construed as some sort of allegory, but more likely it is just a grotesque picture of macabre squalor. Similarly, “Passenger on the Menu,” with lines such as “had no choice, lost and alone / eat the flesh, spit out the bone,” describes graphically the decision of the survivors of the Uruguayan Air Force Flight 571 plane crash to resort to cannibalism to survive the harsh weather of the Andes.<sup>12</sup> “Bellend Bop,” the album’s closing track, is a testosterone-driven anthem that aligns with the street punk aesthetic. The lyrics describe a night of heavy alcohol consumption, a police raid, and vulgar sexual promiscuity:

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<sup>12</sup> For further reading: Piers Paul Read, *Alive: The Story of the Andes Survivors* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1974), is a particularly potent telling of this tale of superhuman courage and will to survive in the face of unspeakable tragedy.

They were doing it on the tables, they were doing it on the chairs.  
They were doing it on the dance floor, they were doing it upstairs.  
But the police came and raided the place, said the music was too loud.  
I didn't want to get recognized so I mingled with the crowd.

While there is no catchy, melodic guitar riff in the track, there are numerous guitar solos, something mostly foreign to blistering anarcho-punk songs: these display virtuosity and potentially excite a live audience. GBH uses gang vocals coupled with hand claps in this song, on repeated iterations of “bop, bop, the Bellend bop,” which would spark audience participation. As such, this album successfully marries competing punk ideologies, warning of nuclear threats, condemning war and organized religion, painting gruesome pictures of working-class society, and finally embracing a rambunctious juvenile life. Hence, simplistic attempts to compartmentalize British punk of the late 1970s to mid-1980s, while useful to an extent, do not paint a complete picture.

Punk rock in the U.K. is not limited to England. Stiff Little Fingers, formed in 1977 in Belfast, Northern Ireland, are perhaps the most widely known Irish punk band. Living in a politically tormented place and time, the band writes frequently about the daily struggles of life in Northern Ireland. Their debut album, *Inflammable Material*, pointedly criticizes The Troubles, an armed conflict between Irish Nationalists and Loyalists, regarding the constitutional status of Northern Ireland.<sup>13</sup> The track “Suspect Device” rails:

Inflammable material is planted in my head  
It's a suspect device that's left 2000 dead  
Their solutions are our problems  
They put up the wall  
On each side time and prime us  
And make sure we get f\*\*k all  
They play their games of power

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<sup>13</sup> Stiff Little Fingers, *Inflammable Material*, Rough Trade, 1979. Not available on Spotify, but “Suspect Device” is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sKsN5cj9ehs> (accessed June 13, 2018).

They mark and cut the pack  
They deal us to the bottom  
But what do they put back?

At issue here are the systems of oppression and control that create Irish infighting. Those in power divide the everyday populace and instigate them in order to ensure continued conflict and reaffirm a position of power. Musically, this song is driving, yet not at the breakneck tempo that would come to be used in the music of Discharge. The guitar is gritty and distorted, and the vocals are hoarse shouts. However, the band shows a knack for melody and catchiness, and the screamed vocals have pitch, following the chord progressions. The chorus contains an added hook of rhythmic unison stingers as the song's title is chanted: "You gotta suss, suss, suss, suss, suss out, suss suspect device."

Rather than focus on bleak pessimism, the band promotes a sense of agency in "State of Emergency," saying:

Please don't just sit there, let's try to break out  
From all the hatred, suspicion, and doubt  
Try to change your life that is no life at all  
Try to break down the imaginary wall  
And if you couldn't be bothered  
Well then, my friend, you'll fall  
And spend all the rest of your life  
In this emergency

This is a rallying cry to others not to feed into the divisive rhetoric previously mentioned in "Suspect Device." This angry, aggressive and yet brutally honest music attempts to express frustration while likewise reaching out to others who may feel the same way and are frustrated that they have no representation in traditional media.

In Scotland, the Exploited formed in Edinburgh in 1979, with a musical and lyrical aesthetic broadly aligning with street punk ideals. The band's first album, *Punk's Not Dead*

(1981), is titled deliberately in response to Crass's "Punk is Dead" off *The Feeding of the Five Thousand*. The lyrical content runs the gamut between anti-military sentiments and alcoholic debauchery, playing up a working-class lifestyle. The song "Mucky Pup" begins with the lyrics, "well I pick my nose, then I eat it up," and concludes with: "Oh the nine o'clock news is something to trip on / I bleeding love her -Angela Rippon!<sup>14</sup> / She's got big tits," boasting of juvenility and immaturity. The song "Sex and Violence" is about precisely what one would imagine, and "Dole Q" is about living off of unemployment payments, and thus being unable to afford going to the pub. Mixed in with these tracks, however, are politically charged tunes, like "Army Life," and "Blown to Bits," echoing further disdain for military action.

"Blown to Bits" – which begins with over a minute of muffled talking and aborted guitar and bass riffs – refers particularly to an IRA bombing. "Royalty," which refers to the Queen as a "little cow," states: "we don't need her, she's no f\*\*\*ing use / she's gonna be a victim of the working class abuse." The lyrics are aggressive and cruel and further embrace the "us-versus-them" mentality that many punk bands, in their own way, employ. In this track, as in others, listeners are the downtrodden who deserve better, seeking vengeance in the overthrow of an authoritative class. The album's closing track, "I Believe in Anarchy," fuses anarchic ideas with the celebration of an offensive, juvenile, yet tight-knit, working-class way of life, especially in its final verse: "I'm not afraid of having a fight, and I'm not ashamed about getting drunk / and I don't care what you say, cause I believe in anarchy." The Exploited do not proselytize anarchic beliefs in the same sense as Crass; rather they see their own drunken sexual deviance as already embracing the freedom that anarchy suggests.

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<sup>14</sup> Angela Rippon was the first permanent female on-air journalist for the BBC.

Clearly, there is no set punk dogma, and there is give and take among different artists and subgenres. Anarcho-punk seeks loftier goals than street punk, which in terms sees anarcho-punk as occasionally holier-than-thou. Some bands show fringe support for anarchist and anti-authoritarian movements, while also embracing one's local community and working-class status. The push-and-pull between differing punk ideologies, though present in this variety of U.K.-based punk bands, is not exclusive to the United Kingdom. Some of the faster, heavier, more aggressive bands in particular draw from the burgeoning hardcore punk movement in the United States.

## CHAPTER 3

### EARLY U.S. HARDCORE

British punk in the wake of the Sex Pistols and the Clash existed predominantly in strains of anarchic nihilism, general disillusion with working-class life, and an embrace of drunken sex and violence. American punk in the late 1970s through the 1980s exists in numerous strains as well. Some early American hardcore punk takes aggression and violence to new levels: instead of focusing on broad anti-government threats and street brawls, American hardcore lyrics are at times graphic rebukes of police officers and other authority figures. Sometimes the lyrics are tongue-in-cheek and satirical, and other times they are pointedly vitriolic.

Dead Kennedys, after playing small venues and releasing several EPs, broke out with their 1980 debut LP *Fresh Fruit for Rotting Vegetables*.<sup>1</sup> The band's name and album cover aim for immediate provocation: the name Dead Kennedys rhymes with the name of former United States senator Ted Kennedy, politician and brother of President John F. Kennedy and Senator Robert F. Kennedy, who were both assassinated. The album's cover is a photograph of police cars on fire from the White Night riots of 1979 in San Francisco, a reaction to the perceived light sentence given to former San Francisco Board Supervisor Dan White after his assassinations of Mayor George White and Board Supervisor Harvey Milk.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dead Kennedys, *Fresh Fruit for Rotting Vegetables*, Alternative Tentacles, 1980.

<sup>2</sup> For more context, see Randy Shilts, *The Mayor of Castro Street: The Life and Times of Harvey Milk* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982).

The music and lyrics of *Fresh Fruit* are no less blunt and provocative than the band name and album cover. The album's opening track, "Kill the Poor," is an indictment of the perceived open hostility of those with power and authority toward the lower classes, written as a tongue-in-cheek missive gleefully to eradicate the underprivileged. A sense of irony and irreverence is immediately perceptible in the song's opening [0:00 – 0:33], as the heavily distorted, feedback-ridden electric guitar; not-quite-metrical drumming, cliché 1950s bassline, and the nasally, wobbly, and slightly off-pitch voice of lead singer Jello Biafra combine in a parody of light-hearted, carefree doo-wop. Aggressively, they pound out a I-vi-IV-V chord progression, the standard doo-wop harmony, with vocals proclaiming: "Efficiency and progress is ours once more / Now that we have the Neutron bomb / It's nice and quick and clean and gets things done / Away with excess enemy / But no less value to property / No sense in war, but perfect sense at home" (Example 4). Typically, Roman numeral analysis serves little use in approaching punk music, but here, as a recognizable progression that clearly borrows from another genre, it is essential to understanding the song's tension and irony.<sup>3</sup> The bass line underscores the fact that this progression is not a mere coincidence, as it is stylistically appropriate for doo-wop and different from the music that follows.

An aggressive drum roll on the snare in a faster tempo leads to a riff-driven verse, with lyrics extolling the virtues of a society without the poor and the decrepit conditions in which they live: "The sun beams down on a brand new day / No more welfare tax to pay / Unsightly slums gone up in flashing light / Jobless millions whisked away / At last, we have more room to play / All systems go to kill the poor tonight" [0:33 – 0:56]. In this faster

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<sup>3</sup> This same progression sees ironic usage in the Stiff Little Fingers song "Barbed Wire Love," a tongue-in-cheek indictment of the conflicts in Ireland and Northern Ireland.



the fact that they are responsible for poverty through their unfair mass of capital and their exploitative nature.

“Kill the Poor” is only one example of these sentiments, as the whole album brims with sardonic and often sarcastic rage toward systems of authority and imperialism. Themes of exploitation, war, and death abound, as track titles “Forward to Death,” “When Ya Get Drafted,” “Let’s Lynch the Landlord,” and “Chemical Warfare” indicate. The album’s penultimate song, “Holiday in Cambodia,” is another biting track, contrasting the life of a well-to-do American college student with life under the Khmer Rouge:

You’re a star-belly snitch, you suck like a leach  
You want everyone to act like you  
Kiss ass while you bitch so you can get rich  
But your boss gets richer off you  
Well you’ll work harder with a gun in your back  
For a bowl of rice a day  
Slave for soldiers till you starve  
Then your head is skewered on a stake

These lyrics are juxtaposed with a surf-rock groove, and the extended musical interlude before the final chorus [2:56-4:19] features repetitive incantations of the name of brutal dictator Pol Pot. To drive home the album’s pessimistic sarcasm, the Dead Kennedys close *Fresh Fruit* with a raucous, up-tempo cover of “Viva, Las Vegas!” After a relentless barrage of social commentary, the band mockingly ignores all of this, singing of the carefree glitz and glamour of Las Vegas, blissfully avoidant of the harsh realities of contemporary American society.

While the Dead Kennedys use irony and tongue-in-cheek lyrics to provoke responses and make statements, Millions of Dead Cops (now referred to simply as MDC) takes a serious tone against what they view as an authoritarian police state. “Dead Cops/America’s

So Straight,” from the band’s self-titled debut album, is exemplary of MDC’s violent attitude.<sup>4</sup> The song is in an overarching ABA form, where the A and B sections are jarringly different. The song begins with six seconds of screeching feedback and barely comprehensible guitar strumming in rhythmic unison with snare drum rolls, leading to the vocal entrance. Gang vocals (when a group of people sings together in unison) shout the titular lyrics “dead cops!” multiple times, creating intensity and inviting audience participation in live performance. The frantic vocals only vaguely match the rhythm of the instruments, vilifying the police as evil Klan members, happily oppressing the poor: “down on the street, giving poor the heat / with their clubs and guns, doing it all for fun / ... / Big bad and blue, they’re in the Klan too / brutality is their sport, we’ll put ‘em to the torch.” After about 26 seconds of this onslaught, there is a noticeable tape splice into the song’s B-section, “America’s So Straight.” This begins with even more incomprehensible snare drum and tom-tom rolls, preceding the full band entrance. This section contrasts with the first via a slower tempo and a greater focus on melody, where the lyrics also present as less aggressive, more introspective, and even questioning: “rebel, rebel, on the street / makeup on my face, stockings on my feet / all the straights asking me why / I’m not a normal American guy / What makes America so straight and me so bent?” The song eventually returns to the A section, with a reprisal of the screaming of “dead cops!” The most potent lyrics are saved for the ending: “Watcha gonna do, the Mafia in blue / hunting for queers, n\*\*\*\*ers and you / Dead cops (x4) / Time for a switch, army of the rich / macho f\*\*\*in’ slaves, we’ll piss on your graves.”

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<sup>4</sup> MDC, *Millions of Dead Cops*, Alternative Tentacles, 1982.

The band's most memorable output, however, may be from the album's following track "Born to Die." This song features a chant, repeated intermittently: "No war, no KKK, no fascist U.S.A.!" At an early 2017 awards ceremony, singer/guitarist Billie Joe Armstrong of Green Day spontaneously erupted into the chant, with a slight alteration: "No Trump, no KKK, no fascist U.S.A."<sup>5</sup> Virulent anti-corporatism is another prominent theme in MDC's output, as in "Businesses on Parade" and "Corporate Deathburger," the latter referring to McDonald's mascot Ronald McDonald.

Showing the lengths to which punk bands go to provoke an emotional response, the band Reagan Youth personally and repeatedly targets then-President Ronald Reagan, making direct correlation between Reagan's followers and the white supremacist ideology of the Nazi regime. Rather than critique the president with direct rebuttals, the band uses satirical lyrics showing overzealous support for his regime. Their first release, *Youth Anthems for the New Order*, contains the eponymous track "Reagan Youth," which paints Reagan's agenda as aggressively Christian, mindless, and bloodthirsty through lines like: "we are the sons of Reagan, heil! / We're gonna kill all pagans, heil! / The right's our sacred mission, we'll start an inquisition / we're gonna purge the heathen kind;" "the right is our religion, we all watch television / drugs have fried our brainwashed minds;" and "we want another war, forward to El Salvador / we're gonna kill some communists."<sup>6</sup> The song's chorus proudly proclaims: "we are Reagan Youth" with following gang vocals, screaming "Heil! Heil! Heil!" in

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<sup>5</sup> Dorian Lynskey, "'No Trump! No KKK! No fascist USA!': The Punk Chant That Soundtracks the Protests," *Guardian* (Jan 31, 2017). <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/shortcuts/2017/jan/31/no-trump-no-kkk-no-fascist-usa-green-day-punk-chant-protest-soundtrack> (accessed May 6, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> The United States intervened heavily over the course of the Salvadoran civil war, and the Reagan administration's actions have been criticized. For more, see Brian D'Haeseleer, "'Drawing the Line' in El Salvador: Washington Confronts Insurgency in El Salvador, 1979-1992," *Cold War History* 18 no. 2 (May 2018), 131-148.

reference to the Nazi salute.<sup>7</sup> The re-release of Reagan Youth's recorded output in 1994, following singer Dave Rubinstein's suicide, doubles down on the band's tongue-in-cheek overstating of white supremacist ideals. It is titled "A Collection of Pop Classics," and shows rock band members dressed up in KKK robes. The bass drum head, which typically displays a band's name or logo, reads instead: "Imperial Wizards." Block text in the bottom left reads: "Sponsored by the David Duke Appreciation Society," a reference to former KKK Grand Wizard. .

While there is a tendency in early American hardcore music toward extreme violence and satiric mockery, this is not ubiquitous. Black Flag, while still featuring the speed and energy and refusal of authority of the previous bands, represents a metered take on contemporary American life. Their 1981 debut album, *Damaged*, is a staple of early hardcore.<sup>8</sup> The album begins with "Rise Above," a rollicking anthem that promotes a sense of unity and agency in the face of oppression. The song opens with an up-tempo drum beat, to which a chromatically descending guitar line joins in, followed by the addition of a second guitar voice in parallel thirds, building intensity before erupting into power chords. A jarring tape splice (on the opening track of this album) occurs, throwing off the rhythm and balance, until the verse begins. The verse hovers in an ambiguous tonal space centered on D and A. The vocals are harsh, pitchless screams, while the guitar alternates between two motivic ideas, switching between riffing on notes D and F sharp and a power chord progression of G5-A5. This duality is reflected in the verse's vocal stylings as well, alternating between lead

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<sup>7</sup> This is also a spin on the punk interjection of "Oi!" popularized by British street punk groups.

<sup>8</sup> Black Flag, *Damaged*, SST, 1981. In a five-star review for AllMusic, John Dougan asserts: "Perhaps the best album to emerge from the quagmire that was early-'80s California hardcore punk, the visceral, intensely physical presence of *Damaged* has yet to be equaled, although many bands have tried." <https://www.allmusic.com/album/damaged-mw0000198777> (accessed May 6, 2018).

singer Henry Rollins's solo screaming and a gang vocal repeating "rise above, we're gonna rise above!" (Example 5). The lyrics continue:

Solo: Try and stop what we do

Group: Rise above! We're gonna rise above!

Solo: When they can't do it themselves

Group: Rise above! We're gonna rise above!

Since there is no specific entity to which the song's "they" refers, it could be interpreted by the listener as any type of authority or negative presence. It also fosters a sense of unity between the performer and listener, and arguably among listeners as well. The song's chorus is a further rallying cry: "we are tired of your abuse / try and stop us, it's no use."

The rest of the album focuses on life as an American youth. "Spray Paint (the Walls)," a 35-second bombastic spurt, features lyrics like: "It feels good to say what I want / It feels good to knock things down / It feels good to see the disgust in their eyes / It feels good, and I'm gonna go wild," expressing a sense of euphoria in accepting a countercultural punk lifestyle. The song "Depression," on the other hand, is an honest statement about struggling with mental health issues. The lyrics to "Six Pack" are a condemnation of those who are obsessed with alcohol. Similarly, "TV Party" is critical of those who ignore the issues facing the world around them by excessively consuming television programs. The criticism in "TV Party" manifests itself musically, with an overly poppy guitar riff, hand claps, and screaming that is less angry than it is comically disjunct. The chorus's gang vocals are done in an over-the-top manner as well, as the band sings together: "We've got nothing better to do than watch TV and have a couple of brews!" To Black Flag, therefore, there is a difference between living how one wants (e.g. "Spray Paint") and being entirely dependent on other

Example 5 "Rise Above" [0:27-0:37]. © 1981 SST Records. Transcription by the author.

**♩ = 208**

**Solo**

Voice: Jeal-ous cow-ards try to con- trol\_ Rise a-bove, we're gon-na

Guitar: [Musical notation]

Bass: [Musical notation]

**♩ = 208**

Voice: rise a bove!\_ They dis - tort what we say

Guitar: [Musical notation]

Bass: [Musical notation]

**♩ = 208**

**Group**

Voice: Rise a - bove, we're gon - na rise a - bove!\_

Guitar: [Musical notation]

Bass: [Musical notation]

Drums: [Musical notation]

desires (“Six Pack,” “TV Party”).

The Descendents, formed in California in 1977, focus on daily life in suburban America as well, but often with a snarky and juvenile twist, accompanied by catchier riffs and vocals. Their 1982 full-length *Milo Goes to College* is exemplary of their musical and lyrical style.<sup>9</sup> The opening track, “Myage,” reads like a pining teenage ode to a female crush:

Almost ready, almost there  
Or is it already over  
She’s a friend in need, she’s a friend indeed  
Needs someone to hold her  
Alone at night, she plans her game  
Correctly thinking that I’m in pain  
Every night, it’s all the same  
She’s been a-f\*\*\*in’ with my brain

She don’t need no one  
She don’t need no one

The less weighty lyrical material here is accompanied by more light-hearted and catchy musical accompaniment. The song opens with a melodic bass riff which is joined by a snare drum roll and the guitar riffing in unison. Singer Milo Aukerman’s screaming is pitched and follows the predominant mixolydian feel of the guitar and bass riffing, which make frequent use of the flatted 7<sup>th</sup> scale degree. The bass line continues in fluidity and riffs extensively in the chorus. The overall impression of the music and lyrics is closer to the Macc Lads’ brand of street punk than other aforementioned American hardcore bands, nonchalant homophobic slurs included. “I’m Not a Loser” concludes with the lyrical passage: “Your pants are too tight, you f\*\*\*ing homos / you suck, Mr. B\*\*\*f\*\*\*, you don’t belong here / Go away, you f\*\*\*ing gay / I’m not a loser.” Other tracks on the album like “Parents,” “I’m Not a Punk,” and “Marriage” explore other themes of youth and struggling for acceptance and personal

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<sup>9</sup> The Descendents, *Milo Goes to College*, New Alliance, 1982.

meaning. Only one track on the album, “Statue of Liberty,” contains sentiments critical of government and mindless patriotism:

Well, the people walk all around the thing on an island very far from here  
They pay it homage like a god  
...  
It has no use, its meaning is gone  
...  
Why is it so important to them?  
What is the beauty they see in it?  
I don't know why I just accept it  
I don't want it, 'cause it makes me sick

The most on-the-nose indictment of suburban life is in the track “Suburban Home,” which begins and ends with spoken text: “I *want* to be stereotyped, I *want* to be classified.” It is another fast tune with pitched screaming, and even simple vocal harmonies in the chorus, as Aukerman sarcastically croons: “I want to be masochistic / I want to be a statistic / I want to be a clone / I want a suburban home.”

Hüsker Dü, from St. Paul, Minnesota, also address life in Middle America, but with an expanded musical palate that pushes the limits of what can be considered punk. Their 1984 release, *Zen Arcade*, is a sprawling double LP, ambitious in a genre known for short songs and albums.<sup>10</sup> The album is loosely structured as a concept album: the lyrical narrative follows a protagonist who leaves behind a broken home and bad relationship to pursue a new life, only to wind up confronting the same problems of hopelessness and alienation. The dystopian underlying message of the album's lyrical matter is that no matter what one does or where one goes, society imposes certain restraints that will continue to restrict one's possibilities and make it difficult to find true happiness. The song “Pride” is undeniably hardcore, with viciously screamed pitchless vocals, squealing guitars, and relentless

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<sup>10</sup> Hüsker Dü, *Zen Arcade*, SST, 1984.

drumming. With its lyrics pleading: “why did you back me into a corner? / I didn't mean it, it was just an act / My friend's outside, can't he come in? / And everybody else / stupid pride, selfish people / stupid pride,” the distraught instrumental accompaniment makes sense. Other songs on the album however, move beyond stereotypical hardcore tropes. In the emotional “Never Talking to You Again,” the band accompanies personal, heartfelt lyrics with purely melodic singing, harmony, and no instruments save acoustic guitar. “Hare Krsna” [sic] features chanting, a tom-heavy drum part, and repetitive, drone-like guitar and bass. “One Step at a Time” is a short, echo- and reverb-heavy piano interlude. Guitarist Bob Mould described the musical extremes of *Zen Arcade* in an interview before the album’s release: “The hardcore is more hardcore than we’ve ever done, the melodic pop stuff is more melodic, the experimental stuff is more experimental. There’s a few straight-ahead rockers, there’s a few psychedelic, a few country songs.”<sup>11</sup> The band stays rooted in hardcore sensibilities for most of the double LP, but Hüsker Dü expands the genre’s musical capabilities in order to further tell a story that, while not traditionally political in nature, is reflective of the state of hopelessness and lack of belonging as someone coming of age in Middle America in the 1980s.

Bad Brains is another important figure in the early hardcore scene that stretches the genre’s boundaries. In addition to being an early pioneer of the hardcore sound (forming in 1977), Bad Brains also fuses sounds of reggae and funk. Being black Rastafarians, they also do not fit the stereotypical punk mold, at least in terms of ethnicity and ideology.

Nonetheless, their self-titled, full-length debut, with album art of a lightning bolt striking the

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<sup>11</sup> Andrew Earles, *Hüsker Dü: The Story of the Noise-Pop Pioneers Who Launched Modern Rock* (Minneapolis: Voyageur Press, 2010), 127.

U.S. Capitol Building, features breakneck tempos, crunchy distortion, and lyrics of dissatisfaction and rebellion. “Don’t Need It” begins with a snare drum count off and drumroll at ca. 160 beats-per-minute, and the song is fueled by a repetitive, frantic, one-measure guitar and bass riff. The lyrics are a positive assertion of self-worth through rejection of materialism, with its passages: “don’t need no ivory liquid / don’t want no afro sheen / don’t need the latest fashions / don’t want my hair to smell clean /... / We don’t need no first class / don’t need no second class / all of the best-of, all that can kiss my ass.” The song contains skilled musicianship, with a guitar solo [0:44-0:56] that is not polished or entirely in-tempo, but nonetheless shows an adeptness on the instrument that is not apparent in other artists of the genre. This leads into a relentless and mechanical motoric drum rhythm that shows skill and control, culminating in an abrupt ending after just one minute and seven seconds.

On this same album is the track “Leaving Babylon,” which is worlds apart in style. It is four minutes and eleven seconds of laid-back reggae. The bass part is active, with a rounded tone and staccato playing punctuating each note. The snare echoes, opening up a musical space that is non-existent in faster-tempo songs that are shrouded in distortion. The guitar tone is clean, not muddied by overdrive, and it plucks offbeat chords in typical reggae fashion. The lyrics still fit with punk ideals of countercultural struggle, but couched in the context of Rastafarianism: the title “Leaving Babylon” refers to a facet of Rastafarian ideology, where Babylon represents western cultural hegemony.<sup>12</sup> Bad Brains thus uses the

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<sup>12</sup> For a thorough detail on the history of reggae and its relationship with Rastafarianism, see Christopher H. Partridge, *Dub in Babylon: Understanding the Evolution and Significance of Dub Reggae in Jamaica and Britain from King Tubby to Post-punk* (London: Equinox, 2010).

same sentiments across the genres of punk and reggae within the same album, expanding the musical language one can use while still remaining punk.

In another splintering direction of punk ideology, Minor Threat, led by front man Ian MacKaye, advocates a clean, sober, self-labeled “straight edge” lifestyle. In stark contrast to the hedonistic lifestyle of drinking and drug use, Minor Threat brazenly lashes out against substance abuse. This is an example of a punk group criticizing the genre’s own scene and followers, as in the song “In My Eyes” off their 1981 EP of the same name:

You tell me you like the taste; you just need an excuse  
You tell me it calms your nerves; you just think it looks cool  
You tell me you want to be different; you just change for the same  
You tell me it’s only natural; you just need the proof  
Did you f\*\*\*ing get it?

The song shifts abruptly and jarringly in the chorus, as the lyrics say condemningly: “It’s in my eyes / and it doesn’t look that way to me.” The drum beat switches to a double-time groove (by subdividing at a diminished metrical value), and the tempo increases from ca. 160 to ca. 180. To further increase the musical tension, the musical mode shifts from a G aeolian center to the modally distant F-sharp aeolian. The tempo change and the tonal push-and-pull drive the song (Example 6). These musical devices appear in other punk songs (e.g. GBH’s “Time Bomb”), but are uncommon in other genres of popular music. This discrepancy perhaps contributes to the notion that punk music is sloppy and amateurish. Finally, in the same way that tension between anarcho-punk and street punk arises between differing punk “factions,” so Minor Threat’s straight-edge message drives wedges between differing

Example 6 “In My Eyes” [1:07-1:22]. © 1981 Dischord Records. Transcription by the author.

$\text{♩} = 160$   
Pseudo-pitched; sing-songy

Voice: You tell me it's on - ly na - tu - ral, you just need

Guitar: [Chordal accompaniment]

Bass: [Bass line]

Drums: [Drum pattern]

Screamed

$\text{♩} = 180$

Voice: the proof Did you f\*\*\*ing get it? It's

Guitar: [Chordal accompaniment]

Bass: [Bass line]

Drums: [Drum pattern]

4/4

Voice: in my eyes\_ it's in my eyes\_ It's

Guitar: [Chordal accompaniment]

Bass: [Bass line]

Drums: [Drum pattern]

Example 6 (continued)

The musical score consists of four staves. The top staff is for the Voice, with the lyrics "in my eyes\_ it's in my eyes\_" written below the notes. The second staff is for the Guitar, written in treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The third staff is for the Bass, written in bass clef. The fourth staff is for the Drums, using a standard drum notation with a double bar line and a vertical line for the snare drum. The music is in 4/4 time and features a driving, rhythmic pattern.

fandoms in the U.S., as the idea of uninhibited individual expression through substance abuse and individual control through sobriety are fundamentally at odds with one another.<sup>13</sup>

Punk music experienced a voracious growth in the 1980s in the United States, both on the coasts and in the Midwest. Because of punk's wide reach and influence, the political strains espoused in the music and their means of deployment vary considerably from group to group. Dead Kennedys use tongue-in-cheek satire, even choosing to borrow a doo-wop chord progression, and to cover "Viva Las Vegas," to make cultural commentary. Millions of Dead Cops choose a directly violent and aggressive, even threatening, approach to address police and brutality and corporate domineering. Reagan Youth address white supremacy and co-opts KKK regalia to bring an uncomfortable racial underbelly to life and connect it to a wing of American politics. Black Flag, Hüsker Dü, and the Descendents focus on average

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<sup>13</sup> Mark Anderson and Mark Jenkins explore this tension at length in *Dance of Days: Two Decades of Punk in the Nation's Capital* (Berkeley, CA: Soft Skull Press, 2001), while also reconstructing the context of the D.C. hardcore scene, describing neighborhoods and venues at the time of the scene's emergence.

American life in their music, addressing cultural norms. Hüsker Dü crafts a story and incorporates varying musical styles to evoke a response and compassion, and the Descendents use juvenile humor. Minor Threat calls out members of the punk community by advocating for a straight-edge lifestyle, antithetical to much of the punk ethos. Bad Brains add jazz, funk, and Rastafarian beliefs to their music to expand what hardcore punk can be and say. In spite of these differences, all of these bands are connected by musical parameters, a DIY aesthetic, and an overarching dissatisfaction with the dominant American culture of the time. However, the growing proliferation and notoriety of punk bands would lead to rekindled mainstream consumption of punk music and culture throughout the 1990s and early 2000s.

## CHAPTER 4

### GROWTH AND CHANGE, 1985-2000

From about 1985 to 2000, punk's musical language expanded in multiple directions, with bands emphasizing different aspects of punk. Some punk bands, after aging, subdued their anger and aggression. Some bands fused punk with pop-like sensibilities, which in turn influenced bands that eschewed almost any political or subversive edge. Still other bands delved into more technical and varied songwriting, adding a polished professionalism and expanded musical vocabulary lacking from earlier artists. With these developments, the boundaries became stretched as to what can be considered "true" punk, opening the question of where to draw the line between punk and its offshoots and sub-genres.

After a few years in the underground limelight, some seminal punk bands called it quits: Minor Threat disbanded in 1983, the Dead Kennedys and Black Flag in 1986, the Descendents in 1987 (after an earlier, two-year hiatus in 1983). Some groups, like MDC and Bad Religion (formed in 1980 in Los Angeles), continue onward until the 1990s and beyond.

Hüsker Dü continued until 1987, but after *Zen Arcade*, they changed their tune, literally. The band toned down the abrasive distortion, break-neck tempos, heavy lyrical matter, and screamed vocals of their earlier records to create the melodic, poppy, and comparatively polished *Candy Apple Grey* and *Flip Your Wig*. After leaving their hardcore roots behind, they earned a major record label deal which brought radio play and even

television appearances.<sup>1</sup> Far from the blitzkrieg tempos of *Zen Arcade*, *Flip Your Wig* is calm and relaxed. Instead of exploring outside genres and experimental album structure via acoustic songs, piano interludes, and other tangential departures, the album is a single, cohesive unit, save the short slide-whistle interlude “Baby Song.” The album’s commercial single, “Makes No Sense At All,” is a formulaic pop tune, featuring conventional chord progressions, including climactic build-ups to cadential V7 chords [0:42-0:54] complete with vocal harmonies. The song satisfies the ear with conventional pivots to the submediant [like the bridge, beginning at 1:27], forgoing the band’s earlier, intentionally shocking and jarring sound in favor of sleek cohesion. The lyrical matter is less about making a statement and more about making a catchy, memorable tune with a ubiquitous refrain (Example 7):

Walking around with your head in the clouds  
Makes no sense at all  
Sell yourself short, but you’re walking so tall  
Makes no sense at all  
Is it important? You’re yelling so loud  
Makes no sense at all  
Walking around with your head in the clouds  
Makes no sense at all

This results in a product that while well-crafted, strays far afield from the band’s hardcore roots.

Other bands emerged in the late 1980s and 1990s that borrow some punk stylistic traits while boasting substantive enough divergences to warrant different generic labels. Perhaps the most famous example is the grunge movement of the 1990s, which “resembled punk, not necessarily in terms of tempo, but in sound,” evidenced through its harsh, often

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the band was interviewed and performed on *The Late Show with Joan Rivers* on April 27, 1987. The recording is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vfkvjcjNj8> (accessed May 1, 2018).

Example 7 “Makes No Sense at All” [0:00-0:12]. © 1985 SST Records. Note the use of vocal harmony. Transcription by the author.

♩ = 160

Voice

Wal-king a-round with your head in the clouds, it makes no sense at all

Guitar

G F A F C C/B A G C

Voice

Sell your-self short but you're wal-king so tall it makes no sense at all

Guitar

G F A F C C/B A G C

screamed vocals, heavily distorted guitars, and anti-establishment attitudes.<sup>2</sup> Nirvana tracks like “Territorial Pissings” and “Tourette’s,” with harshly screamed vocals, pounding drum beats, and gritty guitar work, could appear convincingly in a hardcore compilation, but the musical aesthetic of their albums as a whole is of a decidedly slower and sludgier vein. The same could be said of fellow Seattle grunge band Soundgarden, with tracks like “Rusty Cage” and “Ty Cobb” that feature the speed as well as the aggression of hardcore punk, but whose quickness is the exception rather than the rule of their musical aesthetic. Lyrically, these groups both share and depart from typical punk themes. Nirvana is subversive in songs discussing substance usage (e.g., “Lithium,” “Dumb”), and occasionally seeks shock value (like the ending of “Stay Away,” where Curt Cobain sings “God is gay,” a *non sequitur* lyric that is used simply because it rhymes with the song’s title). However, such subversive lyrics

<sup>2</sup> Lars Kristiansen, *Screaming for Change: Articulating a Unifying Philosophy of Punk Rock* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008), 16.

are the exception, and there is no unified message of dissent, virulent anti-authoritarianism, or suburban malaise that typifies punk groups. Still, the punk underpinnings exist, and Nirvana bassist Krist Novoselic has admitted that artists like Hüsker Dü were important influences on the band.<sup>3</sup>

In grunge's wake, some burgeoning punk acts received mainstream recognition, as Green Day and the Offspring released breakthrough albums *Dookie* and *Smash* in 1994. The Offspring (formed in 1983 in Southern California) began their career in the same hardcore vein as earlier bands. Their self-titled debut album criticizes older generations for presuming authority simply through age ("Elders"), and "Out on Patrol" emphasizes the arrogance of war and how quickly a soldier can die, with little fanfare, through these lyric passages:

Look at you, soldier boy, now, with that big gun in your little hand  
As you patrol this foreign land, hear the mine that clicks beneath your feet  
...  
Now do you see the light, fading while your world is crumbling?  
Out on patrol, and all you can do is sit and stare  
What revelation have you now?  
What culmination to your speck of life?  
Your moment in time

The band levies heavier military criticism in "Tehran," which combines brash punk speed with flattened second scale degrees and pseudo Middle Eastern riffs to set an Arabian atmosphere (Examples 8.1 and 8.2). This is not novel in punk music, as the Dead Kennedys borrowed such stereotypical elements for "California Uber Alles," but here it makes more musical sense, as the song criticizes U.S. involvement in Iran.<sup>4</sup> Lyrics attack varying

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<sup>3</sup> Bart Bealmear, "Grant Hart and Hüsker Dü Invent Noise Pop, 1983," *Dangerous Minds* (September 2017), [https://dangerousminds.net/comments/grant\\_hart\\_and\\_huesker\\_due\\_invent\\_noise\\_pop\\_1983](https://dangerousminds.net/comments/grant_hart_and_huesker_due_invent_noise_pop_1983) (accessed April 23, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> The band would later re-record the song with slightly altered lyrics, referring to Baghdad instead of Tehran, as a result of U.S. intervention in Iraq. The fact that the exact same sentiments apply, enabling the band to do this,

Example 8.1 “Tehran” [0:32-0:45]. © 1989 Nemesis Records. Transcription by the author.

$\text{♩} = 150$

Guitar 1

Guitar 2

Bass Guitar

Gtr. 1

Gtr. 2

Bass

Gtr. 1

Gtr. 2

Bass

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provides further commentary on the seemingly unending U.S. conflicts in the Middle East.

Example 8.2 [0:52-1:02]

The image displays two systems of musical notation for two guitars. The first system shows Gtr. 1 with a treble clef and a Gtr. 2 with a treble clef. Gtr. 1 has a series of rests followed by three chords, each with a downward bowing mark (v). Gtr. 2 has a continuous rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, with three measures marked 'P.M.' (palm mute) indicated by a dashed line and a vertical bar. The second system shows Gtr. 1 with a treble clef and a Gtr. 2 with a treble clef. Gtr. 1 has a series of rests followed by a melodic line starting with a sharp sign (#) and a downward bowing mark (v). Gtr. 2 has a continuous rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, with the first measure marked 'P.M.' (palm mute) indicated by a dashed line and a vertical bar.

sentiments of the conflict: “This is no Vietnam, we will win in Iran;” “Islam be damned, make your last stand in Tehran;” “Will you wonder if the man that’s in your sights ever kissed his girl goodbye?;” and “Soon America may find its young men in the sand / where the casualty is just a number.” The song’s bridge [2:08-2:28], in a similar manner as the “Pol Pot” incantations in the Dead Kennedys’ “Holiday in Cambodia,” consists of repeated utterings of “Great Satan” and “our flags our burning.”<sup>5</sup> “Kill the President,” despite its provocative title, does not advocate for a literal assassination of the president, but rather removal of such a powerful Head of State position in the U.S., pleading:

In a world without leaders, who’d start all the wars?  
The world that you’re saving, will always be yours.

<sup>5</sup> “Great Satan” is a derogatory term for the United States that with its usage coined in Iran in 1979 in response to U.S. imperialism, as cited in, e.g., Christopher Buck, *Religious Myths and Visions of America: How Minority Faiths Redefined America’s World Role* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2009), 136.

Kill the President, listen to the voice of reason  
Unify with that single line  
Stop the man with the power of the government  
A leader's not the center of democracy

The Offspring's second album, *Ignition*, includes the track "L.A.P.D.," with a pointed indictment of militant police officers that follows the vein of MDC, albeit less frantic and slightly more melodic:

When cops are taking care of business I can understand  
But the L.A. story's gone way out of hand  
Their acts of aggression, they say they're justified  
But it seems an obsession has started from the inside  
They're shooting anyone who even tries to run  
They're shooting little kids with toy guns  
Take it to a jury but they don't give a damn  
Because the one who tells the truth is always the policeman  
Beat all the n\*\*\*ers, beat whoever you see  
Don't need a reason, we're L.A.P.D.

The Offspring's following album, *Smash*, broke new commercial ground, having sold to date over ten million copies worldwide.<sup>6</sup> Released on an independent label (Bad Religion's Epitaph Records), it became the highest-selling independent record of all time.<sup>7</sup> One of the album's main singles, "Come Out and Play," makes a statement toward youth gang violence. This marks a departure from the typical anti-authoritarian messages of punk artists, showing that youth are not above reproach for destructive behavior:

Like the latest fashion, like a spreading disease  
The kids are strappin' on their way to the classroom  
Getting weapons with the greatest of ease  
The gangs stake their own campus locale  
And if they catch you slippin' then it's all over pal

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<sup>6</sup> Compare this to the first pressing of Crass's *The Feeding of the Five Thousand!*

<sup>7</sup> <http://offspring.com/thehistory/> (accessed May 4, 2018). For the RIAA's official certification, see [https://www.riaa.com/gold-platinum/?tab\\_active=default-award&ar=Offspring&ti=Smash#search\\_section](https://www.riaa.com/gold-platinum/?tab_active=default-award&ar=Offspring&ti=Smash#search_section) (accessed May 4, 2018). This figure, however, includes United States sales only, and does not account for international sales.

If one guy's colors and the others don't mix  
 They're gonna bash it up, bash it up, bash it up, bash it up  
 Hey, man you talkin' back to me? Take him out  
 (You gotta keep 'em separated)  
 Hey, man you disrespecting me? Take him out  
 (You gotta keep 'em separated)

The vocal line “you gotta keep ‘em separated,” uttered by someone besides lead singer Dexter Holland, a funky, “Middle-Eastern” guitar riff (à la “Tehran,” yet without the geographical relevance), and a drum beat that uses the hi-hat stand for its own percussive tone provide a unique and catchy synthesis that may have been crucial to the song’s popularity (Examples 9.1 and 9.2).

Seizing on the popularity of *Smash*, Offspring signed with a major label and, as with Hüsker Dü, their sound became more pop-influenced and their production more polished. *Americana* (1998) contains hints of the band’s hardcore beginnings, lyrically and musically, especially in the album’s title track and in “Pay the Man.”

Example 9.1 “Come Out and Play” [0:06-0:12]. © 1994 Epitaph Records. Transcription by the author.

♩ = 160

Spoken in rhythm

Voice

You got-ta keep 'em se-pa-ra-ted!

hi-hat stand

Drums

Example 9.2 “Come Out and Play” guitar riff.

♩ = 160

Guitar

However, the popular singles from the album – “Pretty Fly (For a White Guy),” “Why Don’t You Get a Job?,” and “She’s Got Issues” – betray all of the band’s earlier hardcore tendencies in a polished sound, sing-a-long melodies, banal lyrics, and pop-driven hooks.

Green Day (formed in 1986 in the San Francisco Bay Area) does not wade deeply into political waters in their earlier years.<sup>8</sup> Rather, they fit into the Descendents mold of snarky humor and sarcasm that are inevitable in lazy, adolescent, suburban life. Perhaps because of this more universal message, and a peppier sound, they received a major label deal following a protracted period of underground success. This first major release, *Dookie*, came in 1994 and has sold over eleven million copies; clearly its snotty lyrics and up-tempo beats and chord progressions resonate, along with the Offspring’s *Smash*, with a post-grunge zeitgeist. Two singles from the album, “Basket Case” and “Longview,” ooze of failed potential and self-deprecation. The latter track has a relaxed tempo, a walking bassline, and a drum part that primarily features the tom-toms, in stark contrast to the quick bass, snare, and hi-hat beats more ubiquitous in the genre. The lazy feel of the music purposefully corresponds to the song’s lyrics:

I sit around and watch the tube, but nothing’s on  
I change the channels for an hour or two  
Twiddle my thumbs just for a bit, I’m sick of all the same old s\*\*t  
In a house with unlocked doors, and I’m f\*\*\*in’ lazy  
Bite my lip and close my eyes, take me away to paradise  
I’m so damn bored I’m going blind, and I smell like s\*\*t

The song expresses a longing for a more interesting and fulfilling life, but an even stronger apathy that prevents one from taking action. “Welcome to Paradise” is a more stereotypical punk song, with a faster pulse, a repetitive chord progression, and heavy energy. Lyrically,

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<sup>8</sup> This would change with 2004’s *American Idiot* (Burbank, CA: Reprise Records). However, *American Idiot* was released after a decade of commercial success, the band’s underground roots long behind them.

this is a song of acquiescence to one's unfortunate and non-ideal circumstances. In particular, it is about moving to an unfamiliar, shady, and crime-ridden part of town, but coming to accept it as home. Consider the first verse and chorus:

Dear mother, can you hear me whining?  
It's been 3 whole weeks since that I have left your home  
This sudden fear has left me trembling  
'Cause now it seems that I am out here on my own  
And I'm feeling so alone

Pay attention to the cracked streets, and the broken homes  
Some call it the slums, some call it nice  
I want to take you through a wasteland I like to call my home  
Welcome to paradise

The final verse boasts similar construction to the first, but relates a message of contentment rather than apprehension:

Dear mother, can you hear me laughing?  
It's been 6 whole months since that I have left your home  
It makes me wonder why I'm still here  
For some strange reason it's now feeling like my home  
And I'm never gonna go

In a way, this song parallels Hüsker Dü's *Zen Arcade*, except rather than leaving home and being disillusioned in one's new surroundings, Green Day accepts this fear and disillusion and acquiesces to both. In both cases, the artist depicts a struggle with a suburban American life that is nowhere near ideal.

Other punk and emerging groups do not sell out or change political or philosophical allegiance, but instead simply adopt an expanded musical style coalescing to form the genre of post-hardcore. This transition occurs as performers become more proficient on their instruments and are no longer limited to the same beats and power chords. As NOFX's "Fat" Mike Burkett quips, "punk music is good music played by bad, drunk musicians," and with

punk performance, there is “very little difference between sucking and not sucking.”<sup>9</sup> So as some artists no longer “suck,” they broaden their musical aesthetics while retaining the same DIY and anti-authoritarian ideals. A prime example is Ian MacKaye, singer of Minor Threat, who formed Fugazi after Minor Threat’s breakup. Fugazi’s 1991 album, *Steady Diet of Nothing*, features classic punk features of heavy distortion, abrasive screaming of vocals, and overtly political lyrics, but subverts them in slower, longer songs. With eleven tracks lasting thirty- six minutes, it is by no means a long album in objective terms, but in a relative sense, it is a far cry from the violent, two-minute bursts typical of the hardcore genre.

The Swedish band Refused released a landmark post-hardcore album in 1997: *The Shape of Punk to Come: A Chimerical Bombination in 12 Bursts*. At its core, the album contains abrasive distortion and screaming, with at times blistering rhythms, but it continuously ventures far afield of typical hardcore tendencies, far more so than the occasional experimentations of bands like Bad Brains. The band explores different musical aesthetics throughout the album, and six of the album’s twelve tracks exceed five minutes in length. “The Deadly Rhythm” includes a jazz breakdown in between fast, heavy, screamed verses, and the sprawling eight-minute “Tannhäuser/Derivè” contains, among other out-of-genre explorations, an extended violin sample. Lyrically, the album is fiercely leftist; “The Deadly Rhythm” refers to the rhythm of the factory line and was written in response to Swedish anti-union laws. The genre’s basis in hardcore punk is obvious, but its experimentations and technical showmanship displace it so far from its musical roots that it can only be considered as a separate, though closely related, genre. Although post-hardcore

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<sup>9</sup> *NOFX: Backstage Passport*, DVD-ROM (San Francisco, CA: Fat Wreck Chords, 2009), episodes 3-4.

explores differing musical aesthetics, by channeling similar messages and ideals, the relationship between hardcore and post-hardcore is one of symbiosis rather than antagonism.

Along with these various developments and splintering, more hardcore acts continued to spring up throughout the late 1980s and 1990s, carrying on in the same tradition as the first generation a decade earlier. Again, this phenomenon is not limited to any specific geographical location in the United States. Pennywise emerged in the late 80s in Southern California and signed to Bad Religion's Epitaph Records. On the East Coast, Lifetime formed in 1990, favoring a more melodic sound with lyrics discussing one's personal struggle within society, akin to Hüsker Dü. This is no mere coincidence, as Lifetime's 1995 album *Hello Bastards* includes a cover of Hüsker Dü's "It's Not Funny Anymore," a nod to one of their primary influences. In Minneapolis, The Dillinger Four formed in 1994, and their albums, particularly 2002's *Situationist Comedy*, evoke tenets of the Situationist movement, which had a profound effect on Crass. Neil Nehring asserts that the Dillinger Four's "most frequent theme is nonconformity as a personal responsibility," which puts them at home with the rest of these hardcore artists.<sup>10</sup>

In the late 1990s, riding the coattails of once-punk bands like Green Day and the Offspring, artists like Blink 182, Sum 41, and Good Charlotte came to prominence under the corporate-branded moniker "pop-punk," featuring the speed of hardcore punk, but with a softened edge and lacking aggressive political undertones. Blink 182, in spite of their quick tempos, simplistic chord structures, and mildly offensive humor, made their name with saccharine-sweet tunes like "What's My Age Again?" and "All the Small Things," singing

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<sup>10</sup> Neil Nehring, "The Situationist International in American Hardcore Punk, 1982-2002," *Popular Music and Society* 29 no. 5 (December 2006): 529.

about youth and chasing girls and never delving into political realms (Example 9). Of course, political messages notwithstanding, the sheer popular success of these bands removes them from the DIY, community-driven roots of the hardcore scene. Good Charlotte singing “Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous,” mocking supposed “struggles” of well-to-do celebrities, fell on deaf ears since it came from a band with a large record contract and an expensive, studio-produced music video. Rallying against the “system” while making millions within it is an antithesis to the punk mindset. To quote Lars Kristiansen: “[Punk] should be sustained by self-contained financing, information, and standards.”<sup>11</sup> The band NOFX, for example, initially made a low-budget music video for “Stickin In My Eye” from their 1992 album *White Trash, Two Heebs and a Bean*; they claimed an honest intention of introducing more people to the genre but regretted the decision, purposefully refusing to make another music video until 2006’s “Seeing Double at the Triple Rock” off of *Wolves in Wolves’ Clothing*. In further punk snark, *White Trash* also features an ironic cover of Minor Threat’s “Straight Edge,” as NOFX makes no pretense of their heavy drug and alcohol use.<sup>12</sup> A final strange twist: the album’s original title was *White Trash, Two Kykes and a Spic*, and NOFX changed it – not from fear of a negative impact on sales, but because one band member’s family member found it offensive. Upsetting corporate overlords is not a problem and is in fact a sign of honesty and legitimacy in punk communities, whereas a respectful line can be drawn when something is in poor taste to one’s own family.

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<sup>11</sup> Kristiansen, 17.

<sup>12</sup> Those with strong constitution can see Jeff Alulis, *NOFX: The Hepatitis Bathtub and Other Stories* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2016) for further detail of the band’s antics.

Interestingly, while non-“sellout” bands avoid signing with major labels or creating music videos for mass consumption, they find a worthy vessel in the quickly developing medium of video games. More specifically, punk bands license their tracks to skateboarding video games, which is logical, given the skate-punk scene, particularly in Southern California. The Playstation game *Grind Session*, released in 2000, features tracks from NOFX and Black Flag, punk-influenced grunge band Sonic Youth, and tracks from hip hop artists and alternative rock acts. *Tony Hawk’s Pro Skater* (1999) includes tracks from the Dead Kennedys, the Suicidal Tendencies, the Suicide Machines, and the Vandals. *Tony Hawk’s Pro Skater 2* (2000) expands its punk repertoire, with contributions from Lagwagon, Bad Religion, Consumed, the Swingin’ Udders, and Millencolin. The inclusion of hip hop on these soundtracks is a conscious fusion of music genres that while different aesthetically still feature the same DIY effort and subversion of mainstream life, culture, and complacency.

In all, this time period, roughly 1985 to 2000, sees a spider-webbing of punk. The limits of the earlier hardcore bands get pushed to a breaking point at different spots of the musical spectrum. Hüsker Dü pivots to the alternative rock genre, grunge bands bring a punk influence to mainstream rock, and bands like Green Day and the Offspring infuse their music with pop sensibilities. From this, the genre of pop-punk emerges, almost completely devoid of any subversive themes, DIY elements, and pointed political messages. Fugazi and Refused, in completely different ways, borrow hardcore elements while adding depth and technical proficiency to the punk repertoire. All the while, punks of the early vanguard continue, unperturbed, and other punk artists arise, avoid much mainstream notice or success, and follow in the footsteps of their predecessors.

## CHAPTER 5

### PUNK POST-2000

After a few years of relative dormancy, a reinvigorated political punk scene resurfaced around 2000, coinciding with the election of George W. Bush and the subsequent U.S. invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. Pennywise reached moderate success with the 2001 release of *Land of the Free?* The album cover features a mass of heavily armed and armored riot police, with the image tinted through a deep red filter. This bears resemblance to the cover of MDC's self-titled debut, which is unsurprising, given how virulently anti-authoritarian the album's lyrical matter is. As a contemporary review from AllMusic notes: "Pennywise themselves are calling *Land of the Free?* 'a wake-up call,' aimed at the slumbering masses of America — an attempt to shake people out of their lethargy, and prod them into thinking about the world."<sup>1</sup> The album makes no mention of specific politicians, parties, or policies, and in this sense, anarchy seems to be the strongest motivation behind the album content. Rather than posit change within the system, the album calls for destruction of the system, here echoing sentiments of Crass. Still, the album advocates for personal agency, as in the track "It's Up to You," which asks: "Is it a crime to want things better for yourself? / How you wanna live is up to you, it's up to you / Is it so wrong you wanna make a difference? / Why I'd like to think there's no excuse." While the band released a commercial single and music video from the album, which could potentially be seen as selling out, they

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<sup>1</sup> Jo-Ann Green, "Review: *Pennywise – Land of the Free?*" *AllMusic*, 2001. <https://www.allmusic.com/album/mw0000588160> (accessed December 17, 2017).

chose the subversive track “F\*\*k Authority” to make a political statement. This too is a call to arms to an angry youth, preaching:

F\*\*k authority, silent majority  
Raised by the system, now it’s time to rise against them  
We’re sick of your treason, sick of your lies  
F\*\*k no, we won’t listen, we’re gonna open your eyes  
Frustration, domination, feel the rage of a new generation,  
We’re living, we’re dying, and we’re never gonna stop, stop trying.

The election of George W. Bush also pushed bands with only minimal political inclinations to take a hardline stance. NOFX, for instance, while wading occasionally in political waters with tracks like “Perfect Government” and “Murder the Government,” turned their 2003 *The War on Errorism* into a measured assault of the political situation in America. Its cover, with an illustrated crooked and tattered American flag and a cartoonish drawing of George W. Bush in clown makeup, gives an immediate impression of mockery and anger. The opening track however, “Separation of Church and Skate,” sets the tone as an indictment of pop influence consuming the traditional punk ethos. To this end, it is reactionary to the commercial success of pop-punk artists in the late 1990s and an encroachment on “true” punk territory. The album opens with a spoken word sample of a father and children, before a record scratch noise segues into a blistering guitar riff:

Father: Hey Kids!  
Kids: Hey Dad!  
Father: What do you want to do today?  
Kids: I don’t know.  
Father: You wanna go to the matinee?  
Kids: No!  
Father: You wanna go to the amusement park?  
Kids: No!  
Father: Do you wanna go to the punk rock show?  
Kids: Yeah! Let’s go to the punk rock show!

In the song, the band asks: “when did punk rock become so safe? / When did the scene become a joke? / The kids who used to live for beer and speed / now want their fries and coke,” and pleads: “I want conflict, I want dissent / I want the scene to represent / our hatred of authority / our fight against complacency / Stop singing songs about girls and love / you killed the owl, you freed the dove.” This is a call to “reclaim” punk and reassert its opposition to authority and its celebration of alternative lifestyles, such as drug use and fighting.

The song “Idiots are Taking Over” lambasts complacency and ignorance. The lyrics suggest that technological developments and corporate and religious pandering have enabled stupidity to flourish as entertainment dominates the American lifestyle: “The industrial revolution has flipped the bitch on evolution / The benevolent and wise are being thwarted, ostracized, what a bummer / The world keeps getting dumber / Insensitivity is standard, and faith is being fancied over reason.” The song’s urgency is expressed in an opening solo bass riff (that in itself is atypical), followed by pounding drums and guitar chords. The volume softens and the beat relaxes in the song’s bridge, however, bringing focus to a lyric passage expressing frustration: “There’s no point for democracy when ignorance is celebrated / Political scientists get the same one vote as some Arkansas inbred / Majority rule don’t work in mental institutions / Sometimes the smallest softest voice carries the grand biggest solutions.” The music immediately thrusts back into its opening speed and aggression, with a biting stanza: “What are we left with? A nation of God-fearing pregnant nationalists / who feel it’s their duty to populate the homeland / pass on traditions, how-to-get-ahead religions / and prosperity via simpleton culture.” Lead singer Fat Mike repeats the titular line “the idiots are taking over,” as guitarist Eric Melvin screams wildly in the background.

“Franco Un-American,” on the contrary, is a song of personal awakening from complacency and ignorance. Fat Mike sings of his discovery of authors and musicians that exposed him to ideas with which he was previously unfamiliar.

I never looked around, never second-guessed  
Then I read some Howard Zinn now I'm always depressed  
And now I can't sleep from years of apathy  
All because I read a little Noam Chomsky

I'm eating vegetation, 'cause of Fast Food Nation  
I'm wearing uncomfortable shoes 'cause of globalization  
I'm watching Michael Moore expose the awful truth  
I'm listening to Public Enemy and Reagan Youth<sup>2</sup>

This reference to Reagan Youth, whose music has been examined above, shows Fat Mike's familiarity with and continuation of a punk legacy. His mention of Public Enemy helps enshrine an intrinsic alliance with and respect for hip hop, another form of music created by disenfranchised individuals rallying against an oppressive authority. The song continues: “I see no world peace 'cause of zealous armed forces / I eat no breath mints 'cause they're from de-hoofed horses / Now I can't believe, what an absolute failure / the President's laughing 'cause we voted for Nader.” While “Separation of Church and Skate” asks for punk's return to rejection of authority, the political stance here is murkier. The latter passage specifically references the 2000 U.S. presidential election, where Democratic hopeful Al Gore lost the state of Florida (and thus the presidency), by a small number of votes.

Meanwhile, Green Party candidate Ralph Nader received a few thousand votes, swinging the

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<sup>2</sup> Fat Mike crams a number of potent references in this short passage. Howard Zinn (1922-2010) was a historian, activist, and professor, perhaps best known for his 1980 book *A People's History of the United States* (New York: Harper & Row), a quasi-socialist retelling of U.S. history from marginalized persons and communities. Noam Chomsky (b. 1928) is an anarcho-syndicalist linguist and philosopher. *Fast Food Nation*, by Eric Schlosser (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001) as a *The Jungle*-type investigation of unethical corporate practices in the fast food industry. The mention of filmmaker Michael Moore references Moore's short-lived TV series, *The Awful Truth*, a satirical skewering of U.S. government and business practices. Public Enemy is a hip-hop group formed in 1986, notable for songs like “Fight the Power,” rallying against oppression.

election in favor of Bush. In condemning this, Fat Mike implicitly supports a “lesser of two evils” mentality toward the presidential vote, advocating for the democratic establishment.

This album came one year after Fat Mike founded [www.punkvoter.com](http://www.punkvoter.com), a website dedicated to educating punks on political topics and encouraging them to register to vote.<sup>3</sup>

The site’s homepage displays their M.O.:

WHO we are: Punkvoter is a grassroots coalition of punk bands, punk labels, and most importantly, punk fans coming together to form a united front in opposition to the dangerous, deadly, and destructive policies of George Bush Jr.

WHAT we plan to do: Punkvoter seeks to inform, inspire, engage, and help turn the millions of punk fans into a political force to be reckoned with.

WHY we need to do it: The current administration is out of control, spending billions on a disastrous, preemptive war in Iraq; passing hundreds of billions of dollars in debt on to future generations (in other words, US!); and waging an unprecedented attack on civil rights and personal freedoms.

YOU can help: By signing up and joining the coalition we become stronger; and the more of us that stand together, the more we will be heard. We got the numbers, so sign up!

This is a concrete attempt at encouraging real political action, and it is a greater step into activism than mere lyrical and musical proselytizing. The site raised specific issues rather than the vague ideas of rebellion found in songs, and it is an organized and collaborative effort: the site content features guest columns from punk artists, downloadable flyers, stickers, banners, and cartoons. It is a merging of bands and community members on a large scale, a reality in the internet age that would have been far more difficult in an era of pen-and-ink zines. However, like *The War on Errorism*, Punkvoter is geared more toward opposition toward Bush at all costs than to support of any more progressive candidate.

Fat Mike continued his opposition to Bush, especially as the 2004 election drew near, with two compilation albums, *Rock Against Bush* vols. 1 and 2, with portions of the proceeds

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<sup>3</sup> The website was shut down in 2008, but as of May 2018, a snapshot of the site is available at <http://www.punkvoter.com/> (accessed May 6, 2018).

used for voter registration drives, particularly in swing states. The compilations, again a collaborative effort, feature contributions from a variety of bands, from Descendents and Pennywise, to pop-punk bands like Sum 41 and New Found Glory. The compilations drew criticism, proving that there are no universal political punk truths. In fact, some conservative punks, including Bobby Steele, an original member of the Misfits, released a rival compilation titled *Crush Kerry*.<sup>4</sup> Anger from the farther left emerged as well, as Fat Mike balked at Propagandhi's request for a brief liner note: "This message was not brought to you by George Soros," billionaire democratic donor, resulting in some squabbling between the bands and their fans.<sup>5</sup>

Lagwagon, another band whose lyrics revolve primarily around suburban dystopia and shy away from political discourse, penned an indictment against Americans rallying mindlessly for war following the terror attacks of 9/11. The song, off of the 2003 album *Blaze*, speaks of the terror attacks as something inevitable, resulting from the role America has taken in policing the world, but warns against blind, craven retaliation.<sup>6</sup>

I knew that this day would have to come  
Wailing on the wall, watching giants fall  
I know there's a message to receive  
Written in debris, its meanings hard to see  
The loss of innocence means nothing in the new world  
All our hands are red, everyone is guilty now

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.discogs.com/Various-Crush-Kerry-A-Conservative-Punk-Compilation-Volume-1/release/10300062> (accessed May 26, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> Aubin Paul, "Fat Mike/Propagandhi Clarify Situation [Updated]," *punknews.org*: <https://www.punknews.org/article/8664/fat-mike-propagandhi-clarify-situation-updated> (accessed May 26, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> Lagwagon, *Blaze*, Fat Wreck Chords, 2003.

The song highlights the average person's gut reaction while following news reports, demanding immediate retaliation, with the same type of politically charged violence that wrought the attacks in the first place:

Another idiot glued to the box  
Frozen to the screen, scared to turn it off  
Quiet shock gives way to righteousness  
Rattle on the bars, vengeance will be ours  
Fanatics on their knees pray for a swift and just revenge  
Become what they condemn, mirror-image men

All of a sudden, outward displays of patriotism were rampant, and although terroristic attacks occur with regularity throughout the world, this brought that reality terrifyingly close to home:

Hands across America, let's catch contact hysteria  
Our flag erects from broken homes, July 4 for evermore  
Colors of democracy fly from every SUV  
The misspelled bumper stickers here, where did all the honor students go?  
Numbers on the news, this time with familiar names  
This time on familiar ground, this reality in your back yard

The song, as in NOFX's "Idiots are Taking Over," slows and softens, taking a brief respite, a musical depiction of taking a breath and collecting one's thoughts [2:30-2:40]. "They say the party never stops / I know we cannot get off." With this realization, the song then thrusts back into its lightning tempo, with its final lyrics condemning those in power who dupe the masses, through fear and religion, to support the ongoing war:

Another idiot comes on the box  
Breathing privileged air, preaching to the fair  
Rallying one muscle under god  
Leading on the cheer, leaning on their fears  
The state of ignorance means nothing to the faithful  
God is with us now; they disregard the world beyond the wall

Against Me!, formed in 1997 by lead singer Thomas Gabriel (now Laura Jane Grace, after coming out as transgender), emerged to considerable underground popularity. After signing onto Fat Wreck Chords, the band released *Against Me! as the Eternal Cowboy*.<sup>7</sup> The guitars on the album are gritty, and the vocals are screamed—sometimes pitched, sometimes pitchless, but always unyielding. Still, the album backs off from the hyper-aggression of more hardcore punk. There are no double-time drum beats, and the songs are in-your-face, but also catchy. “Cliché Guevara” with its mocking reference to the Argentine revolutionary, and “Rice and Bread,” are songs about personal relationships tinged with political inflections. “Sink, Florida, Sink,” and “Cavalier Eternal,” however, are more folk-influenced and mostly acoustic, following the same vein as the band’s eponymous acoustic EP released two years prior. Of course, as has been noted, particularly in the reggae excursions of Bad Brains, punk bands frequently make marriages between seemingly disparate genres.

Canadian group F\*\*\*ed Up formed in 2001, and they avoid the aggressive anti-authoritarianism of the American bands discussed above, as evidenced in their 2011 album *David Comes to Life*.<sup>8</sup> *David Comes to Life* is a meta-narrative concept album featuring a main character who realizes he is part of a story, and through the complex web that the album weaves, he confronts life, death, love, authority, and factory work, the latter of which is easily seen as representative of the working class in general. The album’s lyrical matter calls to mind Hüsker Dü, while the music itself is straightforward hard rock. The guitar chords are simple and heavily distorted, the songs are up-tempo but not frenetic, and the vocals are brutal.

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<sup>7</sup> Against Me!, *Against Me! as the Eternal Cowboy*, Fat Wreck Chords, 2003.

<sup>8</sup> F\*\*\*ed Up, *David Comes to Life*, Matador Records, 2011.

Gogol Bordello takes punk to a different direction, with Ukrainian-born lead singer Eugene Hütz inflecting the genre with his own gypsy roots. Violin and accordion parts abound on their 2005 album *Gypsy Punks: Underdog World Strike*, as do lyrical themes of alienation and fond remembrances of a different, simpler culture.<sup>9</sup> “Not a Crime,” with a spoken word sample in Russian; indecipherable Ukrainian screaming; a gypsy-like violin line (Example 10); a repeated plea to “drop the charges;” and lyrics like “in the old time it was not a crime” create a hectic jumble of different cultural experiences, anchored in a punk nonchalance and defiance. “Immigrant Punk” also expounds upon the immigrant experience in the punk subculture, and “Start Wearing Purple” adopts a sing-along, folk-like refrain, with Hütz again breaking into Ukrainian mid-song.

Boundaries blur, however, as bands appear with clear punk influence, but mostly devoid of any political inclinations. Early November, Thursday, Saves the Day, Bayside, and Fall Out Boy sing mostly “songs about girls and love,” which would be derided by Fat Mike and others. As genres are nebulous, arguments could be made that some of these are still punk bands, but the ties to early punk acts grow tenuous. There are musical differences as well. Thursday attacks corporate culture and the military industrial complex in *Full Collapse* and *War All the Time*, and while the songs are heavy, they are slower, more drawn out, and boast more complex structures, as in “Jet Black New Year,” a nearly-five minute track with key and tempo changes.<sup>10</sup> Saves the Day, who has covered punk songs like the Clash’s “Clash City Rockers,” the Descendents’ “Cheer,” and the Dead Boys’ “Sonic Reducer” owe a debt to these bands, but departs from them musically and lyrically, with the saccharine

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<sup>9</sup> Gogol Bordello, *Gypsy Punks: Underdog World Strike*, SideOneDummy Records, 2005.

<sup>10</sup> Thursday, *Five Stories Falling*, Victory, 2002.

Example 10 “Not a Crime” violin motif (modified with subtle variations throughout) [0:40-0:47, for example]. © 2005 SideOneDummy Records. Transcription by the author.



sweet *Stay What You Are* and the trippy, Beatles-inspired *In Reverie*.<sup>11</sup>

In extra-musical aspects, punk scenes continue to thrive underground. Basement shows and small venues still house fledgling groups seeking community similar to the previous generations of punks. Black Hawk Hancock and Michael Lorr describe hardcore punk basement shows in Chicago, where activities such as moshing, stage-diving, and spatial role-reversals (e.g., crowd members coming into the performing area and band members going out into the crowd) break down the barrier between band and the audience, fostering a connection. As one of their interviewees describes: “Being right next to the band, on the floor, makes me feel like they care who I am. ... I’m not just a punk in a crowd who they are making money off of. I’m part of the scene, and after their set, they remember who I am and we can have a real conversation about the set and the lyrics and the politics of punk.”<sup>12</sup> The musical aesthetics, the politics, and the sense of a tight-knit hardcore community still exist together.

While bands continue to play local shows in small venues, festivals are visible public bastions of the genre. Though the idea of a punk festival may seem counterintuitive, Andy

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<sup>11</sup> Saves the Day, *In Reverie*, Dreamworks, 2003.

<sup>12</sup> Hancock and Lorr, 340-43.

Bennett argues that the festival is an important trans-local scene for the punk community that unifies young and older fans of the genre across large geographic spans.<sup>13</sup> Bands like NOFX, Bad Religion, and the Descendents continue to tour and play at festivals, three decades after their inception. Today, they play alongside younger hardcore bands from the 90s and 2000s, post-hardcore groups, and in large-scale festivals like the Warped Tour, alongside pop-punk and “sell-out” bands like Blink 182 and the Offspring.

This is all to show that punk music does not exist in a vacuum. The genre is fueled by varying individuals and communities with their own tastes and allegiances. Bands popular on the East Coast of the United States may be unpopular on the West Coast, and bands popular in Canada may be unknown in the United States and the United Kingdom. How these different communities express their tastes and communicate their opinions and preferences, and thus create support networks for bands, record labels, and fans, is worthy of its own investigation. In particular, zines (from “magazine” and “fanzine”) have been essential to the dissemination of punk music and ideals, and a primary source analysis of a selection of zines provides insight into the inner workings of punk communities.

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<sup>13</sup> Bennett, 230-231.

## CHAPTER 6

### ZINES

Zines are a microcosm of the punk subculture as a whole. They are made by independent, DIY publishers, distributed either for free or very cheaply, allowing for their consumption even by the most impoverished. They are irreverent, often offensive, and they espouse varying political ideas, which cannot always be easily classified in a typical left/right dichotomy. Their coarse language and informality serve to erase barriers between the writer and the reader, on one hand promoting unity between those in the subculture, but on the other delivering something that would not be easily consumed by outside audiences. They feature blatantly anti-capitalistic stances as well as stances against governmental control. Also, as punk musicians make statements against marginalization of the average person, these zines offer information and bring attention to other impoverished and marginalized peoples around the world. All this being said, there is no central zine or punk “headquarters.” Zines at times present contradictory views while still reporting from within the same overarching subculture.

Zine authors even willingly call out perceived hypocrisy and breaking of unspoken codes among their readers, to police the scene. These are the same subtle oppositions and points of contention that make it difficult to pin down an overarching and universally accepted definition of punk music. The general idea of what makes up this music and culture, however, is more readily ascertained when one surveys the zines this community produces.

For punk to proliferate, with its resistance against mainstream media and conventional circuits of cultural consumption, the scene’s DIY element is crucial. The

creation and distribution of zines (short for magazine or fanzine) has been essential in spreading punk culture. These often crude (in both creation and content) zines are a labor of love, sold at a low cost (\$1-\$3) and keeping with the punk tenet of aiming to help the disenfranchised and avoid consumer exploitation.

As one would expect, these zines contain advertisements and promotions for album releases from punk artists. In continuing the feedback loop between performers and fans, advertisements from independent record labels (like Fat Mike's Fat Wreck Chords) are prevalent: the labels support the zines by buying advertising space, allowing the zine makers to afford the cost of production, and fans in turn are updated on new releases and buy them to support the musicians. These advertisements are rarely sleek and polished, represented by a full-page ad from Canadian independent label Hourglass Records that bluntly describes one of its albums for sale as "Fast, aggressive punk, lots of harmonies, NO BULLSHIT." This straightforward and vulgar approach to promotion speaks to an audience wary of polished, manufactured corporate advertisements.

Zines provide reviews both of albums and of shows, and these are also frequently written in an informal and often conversational manner, complete with spelling and grammatical errors, like the following review of The Forgotten Rebels' 1979 release

*Tomorrow Belongs to Us* [all sic]:

This band has had more of an impact on me music wise than any other. First hearing there classic record I'm in love with system. These Hamilton , Ontario boys can easily take place of being one of the best Canadian and just general punk bands of all time. Witty lyrics, catchy choruses and singalong anthems taking a jab at political and social issues with a comical note and enough cheesy songs about girls to give the

Ramones a run for there money. What more can you ask for , track down this and there other records.<sup>14</sup>

This casual, seemingly lazy and un-proofread prose is an extension of a contrarian punk attitude. Ignoring grammatical rules is itself a statement: no corporate magazine or mainstream missive would dare leave such an unruly mess on its pages. This provides a textual parallel to the rough and unrefined edges of punk music itself.

Show listings are occasionally presented in zines as well; particularly in the pre-internet era, and without mainstream channels of dissemination, these provide a way to keep fans informed about when and where punk artists are playing. Many zines offer interviews, often with smaller, local acts, and again replete with informality and typos, perpetuating the contrarian attitude of much of the subgenre. Many of these interviews contain questions regarding politics. In Vancouver-based *Agree to Disagree* #4 (the cover of which is immediately political, with a cartoon punk lighting an American flag on fire), the Canadian band Reset is interviewed. Some questions the band is asked include: “What are your thoughts on us humans tearing apart the earth in the name of greed, do you think we’ll ever be able to stop this?”; “Are you guys involved in any political organizations of [sic] volunteer anywhere...?”; “What do you think of corporations making money off playing your video?”; and “The mainstream media keeps telling us Quebec wants to separate from Canada who’s at fault for wanting them to do this...?”<sup>15</sup> The wording of these questions immediately and with zero subtlety reveals a political agenda. The questions invoke human and corporate greed, the health of the earth, the idea of Quebecois sovereignty, and political

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<sup>14</sup> Jeffery Ogla McCloy, *Hardcore Hotline* (Kamploops, BC: n.p., n.d.), n. pag.

<sup>15</sup> Andy Gronberg, ed., *Agree to Disagree* 4 (Vancouver: n.p. 1997), n. pag.

and volunteer affiliation, but through a clearly biased lens. The feedback loop between the reader and the musician strengthens. The reader feels like part of an enlightened group outside of the mainstream, while the ideas they already have are repeated back to them, validating and strengthening them, furthering their loyalty to the punk community.

Not every interview and review delves into politics, but in these cases as well there still exists an appeal to an audience of outsiders, with no regard for political correctness. The interviews are informal and the interviewers themselves are clearly amateurs. In the Belgian zine *Troep Van Morgen* (which translates to “troops of tomorrow”), an interview with Bad Preachers asks, “The lyrics of the tape are mainly about girls and sex. I guess none of you is married yet? Do you also have songs about serious topics?” The response is as follows:

Age drummer = 31; married, two children  
Age guitar = 29; married, no children (one is coming!)  
Age bass = 18; horny as hell !!  
So you guessed none of us is married hé ?!  
Serious topics ? Music is supposed to be fun no ?<sup>16</sup>

Following this is a review of the Bad Preachers’ *Fear no Beer* tape, complete with raunchy track titles like: “Pussy Hunter,” “Fire in My Pants,” and “(Courtney Love) Ain’t Worth a F\*\*\*.”

In other cases, not merely apolitical, but rather anti-political stances can be found. In the British street punk scene, for instance, whose bent is less political than other varieties of punk, the focus is less on politics and more on having fun. In *Oi! 95*, an interviewer asks the group Oxymoron: “Are you a political band?” They respond: “We try to leave politics out of the band and no one of Oxymoron are extremely right or left. Politics are to blame for what

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<sup>16</sup> Kris V.P., *Troep Van Morgen* (Turnhout, BE: n.p., March 1996), n. pag.

has become of the movement cause it splits the youth. Our lyrics are about everyday life, fun, fear and things that get you f\*\*\*ed up, just about being a punk or a skin. F\*\*\* politics.” As with the above political interview from *Agree to Disagree*, leading questions are asked with an expected answer that reaffirms what the reader already feels.

Zines also target topics far afield from music, and this is key to fostering a punk subculture that exists as more than just a musical genre. The aforementioned issue of *Agree to Disagree* contains articles on other, diverse topics. An article called “Bear Watch,” by a Bear Watch Campaign coordinator, with its look at the plight of wild bears in Canada, speaks to issues of nature conservancy and the cold-bloodedness of political and corporate entities in the face of the environment. Also in the issue is the article “NATO on Notice,” critiquing the massive organization and its proliferation of military weapons of destruction. This article is authored not by one of the zine makers, but by co-editor of the *Nuclear Resister Newsletter*, which has gone digital and still operates online as of the time of this writing.<sup>17</sup> This article is not written in the same informal style as the reviews and interviews, beginning starkly but professionally:

A new phase of anti-nuclear civil disobedience has begun.

Over the next several months, nonviolent direct action for nuclear disarmament will be defended in the courts of seven nations, as part of an international citizens’ campaign to enforce last year’s International Court of Justice (the World Court, or ICJ) opinion on nuclear weapons. The ICJ Advisory Opinion of July 8, 1996 declared the threat or use of nuclear weapons to be generally contrary to international humanitarian law.<sup>18</sup>

As insular as the punk community can seem, this article proves the importance of outside sources and authorities on extra-musical topics from like-minded thinkers. The fact that this

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.nukeresister.org/> (accessed April 30, 2018).

<sup>18</sup> Gronberg, n. pag.

is a more nuanced and formal essay is an acquiescence to the currency of authoritative and formally structured writing, but only insofar as it promotes a message contrary to governmental and military control.

An issue of *One-Eyed Jack: Voices from the Street* contains an in-depth article titled “Victims of Geography,” with diary entries by independent filmmakers Doug Aubrey and Alan Robertson. The entries have nothing to do with punk music, but rather the filmmakers’ travels through marginalized communities, “the idea being to film different aspects of alternative culture in towns and cities across Europe, starting in war-torn Yugoslavia and ending in the wilds of northern Scotland.”<sup>19</sup> Through these entries, the filmmakers highlight injustice in inequality around the world, urging a sense of understanding and fostering a feeling of solidarity with other marginalized communities. This echoes general punk concerns about alienation and indifference from those in power, and the resultant disenfranchisement of many average, working-class people. The article’s closing entry states this with an impassioned plea:

Crossing borders is something that we can all do, like changing TV channels. Something that we should all do – even if it’s just in our imagination or on the internet – to stop the kind of shit that’s been going down out here from continuing. In the end it takes brave people like [the people we’ve encountered] to prove that we really aren’t victims, but can really be heroes.<sup>20</sup>

The collective pronoun “we” in this sense connects the writers with the people they have encountered, as well as the reader, in opposition to forces of oppression.

Sometimes brief comics are used to convey ideas in zines, adding a visual element to the publications. These may be humorous or may merely serve as a different way to make a

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<sup>19</sup> George Marshall, ed., *One Eyed Jack: Voices from the Street* (Lockerbie: S.T. Publishing, Spring 1997), 12.

<sup>20</sup> Marshall, 15.

point. There is a comic in the aforementioned issue of *Agree to Disagree* that voices criticism of the construction of freeways, referring to pollution and marginalization of neighborhoods in West Oakland, San Francisco, the South Bronx, and New Jersey, all of which came about after the construction of freeways. The comic reads:

I live in a little house underneath the Macarthur Freeway Interchange. Anyone who says, “putting highways through urban neighborhoods is a good idea,” needs their head examined. Imagine living under the constant droning noise of a freeway – day in and day out – having your house shake as big trucks and buses rumble by... or having your windowsills and porches covered with black tire dust and your ground filled with lead. Forget vegetable gardening near a freeway, it’s just a ticket to slow lead poisoning. An examination of urban areas shows how freeways have destroyed neighborhoods. In West Oakland California, the Cypress Freeway took an already marginal area and turned it into a ghetto, polluting it and cutting it off from the rest of the city. Freeways in San Francisco did the same thing to Hunters Point. The South Bronx in New York City... same story. Northern New Jersey!!<sup>21</sup>

The comic concludes ominously: “Don’t let your neighborhood be devoured by... THE FREEWAY MONSTER.” The author provides a personal appeal in the opening sentence, makes a provocative statement in the next, and provides argumentative points accompanied by drawings. The bent is clearly political, and in line with the punk ethos, it speaks up for the disenfranchised, residents (presumably in low-income neighborhoods) who are displaced or whose lives were at least significantly disrupted by the creation of urban freeways.

In addition to serious pleas, a snarky, humoristic guise permeates other aspects and sections of zines, often with pointed critiques of capitalism and mindless consumer culture. In an issue of *Hardcore Hotline*, there is a photo of four black youths walking past a man and a woman in full Klu Klux Klan regalia. The text below is a non sequitur, titled “Help Save the Corn Dog” [all sic]:

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<sup>21</sup> Gronberg, n. pag.

Ever since the pop food culture explosion, of the 60's. The number of free roaming corn dogs in North America has dropped from 58,000 to 1500 corn dogs. Approximately 10 corn dogs can be scraped and squashed out of one fully grown corn dog. ... So what our plan is, is to have corn dog packages that currently come with 3 corn dogs, reduced to 2... This way it will take us about 5 more years to consume every corn dog. And in doing so, relieving our conscience of the ever barring burden, of complete annihilation of one of man's greatest cross breeding creations, the corn dog.<sup>22</sup>

The corn dog is a bland, unhealthy, and heavily processed item that highlights mindless consumption and unnecessary production, and the over-the-top praise and concern for "one of man's greatest cross breeding creations" mocks this. This provides a humorous but disturbing juxtaposition with the photo above it, a stark illustration of the very real and ongoing problem of racism in society.

Zines create interweaving networks amongst themselves by reviewing other zines. The summer 1996 issue of U.K. zine *Control!*—whose cover boldly asserts: "FREEDOM? THERE AIN'T NO F\*\*\*ING FREEDOM! The Truth Behind The UK's Legacy Of Lies...." —contains two pages devoted to reviews of other zines. This section is labeled bluntly "Mr. Bastard Reviews" and begins, "As the word of the mighty Mr. Bastard spreads throughout the land, more and more trash comes into the mailbox for me to send worthlessly kicking into oblivion!" The rating system used for the zines is a comparison to alcohol content of different beers:

- '5C' – Stella Artois (5.2%)
- '4C' – Carlsberg (4.2%)
- '3C' – Hoffmeister (3.6%)
- '2C' – Royal Standard (2.6%)
- '1C' – Kalibre (0%)
- '0C' – French Wine!!<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> McCloy, n. pag.

<sup>23</sup> *Control!* (Dagenham, UK: n.p., Summer 1996), 18.

The punk ethos and irreverence permeates everything, as the typical idea of a review is subverted: the reviewer is a “Mr. Bastard” who refers to submissions as trash to be kicked. Instead of a traditional star rating or a simple numerical rating, alcoholic debauchery is proudly displayed, in the comparison to beer. The placement of French wine, a more bourgeois beverage of consumption, at the bottom of the rating system is an additional level of snide commentary.

The reviews themselves contain information on pricing and mailing addresses, and the zines reviewed are diverse: there are publications from elsewhere in the U.K., San Francisco, Buffalo, Belgium, and Singapore. The reviews vary in length and content, as the review of Czech zine *Bulldog* simply states: “Czech Skin zine with a SHARP front that makes no sense to me! Speak English so we can read the lingo, please. ‘3C.’”<sup>24</sup> Mr. Bastard deploys the full range of ratings, from 0C-5C in this issue’s reviews, which shows he is neither universally effusive in praise nor universally negative. Even through the sarcasm and irreverence, there is a desire to be authentic and retain integrity, neither praising nor being cynical of everything. There is thus a discretionary attitude even as zine publishers look at their peers from diverse communities around the world.

Opinion articles in a section entitled “Rants” in a 1998 issue of Kansas City-based *Upstart* advocate for vigilant self-policing within punk communities. Tim Nord’s editorial “A.C.A.B.: All cops are bastards...” recounts a run-in that he, a skinhead punk, has with another skin, which turns into a violent altercation. The other skin flees the scene and goes to

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<sup>24</sup> *Controll*, 18.

a police officer for protection. Nord's stance on the issue is virulently anti-police, and he writes his feelings of rage and betrayal, as if a sacred punk code has been broken:

The skinhead is a troublemaker, an upstart... Get a few brews in us then it's glory time, we expect those people to call the cops. When another skinhead calls the cops, that's a violation of everything held f\*\*\*in' sacred. A skinhead should solve his own problems, stand up for himself and his friends. At least take a beating like a man; not rely on the law to back his shit up. How can anyone who claims to be a skin hold his head up after he has done something as weak as call in for police protection and justice? What ever happened to 'there's no justice, it's just us...'<sup>25</sup>

A distinction is made between the skins and the community at large, where one expects an average citizen to seek the aid of the police in an altercation, while skins are expected to work out differences among themselves. The collectivist mindset of the community sees it as an unforgivable act to seek aid from the police, even if the consequence of the altercation is a thorough beating. Here, the concept of a punk "code" supersedes the written law, even in the case of violent assault.

The next rant in the zine is "Being pissed off at 'sellouts' because you didn't think of it first. Waahhh!" and it takes aim at hypocritical tendencies among local punks. Author Jane Charlotte points out that many in the punk community criticize artists who "sell-out" (by seeking mainstream and even corporate support, often changing one's sound to appeal to broader audiences) yet refuse to support local artists financially. The author rhetorically asks "Who in the hell do you think pays for the band? You don't really think the bar owner is shelling it out of his own pocket, do you?" and she follows this with the accusation that local punks at shows "would rather save [their] money and spend it on cheap beer before the show (by the way, most cheap beer is manufactured by some really big corporation that you are

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<sup>25</sup> Timothy Nord., ed., *Upstart* no 2 (Kansas City, MO: Top Ten Productions, August 1998), 7.

supposedly so much against).”<sup>26</sup> The implication is that punks who act as if they support the scene will purchase alcohol with impunity, yet take reticence when spending a fraction of that amount of money on a cover charge, album, or piece of merchandise. The fact that alcohol is produced by large corporations and this music is produced by local, struggling artists further highlights the hypocrisy between what punks preach and what they actually practice.

Because of punk’s far-flung presence around the globe, it follows that there is no single punk “community.” Rather, punk fan bases exist as a network of communities. Punk fandom acts as a subculture which, much like the music itself, has different variations, allegiances, and political views. Artists in the genre inform this subculture, which in turn digests and responds to said artists, in terms of critiques, reviews, and purchasing of albums and merchandise. Perhaps because of the punk scene’s avowed DIY element as well as its desire to extoll the voices of the disenfranchised, there is a feedback loop between fans and musicians, and zines are an important nexus for this feedback.

The analysis hereto centers predominantly around white, Anglo punk groups, which is unsurprising given the agents of the genre’s birth and proliferation. However, as punk is nebulous and not uniform, and given punk’s proclivity toward rebellion against dominant cultural forces, punk does indeed exist in other spheres. Feminism, LGBT rights, and racial injustice are issues that appear in punk bands and communities, and even youths in foreign cultures turn to punk as a sign of rebellion against their own governments. What remains, then, is a survey of politics in punk in these traditionally marginalized communities and spaces.

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<sup>26</sup> Nord, 8.

## CHAPTER 7

### PUNK IN MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES

As is evident by now, providing a concise definition of punk that satisfies everyone is impossible. In a movement comprised of local scenes with less central authority and fewer concrete connections among people and places, innumerable ideological and musical differences arise, and they span a wide range. A coagulation of ideologies, attitudes, and manners of dress comprise a nebulous cloud of “punk,” with overlaps and fuzzy edges. While vaguely anarcho-leftist political beliefs are described most often in this writing and elsewhere, it would be impossible to discount the importance of, for example, British street punk, with its at times wholly apolitical and at times fervently nationalistic (in some cases brazenly fascist) messages, to the genre as a whole. However, if one accepts that the coexistence (and at times contradiction) of varying political and musical threads do not negate each other, but instead form sub-styles of punk, then in this discussion of punk as a predominantly white and male phenomenon occurring in the United Kingdom and United States, it becomes easier to understand the varying currents of punk that exist in marginalized communities and around the world.

#### **Punk and Race**

That punk musicians and fans are predominantly white is undeniable. And while the all-black band Bad Brains was an important catalyst of early hardcore music, they are nonetheless an outlier. There are varying explanations for this racial disparity, including

general cultural differences between black and white Americans in the decades following the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Scholar David Ensminger notes this with citations of interviews with members of the mixed-race punk band Scream, from Washington, D.C. The band's white singer proclaims, "Blacks aren't exposed to it. The only exposure they get is from the media. It's all twisted and distorted ... I think it's just a prime example of this whole country, it's basically just as racist as when the *Emancipation Proclamation* was first signed."<sup>1</sup> The argument is that even with the ending of slavery and segregation, racism still existed and erected a cultural barrier between blacks and whites. In a separate interview, the band's bassist, Skeeter, elaborated on being black in the hardcore punk scene: "It's different. You notice it every time you walk into a town. There's always some sort of hesitation. I feel a certain pressure, there's a block there, a wall." While punk bands and fans often preach the rejection of authority and oppression along with the glorification of the marginalized, reality paints a darker picture. Physical and cultural divides separate black and white Americans, with less exposure of African Americans to punk—and hostility should they attempt to assimilate into the scene. African-American Reggie Rector, late guitarist of Secret Hate, answered that other African Americans "are more into Michael Jackson," when asked in an interview why there are not more African Americans in punk bands. Bandmate Kevin Roach followed with, "There's pressure not to be, if you hang out with a bunch of Crypt Town guys, they don't want you getting a Mohawk, or wearing a kilt."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David Ensminger, "Coloring Between the Lines of Punk and Hardcore: From Absence to Black Punk Power," *Postmodern Culture* 20 no. 2 (January 2010), <https://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed November 11, 2016), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Ensminger, 12.

At times, entering the punk scene comes with the rejection of one's own blackness. Ensminger continues with a quote from Karla Duplantier (known as "Mad Dog"), drummer of early Los Angeles punk band the Controllers, where she bluntly asserts she is a "white man trapped in a black woman's body. You have to print that and if people don't get it, well then, f\*\*k them."<sup>3</sup>

This clear line of separation and hostility is more perplexing when one considers punk artists' infatuation with Jamaican ska and reggae. 2 Tone and third wave ska are both genres that borrow heavily from Jamaican ska and reggae with their inclusion of brass instruments, walking bass lines, and off-beat guitar strumming.<sup>4</sup> The Clash spent time in Jamaica, and reggae influence is palpable throughout *London Calling*. Stiff Little Fingers perform a punk cover of Bunny Wailer's "Roots, Radics, Rockers and Reggae" on their 1981 album *Go For It*. Coco Fusco makes sense of the connection, stating that "the third-world DIY approach to creating the reggae sound was something ... that the punks could relate to, as most of them had no formal music training."<sup>5</sup> This is logical and posits a notion of kinship between mostly white punk musicians and black ska and reggae artists, as both groups share a DIY attitude and create subversive music that rallies against authority. However, Fusco also argues cultural appropriation and consumption cannot "substitute for equitable exchange," and that white co-opting of Jamaican culture may even unintentionally strengthen Anglo "mass-cultural dominance," and "symbolic capital by means of commodification,

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<sup>3</sup> Ensminger, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Examples of 2 Tone ska bands (predominantly a British phenomenon) include the Specials and the Selectors. Examples of third wave ska bands (predominantly American) include Less Than Jake, Catch 22, and the Aquabats.

<sup>5</sup> Ensminger, 5.

while exposing undercurrents of political, cultural, and linguistic control, as long as white bands take from, rather than trade with, their black peers and forefathers.”<sup>6</sup> The punk consumption and repackaging of ska and reggae, despite well-meaning intentions, becomes an element of white cultural hegemony, as long as there continues to be a distinct barrier between white and black participation in punk communities.

### **Punk and Gender**

In addition to being a predominantly white musical culture, the punk scene is also male-dominated. In the same way that there is a palpable barrier between white and black punk artists and fans, there is a divide between male and female. With punk music’s testosterone-driven aggression, this divide is not surprising, yet female punks do exist. As with black punks, however, there is a degree of hostility and antagonism.

Rebecca Daugherty gives context for popular music’s hypermasculinity, even in pre-punk music:

In 1963, at the height of the girl groups’ popularity, female artists recorded 32 percent of records on the year-end singles chart. By 1969 only 6 percent of the year-end singles were by groups with female vocalists. Despite the moderate success of women in folk and the strong pro-woman statements of some female soul artists (such as Aretha Franklin’s “R-E-S-P-E-C-T”), the mainstream of rock was often extremely offensive toward women. Songs like the Rolling Stones’ “Stupid Girl” and “Under My Thumb” created a culture of hypermasculinity as the standard in rock. As a result, the few women who, like Janis Joplin and Grace Slick, were able to break into this boys’ club necessarily developed wild, masculine personae, conforming to the norm for men in rock.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Rebecca Daugherty, “The Spirit of ’77: Punk and the Girl Revolution,” *Women & Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 6 (2002), <https://search-proquest-com/docview/1542604> (accessed November 26, 2016), 2.

Thus, in an already masculine popular musical world, the punk scene veers even further into a testosterone-driven realm. Female punks would thus at times develop an on-stage persona to assimilate into the scene. Daugherty mentions Jennifer Miro of the Nuns (formed in 1975 in San Francisco), who “cultivated a glamorous onstage persona but sang songs like ‘Child Molester’ and ‘I Wanna Be Your Dog,’” yet “confused her cool, sophisticated image by reporting that ‘actually, I lead the most non-life. I go home, don't see anybody, never leave the house for weeks, then I go on stage and I'm JENNIFER MIRO! At home you wouldn't recognize me: without my makeup, in tennis shoes, I look about 13.’”<sup>8</sup> Her punk ethos is personified with controversial and subversive song titles and lyrics as well as her performance attire, yet this is at odds with her everyday lifestyle.

In some cases, however, female performers positively embrace a punk lifestyle in order to reject societal norms and what is considered to be appropriate female behavior. Frances Sokolov (known as Vi Subversa) formed Poison Girls in Brighton, England, in 1976, at the age of 40 and as a mother of two. The band helped her express her anarchic beliefs and radical feminism. In “Old Tart’s Song,” she sings “If I had my time again / I’d like to come back as a man / ... I don’t want to be like my mother / hang behind, fall behind / wait on all the others,” illuminating the discrepancy between traditional gender roles, and the passive, doting role expected of the female. In “State Control,” she calls out male hegemony in the music world, portraying it in tandem with governmental authority:

State control and rock and roll are run by clever men  
What they sell is selling very well and the price is up again  
State control and rock and roll are run by clever men  
What you know is what they show so it all goes round again  
...

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<sup>8</sup> Daugherty, 5.

State control and rock and roll are run by clever men  
It's all good for business and it all goes round again  
State control and rock and roll are run by clever men  
And anarchy is this year's thing...

In Subversa's view, punk music is not as egalitarian as it claims to be, and bands may profess anarchic ideology while acting in oppressive ways that project male superiority. Poly Styrene (stage name of Marianne Joan Elliott-Said) of X-Ray Spex echoes these sentiments. The song "Oh Bondage, Up Yours!" begins with Styrene intoning in an innocent, child-like voice: "Some people think little girls should be seen and not heard, but I think..." after which she erupts wildly, "oh bondage, up yours!" Her raucous vocals paint scenes of binding and beating, contrasted with the refrain "oh bondage, up yours / oh bondage, no more!" This song is less an indictment of male hegemony in punk spheres than an individualistic expression of rebellion against traditional gender norms.

Action toward women in punk circles, even at band members themselves, is at times violent. Daugherty elaborates: "Viv Albertine, of the Slits, recalled that 'we got picked on in the street, our lead singer Ari was stabbed.' Lucy O'Brien of the Catholic Girls remembers a show when 'a crowd of around 20 of [the audience members] followed us outside and attacked us ... During gigs there were regular cries of: f\*\*\*in' cows, who do you think you are?'"<sup>9</sup> As with black punk musicians, there are both explicit and implicit barriers to assimilating into the scene. Artists transgress these barriers at their own risk, and with varying degrees of acceptance, though that acceptance rarely feels universal.

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<sup>9</sup> Daugherty, 7.

## Punk and Sexuality

The most prominent and loosely collected movement of LGBT-focused punk music is known as “queercore” or “homocore.” As D. Robert DeChaine explains, queercore is punk rock combined with “radicalized perspectives on gay and lesbian politics and identity.”<sup>10</sup> This broad definition of bands of differing aesthetics and approaches to LGBT topics is not all-encompassing, and DeChaine references *Outpunk*, a queercore zine, while quoting the zine’s editor Matt Wobensmith: “I can’t tell you what [queercore] means, because I don’t know, and ultimately the definition starts with you. What do you want it to be? What do you want out of life? Please don’t let what you see and hear be your only defining tools.”<sup>11</sup> This existential waxing on the movement’s exact nature jibes with punk rock as a whole. As a confluence of communities and artists, there is no single definition for punk, and the same holds true even when grouping bands that focus on identity and sexuality.

The names themselves of some queercore bands immediately indicate subversive sexuality, such as Pansy Division, Sister George (whose name comes from the play and subsequent film adaptation of *The Killing of Sister George*, which centers around lesbianism), and the Mukilteo Fairies (a pun on the Mukilteo Ferry in Washington state). Of the artists associated with the movement, Pansy Division (formed in San Francisco in 1991) is among the most distinguished, having supported Green Day in their 1994 tour (in wake of Green Day’s *Dookie*, before the band eventually lost punk credibility as commercial success piled on). The act of starting an all-gay punk rock band in itself is subversive, smashing the

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<sup>10</sup> D. Robert DeChaine, “Mapping Subversion: Queercore Music’s Playful Discourse of Resistance,” *Popular Music and Society* 21 no. 4 (Winter 1997), 17.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

stereotype that “gay men’s music tastes favor pop divas and showtunes, while lesbians dig sensitive folk.”<sup>12</sup> Pansy Division addresses LGBT issues in a manner that is often humorous and sometimes graphic, as album titles *Undressed*, *Deflowered*, and *That’s So Gay* indicate. There is no subtlety in their messages, as in songs like “Horny in the Morning,” “Dick of Death,” and “The C\*\*ks\*\*\*er Club” show. Sometimes the band uses humor not merely to discuss sexual exploits, but to address issues of homophobia, as in the tongue-in-cheek title track of *That’s So Gay*. The lyrics condemn the use of “gay” as a slang term to describe something boring or stupid: “I heard what you said / I’m not stupid, you know / What do you take me for? / Hetero?” Another verse exclaims: “I heard what you said / just a figure of speech? / If you meant nothing by it / practice what you preach / The next time you say it / you better think twice / some pissed off f\*\*\*got / may not take it too nice.” While tongue-in-cheek – the band is not actually advocating those who use the term to “practice what they preach” – they make the point that slang use of the term is pejorative and harmful.

Not all gay, lesbian, and queer punks involve themselves in the queercore movement, however. For some, homosexuality is part of who they are, but those issues are not part of their music. Rebecca Daugherty quotes Laura Kennedy, bassist of the Bush Tetras, who said that “our being gay wasn't an issue ... there was a queer presence all over the place.” Daugherty continues, saying, “In fact, Kennedy found punk clubs more accepting than lesbian clubs at the time: ‘We got kicked out of women's bars.... There didn't seem to be room for weirdos, which we were. The punk world was my world, the gay world definitely was not.’”<sup>13</sup> In this case, there is no antagonism between the punk world and homosexuality,

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<sup>12</sup> DeChaine, 21.

<sup>13</sup> Daugherty, 6.

but rather between the gay world and the punk lifestyle. Indeed, in spite of homophobic tendencies in some punk acts (the Macc Lads, for example), there appears to be less of an invisible wall between LGBT punks and merely existence as a woman or as an African-American in punk communities. Even Laura Jane Grace of Against Me! has not been ostracized or publicly criticized after transitioning, despite the band's relative popularity and visibility.

### **Punk Around the World**

Some common trends appear when looking at punk music in different regions of the world. Sean Martin-Iverson posits a struggle between territorialization and deterritorialization that can occur during the process of cultural globalization in Indonesian hardcore punk. Likewise, Alan O'Connor reaches similar conclusions through Pierre Bourdieu's sociological notions of *habitus* in the context of punk music in Mexico and Spain. Indeed, it is only through globalization that punk has been able to spread throughout the world. Because of its origins in English speaking countries, and because of the prevalence of English spoken as a *lingua franca* throughout the world, punk in other parts of the world is still often sung in English. Additionally, although regions like Mexico, Spain, and Indonesia have their own hardcore scenes, these areas are still heavily influenced by British and American punk bands; after all, the economic and cultural capital these nations have is greater than in many places in the world, and it has historically been easier for the United States and United Kingdom to spread punk music and culture.

That being said, local punk bands and collectives in these nations do exist, and although there is some degree of overarching Anglo-centric dominance of punk music, these regional bands still blend their own local and cultural messages and struggles within a nebulous punk “framework.” As O’Connor elaborates:

...the US scene dominates the global punk movement because of its economic resources. All globally important fanzines originate in the US and American punk labels are ubiquitous. The punk scenes in Europe occupy a semi-peripheral position and those in Latin America exist on the periphery of the global punk movement. Each scene is also somewhat different. In Europe, there is an important network of squats where underground punk bands play. These social centers are famous for their hospitality and social organization. The punk scene in Mexico City, in spite of its lack of economic resources, is vibrant and well organized by several anarcho-punk collectives.<sup>14</sup>

Important to O’Connor’s argument is the notion that Spanish bands like Elektroduendes, Los Muertos de Cristo, and Sin Dios have toured in and have currency in Mexico, but Mexican punk bands are far less capable of touring Spain for economic reasons and per the difficulty of obtaining visas. Additionally, these bands are known in Spain and Mexico, but remain virtually unknown in the United States; this further illustrates a cultural hierarchy between the United States, mainland Europe, and Latin America.

Martin-Iverson notes in Indonesia similar relationships regarding hardcore. Western punk bands visit Indonesia more often than the reverse, and O’Connor and Martin-Iverson both note that foreign bands draw larger crowds than local bands. Martin-Iverson points out as well that a prominent Indonesian hardcore compilation album was released by a French punk label, and the German band Wojczech were instrumental in incorporating Southeast

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<sup>14</sup> Alan O’Connor, “Punk and Globalization: Spain and Mexico,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 7 no. 2 (2004), 176.

Asian countries into punk tour circuits.<sup>15</sup> Indonesia's situation is a peculiar one: there are many dialects of Indonesian, and some are not mutually comprehensible. The use of English lyrics, a language which many of the country's youth learn, makes the music more universally understood. Punk is truly rebellious in territories like Bandah Aceh, which is ruled by Sharia Law. There, punk musicians are not merely an annoyance to authority, but are viewed as potential criminals. In December 2011, police imprisoned a group of punks, shaved their heads, and forced them to bathe in a lake and pray in an act of "moral rehabilitation."<sup>16</sup> Punk's raw aggression and outward expression of discontent is appealing in such oppressive environments, and that it can even prompt arrests demonstrates an effectiveness at startling and provoking authority.

In a globally publicized incident in February 2012, three members of all-female collective Pussy Riot were arrested and convicted of "hooliganism" for a guerilla-style performance of their "Punk Prayer" in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow; the song is a profanity-laden and sarcastic "prayer" to the Virgin Mary to drive President Vladimir Putin away.<sup>17</sup> Brian Rourke and Andrew Wiget frame the event from a queer and feminist perspective, providing historical context of Russian (and formerly Soviet) marginalization of women and queerness. This oppression comes from the State as well as the Orthodox Church, often working in tandem to create a "silenced, intimidated, conforming,

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<sup>15</sup> Sean Martin-Iverson, "Bandung Lautan Hardcore: Territorialisation and Deterritorialisation in an Indonesian Hardcore Punk Scene," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 15 no. 4 (2014), 537-39.

<sup>16</sup> "Police Arrest Punks in Indonesia – In Pictures," *The Guardian*.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/gallery/2011/dec/14/police-arrest-punks-indonesia> (accessed April 10, 2018).

<sup>17</sup> Laura Smith-Spark, "Russian Court Imprisons Pussy Riot Band Members on Hooliganism Charges," *CNN*.  
<http://www.cnn.com/2012/08/17/world/europe/russia-pussy-riot-trial/index.html> (accessed April 10, 2018).

easily managed society.”<sup>18</sup> In this incident, Pussy Riot used punk to make visible the Russian’s oppressive hand: the group performed in revealing attire (save face masks) in a sacred space, with profane music and profane lyrics, to offend the sensibilities of religious and state authorities. Despite the event’s brief duration before its interruption, the incident motivated global awareness and discussion. The following trial and sentencing received further scrutiny, further showing the ability of punk music and performance to instigate. As Rourke and Wiget frame it: “The value of Pussy Riot’s performance lies in its making visible, and thus available for public debate, the ways in which authoritarianism legitimates its exercise of power by exploiting social divisions through a network of institutionalized forces which civil society had come to take for granted.”<sup>19</sup>

This brief survey shows a few ways that punk can be adapted and co-opted, both as a form of music and as a means of protest: to understand the politics of punk around the world, it is important to realize first the cultural and economic hierarchies at play, then the interplay between expressing local concerns through foreign conduits and methods. In Mexico, punk flourishes but suffers from lack of capital that enables American and other bands to proliferate worldwide. In Indonesia, English is used not as a result of colonization, but as a way to make music more universal, particularly among the country’s youth. In Russia, a small, brief, nonviolent incident was enough to prompt global attention and a prison sentence, with punk as its vessel of delivery. These are certainly not the only non-Anglo regions where

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<sup>18</sup> Brian Rourke and Andrew Wiget, “Pussy Riot, Putin, and the Politics of Embodiment,” *Cultural Studies* 30 no. 2 (2016), 249.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 255.

punk flourishes, and further research on punk's existence and function in different societies would be welcome.

## CHAPTER 8

### CONCLUSION

As time marches inexorably forward, the spirit and the context of the original punk movement become further removed from the present day. Artists from the late 1970s and early 1980s continue to age and pass away, and the day will come when there are no veterans left from the scene's beginning. Some of these artists soldier on and continue to perform and release material (some after periods of hiatus), but even with them, some three to four decades removed from their inception, something crucial is lost.

MDC broke up in 1995. After a five-year break, singer Dave Dictor then reformed the band in 2000 with different members. They released *Magnus Dominus Corpus* in 2004, a handful of EPs and splits, and then, following the 2016 U.S. presidential election, *Mein Trumpf* in 2017. Dictor is still a man of passion and conviction, and his desire to write and record this album was commendable; however, Dictor is now over sixty years old, and his advanced age has musical ramifications. *Mein Trumpf* is tired, lacking the insane furor of the band's early albums. Both the intensity and the speed are toned down, and even the up-tempo segments on the album lack bite. The lyrics are mediocre at best – certainly they were nothing spectacular on their earlier albums, but the raw energy and youthful exuberance of their delivery imbued them with power that is sorely lacking here. The album closes with a re-recording of “Born to Die” with the original lyrics “no war, no KKK, no fascist USA” replaced with “no Trump, no KKK, no fascist USA” (though Dictor's elided vocals on this recording make it sound more like “KK” than “KKK”). This is a fitting ending to the album,

as it provides the listener a ready reference point, a time portal, to hear the band in their heyday (by listening to the recording of their self-titled debut) and compare it to them some thirty-seven years later.

Dead Kennedys broke up in 1986 and re-formed in 2001 without Jello Biafra. Biafra's unique and snide vocal timbre was an indispensable element of the band's sound, and the band is not the same without his iconic voice and presence. Ongoing acrimony between Biafra and the current band (reaching the point of litigation in the early 2000s) tarnishes their reputation further. Furthermore, the band has recorded no new material. Their releases after re-forming have been solely reissues or compilations of previously recorded material; essentially, they are surviving solely off of nostalgia. For a band with such a subversive and anti-capitalist message, it is off-putting that their current state is to cash in on past successes with a singer who is no longer part of the band, while creating no new material of their own.

Reagan Youth broke up in 1990, and lead singer David "Insurgent" Rubenstein committed suicide in 1993. Original guitarist Paul Bakija (Paul Cripple) reformed the band in 2006, and they have since gone through scores of members. The band's website affirms:

Paul Cripple plans on making one last Reagan Youth album which will focus on the life and times of the band's spiritual guiding force; DAVE INSURGENT. The record will be a concept album about the life and times of Dave I., as well as Reaganomics, N.Y.C. during the 80's, and it will sound catchy, hardcore, fast, punk, and of course the songs will consist of three chords like all the other tunes. It will be the last album.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.reagan-youth.com/history/> (accessed March 7, 2018).

However, this has not yet come to pass. The only new material the band has written and released is a lone demo (for the above project), back in 2012, leaving it unfinished some six years out.

Some of the pioneering British punk bands continue to release new material as well. GBH has stayed together from 1978 to the present day, with minimal lineup changes, but their output is sporadic: from 1996 to 2017, they released only five LPs. Discharge has survived multiple hiatuses and released a paltry three LPs between 2002 and 2016. The main issue with these bands, however, is not their slow pace of releasing new material. In fact, it is not even that the material is bad. Discharge's *End of Days* (2016), for instance, completely matches the tone and feeling of their earlier albums. The band mirrors their spoken word sampling from "Cries of Help" on *Hear Nothing See Nothing Say Nothing* on the title track "End of Days." Here, the band uses a sample from the British civil defense series *Protect and Survive* from the 1970s-1980s, where the narrator calmly states: "If we are attacked by nuclear weapons, these are the warning sounds you must recognize. First, the attack warning. If an attack is expected, the sounds will sound a rising and falling note, like this," and the band erupts into a blistering, breakneck track at 180 BPM that would be perfectly at home on their earlier releases. Here, paradoxically, is where the issue lies. In a way, bands like GBH and Discharge also survive on nostalgia like Dead Kennedys and Reagan Youth: while they occasionally release new material, the musical language and style are fossilized. They remain almost unchanged after nearly four decades, so while their style is consistent, it is also increasingly distant from the present.

NOFX has continued to churn out albums, with 2016's *First Ditch Effort* their most recent release. The album comes four years after the band's previous LP, and after Fat Mike

went into detox and rehabilitation for painkiller abuse. The lyrics are personal and introspective, and “Happy Father’s Day” is a particularly biting song penned to the singer’s late father: “F\*\*k you Paul Burkette, I’m glad that you are dead / You weren’t a father or a parent, more an acquaintance than a friend / I changed my name to make sure that your surname won’t live on / When I’m dead, our family history will be gone.” As with GBH and Discharge, however, the musical language remains fossilized, and the band is past the heyday of 1994’s *Punk in Drublic*. This is evident in that Fat Mike himself has created a *Punk in Drublic* craft beer and music festival.<sup>2</sup> The band’s breakthrough album is still perhaps their most famous and most memorable, and Fat Mike continues to milk his cash cow, branding it with beer and turning it into a festival. This, coupled with his creation of a punk rock musical in 2015, *Home Street Home* (a collaboration with Tony Awards winner Jeff Marx), indicates a continued shift in focus of Fat Mike’s activities and priorities. Aside from that, it distances him further from the grassroots, street-level DIY scene where punk bands and communities are formed.

For better or for worse, as more time passes, it becomes more difficult to make music that is labeled as “punk” that is also fresh and innovative. Even first and second-generation punk bands that are still releasing albums often prove only shells of their former selves, coasting on nostalgia. Other bands were mentioned previously like Thursday, Taking Back Sunday, and Saves the Day, whose musical styles betray an obvious punk influence but are

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<sup>2</sup> The original Fall 2017 festival announced at <http://www.fatwreck.com/news/detail/1111>, with updating site at <http://punkindrublicfest.com/> (both accessed March 4, 2018).

difficult to call punk in their own right.<sup>3</sup> These bands in turn have influenced other bands, and levels of abstraction from the original punk sources grow. Man Overboard (on hiatus since 2016) took ownership of the moniker “pop punk,” with merchandise reading “Defend Pop Punk.” Thus, what once was seen as pejorative and “untrue” to the nature of punk music has become something acceptable. FIDLAR falls into a similar category, with snotty, sloppy music that is still melodic and catchy, with lyrics focused on romantic struggles rather than weighty politics, as in their song “Awkward”:

Well every time you come on over, I just wanna listen  
I know you got some issues and I know that you just miss him  
I gotta fever just to see her, feelin’ like a stalker  
And didn't know I'm really good at making you feel awkward  
...  
I'm at a party and I'm barfin', I can barely see  
And every time I talk to you well I can never breathe  
I'm gettin' drunker, I'm a bummer, I should just call her  
I didn't know I'm really good at making you feel awkward  
...  
I got no job, I got no money, got no self esteem  
I take a Xanax every morning for anxiety  
I take a beer and take another, then I'm gonna call her  
I'll probably end up f\*\*kin' up and makin' it feel awkward...

The lyrics’ mention of partying and care-free substance abuse to the point of vomiting recall the suburban malaise and subversion of early punk bands, but the relaxed tempo, and catchy, sing-song melody are pop-punk to the core.

The Dahmers, from Sweden, tap into the Misfits’ horror punk aesthetic. “Blood on My Hands” is loud, gritty, and intense, and the music video is a playful pastiche on 70s

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<sup>3</sup> Saves the Day’s debut *Can’t Slow Down*, for example, sounds like a clone of fellow New Jersey band Lifetime, who had a palpable influence on them. However, by the time the band matures with *Stay What You Are* and *In Reverie*, with a slower, softer, and more nuanced sound, there is a clear break from the punk tradition.

horror B-movies. But here lies another problem: with the ossification of punk, this song works because of its conscious reference and emulation of earlier punk bands.

Here lies the paradox of punk: what emerged as punk and hardcore has been crystalized. Too substantial of a deviation and one can no longer call it “punk,” but simply say it has punk influences; yet, no deviation whatsoever means stagnancy, and the original purpose of punk was for anything but stagnancy and complacency. However, as has been observed with Pussy Riot and punk bands in Indonesia, punk music can still be dangerous, subversive, and even deemed criminal. While it remains to be seen what will happen to punk and its progeny in the future, it is imperative to understand the different nuances and dynamics between punk and its related artists and genres. It is also important to not place a premium on “authentic” punk simply for its primacy and for its closeness to the source, because there is reason and context for everything, and there is no reason that a forty-year old genre must remain unaltered, particularly when this genre came to fruition by being bold, fresh, and daring.

The question now turns to punk research and scholarship. As has been shown, a vast amount of material has been written about punk, from all angles, in all types of journals. This is well and good, and it gives the aspiring student or researcher myriad avenues to navigate. The problem is, however, that there is little back-and-forth. There are no arguments between authors and no corrections. It is helpful to read about, for example, territorialization and deterritorialization in Bandung Laotan hardcore, but if the reader is not familiar with this region and its history and culture, one must take this single author on his or her word. Each individual writer contributes his or her piece, which is productive and important to creating a

discourse, but now actual dialogue must occur. It is highly unlikely that every author on the subject is correct in all of his or her assertions or assumptions.<sup>4</sup>

Additionally, there is a tendency of scholarly writing to remain insular— that is, to contribute to discussion solely in reference to other scholarly writings. With a genre like punk, this discounts other sources that can provide great utility. *Rolling Stone* may not be useful to cite in certain cases, but when it makes mention of the popularity of the Van's Warped Tour, it becomes a source for the reception history of punk. There remains a reluctance among academics to incorporate sources like tabloids, magazines, non-scholarly books, or television programs as viable resources on the punk. This misses so much of punk's very essence: its complicated relationship with mainstream media exposure. Bands like Green Day and the Offspring are rarely mentioned in punk scholarship, and even then mostly pejoratively and in passing, perhaps for having "sold out" as based on their commercial success. However, their stories are still useful, precisely for this reason: it is in MTV music videos, Grammy awards, and issues of *Rolling Stone* where one sees the divide between mainstream perception (or co-opting) of punk and underground iconoclasm.

This situation is beginning to change, fortunately, with the introduction of the *Punk & Post Punk* journal. A proper home dedicated entirely to discourse of punk music helps solve a number of issues. It aggregates punk articles from numerous disciplines, greatly reducing the number of sources one must comb through to find relevant articles. Not only does it

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<sup>4</sup> One prominent example comes from Chris Salewicz's *Redemption Song*, a biography of Joe Strummer. In a passage, Salewicz asserts offhandedly that Strummer's least favorite city to perform in was Vienna, quoting Strummer as saying "it means nothing to me." However, it very well could be that Strummer was joking and making reference to the 1981 single "Vienna" by the British new wave band Ultravox, with its chorus repeating: "This means nothing to me, oh, Vienna!" Strummer would almost certainly be familiar with this song, being in a related genre, and reaching number 2 on the U.K. singles chart. This stands out because the biography is incredibly thorough, and the author's closeness to the late Strummer is inarguable. Even still, no one source is infallible.

contain scholarly content, but its inclusion of interviews and reviews brings it closer to the genre's surface, instead of obscuring punk in layers of academic jargon and (at times) absurdly deep philosophical ideas. The stark nakedness of a journal devoted to punk makes it more difficult for a writer with weaker or dubious statements to go unchallenged and taken for truth. In other words, an actual back-and-forth dialogue can take place, and peer-editing can reject particularly questionable contributions.

There remains a need to discuss the music itself. The musical examples and transcriptions above are hopefully a worthy beginning. As much as there is an unwillingness to include tabloid articles in a bibliography, I perceive an uneasiness to include musical transcriptions in punk writing. This is a grave error that abstracts the genre completely to the realm of philosophy and social studies, when it is, first and foremost, a type of music. It is not enough to say that punk music is often gritty and aggressive without showing precisely how. Saying Dead Kennedy's "Kill the Poor" is satirical is a correct assertion, but an incomplete one. Remarking its co-opting of the traditional doo-wop chord progression provides a more robust understanding of the song's message and its bite. Acknowledging John Cage's influence on Crass's "They've Got a Bomb" shows the band's attentiveness to the post-war avant-garde.

Perhaps there is less unease about including transcriptions in articles than there is an inability. It can be difficult to analyze punk music because there is no singular method applicable across the board. Referring to "Kill the Poor," Roman numeral analysis works, coupled with a bass line transcription, because these make direct comparison to another type of music. However, Roman numeral analysis aids little in understanding the Offspring's "Tehran." There, transcribing the repetitive bass ostinato and the modal harmonic and

melodic ideas does a much better job at explaining how the song evokes a Middle Eastern atmosphere, which is crucial to understanding the full extent of the song's meaning. Similarly, the violin transcription for Gogol Bordello's "Not a Crime," with its open string double stops and Eastern European modal melody, shows how the band gets its gypsy flare. Simply pointing out intervallic relationships in Crass's "They've Got a Bomb" helps one understand precisely why, after the fifteen seconds of silence, the guitar's re-entrance sounds so foreign and distant. Given the fact that so many scholarly contributions are from fields other than music, it is no surprise that researchers would feel unwilling or unable to include such analyses. Unfortunately, even in popular music and ethnomusicology journals, these types of examples are almost entirely nonexistent.

There remains a dearth of any unified vocabulary in discussing the music, in particular its timbre. Returning once more to "Kill the Poor," to add one more step to the analysis, it is useful to mention the song's tempo, the overdriven guitar, and Jello Biafra's warbling vocals. These further illustrate the depths of the song's satire, because while the chord progression is taken from 1950s doo-wop, the progression is completely subverted in timbral parody. Here one cannot rely on the same frame of reference as in, say, orchestral analysis. The use of different guitar pedals, amplifiers, and studio processing can create worlds of sonic possibility, and even saying a guitar is distorted does not provide a concrete understanding of the sound. Conversely, one can, for example, mention a solo oboe performing over an orchestra's string section, then provide the score, and thus end up with an understanding of the music's timbre. While there are clearly differences of tone, tuning, and expression for an orchestral oboist, these are severely limited compared to the vast array of guitar pedals and amplifiers available to punk musicians, not to mention further tweaks added

by studio producers. The character and soul of a punk album lies so much in the timbre itself. This is why MDC's self-titled debut succeeds while *Mein Trumpf* fails, a comparison made easier as both albums include a recording of the same song, "Born to Die." This is also why, conversely, Discharge's *End of Days* is a worthy entry in Discharge's discography. Some method of describing the timbre of punk instruments, as well as their mixing and studio production qualities, would be a crucial aid in writing more effectively about the music itself.

There is another reason why more analytical writing must be done on punk music: to demonstrate that it is a genre worthy of serious scholarly analysis. There is a pervasive assumption that, because of punk's abrasiveness, its often repetitive nature, and its proliferation of sub-two minute songs, that it is amateurish and not worthy of closer, nuanced consideration. However, there is a reason for the genre's continued endurance, and a reason why there even exists a gelatinous canon of important artists. Closer musical scrutiny reveals a compositional and technical prowess among a number of artists that is often assumed lacking. The fact that these songs are by and large composed and rehearsed aurally, without transcription (save lyrical content) shows strong songwriting instincts. Even if there are brilliant elements to songs that are made unconsciously (or perhaps subconsciously), this does not detract from the music: on the contrary, it shows a compositional strength that exists in a different realm from the academic composer or theorist but is no less worthy of consideration.

As in any discipline, there will be no final say. There is no singular end result in punk scholarship; there is no point where the research will be "finished." Additionally, no single source or tome can ever be complete. There are endless rabbit holes to fall into, and more songs than one could ever hope to listen to and intimately analyze in a single lifetime. And as

with music, scholarship itself is a product of its time, and says much about the state of research and cultural climate at any given time. Dick Hebdige is still read, but his scholarly aims reflect different points of focus from those of today. Likewise, my humble entry is but a single mote of dust in a world of research and discovery, influenced by my own circumstances. Whether punk remains fossilized, evolves, or disappears completely, there will always be some form of music that thrives in subversion, that is politically motivated, that challenges the status quo, and that is seen as dangerous by the authorities it questions. The best hope for listeners and researchers is to preserve, contextualize, and have as complete an understanding as one can of this music and the communities and cultures it fosters, so that its influence may live on, and so that punk ideals may continue to lurk under the mainstream, occasionally and vigorously bubbling to the surface.

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## VITA

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After two years in the work force, Mr. Henry attended the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, where he was awarded a Master of Music degree in Music Composition in 2014. Later that year, he began work toward a Doctor of Musical Arts degree in Music Composition, as well as a Master of Music degree in Musicology, at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. Since 2016, Mr. Henry has worked in LaBudde Special Collections at UMKC's Miller Nichols Library, where he has been an archival assistant and a metadata specialist. Upon completion of his degree requirements, Mr. Henry plans to continue composing and to pursue his research as well as archival interests.