

Academy of Marketing Annual Conference 2017,

University of Hull Business School, 3-6 July 2017

**FROM ‘SPIRAL SCRATCH’ TO PLEDGEMUSIC:
THE BIRTH AND RE-BIRTH OF PUNK CULTURE’S
ENTREPRENEURIAL SPIRIT**

Abstract

Punk has come a long way from its prematurely declared death in the early-1980s to being not-so-dead after all in the 1990s to still being ‘alive, loud and kicking’ today. This paper examines how punk culture’s inherent entrepreneurial DIY spirit has kept it alive after returning to its underground origins. While much has been made in the recent literature about social media and the digital revolution’s role in democratising the access to the marketplace, (self-)branding, entrepreneurship, crowdsourcing and co-creation of products and meaning have been at the heart of punk culture since its beginning - and long before people ever dreamed of digitalisation. Buzzcocks’ self-funded EP ‘Spiral Scratch’ is widely credited with being the first independent and crowdfunded record ever to hit the marketplace. Although most classic punk bands were actually signed by major record labels, numerous independent record labels have followed the ‘Spiral Scratch’ business model ever since. In recent years, after being dropped by their labels, many of those bands have moved to PledgeMusic, not only to crowdfund and sell their new albums, but also to revive the entrepreneurial spirit of the past that has truly ‘democratised’ the marketplace. Interestingly, PledgeMusic’s most popular music format is vinyl.

Keywords: Punk Music, Punk Culture, Marketing Myths, Stereotypes, Appropriation of Subculture, Nostalgia, Subjective Personal Introspection

From ‘Spiral Scratch’ to PledgeMusic: The Birth and Re-Birth of Punk Culture’s Entrepreneurial Spirit

“Punk was like we didn’t have a map and we didn’t have an address. It was like someone nicking a car and saying, ‘Who’s coming?’” Jimmy Pursey (Sham 69)

“Punk rock came into the world like a cataclysmic force of nature, hell-bent on transforming not only music, but also our very social fibre.” Penelope Spheeris

Introduction

Much has been made in the recent marketing literature about how social media and the digital revolution have democratised the marketplace (De Vries et al. 2012; Elberse 2010; Gensler et al. 2013; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2007; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2013) and opened it up for the consumer to participate actively in the co-creation of value (Pongsakornrunsilp & Schroeder 2011; Schau et al. 2009; Seraj 2012; Thompson & Malavia 2013), if not even in prosumption or actual co-production activities (Bacile et al. 2014; Mount & Martinez 2014) rather than as the passive recipients of marketing activities. As a result, Hennig-Thurau et al. (2013) conclude that digitalisation has killed off – or, at least, has begun to kill off – the traditional textbook marketing approach of linear value creation and propose “Pinball Marketing” as a new revolutionary non-linear approach to value creation, which involves a proactive interplay between marketing managers and consumers as co-creating partners “playing the ball to each other like bumpers in pinball machine”. The major problem with their proposition is that consumers have never been the passive recipients of marketing activities that our marketing and management theories have traditionally assumed them to be (and often still do). Instead, historic evidence shows that consumers have always engaged in co-creation and prosumption activities – at least with regard to value creation in the creative and entertainment industries (Barbas 2001). Since the first years of the 20th century, film fans have already shared their admiration for films and film stars by organising local, national and international fan-clubs and conventions, publishing fanzines that evolved into leading movie journals over time and even opening cinemas or running film clubs (Barbas 2001).

The punk culture that shocked the establishment more than 40 years ago and has had a long-term knock-on effect on the way of doing business in the music industry ever since provides another, even more profound example. Indeed, co-creation of both products and shared meanings, (self-)branding, entrepreneurship and crowdsourcing have been at the heart of punk’s inherent DIY culture from its very early beginnings in the mid-1970s (Cogan 2010; Laing 2015) – and long before ever dreamed of digitalisation. However, while punk has come a long way from its prematurely declared in the early-1980s to its ‘*big revival*’ in the 1990s to still being ‘*alive, loud and kicking*’ today (Bennett 2006; Hermann 2012), the digitalisation’s impact on the music industry has also caught up with the punk. As a result, the crowdfunding website *PledgeMusic* has in recent years become the platform of choice for punk bands and solo-artists (and not only for them) to keep them going on and the punk art movement ‘*alive, loud and kicking*’. Therefore, as part of a larger study, this paper examines how punk culture’s inherent social-capitalist, entrepreneurial DIY spirit has ensured its long-term survival after the return back to its underground origins. A closer look is thereby taken at whether and, if yes, what particular role *PledgeMusic*’s popularity among established and new punk as well as other indie bands or solo-artists plays in reinventing punk’s original punk DIY culture. We argue that this DIY spirit, not social media, has truly ‘*democratised the marketplace*’.

Kick Out the Jams

Although punk only entered the mainstream and caught public awareness primarily in late-November 1976 with the release of The Sex Pistols’ first single “Anarchy in the UK”, their infamous appearance on the Bill Grundy Show and the frenzied media outrage that

followed (Savage 2005; Strongman 2007; Tesco 2016), it actually was the release of the self-funded, -produced and -distributed EP “*Spiral Scratch*” by the Buzzcocks on 31st January 1977 that is widely credited with being the birth of the indie record label and the independent record industry (Cogan 2010; Laing 2015; Needs & Porter 2017; Simpson 2017) – and, thus, the inspiration for punk’s DIY culture. At least, this is often the popular belief, particularly in the British consciousness. But the truth is obviously a bit more complicated than that. Firstly, Buzzcocks were not the first musicians to produce a record themselves. Sun Records was one of many small recording studios in 1950s/60s small town USA, where everyone could come in, record two songs for a fee and get 50-100 copies. Especially, local folk and country artists used those opportunities to produce test records to be played on local radio stations and to impress the talent scouts of the major record labels. The difference between Sun Records and most of its competitors was that its owner a) gave Afro-American musicians the opportunity to make records of their own music, and b) discovered in the process artists like Johnny Cash, Elvis Presley and Jerry Lee Lewis. Secondly, the exact year and birthplace of punk is actually unknown, as punk is mainly an umbrella term for a range of different styles and subcultures. Though, current evidence would suggest that punk rock emerged, first, around 1968 in Detroit and, then, in various forms and disguises in New York, Berlin, San Francisco, Cincinnati, Sydney and London independently of each other (Robb 2006).

The commonality was that (liberal) arts students and youths from poor working-class neighbourhoods perceived their society’s corporate mainstream culture as ‘*representing only the suburban middle-classes*’, ‘*distant*’ and, thus, ‘*no longer speaking to them*’ (i.e. hippie culture and corporate stadium rock in the US, prog rock in the UK or cheery-cheesy Schlager in Germany) and, subsequently, wanted to ‘*tear up*’ what youth culture has become, go back to the beginnings and start all over again (Fiedler & Gent 2012; Robb 2006). For that reason, young adult consumers in the US and UK initially sought inspiration in the music and fashion of the 1950s like Soul, Blues and Rock ‘n’ Roll, whose fragmented features, symbols and styles they sampled in playful de-differentiated juxtaposition that could be understood as postmodern retro-branding long before postmodernism confused the marketing mind (Brown 2001). But poaching and reinterpreting the original meaning of ‘*second-hand*’ products through subcultural co-creation and consumption (Pongsakornrunsilp & Schroeder 2011; Schau et al. 2009) in a kind of ‘*pre-digital*’ Pinball Marketing (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2013) is one thing, engaging as a genuine co-creating consumer or prosumer with the ‘*democratised*’ marketplace quite another. While the major record labels were happy to re-release their back-catalogue to an eager new audience, they had little interest in signing non-mainstream acts. Neither was the mainstream music press interested in writing about non-mainstream bands or subcultures (Laing 2015). This is where punk’s DIY culture became the actual game-changer.

Never Mind the Social Media and Digitalisation, Here’s Punk’s DIY Culture

Contrary to popular belief and its own nostalgic-mythological reputation as an anti-capitalist, anarchist counterculture (Herrman 2012), punk culture’s DIY culture and inherent entrepreneurial spirit is strongly embedded in social capitalist ideals and values (Laing 2015; Robb 2006). This comes particularly to the fore in the repeated call to “Stop moaning! Get up your lazy arse and start something!” by Richard Hell (2013), John Lydon (2014), Jimmy Pursey, Jake Burns, Ian McKaye, Henry Rollins, Kathleen Hanna and many more ever since (Cogan 2010; Savage 2005). In other words, instead of complaining and waiting for someone to come around to ‘save’ them, they should get up and help themselves (Laing 2015). Thus, if popular mainstream fashion doesn’t fit your body or personality, then create your own fashion-style and design your own clothes. If there is no commercial magazine writing about your favourite music, fashion or subculture, then start publishing your own magazine. If you don’t like the music out there, here are three chords and now start a band. If major record labels don’t want to sign your band and produce your records, then start your own record label to produce your records. If there is not retail store selling your kind of music or fashion,

then open and run your own store. If nobody delivers the music or clothes you like to relevant stores near you, then set up your own distribution network with like-minded individuals. If there is no place, where they play your music and you can see your favourites bands playing live, then open your own venue – or, at least, organise your own gigs.

Since Rolling Stone and other music magazines in the US were preoccupied with stadium rock bands, Disco and the Billboard charts and showed little interest in “club music”, John Holmstrom, Legs McNeill and Ged Dunn started in October 1975 the now famous self-financed ‘*Punk*’-magazine that was strongly linked to New York’s CBGB and Kansas scene, which run until 1979 and achieved at its height a print run of over 50,000 copies per issue (Cogan 2010; Holmstrom & Hurd 2012). The professional quality of the magazine with its unique mix of factual news, interviews and comic cartoon retellings of actual events at CBGB or its punk stars inspired numerous other fanzines around the world to adapt a similar style. The magazine is also often cited as being responsible for actually given punk culture its name (Hell 2013; Valentine 2006). Its UK equivalent has been ‘*Sniffin’ Glue*’, which was started, edited and published part-time by Mark Perry from September 1976 to August 1977 (Cogan 2010; Fiedler & Gent 2012), when he founded Forward Records. Now, while Buzzcocks were not the first musicians to produce their own record, they were the first to start their own record label and to produce their records with a view to selling them to consumers at their gigs and via retailers (Fiedler & Gent 2012; Simpson 2017).

After seeing the Sex Pistols in London, Salford students Howard Devoto and Pete Shelley were not only inspired to start their own band, the Buzzcocks, but also organised two Sex Pistols gig in Manchester’s Lesser Free Trade Hall, where they would open the second as a support act. While only 43 people attended the gig, many of them started their own bands like Joy Division (later New Order), The Fall, The Smiths, Frankie Goes to Hollywood, The Stone Roses and The Happy Mondays. Furthermore, Buzzcocks engaged in an early form of crowdfunding in order to fund the recording the EP ‘*Spiral Scratch*’ by asking not only family and friends for a loan, as it is usually the case, but also encouraged audience members to buy a pre-paid order of the record in advance of its production (Needs & Porter 2017; Robb 2006). With the over £500 they collected, they paid the first 1000 copies of the EP and convinced a number of independent retailers in Manchester, Liverpool, Sheffield and London to stock between 20 and 100 copies each. With the money earned from the first batch, which sold out quickly, and pre-paid orders collected by the retailers, they financed the print of another 3000 copies and eventually a third print of 20000 copies (Fiedler & Gent 2012). However, because the marketing, sale and distribution of records is a full-time job that heavily conflicted with writing and rehearsing songs, touring and playing live shows, Buzzcocks eventually signed – just like most other punk bands at the time – to a corporate record label with an established and efficient global distribution network (Cogan 2010).

Nevertheless, Buzzcocks’ ‘*accidental*’ business model inspired numerous other punk, post-punk and indie bands to start their own record labels and establish their own distribution networks. In particular, Jerry Dammers of The Specials, Ian McKaye of Minor Threat and Fugazi, Jello Biafra of Dead Kennedys and Greg Ginn of Bad Religion were inspired to start the 2-Tone, Dischord, Alternative Tentacles and SST record labels, which also started to sign, produce and distribute other new artists and, with the exception of the first, are still active players on the marketplace (Cogan 2010). Furthermore, a number of other independent labels started by entrepreneurial punks and music fans, such as Rough Trade, Factory, Cherry Red, Forward Records or Stiff Records (Balls 2014), also emerged to sign, produce and promote new bands – though Stiff Records already existed prior to the release of ‘*Spiral Scratch*’. With Ian Dury & the Blockheads, The Damned and Elvis Costello on its roster, Stiff Records had released the first UK punk single with The Damned’s “New Rose” (Balls 2014).

The biggest disadvantage of those new independent labels against dominant major record labels was the lack of a distribution network, which often prevented their records from being stocked by most national, never mind international record stores (Balls 2014). Instead,

most independent labels relied on selling their products directly to the consumer at their bands' live-shows, in their affiliated local record store or via mail order (often from their bedrooms) (Cogan 2010; Herrmann 2012). Therefore, Nick Lowe of Stiff Records and his counterparts at Rough Trade arranged a co-operative distribution network among independent record labels, whereby each participating label acts as an authorised agent for all other labels and supplies the one's affiliated independent record stores with their products in addition to one's own (Balls 2014; Robb 2006). In so doing, the punk culture was able to provide punk communities and their members across the country and even abroad with access to rare '*hard-to-get*' and limited music, magazines and even fashion advice. In the process, Stiff, Factory and Rough Trade even cooperated with Dischord, Alternative Tentacles and SST to give their punk acts exposure to punk audiences in other countries and continents.

PledgeMusic Is Calling

During the first wave of punk from 1976-1982, most punk bands were signed by a major record label, especially after leading bands proved to be commercially viable thanks to solid loyal following – though it were primarily Virgin, Polydor, EMI, Epic and Sire that showed a genuine interest in punk. By 1983, nearly all of the leading punk bands have either broken up or went into a hiatus (Conlon & Jehn 2009; Fielding & Gent 2012). Punk had fully disappeared from the mainstream again and continued mainly in the underground, whence it previously emerged in 1975/6. With no interest from the corporate major record labels, it were primarily the indie labels started during the first wave that continued to sign, produce and promote new post-punk, synth-rock, gothic and hardcore bands. Until in the 1990s, due the commercial success of Grunge, young US punk bands like Green Day, Offspring, NOFX and Rancid were signed by the major labels following Green Day's 1994 success album "Dookie" and produced million selling albums. However, once digitalisation and digital piracy hit the music industry and the major record labels began to consolidate or collapse, many of these bands found themselves dropped by their labels – just like many original punk bands returning from hiatus in the late-1980s/early-1990s found that they had been dropped after their record labels had been liquidated or bought by a major label.

Although those punk veterans still draw strong crowds of 'middle-aged' (Bennett 2006; Herrmann 2012) and new young punks in their hundreds (and on occasion in their thousands) who are hungry for new material, just as the bands did when they were young, they find it extremely difficult to obtain the necessary funding required to record, produce, distribute and promote a professional new album (Conlon & Jehn 2009); especially, since only three record companies (UMG, Sony BMG and Warner Brothers) are still left in 2012, owning all remaining major labels. Some of them, like Iggy Pop or John Lydon (2014), turned to starring in advertising in order to use their fees to fund new albums. Others opted for home-made recordings, mixed on a laptop and sold as digital downloads. Neither option was useful in the long-term. And this is where, since its launch in 2009, PledgeMusic has come into play. PledgeMusic was originally conceived by music fan and part-time musician Benji Rogers mainly as an online crowdfunding platform, which is specialised in music projects and where professional musicians can connect with music fans with a view of collecting funding for their new album recording projects (www.pledgemusic.com). Unlike Kickstarter, consumers are not so much asked to invest money in a project, but to pre-order the artists' new album on CD or vinyl (with a digital download as bonus) before it is recorded and produced. For a higher contribution to the project, consumers can pre-order one of the limited autographed CDs or vinyl records, hand-written lyrics, special pledge T-shirts or other merchandise. And the upper end, consumers can also pay for a 'meet & greet' with the band or a private gig at the consumer's home. A digital download of the album comes as a free bonus with any other purchase (www.pledgemusic.com).

Hence, PledgeMusic has become a welcoming home for many established and new, upcoming punk, indie, alternative, rock and folk bands as well as solo-artists that have either

been dropped by their previous record labels or are unable to get a record deal with a major label. The list of bands and solo-artists that are on PledgeMusic these days would have been the dream roster for any many record label/company in the 1980s and 1990s. But it is in particular the ‘non-commercial’ punk and indie bands that have found in PledgeMusic an exciting online platform to interact with their fans. Since 2012, PledgeMusic enables artists to engage with their fans and ‘pledgers’ (aka backers) through news feeds, a chat-room and the upload of videos, podcasts and downloadable files in a social media dialogue. Thus, besides crowdfunding, PledgeMusic allows both artists and consumers to interact with each other as co-creators and even co-producers (Bacile et al. 2014). Moreover, since PledgeMusic also allows artists to run not only targeted projects, where funding is sought for a new project, but also for non-targeted projects, where pre-orders are sought for already existing records (i.e. re-releases), many punk and indie artists are using PledgeMusic as a store window for their older records or special editions and other collectibles to niche-market audiences. It is hereby quite interesting to note that, according to PledgeMusic’s press office, most purchases/pledges on PledgeMusic in 2015 have involved vinyl records (nearly 60%) either alone or in package with other items, followed by CDs (approx. 30%) and personable collectables or meet & greets (approx. 20%). Digital downloads, on the other hand, are often no longer available for purchase and only come as a free bonus with any other purchase (www.pledgemusic.com).

Conclusion

In contradiction to much of the recent marketing discourse’s claim that social media and the digital revolution have democratised the marketplace (Elberse 2010; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2013) and enabled consumers to engage in co-creation and co-production activities (Bacile et al. 2014; Schau et al. 2009), consumers have always been involved in co-creating brand meaning and consumption experiences as spectators in sports stadiums or at live music shows or within fan communities, fan-clubs and consumer subcultures (Barbas 2001). But it was punk’s inherent DIY culture with its social-capitalist values and entrepreneurial spirit that truly democratised the marketplace and provided ordinary young working-class consumers access as co-creators and co-producers in the value creation process (Savage 2005) and as prosumers to overcome market deficits with their own business start-ups (Balls 2014; Conlon & Jehn 2009) – whether these were their own bands, their own fanzines/magazines, their own fashion and record stores or their own record label and distribution network (Cogan 2010). In recent years, many established and new punk bands have moved to PledgeMusic not only with a view to crowdfund and sell pre-orders for their latest albums, but also to revive, if not even to reinvent punk’s original entrepreneurial spirit and DIY culture. The interesting irony, thereby, is that even though punk culture is using social media and an online retail platform to connect with their audiences as co-creators and co-producers, the most popular media format in punk culture among bands and audiences is still, or once again, the good old-fashioned vinyl. But this should be hardly surprising as punk culture has always had a habit of going back) to start again by juxtaposing the new with the old in a de-differentiated pastiche (Robb 2006). In this regard, PledgeMusic’s popularity with punk bands and the punk culture must be seen as extension of what the Buzzcocks started in 1976/7 with “Spiral Scratch” project.

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