

PUNK IN TRANSLATION:

A Music and Fashion History of Punk

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Research Question: How has punk's politics, music, and fashion in the United States and Britain evolved from its inception to its evolution into other genres?



## Proto Punk, 1964-1973

Every genre has its genesis. In the spheres of music, culture, and fashion there are always predecessors. Punk stems from the development of rock and roll in the late fifties. While rock and roll would eventually be commodified and repackaged for the general public, the genre started out as an inherently alternative; an amalgamation of genres specific to black culture such as jazz, rhythm and blues, boogie-woogie, gospel, and jump blues. Main players included Little Richard, with tracks like ‘Tutti Frutti’, kicking off the very punk ethos of including taboo subject matter in his material; while Vince Taylor & His Playboys’ ‘Brand New Cadillac’ gave future punk band The Clash material for their *London Calling* album, perhaps chosen because it was considered by drummer Topper Headon to be the first British rock and roll song<sup>1</sup>.

Another strong and direct influence on Punk style, James Brown was not only incredibly influential in the rock and roll scene of his time, but was cited by guitarist of proto punk/rock band Motor City 5 (better known as MC5) Wayne Kramer to be vital in finding the band’s sound: “Our whole thing was based on James Brown,” he said. “We listened to *Live at the Apollo* endlessly on acid. Everything we did was on a gut level about sweat and energy. It was anti-refinement. That was what we were going for.”<sup>2</sup>

Sweat and energy would become huge sonic qualities of punk’s preceding musical influences, bridging the gap between American rock and roll of the fifties with distinctly proto punk bands was the sound of garage rock. Belonging to the genre were songs like Kingsmen’s ‘Louie Louie’ was a cover taken from Richard Berry and the Pharos’ repertoire, now with

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<sup>1</sup> “Brand New Cadillac - the Clash,” Last.fm, accessed November 28, 2023, [https://www.last.fm/music/The+Clash/\\_/Brand+New+Cadillac](https://www.last.fm/music/The+Clash/_/Brand+New+Cadillac).

<sup>2</sup> Rick Clark, “Classic Tracks: The MC5’s ‘Kick out the Jams,’” Mixonline, September 16, 2022, <https://www.mixonline.com/recording/classic-tracks-mc5s-kick-out-jams-365187>.

electric guitar front and center and a faster rhythm, it was considered so outlandish for the time that the FBI investigated them for obscenity<sup>3</sup>. (The song would go on to be covered by The Kinks and Black Flag.) The release of ‘Surfin’ Bird’ by The Trashmen brought outlandish gibberish and a garage rock sound to the top of the charts; with both singles favoring a driving rhythm, harder guitar strumming, and a new unsophisticated, sometimes aggressive energy, together ‘Louie Louie’ and ‘Surfin Bird’ swept the nation with their new take on rock.

In Britain, bands like The Kinks and The Rolling Stones adopted garage rock, elevating it sonically with fuzz and distortion thanks to taking a razor blade to their amps or Gibson fuzz tone distortion unit, with the latter being made and employed to prevent the former. Tracks like ‘You Really Got me’ 1964 and ‘(I Can’t Get No) Satisfaction’ 1965.

At about the same time, several lesser known bands were garage rock to the extreme, not only embodying the DIY ethos, but also incorporating political discussion- or rather asserting frank and often aggressive dissatisfaction with the politics around them. Bands like Los Saicos from Peru incorporated not only dissatisfaction with authority, but utilized the element of shock factor in their work. Even the band’s name was meant to disturb: “Saicos” comes from the Spanish word “sadico” or sadist, sans the letter D, to give the impression of the English word “psycho.” Los Saicos blended garage rock and surf rock, while containing the aggressive and angry energy that western proto punk would later evolve into. Their members credit rock and roll-ers like Elvis and the rise of surf rock, which influenced teenage boys everywhere to pick up guitars and form their own makeshift bands that would practice in their home garages.

Most of the young guys got their start, cause they grew up watching Elvis and that was their first introduction into rock and roll. And then surf music came into vogue and more teenagers picked up guitars, but then really after The Beatles exploded that's when pretty

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<sup>3</sup>“Louie Louie (the Song),” FBI, June 7, 2011, <https://vault.fbi.gov/louie-louie-the-song>.

much every adolescent boy decided they wanted to be popular and try to play guitar, so that's when all of the 'garage bands' popped up everywhere. But they didn't pop up just in the US or the UK, but all over the world."<sup>4</sup> (César Castrillón, Los Saicos)



Los Saicos ~1964

However, Los Saicos differed from the garage rock genre in their song's lyrics and delivery. Their frontman famously yelled due to lack of singing skill, and was known for having a voice that gave the impression he "gargles with razor blades"<sup>5</sup>. In addition, none of the band members could fluently play their respective instruments. This sophomoric knowledge of music would later become a staple in punk bands, famously with artists like The Sex Pistols, The Ramones, and The Clash. The lyrical content of Los Saicos's songs ranged from talk of blowing up train stations to being fugitives, Their music was incredibly influential in South America, and in 2006 Los Saicos were given a civic medal courtesy of the Peruvian government for their

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<sup>4</sup> "Saicomania 1966 - 1968: Los Saicos Considerada En El Mundo Como Una de Las Bandas Precursoras Del Punk Tocando El Género Proto Punk y Garage Rock , Gozaron de Mucha Popularidad...: By La Casona Musical," Kitchen Porter Films, 2011, <https://www.facebook.com/LaCasonaMusical88/videos/saicomania-1966-1968/622675791632544/>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

contribution to music, as well as being inducted into the Peruvian Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2010.

As garage rock slowly spread out to form regional pockets all over the US, bands like Death grew sonically closer to punk as we know it. Originally named Rock Fire Funk Express, they decided to play exclusively rock after seeing The Who on tour. They remained Rock Fire Funk Express until their father died in '74, leaving a lasting effect on all the members and swaying them to change the band's name in his memory. When they started looking for record labels to sign to and ways to find an audience, they were repeatedly rejected by labels and radio stations due to their blackness and their music being considered "too fast, loud, and political,"<sup>6</sup> but especially because of their new name: *Death*. In an attempt to advertise their music, they put up flyers around their neighborhood but they were repeatedly approached by local authorities and told not to advertise their "cult". Almost thirty five years later, when the band's records began circulating in underground DJ and record collecting communities, they became rightfully recognized and accredited as ahead of their time while they were active. Their tracks like 'Politicians in my Eyes' exemplified punk in their heavily political lyrics such as:

Always tryin' to be slick when they tell us the lies  
 They're responsible for sending young men to die  
 We have waited so long for someone to come along  
 And correct our country's law, but the wait's been too long" (Politicians in my Eyes,  
 ~1974)

Similarly built on alternative and taboo content was The Velvet Underground, an alternative rock band formed in NYC 1964 at the peak of Manhattan's then flourishing art scene.

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<sup>6</sup> Haven Entertainment, "A Band Called Death," A Band Called death, 2012, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bWP\\_fmRnDEc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bWP_fmRnDEc).

Frontman Lou Reed and violist John Cale met in college and moved to New York City to pursue music together; with Lou being their songwriter, and John being a capable multi instrumentalist as well as classically trained in viola; with Maureen Tucker joining in 1965 as their drummer. Their early music was sonically minimalist, utilizing white noise as sonic backdrops. As part of their unconventional approach, they would even play to the 60-cycle hum of their refrigerator in order to add to the sonic “texture” of their music. Though no record label sought to sign them due to their provocative sound and lyrics, The Velvets would play their originals at venue Cafe Bizarre, and it was ‘Venus in Furs’, a song about BDSM, that caught the attention of Barbara Rubin, an established friend and patron of Andy Warhol’s factory. It was Rubin who noted The Velvet’s “scary” and “off-putting aura”<sup>7</sup>, and it was after hearing that song she pushed Warhol to watch them play.

Known at the time mostly for his work in pop art, his studio, better known as The Factory, served as a socializing space for him and his friends. Though as his fame and social circle grew, it attracted aspiring artists and personalities; changing the factory from a private studio for Warhol and friends to a socializing hub for artists and those who wanted a taste of fame. Music-wise, Warhol had designed a number of album covers for the likes of Diana Ross, The Rolling Stones, Aretha Franklin, and The Smiths; as well as directing music videos for The Cars and Walter Steding. Perhaps it was this foray into music that made him want to start incorporating music into his art, and in 1965 find a rock band for a new performance installation; The Exploding Plastic Inevitables, an experimental multimedia art piece consisting of live music, strobe lights, and projections of Warhol’s visual art.

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<sup>7</sup> *The Velvet Underground and Nico, The Velvet Underground*, 2021, <https://tv.apple.com/us/movie/the-velvet-underground/umc.cmc.69ic79cvvy80epfhz5efdgjjd>.





The Factory, 1964

Under Warhol's management, Reed wrote around four albums worth of lyrical material, including several tracks that would later comprise the album *The Velvet Underground and Nico*, such as 'Heroin'; a song from the perspective of a heroin user that sonically embodies the experience of a heroin high, with a slow start that crescendos with the proverbial onset of the speaker's high. With lyrics like:

Heroin, be the death of me

Heroin, it's my wife and it's my life

Because a mainline to my vein

Leads to a center in my head

And then I'm better off than dead (Black Angel's Death Song, 1967)

It is no wonder the Velvets' work was unsuitable for a mainstream audience. Luckily, The Factory mainly served as a process-oriented creative space where artists could intermingle. Warhol's philosophy when it came to guiding his artists was very much non-interference, encouraging The Velvets to create music authentic to them. Music historians and Velvet Underground enthusiasts abound have Warhol to thank for preserving The Velvet's less than

commercially viable sound. While recording their self-titled album, the group had issues with producers and engineers who tried commercializing their work, Reed contends:

Warhol didn't know anything about music, but when he came into the sessions as "producer," the dynamic quickly changed... "He just made it possible for us to be ourselves and go right ahead with it because he was Andy Warhol... He just sat there and said 'Ooooh, that's fantastic,' and the engineer would say, 'Oh yeah! Right! It is fantastic, isn't it?'"<sup>8</sup>

However, the one thing Andy pushed on them was the inclusion of an additional member, Nico. Though not initially included for her talent, Warhol reasoned to The Velvet Underground that an alternative rock band on their own would be grating and unpleasant to an audience; contending they needed to add another more attractive member for looks and intrigue. As stated by violist John Cale, "All of a sudden you realize the eye for publicity and the idea of this blonde iceberg in the middle of the stage next to us all dressed in black"<sup>9</sup>

Nico, although chosen for her looks, possessed an incredibly distinct singing voice; as discussed in Todd Haynes' "The Velvet Underground" documentary, as a German native her accent made for a "...deep, haunting timbre that sounded as if it had been sung from the depths of a cold, dark cave."<sup>10</sup>, and was described by The Guardian as a "...Teutonic quaver and beguiling lack of affect, gave everything she sang a poignancy that was almost otherworldly."<sup>11</sup>. With Warhol's help, they secured a deal with Verge records, and *The Velvet Underground and Nico* was released in 1967.

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<sup>8</sup> *The Factory Factor: Andy Warhol and the Velvet Underground*, Sandra Canosa, (Highbrow Magazine, 2016)

<sup>9</sup> *The Velvet Underground and Nico*, *The Velvet Underground*, 2021, <https://tv.apple.com/us/movie/the-velvet-underground/umc.cmc.69ic79cvvy80epfhz5efdgjjd..>

<sup>10</sup> *The Velvet Underground and Nico*, *The Velvet Underground*, 2021, <https://tv.apple.com/us/movie/the-velvet-underground/umc.cmc.69ic79cvvy80epfhz5efdgjjd..>

<sup>11</sup> "From the Velvets to the Void," The Guardian, March 16, 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2007/mar/16/popandrock3>.



Nico, Exploding Plastic Inevitable short, 1967



The Velvet Underground as the Exploding Plastic Inevitable, 1967

Initially, *The Velvet Underground and Nico* flopped because of its lyrical content and alternative sound, especially on tracks ‘Venus In Furs’, ‘Heroin’, and ‘The Black Angel’s Death Song’.

Though there was an extremely small receptive audience for it at the time, *The Velvet Underground and Nico* is now considered staple album, pioneering not only alternative rock and punk, but additionally in krautrock, post-punk, shoegaze, goth, and indie; and the album and band members are to this day praised as trailblazers by even the most acclaimed of artists. As David Bowie highlights, “There were elements of what Lou was doing that were just

unavoidably right. The nature of his lyric writing. Dylan had certainly brought a new kind of intelligence to pop song writing, but then Lou had taken it to the avant-garde.”<sup>12</sup>

With the album later influencing later punk bands to infuse the same provocativeness into their work, The Velvet’s performance style and general disregard for pleasing their audience seeped into later punk band’s ethos as well; and can be observed in punk bands like Iggy and The Stooges and The Sex Pistols. John Cale explains, “I had no intention of letting the music be anything other than troublesome to people. It was a revolutionary, radical situation. We really wanted to go out there and annoy people.”<sup>13</sup>

Artists like MC5 and their sister band Iggy and the Stooges were not only embodying this antagonization of their audience, but incorporating drama and theatricality to hard rock performance. Considered more rock and roll at the time but now recognized as distinctly proto punk, MC5 was known for their hard and fast sound that mixed psychedelic rock with garage rock.

Considered their little sister band, Iggy and the Stooges would open for MC5 at their concerts. And while the bands had their similarities, The Stooges’ frontman Iggy Pop was especially well known for his live on stage antics; notorious for smearing himself in various substances including but not limited to: peanut butter, raw meat, blood, and motor oil. He was notorious for being unpredictable during live performances and would often roll in broken glass, dive off stage and wrestle fans, climb to high places like speakers or high structures and stage dive into the crowd. In addition, band members would also ingest various drugs on stage during their sets.

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<sup>12</sup> *The Velvet Underground and Nico*, *The Velvet Underground*, 2021, <https://tv.apple.com/us/movie/the-velvet-underground/umc.cmc.69ic79cvvy80epfhz5efdgjld>.

<sup>13</sup> Clinton M. Heylin, *From the Velvets to the Voidoids: The Birth of American Punk Rock* (Chicago: A Capella Books, 2005).



Iggy pop Crowdsurfing at Crosley Field in Cincinnati  
By Tom Copi, Ohio, June 23, 1970



Iggy Pop at the Whisky a Go Go after rolling in shards of glass, West Hollywood, CA, 1974

Being surrounded by black Detroit and their music, they had a noticeable impact on The Stooges sound; with Iggy Pop attesting about trying to replicate the music he heard from black musicians in the Detroit music scene,

I realized that these guys were way over my head, and that what they were doing was so natural to them that it was ridiculous for me to make a studious copy of it, which is what most most white blues bands did<sup>14</sup> (Iggy Pop, 2016)

MC5's debut album was the first to have used the word "motherfuckers" as released by a major label. Besides profanity and a hard and fast sound, the album also made references, (although vague) to revolution. in their song *Ramblin Rose*, a few of the opening lines read:

"I wanna hear some revolution out there, brothers, I wanna hear a little revolution  
Brothers and sisters, the time has come for each and every one of you to decide  
Whether you are gonna be the problem or whether you are gonna be the solution"

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<sup>14</sup> Legs McNeil and Gillian McCain, "I Wanna Be Your Dog," essay, in *Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk* (Grove Press, 2016), 37.

The rest of the song makes no allusion to revolution, or even anything political. In fact, it is never made clear what their call for revolution is about. Perhaps it was clear to the band that rebellion was integral to the sound they were attempting to build off of.

At one of MC5's most notable gigs, the crowd devolved into a riot after the band showed up in a limousine.

We arrived downtown in the midst of the Motherfuckers [the crowd] banging on the doors of the Fillmore to be let in free. And at that moment comes this big symbol of capitalist pigism, a huge stretch limo, and the MC5 get out. The Motherfuckers start screaming 'TRAITORS! BETRAYAL! YOU'RE ONE OF THEM, NOT ONE OF US!'<sup>15</sup>

The crowd became so enraged they started smashing the band's equipment, setting the venue's seats on fire, breaking the records for sale, and threatening to kill the band members (an inadvertent foreshadowing of the behavior of future punk audiences and crowds). These empty calls and promises for revolution would become a common theme in the making of punk. In fact, the majority of these musicians' values were directly opposed to the revolutionary image they projected. Wayne Kramer, guitarist of MC5, confesses, "We were sexist bastards. We were not politically correct at all. We had the rhetoric of being revolutionary and new and different, but really what it was, was the boys get to go fuck and the girls cant complain about it."<sup>16</sup>

MC5's debut self-titled album came out in 1969, American politics were amidst an era of "uncivil wars", movements and political events like the civil rights movement, the vietnam war, and women's liberation movement were at the forefront of politics and social justice efforts. A time marked by a yearning for social upheaval and change, it was also why anti-establishment

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<sup>15</sup> Legs McNeil, *Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk* (New York: Grove Press, 2016), 60

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

and peace-focused music genres and movements continued to flourish; including the beatniks, the hippie movement, and the folk revival movement. All countercultures centered political activism as a core ideology.

However while the folk revival and hippie movements sought to resist inequality through peaceful protest and political action, many in the proto punk/rock and roll scene of the late sixties were not only “politically incorrect”, but bands like MC5 were literally white people attempting to copy black artists, according to Iggy Pop, “MC5 went beyond having a sense of humor about themselves, they were a parody. They just acted like black thugs with guitars. In Detroit, if you were a white kid, your dream would be to be a black thug with a guitar and play like one.”<sup>17</sup> Bands like MC5 took advantage of the socio-political unrest around them to inject a hollow sense of woke-ness into their otherwise lukewarm political messaging that talked of not much other than pop-y declarations of love. An attempt to benefit off the anti establishment/status quo that was in vogue, MC5’s music serves as an unintentional full circle moment for a white rock band co-opting rock’s roots in black culture.

The Stooges’ gritty and provocative style translated into their lyrics as well, notably with ‘I Wanna Be Your Dog’ off their debut and self-titled album, spoke of a desire to be sexually subservient. The album boasts sleigh bells and a one note piano drone just like their Velvet Underground predecessors, courtesy of John Cale who produced the album. In fact, later punk band The Sex Pistols’ Steve Jones learned how to play guitar along with The Stooges’ album *Raw Power*. The Stooges drew lots of creative inspiration from The Velvets once Cale started to produce for them. In addition to the sleigh bells, another sonic commonality the bands shared was their use of droning. Manager John Sinclair notes,

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<sup>17</sup> 1. Legs McNeil, *Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk* (New York: Grove Press, 2016), .

Iggy kind of created this psychedelic drone act as a backdrop for his front man's antics.... they'd just get this tremendous drone going but they weren't songs they were like demented grooves - 'trances' I called them. They were closer to North African music than they were to rock.<sup>18</sup>

While The Velvets used their fridge and Cale's viola, guitarist Ron Asheton explains The Stooges usage of non-instrument objects to create unique sounds, in a very DIY manor.

We invented some instruments that we used at the first show. we had a blender with a little bit of water in it and put a mic right down in it, and just turned it on... then we had a washboard with contact mics. So Iggy would put on golf shoes and get on the washboard and he would just kind of Shuffle around. We had contact mics on the 50 gallon oil drums that Scotty played, and he used two hammers as drumsticks.<sup>19</sup>

Iggy and the Stooges built on The Velvet Underground's raw, unpolished, and experimental sound, embracing a similar sense of rebelliousness and countercultural philosophy of playing for the displeasure of their audience. Channeling the intensity of The Velvet Underground's music into their own brand of primal rock, Iggy and the Stooges drew inspiration in experimentation and boundary-pushing the ethos and sound of their predecessors that shaped their own approach to rock and roll.

Around the same time, David Bowie would debut his character Ziggy Stardust, who would pioneer the glam rock genre as its alien prince. The idea for Ziggy came to Bowie as a melding of Lou Reed and Iggy Pop's artistic character with looks consisting of glitter, makeup, and elaborate costuming resulting in a colorful and androgynous aesthetic. With the latter being

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<sup>18</sup> Legs McNeil and Gillian McCain, "I Wanna Be Your Dog," essay, in *Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk* (Grove Press, 2016), 40

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



part of a larger British trend of gender fluidity in pop culture, with styles in high fashion and the average citizen leaning more androgynous than ever, pushback in response to the 50's values of modesty, conformity, and fitting traditionally masculinity or femininity. This can be seen not only in the feminine masculinity of glam rock, but in the rise of boyish or gamine models in the fashion world, with models like “Twiggy”, “The Shrimp”, and Pattie Boyd deemed the “It” girls of their time, with everyday fashions morphing to reflect the more carefree, liberated values of the sixties.



Vogue UK, May 1955



Vogue UK, August 1965

Glam Rock utilized this gender fluidity to make for an otherworldly feel; with much of the lyrical content from this era incorporating celestial themes of space, aliens, and planets. Ziggy's origin story goes: he was an alien rockstar who has come to earth to deliver a message of hope before impending apocalyptic disaster, whose self demise comes from an ironic indulgence in fame and excess. The character was accompanied by a song of the character's name, and parent album *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*, released in 1972. Tracks from which served as direct and crucial inspiration to bands of the NYC punk scene The Ramones, with the guitar riff for The Ramones' 'Teenage Lobotomy' being a faster, choppier descendant of that of Bowie's 'Hang Onto Yourself'.

Bowie's exploration in androgynous gender expression and extraterrestrial themes became apparent with the release of 'Life on Mars?', 1971. This exploration and gender fluidity especially seeped into his Ziggy stardust character, becoming a staple in the glam rock genre. Ziggy's look included soon to be glam rock staples like bright and bold eyeshadow and lipstick, bright orange hair in an androgynous cut, feminine silhouettes and platform/heeled boots.



Bowie for Masayoshi Sukita, 1972



Bowie dressing for a show by  
Roger Bamber, 1973



Bowie performing live by Michael Ochs, 1973

A fellow glam rock artist and subsequent adopter of similar attire, songwriter and frontman of band T-rex, Marc Bolan would become known for his use of glitter, metallics, animal print and feathers onstage. T-rex's music would inject not only these fashion touch stones, but also a liberated candor in the mentioning of sex into the genre. Tracks like 'Solid Gold Easy Action', 'Hot Love', and 'Jeepster', exemplify Bolan's playful and romantic lyrical style.

While glam rock started and flourished in the UK, the lighthearted, spritely qualities of the genre never truly took off in America; perhaps because toying with sexuality on stage in a lighthearted way was well loved a form of theatricality in the country, per the tradition of the British pantomime. When the genre made it to America, glam rock became an exploration of the seedy underbelly of the UK's glitz and glamor, translated into a grittier, darker version of its British counterpart.

## American Punk: 1973-77

While American glam rock lacked the colorfulness and interest in the otherworldly, it relished in an almost depraved indulgence in themes of sexuality and gender.

Bands like Alice Cooper and the New York Dolls similarly gained a reputation for their love of spectacle in performance. While The Dolls were well known for their drag, Alice Cooper was known for their elaborate stage props and gimmicks, including a fake electric chair, and releasing live snakes on stage. Cooper would fake beheading himself while performing 'I Love the Dead', and during 'Dead Babies', the frontman would chop apart a baby doll with an axe on stage. Lyric-wise, no Alice Cooper song encapsulates the "no future" nihilism of punk than 'Schools Out For Ever'. The song is a strong precursor not only in its fast and loud playing, but the content speaks to a distaste towards authority as well as boredom with the status quo.

In a punk vein, the band had the staple of a self-sufficient and DIY approach to producing their own music and was a believer in self promotion, with the members of the band often doubling as their own managers and producers. Alice Cooper's willingness to push boundaries and provoke audiences helped to establish him as a pioneer of shock rock and an influence on the development of punk rock.

The New York Dolls took glam rock's light suggestion of femininity and dialed it up to the max. Known for their high camp drag looks, the five members would don full wigs, jewelry, loud makeup, tight spandex, dresses, heels, and anything that fit a feminine wardrobe.



Promotion for their Lipstick Killers tour, 1973  
*"Introducing the New York Dolls  
 A band you're gonna like, whether you like it or not"*

The Dolls not only belonged to glam and shock rock, but they were key in the budding alternative music scene in early seventies NYC. Facilitated by the opening of legendary music venue, CBGB. Short for Country, Bluegrass, and Blues, is considered by many to be the cradle of punk as a genre. The venue started as a dive bar in The Bowery on the lower east side of NYC, known at the time for drugs, crime, and poverty. This of course was because the neighborhood was home to a large low income population, with even a homeless shelter being located just above the bar. In fact, there was another bar next to CBGB that was notorious for sex workers drinking themselves to death on site. As musician Miriam Linna attests, "There's no words to describe how desolate and undesirable the lower east side was to people at that time. The first time I came, I walked down the street and it was so dirty. I mean, there was just garbage and rats everywhere, and there were tons of bums."<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Jesse Rifkin, *This Must Be the Place: Music, Community, and Vanished Spaces in New York City* (Toronto, Ontario: Hanover Square Press, 2023).



CBGB, Circa 1977

Though legacy-wise married to rock, CBGB's music was originally meant to center music from the genres of its titular name; the first non country, bluegrass, or blues band to play there were The Magic Tramps: pioneers of NYC's glam rock scene. Permission for their first performance started at CBGB owner Hilly Kristal joking, "If you can build a stage you can play here"<sup>21</sup>. CBGB is widely considered the birthplace of the NYC punk scene largely due to the venue's unapologetically grimy and sometimes grating atmosphere that attracted an audience in the same vein.

One could argue a large part of punk being attributed to gritty and grimy venues and artists such as CBGB is the shared rejection of femininity by punk artists and crowds. Punk, while not overtly masculine, is distinct in its rejection of femininity, perhaps as not to be mistaken for having any homosexual association. This is seemingly why glam rock bands and artists are thought of as a distinct and separate camp of rock with minimal correlation or influence on punk. Even artists in bands who crossdressed like the New York Dolls would reject

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

femininity out of costume. Trans artists like Jane County have been lost to time, with many uninterested in crediting queer artists with influencing a genre as un-queer as punk.

County, while certainly not the inventor of shock rock, absolutely tops any other self proclaimed shock rock artist; with her performances being so outrageous venues would stop her mid performance.

They were horrified by me because they didn't want people to think 'gay' meant being like me on stage, rolling around licking dildos and sitting on toilets and pretending to shit using dog food. It freaked them out so much, they pulled the plug on my shows. They said: 'We will not have New York University turned into a 42nd Street smut show.' They were afraid that someone was going to think that they liked that stuff, too.<sup>22</sup>

Unlike County, the first wave of Regular patrons and performers at CBGBs were distinctly cis. Perhaps punk's fanbase wanting it to be associated with straightness is why not only queer artists are often glossed over in its history, but queer-friendly venues such as Max's too. Max's served as a safe gathering space for not only the alternative rock scene, but a vibrant community of varied artists. In addition, Max's was equidistant from both Hotel Chelsea and Albert, the former housing resident and visiting artists like Bob Dylan Leonard Cohen, Janis Joplin, Chet Baker, John Cale, and Nico. With Hotel Albert housing Joni Mitchel, James Taylor, Jonathan Richman, and Carly Simon; as well as serving as a practice space for artists like Bob Dylan and The Band. At the actual venue, proto punk names like Alice Cooper and Iggy and the Stooges made regular appearances. While Max's patrons and performers had a much more

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<sup>22</sup> "'we Got Shot at' – The Outrageous Life of Jayne County, the First Trans Rock'n'Roller," The Guardian, May 18, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2021/may/18/shot-outrageous-life-jayne-county-first-trans-rocknroller-electric-chairs-memoir>.

diverse crowd and genres, it often gets left out due to the large crowd of Gay, lesbian, nonbinary, trans and queer patrons.

Besides being known for being truer to the idea of punk we have now, at its core CBGB was a biker bar with an environment which to put lightly, was notoriously disgusting. There was seemingly no one who cleaned the space. The owner had a dog who's habit of urinating and defecating indoors was never reprimanded, not even when it would relieve itself on stage while the bands were playing. Unsurprisingly, the bathroom was especially filthy, covered with graffiti, stickers, and spray paint. It was so famously dirty in fact, that since the venue's closing The MET re-created it as a part of their 2013 exhibition *Punk: Chaos to Couture*, complete with faint, muffled music of bands that played there for an authentic feel.



Facsimile of CBGB bathroom,  
Punk: Chaos To Couture © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013

Aside from the grime that gave it a distinct atmosphere, there were several other factors contributing to CBGB's success. For starters because of licensing laws, the venue only allowed original material and all money charged at the door went straight to the performers, and CBGBs



charged no room fee to perform, with the owner's earnings being made on drinks bought by attendants.

Most of the regularly performing bands lived within a few blocks of the venue, including regular artists like Patti Smith, Richard Hell, The Ramones, and Television, making for a consistent crowd and performance roster of the same players and guests; essentially all just watching one another play. This made for a supportive community of creatives where bands and artists could try new material while being assured good turnout, the bar functioned as a communal gathering space, so patrons would attend no matter who was playing. On top of these perks, if you were a regular performer, the club provided free food and drinks; This meant struggling artists suddenly had a space where they could make money performing, eat for free, test out new material, and practice performing for a live audience.

Of course, young white artists moving to a neighborhood made up of predominantly poor people of color had its own geo social impacts. With the influx of this new demographic, the residents of the bowery were slowly displaced as CBGB's and the art population grew. As Arto Lindsay of DNA attests,

The lower east side was really cheap, and kids poured in and shared space with people who couldn't really afford to live anywhere else or weren't allowed to live anywhere else. So it wasn't innocent, even back then. You could say that the punk and post-punk movements on the Lower East Side were a kind of gentrification.<sup>23</sup>

This thriving community of creatives came at the cost of the comfort of many locals,

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<sup>23</sup> Jesse Rifkin, *This Must Be the Place: Music, Community, and Vanished Spaces in New York City* (Toronto, Ontario: Hanover Square Press, 2023), 205.

And today it is clear the reason CBGB was able to play loud rock music all night despite its placement directly under a homeless shelter correlated to the fact its population had no power to stop it.

Throughout the mid seventies, the first wave of regular performers and bands started to outgrow and trickle out of CBGB, but the initial flourishing art community had attracted itself more patrons interested in all the frenzy, and soon the casual t-shirts and leather jackets of the more established names had turned into a uniform for what was subsequently dubbed the NYC punks scene. When the regular lineups started to include the dead boys, the cramps, the talking heads, it marked a turning point in the venue's scene. Suddenly there were people coming from out of town to be a part of the scene.

There were kids coming in from New Jersey and other places outside Manhattan, dressing up and pretending to be punks. I actually caught some once when I was just walking by: These people had parked their car nearby and were changing into their punk clothes that they had brought with them and then going to CBGB. They had their CBGB's costume in order to be a part of CBGB<sup>24</sup>

With the venue serving as a gravitational pull towards the lower east side, with the music scene drawing more people from out of town with more cash to spend. Because of this the late seventies saw the overt gentrification of the lower east side, now home to boutiques and artisanal coffee shops, the once grimy seedy Bowery is now the seventh most expensive place to live in New York City, with the median cost for a home being \$2.8 million.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Jesse Rifkin, *This Must Be the Place: Music, Community, and Vanished Spaces in New York City* (Toronto, Ontario: Hanover Square Press, 2023), 209

<sup>25</sup> "Bowery, Manhattan, NY 2023 Housing Market: Realtor.Com®," realtor.com, accessed December 1, 2023, [https://www.realtor.com/realestateandhomes-search/Bowery\\_Manhattan\\_NY/overview](https://www.realtor.com/realestateandhomes-search/Bowery_Manhattan_NY/overview).



315 Bowery, circa 2015

Around the time CBGB started to be codified into a scene, first wave band The Ramones were making waves in the UK, with their tour coinciding with the beginning of the first glimmers of punk in the UK, going on to impact prominent British bands' look and sound.

NYC laid the groundwork of distinct musical styling, fashion sensibility, and a fanbase for punk, but it is far from the setting of punk's culmination and peak. With the scene being formed in the city largely as a result of a concentration of artists all experimenting with a new or similar sound and shared ideologies; with the DIY/inexperienced approach of bands in the scene coming from a lust for to participate in music as a medium of creation and community.

By the time Britain had found punk, the country was in political disarray. In the aftermath of World War II Britain still struggled to get back on its feet; bringing about a new era in the UK marked by economic adversities including stagflation, high unemployment, low wages, coal miner strikes, the three day week, and deep national debt. Even though Britain still held a great deal of power, the once an imperial superpower saw a decline in their influence and authority, having to face that, to quote prime minister Harold Macmillan, Britain was now "Just another

country”. In addition to weakening prestige, the Cold War brought a constant, looming threat of nuclear war and global conflict to the UK’s populace. This led to a culture of fear and anxiety, allowing the conservative party the opportunity to permeate much of the collective consciousness, positioning themselves as the fix to Britain’s problems brought on by the labour party being in charge; with the country even seeing an upswing in neo-fascist ideology on the fringes of society as well as street crime. With slim opportunities for adolescents to get higher education and reliable income, many of Britain’s young adults felt particularly susceptible to this restlessness and discontent. It was this combination of dissatisfaction for the world they were inheriting as a generation of burgeoning adults, as well as the conservatism much of the older generations were turning to, that must have made loud rebellion so appealing.

While NYC punk was largely born of a social scene, the scene in the UK was adopted and quickly built upon more as a reaction to economic and sociopolitical unrest among the UK’s youths. This can be seen in the regional differences in dress, the punk scene in NYC was a casual artist’s community; at CBGB patrons came as they were, with little frills or flamboyance. As CBGB owner Hilly Kristal testifies,

CBGB bands and audiences weren’t style conscious in the way ...the English punks were later on...Even though CBGB is referred to as a punk club, there was never much of that fashion here. Richard Hell was probably the most unusual dresser at CBGB, He used to wear the same T-shirts as everybody else, but he pinned them together with safety pins<sup>26</sup>

While Punk was more a social scene in NYC, by the time it traveled to Britain with Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren, the alternative values appealed more to Britain’s youth due to the state of their country. Britain as a whole was grappling with no longer having

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<sup>26</sup> Andrew Bolton et al., *Punk: Chaos to Couture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013).

the power and credibility they once had as a global superpower, with its political influence over other countries waning, including the US.

During the twentieth century, in a reflection of the change in the balance of power between the US and Great Britain, the latter's social and cultural influence on the former ineluctably declined. Conversely, the impact of America on Great Britain became substantial. The influences were economic and commercial, social and intellectual.<sup>27</sup>

This shift in power manifested in not only economic but social distress that touched the collective; making for a populace that felt a sense of dread and tension. These conditions made for a reactive youth population looking for not only community but a form of cathartic expression.

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<sup>27</sup> Kathleen Burk, *Old World, New World: The Story of Britain and America* (London: Abacus, 2009), 310.

## British Punk 1973-77

When the term punk surfaced it didn't mean anything. We were doing something and people gave it a name. Maybe it came from America where there was a similar attitude among some of the youths...the punk 'look' evolved in our shop at 430 King's Road. Malcolm and I changed the name and décor of the shop to suit the clothes as our ideas evolved. I did not see myself as a fashion designer but as someone who wished to confront the rotten status quo through the way I dressed...eventually this sequence of ideas culminated into punk<sup>28</sup>

When one thinks of punk music and fashion, there are seldom better known names that come to mind for the punk genre than Vivienne Westwood and The Sex Pistols. Although the seeds of punk were very much sowed in America, the two have come to be somewhat poster children for the scene in the public eye.

The Vivienne Westwood career we know began after she met Malcolm McLaren through her brother. Westwood worked practical and relatively creativity free jobs as a sales assistant, primary school teacher, and factory worker; and though her whole life she had been designing clothing and aspiring to be a designer, she worked these jobs in the name of steady income.

When she met McLaren, he was an established face in the London music and art scene, no doubt an attractive quality to Westwood, as he lived the creative career she had been trying to realize her whole life. Some time after they had gotten together, Malcolm came into ownership of the clothing store where he was employed, rebranding to market to the local teddy boy scene,

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<sup>28</sup> Andrew Bolton et al., *Punk: Chaos to Couture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013).

a retro inspired fad amongst london's youth in music and clothing and invited Vivienne to design the store's clothing, at the time named "Let it Rock".

After designing for the teddy boy crowd for some time, Vivienne could no longer ignore her creative differences with their dogma, as she felt they weren't rebelling for any worthwhile cause. Eventually Westwood convinced McClaren to pivot the store's intended audience to alternative rock fans generally, as Westwood had the foresight to see the teddy boys would be a short lived fad.

The boutique went through several other rounds of rebrandings, from the teddy boy styles to fetishwear marketing towards the more extreme rock fans by including chains, leather, and provocative graphic t-shirts. When the duo rebranded again as SEX in 1974, the new name came with a fresh style heavily influenced by the fashions of artists in NYC, thanks to a trip to NYC for the then couple so Malcolm could search for artists to promote Vivienne's work. On his quest for a muse, a trip to CBGB introduced him to Richard Hell, who at the time was part of the band Television.

His head was down, he never looked up. He sang this song, 'Blank Generation', his hair was spiked, he had a kind of nihilistic air. He looked contemporary to me, he looked everything that rock 'n' roll wasn't. He had a poetry about him. He, for me, was very creative, he really was art and I thought, that's exactly who I want to sell in my store, that icon.<sup>29</sup>

He was this wonderful, bored, drained, scarred, dirty guy with a torn t-shirt. I don't think there was a safety pin in there, though there may have been, but it was certainly a torn and ripped t-shirt. And this look, this image of this guy, this spiky hair, everything about

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<sup>29</sup> John Scanlan, *Sex Pistols: Poison in the Machine* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2016), 79.

it— there was no question i'd take it back to London. By being inspired by it, I was going to imitate it and transform it into something more English<sup>30</sup>



Richard Hell, ~1974

After seeing his performance, McClaren told Hell he would help any possible way if Richard came back to London with him to realize his vision of a band Vivienne could dress, but Hell declined. Since McClaren couldn't get Richard to work with him, he turned his attention towards the people already frequenting his store, as he realized some of the best musicians in London already came to him. Steve Jones, Paul Cook, and wally Nightingale had started playing together, calling themselves “The Swankers”. When McClaren discovered them, Jones asked him to manage them in 1974, with SEX store employee Glen Matlock eventually joining the band as the bassist. Since the band’s inception, all their equipment had been stolen.

When he decided at one point that he was going to play the drums, Jones dismantled and nabbed a complete drum kit from the Palais, straight off the venue’s revolving stage –

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<sup>30</sup> Andrew Bolton et al., *Punk: Chaos to Couture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013).



which conveniently wheeled around to facilitate easy access – into their minivan, also stolen (vehicles were Jones’s other speciality as a thief)<sup>31</sup>

Steve Jones and Glen Matlock even stole equipment from David Bowie’s final performance as Ziggy Stardust. Once McClaren had officially been appointed manager, he hit the streets in search of someone who fit his vision for The Sex Pistols, looks wise. McClaren was not concerned with technical skill, as his main prerogative was promoting Westwood’s punk look and clothing,

So more important was how his prospective frontman would fit the look and personality he wanted the pistols to emulate. Eventually he scouted John Lydon, described in Sex Pistols Poison in the Machine as:

a badly dressed street urchin with a style all of his own, improvised from clothes that seemed to have been attacked with a razor blade, defaced with slogans, and put back together with safety pins. He wore a Pink Floyd T-shirt that had the words ‘I HATE’ carefully inscribed above the band’s name. His hair was wild and unusual, and reminiscent of the kind of spiky crop Richard Hell wore.<sup>32</sup>

McClaren was struck at the resemblance between Lydon and Hell, and pushed the other members to consider him as a bandmate despite indifference and outward dislike from the existing members. Lydon was welcomed into the Pistols after performing a jukebox rendition of Alice Cooper’s ‘Eighteen’.

Scouting members for their looks became a recurring theme, from the author Nik Cohn on attending a Sex Pistols show:

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<sup>31</sup> John Scanlan, *Sex Pistols: Poison in the Machine* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2016)

<sup>32</sup> John Scanlan, *Sex Pistols: Poison in the Machine* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2016), 79.

Then the Pistols started, incredibly bad, incredibly good, and the crowd forgot me in favor of beating up on each other. Punches, kicks, total chaos. One little bastard in particular seemed determined to start a riot. He was ugly and drunk, completely filthy, and every time the Pistols started a new number he half turned to his left and punched whoever was next to him...I caught him off balance and he was very fragile, so he went flying. Crashed into the guy next to him, and that guy also went flying. And the next one, and maybe even the next one, down they all went, skittles in a bowling alley. And that... was how I met Sid Vicious.<sup>33</sup>

A frequenter of their shows, Sid Vicious was a friend of Johnny Rotten prior to his recruitment into the band. Though he had no experience playing bass, he had the punk look that fit so perfectly into the band, McClaren was willing to overlook the fact he was both musically inept and addicted to heroin. Though brought on to boost the Pistols' alternative look and not much else, Vicious delivered. Even though he was the latest member to join, Vicious embodied the Pistols' punk ethos to a fault, indulging in not only heroin but frequent aggravated assault, self mutilation, and abuse of his girlfriend.

It was on their anarchy in the UK tour in Dallas that Sid on stage cut the words "Gimme a fix" into his torso. He was so under the influence (presumably of heroin) that he did not feel this or when he was headbutted by an audience member, hence his bleeding nose.

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<sup>33</sup> John Scanlan, *Sex Pistols: Poison in the Machine* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2016)



Sid Vicious & Johnny Rotten, 1978 - Longhorn Ballroom, Dallas, TX

Now catering to only the most hardcore rock fans, Westwood and McClaren used The Pistols to project a specific image to both attract an audience as well as media attention. They did this by curating not only the polarizing and rebellious clothing in which they dressed the band wore, but in curating a cult of personality.

Before their first performance, McClaren plowed the boys with alcohol and reminded them to “be bad,” while guitarist Steve Jones helped himself to a pre performance mandrax. During their set Johnny Rotten kept eating the snacks provided by the venue and spitting them into the audience. It was this among other stunts that gave them a reputation for abusing their audiences, including showing up to their shows heavily intoxicated, and intentionally breaking borrowed equipment. This behavior was encouraged by McClaren; in his eyes The Pistols were ushering in an entirely new attitude, juxtaposed against the sixties hippie’s peace and flower power ideology.



The Sex Pistols 1976? Right to left: Johnny Rotten, Sid Vicious, Steve Jones, Paul Cook

Performing at the same event were the 101ers, who played generic R&B for the time. Among their members was Joe Strummer, who saw their crazy performance, and quit the very next day, saying “Yesterday I was a crud. Then I saw the Sex Pistols and I became a king and I decided to move into the future.” Within days he formed The Clash, one of many bands who followed the punk road The Pistols were paving; their style and attitude attracted a crowd of young like minded music enjoyers as they performed through the summer and fall of 1976, thus solidifying punk as a social and music scene in the UK.

On October eighth 1976 The Sex Pistols signed a two-year recording contract with EMI records, and on November first of 1976, their record label made the band appear last minute on Bill Grundy’s today show as a replacement for the band Queen who was supposed to fill the slot.

Johnny Rotten, Steve Jones, Paul Cook, and Glen Matlock sit in interviewee chairs accompanied by members of the Bromley Contingent (including Siouxsie Sioux); among them is someone wearing a swastika armband. Steve Jones is wearing a shirt with boobs on it, smoking a cigarette. The band and the contingent have helped themselves to the free bar. In the live aired interview, Steve Jones calls Grundy a “dirty bastard” and “dirty fucker”, someone calls out “we fuckin spent it” in response to Grundy’s questioning about the 40,000 pounds given to them by their record label. Johnny Rotten at one point says Beethoven, Bach, and Brahms are all “wonderful people, they really turn us on.”



The Sex Pistols’ guest appearance on the Bill Grundy today show, Nov. 1 1976  
 Pictured left to right: John Lydon, Glen Matlock, Steve Jones, Paul Cool, Bill Grundy, Siouxsie Sioux (top right)

Their appearance on Grundy’s show served as a sharp turning point in the Pistols’ reputation and public image, the impact of the interview was almost immediate and basically overnight The Sex Pistols had permeated the cultural zeitgeist of the UK; and they had even got Bill Grundy suspended from his own show. It was this publicity that allowed them to reach teens and new punks for whom they would serve as the music and fashion template for in the years to

come, however it was the same exposure that horrified much of the country and caused outcry at The Pistols' behavior and presence as a group.

The following is a quote published in The Guardian newspaper the day after: "After too many years of drug-taking, peace-loving, long-haired gentlemen, what better news value than drug-hating, hateloving, short-haired gentlemen who, as Bill Grundy said on Today, 'make the Rolling Stones seem clean'"<sup>34</sup>



Daily Mirror Issue December 3, 1976

*"The Sex Pistols are leaders of the new 'punk rock' pop cult. They hurled four-letter words at Grundy during an interview on Thames TV's tea-time programme Today on Wednesday. The filthy language brought a flood of complaints by viewers—and an inquiry by the TV company yesterday"*

<sup>34</sup> Steve Turner, "The Anarchic Rock of the Young and Doeful," *The Guardian*, December 3, 1976, 13.

This media outburst happened immediately before their first tour, "Anarchy in the UK", and the fear of their public indecency caused 24 out of the 31 venues they had booked to cancel their booked shows. The Sex Pistols and the other bands on the 'Anarchy in the UK' tour (The Damned, The Clash and Johnny Thunders's Heartbreakers) found themselves trapped in hotels to avoid leering paparazzi eager to demonize and berate them in the media. In fact, there was so much fear and disgust toward these band of delinquents, the factory workers tasked with packaging their records refused to handle them, which halted their production. Because the demonization of the Pistols had by this point reached Global status, their record label at the time EMI being associated with the band began to see the effect on their own image. Not only was the label's artistic taste called into question, but being professionally tethered to The Sex Pistols name made it difficult to advertise unrelated products that the label had hoped to put on the market. Because of this, EMI dropped the Sex Pistols in January of 1977. One month later, Glen Matlock, their bass player quit the band due to tension between him and Johnny Rotten, who he found impossible to work with. McLaren confirmed the rumors to media outlets in a telegram, which declared that Matlock had been kicked out because he liked The Beatles and "went on too long about Paul McCartney". In the same note he announced Matlock would be replaced with Vicious.

Charges to pay		POST OFFICE <b>TELEGRAM</b> Profile. This headed in Office of origin and Service Instructions. Words.	No. OFFICE STAMP
Tarif £			
V.A.T. £			
Total £			

RECEIVED

From: Malcolm McLaren

By: Malcolm McLaren

B 183 1747 LONDON T 86

DEREK JOHNSON NEW MUSICAL EXPRESS KINGSREACH TOWER  
STAMFORD ST SE 1

YES DEREK GLEN MATLOCK WAS THROWN OUT OF THE SEX  
PISTOLS SO IM TOLD BECAUSE HE WENT ON TOO LONG  
ABOUT PAUL MCCARTNEY STOP EMI WAS ENOUGH STOP THE  
BEATLES WAS TOO MUCH STOP SID VICIOUS THEIR BEST  
FRIEND AND ALWAYS A MEMBER OF THE GROUP BUT  
UNHEARD AS YET WAS ENLISTED STOP HIS BEST  
CREDENTIAL WAS HE GAVE MICK KENT WHAT HE DESERVED  
MANY MONTHS AGO AT THE HUNDRED CLUB LOVE AND PEACE  
MALCOLM MCLAREN

SE 1 SEX PISTOLS TSO TQMS LNAU

For free repetition of doubtful words telegrams "TELEGRAMS ENQUIRY" or call, with this form at office of delivery. Other enquiries should be accompanied by this form, and, if possible, the envelope. 8 or C

McLaren's telegram to the New Musical Express announcing Matlock's departure from The Sex Pistols

*“Yes Derek Matlock was thrown out of the Sex Pistols so i'm told because he went on too long about Paul McCartney Stop EMI was enough stop the beatles was too much stop Sid Vicious their best friend and always a member of the group but unheard as yet enlist stop his best credential was he gave mick kent what he many months ago at the hundred club Malcolm McClaren”*

The combination of dropping members, public outrage and drug abuse by members contributed to rising tensions. There were however members who were spiraling out of control faster than others. Though Sid's antics would later prove to be a large contributor in the band's downfall, while they were still together Vicious was notorious for violent outbursts, even landing two men in the hospital after a physical altercation between them and Vicious and a friend of his called Jah Wobble. This scuffle resulted in the band getting dropped by their second label, A&M.

It was when they got signed to their third label Virgin records, the band was set up by the label to perform “God Save the Queen” at the height of jubilee week festivities on June 7th. The boat on which they performed was packed with journalists, press, photographers, expensive



recording equipment and a large, *heavily* intoxicated crowd. Mr. Wobble had a notoriously short fuse and it was no mistake McClaren secured him an invite, McClaren intended to coax him into hijacking the vessel and running it into a bridge or a police patrol boat to provoke outrage in the public and press. Though he didn't end up going that far, Mr. Wobble did start a fight that spread throughout the entire boat of about two hundred people aboard. Needless to say, the performance was shut down by police, and dozens were arrested including Westwood, McClaren, and Wobble.

'God Save the Queen' was one of the most outwardly angry and political songs to penetrate the mainstream that decade, and to the public's horror, post release the song was speedily climbing the charts. All this despite music stores/newspapers refusing to run the original advertisement, featuring a portrait of queen Elizabeth with her eyes and mouth blocked out in favor of newspaper clipping-style text spelling the band and titular name.



Advert for God save the Queen circa 1977

With the outrage sparked by the release, Virgin records made sure to let like-minded punk listeners know the single would likely not be available for long, with each poster warning

*“It won’t be on the new album and it may not be out at all for very long. So get it while you can.”*

Though The Sex Pistols as a band largely ended up being a vessel for McClaren to pull publicity stunts, the extreme nature of the band allows us as outsiders and music historians to observe what led to the Pistols being the pinnacle of punk as a genre. While punk still very much exists to this day, it flourished in the political unrest of the general distrust of the government among its youth’s need to rebel against cultural norms of the time. The Sex Pistols serve as the

culmination of the punk genre as well as representations of its ideals in a musical, political, and fashion sense, and rightly served as inspiration for genres and bands to succeed them.

The Damned was another key player in the UK punk scene. They debuted July 6, 1976, just two days after The Clash. The Damned debuted at the 100 club punk festival, alongside not only The Clash, but Siouxsie and the Banshees, The Pistols, as well as The Buzzcocks. Though The Damned and really all other events of the night were overshadowed by Sid Vicious smashing a pint glass on the edge of the stage, spraying shards into the front row and harming crowd members. The incident would later be used by the press as an example of how punk bands/audience members/the subculture was dangerous.

The Damned stood out from other bands in the UK punk scene not only for their quick, catchy, material; but unlike the other bands of the scene who's creative inspiration involved disregard/rejection of rock music's pioneers and their predecessors in favor of fancying themselves pioneers of an entirely new kind of music. The rest of punk in the UK was anti-nostalgic. The "no future" cry of the sex Pistols resonated with a generation of teens whose country was in political and economic shambles, because for them, there was no future; no work or education, no financial stability, no peace. With this inability to see a future came an element of infantilization, a desire or perhaps need to stay young. Andrew Bolton of the MET writes,

...The clarion cry of 'No future' expressed a desire to stay young forever, to remain in a state of perpetual adolescence. This arrested development was played out by punks in their adoption of clothes and accessories from childhood, including fragments of school uniforms such as school ties, shirts, and blazers. Soo catwoman, a punk icon whose hairstyle resembles the ears of a cat, was famous for wearing pacifiers as accessories.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Andrew Bolton et al., *Punk: Chaos to Couture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013).



Soo Catwoman, ~1977

The Damned would go on to release 'New Rose' October of the same year, sneakily releasing what is now considered the first punk single, much to Malcolm McClaren's dismay. His animosity for the band continued for the rest of both The Damned and The Pistols's lives, though he set aside his preoccupations and booked The Damned for The Pistols's Anarchy in the UK tour because he knew they would draw crowds. Though the tour flopped because of The Pistols's Bill Grundy interview, venues turned the Pistols away but not The Damned, so they went on performing on the Pistols's tour without them. Not four days after the tour started, McClaren used their betrayal as an excuse to kick them off the tour. Smearing their name in the punk scene and further outcasting them in their home scene.

The Damned's music was notably less focused on politics and the 'destroy everything' punk ethos, but they had the same energy and electricity that allowed them to draw big crowds and attention.

Among the amassed fans and new faces of the scene were a group of particularly dedicated followers of the Pistols dubbed the "Bromley Contingent" by journalist Caroline Coon. Among them were Siouxsie Sioux, Steven Severin, and Billy Idol, who all went on to achieve their own musical success. In their early days, the Bromley Contingent adopted the same classic punk look as it was coming to fruition in The Pistols' early days. This not only due to their fandom of the Pistols and the blossoming diy London punk scene, but they also (like many if not all other punks in the area) had access to SEX, and shopped Vivienne's designs.

The evolved punk look consisted of distressed mohair knits, spiked accessories and hair, unisex eye makeup, neck ties, safety pins, creeper platform shoes, and of course plenty of DIY alterations, stitching, rips, and writing in pen.



Sheila Rock *Young Punks*

As the Pistols found their look as well as sound, their clothing consisted of a few trademark styles meant to shock and visually disrupt.

Plaid, a pattern that has become almost synonymous with Westwood's work, likely chosen for not only its history of being worn by the working class, but also its history as a banned garment. The Scottish Dress Act of 1746, put in place after the Jacobite uprising in Scotland, was the British government's way of suppressing Scottish identity and tradition, by stripping people of their rights to wear Scottish highland traditional dress.

Bondage wear, loved by punks for its shock factor, bondage straps were put on pants, harnesses were worn as accessories, and latex and rubber were worn as any other fabric. The fetishized, sexual nature of all these garments made for great shock factor

Crazy hair: mohawks, liberty spikes, bright eye-catching colors of dye, and spikey, short, androgynous styles for women signaled a lack of care for beauty in favor of a chaotic, wild look; key players of the punk philosophy.

Graphic and political imagery: Punks often adorned intentionally controversial and political symbolism and imagery. Pioneered by Westwood, she felt reclaiming symbols for a political statement was important. Her signature muslin shirt or shirts with intentionally provocative words, phrases, or images on her clothing such as "destroy", naked children, defaced face of the queen, "be reasonable, demand the impossible", and of course most controversially, the utilization of the nazi swastika and armband. SEX's clothing was made in the punk spirit of offending and . McClaren has stated, "We messed around with imagery that basically was provocative, and more often than not, to do with sex, and if it wasn't to do with sex it was to do with politics."<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Andrew Bolton et al., *Punk: Chaos to Couture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013).

However, the desire to shock and disturb led some ...simple, punks to don swastikas and nazi paraphernalia. While a great number of these punks only wore it for shock value, this in turn attracted a subset of punks who donned the nazi symbolism unironically.



Pictured: Siouxsie Sioux Sid Vicious, and Vivienne Westwood respectively, donning swastika a armband and shirts

The Sex Pistols caused a domino effect in the UK, and by the time they disbanded in 1978 they left a tangible impact in the UK alternative scene; directly influencing bands and artists such as The Clash, the Buzzcocks, The Damned, Generation X, Siouxsie and the Banshees, X-Ray Spex, and Sham 69. While The Sex Pistols' influenced other artists and punks by means of DIY approach to adornments like safety pins, studs, ripped fabric, spiky dyed hair,

Dr. Marten brand boots, and a rebellious attitude that contributed as much to the cultural movement of punk as their fashion; we have Pistol influenced artists like The Clash, Siouxsie Sioux of Siouxsie and the Banshees, and Poly Styrene of X-Ray Spex to thank for the musical and fashion influences of leather (jackets specifically), the incorporation of woodwind instruments, heavy black makeup, teased hair, and fishnets (later adopted by the goth subculture).



The Clash, ~1976



Siouxsie Sioux, ~1979



## Post Punk 1977-onwards

As The Pistols fizzled out and their members slowly started trickling out, the niche they carved for themselves in the rock scene didn't die with them. Rather the scene they created in the UK as well as the bands they influenced in look and philosophy started to morph and evolve in different directions. In the period between punk's culmination and the fanbase's split into factions in late 1977, the music informed by punk but not exactly punk was given the blanket term of post-punk.

Post-punk was coined for bands who were drawn to punk's nihilistic and DIY ethos, but veered away from the fanbase's persistent aggression and 'destroy everything' dogma that eventually rang self indulgent, and felt like a parody of itself. The rowdy declarations of hating authority no longer had the shock factor it once relied on to preach their 'destroy everything' 'no future' idgaf about you or anything dogma. Punks, in search of new or better ways to express these ideologies, effectively split up into two camps. The first being the 'true' punks, who believed what punk was shaping into should remain unpretentious and accessible, populist music of the underdog working class. These would later evolve into the Hardcore and Oi! Genres, notably less political, about day to day subject matters like drinking, working, and going to shows. Some sects of which concerned with antiracism such as skinheads, who formed in response to those using nazi memorabilia and hate messaging unironically.

Oi was initially antiracist, with movements like skinheads against racial prejudice. However in response to this outspokenness, there was pushback from within the subculture. The second camp simply dubbed 'post punk', saw holes in the initial wave of punk's ideologies, or more importantly, what message was being conveyed through their music/art. Post punkers felt a strong responsibility to speak about systemic issues in their lyrics and work, seeing the former

camp as shallow and not doing enough; post punks were seen as pretentious and not of the people.

While the other camp equated punk music as a medium for breaking tradition, influenced by modernists, and believed punk had failed in disrupting the status quo because of the use of conventional (rock) music. Both were comprised of a rise in independent record labels for the sake of not being controlled by big labels, this decision on both parts no doubt influenced by the very public dissatisfaction the Pistols and the general power record labels had over their signed artists who they sought to profit off, an attempt to not be made commercial for the label's profit. This would soon after become synonymous with "selling out", an insult to anyone who considered themselves punk. Peter Murphy of Bauhaus suggests,

The Brits have a penchant for absorbing influence and turning it back out into something original. [The UK] creates its own culture. It's an island race. Punk gave a kind of quantum tearing of the veil: Most of the punk bands were found through self-created, regional labels; one could start a label up and press a thousand records. You had John Peel, who was a great champion of music in general, and he would play anything once. The [Sex] Pistols broke open a window of opportunity really quickly.<sup>37</sup>

While punk's influences included the likes of fifties rock 'n' roll, garage rock, etc. Post punk kept their parent genre's alternative ideologies while favoring a funk and reggae inspired "skinny" guitar rhythm style, unlike punk's "fat" rhythmic style, as described in Reynolds' book<sup>38</sup>. According to user "fender3x" on [www.buildyourownguitar.com](http://www.buildyourownguitar.com)'s forum,

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<sup>37</sup> Pitchfork, "The Story of Goth in 33 Songs," Pitchfork, October 25, 2017, <https://pitchfork.com/features/lists-and-guides/the-story-of-goth-in-33-songs/>.

<sup>38</sup>Simon Reynolds, *Rip It up and Start Again: Post-Punk 1978-84* (London: Faber & Faber, 2019), 3.

“A good thin tone will have crisp, full, maybe even chimey or jangly highs...Fat pickups emphasize the lows...”<sup>39</sup>

“Skinny” rhythms take less sonic space, allowing the bass to take a front seat instead of a supporting roll. Where punk sought to make as much noise as possible,<sup>40</sup> post punk intended to push the bounds of what alternative music could be. Folded into this was the emerging spread and mainstream utilization of technological advancements.

Post punk was an experiment in modernism. Opposed to punk’s ‘1976 as ground zero’ approach to creation, post’s looked to the past as a way forward; post punkers firmly believed there was more to be done with rock, a bright and promising future for alternative music. Post punk wanted to shift what it meant to be alternative, instead of punk’s screaming and shouting about authority as a means not necessarily to change society but as a vehicle for blowing off steam, Post punk felt a responsibility to shock their audience into awareness of relevant political issues.

The established ways of doing things that post punkers refused to perpetuate ranged from conventions of production...to the predictable rituals of touring and performing (some post punk bands refused to do encores, while others experimented with multimedia and performance art). Aiming to break the trance of rock-business-as-normal and jolt the listener into awareness...<sup>41</sup>

While punk did this by screaming, that had become old; and post punk aimed to marry technical experimentation with serious politics. This was carried out not only with electronic synths and performance art, but how bands and artists conducted themselves as well.

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<sup>39</sup> “Thread,” GST-1 “Hexacaster” build, accessed November 28, 2023, <https://www.buildyourownguitar.com.au/forum/showthread.php?t=11448>.

<sup>40</sup> John Scanlan, *Sex Pistols: Poison in the Machine* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2016), 201.

<sup>41</sup> Simon Reynolds, *Rip It up and Start Again: Post-Punk 1978-84* (London: Faber & Faber, 2019), 8.

Inspired by punk's DIY ethos and alternative political messaging, post punk combined elements of new synth technology, jazz, funk, and reggae. The latter two coming from the adjacent, predominantly black music scenes also happening in the UK at the time. Punk Documentarian Don Letts explains:

First of all you've gotta be honest about white people being inspired by black music because that goes back to a long tradition where they align themselves with the only rebel sound around and invariably that is black music...with punk and black music is that no longer were they being inspired by sounds from the mississippi delta, we were living next door to these people. So the effect was a lot more direct and obvious, it wasn't disguised in interpretation

Each branch of post punk went on marrying themselves with different influences, morphing and molding around their sociocultural climates and values, directly and indirectly sprouting genres including (but certainly not limited to): goth, oi!, riot grrrl, metal, ska, pop-punk, emo, folk punk, new wave, psychobilly, industrial, nu-metal, and screamo. A product of genre fusion itself, it is no surprise punk's descendants have grown limbs and legacies of their own, and since punk's hay day such musical offshoots having inceptions, rises in popularity, prominent genre-specific stars, tapering offs, and revivals of their own. Groundwork laid out by black rock 'n roll singers frustrated by the system oppressing them, and experimental sound coming from alternative artists, seeking to experiment and disturb. From its roots to its conception, punk meshed glitz and glamour with alternative values and sounds, independent anti-establishment values and execution still visible in the cultural zeitgeist today.



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