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"Rock against Reagan": The punk movement, cultural hegemony, and Reaganism in the eighties

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“ROCK AGAINST REAGAN”:
THE PUNK MOVEMENT, CULTURAL HEGEMONY, AND REAGANISM IN THE
EIGHTIES

An Abstract of a Thesis
Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

Johnathan Kyle Williams
University of Northern Iowa
May, 2016

ABSTRACT

Despite scholars' growing interest in the cultural movement known as punk, there has been a lack of focus on the movement's relationship to its historical context. Punk meant rebellion, and this research looks at how the rebellion of the American punk movement during the eighties [1978 to 1992], was aimed at the president Ronald Reagan. Their dissent, however, was not only directed towards Reagan, but the culture that he encompassed. Under this influence, American culture gave way to Reaganism: a culture of individualism, greed, power, and symbols. Adding to the work by historian Dewar MacLeod and others who have focused on punk rock in major urban settings like New York and Los Angeles, this project will look beyond those centers. By using fanzines (underground magazine publications), songs, oral histories, interviews, video recordings, and popular news media sources, this research explores: the influence of the Atlantic littoral in the development and politics of punk; a regional focus on the Midwest and how the youth of the region created a punk community in an unlikely location; the "Rock Against Reagan" tour and political activism within punk that challenged Reagan's bid for a second presidential term; censorship and the charges of "distributing harmful matter to a minor" against the Dead Kennedys' 1985 *Frankenchrist* album; and how the punk movement adapted to a new decade, and what can be seen as a new century in the 1990s. Filling a missing gap for research, this project helps to better understand the punk movement, Reagan, and the culture of the eighties.

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Entitled: “Rock Against Reagan”: The Punk Movement, Cultural Hegemony, and Reaganism in the Eighties

has been approved as meeting the thesis requirement for the

Degree of Master of Arts

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INTRODUCTION

The 2010 *Saturday Night Live* skit “Punk Band Reunion at the Wedding,” revived the spirit of 1980s punk rock at an unlikely location. Featuring an impressive lineup, Fred Armisen, Bill Hader, Ashton Kutcher, and Dave Grohl—the former drummer of the band, Nirvana, one of the most recognized groups of the 1990s that emerged from the late-1980s punk scene—formed the fictional punk band “Crisis of Conformity.” Making a speech at his daughter’s wedding, the father of the bride (Armisen) brought his former group on stage to perform their first gig in decades. Playing a song called “Fistfight in the Parking Lot,” the lyrics shouted out against Ronald Reagan and symbols of Americana. Their short performance ended with a destroyed wedding reception and Armisen diving into the wedding cake. The audience was stunned at such a sight, except for the father of groom (Jason Sudeikis), who seemed as if he just relived the excitement of 1980s punk rock.¹

Aired three decades following Ronald Reagan’s first presidential campaign victory, the *Saturday Night Live* skit demonstrated how Reagan and punk rock have remained relevant in recent times. But what was it that linked the two together? Out of historical context, the skit demonstrated how the rebellion of punk has been defused by popular culture. Punk, from whatever perspective one wants to explain, meant rebellion; and for the United States, that rebellion was aimed at the face of the 1980s, Ronald Reagan. The *Saturday Night Live* skit, although of a fictional band and song, displayed a

¹ *Saturday Night Live*, “Punk Band Reunion at the Wedding,” Season 35, 2010, [www.nbc.com/saturday-night-live/video \(n12715\)](http://www.nbc.com/saturday-night-live/video/n12715).

hint of reality by showing how punk's rebellion was not just Reagan, however, but the culture that he represented. Mentioning "white picket fences," "Happy Meals," "Alexander Haig," and putting on a "suit and tie," the song highlighted multiple targets of 1980s punk rockers. More importantly, these targets were symbols of nostalgia, suburban white America, militarism, and the idolization of the businessman, part of the very essence behind the culture of Reaganism.²

As a specific genre of popular music, punk or punk rock emerged in the mid-1970s. Rejecting the overproduced, derivative sounds of the music industry—disco on one hand, and the once Counterculture rebels turned to rock & roll superstars on the other—punk countered with a striped-down, simplistic, and aggressive sound that reflected the uncertain decade.³ Punk music focused on creativity and encouraged groups to create their own unique sound. Because of this characteristic, punk rock adopted styles from other musical genres, such as, but not limited to, early rock & roll, reggae, and heavy metal. The fusing of these genres of music created sub-genres—ska, hardcore,

² The usage of Reaganism to define the culture that developed around the iconic president takes a look at multiple works that discuss his influence from more than a political perspective, several of these include; Sidney Blumenthal, "Reaganism and the NeoKitsch Aesthetic," *The Reagan Legacy*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), 251-294; Steve Fraser, *The Age of Acquiescence: the Life and Death of American Resistance to Organized Wealth and Power*, (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2015); Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, (New York: Henry and Holt Company, 2007); Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics*, (United States: Da Capo Press, 2002); Ed. Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer, *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan: A History 1974-2008*, (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009).

³ Dewar MacLeod, *Kids of the Black Hole: Punk Rock in Postsuburban California*, (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press: Norman, 2010), 1-5; Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies*, 253-254. For a more in depth look at the creation of punk see, Jon Savage, *England's Dreaming: Anarchy, Sex Pistols, Punk Rock, and Beyond* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002).

crossover, grunge, and other labels to identify musical differences within punk rock. Avoiding the painful attempt to specifically define the style of music, the view of punk being “urban folk music” perhaps offers the best perspective. Like the famous folk musician, Woody Guthrie, punk reflected the experiences and politics of common Americans, the working class, and a reflection of their contemporary culture. Unlike Guthrie’s music from the earlier twentieth century, however, most Americans lived in urban settings by the end of the century and punk reflected youth experiences in the new urban environment where most Americans resided.⁴

Expanding from a musical genre into a cultural movement, punk reached its apogee during the first half of the 1980s. This development corresponded, that is, with the rise and apparent triumph of what has been called the “Radical Right,” the “New Right,” and later “neoliberalism”—with a political stress on individualism, homilies to the values of white America, and a near religious devotion to the amoralities of a so-called free market.⁵ In the United States these ideals have also been referred to as Reaganism. Reaganism and punk were thus twinned in history and politics. Greatly transforming American culture, Reaganism influenced a transition in American economic, social, foreign, and political policy—and how they would function into the

⁴ David Ensminger, “[Interview with] Thomas Barnett,” *Left of the Dial: Conversations with Punk Icons* (Oakland: PM Press, 2013), 281.

⁵ Many of these cultural characteristics have been emphasized in recent studies that have focused on conservatism, the Conservative Movement, and or the American Right in recent history. Historians such as Lisa McGirr, Bruce Schulman, and Julian Zelizer have contributed greatly to explaining the cultural and political characteristics that have shaped the New Right. For neoliberalism’s role in this development see, Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Inequality: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003).

twenty-first century. Reagan was not himself what created the culture of Reaganism, but the symbolic reflection of what that culture represented. Gaining “cultural hegemony” throughout the decade of the eighties—from 1978 to 1992—the culture that Ronald Reagan symbolized represented one of the main focuses that the American punk movement attempted to challenge and tear down; a relationship yet to be explored.⁶

The term *punk movement* identifies the countercultural elements of punk. As a cultural movement, punk developed multiple ideologies, philosophies, institutions, and tools that linked various youth together across the United States—and eventually the world. This identification is not intended to suggest that there was a coherent direction or set of definitive ideas that contributed to the movement. Instead, the usage *punk movement* is to describe the ideas and practices that became exchanged throughout youth who were connected by their shared interest in some form of punk rock. The term, however, was used by some punks during the eighties—although others staunchly rejected such labeling.

⁶ Dawson Barrett, “DIY Democracy: The Direct Action Politics of U.S. Punk Collectives,” *American Studies*, 52 [2] (2003):23-42; Kenneth J. Bindas, “The Future is Unwritten: The Clash, Punk and America, 1977-1982,” *American Studies*, 34 [1] (Spring, 1993):70-89; Kevin C. Dunn, “Never Mind the Bollocks: The Punk Rock Politics of Global Communication,” *Review of International Studies*, 34 (2008):193-210; Dewar MacLeod, *Kids of the Black Hole: Punk Rock in Postsuburban California*, Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press: Norman, 2010); Craig O’Hara, *The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!* (San Francisco: AK Press, 1999); Roger Sabin, ed., *Punk Rock: So What? the Cultural Legacy of Punk* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Stacy Thompson, *Punk Production: Unfinished Business* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004); Joseph M. Turrini, “‘Well I Don’t Care About History’: Oral History and the Making of Collective Memory in Punk Rock,” *Notes*, 70 [1] (September 2013): 59-77; Daniel S. Traber, “L.A.’s ‘White’ Minority: Punk and the Contradictions of Self-Marginalization,” *Cultural Critique*, 48 (Spring, 2001); Teal Triggs, “Scissors and Glue: Punk Fanzines and the Creation of a DIY Aesthetic,” *Journal of Design History*, 19 [1] (Spring, 2006): 69-83; 30-64; Steve Waksman, *This Ain’t the Summer of Love: Conflict and Crossover in Heavy Metal and Punk* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009); Mary Montgomery Wolf, “‘We Accept You, One of Us?’: Punk Rock, Community, and Individualism in an Uncertain Era 1974-1985” (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2007).

Identifying these relationships also overcomes the labeling of punk as a subculture, a term that far too many scholars on the topic have focused on.⁷ Dawson Barrett, a scholar of American Studies, has addressed this issue writing that: “most popular approaches have framed punk in the language of either a musical genre or a youth subculture.” While acknowledging the “rationale for each, and the evidence of both,” he explained that “neither categorization places punk in an appropriate historical context or relates its radical ethos to the broader political left.”⁸

Barrett’s statement has held a lot of truth, but his article “DIY Democracy: The Direct Action Politics of U.S. Punk Collectives,” focused on an aspect of the punk movement that developed towards the end of the eighties. Discussing two well-known punk collectives, ABC No Rio in New York City and 924 Gilman Street in Berkeley, California, the punks who supported these locations demonstrated a growing emphasis on local scenes and direct action politics that has remained relevant to today. While the punk movement used various “counter-institutions,” a concept that can be traced to the New Left of the 1960s, their development towards a direct action collective that “encouraged active democratic participation,” became a result of the violence and “pack mentality” that had taken over the earlier 1980s punk scene.⁹ The “pack mentality” that he described

⁷ Kenneth J. Bindas, “The Future is Unwritten”; Kevin C. Dunn, “Never Mind the Bollocks”; Dewar MacLeod, *Kids of the Black Hole*; Craig O’Hara, *The Philosophy of Punk*; Stacy Thompson, *Punk Production: Unfinished Business*; Joseph M. Turrini, “‘Well I Don’t Care About History’”; Daniel S. Traber, “L.A.’s ‘White’ Minority; Punk and the Contradictions of Self-Marginalization”; Teal Triggs, “Scissors and Glue: Punk Fanzines and the Creation of a DIY Aesthetic”: 69-83; Mary Montgomery Wolf, “‘We Accept You, One of Us?’”.

⁸ Dawson Barrett, “DIY Democracy,” 24.

⁹ *Ibid*, 24-33.

has been a major issue with understanding the continuity of punk. Many studies have concluded that the violence, racism, sexism, and homophobia that divided the punk movement in the mid-1980s, meant the inevitable end of punk. Others have acknowledged that musically “punk rock” continued, but it became a commodified product of popular culture. Barrett, however, demonstrated that these perspectives have limited the understanding and reasoning behind the punk movement’s longevity.¹⁰

While Barrett’s study showed a more expansive perspective towards punk—both historically and politically—much of the studies before him focused on the identity politics of punk. This relationship has seemed to stem from scholars focusing on the different subcultural elements within the punk movement and not their broader relationship. The all too frequent evaluation of punk as a “subculture,” has been an idea that has held on for nearly four decades following Dick Hebdige’s 1979 book named after the term, *Subculture*. Examining various youth social groups in Britain, such as the mods, teddy boys, and of course punks; Hebdige explained these youth groups as differentiating subcultures.¹¹ While Hebdige’s book greatly altered the perspective of culture and its influence and role in the modern era, the evaluation of punk, something still growing during the time of publication (especially in the U.S.), limited a full understanding on the importance of the youth culture.

¹⁰ For examples see, Dewar MacLeod, *Kinds of the Black Hole*, 134-135; Hugh C. O’Connell, “(Re)Turning Money into Rebellion: Reification and Utopianism in Early Punk Productions,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 47 [3] (2014): 591-593; Stacy Thompson, *Punk Productions*, 1-7.

¹¹ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (New York: Routledge, 1979), 1-4.

Although various books and articles appeared covering punk in the 1980s, most either were from a journalistic approach or a highly scientific social study. By the end of the decade, however, Tricia Henry's book, *Break All Rules!*, became one of the first attempts to historicize the early aspects of punk by an academic. Henry focused on how punk rock became a form of entertainment for a generation of youth that were bored with their cultural environment. Following the origins of punk rock from the underground music scene in New York with groups like Blondie, the New York Dolls, Velvet Underground, the Ramones, and the famous venue CBGBs; to the emergence of punk rock in London with the Sex Pistols and the Clash, she linked the role that the Atlantic littoral played in the development of punk's cultural characteristics. Setting a basis to expand from, Henry's book was soon joined by an abundance of other works throughout the 1990s.¹²

With later works being written by many people who were influenced by punk during their own youth, the study of the topic greatly expanded towards the end of the 1990s and into the twenty-first century.¹³ Yet even with research on the topic expanding,

¹² Examples of several academic works that reflected this emphasis see, Kenneth J. Bindas, "The Future is Unwritten: The Clash, Punk and America, 1977-1982," *American Studies*, 34 [1] (Spring, 1993):70-89; Craig O'Hara, *The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!* (San Francisco: AK Press, 1999); Neil Nehring, "Revolt into Style: Graham Greene Meets the Sex Pistols," *PMLA* 160 [2] (March, 1991): 222-237; Karen Pinkus, "Self-Representation in Futurism and Punk," *South Central Review* 13 [2/3]. "Futurism and the Avant-Garde," (Summer-Autumn, 1996): 180-193; Geoffrey Sirc, "Never Mind the Tagmemics, Where's the Sex Pistols?," *College Composition and Communication* 48 [1] (Feb., 1997): 9-29; Susan Willis, "Hardcore: Subculture American Style," *Critical Inquiry* 19 [2] (Winter, 1993): 365-383; In addition numerous journalistic and personal works were published throughout the decade.

¹³ Authors who have explained their relationship with the topic of punk includes scholars such as, David Ensminger, Dewar MacLeod, Craig O'Hara, and Steve Waksman to name a few; While numerous other scholars did not discuss their relationship with the topic, their interest in researching such suggests that they may not have "mashed in the pit" (for lack of describing their dedication/relationship with punk) but were at least fans of the music.

many of these studies remained narrowly focused. Much of the emphasis was placed on New York or London, and later Los Angeles, the Sex Pistols or the Ramones, and punk being mostly composed of young, white, middle-class males.¹⁴ This limited perspective ignored the role that women, minorities, and homosexuals played in the development of the punk movement. Although these groups became more isolated farther into the 1980s, their influence early on—and eventually later on—emphasizes the concept that many punks saw past these social differences and instead perceived one another as *punks*, a perspective that overcame differences of gender, race, and sexuality and a characteristic of identity politics within the movement.¹⁵

The perspective of identity politics within punk, and its influence on the punk movement as it developed into the 1990s was seen in early studies like Craig O'Hara's book *The Philosophy of Punk*. While O'Hara's work demonstrated many of the different

¹⁴ Sean Albiez, "Know History! John Lydon, Cultural Capital, and the Prog/Punk Dialectic," *Popular Music* 22, no. 3 (Oct., 2003): 357-374. JSTOR (3877580); Peter Robert Brown, "Strange Notes from the LA Punk Underground: the Durability of Darby Crash and the Germs," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 41 [2] (2011): 199-222. Kevin C. Dunn, "Never Mind the Bollocks: The Punk Rock Politics of Global Communication," *Review of International Studies* 34, (2008):193-210; Alan O'Connor, "Local Scenes and Dangerous Crossroads: Punk and Theories of Cultural Hybridity," *Popular Music* 21 [2] (May, 2002): 225-236; Brian James Schill, "Shame and the Politics of Punk Fiction," *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 69 [4] (Winter, 2013): 133-156; Daniel S. Traber, "L.A.'s 'White Minority': Punk and the Contradictions of Self-Marginalization," *Cultural Critique* [48] (Spring, 2001): 30-64.

¹⁵ Barrett, "DIY Democracy"; David Ensminger, "Coloring Between the Lines of Punk and Hardcore: From Absence to Black Punk Power," *Postmodern Culture* 20 [2] (Jan., 2010), accessed through Project MUSE; Joseph Heathcott, "Urban Spaces and Working-Class Expressions across the Black Atlantic: Tracing the Routes of Ska," *Radical History Review* 87 (Fall, 2003): 183-206; Sarah Jaffe, "Difficult Fun," *Dissent* 62 [2] (Spring, 2015): 10-15; Mimi Thi Nguyen, "Minor Threats," *Radical History Review* 122 (May, 2015): 11-24; Tavia Nyong'o, "Do You Want Queer Theory (or Do You Want the Truth)? Intersections of Punk and Queer in the 1970s," *Radical History Review* 100 (Winter, 2008): 103-119; Caroline O'Meara, "The Raincoats: Breaking Down Punk Rock's Masculinities," *Popular Music* 22 [3] (Oct., 2003): 299-313; of important note is also the Riot Grrrl! aspect that emerged in the late-1980s early-1990s see, Stacy Thompson, *Punk Productions*, 58-70. For a fascinating perspective towards identity politics see, Kwame Anthony Appiah, "The Politics of Identity," *Daedalus* 135 [4] (Fall, 2006): 15-22.

aspects and ideology that had been largely ignored in preceding works, it lacked a definitive argument. O'Hara, however, was himself involved in the punk movement from the early-1980s and into the early-1990s. This personal experience and understanding gave O'Hara's book a unique perspective and expanded the historical context of punk past the 1980s.¹⁶

Opening up a broader understanding of the punk movement, O'Hara explored topics such as feminism, sexuality, anarchism, and popular media's "misrepresentation" of punk. Most importantly, he was one of the first to explain what "Straight Edge," a type of ideology within punk, was. "The message" behind Straight Edge "was simple," he wrote: "you do not have to drink alcohol, smoke, or indulge in any mind altering drugs to have a good time." With punk being a youth culture, all-ages venues became important since some punks were only thirteen or fourteen—and in some cases even younger. Although initially starting as a means to gain independence, over oneself and venues to play for all punks, the ideology of Straight Edge became turned against itself with people using the concept as an authoritarian principle.¹⁷

This schism of ideological affiliation became a trademark feature of the punk movement. Ian Mackaye and his Washington D.C. band, Minor Threat, have been

¹⁶ Craig O'Hara, *The Philosophy of Punk*, 8-18; Of other studies who have focused on the late-1980s and early-1990s, Dawson Barrett has written a persuasive article that focused on two punk venues, 924 Gilman Street in Berkeley, CA and ABC No Rio in New York, Dawson Barrett, "DIY Democracy: The Direct Action Politics of U.S. Punk Collectives," *American Studies* 52 [2] (2003): 23-42.

¹⁷ O'Hara, 142-151. Many other scholars since O'Hara's early publication have focused more on the Straight Edge movement within punk. Sociologists in particular have contributed to these studies. See, Ross Haenfler, *Straight Edge: Clean-Living Youth, Hardcore Punk, and Social Change* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press), 2006; Robert T. Wood, *Straightedge Youth: Complexity and Contradictions of a Subculture* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2006).

credited as being the creators of Straight Edge. Mackaye's perspective reflected his own philosophical belief and he never intended that his philosophy and actions would become an ideological movement within punk. Like the British working-class skinhead of the 1960s, Straight Edge would also become co-opted by rightwing ideology that opposed its original intentions. Whereas skinheads began as a subcultural group of youths that enjoyed the newly arrived sound of reggae from the Caribbean, the reemergence of the skinhead identity in punk during the 1970s and into the 1980s saw an increasing influence of racism and the creation of music that has been referred to as "Nazi rock." In the United States, the Straight Edge appearance greatly resembled the skinhead look from Britain, which gives suggestion to it sharing the same fate and becoming divided along ideological and political beliefs.¹⁸

Along with discussing various philosophies within punk, O'Hara's book also bridged an academic perspective towards punk, with the punk aesthetic of do-it-yourself (DIY). O'Hara originally published the book himself and distributed it in 1992. While lacking a complete academic format, his work showed an attempt to use a punk approach to formulate a scholarly perspective. The DIY philosophy, such as to write and publish a book like O'Hara, represented one of the key components of the punk movement. DIY presented both independence and empowerment that became a tool used throughout various punk cultural features: fashion and art aesthetics, counter-institutions,

¹⁸ Timothy S. Brown, "Subcultures, Pop Music and Politics: Skinheads and 'Nazi Rock' in England and Germany," *Journal of Social History* 38 [1] (Autumn, 2004): 157-158.

communication with fanzines, and for punk music—applying to both creativity within the music and the economic side of performing, recording, and distributing.¹⁹

As for historians' approach to punk, there have been notable scholars who have mentioned the rebellious music, but Dewar MacLeod's, *Kids of the Black Hole: Punk Rock in Postsuburban California*, stands alone as the only book to specifically examine the subject.²⁰ MacLeod focused on the relationship between the punk scene in Los Angeles and the surrounding suburban landscape. With youth from the suburbs being attracted to the music coming out of the city, they began to form their own bands. However, the new music from these youth was different from the older generation of punks. Being known as "hardcore," an even faster, more aggressive, form of punk rock compared to earlier bands from the 1970s, he argued that it "developed less out of musical circumstances than social ones." This relationship reflected the changes occurring in the United States that were social, economic, and political. And for Southern California, the once safe suburbs that represented American prosperity, entered into the not so safe realm of postsuburbia.²¹

¹⁹ Nearly every study on punk has focused on the DIY aesthetic, for a look at DIY and its function within two punk venues see, Dawson Barrett, "DIY Democracy"; for a study on how DIY was used in the artistic side of punk see, Teal Triggs, "Scissors and Glue: Punk Fanzines and the Creation of a DIY Aesthetic," *Journal of Design History* 19 [1] "Do It Yourself Democracy and Design" (Spring, 2006): 69-83; for a look at DIY's function within punk economics see, Stacy Thompson, *Punk Productions: Unfinished Business* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 139-149.

²⁰ Dewar MacLeod, *Kids of the Black Hole*; notable historians such as Steve Fraser, James Livingston, Bruce Schulman and the historian by training Thomas Frank have mentioned punk in their writings. Other historians and history journals have published articles on punk, but as for books the field remains open for new historians to explore.

²¹ *Ibid*, 1-5.

Adding a needed perspective of a historian to the large scholarly collection of books on the topic, MacLeod's work fell short of fully grasping punk in its larger historical importance. Part of this was with MacLeod's regional focus, limiting a broader understanding of the punk movement. But within this regional focus, MacLeod did bring up an important relationship between the new generation of punks from the suburbs, and their evolving postsuburban environment. These suburban youths attacked the symbols of suburbia, reflecting the end of the suburban dream. One of these symbols, although MacLeod did not expand upon, related the punk rockers from Southern California that he discussed, to punk rockers across the whole United States. He wrote: "Ronald Reagan's victory in the 1980 presidential election may have done more than any other event to revitalize punk . . . not only because punks opposed his conservative politics, but because here was an enemy with a face."²²

The punk movement, like any movement that encompasses a large group of people, had its own ambiguities and contradictions. Its dismissal of Reagan, however, offers an important relationship for analyzing punk. As a president, Ronald Reagan only relates to punk during his two terms as president from 1980 to 1988. But as an icon, a symbol of the conservative movement and New Right that followed the failed 1964 presidential campaign of Barry Goldwater; the culture of narcissism reflected by the "Me Generation"; the American imperialist culture and perpetual warfare; the front for the rise of corporate oligarchs; and the yuppie culture, filled with the praising of wealthy, sunny optimism, and the fear of criticism. Being a cultural symbol of these ideas, Reagan's

²² Dewar MacLeod, *Kids of the Black Hole: Punk Rock in Postsuburban California*, 3-5, 103.

historical focus expands well outside the barriers of his presidency. Within this context, Reagan's symbolic element crosses with the development of punk rock in the 1970s—and even gives suggestion to why both Reagan and punk rock have remained relevant in the United States today.

The twenty-first century has been filled with scholarship puzzled over the recent rise in conservatism and its relationship to the staggering wealth inequality in the United States. What has become clear from these studies is that the legacy of Reagan has become more about his symbolic nature compared to his actual actions as president. The symbolic representation of Reagan has allowed for Reaganism to maintain “cultural hegemony”: a Gramscian concept that historian T.J. Jackson Lears wrote when experiencing the growing influence of Reaganism in 1985.²³

Gramsci emphasized the competition for power between the various social groups of a society. Sharing a common culture, dominating groups sustain hegemony over subordinate groups through two particular means: force and consent. Physical force, or the threat of force, is always an option. But gaining “cultural hegemony” over subordinate groups can be more easily obtainable through consent—even if that consent is at odds with the subordinate's own interest. Although subordinate groups may be limited by hegemony, Gramsci acknowledged that the chaotic conflict between social groups offers the opportunity for counterhegemonies to challenge the hegemonic culture. Ruling groups, however, uphold their “cultural hegemony” by shaping the language and

²³ T.J. Jackson Lears, “The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities,” *The American Historical Review* 90 [3] (June, 1985): 567-574.

symbols to gain consent, making counterhegemonies more difficult. Overcoming the barriers of language and symbols, tools that guise a critical understanding of the power structure, becomes the first step to challenge a ruling hegemony.²⁴ “Critical understanding of self,” Gramsci wrote, “takes place therefore through a struggle of political ‘hegemonies’ and of opposing directions, first in the ethical field and then in that of politics proper.”²⁵ Therefore, for a subordinate group to challenge the dominating order they must first break down the “ethical” support that has given justification for their rule and consent by those with competing interest.

When dire situations occur within a society and the structures upholding the “cultural hegemony” becomes more easily questioned, subordinate groups are presented with an opportunity to support a counterhegemony. A prime example of this situation can be seen in the United States following the economic disparity that many Americans felt in the 1930s during the Great Depression. In scholar Michael Denning’s book, *The Cultural Front*, he examined how the Popular Front, the coalition of Depression and World War II era musicians, artists, fellow travelers, and writers, helped to build the cultural support for the New Deal coalition that developed following the Great Depression. The Popular Front became successful in establishing a new “cultural hegemony” by uniting various social groups, divided by regions, race, gender, and even political ideology—with communist and socialist being involved—to create a culture that supported the common American, valued the working class, and encouraged standing up to power. This focus of

²⁴ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 12, 262-263, 323-327, 333.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 333.

the Popular Front reflected what Denning described as “cultural politics”: or in other words, “the politics of allegiances and affiliations.” Elaborating on the concept of “cultural politics,” he explained; “is at one level simply the politics of letterheads and petitions, the stances taken by artists and intellectuals, the pledges of allegiances and declaration of dissent. But it is also the politics of the cultural field itself, the history of the institutions and apparatuses in which artists and intellectuals work.”²⁶

For the punk movement, oral history demonstrates part of the cultural apparatus that Denning discussed. Scholars, journalists, and participants in the punk movement have produced a wide-array of sources on the topic—varying in both style and approach—the work produced has had one common theme, oral history. The punk movement has long had a held value in oral history, making it an important feature to better understand punk. Fanzines, the underground publications that quickly became a part of the cultural movement and were a tool of communication between different punk scenes (local communities), demonstrated the use of oral history by publishing interviews with bands and letters from readers. Being a cultural tool of communication, oral history reflected the DIY aesthetic, cultural independence, and a type of “collective memory,” as Joseph Turrini has argued. Being a political expression of collectivism, Turrini demonstrated how this type of politics was a valuable aspect of the punk movement: venues for all-ages shows, fanzines, the network of independent labels, and the structure of bands themselves. Turrini explained “that oral interviews as a source and the do-it-yourself ethic are primary components of punk’s ‘cultural toolkit.’” His relationship

²⁶ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*, (New York: Verso, 1996), XIX.

between oral history and the collective value in punk explained why so many books, scholarly and journalistic, have used this cultural tool.²⁷

Much of the focus on oral history has been placed upon iconic punk figures.²⁸ The dilemma with such focus is that punk rejected the rock star mentality—a political statement on its own. In an effort to examine punk from a bottom-up perspective, this research tries to give voice to actors in the punk movement who are often not given one. Due to time and other restraints—accessing physical resources, along with the numerous factors that limit the research of a young scholar—more notable figures are discussed at length. This focus, however, is not intended to idolize the more notable figures involved in punk, but to suggest that their involvement and beliefs influenced the movement as a whole. In a sense, this perspective suggests a type of *trickle-down culture*, where unlike the “trickle-down economics” professed by the Reaganites in the 1980s, actually transferred something back. In this case ideas and style were what became transferred to people of a lesser influential role (*lesser* to not denounce their roles as individual actors, but their communicative reach). As punks have noted, each scene across the U.S. had bands that became local favorites and often influenced the musical style and lyrical content—among other characteristics—of bands that followed.²⁹

²⁷ Joseph M. Turrini, “‘Well I Don’t Care About History’: Oral History and the Making of Collective Memory in Punk Rock,” *Notes* 70 [1] (Sep., 2013): 59-62.

²⁸ David Ensminger’s *Left of the Dial: Conversations with Punk Icons* demonstrates this perspective just from the title itself.

²⁹ For an example see interview with Steve Albini published in, Ed. Daniel Sinker, *We Owe You Nothing Punk Planet: the Collected Interviews*, (expanded edition) (Chicago: Punk Planet Books, 2008), 156-158.

Focusing on a wide-array of sources, the punk movement reflected the changing landscape of American culture during the eighties. The Reagan presidency set the stage for a new hegemonic culture that favored the wealthy and powerful. This outcome was not the result of Reagan himself as president, but his symbolism as a cultural figure. The former Hollywood star was able to be the famed “Gipper,” a cowboy, a farmer, a father, and became personified in culture as the representation of all that was and is America. But take away the mask from the actor of symbols and what one finds is the reflections of: white America, Christian bigotry, an imperialist nation, a narcissistic ideology, praising of the wealthy and hate for the poor, the acceptance of massive wealth inequality. and the support of the oligarchic rise of corporations. The cultural dissent of the American punk movement attempted to remove the mask and reveal what the president, beloved by millions, represented.

Chapter I explores what the punk movement entailed and how the influence from Britain shaped it into a countercultural reaction to Reaganism in the 1980s. This reaction and altering to historical context and location saw the emergence of hardcore in California that quickly spread to other areas of the United States and became the dominant sound of the decade’s punk bands.

Chapter II discusses the “Rock Against Reagan” tour that was seen all across the United States between 1983 and up to the presidential election in November of 1984. The tour demonstrated how numerous punks, some with differentiating political ideology, united together in an attempt to prevent Reagan’s reelection to a second term. Focusing on the tour’s shows at both parties’ national conventions, the dissent by the punks was

met with fierce opposition. As punks united towards a common goal by portraying the negative aspects of the Reagan presidency and the culture he supported, the president countered with positive messages that overcame the negative attacks from opponents.

Chapter III looks at how the punk movement reached every corner of the United States in the 1980s. It even penetrated into the, unlikely middle, with the Midwest creating its own community. This region once a center for progressivism, the Populist Party, leftist reform, and collective structures in farming communities, had by the appearance of punk fallen on lean and conservative times. Transforming the landscape of the Midwest, the Farm Crisis of the 1980s set the stage for economic restructuring, a result that devastated communities across the region. With disparity and change impacting the region, the majority of Midwesterners supported a culture that opposed their interest with the allure of nostalgia. Like the rest of the country, this transformation within the Midwest, led thousands of youth to find punk rock that spoke of what they were experiencing.

Chapter IV covers how conservatism influenced identified liberals to turn against the left, support social and moral conservative values, and corporate influence by supporting music censorship. Examining the Dead Kennedys *Frankenchrist* album and the charges of “distributing harmful matter to a minor,” for a H.R. Giger poster that was packaged with the record. The impact of such demonstrated the growing influence of corporations in public space by limiting and monopolizing consumer outlets.

Chapter V looks at how the punk movement began to splinter during the mid-1980s. Many punk pundits declared that punk was dead, however, this demonstrated a

hierarchy belief and created a battle over what exactly punk was. With Reagan out of office in the late-1980s, the iconic figure that gave punks a unifying target, the context of punk changed to the landscape that had been altered so much during his tenure in the White House. As the 1980s came to close, punk did not die, instead a new generation found it as something to express their perspective of the world around them. This new generation of punks, however, entered into not so much a new decade, but a new century. With the influence of Reaganism transforming the economic, social, and cultural structures of the United States, punk rock during this decade faced new problems from that of their predecessors.

Throughout the period between 1978, when the notorious British punk group the Sex Pistols first played in the United States, to the end of the Reagan-Bush I era in 1992; punk rock had found its way into communities across the United States. Local scenes (small and large), news reports, television, and record stores exposed punk rock to a massive audience. As punk gained recognition, however, the outlets that exposed punk to youth across the nation became increasingly hostile towards the youth music and culture. Police, news media, television shows and movies, and even politicians became evidence of the aggression towards the cultural movement. While outside factors threatened the movement, disputes over the identity further divided the potential for change that punk presented. But as punk had proved itself to remain a tool for dissenting youth, the end of the eighties saw the rebellious spirit being commodified into popular culture. Becoming a product that one could buy at a shopping mall, however, did not mean the end of punk as a threat to the dominant culture. Groups continued to challenge authority, mores, and

most importantly the symbols that supported Reaganism's hegemony over American culture.

As politicians of today discuss Reagan through a nostalgic lens, this study is as much about punk rock as it is about how the eighties have shaped the recent past. Although the streets of America are no longer filled with crowds of easily identifiable punks, punk remains as relevant in recent times as Reagan. Stylistically it can be seen walking through any campus where one can spot youth with colorfully-dyed hair, Ramones tee-shirts, and an assortment of piercings and tattoos. What is more difficult to see is the continuing dissent of revealing the symbols of control within American culture. With that in mind, step back to a time when both Reaganism and punk struggled against one another in a battle of thoughts and ideas during a decade long removed, yet still alive today.

CHAPTER I

“THE GREAT ACCEPTANCE”

Reagan and the Development of Punk Rock

During a 2014 interview *Maximum Rock N Roll (MRR)* asked Gary Floyd, the former lead singer of the Dicks, a 1980s punk group that formed in Austin, Texas, to reflect back to “[w]hat sparked the fire” for him to join the punk scene? Floyd replied to the question by saying:

That same conforming to the norm made me sick. Reagan was the leader and people were following like sheep. Wars all over; not Vietnam but non-ending small wars everywhere. Nobody gave a shit. It made me really mad - Sheep! Seeing the oppressed queers going along with the norm - being right wing, even - really sickened me. The great acceptance made me mad.¹

Floyd lived in Texas, “a place of rednecks” as he described, “but in Austin and Houston the punks were alive and new moving and doing stuff, putting on show [*sic*], starting bands. It was a new era and everybody was invited to join in.” Austin was only one of the numerous scenes that were spreading across the United States in the early eighties.

Floyd’s sexuality made him stand out during such a time, even among others with the same sexuality. He explained that the homosexual community “hated [him] for being different.” He described himself as someone who “was loud and happy to be letting people know, ‘Hey, I am a big ol’ fat queer, what the hell are you?’” The “oppressed

¹ Jojo, “Queer punk legend Gary Floyd!,” *MRR*, April 26, 2014, <http://maximumrocknroll.com/gary-floyd-interview/>.

queers,” he said, rejected him for his outspokenness, and it was in the punk movement where he found like-minded people.²

“The great acceptance,” as Floyd put it, reflected the root of the punk movement’s rebellion. What became clear to punks, such as Floyd, was that after Ronald Reagan won the 1980 presidential election over the incumbent Jimmy Carter, the United States was changing. Shepherding this paradigm of historical significance, the Reagan years saw ideas that were once perceived to be on the fringes of mainstream, or even radical, embedded into the norm of American life. His election into the White House became seen as a triumphant victory for the conservative movement and New Right: And Reagan became a champion of their cause. But the glitz and celebration of wealth seen at Reagan’s first presidential inauguration was even too much for the 1964 Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater, the candidate who years before ran under the slogan: “In your heart you know he’s right.”³

During a time when much of America was being divided by fears from abroad and at home, individualism, and the pursuit of wealth at all costs; the punk movement brought youth together who opposed the changing landscape. In Floyd’s words, punk harnessed “a feeling of togetherness with people who shared a lot of ideas, that there were a lot of old things that are dictating not only music but lifestyles.” With “Yuppie shit” and the “Me Generation,” he described appreciation for the “cultural scene” that

² *Ibid.*

³ For a look at the culture of Reaganism and what made it different from the New Right, see Sidney Blumenthal, “Reaganism and the Neokitsch Aesthetic,” *The Reagan Legacy*, ed. Sidney Blumenthal and Thomas Byrne Edsall (New York: Pantheon Book, 1988). For information on Goldwater’s 1964 campaign ads, see <http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/1964>.

was “treading new ground. It had nothing to do with the Sex Pistols or the Ramones. It had to do with your own personal life changing.”⁴

Gary Floyd and the Dicks became a part of something larger than their local Austin punk scene. The Sex Pistols and the Ramones may have pioneered a new style of music and fashion aesthetic known as punk in the mid-1970s; but they were only the beginning of something larger. At first, punk was an underground music movement that sought for originality. But by 1976, the once underground, became a sensation throughout the Atlantic littoral. Run-downed clubs and streets of New York City and London quickly filled with people sporting mohawks, wearing leather jackets, and numerous other types of culturally shocking attire. While debates were raised over the idea of a second British cultural invasion, punk spread to other major cities in the United States and jumped coast with Los Angeles becoming a new hotspot for punk to set in. Challenging the overproduced and stagnant rock music industry, these earlier punk groups quickly gained attention. The music was new and exciting and youth across the United States realized that they too could form their own band and play a style of rock music called punk. Countless bands sprang up across the country and with them a movement followed.

⁴ Suburban Voice, “Gary Floyd of THE DICKS [interview],” *Suburban Voice*, 41 (1998), NYU, http://files.nyu.edu/cch223/Public/usa/info/dicks_SVinter.html.

“California Über Alles” - Dead Kennedys

The cultural, economic, and social shifts that occurred in the United States during the twentieth century had relocated the focus of these systems from the old industrialized northeast and Midwest, the Rustbelt, to the South and Southwest, the Sunbelt. California became one the largest beneficiaries of this shift. The postwar boom of the 1950s had created sprawling suburbs outside of major cities like Los Angeles. Within these suburbs, white middleclass Americans, became distanced from the problems facing the rest of the United States. Lisa McGirr’s study of Orange County, a densely suburban area outside of Los Angeles, examined the area for a case study to argue that suburbia created the roots for the New Right.⁵ Becoming a breeding ground for conservatism, McGirr looked at how the support behind Barry Goldwater created a network of conservative activist whose efforts eventually found their champion when Ronald Reagan stepped into the White House in 1980.

While Reagan owed much of his success to the organizational support that suburban California, and eventually other similar areas across the United States, many suburban youth opposed the support for the president that their parents had. As adults within these suburban areas worked towards a conservative backlash, it had an opposite reaction for many youth. Bored of their enclosed suburban surroundings, as Dewar MacLeod has suggested, the sound of punk rock from Los Angeles became a new and exciting fascination of youth from the suburbs. Being a familiar face to California, the

⁵ Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Rights* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 3-6.

punk rockers from the state quickly targeted their former governor from the 1960s.⁶ But it was not only youth of California who saw Reagan as a figure that represented a changing culture. Gary Floyd's earlier mentioned perspective of the "Great Acceptance," showed that youth across the United States began to see past the barriers that had allowed for Reaganism to transform American culture.

Becoming enemy number one to punks, Reagan's image and name reappeared endlessly in punk culture. Fanzines often featured altered images of the president or characterized him in cartoon illustrations. Even the attempted assassination of the president early on during his first term, became part of the assault by punks. One California band even went by the name "Jodie Foster's Army," (JFA) as John Hinckley Jr., the attempter of the assassination, claimed that his actions were to impress the famous Hollywood star—Jodie Foster, not Ronald Reagan.⁷ Taking this a step further, one Michigan band even had a song titled "Hinckley Had a Vision," In addition to mocking the assassination attempt on Reagan, bands like New York's Reagan Youth, used a satirical name that played off of the Hitler Youth from mid-twentieth century Nazi Germany. Eventually spanning from coast to coast, one of the most evident common feature that united punks together was their distaste for Reagan.⁸

⁶ Dewar MacLeod, *Kids of the Black Hole: Punk Rock in Postsuburban California*, 103.

⁷ Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan: A History 1974-2008* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 142.

⁸ JFA was an early 1980s group notable for bringing skateboarding culture into punk rock. The song "Hinkley Had a Vision," was a song played by the group the Crucifucks from Lansing, Mi the song can be heard on their 1985 self-titled album.

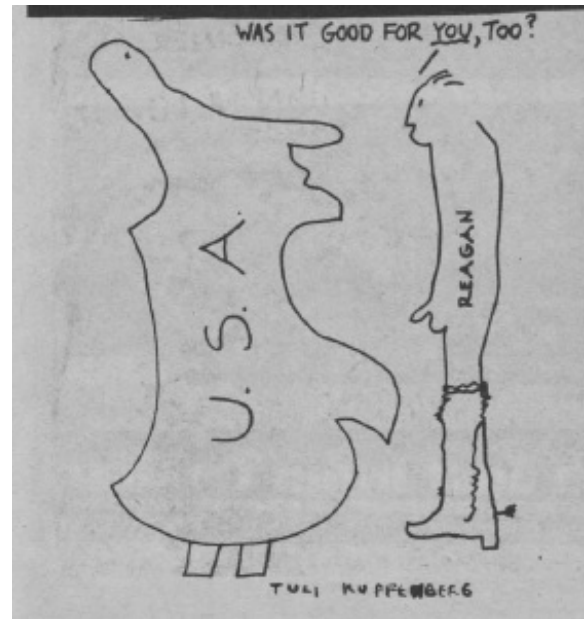
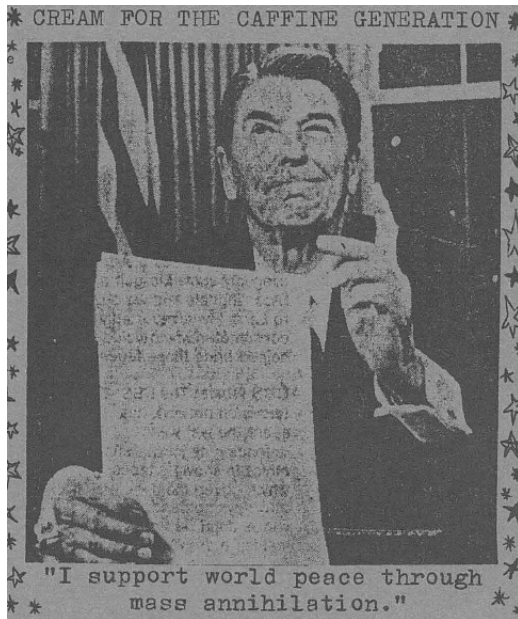


Figure 1. (Left) Reagan's Support of World Peace. Image from front page of a Kalamazoo, MI fanzine *Free Beer Press* 5 (Nov.-Dec., 1983): 1.

Figure 2. (Right) "Was It Good for You, Too?". Cartoon illustration from *Maximum Rock N Roll* 6 (May-June, 1983): 31.

With the support of the conservative movement, Reaganism took advantage of the backlash and gained tremendous political support. The religious emphasis and populist rhetoric of Nixon's "Silent Majority," was only a part of what Reagan represented. Outside of conservative politics, Reagan reflected the "Me Generation" and its narcissistic characteristic. The self-centered trait from the baby-boomers, a generation that grew up with abundance, carried into the next generation with the addition of greed and celebration of wealth. This generation gained its own identity under the continuance of Reaganism throughout the eighties, creating the yuppie culture. Although the features of individualism, conservative politics, greed and celebration of wealth had their own

symbols, Reagan himself became the symbol that reflected all of these features that assisted in Reaganism's rise to "cultural hegemony."

Harnessing the cultural symbols of other movements became a crucial part of Reaganism. Using the populism of the New Right, and its strong ties to Evangelicalism, Reaganism adopted the symbols used by the Christian denomination. Chris Hedges, the journalist and Presbyterian minister, has written about the symbols that Evangelists have used, which he highlighted including: "blind obedience to a male hierarchy that often claims to speak for God, intolerance toward nonbelievers, and disdain for rational, intellectual inquiry," a focus that he pointed to being a recent characteristic for Evangelical faiths. "Dominionists and their wealthy, right-wing sponsors," Hedges wrote, "speak in terms and phrases that are familiar and comforting to most Americans." However, these terms are not what they use to mean, such as words like "'life' and 'death' mean[ing] life in Christ or death to Christ, and are used to signal belief or unbelief in the risen Lord."⁹

Language is an important component for cultural understanding. As Gramsci pointed to, language is the tool used for people of a culture to understand their surrounding world.¹⁰ But if that language is altered, like that of the Christian Right, it creates barriers that limit one's full understanding of the world around them. The fatherly figure that Reagan presented himself as, therefore a symbol of male hierarchy, demonstrated his symbolic fluidity. Furthermore, Reagan's refueling of the Cold War

⁹ Chris Hedges, *American Fascist: The Christian Right and the War on America* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 13-14.

¹⁰ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 324-325.

reflected the “intolerance toward nonbelievers,” in this case the Soviet Union and anything that resembled communism.

By presenting communists as “nonbelievers,” Reagan symbolized capitalism and the “free market” as a holy symbol itself. Anyone who questioned capitalism became seen as a heretic, no matter what intellectual inquiry was used to argue differently. The policies of supply-side economics, were not favorable by the public. But when they became known as “Reaganomics,” the policies became presented as to support the holy “free market” and release the bondage of state control used by the “nonbelievers.”¹¹

This economic transition became further supported by a new youth culture that celebrated wealth, becoming rich, and purchasing material goods to show success and buy happiness. Perhaps one of the most significant cultural features of the eighties, these youth became known as yuppies. Author Bret Easton Ellis’s novel *American Psycho*, set in New York City in the late-1980s gives one of the best perspectives towards the new youth culture, and an overall cultural perspective towards Reaganism’s influence on American culture in the eighties.¹² From the opening section of Ellis’s work, the reader is introduced to Patrick Bateman, a young Wall Street yuppie warrior. As Bateman rides in a cab his thoughts reflect the yuppie mentality to the reader. He sees the problems facing everyone around him, vandalism, drugs abuse, poverty, and a growing homeless population, but remains focused on himself. His material possessions constantly distract him from the problems that seem so evident. Although he acknowledges the growing

¹¹ For information on Reaganomics, see Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974-2008* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 145, 168, 276.

¹² Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991).

AIDS situation, designer suites and walkmans quickly shifts his attention away from these issues. The fictional yuppie character continuously shares his own insecurities, but this focus changes and is countered with sunny optimism, avoiding any ability for self-criticism. In Bateman's mind, he is continuously trying to understand the world around him, but never able to succeed.¹³ As the story unravels, the young Bateman loses it and finds his sadistic desires leading him on murder spree.

The point of Bateman is not to suggest that the culture of Reaganism created serial killers, but that Ellis' fictional character gives a look at how a new "cultural hegemony" had set in during the eighties. While people became more self-centered and set their priorities on becoming wealthy, the positive thinking and fear of criticism distracted people from the problems facing the United States. In addition, Bateman was never prosecuted for his crimes. This demonstrated another cultural feature of Reaganism, the perspective that criminals were not businessmen or the rich, but the poor. The wealthy and powerful earned their success, while the poor were presented as being poor because of their own choosing.

Using these symbolic tools, Reaganism led the way for a new hegemonic culture within the United States. Reagan did not pioneer all of these cultural symbols, as much of these were a product of the 1970s, but his success in the 1980 election owed much to his ability to become a symbol for these multiple cultural movements. For the American punk movement, his rise to the presidency gave a target that represented multiple cultural changes that contributed to the creation of punk rock.

¹³ *Ibid*, 3-24.

Targeting iconic figures, however, was not something new to punk rock after Reagan's 1980 presidential victory. When punk rock first began in the United States during the mid-1970s, the main source that fueled the music was to challenge what the music industry had become. Groups from the Counterculture of the 1960s, like the Rolling Stones, were playing huge stadium concerts and youth did not identify with the acts from a previous generation. Not long after the punk sound developed in New York with groups like the Ramones, the musical style found itself crossing the Atlantic and finding a new home on an island that once had an empire spanning across the world, Britain. From the influence of British punk groups, most notably the Sex Pistols and the Clash, the American punk movement found a new style of politics that they used to challenge Reaganism's rising influence on American culture.

"God Save the Queen" - Sex Pistols

The New York City club CBGB's, founded by Hilly Kristal in 1974, became a launching pad for pioneering musicians that contributed to the development of punk rock. Leading this push for new, exciting, and creative music, bands like Television and Richard Hell, Patti Smith and her "non-musician" performances, the alluring Blondie, Talking Heads, the Dead Boys, and the uniformed foursome known as the Ramones, all found themselves gaining attention at the famous New York club.¹⁴ Long sharing a

¹⁴ Stacy Thompson, *Punk Productions*, 4, 10-13, 16-17. Patti Smith, remaining a cultural icon, has rejected the notion that she is a musician. She acknowledges that she does sing and enjoy music, but does not take believe that she has the talent to be considered a musician. For a recent interview where Smith discusses this view see, "Legendary Patti Smith on Her New Memoir 'M Train' & National Book Award Winner 'Just Kids,'" *Democracy Now!*, Oct. 8, 2015, http://www.democracynow.org/2015/10/8/legendary_patti_smith_on_her_new.

cultural relationship, the music from the former American colonies found itself shipping back to the homeland of Britain. Facing a dreadful recession, youth unemployment skyrocketed on the island. Like the problems that had begun impacting American cities along the Rust Belt, the manufacturing centers of the Northeast and Midwest, Britain was experiencing economic restructuring with manufacturing being replaced by service industries. Seeing their situation as the fault of their elders, the youth—who were out of work, out of school, and squatting in abandoned buildings that many called home—found punk rock as a medium for their angers and frustrations.¹⁵

News stories covering the British punk phenomenon became an increasing topic in American media. During many punk shows, slam-dancing—a physically demanding form of dancing that involves dancers flailing their bodies against one another—became a focus of their negative portrayal of punk by emphasizing it as a violent characteristic within the cultural movement.¹⁶ But what these reports mostly missed was that the violence was a part of the politics reflected in punk. The destructive dancing itself was a protest against the changing landscape. Along with that, violence speaks the politics of anger, of frustrations, of challenging and disrupting a culture that had forgotten about their youth.¹⁷ Where the punk movement first gained this politics of anger was not in the

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 19. For information on the decline of the Rust Belt, see Schulman, *The Seventies*, 5, 106-107.

¹⁶ Dewar MacLeod, *Kids of the Black Hole*, 110-112.

¹⁷ Hugh C. O'Connell, "(Re)Turning Money into Rebellion: Reification and Utopianism in Early Punk Production," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 47 [3] (2014): 592-597. The violent aspects of the punk movement, particularly the aggressive and physical dancing that frequently became noted by the press, can be seen as a type of protest itself. Like the soccer hooligans of the late-1980s and into the early-1990s, the

United States under Reagan, but in Britain to rebel against their sacred icon. The Queen and empire.

The Sex Pistols, one of the first punk groups to gain worldwide attention, were seen as nihilistic and apolitical anarchists who supported violence. This focus was easy to condemn as non-political, or if political aimed towards the farthest fringes of the Right. But then a group called the Clash started to turn heads and gain their own recognition. Unlike the Sex Pistols, the politics of the Clash clearly displayed their political affiliation.

To understand the development of punk rock, especially when examining its influence on American youth in the eighties, one has to look at the exchange of ideas between the United States and Britain. The musical style of punk rock may have begun in the United States with the Ramones' simplistic approach to rock music, but it was in Britain where that style expanded into a larger culture, a counterculture. Two of the most notable groups who influenced this expansion, furthering the development of punk, were the Sex Pistols and the Clash. Although the mid-1970s British punk explosion had numerous other bands that American youths listened to, the Sex Pistols and the Clash became two of the most well-received and recognized of these groups in the United States. Bringing punk rock to world attention, the Sex Pistols offensive name to prudent observers and their aggressive lyrics, media appearances, and destructive shows led many to see the group, and punk rock itself, to be of violent nihilistic youths. The Clash, on the other hand, offered a different perspective. The group's appearance and raw sound was

collective group violence in punk demonstrated a protest by working-class people who were expressing their frustrations through their physical actions. For an investigative journalists look at this perspective, see Bill Buford, *Among the Thugs* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).

obviously punk, but as the group's career developed their musical sound became more diverse with their expanding musical talent, and lyrical content that were more easily identifiable as political compared to the Sex Pistols. The nihilism that many saw in the Sex Pistols, and applying to punk rock as a whole, became more difficult to support after the Clash gained an equal response by American audiences.

Looking at the economic and social situation in Britain, with its long tradition of a class social system and hard-hitting recession during the mid-1970s, many suggested that the combination of the two created the environment for thousands of youth to become punks.¹⁸ Although the United States did not have the same class structure as Britain, the economic situation was on the downturn.¹⁹ During such economic uncertainty, both nations found the leadership of their nation turning towards the Right. This situation saw the emergence of Margaret Thatcher in Britain and not long after Ronald Reagan in the United States. As punk rock developed a relationship of development between the Atlantic littoral, so too did the politics with both. Thatcher and Reagan became proponents of supply-side economics and persuaders for military intervention in the south Atlantic with the invasions of the Falkland by the British in 1982, and shortly after the

¹⁸ The economic recession is a common theme amongst writings that focus on British punk rock in the mid-1970s. For an example see, Kenneth J. Bindas, "'The Future is Unwritten': The Clash, Punk and America, 1977-1982," *American Studies* 34 [1] (Spring, 1993): 69-70; O'Connell, "(Re)Turning Money into Rebellion," 602-605.

¹⁹ Jules Tygiel, *Ronald Reagan and the Triumph of American Conservatism* (New York: Pearson, 2005), 108-115; The economic relationship and effects of deindustrialization have been compared between 1970s Britain and the United States in the early-1990s, Susan Willis, "Hardcore: Subculture American Style," *Critical Inquiry* 19 [2] (Winter, 1993): 367.

Americans' intervention of the tiny island of Grenada in 1983.²⁰ Yet before Thatcher, the Sex Pistols attacked an even more symbolic figure that upheld a hegemonic culture, the Queen.

The Sex Pistols quickly gained recognition in Britain and not long after that attention reached the United States. Drawing curiosity to American's who wanted to get a taste, or at least a look, at the notorious foursome. Their American debut tour became delayed because of a refusal to give a group with a criminal past visas to perform in the United States. One story printed on New Year's Eve of 1977 showed no surprise that Johnny Rotten (John Lydon), the lead singer of the band, had a criminal record. It was a part of "the normal process" for Britain's "male adolescence[s] in a working-class neighborhood," a perspective that focused on the violent aspects of British punkers, and undermined the possibilities of the phenomenon to attract American youth.²¹

Earlier in December the Sex Pistols were scheduled to make their first appearance in the United States on the nationally broadcasted show *Saturday Night Live*. Although the group had received permission to perform on the show, a sudden change of events caused the group to cancel their scheduled appearance.²² Replacing the Sex Pistols, Elvis Costello, another influential character on punk rock from Britain, created his own controversy by stopping in the middle of his performance and playing a song that had not

²⁰ Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Picador, 2007), 12, 170-174; Tygiel, *Ronald Reagan and the Triumph of American Conservatism*, 121, 147-148.

²¹ John Rockwell, "Sex Pistols Are Given Visas To Enter U.S. for Concerts: Controversial Lyrics," *New York Times*, Dec. 31, 1977, 6.

²² "'Saturday Night,' it wasn't the Pistols," *St. Petersburg Times* (Tampa Bay, FL), Dec. 20, 1977, 7D, News.google.com/newspapers.

been approved by the show's censors—a move that made the producers of the show furious.²³

Whatever the reason for the Sex Pistols cancellation of the *Saturday Night Live* show, the group finally appeared across the Atlantic on January 6, 1978 in Atlanta. “The publicity that swirl[ed] around” the band was described as being “so intense that a simple report of its performance bec[ame] almost impossible.” The difficulty to explain such an event was that it was not the Sex Pistols who were “indulging in overt violence,” as reported by John Rockwell of the *New York Times*, but instead “the crowd that was screaming insults, making obscene gestures and throwing things at the band - including . . . a pig’s ear” according to the band’s drummer Paul Cook.²⁴ The publicity covering the group had gained the curiosity of Americans. The shocking reports about their first show demonstrated that the intensity and spectacle of punk rock would not remain a British sensation. Although their career would be short lived, it was the reaction of their career that brought American attention to punk rock.

“After nearly a year of foul reports from overseas,” journalist Bob Ross was one of the commentators trying to interpret what made the Sex Pistols so unique. His conclusion was that the group either “represent[ed] the new age in rock,” or “an immense, disgusting practical joke.” Reporters and photographers had “flocked . . . from London, Boston, New York and other cities,” to witness the punk group that had “a nationwide ban in England on live performances and BBC airplay.” Although the news

²³ Mark Lasswell, “Elvis Costello and the ‘SNL’ Weenies,” *Rolling Stone*, Oct. 5, 1989, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/features/elvis-costello-and-the-snl-weenies-19891005>.

²⁴ John Rockwell, “Sex Pistols Make United States Debut,” *New York Times*, Jan. 7, 1978, 12.

media focused on the “costumed freaks” that were expected to be seen at the punk show, the majority of the crowd was simply curious to see this peculiar group described as “four rather untalented, but freakishly seductive young amateurs,” as Ross described the group. These curious observers, “descended on the relatively few punkishly bedecked fans like buzzards on dead rabbits.” Most of the crowd was “neither press nor punks. This majority - rather routine for a night in a rock club in terms of age and looks - watched scornfully as reporters and costumed freaks exchanged views.” Ross suggested that the band gave, “a diverting reminder that rock should be fun.” However, he also turned down the concept of “any notion that they might conceivably herald a British invasion comparable to the mid-’60s Beatle phenomenon.”²⁵

Although the report by Ross declined the idea of a second British invasion, like that of the earlier Counterculture, the Sex Pistols did have a connection to the earlier musical sensation of the 1960s. Working behind the stage, Malcolm McLaren, formed the band that exploded onto the music scene in 1976. McLaren may have assembled the group to reignite the rebellious spirit of the 1960s, but he could not control it. Whether the group’s creation was to promote and market a new clothing fashion, or to reignite 1960s radicalism, they had a major contribution to punk culture.²⁶

²⁵ Bob Ross, “Sex Pistols are funny, if short lived joke,” *St. Petersburg (Florida) Times*, Jan. 6, 1978, 1D-2D, news.google.com/newspapers.

²⁶ Kevin C. Dunn, “Never Mind the Bollocks: The Punk Rock Politics of Global Communication”, *Review of International Studies* 34 (2008):193-210; Tricia Henry, *Making of a Style*, (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1989); Stacy Thompson, “Market Failure: Punk Economics, Early to Late”, *College Literature* 28, no.,2 (Spring, 2001) 48-64.

McLaren had, “toyed in the past with leftist-anarchic rhetoric,” but as *New York Times* reporter John Rockwell suggested in a February, 1978 article: “it seem[ed] so mixed with contradictory impulses toward sensationalism and provocation for its own sake that one wouldn’t feel very comfortable trusting him.” Although Rockwell did criticize the intentions and or ideological purpose behind McLaren’s creation, he did suggest that the Sex Pistols told something that was “not just about . . . punk rock, British punk rock and rock-and-roll in general.” Rockwell explained how “attention of the world at large has been captured by the more bizarre and sensationalistic aspects of the punk rock phenomenon . . . the torn clothes, queer makeup and hairstyles, the safety-pins, the Clockwork Orange-ish violence.” They had ignored that “at their core the Sex Pistols represent[ed] an extension of the essential impulse of all rock.” He suggested that they had a “mission” that “was revolutionary.” And described it as “revolutionary in Britain more generally, as a manifestation of class frustration and anger, and in the Western world in a still larger sense as a symbol of the restless energies of a youthful sub-culture that found industrialized bourgeois society hypocritical, self-satisfied and stale.”²⁷ Rockwell, however, although noticing an important aspect behind the punk movement before his contemporaries, undermined how punk was forming the same “revolutionary” characteristics in his own country, as it was in Britain.

What these reports missed was that the Sex Pistols politics were not something that could be easily placed into a political category that most Americans understood. The group’s perceived destructive nature, call for anarchy, and nihilistic message was a type

²⁷ John Rockwell, “The Paradox of the Sex Pistols,” *New York Times*, Feb. 5, 1978, D5.

of protest against British culture and politics. This perspective was most evident in their songs, “Anarchy in the U.K.,” and “God Save the Queen.”²⁸

Both songs demonstrated a feature that became a key feature that the group gave to the punk movement: targeting cultural symbols that upheld hegemony. Although Thatcher would later become a target for British punk rockers, the Sex Pistols’ song “God Save the Queen” attacked an even more powerful symbol of British culture, the Queen. The Queen, being a figure of monarchy, upheld cultural nostalgia, class structures, empire, and conservative mores. The British monarchy had lost power long ago, but keeping the Queen upheld an identity of a Britain from long ago.

It was no surprise that when Johnny Rotten began their song dedicated to the iconic figure, that people became immensely offended at the lyrics of “God Save the Queen.” The opening lyrics of the started with the line: “God save the queen/ The fascists regime.” Being only just over two decades since the world united to stop fascism in World War II, the second line made a powerful statement that quickly gained the listeners attention. Beginning the second verse with the same first opening line, and title to the song, the lyrics further attacked the Queen by saying that: “She ain’t no human being/ There is no future/ And England’s dreaming.” By suggesting that the Queen was not human, the implications in the lyrics point to the purpose behind the song. As a symbol that represented the hegemonic culture that allowed for England’s youth to see “no future” ahead, England was surely “dreaming” and the song sought to wake the British people up to see reality. Although the “no future” aspect of the song presented the

²⁸ O’Connell, “(Re)Turning Money into Rebellion,” 602-606.

interpretation of the group's message as nihilistic, lyrics like: "Don't be told what you want/ Don't be told what you need," suggested that the group did actually seek for change." As the song continued, the lyrics further upheld the perspective that the group was attempting to tear down the ultimate symbol of the British culture that had led to the predicament the Sex Pistols grew up in. There would be "no future," in the Sex Pistols' view, if people did not stop praying to save the royal symbolic figure. But when "tourists are money," and Britain was increasingly shifting away from manufacturing and towards a service-based industry, then the "figurehead" was a leading part of their tourist's industry; even if she was "not what she seems."²⁹

The message behind the Sex Pistols' songs was not to promote a different politics from the current system, but to tear down the structures that upheld that system. As "God Save the Queen," showed, the group attempted to achieve this by tearing down the symbols that represented and supported the culture that created the current system. This perspective was further seen in the group's other hit song "Anarchy in the U.K." Like the song previously discussed, "Anarchy in the U.K." also became used as a support to push the perspective that the Sex Pistols supported a nihilistic perspective towards the world, and not one for change. This narrative however, misrepresented the group's message in their songs. Along with that, if the group was nihilistic and had no political aims then in brings to question of why they became so feared in Britain and eventually the United States? That answer may lie in their song "Anarchy in the U.K."

²⁹ Sex Pistols, "God Save the Queen," *Never Mind the Bollocks* (London: Virgin, 1977).

Johnny Rotten began the lyrics of “Anarchy in the U.K.” by declaring that he was an “anti-Christ,” and in the second line, a “anarchist.” While anarchy is often perceived as an apolitical, and or apocalyptic view calling for the end of government that upholds civilizations, the next part of the song posed a different interpretation. The Sex Pistols call for anarchy was not an apolitical position, but one that called to tear down the system. Following the declaration of being an “anti-Christ,” and an “anarchist,” the next line presented one of the most philosophical musical lyrics of the twentieth century: “Don’t know what I want/ But I know how to get it.” The line demonstrated that the goals of the group was not to promote a new political ideology, but to destroy the current one—hence the meaning behind the second line, “I know how to get it.” Like “God Save the Queen,” the song also sought to tear down the barriers that kept people in a “dream.” In the case of “Anarchy in the U.K.,” that dream was a “future” that involved a “shopping scheme.”³⁰ This usage of language reflected back to Gramsci’s perspective that for subordinate groups to challenge the hegemonic culture, they must first see through the common language to create a new understanding of the world.³¹ This was the politics of the Sex Pistols. The group demonstrated anger in their lyrics, but that anger itself was a form of politics. Anger overcomes acquiescence and allows for people to search for where that anger is coming from. For Britain, the economic situation, fueled this anger among the youth. The Sex Pistols’ approach to music sought to turn that anger into

³⁰ *Ibid*, “Anarchy in the U.K.”

³¹ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 12, 324-327, 333.

something constructive, or rather *destructive*, as their song's encouraged breaking down the barriers that created the situation they were experiencing.

"Revolution Rock" - The Clash

As punk spread in the United States during the latter part of the 1970s with bands such as the Germs, the Misfits, and X, there existed yet another British band that contributed immensely to punk culturally, ideologically, and politically as well, the Clash. While they also stepped onto the punk scene of Britain in 1976 with the Sex Pistols, their arrival to the United States would be further delayed. Even though they had a tremendous impact on punk, the band has been often ignored in most academic writing. The Clash were received quite differently than their counterparts, the Sex Pistols, with *The Nation* and *Time* praising them as the creators of two of the 1970s greatest albums.³² The band not only expanded the sound of punk and were musically appealing to a larger audience, but their lyrics gave a more direct political statement of protest. Becoming more politically oriented in their lyrics as their career progressed, the Clash's songs bridged a connection between issues that leftist in the Western World saw and popular culture.

To the Clash their music had a message to share. In many ways this message was similar to that of the 1960s as Kenneth J. Bindas has argued.³³ Although the Clash shared

³² Tom Smucker, "Pop Music," *The Nation* 230 [21] (May 31, 1980), 667-668; *Time*, "The Best of the Seventies," *Time* 115 [1] (Jan. 7, 1986), 96.

³³ See, Kenneth J. Bindas, "The Future is Unwritten: The Clash, Punk and America, 1977-1982," *American Studies*, 34 [1] (Spring, 1993):70-89

aspects of the political message from the Counterculture, they rejected the way in which this message was expressed. The momentum that had been generated a decade before became exhausted; and to the Clash there was direr need in their current time to overturn that. The foursome that created the successful British band, Joe Strummer (vocals), Mick Jones (guitar), Paul Simonon (bass), and Topper Headon (drums), demonstrated their social understandings of not only their role in society, but others who were placed in similar social systems.

The Clash's songs spoke out against police violence and racism in "Guns of Brixton," corporate greed in "Complete Control," imperialism in their song "Spanish Bombs," and the unpunished crimes committed by the wealthy in songs like "Bankrobber." They were talented and played diverse music that drastically differed from the Sex Pistols, and it became difficult for media sources to support the idea that punk was simply ruthless nihilism.

With the Clash gaining reputation, popular media publication could not ignore the success of the band. An early March, 1979 issue of *Time* magazine reported that the band "sings straight to - and, in a sense, even speaks for - a generation of working-class kids not only cut off from the mainstream but disaffected from the smug, cushy sounds of most contemporary pop." It was their "restless anger and hangman's wit, rediscovered and redirected the danger at the heart of all great rock." Yet with this recognition of what had led to the band's success, the article rejected the idea that the Clash would become popular in the United States because of its "shrewd reflection on class and generational

warfare.”³⁴ The rejection of seeing class and disaffected youth as an issue that would resonate to an American audience reflected a sense of American exceptionalism, and that such issues did not exist in the United States. The Clash’s perspective may have been received well by a class-conscious British society, but to the United States, as *Times* suggested, their perspective was that of “radicals.”³⁵

While the term “punk” received almost an instant negative connotation to the genre of music and cultural aesthetics that it adopted, the suggestion of its short-lived career was seen early on. One particular article by the right-wing publication *National Review* demonstrated this in a November 9, 1979 piece written by John M. Buckley. Titled “Rock: The Cold War Sound,” Buckley suggested that punk rock had failed. The narrow understanding that the genre of punk was simply a short-lived style of violent and unappealing music, led him to describe the Clash not as a “punk” band, but instead, they were part of the “new wave” sound that was taking over rock & roll with music acts like The Cars and David Bowie. By focusing on the musical style and ignoring the ideological differences between the Clash and context of many songs considered to be new wave, narrations such as Buckley’s presented either a misunderstanding of punk, or an attempt to diverge the style through identification. In effect, the changing of language to describe punk as something else, barred the general public from a greater understanding of the ways in which the punk cultural figures reflected issues that youth of the United States

³⁴ Jay Cocks, “The Best Gang in Town,” *Time*. 113 [10], March 5, 1979, 68.

³⁵ Thomas N. Jewell, “Rock: The Best Recordings of 1979,” *Library Journal*, 105 [4], Feb. 15, 1980, 476.

were seeing within their own culture.³⁶ When media publications began identifying groups like the Clash as “new wave,” instead of being *punk rock*, it showed how language can defuse any challenge to the “cultural hegemony.” At the same time, this labelling also opened up a broader market to sell the new style of rock music. Punk had been identified as destructive and violent, but “new wave” did not have the same negative affiliation. For the Clash, however, this may have benefited the group to be more appealing to larger audience. But the multiple labels that became used to describe punk, new wave in this case and an abundance of labels later on like hardcore, crossover, and ska, created ambiguities as to what punk rock was. This also defused the possibility for people to see how punk movement was expanding and becoming more threatening to the hegemonic culture.

The following year, one writer pointed out in a 1980 article that “It appears from the evidence that rock, like America itself, has gone conservative.” Country music had boomed along with the rise of easy listening tunes, yet somehow the Clash continued to rise in popularity in the United States.³⁷ The 1970s had come to a close, and with Ronald Reagan soon taking the White House, the further realization of America’s shift towards conservatism became evident. But while this was occurring, the Clash’s popularity appeared abnormal in this environment because of their distinctive popular leftist expression through their songs and to the press. As media publications gave the

³⁶ John M. Buckley, “Rock: The Cold War Sound,” *National Review*, 31 [45], Nov. 9, 1979, 1445-1447.

³⁷ Thomas N. Jewell, “Rock: The Best Recordings of 1980,” *Library Journal*, 106.

perspective of the band through the authors' lenses, the continuous success of the group brought them to the visual scene through television media. Following the complications of overbooking their debut New York City shows at Bond's Casino, the band extended their already four day, four show visit, to make sure that every fan who purchased tickets were able to see the band play. When interviewed by News 4 Manhattan (circa June, 1981) the Clash's lead singer, Joe Strummer, explained that; "Half of Europe is listening to the same rubbish, most [*paused to correct self*], all of America is listening to the same rubbish, just get all of this rubbish out of the way so we can see what's going on." Later in the interview bassist, Paul Simonon, was asked; "Do you think it can hurt you supporting political causes?" Simonon replied to the question with, "not if you feel strongly enough in it. You know, we all feel pretty strong about what happened and for the people."³⁸ The report by the New York news station followed the Bond's Casino show in the city, where after being shut down due to overcrowding, mounted police dispersed nearly eight-hundred fans.³⁹ Although a major let down for the American fans who had anticipated the arrival of the British punk group, the band's decision to play additional shows until every fan who purchased a ticket could see the group. demonstrated how the group saw their music as an important message to share. The Bond's Casino shows also reflected a concept that had developed in punk economics by valuing the consumer. The group could have simply given refunds to fans who were

³⁸ "The Clash - News Report about Bond's Casino Shows - June 1981," YouTube, Sep. 12, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JAIPVkrMI5M>.

³⁹ United International Press, "City Shuts Bonds Disco; Clash Show Is Canceled," *New York Times*, May 31, 1981, 33.

unable to see the show that they purchased tickets for. But the Clash saw their music as something worth more than monetary value, it was a cultural and ideological exchange as much as it was about having fun and enjoying music.

Following the Bond's Casino shows, the band found itself on a nationally broadcasted interview with Tom Snyder on the night show *Tomorrow*. Snyder was one of the few who allowed for punks to be seen on national television with Patti Smith being an earlier guest on the show.⁴⁰ The interview expressed the band's feeling that they were not as much a rock & roll band, but that they were a "news giving group" (a concept that reflected their decision to play additional shows at the Bond's Casino). Although the band made a joke of much of this interview—with Snyder getting upset over them messing around with a stuffed teddy bear—Strummer made an important acknowledgement of a feeling that became a theme of punk. "Isn't life boring?" he asked: "We're trying to make it interesting." Snyder replied to the comments by asking if they were even old enough to understand life? Giving encouraging words to other youth, the young charismatic Strummer stated: "We got out, right? We want to show other people that they can get out."⁴¹

The Clash may have gotten out, but their message of showing others to do the same was blurred by much of the "rubbish" that Strummer earlier warned of. The success of the group; the disagreement of musical ambitions within, and issues from the large

⁴⁰ Tavia Nyong'o, "Do You Want Queer Theory (or Do You Want Truth)? Intersections of Punk and Queer in the 1970s," *Radical History Review* (Jan., 2008): 103.

⁴¹ "The Clash - Interview with Tom Snyder 1981," YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JVygiXOKEEw>.

record company, CBS, that they were signed to, led to the demise of the band. Just before this breakup, in what was perhaps their last interview, the band pointed out that “music is what people are turning onto this last thirty, forty, years, not books and art.”⁴² The Clash used this change in cultural communication to inform their audiences of the issues that often were ignored in their contemporary time. Yet, although the original members of the Clash took different paths, their musical and ideological contribution to punk set into motion the greater expansion of the movement. While attention was focused on the growth of the punk movement in Britain, similar dissatisfactions by youth in the United States was spreading. As more of America’s youth were discovering punk rock as something new and exciting, they also found it as something that reflected what they were experiencing.

* * *

The Sex Pistols never made an appearance on *Saturday Night Live*. Their replacement, Elvis Costello, surely earned some enemies of the show, but playing a song that was not approved prior to the show would be nothing compared to the 1981 performance a handful of years later by the Los Angeles band FEAR—a well suited name for a group playing a show on Halloween night. Being invited by John Belushi during his last appearance on the skit comedy show, FEAR’s shocking performance showed that the destructive nature of the Sex Pistols never fully left the United States. The show’s decision to have real punks in the audience slam-dancing—a physically demanding form

⁴² “The Clash - February 1982 Interview in New Zealand,” YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k4mmSkbQhJI>.

of dancing where people hurled their bodies against one another—turned into an out of controlled scene that caused the airing of the show to be cut.

Receiving a phone call, Ian Mackaye, the singer of the Washington D.C. group Minor Threat, was asked if he and several others were interested in coming to the NBC studio to be slam-dancers for FEAR's musical performance. Tesco Vee, one of several punks who were gathered in Mackaye's basement when he received the phone call, remembered Mackaye saying one thing after the random phone call: "Balushi needs slam dancers." From a relatively small group, more and more punks joined the travel to appear on nationally broadcasted television show. With a full audience of punks showing up, total destruction rained down on the New York studio. Jumping to grab the microphone, John Brannon yelled "Negative Approach is going to fuck you up," Negative Approach being the name of his Michigan band—and one of the last sounds heard before the station cut the broadcast. Vee, being older than many of the other punks and a former school teacher, stepped away and felt immensely embarrassed at the destruction his fellow punks had caused. Vee was the lead singer of another Michigan punk band, the Meatmen, and in the Midwest few people were exposed to punk rock. National attention to violent perspectives towards punk, such as that seen on that Halloween night in 1981, presented a difficult obstacle for the youth of the region.⁴³

⁴³ BlankTV, "The Meatmen - BlankTV's Uncensored Interview with Tesco Vee! (April - 2011)," YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U3Zn5CCaoIo>. For a recorded version of FEAR's *Saturday Night Live* performance, see Hardcore Worldwide, "FEAR – BEEF BALONEY – NEW YORKS ALRIGHT ON SAT NIGHT -LIVE (OFFICIAL VERSION HCWW)," YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Frud5RFtTi0>. For a recent interview with FEAR's lead singer Lee Ving, see The Lip TV, "When FEAR Destroyed SNL," April 1, 2015, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6xSHqr57v0A&ebc=ANyPxKrw_AAGgR8AJIYi1-6MU7yJh-xKucuUWct8G-Yg1WzIMJDIB6BDOSrFwyD15vXp6L4rbRN1y2ntrfA1tA1U9RzVh9rUww.

By the early-1980s, the influence from British punk rock had helped to expand punk throughout the United States. New York may have harbored the sound and style of punk, but the influence from similar youth in London brought punk out of the underground. Just as these two major urban areas developed punk scenes, other American cities followed throughout the late-1970s with Washington D.C., Los Angeles, and San Francisco developing their own vibrant punk breeding grounds. With Ronald Reagan in office, one of the common themes throughout the growing American punk scenes was their dissent towards the iconic president. The punks' distaste for Reagan united them together, and as the punk movement spread, groups across the country worked together during the "Rock Against Reagan" tour to prevent a second term of the former Hollywood star.

CHAPTER II

“ROCK AGAINST REAGAN”

Punk Protests, 1984 Presidential Election, and the Culture of Reaganism

The 1984 National Democratic Convention in San Francisco saw some unusual characters outside the building where the members of the party met. Among the large crowd assembled for demonstrations and marches, a man dressed as “a lobster confessed to one of the local papers that his costume was impractical for a march. ‘It’s more for standing in place and doing a little break dancing. It’s hard to be a lobster these days in the city.’” This crustacean would be one of numerous people dressed up for an “All Species parade”. Others joined the all species costumes with outfits such as “a bunch of transvestites in nun costumes [who] performed an exorcism of [the evangelical Southern Baptist pastor and televangelist] Jerry Falwell.” Along with all of these people expressing their concerns towards the America around them; the streets around the convention center in San Francisco also included “a seven-hour punk rock concert, ‘Rock against Reagan,’ featuring such artists as The Dead Kennedys.”¹

The first presidential term of Ronald Reagan was coming to an end and in hope to prevent another term, the Youth International Party, known as the Yippies, from New York City created the “Rock Against Reagan” (RAR) tour. The group toured all across the United States from 1983-1984, leading up to the presidential election. The shows featured some of the most popular punk bands of the era including: The Dead Kennedys

¹ “Spin, Crash, and Burn,” *National Review* 36 [6] (Aug. 10, 1984): 12.

from San Francisco, the young trio from San Pedro, California known as the Minutemen, the Crucifucks from Lansing, Michigan, the Dicks and Millions of Dead Cops from Austin, Texas, and Reagan Youth—whose name played off of Hitler’s Youth—from New York. The tour had more than just free shows to see some of the biggest acts in punk rock, however. RAR also registered voters, presented informative films on topics such as American imperialism, political speakers, and even comedy; with the later to come popular comedian Whoopi Goldberg performing during the tour’s 1983 show at Dolores Park in San Francisco.² As one tour spokesman shared with a Florida newspaper, the shows were also to generate “proceeds from accompanying T-shirt and art sales . . . to be used for the cause.” The “cause” in question was simple: prevent another four years of the Reagan administration.³

Following the Democratic convention where RAR and other liberal groups displayed their frustration towards the current affairs of the United States, Dallas hosted the Republican Party’s National Convention. This time there were no lobsters. There were, however, quite a few punk rockers. Representatives of punk rock were there to speak on behalf of all crustaceans and others who opposed the former Hollywood-star-turned president, Ronald Reagan. As the RAR shows demonstrated, it was more than just Reagan’s politics that united these various people together to tour across the nation, it was the culture he represented.

² “Anti-Reagan group can protest the day before president arrives,” *Desert News* (Salt Lake City, Ut), Aug. 27, 1984, 2B, news.google.com/newspapers; David Ensminger, “Dave Dictor (MDC),” *Left of the Dial: Conversations with Punk Icons* (Oakland: PM Press, 2013). 267.

³ Ken Haldin, “Varied Weekend Concerts Will Suit All Musical Tastes,” *Ocala Star-Banner* (Ocala, Fl), March 22, 1984, 78, news.google.com/newspaper.

As 1984 marked the success of Reagan's second presidential campaign, it brought with it a lasting shift in American ideology. Reagan's presidency demonstrated how the once politically radical New Right supported by Barry Goldwater only two decades prior, had become accepted by the public. Yet while Reagan reflected many of the ideas supported by Goldwater, there was something drastically different about him. Discussing Reagan's first inauguration, the journalist and social critic Sidney Blumenthal explained the event as; "a celebration of wealth, by the wealthy, for those who wanted to be wealthy (the rest of us). The line between fantasy and reality was constantly blurred, and the glitz of new money was presented as the heart of tradition . . . this was the authentic vision of Reaganites, advanced without shame or irony."⁴

Reagan began his presidency praising the wealthy, but just after taking office in 1981 the United States faced an economic recession. For areas like the Midwest, as explained previously, the impact of this recession in combination with the Farm Crisis scarred the region for years to follow. The Farm Crisis would continue into Reagan's second term, even as for some the overall economy began to bounce back in 1983. By the end of the year, as the Democratic party's presidential candidates began to announce their campaign to challenge the incumbent president, things were looking bleak for the former actor. The recession had helped Democrats gain seats in congress during the midterm election, leading some in the party to believe that the American public would see

⁴ Sidney Blumenthal, "Reaganism and the Neokitsch Aesthetic," *The Reagan Legacy* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988). See also, Ed. Bruce J. Schulman; Julian E. Zelizer, *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 251.

Reaganomics as the same failed economic policy that contributed to the Great Depression in the late 1920s.⁵

The prediction by the Democrats turned out to be wrong. The Reaganites quickly took credit for the recovery with their new economic philosophy that praised tax cuts. This perspective, however, was misleading: it was not the new economic policies that helped the recovery—but a new type of Keynesian practices. Unlike traditional Keynesian approaches the recovery from the recession invested largely into military, or what has been called “military Keynesian” economics. In addition, the costs of these investments generated a significant amount of national debt that the Reagan administration kept out of discussion.⁶

The economic success of the latter half of Reagan’s first presidential term overshadowed the corruption and controversies that came out of many of his appointed officials in government agencies. For instance, James Watt, the Secretary of Interior, offensively described the diversity of his staff. After being ridiculed by the press, Secretary Watt resigned from his position. Watt’s controversy, in addition to others in lower positions, seemed to do little to discredit the fervor of Reaganism.⁷

Avoiding criticism, the failed policies were overshadowed by the way in which the president presented himself. Reagan had restored American pride, and was portrayed

⁵ Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan: A History 1974-2008* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 168-169.

⁶ Jules Tygiel, *Ronald Reagan and the Triumph of American Conservatism* (New York: Pearson, 2005). 150-152; Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan*, 168-170.

⁷ Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan*, 169-170.

as all that was America. The United States had successfully invaded the tiny island of Grenada to push out the Cubans and to save the American medical students that were trapped in communist held territory. Overcoming the impact from Vietnam, many Americans rejoiced in what media outlets portrayed as a triumph over communist expansion. Reagan had stepped into office with a firm and aggressive stance against communism. He had re-intensified the tensions of the Cold War and Grenada refueled anti-communist sentiment once more. Along with this manufactured aura of military success there was an explosion of American patriotism. Much of the connection between Reagan and patriotism came out of successful efforts to link his re-election campaign to the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles. The media depicted the event as the “American Games,” not merely because they were on home turf but because with a Soviet and Eastern bloc boycott, Americans won an overwhelming majority of the medals. But as the anti-communist president prepared for the 1984 election, his aggressive rhetoric towards the Soviet Union had been toned down and Reagan preached a new policy of negotiation between the two superpowers.⁸

The actor of many faces, Reagan, was able to appeal to every demographic (except African Americans, to which he received the lowest percentage of votes in American history).⁹ His economic philosophy spoke to the wealthy and those disgusted by taxes. The firm and aggressive foreign policy towards the Soviets had gained the

⁸ Jules Tygiel, *Ronald Reagan and the Triumph of American Conservatism* (New York: Pearson, 2005), 150-152.

⁹ *Ibid*, 153.

attention of hawkish constituents and the victory in Grenada had re-established an image of U.S. military superiority. His popularity as a Hollywood star made Reagan a household name. He was the “Gipper,” the great Notre Dame football player, and he became seen as all that was America. Reagan was a farmer to the Midwesterners where he began his roots growing up in Illinois and later a popular sports announcer in Iowa before beginning his acting career. He was a cowboy to those in the West and a genuine Texan to the state that owed much of its economic expansion to the president who rode horses at his ranch in California.¹⁰ As Walter Mondale, the candidate that emerged from the large field of Democratic presidential hopefuls, stumped Reagan in their first of two televised debates, commentators questioned the age of the oldest president to hold office. Turning the issue around in the second debate, Reagan joked about his opponent’s youthful inexperience.¹¹

Although Punk rockers strongly opposed the incumbent president, the majority of their peers voted differently. Young people flocked towards the Republican party as Richard Wirthlin pointed out to *Time* magazine in September of 1984. “For the first time in my memory, voters 24 years old and younger support Republicans and Reagan more strongly than any other age group except those over 65.” Wirthlin suggested that: “If we

¹⁰ Roger Rosenblatt, “Tell Me, What Was It Like?: An essayist offers a personal look at the doings in Dallas,” *Times* 124 [10] (Sept. 3, 1984): 41.

¹¹ Jules Tygiel, *Ronald Reagan and the Triumph of American Conservatism*, 152-153.

get a voter who is 19 or 20 years old to cast his first vote for Reagan, we know we have a very good chance of having that voter for ten presidential elections.”¹²

During the president’s second term the Reagan culture transformed all walks of society. For young Americans it created “[a] new youth culture of brash entrepreneurs and extravagant consumers,” according to one historian. The new culture encompassed youth who could be seen, “toasting Reaganomics with rivers of chardonnay and mountains of French brie. With their designer clothes and imported cars.”¹³ They were young urban professionals, yuppies. And it was to their credit that hip consumerism would be revived by the rebellious spirit of America’s youth.

Yet even though the youth of the decade favored another term of Reagan, according to historian Bruce Schulman, “yuppie values never implied respect for tradition or nostalgia for the small-town values.” Just as much as their punk counterparts, they too sought to rebel, however, their rebellion was set on glorifying wealth and individualism above all else. As yuppies attempted to overthrow the establishment idea, they generated a new establishment that reinforced the Reaganesque concept of greed.¹⁴ Yuppies’ actions were “without the patina of rebellion,” as Steve Fraser has suggested: “all style, no substance, but allowing for every manner of theatrical self-invention. That, together with cold cash, made for a composite personality with an empathic sense of entitlement,

¹² “Voices Beneath the Harmony: Three prominent Republicans talk about the political future,” *Time* 124 [10] (Sept. 3, 1984): 38.

¹³ Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies*, 219.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 241-244.

empowerment, and off-the-rack (designer) individualism.”¹⁵ Punk culture challenged Reaganism, but yuppiedom became the popular rebellion that focused on dismissing cultural and social aesthetics, such as religion and appropriate apparel for formal settings. Yet the rebellion of the yuppies accepted the more overtone characteristics of rigid individualism and economic greed, the basis behind Reaganism.

As the culture of the older generation became the target of the punk movement, so too did their own youthful peers. The “straightedge” ideology that many punks adopted, was in part to differentiate from the business culture that had come to embrace, and even promote, alcoholism and drugs (especially cocaine as the Midwest punks pointed to during the Indianapolis and Twin Cities talk shows). The majority of America’s youth were either accepting the new manufactured rebellion supported by the Reaganites, or accepting the apathetic approach to politics and withholding their vote. The combination of the two was worrisome to the punk movement and “Rock Against Reagan,” with its free concerts and registration of voters, was at least an attempt to overturn the latter.

The message from the band’s songs in the RAR shows compared to Reagan’s 1984 campaign were at constant odds strategically. The punks spoke of corruption and greed in politics. They warned of nuclear war and the imperialistic wrongdoings of the United States. Their message, although with the intent of positive change, was less harmonious than what Reagan pronounced. The Reagan campaign trail avoided discussion of such topics that concerned the punk movement and instead focused on optimism. “Reagan wanted America to feel good, not think too hard,” as historian Troy

¹⁵ Steve Fraser, *The Age of Acquiescence*, 316-317.

Gil has described the president's reelection strategy.¹⁶ With emotions playing a role in the American mindset when heading to the polls, the anger and frustration of punks was not the motivating message that voters kept in mind. For the punk movement the RAR tour brought out more punks to join in demonstrations across the United States, but their message and the way they were portrayed by the media only further hampered their cause.

Youth International Party

The Youth International Party (Yippies) was formed in New York City by the iconic Counterculture figures, Jerry Rubin and Abbie Hoffman (amongst others), in an attempt to expand the countercultural revolution of the 1960s. With punk rock becoming a new counterculture against the Reaganism of the 1980s, the Yippies history shared many similarities with the new movement. It would be the Yippies of the 1980s that organized the RAR tour to fulfill the failed revolution that their earlier predecessors had attempted.

Rubin, being credited as the founder of the Yippies, originally sought to find a way to get disenfranchised people—marijuana smokers for instance—to unite towards political causes.¹⁷ Adopting the guerilla theatre idea from R.G. Davis, the Diggers (a similar radical Counterculture group to the Yippies) use of this strategy in San Francisco

¹⁶ Troy Gil, *Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980s* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2013), 148-149.

¹⁷ David Farber, "The Intoxicated State/Illegal Nation," *Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s & 70s*, ed. Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle, (New York: Routledge, 2002), 34-35.

became a model for their East Coast counterparts. Guerilla theatre was a way to use art as a direct-action form of politics to transform society. According to historian Michael William Doyle, the Diggers used guerilla theatre as an attempt “to extend the suspension of disbelief, act out alternatives to bourgeois ‘consensus reality’ in its liminal space, demonstrate that these alternatives were possible, and thereby convince others to join them.” As for the Yippies use of this strategy, Doyle explained it as the “third phase” of guerilla theatre. The version that the Yippies used was “designated” by Hoffman as a type of “‘media freaking,’” intended “to commit absurdist, gratuitous acts that were carefully crafted to obtain maximum publicity.”¹⁸

Becoming a part of the anti-war movement, the Yippies gained national recognition following the 1968 National Democratic Convention in Chicago. It was at this convention where the Democratic party saw itself being pulled apart by the conflict in Vietnam that had been started under their control of the White House. While the Democratic party inside the convention erupted in dispute over the conflict, the scene outside had a similar feud. George McGovern—who became the Democratic presidential nominee and gave political voice to the anti-war movement—recalled that he felt sympathy for the “two groups of young people facing each other,” during the disruption. One of the groups was the youth “protesting the war,” the other was the “young policemen” who disturbingly used fierce physical tactics of violence on their youthful

¹⁸ Michael William Doyle, “Staging the Revolution,” *Imagine Nation*, 85-86.

peers protesting.¹⁹ The event gained the media coverage that the Yippies had hoped for, but this coverage did not create the response that the group intended.²⁰ With the police brutalized the demonstrators, the “non-organization Yippies!” as described by Peter Braunstein, used the event to frame the idea of a “generational war” between America’s youth and adults. Framing their ideology on youthfulness, it was not a concrete belief but “a state of mind: you ‘belong’ to the Yippies if you think like a child, not an adult.” If the Yippies had one concrete philosophy, it was to have fun. The idea of revolution and overthrowing the government itself was “fun” as Rubin claimed.²¹

The ideas preached by the Yippies were not for everyone. Youthness has its limits, and instead of uniting people towards political change, the Yippies created a divide within activists as the political left became divided over Vietnam. The divide between leftist politicians and activists extended further as the police assaults on the protesters in Chicago changed the way white spectators, who watched the conflict between police and the protesters on television, viewed police brutality towards dissenters. Author and Civil Rights activist, Dick Gregory, declared that the outcome of the collision between police and protesters had put “blood” on the “hands” of the Democratic Party. Recalling the day of convention in Chicago, he discussed how he erupted in laughter. His wife questioned what was wrong with him? To which he replied,

¹⁹ George McGovern, *One Bright Shining Moment: The Forgotten Summer of George McGovern*, directed by Stephen Vitoria (Street Legal Cinema, 2005).

²⁰ Michael William Doyle, “Staging the Revolution,” 91.

²¹ Peter Braunstein, “Forever Young,” 265-266.

‘The world is changing.’ . . . The white folks around the world have never seen their children get beaten up. I mean white folks have always looked at the cops as the guy who gets my cat out of the tree in the suburbs, and is always there to keep them away from me. Remember one thing; going into that ‘68 convention the chant was one thing, ‘support your local police’ coming out of that ‘68 convention something happened.²²

What happened, and can be clearly seen from the 1984 Democratic Convention in San Francisco less than two decades later, was that white Americans had come to accept police brutality being used against youth of any ethnicity.

Without public support, the idea of a revolution that groups like the Yippies had hoped for “fizzled after Chicago,” according to one historian.²³ With punk rock reviving youth counterculture in the 1980s, the message of the Yippies from the “various splinter groups” remaining in New York City found a “clear reprise of the actions surrounding the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago,” with the idea of the RAR tour, as author Ben Nadler has explained. The Yippies of the 1980s had established locations where punks learned of anarchist history, such as with the Anarchist Switchboard. Reagan Youth, one of the most popular bands from New York during the early-1980s, saw punk’s similarities with the hippie movement and became one of the leading acts in the RAR tour. Although “West Coast punk audiences loved the shows,” according to Nadler, “some West Coast activists were less than impressed with the political commitment of the hard-partying New York punks.”²⁴ As the RAR tour showed, the strategy of using

²² Dick Gregory, *One Bright Shining Moment*.

²³ Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies*, 13-14.

²⁴ Ben Nadler, *Punk in NYC’s Lower East Side 1981-1991* (Microcosm Publishing, 2014). 18-20.

spectacle to gain media attention would backfire against the protesting youth as it did during the protests from the previous generation.

In the early Spring of 1983, the RAR tour had started across the United States. Receiving little media attention prior to the Democratic National Convention in San Francisco in July of 1984, the tour travelled to many unlikely places. From major cities like New York, Boston, and Washington D.C. to small Midwestern cities like Ames and Iowa City, Iowa and Bloomington, Indiana.²⁵ Although many of the shows were overlooked by news coverage, the major punk acts involved surely drew a crowd from the local punk scenes where the tour played.

“Democracy Spawns Bad Taste” - Crucifucks

Touring across the United States, the RAR shows featured numerous local unnamed bands along with several headline acts. Although there is little information on the shows themselves—or the various local bands that joined the tour across the nation—the nationally recognized (to the punk community) bands that played for periods of the tour between 1983 to the election in November of 1984, demonstrates the context behind what the punks were protesting. By examining several songs from the larger acts that played during the tour; the Crucifucks, MDC, the Dicks, and DRI, their messages reflect a better understanding behind the punks’ protests. Their songs spoke against many of the issues that punks had against the Reagan administration and the culture that would

²⁵ [“Rock Against Reagan” tour dates, ad], *MRR* 1 [5] (March-April, 1983): 2.

eventually vote for an extended four more years. Much of the songs' content was anti-war, as during the Counterculture and Vietnam protests, but they also took on new issues such as religious radicalism, corporate economics, and cultural icons of Americanism.

One of the earliest touring headlining acts during the RAR tour, was the Crucifucks from Lansing, Michigan. The Crucifucks were often quick to be targeted for their name and aggressive anti-police lyrics. Interludes between songs on their first album shared recordings of numerous complaints that the band had received due to their name—which many complaining refused to say. While offensive to many, the band's name reflected the feeling that many Midwestern punks had against the influence of Christianity in their home region. The band's songs criticized the overall American culture that had supported electing Reagan to office.

One of the band's songs from their self-titled 1985 album, "Democracy Spawns Bad Taste," reflected the feelings against the consensus culture that infuriated many within the punk movement. With the unique and squeaky high-pitched vocals by the Crucifucks singer Doc Dart, the song began with the fast paced verse: "You make things miserable everyday/ You make me sick with the things you say/ You stand for the anthem at the old ball game/ And your Pledge of Allegiance is so fucking lame." Criticizing the intense patriotism that the Reaganites generated during the president's first term, the song's attack on baseball was an attack on American culture itself. Continuing the song with the

same intensity the next verse followed with: “This kind of freedom is perfect for you/ As long as you can get away with what you do/ But everything you do is in such bad taste/ And it’s your fault the media is such a waste.” Focusing in on how patriotism had allowed for corruption, the second verse’s “kind of freedom” acknowledged how the idea of “freedom” favored a few compared to the larger population. Countering these verses, the chorus demonstrated how American culture perceived outspoken dissent such as that of the Crucifuck’s song: “Be a good American - Fuck off!/ Be a good American - Go to war!/ Be a God-fearing citizen, kill someone/ Or kill yourself.” In the context of the song as a whole, “Democracy Spawns Bad Taste” discussed how American patriotism had created a culture of control. “Freedom” as the song pointed to, was only in favor of a few as everyone else was expected to “Be a good American” and fight for a system that did not favor their interest and only gave “freedom” to a select few.²⁶

As the Crucifucks toured for a brief period throughout the early part of the RAR shows, the main act to follow the shows that year was Millions of Dead Cops (MDC). Originally from Texas, the band moved to San Francisco by the time of the RAR shows. Describing the band during a punk show, a young female host shared “a recent quote from Boston Rock: ‘The group is for people to start thinking and start reasoning what’s happening around them. And to build a certain amount of consciousness, to spread it around, to change the status quo and the

²⁶ The Crucifucks, “Democracy Spawns Bad Taste,” *The Crucifucks* (1984; Alternative Tentacles, 1985).

bullshit values.”²⁷ Like the Crucifucks, MDC’s name also drew attention to the band—most likely the reason for the band’s move to the more politically active San Francisco punk scene. The bands also shared the same fast-paced tempo that marked many hardcore bands of the era. Yet even with their aggressive sound in their music, MDC’s songs spoke of intelligent evaluations of American culture.

Rock Against Reagan Tour

WITH **CRUCIFUCKS** MAR 23 - APR 23

MILLIONS OF DEAD COPS APR 23 - JULY 4

PLUS MANY LOCAL BANDS JOINING ALONG WAY. OTHER DATES TO BE ADDED SOON!

Rock Against Reagan
P.O.B. 392
Canal St. Station
NY, NY 10013
(212) 533-5028

Washington, D.C. July 3 & 4
RAR at the Lincoln Memorial
Pot Parade to the White House
Denver, CO July 8
at the State Capitol
San Francisco, CA July 14 & 19
Democratic Convention week
Bastille Day Parade
Rock Against Reagan outside
Moscone Center.
Monte Rio, CA July 21
Bohemian Grove Protest (Exclusive playground of America's most rich and powerful)
Santa Cruz, CA July 26
San Lorenzo Park
San Diego, CA August 3
Los Angeles, CA August 5
Olympic protest
Survivalfest, March to McArthur Park
Phoenix, AZ Aug. 8
Albuquerque, NM Aug. 12
Dallas, TX Aug. 17-23
Republican Convention

Figure 3. Rock Against Reagan Tour Ad, 1983. (Left) Image from *Maximum Rock N Roll* 5 (March-April, 1983): 2.

Figure 4. Rock Against Reagan Tour Ad, 1984. (Right) Image from *Maximum Rock N Roll* 15 (July, 1984): 37.

²⁷ “MDC (Live On Broadway) San Fran 1984,” [c.a. 1984], YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pACdjavg5KO>.

Their 1982 self-titled album demonstrated many of the views supported by the band. Like the Clash, their songs suggested a “news-giving” medium as well as something for musical enjoyment. For instance, their song “Business On Parade” included the lines: “We’re here to warn you/ They’re gonna say shut up and buy/ We’re here to warn you/ They’re gonna say buy or die.” And with the repeating line from the chorus, “Business is on parade/ Corporate scam charade.” As Reagan began his presidency praising the wealthy, the economic practice he implemented, Reaganomics, favored those of affluence and corporate interests. Describing these economic practices, MDC’s song claimed that it was: “Crumbs for the poor/ Rich man’s profit soar/ Government by the rich/ Poor man’s life a bitch/ Don’t believe what the politicians do/ Don’t believe a word they say/ All they want to do is fuck you/ Get fat off their pay.”²⁸

Along with being critical of economic policies and the culture that supported them, MDC further criticized corporate culture with their song “Corporate Death Burger” that assaulted “Ronald McDonald” and the identity of Americana fast food. But attacking cheeseburgers was only a part of MDC condemnation of American culture, however, as their most popular song, “John Wayne Was a Nazi,” attacked the iconic Hollywood cowboy (a role Reagan always desired). Presenting the American hero as the face of genocide against the native population and the glorifier of masculine glamour in war, the song compared his glorified fictional actions as that of fascists. These two songs’

²⁸ MDC, “Business On Parade,” *Millions of Dead Cops* (Radical R, 1982).

perspective towards American culture was drastically different from Bruce Springsteen's "Born in the U.S.A." that became co-opted by the Reagan 1984 campaign. But the band's song "Born to Die" became a slogan for the anti-Reagan demonstrations during that year: "No war/ No KKK/ No fascist U.S.A." As Springsteen was the most popular musician of mainstream liberalism during the decade, the views by bands such as MDC would become the music of the Left that could not be commandeered by rightwing politicians.²⁹

As the Crucifucks and MDC's songs criticized much of American culture, they also had the underlying message of a fear of war. Many punks reflected a feeling that the aggressive stance that Reagan had adopted against the Soviet Union, generated the sense that nuclear war was around the corner and World War III would soon destroy everyone. The patriotism that had been generated from Grenada had reinvigorated the pride of serving in the military. But as parents supported their kids' enlistment, the punks saw this perspective as naive since they ignored the implications that their children may very well not return home. As the Dicks, another band like MDC who moved from Texas to San Francisco, sang during their song "Right Wing/ White Ring": "Hey mothers crying in the street/ Because their children can't get enough to eat/ Hey daddy tell me what you say/ You send your kid to die and then you pray."³⁰ While Americans supported

²⁹ MDC, *Millions of Dead Cops* (Radical R, 1982). For Reagan using Springsteen's "Born in the U.S.A.," see Marc Dolan, "How Ronald Reagan Changed Bruce Springsteen's Politics," *Politico*, June 4, 2014, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/06/bruce-springsteen-ronald-reagan-107448>.

³⁰ The Dicks, "Right Wing/ White Ring," *Kill from the Heart* (SST, 1983).

the growth of national defense, their support allowed for the divestment of government funds from assisting people and towards the expansion of the military. The connection between the two, however, was overlooked by the general population who had been persuaded to believe that communist expansion was still a great threat to the United States, capitalism, and democracy.

Another band that shared this view and played during the RAR tour was Dirty Rotten Imbeciles (DRI) who were also from San Francisco. Their song, “I Don’t Need Society,” further emphasized the feeling of war looming under the Reagan administration. Like the other punk songs discussed, this song too criticized American culture as the issue behind their perspective: “You were an apple pie clone living at home/ Never straying too far from your phone/ Now son make it through enemy lines/ You must hurry there’s not much time/ ‘Made it sir, they’re gonna drop the bomb/ No time to evacuate, they’ll call our moms.’”³¹ This anti-war feeling that was expressed in DRI’s song, was the one vibrant message that was heard, in one way or another, in all of the acts to perform during the RAR tour.

While the bands who played during RAR had a wide-variety of political and social views—the Dicks, for example, were an openly communist band with an overweight flamboyant homosexual lead singer Gary Floyd—they all came together in denunciation of the incumbent president. Even more, these bands joined towards that common goal with little financial reimbursement. But the tour

³¹ Dirty Rotten Imbeciles, “I Don’t Need Society,” *Dirty Rotten* (LP) (Dirty Rotten, 1983).

was not a utopian parade across the United States: there were many conflicts and problems that arose as the tour raveled the country, from the minimal support to tour stops that included some diehard fan's basement and the supposed fact that many associated with the tour consumed an overwhelming abundance of packaged hot dogs for food.³² While under the radar of most Americans, the RAR tour made national headlines during the summer of 1984 with shows appearing at both political parties' conventions.

1984

The June, 1984 edition of *MRR* cover had images from protests in San Francisco from earlier in the year. Along with the collage of photos from protests, the cover page included a letter written to the fanzine:

Dear *MRR*,

I'm sick and tired of hearing anti-Reagan songs by hardcore bands. Now don't get me wrong it's not that I'm conservative or anything, but these "political" punks aren't accomplishing a thing. they are all a bunch of hypocrites. They never do anything but preach, preach preach. If they meant what they said, they'd be out doing something else about it.....³³

The article inside covering the event shared how many had worried about the apathetic thinking that was visible in the punk scene, and the lack of action that the letter shared. While it was true that many punks were more talk than action, the article covering recent protests showed that 1984—the year of George

³² Suburban Voice, "Gary Floyd of The Dicks [Interview], *Suburban Voice* 41 (1998).

³³ *MRR*, [Cover Page], *MRR* 14 (June, 1984): Cover.

Orwell's dystopian novel, that punks regularly acknowledged—had been generating an increased amount of punks “doing something” and taking action, instead of just complaining.³⁴

ERIKKA, the name used by the author at the end of the article, explained how San Francisco punks had been a more common sight during recent protests. “We have become a noticeable enough force at these events for even ‘straight’ media to make mention of this fact,” she claimed. “The types of demonstrations range from anti-nuke and anti-Reagan Administration to animal rights and tenant rights rallies,” bringing punks into direct-action protests for numerous causes. To encourage others and discuss the importance to have punks involved in demonstrations, she discussed several groups and people who had participated in the recent protests.

For instance, Dave from the local “autonomous affinity group called ‘Domestic Terrorist?,’ made up primarily of punks,” was one of the activists discussed. Domestic Terrorist? was described as a group that used “non-violent direct action to bring public attention to what it considers some major problems facing the world today.” Their approach to demonstrations included “die-ins,” a form of protest where a group of people simultaneously collapsed “to show the immediate after-effects [*sic*] of nuclear war.” ERIKKA described that this strategy accomplished “something on more than one level. Besides the symbolic

³⁴ ERIKKA, [Untitled], *MRR* 14 (June, 1984): 19. For an example of the punk movement's concerns of Orwell's dystopic warning for the year, see Jeff Bale and Tim Y, “Now It's 1984. .’ an interview with Winston Smith,” *MRR* 11 (Jan.-Feb., 1984): 58-63.

message involved, these people are also physically attempting to stop the manufacturing of nuclear weapons and the advancement of the Administration's war machine, using a non-violent method."³⁵ Die-ins had been used by the group "at the P.G. & E. and Bechtel buildings," and also to protests the arrival of Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger and Henry Kissinger—to whom many see as a war criminal who has yet to be convicted for his involvement in such crimes.³⁶

The demonstration against Kissinger in San Francisco brought a crowd of over a thousand to protest "his role in promoting the Reagan administration's policy in Central America," as the *Washington Post* discussed in a May 16, 1984 article. During this demonstration police had feuded with protesters leading to violent conflict between the two. The clash, which took place in April of 1984, only several months before the Democratic Convention, raised concerns as to how the city would handle an even larger crowd of demonstrators. "[E]ven in this tourist- and convention-weary city," the upcoming convention was, "generating more excitement, trepidation, public clamor, furious planning and general hoopla than any large-scale event in recent San Francisco history," claimed the *Post*. "From the staggering logistics and massive remodeling job planned for its convention center to the elaborate party arrangements," the city was, "bracing itself for a mid-July onslaught that will be broadcast to an audience Democrats

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

estimate at 1 billion people worldwide.” San Francisco’s Mayor Dianne Feinstein’s spending for the upcoming event was also a factor to cause concern. The article shared how the city had at that point spent “\$1.8 million more than the \$7 million promised earlier.”³⁷

As the Kissinger demonstration in April caused concerns for San Francisco’s Democrats organizing the July convention, it gave hope for change to the local punk scene. Dave from Domestic Terrorist? saw “the Kissinger protest as the point where suddenly a lot of punks became involved.” Discussing the importance for “people’s involvement to be positive,” he believed that it would help “others view the counterculture as a positive force, as that’s the way our generation will be able to push forward into action.” In his perspective, “if any changes are brought by this generation, they will emerge from the punk scene.” To help those wanting to participate in future protests, he suggested that the most “effective” way to demonstrate “is by working with close groups of friends who are interested in approximately the same level of involvement and activity.” When familiar people demonstrate together, “they tend to provide the most support for one another.” According to Dave, it would be essential to have a “consensus form of decision-making” in difficult situations.³⁸

³⁷ Cynthia Gorney, “Quaking in San Francisco,” *The Washington Post*, May 16, 1984, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1984/05/16/quaking-in-san-francisco/8104b074-1a01-457c-a399-e0a47e95d1d3/>.

³⁸ ERIKKA, [Untitled], *MRR* 14 (June, 1984): 19.

Although demonstrations brought people together towards a common cause, according to some, there was a “negative side” to them. In the same article discussing Domestic Terrorist?, two punks from the band “STATE OF MIND,” shared the “view (and believe that the government shares this view),” the article stated, that such acts of assembly were “a sort of pacifier, in the sense that people participate, release their anger concerning the topic at hand, and return to their normal lives without having accomplished anything.” The two punks did, however, also see the positive aspect from people participating in demonstrations. “For punks in particular,” the article shared, “demonstrations can be a positive experience because it unifies them with others.” With punks often being perceived as outsiders, demonstrations allowed them to be “accepted by other segments of society with whom they are protesting, because it becomes known that they share some ideals.” Even so, however, the two pointed to how punks’ appearance often made them more “visible and are therefore primary police targets,” making their direct-action dissent even more likely to have repercussions.³⁹

With the upcoming DNC though, the punk community sought to get enough punks involved so that they did not seem like a minority amongst the demonstrators. It was common for punks to offer free board at their homes to visiting punks. In the same issue of *MRR* that covered the demonstrations in San Francisco, one punk’s letter to the fanzine showed the openness to invite other punks, whom they never met, to lodge in their home. Inviting any “gay/lesbian

³⁹ *Ibid.*

punks,” J.T., a local San Francisco punk, opened his home as a “free place to stay” for visiting protesters. “I don’t expect sex or anything,” he emphasized, “I just want to help you get here so you can witness for yourself the convention area, which could turn out to be big news.” After leaving his contact information, he concluded with: “P.S. On the way out chance that a straight punk needs a place to stay during the convention and would consider taking up the offer-- go ahead.” Adding that, “I was going to make this offer just to punks in general, but I thought I’d better not. The way some punks are, there could be trouble if when they got here they found out I was gay (just another example of how gay people have to modify any idea that comes into their head because of PREJUDICE).” While J.T.’s invitation showed the communal aspect of the punk community, it also demonstrated how even though they shared much in common; certain beliefs greatly divided punks.⁴⁰

Writing in the July edition of *MRR*, the same month as the DNC in San Francisco, Tim Yohannan—one of the founders of the *MRR* radio show and fanzine that followed—wrote that: “By the time you read this, the Democratic Convention will be about over. Besides all the demonstrations planned, a R.A.R. gig will have taken place on the final day, outside of Moscone Convention Center.” The show would feature two of the Bay Area’s most prominent punk bands, the Dead Kennedys and MDC along with “Reagan Youth, and others.” Writing before the outcome of the demonstrations and DNC, he suggested that the event “brings up the question of whether or not participation

⁴⁰ J.T., [Letter], “If you come to San Francisco . . .,” *MRR* 14 (June, 1984): 5.

in the electoral process is a worthwhile effort or not?” Although the monthly publication did not have the resources to address more of the ongoing gathering of protesters and Democratic party members, Yohannan acknowledged that the “next issue” will cover his question and the whole event.⁴¹

Democratic National Convention, San Francisco

It may have been in San Francisco, at the Democratic National Convention in July of 1984, where the punk movement reached the apex of political engagement. As the convention met opposition from numerous left wing groups outside; inside according to the title of an editorial “wasn’t a circus, but was one great show.”⁴² If inside the convention was not a “circus” surely the show outside was. Peaceful protests went on throughout the week of the convention, however, July 19th marked a police crackdown on the crowds that amassed on San Francisco’s streets.

The day started with a march, “held by a marijuana group and members of a coalition called the War Chest, which was protesting [military-industry] business dealings of top Democratic Party leaders.” As these peaceful protesters reached closer to the convention center, they were met by police and “booked for investigation of obstructing traffic.” These criminal charges, however, were claimed to be faulty with demonstrators pleading that, “they were forced to block the street when police herded them into groups.” Hearing the calls of injustice, a “second protest march was hastily

⁴¹ Tim Y, “Northern California: End of an Era [Scene Report],” *MRR* 15 (July, 1984): 19.

⁴² Dave Zwelfel, “It wasn’t circus, but was one great show,” *The Capital Times*, Madison, Wi., Friday, July 20, 1984, Newspaperarchives.com.

arranged to demand release of the first demonstrators and was announced at [the] ‘Rock Against Reagan’ punk music concert outside the convention hall.” As the protesting march reached upwards to five-hundred people, the crowd began marching several blocks to the Hall of Justice where the protesters from the earlier march were being held. “Chanting ‘No KKK, No Fascist USA’”—the popular slogan for demonstrators the week of the convention—and being accompanied by a “papier-mache Trojan donkey colored green and brown like Army Fatigues.” The marchers were met by a force of one hundred police officers. “Within minutes, Police Capt. Richard Shippy declared over a bullhorn that the rally was an unlawful assembly and ordered [the protesters] . . . to disperse.” By the end of the second march 369 people total had been arrested. Billy Nessen, a twenty-seven-year-old who partook in the event, was quoted saying: “There was no order to disperse.” He added that the purpose was to protest the connection between several corporations and the De[m]ocratic Party, the war machine, and South Africa.”⁴³

The outcome of the protests in San Francisco triggered an alarm for the Republicans who held their convention in Dallas the following month. Dallas prepared for a large assembly of protesters by bringing in extra law enforcement and clearing out the city’s jails. The Dead Kennedys were coming to the town where John F. Kennedy himself was assassinated! Escorting the band would be the “Rock Against Reagan” show and hundreds if not thousands of protesting punks. In addition, there were also concerns

⁴³ “March Led by Trojan Donkey: 369 Dem Protesters Arrested,” *Oxnard [California] Press Courier*. Friday, July 20, 1984, 15, Newspaperarchives.com.

over how the pro-Reagan supporters and anti-Regan demonstrators would interact during the week of the convention.⁴⁴

Republican National Convention, Dallas

The outcome of the demonstrations outside the DNC in San Francisco resulted in a large amount of arrests, but punks had been noticed by the media. Police had harassed the protestors the whole week leading up to the convention but they did not divide their spirit. The rallying of punks to join with others towards a common cause stirred up the sense that something positive may in fact come from their effort. Demonstrating against the Democratic Party's growing connections with the military industrial complex was one thing, but they were not the head of the beast. It was the Republicans—and more importantly to the cultural rebellion of punk, Ronald Reagan—that was the prized target. Yet although the punk community showed hype towards the upcoming Republican National Convention (RNC) in Dallas, obstacles of counter-protests would prevent the same commotion that RAR stirred in San Francisco.

Before *MRR* even published a full story on the outcome of the events at the DNC in San Francisco, their July 1984 issue was already informing punks of the upcoming RAR show and demonstrations the following month in Dallas. Within the issue a scene report from Texas ended by informing readers of the “much awaited return of Pres. Ronnie and his G.O.P Convention August 19-24.” Continuing, the report suggested that

⁴⁴ Wayne King, “Dallas Is Girding for Delegates and Demonstrators,” *New York Times*, Aug. 13, 1984, A10.

any punks planning on attending to “contact the Dallas March & Rally Committee” to help organize the planned rallies—including “a slated outdoor R.A.R. show,” of course.⁴⁵

Just days before the Convention a city meeting took part where Police Chief Billy Prince was reported stating that, “We’re a lot more relaxed than people think we are.” However, while Prince talked with the reporters, “officers three blocks away were ordering protesters to remove a 250-foot, butcher-paper banner from a security fence . . . [that] said: ‘Republican Ethics: Greed, War, and Bigotry - Dump Reagan! Rally for Peace and Freedom - This Saturday 7 p.m. Kennedy Plaza.’” After being told to remove the sign, the group refused. The protesters “cit[ed] a recent court ruling by U.S. District Judge Barefoot Sanders. In part, the order sa[id] protesters may temporarily hang signs as long as the protesters stay with the signs and remove them when they leave.”⁴⁶ The claims by the police chief held true and his officers remained “relaxed” for the time being.

The convention itself, started on August 20th with an encouraged crowd marching while chanting “Let’s dump the chump.” What followed included protests against police brutality with a spokesman for the protesters, Dave Whitaker, being quoted saying: “We’re trying to show the world that the cops aren’t as mellow as they’re coming off.”⁴⁷ Although the first day was met with large crowds, the protesters diminished for the week to come due to immense heat.

⁴⁵ MRR, “Texas [Dallas Scene Report],” *MRR* 15 (July, 1984): 23.

⁴⁶ Christy Hope; Susan Rogers, *Dallas Morning News*, “Anti-Reagan protesters deal with ‘relaxed’ Dallas police,” *The Spokesman-Review* (Spokane, Washington), Aug. 14, 1984, B3, news.google.com/newspapers.

⁴⁷ Dallas (UPI), “Heat helps to wilt protesters in Dallas,” *Lodi (California) News-Sentinel*, Aug. 21, 1984, 2, [News.google.com/newspaper](https://news.google.com/newspaper).

The designated protest camping location referred to as “Tent City” became almost inhospitable as “Temperatures ha[d] climbed over 100 degrees . . . prompting Rock Against Reagan spokesman Les Ledbetter to call Tent City a ‘deathtrap.’”⁴⁸ Asking for a necessary air-conditioned medical trailer, RAR took its plea all the way to a Federal Judge. The judge happened to be Barefoot Sanders, who’s ruling the protesters had earlier used in their defense. Representing the protest group, a young, recently graduated lawyer from Wisconsin named, James Fosbinder, explained to Sanders that temperatures had reached a staggering 116

°F and that the

denied the protesters pleas and pointed to the fact that no one made them stay there.

The discussion of hot temperatures would not be the only heat during this trial. *The Capital Times* of Madison, Wisconsin reported that “Sanders applied a little more heat of his own.” Verbally attacking James Fosbinder, Sanders lectured the lawyer by telling him to, “Take your hands out of your pockets, sir, and stand up and talk like a lawyer,” while “shaking a finger at the young attorney . . .” Following the court case, Fosbinder described “Tent City” in much harsher terms than just a “death camp” as described by his colleague Ledbetter; but instead, Fosbinder claimed that it was a “concentration camp.”⁴⁹

With the terrible conditions the “Rock Against Reagan” group moved its buses to the rally ground. For the week to come the buses remained there; where although they

⁴⁸ Dallas (AP), “Judge throws out rock group’s suit,” *The Galveston [Texas] Daily News*, Tuesday Morning, August 21, 1984, 13-A, Newspaperarchives.com.

⁴⁹ “Dallas court also hot for city lawyer,” *The Capital Times* (Madison, WI), Aug. 21, 1984, 20, newspaperarchives.com.

were undesignated to stay, the city would not bother the defeated punk rockers. “That left Tent City only a tiny band of people describing themselves as beatniks, hippies, Yippies, and punks,” as described in a newspaper story.⁵⁰

Dallas finally lost its cool on Wednesday August 22, when destructive protests finally broke out into the news. “Police arrested 99 protesters . . . after a rowdy group marched through downtown, splattering paint, disrupting businesses and burning a U.S. flag.” Following this display it was noted that, “[they] then went for a leisurely swim in a fountain.” In response to protesters disruption of the downtown scene of Dallas, Deputy Police Chief William Newman claimed that; “‘I know they (wanted to be arrested) . . . They’re not dummies. They were marching the wrong way down a one-way street and things of that nature. This group announced their intentions a month ago.’”⁵¹

Although protesters ravaged through the downtown; it would be the flag burning demonstration by Gregory Johnson that took front stage of the event. Johnson’s demonstration led to his arrest and created such attention that it ended up in the Supreme Court under the title *Texas v Johnson*.⁵² This court case overshadowed the true problems that the “Rock Against Reagan” shows and protesters at both national conventions saw during the 1984 presidential campaign.

⁵⁰ Dallas (AP), “Judge throws out rock group’s suit,” *The Galveston [Texas] Daily News*, Tuesday Morning, August 21, 1984, 13-A, Newspaperarchives.com.

⁵¹ Dallas (AP), “Police Keep Cool, Quietly Arrest 99,” *Observer Reporter* (Washington/Waynesburg, PA), Aug. 23, 1984. A-1,A-2, News.google.com/newspapers.

⁵² Richard Bradee, “Kastenmeier one who puts braks on the flag ‘railroad’ temporarily,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, June 28, 1989, 6, part 1, news.google.com/newspapers.

The city of Dallas may have been able to prevent screams of revolution outside the convention, but they had no control over the Republicans they hosted. An article from *Time* magazine, published shortly after the convention in September titled “Setting Out to Whomp ‘Em,” described how the sound heard inside the convention was a “battle cry” in praise of the renomination of the Reagan-Bush Republican ticket. The celebration was heightened with the possibility of having the first two-term president since Nixon (who resigned in his second term). A spectacle of “50,000 balloons” were arranged to synchronically “disgorge on cue” when the president and his running mate “appeared for their victory waves” at the end of the convention.⁵³

Even before the balloons covered the convention floor, a spectacle of speeches—many of which “were edited by two Reagan campaign staffers”—rained down upon the Republican supporters. While lionizing the president, the speakers also made the occasional jab at the Democrats and reminded the crowd of the failures of Jimmy Carter and how Mondale was his vice-president. Speech after speech was met with immense applause and the “eliciting war cries and hoots from a convention that seemed to smell blood,” according to the *Time* article. When Reagan finally took the podium, he “could hardly restrain the ecstatic ritual chants of ‘Four more years!’ that repeatedly interrupted his speech.” He spoke of the divide and contrast between himself and his opponent, Mondale, in simple terms. Mondale was pessimistic and wanted to raise taxes, whereas, Reagan supported individualism and patriotism.⁵⁴

⁵³ William R. Doerner, “Setting Out to Whomp ‘Em,” *Time* 124 [10] (Sep. 3, 1984): 28.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 28-29.

Not all Republicans were moved by the celebration. Moderate Republican Lowell Weicker, a Senator from Connecticut, saw the convention as a sign that the party had been lost to the “far right.” Reagan’s economic policy was far from what Republicans had supported since the New Deal consensus from the 1950s, but it was evident at the convention that Weicker’s and other moderate Republicans’ view on economics was an abandoned belief with the majority of party supporters. Reagan would not be the only famous face to turn to politics as the convention also featured the “former pro-football quarterback” Jack Kemp, “the ardent apostle of supply-side economics.” “Hundreds of KEMP signs waved and bobbed throughout the hall” when Kemp “took the podium” as reported by *Time*. Instead of focusing on economic policies in his speech, however, Kemp used his celebrity status to discuss foreign policy. Using the failures of the Carter administration, with Mondale’s connection, Kemp “compare[d] the foreign policies of Carter,” as out-of-date compared to Reagan’s who ““actually seems to be getting younger.”” Continuing his support of Reagan’s foreign policy, Kemp “charged that the opposition” was opposed to democracy. ““The leaders aren’t soft on Communism; they’re soft on democracy.””⁵⁵

The convention had it all. The orchestration of speeches by well-known Republicans, including Nancy Reagan and Barry Goldwater, along with the spectacle of balloons, signs, and a giant screen to show a movie of Reagan, was an extravagant display. Although running as the oldest person to hold the office of president, Reagan

⁵⁵ Ibid, 30; see also, Dallas (*UPI*), “Ford, Kemp star at GOP ‘Party,’” *Lodi News-Sentinel* (Lodi, Ca), Aug. 22, 1984, 1, 12, news.google.com/newspapers.

was presented as having youthful and new policies compared to his opponent. For Republicans, social programs became old and outdated politics: and the moralism of Jimmy Carter became antique. The atmosphere inside the convention was set to allow such a show to be performed. The demonstrators outside the convention did not have such luxury as the immense heat and strict regulations limited their impact. As the convention fulfilled Reagan's 1984 presidential campaign strategy to become presented as all that was American, the demonstrators came out of the convention as all that was not—especially with the attention given to Gregory Johnson's display of protest with burning an American flag.

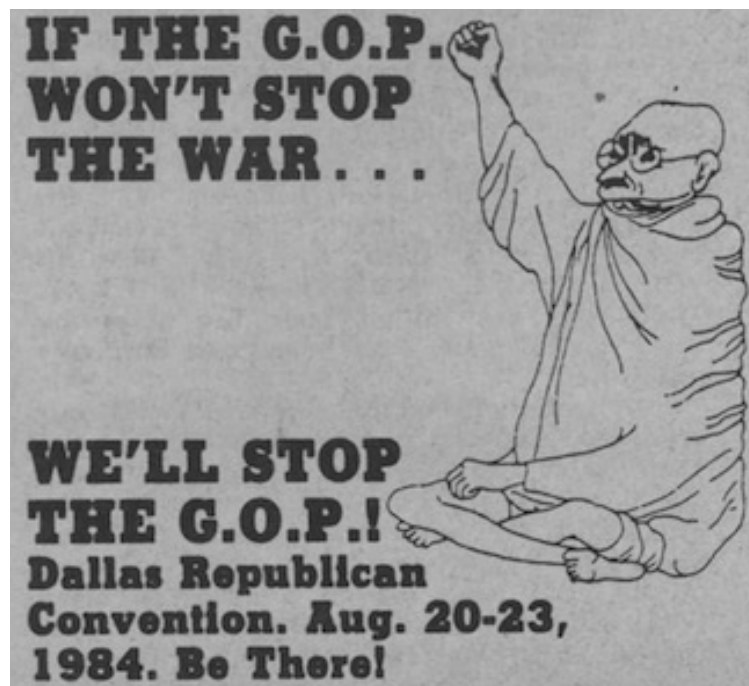


Figure 5. "If the G.O.P. Won't Stop the War . . ." Ad promoting "Rock Against Reagan" show at the Republican Nation Convention in Dallas, Texas. Image from *Maximum Rock N Roll* 16 (Aug., 1984): 6.

“How come we got no one to vote for?” - Jello Biafra

The Democrats and San Francisco, showed that street performances, counterculture music festivals, and political protests would continue to be met by fierce content as in the past. Instead of rejoicing a leftist part of the punk movement, the Democrat’s rejected it. In an interview years after the RAR show outside the DNC, Dave Dictor, the lead singer of MDC, shared how Mayor Feinstein earned the nickname “Swinestein” after showing how she was just as “horrendous” as some Republican officials. According to Dictor it was the mayor who “stuck those police on us in San Francisco in 1984. When I still see her on TV, I can’t help but mumble ‘Swinestein.’ I don’t care if she is voting down some conservative judge, or whatever. That personally affected my life. I watched people who got their jaws broken by the police based on her style of leadership.”⁵⁶ The Democrats also continued to show its’ masculine dilemma, a problem it had faced throughout the Cold War, by supporting a strong military industry and budget—one of the main focuses behind the RAR tour.

As for the Republicans and Dallas, it is important to look at the way in which the convention was promised to be handled. Although Dallas, *kept its’ cool* by limiting the amount of arrests during a literally “heated” scene, it did not keep its’ promise to have the convention completely privately funded. Breaking the promise, *The New York Times*

⁵⁶ David Ensminger, “Dave Dictor (MDC),” *Left of the Dial: Conversations with Punk Icons* (Oakland: PM Press, 2013). 271.

reported that the convention actually cost the taxpayers of Dallas an estimated \$1.5 million dollars.⁵⁷

Perhaps, with the acknowledgement that taxpayers of the city would unwillingly be paying for a convention; paying a sliver extra to provide an air-conditioned trailer for a group opposing the deceptive party would have been more supported. Especially, when looking at how lavish the convention was as described in reports afterwards.⁵⁸ But did it matter?

MRR published the feelings of an unjust political system by a protester simply referred to as Jeff; ““They (the Democrats) are not changing.” “There’s a slight difference (between the parties),” he added, “but it’s so small compared to the range of possibilities that its insignificant. If voting could change anything it would be illegal.””⁵⁹

Jello Biafra, lead singer of the Dead Kennedys, expressed similar thoughts addressing a large crowd at a concert just weeks before the first National Convention with the question;

How many of you people think this country is a democracy? Well, if it’s a democracy how come we got no one to vote for, but Reagan and Mondale? Two different parties, Republicans and the moral opposition. Same financial backers, same games, same corruption, same everything. I don’t think this country is a democracy anymore. If you think this country is a democracy look outside.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ “Dallas Mayor Defends City Convention Costs,” *New York Times*, Oct. 21, 1984, 28.

⁵⁸ For an example see; Roger Rosenblatt, “Tell Me, What Was It Like,” *Time* 124, [10] (Sept. 3, 1984):40-42.

⁵⁹ Seth Rosenfeld, “Peace punks’ week of rallies” (convention-protests-centerfold), *Maximum Rock N Roll* 14 (Aug., 1984). www.maximumrocknroll.com.

⁶⁰ Dead Kennedys, “Dead Kennedys - Bleed for Me (Live, San Francisco, 1984),” Feb., 10, 2015, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mNvLygR1h1A>.

When looking at the protests outside the 1984 conventions in Dallas and San Francisco, Biafra's statement held a demoralizing feeling towards the idea that democracy could exist in a two party system. Although voting had not become illegal; the 1984 conventions showed how speaking out for change had illegal implications for protesters.

With Reagan winning the 1984 election, the full force of Reaganism and the New Right became unleashed upon America. The RAR punks had been defeated. With their defeat the hopes of a new counterculture revolution and a leftist political platform drowned underneath the tides of conservatism through bipartisan consensus.

The "Teflon President"

Though Ronald Reagan was the favored target of the punk movement, it was the culture he represented that infuriated punks the most. Punks everywhere—from San Francisco to New York and even throughout the Midwest realized that the issue was not just Reagan, but the apparent fact that American culture had been persuaded to support the former Hollywood star. This view was not just one shared by punks, however, as a guest columnist and associate professor of journalism explained in Iowa City, Iowa's *Daily Iowan* just before election day.

Questioning the incumbent president's popularity, Dennis Corrigan described it as "One of the baffling mysteries of our time." Reagan's "mistakes and errors, his fumbling of words and his bumbling in foreign affairs, don't seem

to stick.” It was as if Reagan was the “Teflon president [who] glides on and retains his popularity.” His Democratic opponent, Walter Mondale, had criticized Reagan’s policies and exposed his mishaps on televised debates, yet the author stated that “nothing happens. People watch the debates, they get the message, and they remain basically unmoved.” Pointing to this issue, Corrigan argued that the president’s “popularity doesn’t have all that much to do with information or explicit messages. Maybe his power is his ability to be an expression of the culture, to be Mr. America.” Corrigan pointed to how Reagan was “greeted by the young with chants of ‘U-S-A, U-S-A.’ He personifies values of family, flag and motherhood. He has captured the roles of Defender of the Faith, Promoter of Free Enterprise, Big Spender on Defense, and Star of State, Stage, and Screen.” According to Corrigan this identity came from Reagan’s ability to “[speak] the popular language of the culture.” Americans had become fascinated with television and it seemed to Corrigan that they wanted a “kind of haphazard success in their politicians as much as in their television heroes.” He explained that “Americans are pulling the voting levers on their TV sets each week for the sleaze of ‘Dallas,’ ‘Dynasty’ and ‘Falcon Crest.’ Even the angel they watch on ‘Highway to Heaven’ resorts to dirty tricks to get his way—for his good cause of course.” The criticism of the “Teflon president” did not “stick” because: “Americans are currently fascinated by decadence,” as Corrigan stated.⁶¹

⁶¹ Dennis M. Corrigan, “What you see and what you get,” *The Daily Iowan*, Nov. 5, 1984, 7A.

Accompanying Corrigan's article, several cartoons portrayed the "Teflon president" and further emphasized his points. Reagan found a way to take on numerous roles (a feat of a well-rounded actor) and could portray himself as the face of any cause. The various caricatures of Reagan displayed him as: the noble patriot, the man of conservative values—family, church, and neighborhood—the leader of the rich, the representation of white privilege, the nostalgic American past of greatness with the victory in World War II and the culture, illustrated by Norman Rockwell, that followed, and the friend of corporate America with Reagan being seen dressed as Disney's beloved mouse.⁶²

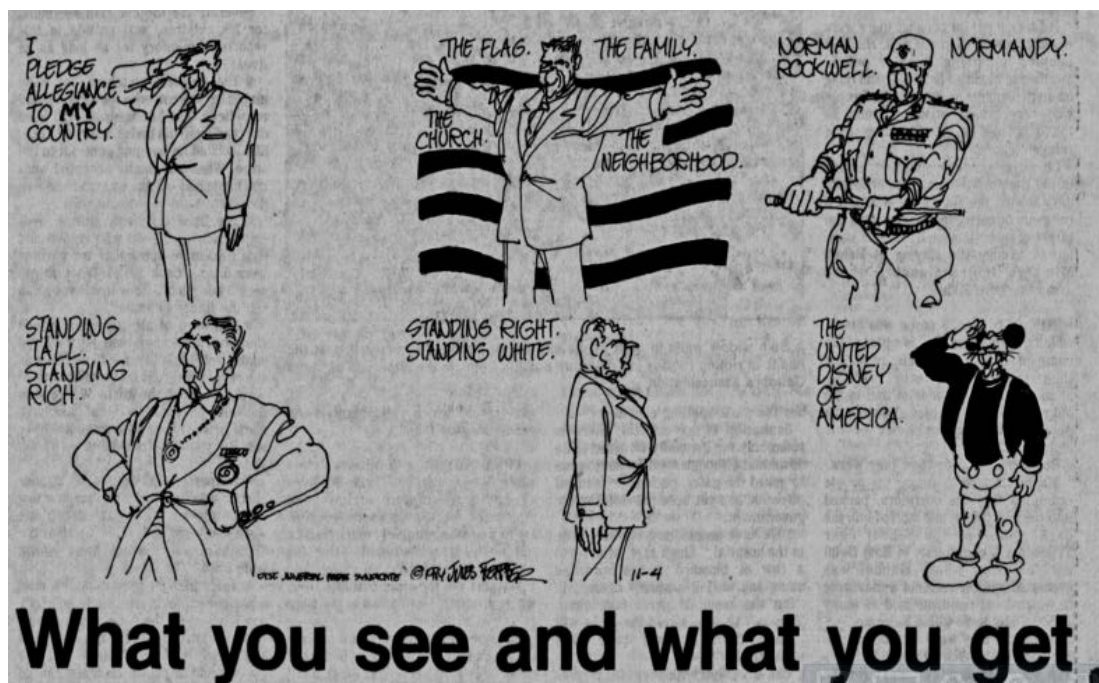


Figure 6. "What you see and what you get." Cartoon published with *Daily Iowan* editorial. Nov., 5, 1984, 7A.

⁶² *Ibid.*

The reflection of these images were not that different compared to the illustrations within the punk community. Reagan had overcome the negative personification that punks presented. In fact, instead of Reagan becoming the face of all that was wrong with the United States, it was the punk movement who would become the image of the negative side of America. Their violent music and association with anarchy made them favorable targets of villainous characters in popular television shows and even Hollywood films. For example, in the *Mad Max* series starring Mel Gibson, the nihilistic people roaming the post-apocalyptic world wore black leather, spikes, and colorfully dyed mohawks—the same apparel as the punks. Could the American public have viewed the message against supporting another term of Reagan as the beginning of doomed world where the dark side of the United States took over common decency? Unlikely. But imagery and presentation had become a major factor in American opinion. No matter what Reagan did poorly, his first term as president had brought a more positive image of the future than what had been presented under the Carter administration.

CHAPTER III

“THE RECLINE OF MIDWESTERN CIVILIZATION”

Cultural Nostalgia, Economic Restructuring, and Midwest Punk Rock

Punk rock lyrics from the 1980s often angrily screamed the punk movement's dissent against the decade's iconic figure Ronald Reagan. The Milwaukee band Die Kreuzen suggested, however, “instead of just doing ‘fuck Reagan, I hate the government,’” bands should explain themselves in their lyrics. In a 1983 interview with *Maximum Rock N Roll (MRR)* the band members explained that “It's not just the fact that Reagan is president, it's the fact that this country could elect someone like Reagan.” Reagan's 1980 presidential victory over the incumbent president Jimmy Carter marked the fusion of a cultural shift within the American public. The Milwaukee band's suggestion pointed to how the real issue was not Reagan himself, but the culture and society that embraced the symbol and elected him president.

Coming from Wisconsin, the punk group explained that “content” in their songs had helped to establish a punk community in a region where the rebellious nature of punk was taboo. One had “to care to see that anything [was] going on” and those who cared; soon realized that there were others around them that were listening to the same music, putting on punk shows, and instead of idolizing bands like “Foreigner” creating their own bands.¹ Within the first few years of the 1980s, the growth of a punk community throughout the Midwest showed that the youth of the region were experiencing similar

¹ Maximum Rock N Roll, “Wisconsin: Die Kreuzen [Interview],” *MRR* (March-April, 1983): 27.

social, cultural, and economic changes that had spawned the punk movement in places like New York and Los Angeles.

Punk rock began in the mid-1970s as a rejection to the rock stars that had emerged from the Counterculture. Rock & roll had become professionalized and the once rebellious spirit it entailed had lost its anti-authoritarian stance by becoming a part of the mainstream culture. Initially forming in the major cities of the Atlantic littoral, New York and London, punk had quickly spread to other densely urban centers like Los Angeles and San Francisco. It continued to expand throughout the decade. Punk rock spoke to and critiqued the social and cultural changes that were becoming more evident as the 1970s came to close.²

The emergence of a new decade, the 1980s, saw punk becoming more than just a rejection towards the outdated established rock & roll acts. The Ramones 1980 album *End of the Century* suggested that they were “on to something bigger than they realized” as historian Bruce Schulman has written: “The band’s first foray into the Eighties, and the rival assessments it provoked, limned the problem of the Seventies.”³ Although the Ramones survived into the new decade, many of the band’s other groups who pioneered the music, were disbanding. Punk, however, continued into the new decade with a new dominant sound that became known as “hardcore.”

² Dewar MacLeod, *Kings of the Black Hole: Punk Rock in Postsuburban California*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010), 2-4; The realization of changing times can be seen in the evolution of the content within earlier punk bands’ songs like the British punk band The Clash and Los Angeles’ X whose lyrics became more political during the transition into the 1980s. Bands that started closer to the 1980s, like San Francisco’s Dead Kennedys demonstrated that the new generation of punks would adopt this new focus as the base of their songs’ content.

³ Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics*, (United States: Da Capo Press, 2002), 253-254.

In some ways hardcore punk was a further rejection of the overproduced sound of rock music. The speed of the songs increased tremendously from the groundbreaking pace set by the Sex Pistols and the lyrics often became almost incomprehensible with the screaming wails that many vocalists adopted. The development of hardcore also reflected the further expansion of the punk movement. In California, hardcore punk became the sound that attracted the youth of the suburbs outside of Los Angeles. A new generation of punks emerged and with them, punk adopted a new context that reflected what the new youth punkers were experiencing.⁴ During the same time, punk had spread across the United States to places like the Midwest. While scholars have focused on the major punk centers, the study of what attracted youth across the country to this countercultural movement offers new insight.⁵

With the emergence of the 1980s and the new president, the United States experienced a cultural shift. Ronald Reagan's ascendancy to the Oval Office reflected this transition by combining the legacy of Barry Goldwater and the New Right with a revolutionary economic philosophy. Since his California gubernatorial career, Reagan had

⁴ Dewar MacLeod, *Kids of the Black Hole*, 3.

⁵ Dawson Barrett, "DIY Democracy: The Direct Action Politics of U.S. Punk Collectives," *American Studies*, 52 [2] (2003):23-42; Kenneth J. Bindas, "The Future is Unwritten: The Clash, Punk and America, 1977-1982," *American Studies*, 34 [1] (Spring, 1993):70-89; Kevin C. Dunn, "Never Mind the Bollocks: The Punk Rock Politics of Global Communication," *Review of International Studies*, 34 (2008):193-210; Dewar MacLeod, *Kids of the Black Hole: Punk Rock in Postsuburban California*, Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press: Norman, 2010); Stacy Thompson, *Punk Production: Unfinished Business* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004); Joseph M. Turrini, "'Well I Don't Care About History': Oral History and the Making of Collective Memory in Punk Rock," *Notes*, 70 [1] (September 2013): 59-77; Daniel S. Traber, "L.A.'s 'White' Minority: Punk and the Contradictions of Self-Marginalization," *Cultural Critique*, 48 (Spring, 2001); Teal Triggs, "Scissors and Glue: Punk Fanzines and the Creation of a DIY Aesthetic," *Journal of Design History*, 19 [1] (Spring, 2006):69-83; 30-64; Mary Montgomery Wolf, "'We Accept You, One of Us?': Punk Rock, Community, and Individualism in an Uncertain Era 1974-1985" (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2007).

toiled with supply-side economics that favored corporate power through privatization.⁶ By using the populist rhetoric of the New Right and building off the frustrations that lingered from the 1970s, the majority of Americans were persuaded to support the revolutionary candidate.⁷ The new allegiance was the beginning of the combination of the “Me Generation” with the yuppie culture. This cultural fusion resulted in a new conservatism, Reaganism, the culture of egotistical individualism combined with economic greed.⁸

Economic Restructuring

Since the postwar years of the 1950s, the United States experienced a relocation of economic and cultural centers. The Northeast and the industrial Midwest became known as the Rustbelt as the South and Southwest, the Sunbelt, was elevated as the new focus of American life. This economic and cultural relocation represented the fall of New Deal Liberalism that had lifted the United States from the economic collapse of the late

⁶ Todd Holmes, “The Economic Roots of Reaganism: Corporate Conservatives, Political Economy, and the United Farm Workers Movement, 1965-1970, *The Western Historical Quarterly* 41 [1] (Spring, 2010): 56-57.

⁷ One important factor that made Ronald Reagan a “revolutionary” candidate was his Hollywood celebrity status. Along with that his presidency has marked an important historical bloc in recent history with Sean Wilentz declaring this period the “Age of Reagan” ranging from [1974-2008], marking a presidential period similar to that in importance as Jefferson, Jackson, and Roosevelt.

⁸ Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies*; explains how the “long seventies” [1969-1984] formed the identity of the “Me Generation” throughout much of this span and by the 1980s saw the emergence of the “Yuppie Culture”, 145-146, 239, 241-246.

1920s.⁹ From the perspective of cultural politics, punk's emergence in the 1970s reacted towards the eve of the new American identity.

The decline of the Rustbelt became felt across the manufacturing centers of the Midwest; expanding from Ohio and the Great Lakes states to Nebraska and the farming heartland of the west. Being a region that has encompassed both a historic center of rural populism and working class sentiments in the urban manufacturing centers; this span of land represents a region that has struggled to establish a sense of identity, yet it holds key cultural characteristics. Published in 1989, James Shortridge's book *The Middle West* explained how the dichotomies between rural imagery and the reality of a mostly urban population at the end of the twentieth century had been the root of the cultural confusion within the Midwest, or as he labeled the region, "the Middle West," adding to the identity confusion.¹⁰ The nostalgic past lingered in Midwestern culture and it was the imagery of a better time that Reagan, a Midwesterner himself, had used to gain political support.¹¹ The political strategy used to gain support had pitted the concepts of rural and urban as

⁹ Steve Fraser, *The Age of Acquiescence, The Life and Death of American Resistance to Organized Wealth and Power* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2015), 3-18; Schulman, *The Seventies*, 3, 5, 36, 106, 110, 220.

¹⁰ See, James R. Shortridge, *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture*, (Lawrence, KS, University Press of Kansas: 1989), 1-12, 143-144.

¹¹ Sidney Blumenthal, "Reaganism and the Neokitsch Aesthetic," *The Reagan Legacy*, ed. Sidney Blumenthal and Thomas Byrne Edsall (New York: Pantheon Book, 1988), 257-260, 262, 285-288; See also, Todd Holmes, "The Economic roots of Reaganism: Corporate Conservatives, Political Economy, and the United Farm Workers Movement, 1965-1970," *The Western Historical Quarterly*, 41 [1] (Spring, 2010): 58, 60-62, the article discusses how during Reagan's early political career he had presented himself as a "farmer" to gain political support with rural communities and agricultural-related industrial workers. With his "Kitchen Cabinet" of advisors leading his earlier campaign, they continued to contribute to his political career helping him obtain the presidency in the 1980s.

unrelated. In reality, however, the two spheres of environments were entwined and interrelated to one another.¹²

With economic restructuring occurring in the old industrial centers of the United States; Detroit, “The Motor City,” the once near-utopia for blue collar labor dwindled and soon other Midwestern cities joined the economic disparity. The region had been a major influence on the movements of progressivism and populism that helped to overturn America’s First Gilded Age in the early twentieth century.¹³ But as the later part of the century saw the emergence of the Second Gilded Age, resistance began to fade away and the “*Age of Acquiescence*” as characterized by Steve Fraser had set in.¹⁴

Although labor resistance was on the decline, an opposite reaction was increasing with what Thomas Frank has described as the “Great Backlash.” Writing in 2004, Frank’s *What’s the Matter with Kansas?* reflected a perspective that can be applied to the whole Midwest. A century before his publication, his home state of Kansas had been a hotbed of populism and leftist reform. By the end of the twentieth century the state had completely shifted becoming dominated by conservative politicians. According to Frank, the backlash was a reaction from the protests and rapid social changes of the 1960s, creating

¹² William Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), 2, 7, 18, 378, 380.

¹³ Examples of the Midwest and its role in the Progressive movement include events, policies, and people such as the Pullman Strike, the approach to political leadership by Wisconsin governor Robert La Follette, and the establishment of farming cooperatives to list a few; see, Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America*, (Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press: 2003); Ballard C. Campbell, ed., *The Human Tradition in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, (Wilmington, DE, Scholarly Resources Inc.: 2000).

¹⁴ Steve Fraser, *The Age of Acquiescence*, 4-13. Fraser emphasizes how many factors contributed to the public’s adoption of acquiescence. In recent history he suggests that practices similar to *Brave New World* and Orwellian examples have been used to deter resistance during the Second Gilded Age.

the atmosphere for a complete flip of voters' support. By harnessing the disgruntled feelings towards these changes, conservatives had accomplished their "great dream" that they had "ever since the thirties." Whereas "earlier forms of conservatism emphasized fiscal sobriety, the backlash mobilizes voters with explosive social issues."¹⁵ Another result of the backlash was the embedded idea that there existed two Americas. One the humble, god loving, patriotic, and small town America. The other being the liberal, smug, sinful, and overeducated America. This concept did more than just divide the rural and urban, it refurbished sectionalism or as Frank described: a sense of the U.S. being "always in a state of quasi-civil war."¹⁶

As Midwestern culture held onto its rural identity, the Farm Crisis greatly contributed to the transformation of the region's economy. The number of farmers had decreased tremendously throughout the century with advancements in technology that had increased production.¹⁷ The decreasing number of farms, however, had found stability during the 1970s and throughout this period many farmers experienced prosperity with the boom in land value and high demand for crops. By investing more into land through debt capital, many farmers held an optimistic outlook of quickly being able to pay off the mortgages occurred. With the "halcyon days of the 1970s coming to a close" according to one agricultural economist, very few recognized the vulnerability of

¹⁵ Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter With Kansas?: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America*, (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004), 2, 5, 9, 14.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 13-27.

¹⁷ Gilbert C. Fite, "The 1980s Farm Crisis," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 36 [1] (Winter, 1986), 70.

the agricultural sector. By 1980 the inflation rate had started an economic crisis, allowing for the opportunity of the new Reagan administration to implement the policy of “supply-side” economics that resulted in conflicting economic practices between Congress and the Federal Reserve. These practices have been compared to being as if “one foot was on the accelerator while the other was on the brake,” leaving, “in its wake a mountain of debt.”¹⁸ With the burden of debt, many farmers experienced depression-like circumstances unseen since the 1930s.¹⁹

With the crisis reaching national attention, the conflict between the struggling farmers and the demand for low food prices by the urban consumers resulted in the favor of the latter. The result of which, gave an opportunity for what Naomi Klein has described as “disaster capitalism.” In her book *The Shock Doctrine*, Klein explained how “supply-side” economics had been implemented during times of disaster resulting in the privatization of economies. In theory, the ideas behind this practice was well-received by a public who was persuaded that government was the source of the economic issues, not the solution. For the Midwest, the Farm Crisis was a combination of an economic and natural disaster of a region that needed assistance from outside to combat the economic tensions. “Supply-side” economics countered this demand by placing more responsibility on the state level. With its vital industry being hampered by the crisis, the reality of these

¹⁸ Barry J. Barnett, “The U.S. Farm Financial Crisis of the 1980s,” *Agricultural History* 74 [2] (Spring, 2000), 370-375.

¹⁹ Fite, “The 1980s Farm Crisis,” 71.

states to recover on their own was dim. As a result, the outcome of recovering relied heavily on private interest that combatted labor and privatized the region's economy.²⁰

The majority of manufacturing jobs had either relocated to the non-union centers of the Sunbelt, or were shipped overseas. For the Midwest, this loss of industry contributed greatly to the high unemployment seen during the recession at the break of the 1980s.²¹ The Farm Crisis had added to the region's problems with its impact in hampering the agricultural dependent industries. And like the rest of the country, the Midwest also found itself being further pulled towards the new conservatism professed by the Reaganites. Although resistance became a foreign concept to most; and Reaganism overtook the country, punk had developed as a reaction to these changes. Joining in on the punk movement that had grown in the densely urban areas like Los Angeles and New York, the youth of the Midwest saw punk as something that reflected what they were experiencing as well.

"Don't Forget the Motor City" - X

Responding to the new economic reality that the United States faced under the early years of the Reagan administration, the Los Angeles punk band X's song "The New World" pleaded for people to not "forget the Motor City." The lyrics claimed that: "It was better before, before they voted for what's his name/ This *is* suppose to be the new

²⁰ Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, **; For an example of how privatization had impacted the Midwest during the 1980s, the case-study of Canton, Peoria, and Rock Island, Illinois describes how this area was impacted and can relate to other Midwestern communities that had a similar fate, Jeff R. Crump and Christopher D. Merrett, "Scales of Struggle: Economic Restructuring in the U.S. Midwest," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 88 [3] (Sep., 1998): 496-515.

²¹ Schulman, *The Seventies*, 218-219, 229-230, 234

world.” And a later verse countered the previous statement with “This *was* suppose to be the new world,” showing their belief that the “New World” promised by Reagan was fictional. Accommodating these lyrics, the music video displayed shots of urban decay along with rural Midwestern imagery suggesting a concern for the people outside of X’s California metropolis home.²²

There was more, however, than just the economic issues that attracted Midwestern punks to the music. Many youths looked for music that was new and exciting compared to the overproduced repetitive sounds coming from the music industry. Rejecting popular music itself was a form of protest, and Midwestern punks shared this feature of the punk movement. Due to their geographical location, it was not easy for these youth to discover punk rock. David “DaVo” Wilkins has explained that popular music “had nothing to do with what we were experiencing.” Wilkins, a punk rocker from Des Moines, Iowa, shared how he had been “subjugated” to his older sister’s music. She was a member of the Columbia Record Club, “I swear to god that she had every terrible record from the 1970s!” “She’s 10 years older than I am; and I was rebelling against that to find my own thing.” There was no “‘Bible’ to go by” in Wilkins’ Midwestern community. Without a guide to punk music, one sorted through albums looking for something that stuck out. “You kind of pretty much went out there and went ‘well this looks weird’ and then flip it over and went ‘well I’ve heard of this Posh Boy Record or

²² X, “The New World,” *More Fun in the New World* (Los Angeles: Elektra, 1983); Music video can be seen on YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YbEhts7g-4U>.

SST or whatever label and you'd buy it."²³ Ambitious youth like Wilkins, discovered punk on their own and soon found out that there was a whole punk community growing around them.

By the late 1970s bands in the Midwest had begun to create their own music. Like other punkers on the coasts, songs like "I Hate Music" by the Replacements from Minneapolis expressed their distaste for the technical structure that had taken over the music industry. Other songs like "Livin' in the 80s" by the Indianapolis band the Zero Boys also rejected iconic rock groups with the lyrics: "I don't remember the Beatles, I don't like the Stones." The song further criticized the new decade by claiming that they had "no heroes" and demanded for people to wake up to the changing landscape with the echoing end of the chorus crying: "I'm living in the 80s."²⁴

Both the Replacements and the Zero Boys were some of the Midwest's earliest notable punk bands forming in the late 1970s. Although the career of the Replacements would later become more recognized in popular music; the Zero Boys had a tremendous influence in helping to create the Midwest's punk scene. After the band's near-instant stardom success within the punk world, the fanzine *Maximum Rock N Roll* asked Mahern in the summer of 1983, "Why do you stay in the Midwest?" He replied; "I guess I stay here because it feels real. The kids around here appreciate the few shows they do get to

²³ David "DaVo" Wilkins, discussion with author, September 10, 2015.

²⁴ The Replacements, "I Hate Music," *Sorry Ma, Forgot to Take Out the Trash* (1980-1981: Twin/Tone, 1981) CD; Zero Boys, "Livin' in the '80s," *Vicious Circle* (1982: Toxic Shock, 1987) CD.

see. Also, to be punk from Indiana means that you went looking for punk rock -- not because all the kids at school are punks. It's real rebellion."²⁵

Not the Safe Midwest

The "real rebellion" aspect of Midwestern punks was seen from their tolerating of social stigmatism for the way they presented themselves. The band the Necros from Ohio explained in a 1982 interview with the fanzine *Indecent Exposure* that in the Midwest "you get total bullshit for being a punk, it scares people here to see someone with a mohawk or shaved head."²⁶ While the punk fashion may have scared the average Midwesterner, it did not mean that they avoided harassing punks. One punk from Iowa City, Iowa shared how "Life on the street can be an endless battle . . . Baseball bat-wielding rednecks cruise around looking for punks, but are too afraid to stop or get out of their cars."²⁷ Although they were stigmatized for their punk culture, this in effect helped to create a need for cooperativeness amongst Midwestern punks.

Cooperativeness became valuable to the region's punks as they began to create their own record labels to distribute their music. Before the age of twenty Paul Mahern created Affirmation Records in the beginning of the 1980s. The label initially started with the release of a compilation album of local Midwest bands that could easily be

²⁵ Carl Haynes, "Zero Boys [Interview with Paul Mahern]," *Maximum Rock N Roll* 8 (Sep., 1983): 22.

²⁶ Indecent Exposure, "Necros Interview," *Indecent Exposure* 3 (1982): 6, us.archives.org.

²⁷ MRR, "Iowa," *MRR* 14 (June, 1984): 29.

obtainable.²⁸ As one punk band pointed out, the West Coast was lucky to have radio stations who were willing to play punk rock. In the Midwest, however, most radio stations viewed “the Talking Heads [as] too hard for ‘em.”²⁹ With radio stations unwilling to play their music and few labels to produce it, independent labels gave bands the opportunity to reach a larger audience. The labels functioned in a co-op style that relied on cooperation between the label itself and the bands (which often were not obligated by contracts). This relationship strengthened the community by granting bands independence that many major labels would not endorse.³⁰

Along with creating Affirmation Records, Mahern also became an open advocate for the punks during a mid-1980s Indianapolis talk show “Night Talk,” joining other punks to defend their movement on the locally broadcasted television show. Several years before this talk show, the Phil Donahue Show and the guest appearance of the Los Angeles group Parents of Punkers had created an uproar throughout the punk community. A letter by one punker published in 1982 showed their disapproval of the show with it presenting the image of a punk rocker as “one who lived for drugs, massive sex, and loved to break laws.” Following this statement the punk continued; “I hate to disappoint you, but most punks go to gigs to enjoy the music and have fun. HOW IMMORAL IS

²⁸ Paul Mahern, phone interview with author, Nov., 14, 2015.

²⁹ MRR, “Toxic Reasons [Interview],” *MRR* 4 (Jan.-Feb., 1983): 13.

³⁰ Carl Haynes, “Zero Boys,” *MRR* 8 (Sep., 1983): 22; The Minneapolis band Hüsker Dü explained how their label, Reflex Records, functioned. This example demonstrates a common theme of how many independent punk labels worked., MRR, “Minnesota,” *MRR* 5 (March-April, 1983): 25; Abbie Mahler, “East Coast/ Midwest U.S.A.,” *Indecent Exposure* 3 (1982): 6, us.archive.org, discussed another compilation album titled “The Process of Elimination,” that was produced by another Midwest label Touch & Go.

THAT I ASK? None more that society to ridicule the younger generation for speaking out, well wake up. We're sick of war, corruption and politics."³¹



Figure 7. Serena Dank Says: Murder Punks!. Ad for the Los Angeles band Black Flag, printed in *Maximum Rock N Roll* 6 (May-June, 1983): 18.

³¹ Jeff (Violent Deeds), "[Letters]," *We Got Power* 3 (1982): 5.



Figure 8. Serena Dank Comic Strip. Printed in *We Got Power* 4 (Sep., 1982): 9.

The desire to introduce a more represented punk to the public came true with Paul Mahern's appearance on mid-1980s Indianapolis talk show. During the show Mahern not only faced a condescending host, but also Bill Levin; a twenty-eight-year-old androgynously dressed punk with blue hair who happily shared that he voted for Reagan and planned to vote for him again—a statement that he may said to shock the audience. The host, however, took Levin's statement seriously and bathed in the older punk's reply: and swiftly added "which is why Reagan is going to win by a landslide. Everybody is obviously voting for him." Levin presented a confusing interpretation of punk that Mahern sought to discredit. Trying to move attention away from the blue-haired spectacle, Mahern discussed how the "mass media" had presented punk as either "a joke or something that is very violent and has focused mainly on the negative aspects and completely skimmed over the positive [ones]." He explained that;

There are a lot of positive things that have come out of the punk movement. . . . such as thirteen year old kids in high schools putting out their own fanzines. . . . showing their own political opinions. Bands forming in a garage and in six months they're putting out their own record

and distribute it themselves. They completely do it without any outside help.³²

The statement gave a perspective that greatly countered that presented during the earlier Phil Donahue Show as discussed in the disgruntled letter.

Mahern later shared how some people, such as his Reagan supporting colleague, joined because of the fashion. But as they began to read the fanzines and were exposed to new ideas, they realized that punk meant something more than blue hair. Punk represented a different way of thinking from “normal people” as one audience member suggested. Mahern pointed to how “punk” was “nothing more than a word.” “I am only here trying to defend this word ‘punk’”—to which he raised his hands and finger quoted—“because someone else has labeled the kind of music that I listen to and the attitude I have.” Mahern concluded with: “If people can see beyond that word, that frightening word, they can see that it’s really not that different from the hippie movement.”

Although the hippie and punk movements shared ideological similarities, the only one asked about by a caller during the show was whether or not they were “all on drugs.” The host questioned why the caller asked that question? After a momentary pause, she could only reply with “Look at them.” To the surprise of the host, the punk panel turned

³² “Night Talk - Cable TV Show - Call-In to Indy Punks [PT1 and PT2],” YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=THITm8I_vFQ&; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mMyFMgqCrK8>; Phone conversation between Mahern and author, Nov. 14, 2015. The intentions behind Bill Levin is difficult to interpret. Levin was the original manager of the Zero Boys, and his comment according to Mahern seemed to suggest him making a mockery of the show. This perspective makes sense considering Levin’s recent stardom for his “First Church of Cannabis” founded in 2015. With Indiana’s RFRA law, Levin is taking the state to court by restricting his church’s freedom to practice their religious liberties (consumption of cannabis), See, Mark Alesia and Tim Evans, “Who is First Church of Cannabis Founder Bill Levin?,” *Indy Star*, June 26, 2015, *IndyStar*, <http://www.indystar.com/story/news/2015/06/27/part-huckster-part-high-priest-pot-indys-counter-culture-icon-sparks-controversy/29287515/>.

down the connection of drugs and alcohol being an issue within the movement. Several even claimed that they did not partake in any of these activities. Again, Mahern made an important defending statement; “I think that you will find more businessmen on cocaine than you will people in this audience who do that much drugs.” His reply was received with positive applause from the numerous punks in the crowd, which included two young punk mothers and their infants. Although rock & roll had a long “tradition” of drinking and drug use, Mahern pointed out that many within the “hardcore punk” movement had rejected this relationship.³³

Other punks like Mahern also found themselves on local Midwestern talk shows. Minnesota’s “Twin Cities Live” hosted by Gene Rump featured a similar show to that seen in Indianapolis. Instead of having punk guests who were young adults, however, the show’s punk panel was that of teenagers ranging from the age of fifteen to eighteen. The show began by showing before and after pictures of the youth who sported punk haircuts including a green spiked mohawk by a fifteen-year-old named Amy Foreman. Rump pointed to how it must take time every morning to style their hair styles. One of the punks replied back that it was not any different “than the girls who spend an hour and a half with the curling iron.”

The parents of these teenage punkers were also present at the show and sitting in the audience. Rump asked each of them how they felt about their child looking the way they did. Besides Foreman’s parents, these adults shared how they had concerns over how their children had disregarded their “talks” over the way they presented themselves.

³³ *Ibid.*

They discussed how they did not know what to do, therefore found themselves in a talk show audience with their children being displayed on television. The mother of fifteen-year-old Bryan Weeds, one of the punks being ogled by the audience and viewers, shared that she thought “he’s rebelling against something,” and after a short pause added “everything.” The mother said that “Every night I pray that he will change,” an awkward reply that was met with laughter from around the studio room.³⁴

While beginning as a circus display of the young punks, the show did shed light on why these teenagers presented themselves the way they did and how people had treated them as though they were not “human.” The youth discussed the issues that they face at school by disapproving teachers and administrators, people rudely gawking at them when they walked into places, and the cops who constantly harassed them. Although they admitted the police did not physically harm them, they believed that their intentions were to have fun with the defenseless minors. Many of the non-punks at the show, especially the host, mocked the culture that these kids had adopted, but a well-groomed middle-age male audience member came to their defense.

It might invite some criticism but listen to what they’re saying about how they get treated. I think that they’re performing two valuable functions. First of all, rock is theatre, punk is theatre, and as far as I’m concerned this is the best show in the Cities. The other thing is that if it weren’t for these people, we’re in danger of thinking that this country is all, we are the world, and hand across the desert. It’s not. There is a dark underside to it and it’s there.³⁵

³⁴ “Twin Cities Live Punk show 1985 [Part 1 of 6],” YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZXCfMM0KpYA>.

³⁵ “Twin Cities Live Punk show 1985 [Part 3 of 6],” YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yiHknyvVrow>.

After finishing the statement, the host quickly announced a commercial break in the show.

Later in the show Rump asked Amy Foreman's father, the one parent who had defended his daughter's stylistic expression, if he ever hopes that she "grows out of this?" Quickly and firmly the father replied with "No." "My only hope is that she gets through this stage without some kind of physical harm. And that physical harm will come from outside. It will come from attacks from rednecks and narrow-minds and the conservative element in the Twin Cities." The reply was well met by the audience. This comment from Foreman's father turned the discussion to this new subject. Input from the audience and teenage punks pointed to the "conservative element" of the culture around them. Drugs came up like they did in the Indianapolis talk show with Mahern. One of the teenage punks even gave a similar remark to Mahern's about how many businessmen regularly took cocaine but this issue did not stigmatize them. It was also suggested that the drug stigma that had been placed on punk rock was because many people felt that the only way they could dress punk was if they were on drugs. Amy Foreman added to this discussion with the comment "That's what Falwell thinks."³⁶

As the show came to an end, the topic of Reagan and politics came up. When asked if the youth cared about their future, one punker in the audience made the comment if "Ronnie drops the bomb" there would not be a future. Shortly after this comment, Rump asked the punk audience if they think things would be better without government?

³⁶ "Twin Cities Live Punk show 1985 [Part 4 of 6]," YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=arkn-HHuMFo>.

Numerous comments from the audience replied with “Without Reagan!” One of the punk guests, Dave Victor the oldest of the group, explained that “People actually run the society, like it or not.” This impressive comment from a teenager revealed an understanding similar to that of the Milwaukee band Die Kreuzen’s point that the issue was not Reagan himself, but that the United States could elect someone like him. Reagan may have been perceived as an enemy to many punks, but he did not take the office of presidency through authoritarian measures as the public had voted for him.³⁷

After a show that began with humiliating teenagers, the direction of discussion and input from the audience had presented a different perspective towards the punk movement. Although the audience included a large portion of punks, the overall group was diverse. A young female punker in the audience asked the last question of the show. She stated how she wondered if people would “think of us as people,” not just a spectacle, after seeing the show? The diverse audience all joined in with applause suggesting that perhaps some opinions did change that day.³⁸

A Midwest Punk

The two talk shows demonstrated that the youth of these Midwestern cities adopted the punk culture because it meant something that reflected the way that they thought. Becoming a punk in a region like the Midwest meant that one became a target of

³⁷ “Twin Cities Live Punk show 1985 [Part 4 of 6],” YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=arkn-HHuMFo>.

³⁸ “Twin Cities Live Punk show 1985 [Part 6 of 6],” YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zC7Usw9if8>.

a homogenous culture, as the teenage punks explained what they had to put up with from the general public. While Indianapolis and the Twin Cities are two of the largest urban areas in the Midwest, urban centers were not the only places one could find a punk community. A letter written by Vince Mulier claimed that “people make scenes, cities do not.” Published in the summer of 1982, Mulier suggested that many of the big city punks joined for the “same reasons that college boys join fraternities. They need security.” He explained that small town punks did not have that luxury. Instead they were “searching for the most logical attitude, and [had] inevitably found it in punk,”³⁹ Later that year, a “scene report” from Chicago showed that even in the Midwest’s largest city, the punk community remained small. Being upset about seeing letters in fanzines like “*Flipside*” where people had complained about having “only 10-15 punks at [their] high school” he put things into a different perspective pointing to how “In Chicago, the only time that many punks are in the same building is at gigs or partys!” Towards the end of his report, the Chicago punk asked visiting bands to “MAKE SURE your gigs are All-Ages Shows!” “Think about it: bars are a stupid place to have gigs. Not only are there stupid bouncers, age limits, and steep prices;” he claimed, “but the owners, (who make the most profit) are exploiting your music for cash!”⁴⁰

Early in 1983 bands from Chicago and Milwaukee sought a way to end the dilemma of people trying to control and profit from their music. They published warnings to other punk bands about venues and people who they believed were exploiting punk

³⁹ Vince Mulier, [Letter to MRR], *MRR* 2 (Sep.-Oct., 1982): 4.

⁴⁰ Ken B., “Chicago [Scene Report],” *MRR* 3 (Nov.-Dec., 1982): 22.

rockers. To “stop the thieves and unfair people” and to “[a]void the middleman,” the punkers gave out their contact information to help book shows for visiting bands.⁴¹ By taking matters into their own hands, punks across the Midwest worked together and created an “alternative network,” as discussed by the Chicago band Articles of Faith, that helped touring bands. Through this network, bands like Articles of Faith had “demolished” the stigma of punk only being a fashion with “lots of different people” coming to shows.⁴² All-ages shows became an important part in gaining this independence as well. With a small scene to begin with, allowing all punkers helped to sustain their independent venues. By working together the growing Midwest punk community showed a glimpse of chance for the punk movement to overturn the way that they saw society changing.

Overcoming the Midwest’s music industry was not the only obstacle for the region’s punks. Outside the cities where punk communities were growing the Midwest had *Cows and Beer*, as the Milwaukee band Die Kreuzen’s title to their 1982 7” album suggested. The title was given because that was the “sort of stereotype for what it’s like around [Wisconsin]” the band explained in an interview. While the title to this album was the impression that most outsiders had towards the Midwest, the band’s name Die Kreuzen itself had another stereotype. Translated from German, Die Kreuzen means “the cross.” As the band had warned for people to “Open your eyes and see what’s going

⁴¹ Dan and Mel, “Letters: Bands-Warning!!!!!!,” *MRR* 4 (Jan.-Feb., 1983): 5; Ken B., “Chicago Scene Report,” *MRR* 4 (Jan.-Feb., 1983): 27.

⁴² *MRR*, “Chicago: Articles of Faith [Interview],” *MRR* 4 (Jan.-Feb., 1983): 25-26; Also see *MRR*, “Wisconsin: Madiscene,” *MRR* 4 (Jan.-Feb., 1983): 24.

around,” and as their name suggested for the region part of that issue was the cultural influence of being a part of the “Bible Belt.”⁴³

The title for *Cows and Beer* was a satirical perspective that reflected Midwestern stereotypes (especially their home state Wisconsin, “the dairy state”), but the album art reflected a much more serious statement towards the region’s Christian stigma. The back of the album showed Midwestern rural imagery with a cow in a field of grass, but the front displayed a much darker sense of Midwestern life (see figure 3). Outside of an urban skyline a cross covered in barbed wire suggested a defensive barrier surrounding the region. At one level the image suggested that people of the region were barricaded. As a reflection towards the “Bible Belt,” the image also presented the impression that Christian fundamentalism had entrapped people inside of Midwestern cities. Either way, the people of this rural battlefield were facing near depression circumstances. While they held onto the idea of a lost past, they were persuaded by the nostalgic “Reaganite aesthetic,” to support the new economic principle that disfavored their economic interest. It was at this root that Reaganism found a new paradigm in pushing cultural politics as the key element in gaining political power. The Christian values held throughout the Midwest, favored the social conservatism professed by the Reaganites, ignoring the economic implications associated with the new conservatism.⁴⁴

⁴³ MRR. “Wisconsin [Die Kreuzen Interview].” *MRR* 5 (March-April, 1983): 27; The “Bible Belt” can be seen with the affiliation that the Midwest has had with Evangelicals. See, Paul Boyer, “The Evangelical Resurgence in 1970s American Protestantism [Chapter 2], Ed. Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer, *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 31-32, 34, 39, 47.

⁴⁴ Sidney Blumenthal, “Reaganism and the Neokitsch Aesthetic,” *The Reagan Legacy*, ed. Sidney Blumenthal and Thomas Byrne Edsall (New York: Pantheon Book, 1988), 260, 285-288; The influence of



Figure 9. Album Art for Die Kreuzen's 1982 7" *Cows and Beer*. Front cover (Left). Back cover (Right). Image from, <http://www.kbdrecords.com/2006/09/17/die-kreuzen-cows-and-beer-ep-7/>.

When the band Toxic Reasons from Dayton, Ohio was asked “How’s the scene in the Midwest?” by a fanzine in the winter of 1983. A member of the band, Ed Pittman, replied by saying that; “Bands are poppin’ up all over the place. But it’s the Bible Belt. Jerry Falwell is President there. There’s complete control of the media. Clubs open, and get shut down in a flash.” J.J. Pearson, the band’s drummer followed with the statement “But in the Midwest, once something grabs hold, you know it’s for real, not a fad. But it takes a long time.” The fanzine followed their reply with the question, “Well, have people in the Midwest caught on to anything yet?” Pearson suggested that “People aren’t that pissed yet. I was watching election returns, and in the [Midwest] where there’s the highest unemployment, they still voted conservative.” Pittman added “That’s ‘cause they

“moral conservatism” in Reagan’s 1984 election is explained in, Eric Woodrum, “Moral Conservatism and the 1984 Presidential Election,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 27 [2] (June, 1988): 192-210.

send Mr. Puppetman, Mr. Reagan, out on these tours. They hold them in a big silo or something, and they hand people American flags at the door, telling them they're going to be on TV - Media Hype." Pittman continued by explaining how the unemployed roamed the countryside in vans looking for work. It reminded him of "[*The Grapes of Wrath*]" as these people struggled to feed their families and ended by adding "With that many people out of work, they go crazy."⁴⁵ The problem of unemployment in the region became an issue that Midwestern punks responded to. As the general public had harassed and disregarded punk rock, these youths used punk rock as a way to express the economic decline of their communities.⁴⁶

The Common Goals

Although much of the Midwest's youth joined in *The Age of Acquiescence*, punk's cultural expression showed resistance. Shock value, however, was not the only form of resistance used by the punk movement as public protest became encouraged throughout the 1980s. A letter written by Eric Blare and published in *MRR*'s July, 1984 issue discussed recent political activism in Michigan. Blare applauded bands who had joined in protests, like the band Social Justice from his hometown of Lansing. These

⁴⁵ *MRR*, "Toxic Reasons [Interview]," *MRR* 4 (Jan.-Feb., 1983): 13.

⁴⁶ Paul Mahern discussed a band that had "best unemployment anthem ever" in an issue of *MRR*, Paul Mahern, "Indiana," *MRR* 4 (Jan.-Feb., 1983): 28; A fanzine from Kalamazoo, MI also discussed the issue of unemployment in the region as one editorial gave a depressing story of the young males struggles while being unemployed himself, Pig Boy, "Pig Boy's Letter to America: Dear Diary, It's Bottoming Out!!" *Free Beer Press* 7 (Sep., 1984): 6, [us.archive.org](https://www.us.archive.org); See also, The Effigies, *Haunted Town* [EP], (Autumn Records 1981), the single can be heard at, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2IBi6yUIALM>, the song's lyrics suggest a reflection towards the deterioration of the city of Chicago by asking "Can you afford/ the exit door/ Back to the suburban playground."

punks joined “with other people of all walks of life,” in a Detroit demonstration. They “shared common goals,” he explained: “End the war against the poor in this country and abroad, stop nuclear insanity, and deny Reagan in 1984 for his foolish mistakes in escalating world tensions and ignoring human needs.” Blare encouraged other punks to partake in demonstrations such as the one he and Social Justice were a part of.⁴⁷

For many of the punks of the eighties, Reagan represented not just electoral politics but the emergence of a totalizing political culture. It was not just Reagan himself that punks had protested against during the 1980s, but also the culture in which he represented. On March 29, 1985 one newspaper headline titled “Protests follow ‘punk’ ban” showed that punks had more than just Reagan to deal with. The story reported that nearly three hundred students at a junior high in the Twin Cities area had erupted into a protest against a recent school dress code policy. The school had sent letters to the students’ parents that specifically targeted “punk” apparel. Seeing their freedom of expression being violated, the students removed themselves from class and gathered outside the building to protest the new policy. With reports of some students banging on the windows of the school, police were called in resulting in the arrest of four of the teenage demonstrators. One of the students arrested was using crutches at the time and claimed that the police “slammed his face into the ground several times and hit him,” leaving bruises and scratches. The excessive force used against the child by the local law enforcement, resulted in the family hiring an attorney to press charges. Even with the over-excessive way that the police had handled one student, there was little sympathy

⁴⁷ Eric Blare, [Letter (Lansing, MI)], *MRR* 15 (July, 1984): 10.

from one “Ms. Leonard,” a teacher at the school. Talking to the reporters after the incident, she “blamed the news media for exciting the children,” and “sarcastically” thanked the reporters for instigating the commotion.⁴⁸

While some adults failed—“Ms. Leonard” in particular—to see the students’ perspective, the aftermath of the incident gave hope towards a changing public. Nearly six-hundred “school administrators, teachers, students and parents” gathered days later “to discuss the ‘anti-punk’ dress policy that prompted the demonstration.” The tremendous support from the public led school officials to abandon the new dress policy “and agreed to set up a task force to study how problems at the school might be better handled” in the future.⁴⁹

Yet even if the public had changed its perspective towards punk, the movement began to fizzle out throughout the latter half of the decade. The sound of the music that hardcore brought became repetitive. As punk began by rejecting the homogenous sound of rock music, it found itself facing the same issue. Bringing creativity back to the movement, punk bands found themselves diverging from the dominant hardcore sound and developing new styles. Wisconsin’s the Violent Femmes presented a unique style of folk-punk with their fast-paced acoustic sound. Although the sound of the music began to change, the content of youth experience and rebellion remained. Their song “Old Mother Reagan” recorded in 1985 openly claimed that it was a “protest” song to the reelected

⁴⁸ Minneapolis (AP), “Protests follow ‘punk’ ban,” *The Free Lance-Star* (Fredericksburg, VA), March 29, 1985, 1, 16, news.google.com/newspapers.

⁴⁹ Minneapolis (AP), “Punk styles will return to school in Minneapolis,” *Lakeland Ledger* (Lakeland, FL), April 11, 1985, 5A, news.google.com/newspapers.

president. The band's lead singer Gordon Gano held religious values that were reflected in many of their songs, but his rejection of Reagan demonstrated that not all Midwesterners of faith supported the new conservatism. In an article published in Australia's *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Gano was quoted admitting that he was; “‘frightened’ by the conservatism currently sweeping his country. ‘We’ll play college shows, and to think that the college-age students voted for Reagan more than they didn’t . . . and that as people get older they tend to get more conservative rather than liberal!’” he exclaimed.⁵⁰

Sharing the concerns of Gano, the band Big Black from Chicago gave a metaphor for how the president had persuaded the public. The group's song “Kitty Empire” began with the lyrics; “The emperor makes his rounds/ Master of all cats/ Fat in the Midwest/ Emperor rolls his little balls.” The lyrics seemed to imply that Reagan had distracted the public from what was going on, just as a pet cat could be distracted by a toy ball. The song had a machine-like pace with chanting vocals, presenting a dark sense behind the song's context. Towards the end of the song the lyrics stated, “I am emperor of cats/ I do what I want now, cats.”⁵¹ While abstract, the message behind Big Black's song pointed to the persuasive power that Reagan used on Midwesterners.

Another band from Chicago, Naked Raygun—an influential group on Steve Albini and Big Black—found success with their melodic-punk style to get “their message

⁵⁰ Mark Demetrius, “The violent Femmes’ raw religion,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Jan. 24, 1986, 18, news.google.com/newspapers.

⁵¹ Big Black, “Kitty Empire,” *Songs About Fucking* (Touch & Go, 1987), CD.

across.” One newspaper article from the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* described this “message” as “[a] cautious, almost patriotic liberalism” with “lyrical content” of “human landscapes depicted keep[ing] the words from turning into vague ranting.”⁵² The group’s song “Only in America,” from their 1985 album *Throb Throb*, demonstrated the perspective given by the article. The song’s verses altered between various criticisms of the United States and the harmonic echoing of “Only in America” that followed. For instance, the first verse of the song stated:

You start your own company/ Only in America
Mixing chemicals a new way/ Only in America
It’s good for the economy/ Only in America
Making cancer everyday/ Only in America

Naked Raygun was pointing to the how an unregulated market could celebrate profits at the expense of others. In the case presented by the first verse of “Only in America,” the expense of others was their health due to a company that saw no problem with poisoning Americans since the reasoning was that: “It’s good for the economy.” The song’s chorus shared this same perspective and the irony of the business culture that Reaganism was instilling on the American mindset:

Then someone can make a buck
With the cure for your bad luck
When you’re born you start to die
Don’t know from what
And you don’t know why

⁵² John Young, “The message is clear from Naked Raygun,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Aug. 4, 1989, 16, news.google.com/newspapers.

Most would consider that the role of a state is intended to protect people from harm. However, as Naked Raygun's song pointed out, the role of the state became influenced by Reaganism not to protect citizens, but to protect business profits.⁵³

Naked Raygun presented a dissenting voice against the culture of Reaganism throughout his entire presidency. But as Reagan left the White House it became clear that a drastic change had occurred in the American political culture. Their 1989 song "Treason" demonstrated how even without Reagan out of office, the impact of his presidency had transformed the United States to the point where the political beliefs held by the band, appeared as "Treason" as Reagan had altered the language and culture of American political discussion entirely.⁵⁴

While some bands like Naked Raygun were able to adapt their message to a new context after their despised president left office, punk became more accepted and lost much of its expression by the end of the 1980s. "Cornerstone" a 1988 Christian rock festival held in a Chicago suburb was reported having "Teen-agers with dyed spiked hair sitting next to suburban housewives and pastors." Earlier in the decade this would have been an unthinkable event, but just like the Counterculture which included hippies, punks became tolerated by the general public. While this may have appeared as a victory for the movement, it represented a decline in the rebellious nature of punk rock.⁵⁵

⁵³ Naked Raygun, "Only in America," *Throb Throb* (Homestead Records, 1985).

⁵⁴ Naked Raygun, "Treason," *Understand?* (Caroline, 1989), CD.

⁵⁵ Patrick Kampert, "Cornerstone '88 will rock 'n' roll to a Christian beat," *Daily Herald* (Arlington Heights, IL), June 29, 1988, Section 3/ Showcase 9, Newspaperarchives.com.

Punks in the Midwest had faced many obstacles throughout the 1980s, yet they were still able to create a community. Finding new musical styles, however, seemed to be the most difficult and in ways self-destructing; as the band Hüsker Dü, from Minneapolis showed. “The band prided itself on equality, with all three members contributing material,” according to one *Associated Press* reporter, “and stayed true to the punk spirit by remaining accessible to the public.”⁵⁶ After gaining national attention and signing with Warner Brothers, however, the band’s career quickly came to a close. The disbandment of the group occurred in 1989, and it supposedly involved the issues of rock stardom: “arguments over drug use and songwriting credits.”⁵⁷ Yet even though the band experienced a depressing departure, their career spanning throughout the 1980s demonstrated something important that thousands of youth in the Midwest experienced. Through the punk movement many fans had discovered that they were a part of something bigger than just their local punk community. They found out that what drew them to punk rock, was an ideological movement that had spread across the United States. It was a different way of thinking, a different way of acting, and a rebellion against the changes that were occurring around them.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Hillel Italie, “Life after Husker Du? It goes on, Mould says,” *Daily News* (Bowling Green, KY), June 16, 1989, 5-B, news.google.com/newspapers.

⁵⁷ Hillel Italie (AP), “Crossroads: Husker Du founder Mould reassessing his life,” *Kentucky New Era* (Hopkinsville, KY), Nov. 23, 1990, 7B, news.google.com/newspapers.

⁵⁸ Kyle Ryan, “Partners in Crime: Bob Mould,” *We Owe You Nothing: Punk Planet, the Collected Interviews* (expanded edition), ed. Daniel Sinker (Chicago and New York: Punk Planet Books/ Akashic Books, 2008), 46.

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Punk rock may have become more accepted in the Midwest throughout the 1980s, but that did not mean that the region had rebounded from the economic problems from the decade.⁵⁹ With issues still plaguing the region, punk found itself still being a major part of the underground culture. “DaVo” Wilkins and other punks from Des Moines found other ways to continue the movement, like their short-runned public access show “The Recline of Midwestern Civilization” that briefly aired throughout 1997. The title of the show was a play on Penelope Sheeris’ 1981 punk film “The Decline of Western Civilization,” and reflected the dying punk scene after a mid-1990s boom in the city.⁶⁰ Other Midwestern scenes also saw television as a way to communicate like Chicago’s “Chic-a-go go” a kids show that included the typical puppets, but also incorporated punk rock.⁶¹ These shows demonstrated that punk rock did not simply “die” as many have resisted to acknowledge. Like the new generation of punks who found punk rock in the 1980s, the continuation of the culture and music continued with a new youth and a new context to what they were experiencing. This evolution of the punk movement, however, demonstrated that without Reagan as a symbol of their frustrations, punk became more about identity politics compared to direct challenge to the hegemonic culture.

⁵⁹ Crump and Merrett, “Scales of Struggle,” 512.

⁶⁰ David “DaVo” Wilkins, interview with author, September 10, 2015; For info on the Des Moines public broadcast show see, DaVo Wilkins, “Recline of Midwestern Civilization,” Underground Archives, <http://underground-archives.com/content/recline-midwestern-civilization>.

⁶¹ Chic-A-Go-Go Webstie, Roctober, <http://www.roctober.com/chicagogo/>; see also, <https://www.youtube.com/user/chicagogo>.

The new conservatism supported by Reagan had greatly altered the cultural political landscape, but in reaction to this transition, the punk movement had spread across the United States to places like the Midwest. Emerging as a youth expression of response towards the social, cultural, and economic changes brought on throughout the 1970s punk brought a unique perspective of interpretation that the country's youth related to.

For the Midwest, the Farm Crisis of the 1980s had greatly contributed to the economic redevelopment in many communities. While country stars like Willie Nelson attempted to bring the disaster to the attention of the American public, they did little to address how the cultural transition in the United States had contributed to the issue.⁶² The rebellious spirit that the Midwest represented during the beginning of the twentieth century with the movements of populism and progressivism, had faded by the end of the century and as a whole, it was very much "The Recline of Midwestern Civilization," as the title of the Des Moines punk show suggested. Although punk rock in the region did not directly discuss the Crisis, it reflected the impact of such economic changes and how the changing cultural political landscape was the root of the issue. Through cooperation and the development of a punk community in a region that most would not imagine to find the rebellious culture that the music created, the youth of Midwest found themselves becoming a part of a larger punk movement. Although the public became more accepting of the youthful punks, they failed to recognize the source of their rebellion. Their

⁶² Fite, "The 1980s Farm Crisis," 71.

frustrations were aimed at Ronald Reagan along with the cultural shift that the decade's president represented.

While youth of the Midwest were able to create their own network of scenes that worked together, they discovered that they were not alone in the struggle against the changing environment of the United States. Although the focus on the regional influence of the punk movement during the 1980s in the Midwest showed many problems that were similar to other regional punks with different variables, felt across the nation; the regional focus overlooks other avenues of resistance and struggles that the punk movement nationally faced during the decade. As many punks in the Midwest demonstrated their distaste for Ronald Reagan, their sentiments were felt throughout many in the punk movement. But as the Midwest punks also demonstrated, the punk movement was dividing towards the end of the eighties. Part of this divide was due to the identity politics within punk scenes, but it was also from outside forces.

CHAPTER IV

“CULTURAL TERRORIST”

Jello Biafra, Harmful Matter, and Music Censorship

Standing outside of a courthouse on an August afternoon, Stan Boucher waited to hear the conviction against his son who was charged with “distribution of harmful matter to a minor.” The *Los Angeles Times* reported that he “admired what the boy he reared on Kennedy liberalism has done with his life.” Boucher’s son was a member of one of the most popular punk bands of the decade, the owner of an independent record label called Alternative Tentacles, had run as a candidate for mayor of San Francisco, and while doing all of this, adopted the name “Jello Biafra.” Biafra (Eric Boucher), a “self-proclaimed cultural terrorist,” as the article reported, created his legacy as the lead singer of the iconic San Francisco punk rock band, the Dead Kennedys. As the owner of the record label that produced the band’s music, a controversial poster inside their 1985 *Frankenchrist* album made Biafra more than just a musician, but also a defender of artistic expression.¹

Following the 1985 Senatorial hearing on “Record Labeling,” Biafra and four other associates became the first targets of attempts to censor music in the United States by using obscenity laws. Being upset over the poster inside the album that her 11-year-old daughter had purchased for her younger brother, Mary Ann Thompson filed a complaint to her California State District Attorney’s office. The complaint was then

¹ Bob Sipchen, “Jello Biafra, Cultural Terrorist,” *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 11, 1987, latimes.com, http://articles.latimes.com/1987-10-11/entertainment/ca-13382_1_jello-biafra.

forwarded to the Los Angeles City Attorney's office, which filed charges against associates of the Alternative Tentacles record label in violation of section 313.1 of the California state penal code on June 2, 1986. While the direct penalty for the violation was not substantial, the defendants saw the implications involved with the case and sought to challenge the charges to avoid setting a precedent for future cases that could impact much more than just music or a poster.²

The California case titled *People v. Bonanno*, named after one of the defendants, Michael Bonanno—the general manager of Alternative Tentacles—represents a peculiar evolution of the limiting of civil liberties in modern United States history. While the issue at hand in the trial was the limiting of freedom of artistic expression, the greater extent of the case had significant implications towards diminishing First Amendment rights. The trial itself, has been blurred by the events and figures that it encompassed. Scholarly publications have identified the influence of the rightwing support for censorship of music (what became identified as “porn rock”) and musicians themselves, but have not looked at its impact on limiting dissent through popular forms of communication.³ With the most recent publication on the *Frankenchrist* trial being from the end of the twentieth century, scholarship since has looked further into the Reagan years of the 1980s.⁴ With

² David Kennedy, “Frankenchrist versus the State: The New Right, Rock Music and the Case of Jello Biafra,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 24 [1] (Summer, 1990): 131-132.

³ Claude Chastagner, “Parents’ Music Resource Center: From Information to Censorship,” *Popular Music*, 18 [2] (May, 1999); Anne L. Clark, “As Nasty as They Wanna Be: Popular Music on Trial,” *New York University Law Review* 65 (Dec., 1990); Kennedy, “Frankenchrist versus the State.”

⁴ For instance; Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies* (U.S.: First Da Capo Press, 2002); Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer, ed., *Making America Conservative*, (U.S.: Harvard University Press, 2008); Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan: A History 1974-2008*, (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009).

the recent work examining the decade, the case involving the *Frankenchrist* album reflected the brink of the “culture wars”—where the influence of conservatism united conservatives, but divided liberals, on social and cultural issues.

Writing three years after the trial, David Kennedy argued that the case against the *Frankenchrist* album “was a direct outcome of efforts by the political right.” Pointing to how the Right had a history of “hostility to rock music,” it was no surprise to see the charges that “were indicative of the hostility of the Reagan Right to unfettered free speech, particularly that which is critical of its politics.”⁵ Although Kennedy’s article showed the connection of the Reagan administration’s influence on limiting freedom of expression, his perspective did not fully grasp the impact that censorship would play in the still evolving debate on the impact of censorship.

Seeing the increased assault on freedom of expression in Europe, French scholar Claude Chastagner later examined how the Parents’ Music Resource Center (PMRC)—the organization that brought the issue of “porn rock” to national attention with a 1985 U.S. Senate hearing—defended censorship of music by claiming that all they sought was to inform parents. Chastagner’s argument focused on how any type of label—with the outcome of a standardized label created by the Recording Industry Association of America in 1991—no matter the intention was a form of censorship. While a simple label may not seem harmful, the significance of identifying something

⁵ Kennedy, “Frankenchrist versus the State,” 132, 135.

based on presumptions (especially music, which message can be interpreted differently by listeners) can have a greater chilling effect on all freedom of expression.⁶

By the time the trial against the *Frankenchrist* album had begun in August of 1987, the Reagan years were coming to a close. However, that did not mean that the culture of Reaganism would continue. Reagan may have been the symbolic reflection of Reaganism, but he himself had represented other symbols that created the conservative movement that he benefitted from. The charges of “distribution of harmful matter against a minor” demonstrated an increasing focus in American life during the eighties. Children and “family values” became a focus of many Americans. Concerned parents saw their children being corrupted from the culture around them, and sought to protect their innocence. This focus became intensified as the Christian Right gained an increasing influence in American culture. The symbolic perspective towards children fueled contentions in the American public and created what has commonly been referred to as the “culture wars.” While the “culture wars” have often been perceived as a battle between conservatives and liberals, the real fight was the division that became created on the spectrum of the American Left.⁷

This perspective of the “culture wars” was most evident in the events that surrounded the issue of music censorship. As for the Dead Kennedys, they were often perceived as a right-wing or even pro-fascist rock group with songs such as “Nazi Punk Fuck Off,” a song that condemned the violent, racists, swastika wearing people who

⁶ Chastagner, “The Parents’ Music Resource Center,” 179-180, 185, 188.

⁷ James Livingston, *The World Turned Inside Out: American Thought and Culture at the End of the 20th Century*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2010), 21, 34,-35, 54-54.

threatened the punk movement. News media had presented punk rock as something that was destructive and harmful to the youth of the United States, when in fact the greatest harm that it had was exposing youth to leftist ideas that had been reemerging following their condemnation during the Second Red Scare. The Dead Kennedys were one of the groups that reinvigorated these ideas, yet mainstream liberal ideology had dismissed this perspective. As actors involved in the trial to prosecute the Dead Kennedys' album as "harmful matter" identified themselves as liberal, their actions ultimately led to un-liberal censorship of expression and freedom of speech.

What is Harmful Matter?

Throughout the twentieth century, there have been several judicial battles over what would be considered harmful matter. With these cases, the material that was questioned as harmful matter were tangible items. As for the *Frankenchrist* album, this was also the situation as the charges originated with the poster that had been packaged with the album. The poster, however, was a replication of a painting by H.R. Giger and had been published in books and magazines that had been available for purchase by any minor. Giger's artwork often depicted dark graphic images that often included sexual innuendo. The poster packaged with the Dead Kennedys' *Frankenchrist* was no exception to this artistic characteristic as many reports described it as resembling several depictions of dismembered body parts fornicating. Even so, Giger's painting that the poster replicated had been displayed in art museums across Europe. Adding to the issue, Giger was the artist who created the terrifying alien of the popular 1979 sci-fi horror film

Alien, directed by Ridley Scott. How then did work by an artist who had been accepted by American and international audiences become considered “harmful matter” and what exactly does that matter entail?

For American courts, the question of harmful matter in the context of that placed against the *Frankenchrist* poster, traces its origins to James Joyce’s book *Ulysses*. Joyce’s book had been brought to federal court in 1933 where District Judge John M. Woolsey set the standards of what makes something obscene. Pointing to the legal definition of obscenity, he explained it as: “Tending to stir the sex impulses or to lead to sexually impure and lustful thoughts. . . .” After his firsthand experience of reading Joyce’s controversial book, he acknowledged that reading and understanding the content was difficult; but “nowhere does it tend to be an aphrodisiac.” Woolsey’s opinion, however, was only the beginning of numerous obscenity cases that would follow throughout the remainder of the century.⁸

The continuance of these cases made it so that materials considered obscene remained outside the protection of First Amendment rights. The only way for controversial material to gain protection was if it had some type of redeeming social value as set by Justice William Brennan. During these following cases, Woolsey’s opinion remained within discussion to determine if something was obscene. With the numerous cases reaching the court following the cultural shifts of the postwar 1950s,

⁸ Paul Finkelman and Melvin I. Urofsky, ed., *Documents of American Constitutional & Legal History: Volume II From 1896 to the Present* (Third Edition), (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 713- 716.

Justice Warren Burger set a new evaluation to determine harmful matter when he wrote the opinion of the Court in the 1973 case *Miller v. California*.

Burger's opinion attempted to set guidelines for determining obscenity. Breaking these guidelines into three categories of evaluation he wrote:

(a) whether 'the average person, applying contemporary community standards' would find that the work, taken as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest, (b) whether the work depicts or describes, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specifically defined by the applicable state law, and (c) whether the work, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value."⁹

Although Burger's guidelines set a more defined standard for evaluating obscenity compared to the previous set in the 1957 case *Roth v. United States*, the dissenting court saw the ambiguity and contradictions involved. Justice William Douglas pointed to this issue by stating that: "We deal with highly emotional, not rational questions." Joining Douglas' statement, Justice Brennan added that "the statute here is unconstitutionally overbroad, and therefore invalid on its face."¹⁰

PMRC and 1985 Senate Hearing

The outbreak of the "culture wars" in the eighties was not just a battle between Democrats and Republicans, but a conflict over the moral values of the United States. The increased rate of crime along with growing concerns of sex, drugs, and violence seen in popular culture alarmed many of those who believed that the social values of the

⁹ Warren E. Burger, [Court's Opinion, *Miller v. California*], *Documents of American Constitutional & Legal History: Volume II From 1896 to the Present* [Third Edition], ed. Paul Finkelman and Melvin I. Urofsky (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 887.

¹⁰ Finkelman and Urofsky, ed., *Documents of American Constitutional & Legal History*; Justice Douglas dissent on page 888, Justice Brennan dissent on page 889.

United States were being harmed by the perceived immoral culture. According to Lisa Duggan the “culture wars”: “drew on the repertoire of rhetorics and alliances developed since the 1970s, positioning ‘liberals’ and progressives in colleges and universities as simultaneously ‘elitist’ and ‘alien,’ in populist mode.” The argument against this once valued part of American society convicted their positions, “as sucking up taxpayer dollars to support cultures of downward redistribution - multiculturalism, Marxism ‘theory,’ and feminism particularly.” Instead of evaluating the drastic political changes that had occurred in recent decades, the social issues that were plaguing the United States were justified as being the result of the culture in which society functioned. Focus would be placed on “sexual content” to simultaneously frame these institutions as both “too political” along with being “too personal” suggesting that it did not belong in the public sector.¹¹ Taking front stage of this debate in the mid-1980s, the Parent’s Music Resource Center (PMRC) represented this assault on American culture. With Tipper Gore, a self-identifying liberal, being the face of this organization, her association demonstrated the Left’s divide in the emerging “culture wars,” It was the PMRC that brought the blame of society’s woes—drugs, sex, violence, and teenage suicide and pregnancy—and challenged music to a showdown on a center staged debate. But the PMRC itself represented a new symbol to continue the culture of Reaganism.

Although the PMRC claimed to be a bipartisan, neutral, group of concerned mothers, the support behind the organization and the stances that it took gave a different interpretation towards the intentions that the group held. The emergence of the PMRC

¹¹ Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Inequality: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 40.

came from concerned members of the National Parent/Teacher Association (National PTA) in the beginning of the 1980s. Worrisome over the lyrics that were involved in many rock songs, Susan Baker (wife of Secretary of the treasury, James A. Baker III) took the concerns of the National PTA and organized a group to combat the “pornographic contents of some rock records.” Thus, with the assistance of other women, who were the spouses of political leaders, like Tipper Gore the spouse of Tennessee senator Al Gore Jr., and notable businessmen from Washington, D.C.¹² Instead of presenting themselves as the wives of influential political men, the PMRC claimed that their partisan divides found commonality with their maternal instincts.

The distraction created by the group’s claims led French scholar, Claude Chastagner, to conclude that, “the primary motive behind the action of the Washington Wives was to divert people’s attention from major issues by focusing it on trivial ones and specific groups.”¹³ Chastagner pointed to how the PMRC initial claims of being an information source that did not promote censorship, contradicted its later support (although not directly outspoken) of legislation that resulted in labelling, with the “Explicit Lyrics” label. In doing so, the label “became synonymous with obscenity,” giving reason for many large retail stores to refuse to carry such albums. While critics have argued that the label itself helped sell records, such as those in the rap music industry, “the PMRC’s insistence on labelling triggered unofficial though effective forms of censorship, from refusing to sell to refusing to record or produce artists whose lyrics

¹² Claude Chastagner, “Parents’ Music Resource Center: From Information to Censorship,” *Popular Music*, 18 [2] (May, 1999),181.

¹³ Chastagner, “[PMRC]: From Information to Censorship,” 190.

were considered scandalous or licentious.” The “chill factor” of such brought Chastagner to question the “real goals of the PMRC’s founders.” It is easy to conclude that their actions were that of sincerity, but it is also one of hypocrisy due to the ambiguity in which labelling was placed upon the music industry. But when looking at who not only financially supported the organization, Mike Love of the Beach Boys and Joseph Coors of Coors Beers (both active supporters of Reagan’s presidency), but also the large support it gained from the Christian Right, involving notable figures such as Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell, the PMRC itself needs to be looked at with the same transparency as they claimed music records needed.¹⁴

Although the 1985 “Record Labelling” hearing itself received a large amount of coverage, including testimonies from music celebrities such as Dee Snider, John Denver, and Frank Zappa—who began speaking to the committee by reading the First Amendment and “called the [PMRC attendees] ‘the wives of Big Brother.’”¹⁵ The outcome of the hearing became a voluntary acceptance by the major record companies to place warning labels on their albums. The Senate hearing did not set any standards or penalties for non-compliance of the voluntary agreement. The charges against the Dead Kennedys 1985 album, *Frankenchrist*, itself demonstrated this ambiguity in a non-regulated yet somehow enforced penalty against the whole album due to the accompanying poster being claimed to being obscene, therefore “harmful matter” to minors. What brings these charges to question was that the album itself did have a

¹⁴ Chastagner, “[PMRC],” 187-189.

¹⁵ National Review, “The Week,” *National Review*, 37 [20] (Oct. 18, 1985): 16.

warning label on it stating that the poster inside may be “shocking, repulsive or offensive,” and concluding that “Life can sometimes be that way.”¹⁶

Dead Kennedys: What’s in a Name?

While the Dead Kennedys did not have a name that was as recognizable as figures such as Madonna or Prince, who were on the PMRC’s “Filthy Fifteen” list—a list of the most offensive songs at the time—the band’s name brought just as much attention to the issue of music censorship. To many the name seemed tasteless and an insult to the idea of Americanism. However, this perspective overlooked the message behind the San Francisco punk band’s name.

Discussing this issue, Australia’s *The Sydney Morning Herald* gave a view that was rare to U.S. publications in its article “Dead Ks: What’s in a name? Fame,” published on July 17, 1983. The author of the article, Stuart Coupe, pointed to how the Dead Kennedys have “become one of the best known bands in contemporary rock ‘n’ roll, but the majority of people who know the name have never heard a note it’s [*sic*] played.” He explained how the band had “instantly attracted an audience because of the name” during their first show in 1978. Their songs were described as “overtly political” and “deemed far from suitable for mass consumption on radio and TV.” Because the band could not use popular media sources to reach an audience, Coupe pointed to how the band “rel[ied] on records and live performances to get the message across.” That message, as the article shared, came directly from the band’s name. It was a message warning about the Me

¹⁶ Los Angeles (UPI), “Dead Kennedys defend graphic graphic: Album’s sexy poster draws fire,” *The Bulletin* (Bend, Or), June 4, 1986: C-8, news.google.com/newspapers.

Generation that followed the death of the two iconic politician brothers from the 1960s, John F. and Robert Kennedy. Following their deaths, the Dead Kennedys believed that the United States went on a decline and things became even worse with the emergence of the yuppie culture in the 1980s.¹⁷

As the Dead Kennedys' name brought attention to themselves—for better or worse—their lead singer, Jello Biafra, brought just as much curiosity to the band. Biafra was not shy to point out his distaste for the America that he saw transform since growing up in Boulder, Colorado in the 1960s. Moving to San Francisco during his early adolescence and joining the Dead Kennedys, he also became involved in local politics. Entering the 1979 mayoral race for San Francisco, Biafra was one of the various candidates that included: Dianne Feinstein, “a taxi driver, a labor organizer, and a nightclub owner,” as one article reported. His “platform include[d] the election of police officers to make them more accountable to neighborhoods, the establishment of a Board of Bribery to set civic corruption standards and making all businessmen wear clown suits,” a unique platform that gave Biafra a significant amount of votes compared to the large field of candidates.¹⁸

Although most of the coverage on the Dead Kennedys gave a negative perspective, there were instances where journalist presented more light towards the band's political stances. As Joel McNally of *The Milwaukee Journal* began a story: “You

¹⁷ Stuart Coupe, “Dead Ks: What’s in a name? Fame,” *The Sydney Morning Herald* (Australia), July 17, 1983, 82, news.google.com/newspapers.

¹⁸ San Francisco (AP), “Leader of punk rock group in race,” *Gadsen Times* (Gadsen, AL), Oct. 30, 1979, 7, news.google.com/newspapers.

know, some people think just because a band calls itself the Dead Kennedys that its music must be tasteless and disgusting.” Those “oh-so-cynical” people, he suggested, would be surprised by listening to their latest 1982 album, *In God We Trust, Inc.* McNally demonstrated his own sense of humor by calling the album that mocked Christianity as a “religious album.” He suggested that “when you scrape away all the tinsel, you get down to the real tinsel,” and for the Dead Kennedys that meant that one discovered that their lyrics “deal with solid political issues.” “Songs such as ‘Kepone Factory,’ about poisoning workers with chemicals for fun and profit, and ‘Hyperactive Child,’ about drugging school children to make them pay attention,” McNally wrote to demonstrate his point. Although mostly presenting a positive perspective towards the band, he too failed to fully understand all of their songs as he pointed to their song “Nazi Punk [Fuck Off]” as a hypocritical song to the band’s proclaimed view towards violence.¹⁹

What these reports from the mainstream news publications failed to recognize was the role that the Dead Kennedys were playing in the punk movement. As Steve Wishnia of the *Nation* reported, the prosecution against the *Frankenchrist* album “was striking at the heart of the left wing of the punk scene, an international network of bands, ‘fanzines’ (fan magazines) and promoters.” Alternative Tentacles was a major part of the group’s contribution to the punk movement and also gained recognition for its role.²⁰

¹⁹ Joel McNally, “The Dead Kennedys religious album,” *The Milwaukee Journal*, Jan. 2, 1982, 5, news. google.com/newspapers.

²⁰ Tim Tonooka, “San Francisco Bay Area,” [Letter dated Jan. 17, 1982], *Indecent Exposure* 3 (1982): 9, us. archives.org.

Expanding from just helping local San Francisco bands, Alternative Tentacles became one of the prominent independent labels to the punk movement by the time the charges against the *Frankenchrist* album was brought to the label. Many of the bands who released records with the label also shared names that were perceived offensive by prudent observers. The Butthole Surfers from San Antonio, Texas and the Crucifucks from Lansing, Michigan were two of the bands with such names. In addition, the label also featured D.O.A. from Vancouver, British Columbia whose political outspokenness in their lyrics matched that of the Dead Kennedys.²¹

The Trial

“Tax Day,” a day annually dreaded by many Americans, but to Jello Biafra the day represents more than just rushing to file his taxes. In a recorded version of one of Biafra’s spoken words shows, he discussed his experience that occurred on, April 15, 1986. On that day, he recalled to hearing footsteps marching up the stairs that he found to be that of nine police officers. After breaking a window to enter his home, the officers told Biafra: “You are in suspicion of trafficking harmful matter.” His fear was intensified when he discovered that three of the nine officers were not from the local San Francisco police force, but from Los Angeles (according to Biafra, the LAPD should bring alarm to anyone). While he sat and witnessed police ransacking his home, he puzzled over what this “harmful matter” could be? When one of the officers found a Butthole Surfers album, a band that had albums produced on Biafra’s independent record label Alternative

²¹ For information about Alternative Tentacles see the label’s website, <http://www.alternativetentacles.com>.

Tentacles; the officer asked him “Are you involved with them too?” At that moment he thought, “this was interesting, this was scary.” “Could it be that some of these cops have been stalking our whole underground scene for a long, long time?” he asked himself. This experience, as Biafra explained, was “a subtle form of rape, and boy did they know it.” He knew that there were no guns or drugs in his home, but feared the idea that they could easily be planted. This possibility could have led to serious criminal charges or even reason for the officers to use physical force, with the ultimate possibility of death. After “two and a half hours they finally found what they wanted, three copies of the [Dead Kennedys’] *Frankenchrist* album” and with them three album posters that contained the controversial poster.²²

Following the police raid on Biafra’s home, officers searched and ripped through Alternative Tentacles’ offices as well. The searches brought nothing of relevance to the charges against Biafra and the four others and were ignored by early reports. In addition to Biafra and Bonanno, who were both directly involved with Alternative Tentacles, Debra Schwartz the General Manager of Mordam Records, Steve Boudreau the president of Greenworld Distributors of Torrance, and Salvatore Alberti, the sixty-six year old of Alberti Record Manufacturing Company—who’s crime was “inserting the posters into the album covers and applying stickers on the outside saying the poster is a ‘work of

²² Jello Biafra, “Tales From the Trial,” [Recorded Spoken Word Performance] YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WDf066KpQFM>.

art.’”²³ The circumstances seemed unbelievable to Biafra and he was reported wondering when he would wake from the “dream” that he felt he was experiencing.²⁴

By July the defendants were given their pre-trial arraignment by Municipal Court Judge Rose Hom. The defense expressed concerns towards the unprecedented charges against a music album. With a sense that the charges were to test the limits of obscenity, Phillip Schnayerson, the leading defense lawyer, was reported considering a demurrer to challenge the constitutional basis of the case. Biafra expressed concerns of the “chill factor” that had begun with retailers becoming scared to sell any Dead Kennedys albums. Although the *Frankenchrist* album remained in some record stores, the poster that accompanied the original releases, were replaced by “a sheet of paper” that explained why the poster had been removed.²⁵

With the trial gaining recognition, criticism against the punk group and in favor of the prosecution increased. An editorial by David Wilson from a Maine newspaper headlined, “Freedom of expression isn’t prime issue in porn battle,” acknowledged that his perspective would receive its own criticism. Wilson pointed to how: “In the past, brave souls battled against prudish Philistines on behalf of literature. The right to sell, possess and read, say, *Ulysses*, *Tropic of Capricorn* or, more recently, *Catcher in the Rye* was involved.” Continuing, he suggested that the recent situation was “not suppression of

²³ Los Angeles (UPI), “Dead Kennedys defend graphic graphic: Album’s sexy poster draws fire,” *The Bulletin* (Bend, OR), June 4, 1986, C-8, news.google.com/newspapers.

²⁴ The Daily Herald, [Untitled], *The Daily Herald* (Arlington Heights, IL), July 4, 1986, 2 - Section 1, newspaperarchive.com.

²⁵ Los Angeles (AP), “Arraignment of punk rockers charged with distributing porn poster delayed,” *Appeal-Democrat* (Marysville-Yuba City, CA), July 5, 1986, C-8, newspaperarchive.com.

the Bible or James Joyce or Henry Miller, or J.D. Salinger. The issue is rather whether American society can maintain whatever social order and felicity it has left while awash in a stew of plastic passion of synthetic sexual excitements steadily more gross, available and bizarre.” Bringing the case with the Dead Kennedys into the discussion, Wilson described the ACLU as going “to bat in California for a punk rock group” whose name “seems to me to imply, at best, a certain tastelessness.” While he gave credit to the First Amendment defense of the case, he suggested that stores and consumers have the same. “But the refusal of some convenience store chains to market this stuff suggests a sensible, potentially effective approach,” he wrote. “The Constitution surely protects the store’s rights not to sell pornography, and the public’s right not to patronize merchants who do sell it. the liberties of merchants and their customers are certainly as sacred as those of pornographers,” concluding with: “Or is the ACLU prepared to argue for a constitutional right of titillation?”²⁶

Two months following Wilson’s editorial, the same newspaper printed a similar editorial from Jon Margolis of the *Chicago Tribune*. The title to Margolis’ editorial, “Question Stupidity,” greatly reflected his perspective towards the *Frankenchrist* trial. Beginning by discussing the importance to question authority, he asked the question “what about questioning those who question authority?” “Consider the following excerpt from a song in the genre known as punk rock, about as anti-authority a movement as we have in the U.S. of A. these days.” The lyrics that Margolis used were from the Dead Kennedys, who he refused to say their name and instead acknowledged the group as “a

²⁶ David Wilson, “Freedom of expression isn’t prime issue in porn battle,” *The Lewiston Journal* (Lewiston-Auburn, Maine), July 22, 1986, 6A, news.google.com/newspapers.

band whose name is so vile it will not be mentioned.” With the lyrics out of context, he suggested that they were an example of a failed poetic attempt. Without seeing the message behind the lyrics of the Dead Kennedys’ songs, he claimed that “it suffices to say that as social commentary the words are incredibly stupid, devoid of wit, wisdom, knowledge, sense or any other redeeming virtue.” Concluding his piece, Margolis discussed his perceived “stupidity of Giger trial and the possibility of making Biafra a hero.”²⁷

Between the start of the case in 1986 and the trial date that was set for August of 1987, the *Frankenchrist* album became caught up in a different legal battle over the cover of the album. The album cover featured a picture of Shriners that Alternative Tentacles had purchased from *Newsweek*. Perhaps it was the news reports about the obscenity trial that brought the Detroit Shriners attention to their picture being used by an album that they believed “consist[ed] of ‘lewd, vulgar, suggestive and sex-laden songs.’”²⁸ The hefty amount that the Shriners were suing for, must have only added to the stress placed upon those at Alternative Tentacles.

On August 10, 1987, the trial officially began. It had been over a year since the initial charges were brought against the five defendants as the *New York Times* acknowledged. Los Angeles Deputy City Attorney, Michael Guarino, was reported intending to use the case to “test . . . the availability of sexually explicit material to

²⁷ Jon Margolis (*Chicago Tribune*), “Question Stupidity,” *The Lewiston Journal*, Aug. 22, 1986, 6A, news.google.com/newspapers.

²⁸ Boca Raton News, “Dead Kennedys group sued,” *Boca Raton News* (Boca Raton, FL), Oct. 3, 1986, 8A, news.google.com/newspapers.

minors” by using the Supreme Court Case *New York v. Ginsburg*. As for the defense, ACLU lawyer Carol Sobel made the suggestion that if material was okay for adults one cannot be criminalized for it. Philip Schnayerson was also reported claiming that the trial was an “attempt to set a precedent in liability.” The *Times* article also discussed how fans had donated to help the defendants; along with pointing out that the album did have a warning label.²⁹

Throughout the next two weeks, three of the defendants were dropped from the case due to a lack of evidence. This left only Biafra and Bonanno, the two who were directly associated with Alternative Tentacles, to stand in defense of the Dead Kennedys artistic freedom of expression. With both of the remaining defendants being assisted by their own lawyers and a representative for each from the ACLU, the trial officially began on August 22, 1987. While Guarino continued with his conviction that the poster was pornographic, the defense used this against him suggesting to jurors that pornography charges were being misused to silence people like the Biafra and the Dead Kennedys. With the music from the album being accepted as evidence to reflect the message behind the poster, the defense portrayed the Dead Kennedys as not distributors of smut, but a group of concerned youth who supported social justice.³⁰

²⁹ Aljean Harmetz, “Singer’s Trial on Nudity in Album Begins Today,” *New York Times*, Aug. 10, 1987, C17.

³⁰ Linda Deutsch (AP), “Rock singer Biafra’s trial begins,” *Reading Eagle* (Reading Eagle, PA), Aug. 22, 1987, 6, news.google.com/newspapers; Los Angeles (UPI), “Dead Kennedys claim poster is art, not smut,” *Pacific Stars and Stripes* (Authorized unofficial publication for Dept. of Defense and other U.S. Government agencies within U.S., Pacific Command), Aug. 23, 1987, 8, newspaperarchives.com.

To the defense, the acceptance of the album to be used in comparison to the poster was essential to show the context of the poster. Biafra claimed that the poster was essential to the message he and the Dead Kennedys were trying to convey in the *Frankenchrist* album. Explaining why he chose Giger's painting as the poster, Biafra shared:

Within the context of the record, it's very clear that it's not just some "tee hee, there's some body parts" or anything like that. It's . . . the ultimate portrayal, to me, the strongest piece I've ever seen that says: "Here we are as a society, the Me Generation and the yuppie mentality. The people who would be willing to traffic arms and genocide all over the world just to make a buck." That kind of thing, here we all are, screwing each other in more ways than one. The image had to be horrific in order to portray it as being the ugly thing that it is, so that maybe people would want to do something about it. Get themselves out of that food chain. We don't have to be part of that food chain in order to survive and have some kind of fulfillment of the soul.³¹

And with this perspective, the defense was able to convince members of the jury that the poster was indeed not for prurient interests, but an important reflection of the message behind the album's music.

Following three days of the hearing the case, the jury became deadlocked in their deliberation. Split 7-5 with the majority favoring the defendants, the defense team "made a dismissal motion" to the charges. Municipal Judge Susan Isacoff approved of the motion believing that the defendants "had learned their lesson." Isacoff's decision led Biafra to jump out of his seat with cheers of celebration. His excitement came to a quick

³¹ "Jello Biafra obscenity trial 1987," YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bAkY4oS9-YO>.

close, however, as the forgiving judge gave the punk rocker a warning and reminded him that he could still be charged with a “contempt of court citation.”³²

Aftermath

It is difficult to conclude that Biafra won anything from the trial except a small victory for the First Amendment and avoiding a minor fine to the state of California. The trial generated a tremendous amount of debt for Biafra and throughout the trial the Dead Kennedys had broken up. Although the album was freed from being labelled obscene, defending the artist’s position had silenced Biafra’s music career. However, he found a way to continue his career as a performer by doing spoken words shows at universities and colleges throughout the United States. During these shows Biafra discussed a wide-range of issues, including of course, censorship. Just months after the end of the trial, Biafra was reported giving such a show at the University of Kansas in October of 1987. An article in the *Lawrence Journal-World* shared how these shows had become the way for Biafra to make a living and pay for the “hefty legal bills” that remained from the trial. The newspaper reported that his show included the discussion of “drug testing, the religious far right, death squads in Nicaragua and leaders from both political parties.” “However, the object of Biafra’s sharpest criticism was the [PMRC],” as the article shared. The article suggested that Biafra saw the group’s perspective, but opposed their approach. That approach, as Biafra was reported telling the audience was the PMRC’s usage of “boycott threats and letter-writing campaigns that help in record companies

³² Los Angeles (*UPI*), “Charges dismissed in case against rock singer,” *Altoona Mirror* (Altoona, PA), August 28, 1987, B2, newspaperarchive.com.

blacklisting several performers not to the organization's liking." Even though Biafra found another way to perform and to share many of the messages from the Dead Kennedys' songs, the article reported him: "Passing around his shoe to collect money to pay his legal expenses" at the end of the show. This type of making a living did not bother the former punk rocker as the article shared that, "Biafra smiled and said, 'politically incorrect or not, this is how I make my living.'" ³³

As Biafra continued to tour performing these shows, the greater extent of censorship became felt throughout the country. An article discussing his show at the University of Idaho in November of 1988 concluded with Matt Kitterman explaining how the school's college radio station, KUOI-FM, had to prohibit "many of the station's albums" to stay safe from becoming targeted for breaking the increasingly restrictive regulations that had been placed on radio stations. ³⁴

Continuing the assault on freedom of expression, the FCC had adopted new regulations that limited all musicians First Amendment rights. In an article published on May 22, 1987 Ethlie Ann Vare discussed how the ambiguousness of the latest regulations had placed the FCC "into a corner by citing George Carlin's famous skit 'Seven Words You Can Never Say On Television' as the official definition of what you can't say on radio, as well." Responding to the new regulations the radio industry informed broadcasters of not just the outlawed words but also "dirty words that might cause the FCC to frown." "This prurient hysteria would be hysterically funny," she wrote "if it

³³ Wayne Price, "Singer advocates saying 'no' to censorship," *Lawrence Journal-World* (Lawrence, KS), Oct. 13, 198, 13A, news.google.com/newspapers.

³⁴ Steve Thompson, "Punk rocker Biafra warns of onslaught on civil rights," *Moscow-Pullman Daily News* (Moscow, Idaho), Nov. 16, 1988, 1A, 16A, news.google.com/newspapers.

weren't for the fact that real people are really getting hurt. Three radio stations recently cited by the FCC (for violating a rule that hadn't been made yet!) face huge legal and possible loss of their broadcast licenses," deterring "any dangerous sparks of adventure" by DJs. As the article discussed how censorship regulations were expanding to other sources of media, it also mentioned how the rap group 2 Live Crew had become the next target of obscenity in a Florida case with their album *As Nasty as They Want to Be*. In this case, however, it was not the record label that was charged as with the *Frankenchrist* album, instead it was the store that sold the album. Vale did not see this relationship but she did poke fun at the whole idea behind having an age limit for music labelled obscene. "Does this mean that a 17-year-old Floridian can go to an R-rated movie—but must wait until he turns 18 to buy the soundtrack album?" Concluding her satirical, but valid perspective Vale ended with a set of questions: "Can I buy a copy if I bring a note from my mother? When my big brother plays 2 Live Crew, do I have to leave the room?" Although humorous, this author presented a perspective that the supporters of labelling did not see.³⁵

With 2 Live Crew being the second target of censorship, the case presented a contradiction compared to the *Frankenchrist* album. The 1987 case over 2 Live Crew's *As Nasty as They Wanna Be* was only the beginning of several charges brought against the album leading up to a 1990 Florida Federal Court case. With these cases it was not the artist or the label itself that was charged with obscenity, but the record stores

³⁵ Ethlie Ann Vare, "Shocking words spark ban," *Daily News* (Bowling Green, KY), May 22, 1987, 22-B, news.google.com/newspapers.

themselves. These stores were not as large as the Wherehouse chain, California's largest record store, but smaller locally owned establishments.³⁶ This conflict of economic interest demonstrated the true issue behind the assaults on music.

Squirrel Hunters, Moral Majority, and "Witch Hunts"

Mojo Nixon was described by one newspaper as the guy who performed "[l]ocker-room shenanigans," in high school. Nixon presented "crude expressions" that were gained "from a hillbilly father during possum or squirrel hunts." Giving a positive review of a show in Salt Lake City, the author, Brett DelPorto wrote that he "enjoyed someone whose act may someday be read into the Congressional Record as a prime example of obscene and/ or unwholesome rock lyrics. I won't detail Nixon's offenses, but suffice to say his act is a far cry from the upbeat, officially sanctioned stylings of Debbie Gibson or New Kids On the Block," which he added, "both of which were excoriated in the vilest terms, by the cantankerous Nixon."³⁷

Mojo Nixon may have not been what most would have considered "punk rock," but he was associated with acts that surely were. Touring with groups like the Dead Milkmen, who gave the comical musician a shout out in their late-1980s hit song "Punk Rock Girl," Nixon had other ties to punk as he became an acquaintance of Jello Biafra. When Biafra was unable to appear on the CNN show "Crossfire" to debate a proposed

³⁶ Anne L. Clark, "As Nasty as They Wanna Be: Popular Music on Trial," *New York University Law Review* 65 (Dec., 1990): 1499-1500.

³⁷ Brett DelPorto, "Off-the-wall songster is aggressively crude but charismatic," *Desert News* (Salt Lake City, UT), Dec. 7, 1990, 8W, news.google.com/newspapers.

record labelling bill in Missouri against the state representative who proposed the bill, Jean Dixon, and the well-known Republican Pat Buchanan, Nixon filled in. Reporting on the show, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that “Nixon was a last-minute substitute” for the show recorded in late February of 1990.³⁸ Battling the two moral conservatives, Nixon displayed that he was no redneck from the backwoods.

Assisting Nixon in the battle against the prudent conservatives reasoning for censorship, or in their preferred language “labelling,” “Crossfire” host Mike Kinsley intensified the debate by highlighting the ambiguity and impracticality of setting standards on labeling albums. Beginning the show by discussing the controversy over 2 Live Crew’s album *As Nasty As They Wanna Be*, the show briefly played a part of the music video for the song “Me So Horny.” Following this brief clip, the panel acknowledged the outcome of the voluntary labeling that came from the Senate Hearing over “Record Labeling.” Pat Buchanan began the discussion by asking Nixon why having a label was a problem? Buchanan suggested that if “seventy-five to eighty percent, I think, of American parents, and people want warning labels on these kinds of records . . . what is wrong with practicing a little democracy and letting the warning labels be placed there?” With a country-twang, Nixon replied: “Well democracy might be interrupted by a little thing called the Constitution, and a little thing called the First Amendment, there Pat. I think that parents have a responsibility to their children, not to other people’s children.” Nixon, being a parent himself, posed a difficult challenge for Buchanan and

³⁸ Thomas K. Arnold, “Pop Music: Wojo Nixon Lets Words Fly Against Record-Label Plan,” *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 28, 1990, http://articles.latimes.com/1990-02-28/entertainment/ca-1670_1_mojonixon.

Dixon's support of the proposed labeling bill in Missouri. One of Nixon's most important statements on the issue involved his suggestion that the musicians censors wanted to place a warning label on, had only gained notice by the general public through their discussion of them. Acknowledging that MTV and the majority of radio stations refused to play many of the songs that were being discussed as "harmful" to children, he suggested that the only reason people know of the questionable songs was because people "like Tipper Gore" and Dixon had brought them to discussion. Oddly enough, before Dixon could reply to the interesting perspective, Buchanan butted in to announce a break in the program.³⁹

While much of it rang the same tune as the issues that have been discussed previously, it demonstrated that although Nixon had country roots and a comical persona, he was an intelligent artist who could go hand-to-hand with someone who would in less than two years be running for the Republican presidential candidacy. At the same time, Pat Buchanan's political affiliation as a hardline right-winger further suggested that the idea of labelling was not a bipartisan perspective.

The Dead Kennedys, a punk band, and 2 Live Crew, a hip-hop group, were both artists of genres frowned upon by wealthy interests. Both styles of music critiqued the corporate society that they were a part of, making them a threat to the interest of the growing corporate power in the United States. These corporations used their power to control what the majority of Americans consumed. While many believe that corporations

³⁹ See recorded version of show, "Mojo Nixon vs. Pat Buchanan / CNN Crossfire 1990 (part 1) [of 3]," YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=quVZmJFoBaE>.

make reasonable decisions based off of their business' interest, it hides the political meaning that those decisions entail. With Wal-Mart being one of these giant corporations that emerged from the 1980s, its buying power gained "cheaper prices out of suppliers" but also used that same power "to change the kind of art that its 'suppliers (i.e., record companies, publishers, magazine editors) provide," according to author Naomi Klein.⁴⁰ With these corporations gaining influence over the consumer market, their decisions to stop carrying albums created a type of corporate censorship that limited the ability of open and free speech, both vocally and from a consumer perspective.

Corporate censorship, however, was easy to defend with the PMRC's accusations of identifying music they opposed as "porn rock." The usage of such language drove a divide within the American Left to combat such authoritarian positions. As Michele Landsberg discussed in her book review of Tipper Gore's *Raising PG Kids in an X-Rated Society*, the attacks on the pro-censors ignored the issue that "their beloved freedom of expression preys on, exploits and deforms female sexuality and the female body." Showing the increasing intensity of the "culture wars," Lamberg warned that "The Great Divide yawns beneath our feet." Her book review criticized fellow liberals, progressives, and democratic socialist (who she identified as) who failed to see that certain music was in fact harmful to parts of society. While these people charged the PMRC as creating a "witch hunt," they failed to make the point that the sexism towards females in society

⁴⁰ Naomi Klein, *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*, (New York: Picador, 1999), 168.

was not just music, but the culture as a whole. As she pointed to: “Pornographic images are invisible as such because they are everywhere.”⁴¹

For the music industry, few musicians came to the aid of Jello Biafra. Although there were songs and albums that attacked the PMRC and the idea of censoring, such as Danzig’s hit 1988 song “Mother,” these protests became commodified.⁴² Taking a direct action protest to these events years later, Rage Against the Machine continued the debate during their 1993 Lollapalooza performance. Each member of the band painted a letter on their body to spell P.M.R.C and stood naked on stage with duct tape over their mouths, instead of performing. Although this protest did nothing to prevent the continuation of the established “parental warning” label, it reflected the band’s political stances. With the Dead Kennedys being one of the most politically outspoken bands in the eighties, Rage Against the Machine eventually demonstrated that the dissent against the culture of Reaganism would continue into the nineties.⁴³

* * *

The issue over the *Frankenchrist* album was not truly over crude music. The Dead Kennedys political views and association with the punk movement demonstrated that they were not the purveyors of smut, but instead opponents to such. The group’s music may have used unsavory content, but it was intended to be a satirical critique of society.

⁴¹ Michele Landsberg, “Free-Market Follies,” *The Nation* (July 18/25, 1987): 61.

⁴² Danzig, “Mother,” [*Single*] (New York: Def American, 1988).

⁴³ Rolling Stone, “20 Great Moments in Rock Star Nudity,” *Rolling Stone*, (Oct. 29, 2015), <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/lists/20-great-moments-in-rock-star-nudity-20151029/rage-against-the-machine-protests-the-pmrc-1993-20151029>.

This perspective, however, was obviously overlooked as they became targets to “set an example” towards more powerful actors in the music industry. Although Jello Biafra and Michael Bonanno were dismissed of the charges brought to them, the impact of censorship did in fact set a “chill” throughout the music industry, leading to a standardized label following the 2 Live Crew conflict. The greater extent of this situation allowed for corporate censorship to limit the type of speech that would be available to a large portion of the American public. Labeling did in fact provide “information” on albums, but it was not for the interest of consumers. The Dead Kennedys’ album had a warning label, yet it still faced the legal issue that has been discussed. With a standardized label created following the 2 Live Crew legal battle, it gave businesses an excuse to not carry albums bearing its mark. This issue was not directly challenged as the American Left became divided among itself with the outbreak of the “culture wars.”

While corporate censorship does not completely eliminate dissent—authors like Noam Chomsky and Naomi Klein still being available for purchase—it has allowed for big business interest to gain significant influence over political actions. With the *Frankenchrist* trial occurring during the end of the eighties, the “culture wars” that became more evident in the nineties allowed for the economics of both political parties to consolidate to the demands of corporations. Being a major feature of Reaganism, the divide of economic perspectives showed how many on the American Left accepted the new cultural paradigm. And as the following chapter will demonstrate, that division amongst the Left became felt across the punk movement as internal conflict broke apart the community that had been created.

CHAPTER V

“PUNK’S NOT DEAD, IT JUST DESERVES TO DIE”

Punk Rock and the End of the Eighties

On September 27, 1991, the *New York Times* published an article covering a recent phone interview with a young bass player, Krist Novoselic (*Times* misspelled the musician’s name as “Chris”), from “the small town of Aberdeen,” Washington. The article shared how “for all Nirvana’s pledged nihilism, there are a number of issues the band strongly supports. ‘We’re pro-feminist,’ Mr. Novoselic said.” Explaining further, the *Times* quoted Novoselic’s view on the matter: “‘Sexism is just as bad as racism. We’ve made it clear that we’re going to play all-ages venues on this tour. And we’re total leftists. We’re going to demand the socialization of the music industry. Records are going to be free to everybody.’” These were strong words from Novoselic, a member of a band on the verge of becoming the biggest musical act of their time. His words suggested the cultural debt Nirvana owed to the punk movement.¹

Growing up in a small town that, like many others of its kind in America during the eighties, faced difficulties adjusting to a transforming economy, Nirvana found punk rock as something that spoke to them.² Novoselic shared how, “‘we all felt odd, like why

¹ Karen Schoemer, “Pop/Jazz: A Band That Deals In Apathy,” *New York Times*, Sep. 27, 1991, C30.

² Like the Midwest, the Pacific Northwest also shared in a trend towards economic restructuring in the region during the 1980s. For Washington, the lumber industry was a major economic focus and the recession of the early 1980s impacted the industry. Laws protecting the Northern Spotted Owl have even been claimed to contributing to the loss of lumbering jobs within the region; See, William R. Freudenburg, Daniel J. O’Leary, and Lisa J. Wilson, “Forty Years of Spotted Owls? A Longitudinal Analysis of Logging Industry Job Losses,” *Sociological Perspectives* 41 [1] (1998): 1-26; Barney Warf, “Regional

are we weird, and we started listening to punk rock. We were listening to the Dead Kennedys and Millions of Dead Cops, and getting these radical political messages that society is really screwed up. And we started getting our own group together.”³ When the *New York Times* published the article with Novoselic, Nirvana had just recently released their album *Nevermind*. In a matter of months, the album climbed to the top of the charts selling hundreds of thousands of copies.⁴ Although their career would be short-lived, the success of the group demonstrated the changing landscape of the music industry, the punk movement, and the United States itself.

Throughout the first half of the 1980s, the punk movement had boomed across the United States (and the world). While it had constantly faced opposition from concerned parents, police, and people trying to profit from the youth culture, the conflict that punk faced by the mid-1980s, was not as much outside forces, but forces from within. In many larger cities, the punk scene had become noticeable as more youth became involved. While punk pundits claimed that punk died years ago, Jello Biafra countered in a 1986 song, “Chickenshit Conformist”: “Punk’s not dead/ It just deserves to die.”⁵ The community that had been established, linking punk scenes across the nation was dissolving, and the punk movement had become more focused on a local level. It was at

Transformation, Everyday Life, and Pacific Northwest Lumber Production,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 78 [2] (June, 1988): 326-346.

³ Schoemer, “Pop/Jazz: A Band That Deals In Apathy,” C30.

⁴ Peter Watrous, “Nirvana’s ‘Nevermind’ Is No. 1: The Pop Life,” *New York Times*, Jan. 8, 1992, C13.

⁵ Dead Kennedys, “Chickenshit Conformist,” *Bedtime for Democracy* (Alternative Tentacles, Nov. 1986).

this local level that groups started diverging away from the homogenous hardcore sound that took over punk, and began to renew the diversity in the music seen from its earliest heyday. Punk was very much alive, but it was changing, just as the United States was changing.

The days of the Reagan administration were quickly coming to a close. The controversy of the iconic face of the eighties had toned down his rhetoric against the Soviets. As the tone of his foreign policy was less aggressive from his first term, he also slowed down his radically aggressive policies. At the same time, Reagan's administration became tied up in the Iran-contra scandal, causing an allure of distrust for the government once again, like that of the Watergate scandal. Writing on the event, Sean Wilentz explained that, "The exposure of these activities, and the subsequent investigations, cast some light on the nation's vulnerability to strategically placed officials who would usurp power in the name of a higher cause." Revealing a covert operation—with little consequences being placed upon anyone—reflected a common trend throughout Reagan's presidency. As Wilentz wrote:

In its politicization of the judicial selection process, in its highly selective enforcement of civil rights laws, in its abandonment of the Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Housing and urban Development to incompetents and looters, the Reagan White House established a pattern of disregard for the law as anything other than an ideological or partisan tool. Laws that advanced the interests of the administration were passed and heeded; those that did not were ignored, undermined, or (if necessary) violated.⁶

⁶ Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan*, 241, 285-286.

Acknowledging that part of the “sorry record of corruption, partisan favoritism, and influence peddling,” of Reagan’s administration came from “the shabby venality that is inherent in human affairs. But,” as Wilentz continued, “it also stemmed from an arrogance born of the same ideological zealotry that propelled Iran-contra—the belief that, in a world eternally ‘at risk,’ the true believers must take matters into their own hands and execute.” Applying to American culture, this meant that the Iran-contra reflected the perspective that: “The rule of law, by those lights, would always be subordinated to, and as far as possible aligned with, the rule of politics.”⁷

Shortly after the revealing of the Iran-contra scandal in 1987, the Reagan presidency ended after eight years of drastically changing the American landscape; politically, socially, culturally, and economically. Taking over the role of Commander in Chief, Vice President George Bush I’s presidential victory in 1988, extended the influence of the Reagan administration for another four years. While more moderate in certain issues compared to his predecessor, Bush I faced a new world with the collapse of the only other superpower, the Soviet Union. Although celebrated as a peaceful end to the Cold War, a near half-century conflict, the United States, under the presidency of Bush I, took little time to find new enemies.⁸

Carrying the baggage of federal deficits, the former vice president stepped into office and quickly adopted the tone that one historian has described as a, “born-again supply-sider,” refusing to raise taxes to assist the slumping economic situation during his

⁷ *Ibid*, 286.

⁸ See Noam Chomsky, “1989 and Beyond,” *Hopes and Prospects* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2010), 271-280.

presidency. Sustaining the trend of cutting federal spending, Bush I did continue to push for increased funding to the military, and expanding the “war on drugs,” that created domestic enemies for Americans to rally against.⁹

By the nineties, however, the Reagan-Bush saga finally came to a close. But that did not mean an end to the culture of Reaganism. Bill Clinton, the first Democrat to take office in 1992 after twelve years of a Republican occupying the White House, had ended the Republican reign but his accomplishment came at a price. The success of Clinton came by not challenging the reforms that the two presidents before him had established, but by shifting the political party towards the policies supported by the culture of Reaganism. Economically, there would be little deterrence from the system that had come to favor the wealthy and allow for massive corporate influence in American life. Tearing down the economic barriers that deterred the monopolization of markets, the Reagan administration set in motion the growth of massive corporations. The power amassed by these companies did not slow down after Democrat’s grabbed control of the White House in 1992, they only accelerated. The military industrial complex continued to expand, and although Clinton did not enter into war in the Caribbean or the Middle East, the war had been brought home. The “war on drugs” continued to intensify and turned into a system that furthered the militarization of police and established the largest, most profitable, incarceration system in the world.¹⁰

⁹ *Ibid*, 303-305. It is important to note that Bush I reluctantly did resort to raising taxes to combat the economic situation during his term in the White House.

¹⁰ Heather Ann Thompson, “Why Mass Incarceration Matters: Rethinking Crisis, Decline, and Transformation in Postwar American History,” *The Journal of American History* 97 [3] (Dec., 2010): 703, 709-710, 713-716, 723-724.

As for the punk movement, it too had changed since spreading across the United States in the early part of the eighties and posing a threat to the yuppie culture and Me Generation that became reinforced by Reaganism. Reagan had been a figure that united the punk movement towards a common cause. Whether that be condemning his foreign policies, criticizing the Christian Right that supported his administration, exposing the corporate relationships with government, his ignoring of police brutality, or simply the fact that an actor had become president. Yet while punks rallied together with Reagan as a mutual enemy, being a symbol of many punks opposed, the movement had turned their frustrations towards each other. It was a battle over what punk was and who was punk, and while punks fought among themselves, they lost the potential to unite towards change.

This trend would shift again, however, as the eighties came to a close. A younger generation of punks replaced many that joined earlier in the decade. Abandoning the homogenous sound of hardcore, these groups once again diversified the sound of punk rock and continued the punk movement with a new context to the changing environment around them. Much had changed since punk first emerged. Corporate influence had gained power to shrink the public space by replacing it with privately-owned substitutes. The reality of such meant that the possibilities of communicating the messages of punk would be limited from their earlier potential. With the shrinking space for communication and expression, bands turned towards corporate influence to reach a wider audience. Although this decision did not fare well for groups like Nirvana, others such as Green Day and the Offspring used these corporate sources in a way that allowed anonymity,

while reaching a massive audience to spread the messages that they had learned from their days in the 1980s punk scene. While some punk pundits claim that this decision was a “sell-out” move, it offered a solution to overcome the corporate control of music and culture. By using the corporate power amassed to reach a larger audience, these punk acts that turned to big business, used their influence to continue the ideas of punk. In doing so, the potential for change that punk posed remained an influencing factor in the pivotal decade of recent history, the nineties.

“Does Punk Suck?” - *MRR* #13

The cover to the May-April 1984 issue of *MRR* addressed a question that was becoming common throughout the mid-1980s punk movement: “Does Punk Suck?”¹¹ Committing a large portion of the issue for replies from punk editors from fanzines, employees of independent labels, and members of bands from various punk scenes, nationally and internationally, the issue revealed the problem with trying to generalize a movement that had no direction and was variable depending where someone was.

In *MRR*’s “Does Punk Suck?” issue, Allison Raine from the fanzine *Savage Pink* addressed the proposed question. Describing herself as “an ancient veteran of the scene at 21,” she wrote, “I have followed and been a fan of punk/hardcore and its legions of splinter groups for nigh [*sic*] on six years now.” She explained, “When I was 16 or 17 and attending every show even remotely associated with punk with enthusiasm bordering on hysteria, I couldn’t understand how the scene vets of those days could skip a show or

¹¹ *MRR* 13 (April-May, 1984): 1.

complain that ‘things just weren’t as cool as they used to be.’” Raine’s comment showed that those within the punk movement had always questioned the music and the culture they had created. But to many youth, like Raine, punk had played a major role in their early years. “When I first took an interest in punk, it was because I couldn’t relate to the lame stuff I heard on the radio. I found the primal pogo beat of the RAMONES ‘Teenage Lobotomy’ much more fun and stimulating. As time passed,” she continued, “I became (largely by influence of the music) more--er--‘politically aware’ and therefore more interested in music that made a statement about the world we live in. The merging of two things important to me, natch.” At this level, the punk movement became more than just a musical style or fashion, it was an idea that greatly impacted Raine’s youth.¹²

Raine valued how the punk movement maintained its distance from the “cliche, sexist, racist, or otherwise negative ruts that the wonderful [*sic*] stuff we hear on radio or see on MTV.” Although she had praised punk for rejecting what she saw as negative values, she shifted her discussion towards some who contradicted this view, and were espousing ideas that were “sexist, nationalistic, and otherwise backwards trends.” Continuing her discussion, she wrote: “Quite a few of the bands playing this stuff claim that it’s a joke or that it’s all in fun. Well, why aren’t they making fun of white, heterosexual healthy people like themselves (for the most part)[?]” The issue that Raine saw with such rhetoric, was that the message that it sent to younger punks who, as she put it, were “more impressionable.” Even though there existed punks in the scene around her who used sexism in their lyrics, whether to be humorous or overtly sexist, she felt that

¹² Allison Raine [*Savage Pink*], *MRR* 13 (April-May, 1984): 22.

many punks maintained the positive message in their music. “A lot of people seem to be realizing,” she claimed, “gee, women and gays are people too, and that God & Country aren’t all they’ve been made out to be.”¹³

Concluding her answer to *MRR*’s question, “Does Punk Suck?,” Raine felt “optimistic that punk will remain true to its roots.” Explaining her optimistic outlook towards the punk movement, she wrote:

While punk, when it began, was mostly a musical revolution, it seems that the youth of today are even more painfully aware of the problems of society and the world as a whole, and these observations are creeping into our music. This musical influence will hopefully spawn more aware adults who question things and refuse to apathetically except [*sic*] all that is fed [*sic*] them by church, state, and the like. Although I may not make it to all the shows these days, I’m still 100% behind those that do.¹⁴

Although Raine held a positive outlook towards the future of punk, many of the other replies to *MRR* held a strongly different perspective. To them, the people causing division within the scene were not a minority, but a majority in their eyes. Doc Dart—the lead singer from the Crucifucks, whose high-pitched voice made the group easily distinguishable from others—thanked *MRR* for “the opprotunity [*sic*] to comment on a subject which is as perplexing as it is challenging.” The root of the divisions being created from punk as Dart saw it, was “the labels which have been tossed (punk/hardcore) about in a feeble attempt to pigeon-hole bands and audiences alike, are a source of aggravations and alenation [*sic*] for me.”¹⁵

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Doc Dart [Crucifucks], *MRR* 13 (April-May, 1984): 15.

When Dart first started listening to punk rock, it “was new and exciting,” and “being called a ‘punk’” did not bother him. He was “proud” of the label because as he explained it, “at least set me apart from the mundane and often sickening mass of idiots that refer to themselves as Americans.” But that time had changed, as Dart claimed that in recent times he had become “confronted with an equally mundane and sickening mass of twerps, some of whom refer to themselves as ‘hardcore punks’”. They are usually not in the majority at shows but their techniques of drawing attention the [*sic*] themselves borrow from some of America’s most inane traditions: football, fashion show, the Marines, and Quincy,” he claimed. “It’s no wonder,” he continued, “that people who might otherwise be interested in good music, or even starved for good music, often go away from ‘hardcore’ shows wishing someone had warned them that the circus was in town.”

Writing that “music is a potential vehicle for social change,” Dart believed that punk, “has thus far worked much better for the government than it has for positive change.” Those that labelled themselves as “hardcore,” or as Dart described them, “mindless violent, fashion-conscious exhibitionist, whose prime motivation is to assert your ‘manhood,’” should “allow the rest of us to transcend these ridiculous labels.” Without their influence, he believed that the punk movement would gain “much for support” by harboring “intelligence, compassion, education, action, and most of all, creative music.” He mentioned how “Madison, Wisconsin,” was one such place where labels had been rejected and the scene focused on music. After all, as Dart put it: “It was the prohibition of good music that spawned our so-called movement; so why shouldn’t

we claim ours as music, and dismiss the mainstream as ‘hardcore shit’?” Addressing the “twerps” who labelled themselves “hardcore,” Dart added: “And anybody in your crowd that goes out of their way to act tough or to spend 5 hours perfecting their appearance could be encouraged to assume their rightful place among mainstream Americans with traditional values,” a jab at punk supremacists who critiqued American egotism, but themselves acted upon it.¹⁶

Many within the punk community began claiming the death of the punk movement. It seemed that the divisions amongst the punks were too great to see any positive change occur. Their political divides distracted many from their similarities, and these were embedded into a concept of what it meant to be punk. For all of the anti-authoritarian beliefs preached throughout the punk movement, they conflated the contradictions and battle over what exactly *punk* was.

Yet as a movement, one in which had no direction or even consistency of its influence, punk remained an influential part of numerous communities. It seemed evident that in California, where suburban kids latched onto hardcore punk, the scene had become something dull. But as Mykel Board, a frequent writer for *MRR*, pointed to during the fanzines question towards the state of punk in 1984: “Remember, what’s ‘boring’ in San Francisco is not boring in Podunkville, Iowa.”¹⁷ If the fictional Midwest town that Board described was Des Moines, Iowa, then DaVo Wilkins showed a great amount of truth to his statement. Wilkins found himself at his first hardcore show in

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Mykel Board, *MRR* 13 (April-May, 1984): 16.

1986, after being recruited to haul equipment in his pickup truck for a local band.¹⁸ To the youth of this Midwestern community, how could punk suck, or even be dead, if it was only beginning?

Even the *New York Times* noticed the problem with claiming that punk was dead in the mid-1980s. Jon Pareles' title to an April 1986 article asked: "Is Punk Rock's Obituary Premature?" Being recirculated through other papers across the United States, Pareles—the *Times* reporter who covered much of the publication's coverage of the topic over the past decade —shared how "certain pundits have decided that 1986 is the 10th anniversary of the punk-rock movement — and that punk is dead." He agreed that "[t]he arithmetic has some logic; the first Ramones album appeared in 1976, though punk might also date back to the New York Dolls, Iggy and the Stooges, the Velvet Underground," or even further back to, "'You Really Got Me,' by the Kinks or Elvis Presley's 'Hound Dog.'" But as Pareles wrote: "Anniversary or not, however, punk's obituaries are premature."¹⁹

Giving a brief history over punk rock and the setting of the music industry and economy during the 1970s, Pareles shared how punk, "got punkier," with the emergence of hardcore— "which is faster, louder, more discordant and far more irregular than early punk rock," he explained. "All over the United States there are hard-core bands, some barely known outside their own county. They bark out angry lyrics and tear into their

¹⁸ David "DaVo" Wilkins, discussion with author, September 10, 2015. Wilkins has also maintained and contributed to an online archive that covers much of Iowa's punk rock history, see <http://underground-archives.com/>.

¹⁹ Jon Pareles, "Is Punk Rock's Obituary Premature?," *New York Times*, April 24, 1986, C18.

guitars; often, their fans have ritualized the violence of early punk into slam-dancing, a series of bodily collisions to the beat.” Sharing how, “such bands as Talking Heads and the Clash actually diverted the mainstream — hard core is determined not to sell out.”²⁰

While many within the hardcore scene believed that the earlier punk bands had “sold out,” Pareles offered a countering perspective suggesting that: “Even the original punks are still making trouble.” He wrote, “Last year, the Ramones recorded a single critical of President Reagan’s visit to the Bitburg cemetery where Nazi S.S. troops are buried. And — shades of early punk and early rock-and-roll — the band’s United States record company refused to release it. If punk rock can still make music business executives that nervous,” he believed that, “it’s got plenty of life left.”²¹

The Biafra Manifesto

While waiting for the trial over the *Frankenchrist* album, the Dead Kennedys recorded and released their final album, *Bedtime for Democracy*. Released towards the end of 1986, the album maintained the Dead Kennedys’ evaluation and dismissal of American culture, and of course the Reagan administration. One track in particular, however, differed greatly from their previous songs, “Chickenshit Conformist.” The Dead Kennedys had been critical of their perceived negative aspects that developed in the punk movement in songs like “Nazi Punks,” but the song “Chickenshit Conformist” from their last album had a different tone to it. The song was not just a dismissal of certain

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

parts of the punk movement, it was an immense criticism of the movement as a whole.²² One album review even noted how the song, in addition to “Anarchy For Sale,” “are two such numbers which hit home, rock hard, and ring true.”²³ With the Dead Kennedys disbanding shortly after the album’s release, and the band later suing Biafra over rights to the band’s music, the message behind the song entailed a sincere perspective that Biafra had towards the dissipating unity that he and others had helped to establish throughout the punk community. In a way, the song was not so much an ultimatum of demands, but a manifesto that shared Biafra’s feelings towards the state of punk—the *Biafra Manifesto*.

Biafra was a pioneer in creating the American punk movement into an expansive community. In addition to being the lead singer of one of the iconic bands that helped create the sound of hardcore, he had assisted in establishing the network that would expand across the United States and the world. He was one of the founders of the Maximum Rock N Roll radio station that became an international punk publication.²⁴ Not to forget, that his independent label, Alternative Tentacles, worked to sign bands outside of its California home, such as the Crucifucks from Lansing, Michigan and the Canadian group D.O.A. from Vancouver, British Columbia. As much as punks despised the rock star persona, Jello Biafra was a punk star. But Biafra’s celebrity status did not deter him from seeing what had become of the punk scene that he greatly contributed to creating.

²² Dead Kennedys, *Bedtime for Democracy* (Alternative Tentacles, Nov. 1986).

²³ Danny Plotnick, “Dead Kennedys *Bedtime For Democracy* [Album Review],” *The Michigan Daily* (Ann Arbor, MI), May 29, 1987, 10, news.google.com/newspapers.

²⁴ For brief history on *MRR* see; <http://www.maximumrocknroll.com/about/>.

The evaluation of the punk scene in the mid-1980s from “Chickenshit Conformist” reflected a perspective of the hypocrisies and failures of the punk movement and how it had become something greatly different compared to its beginnings. Punk started as an assortment of musical sounds and styles, but it had become a homogenous reproduction of similar songs—fast, loud, and lyrics with little content but anger—and lost the creativity that attracted so many youths to the music. At the same time, punk had no longer become some obscure musical style or fashion. Popular music stars like Prince and Madonna adopted the outlandish apparel and the undertones to their songs had punk rhythms. The lyrics from such hit artists’ songs also discussed content outside of social norms, just as punk did. More directly, heavy metal had risen in popularity with bands such as Van Halen.²⁵ What separated punk from these popular acts, however, was that it had a whole community spread across the United States—and by the mid-1980s, the world.

Punk remained alive, but to Biafra the community was breaking down and losing its creativity as he began “Chickenshit Conformist” with the words: “Punk’s not dead, it just deserves to die/ When it becomes another stale cartoon.” Accompanying Biafra’s decree to the punk community, the background guitars slowly climbed up and down a scale setting the mood of the lyrics. As the guitars picked up in speed, Biafra continued his manifesto: “If the music’s gotten boring/ It’s because of the people who want everyone to sound the same/ Who drive the bright people out of our so-called scene/ Until all is left but a meaningless fad.” With both guitars and Biafra holding onto the last

²⁵ For an example discussing this see, Jon Pareles, “Is Punk Rock’s Obituary Premature?,” *New York Times*, April 24, 1986, C18.

note, the song came to a sudden pause. After a brief moment, they erupted. Matching the fierce high-paced slashing of the guitars, the lyrics turned from an announcement to a full out assault: “Hardcore formulas are dogshit/ Change and caring are what’s real/ Is this a state of mind/ Or just another label?” Pointing to the “cliche[s]” of punk, the lyrics stated how “A hairstyle’s not a lifestyle,” suggesting that to be punk was more than just adopting the fashion. During this explosion of insults, Biafra’s voice changed to impersonate a conversation between two: “Who played last night?/ ‘I don’t know, I forgot, but diving off the stage was a lot of fun.’” Exceeding to a new intensity in the song, the chorus followed with the repeating line: “So eager to please/ Peer pressure decrees.” Reaching the high point in the song, the chorus concluded with: “Make the same old mistakes/ Again and again.” Then suddenly, the music slowed down as Biafra vocally exaggerated and bellowed out the final line: “Chickenshit conformist like your parents.”²⁶

Just as the song had reached a climax in speed and intensity, it returned to the same slow paced tempo and focus from the beginning. In this second part of the song Biafra claimed how the greatest threats to the punk movement were not “drugs,” but “the thieves and goddamn liars.” The song condemned the thievery by more than just exploiting the musical intensity of punk rock: “To make a buck revving kids up for war,” however. People had stolen the enjoyment of the whole scene, with “gigs” being “wrecked by gangs and thugs” they had broken down the sense of community. By doing such, “Chickenshit Conformist,” pointed to a major issue driving a wedge within the

²⁶ Dead Kennedys, “Chickenshit Conformist,” *Bedtime for Democracy* (Alternative Tentacles: Nov., 1986).

punk movement with the creation of different “factions” and their dividing influence. While the punks were fighting amongst themselves, the song asked: “Guess who’s laughing while the world explodes/ When we’re all crybabies who fight best among ourselves?”

Repeating the chorus and having the same musical transition from earlier in the song, the sense of a lost community continued in the next portion of Biafra’s message. Punk rock began as a rejection to the rock star mentality of the 1970s, but close to a decade later, Biafra saw it turning against punk: “Who needs friends when the money’s good?/ That’s right, the seventies are back.” With the ideas that once bounded punks together dissipating, Biafra shared how: “As a fan it disappoints me,” showing that his perspective was from more than being a musician.

While being critical of heavy metal in the song for its sexism, homophobia, and masculine militarism, its music was producing a culture that had potential for change, similar to punk. It was Dee Snider who was one of the few musicians to stand up to the PMRC during the 1985 Senate hearing on “Record Labelling,” and there were also heavy metal fanzines. But, Biafra posed the question: “Will the metalheads finally learn something?,” followed by a question directed towards his fellow punks: “Or will the punks throw away their education?” Addressing both groups, the message continued: “No one’s ever the best/ Once they believe their own press/ ‘Maturing’ don’t mean rehashing/ Mistakes of the past.” After another repeat of the chorus, the concluding lyrics stated: “The more things change/ The more they stay the same/ We can’t grow/ When we won’t criticize ourselves,” a line that had the same tone of criticism towards punks’ ultimate

trust in believing their own press—fanzines. Followed by the line stating: “The sixties weren’t all failure/ It’s the seventies that stunk/ As the clock ticks we dig the same hole.” And the final verse before the eruption of one last repeat of the chorus: “Any kind of real change/ Takes more time and work/ Than changing channels on a TV set.”²⁷

Being one of the final Dead Kennedys’ songs, “Chickenshit Conformist” revealed some of the group's final feelings towards the punk movement. With the situation that the group faced over their *Frankenchrist* album—primarily Biafra, being the owner of the label prosecuted—there was little support from the punk community. While “Chickenshit Conformist” criticized many issues facing the punk movement, the message behind the song shared possibilities that could save punk from the death sentence that the song suggested it deserved.

“The geeky Dead”

Masculine militarism and the celebration of wealth were two clearly evident characteristics of eighties. Reagan immediately had stepped into office and glorified the wealthy during his first inauguration and the yuppie culture showed the influence this rhetoric had on America’s youth. In addition to glorifying the business of making money, the president’s anti-communist stance had reinvigorated the masculine military stance that became reflected in films and popular television shows.²⁸ While these traits reflected reaganism, the technological advancements in computers set the stage for the age of

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies*, 222-223.

geeks to reign in. Films like *Revenge of the Nerds*—the 1984 film of a fraternity with characters like “Booger” and an accompanying set of outcasts—hinted at how the upcoming information age would lift geeks to a new social status.²⁹ While films portrayed this transition, so too did music in punk rock.

The Descendents, one of the numerous bands to emerge into the punk scene from the California suburbs in the early-1980s, joked of farts, drinking coffee, and teenage love dilemmas. Their lead singer, Milo Aukerman, was from appearance and character, a nerd. On stage, however, Aukerman unleashed a fierce intensity that matched any other punk singer. Adopting the image and idea of Aukerman, the band’s album art contained the cartoon character “Milo,” with large glasses and a shirt and tie, a legendary punk image (see figure 10).³⁰

Thousands of miles away on the opposite coast from the Descendents, who were breaking apart with Aukerman’s decision to turn his focus away from being a punk singer and towards receiving a doctorate, a group of geeky punk rockers in Philadelphia were gaining recognition, The Dead Milkmen. They were “The geeky Dead,” as *The Michigan Daily* titled an article discussing an upcoming show in October of 1990 at an Ann Arbor club. “You might not get it unless yer from the east coast, but The Dead Milkmen’s ‘Bitchin’ Camaro’ certainly ranks among the ten best songs of the ‘80s, if not of all time,” the newspaper wrote. “In their tradition of amazingly precise parodies of Americana, ‘Bitchin’ Camaro’ gave pop culture lines like ‘don’t forget to buy your

²⁹ *Revenge of the Nerds*, directed by Jeff Kanew (20th Century Fox, 1984).

³⁰ *Filmage: The Story of Descendents/ALL*, directed by Deedle LaCour and Matt Riggle (Rogue Elephant Pictures, 2013).

Mötley Crüe t-shirt/ All the proceeds go to get the lead singer out of jail,” sharing just a taste of the song’s content. Continuing their discussion of this peculiar band, the article stated: “Besides Jersey Shore decadence, the Milkmen also tackle such poignant topics as love between disaffected youths (‘Punk Rock Girl’), terminally trendy people (‘Instant Club Hit’), and even essential Yes satire (‘Anderson, Walkman, Butthole, and How!’). Of course such overt hipness causes the band to think that they are the coolest people ever.” While this perspective suggested a yuppie mentality, it held a certain “charm,” because as the article pointed out, “they are about the geekiest guys ever amassed.”³¹

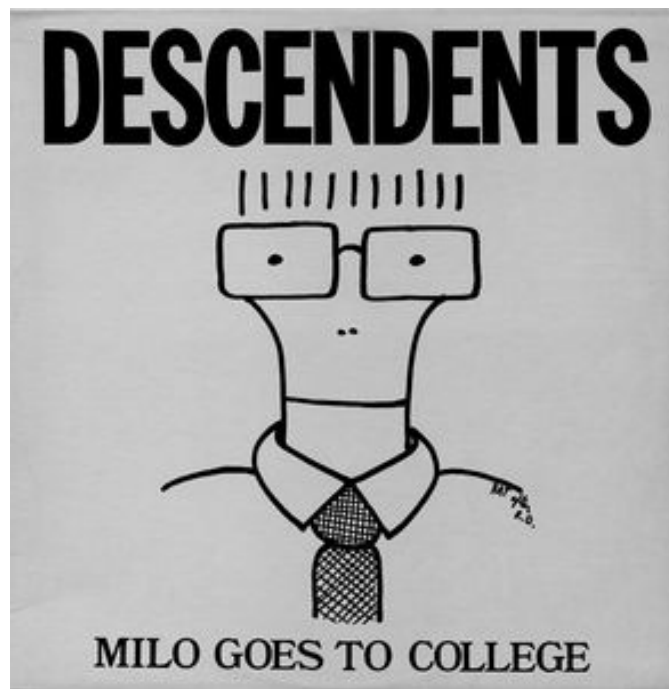


Figure 10. Cover for the Descendents’ 1982 Album *Milo Goes to College*. Image from <https://www.discogs.com/Descendents-Milo-Goes-To-College/master/29768>.

³¹ “The geeky Dead,” *The Michigan Daily* (Ann Arbor, Mi), Oct. 5, 1990, 9, news.google.com/newspapers.

What The Dead Milkmen brought back to punk was youthful humor. The satirical criticism of punk, youthfulness, and American culture was at the root of the American punk movement when it was spreading like fire in the early-1980s.³² Further into the decade, however, the ability to make humor out of issues became overshadowed by anger, frustration, and fear within songs. Bringing back the satirical side to punk, singer and guitarist Joe Jack Talcum (Joe Genaro), singer and keyboardist Rodney Anonymous (Rodney Linderman), Drummer Dean Clean (Dean Sabatino), and bassist Dave Blood (Dave Schulthise), formed one of the key groups that brought punk out of the underground once again. And as one newspaper wrote, they achieved this with “a lot of comic mileage out of society’s various subcultures.”³³

Like the nostalgic imagery of the Reaganites, the name of the group reflected a lost past. “‘In the suburbs when I was a kid, milkmen became extinct,’ recalled Philadelphia native Joe Jack Talcum . . . ‘They just disappeared. And for some strange reason, I’ve never been able to forget that,’” as Jeff Sewald quoted the young musician in a January of 1986 article from the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. Talcum had thought of the name during his high school years when death was often a curiosity of his. “What prompts an otherwise good-natured 23-year-old to dwell, at times, upon the dark side?” Sewald asked. “Surely the easy pace and spaciousness of suburban living carries messages other than those of impending doom. Talcum conceded the point.” Suburban

³² Many Dead Kennedys’ songs reflected this such as “Holliday in Cambodia” and “Winnebago Warrior,” other notable band’s such as The Vandals used satire in many songs such as “Anarchy Burger (Hold the Government),” “Urban Struggle” (a song mocking urban cowboys), and “Pirates Life.”

³³ Thor Christensen, “The Milkmen deliver fun and absurdity,” *The Milwaukee Journal*, May 12, 1989, 7B, news.google.com/newspapers.

life had its advantages of comfort for growing youth, but this had a cost as these youth ““grow up a little slower there than you do in the city,”” in Talcum’s view. Like so many other youths, the group saw punk as an “idea.” When they first started a band, they did not know how to play their instruments, but that was what made punk rock such a great medium for youth to express themselves. Although they admired bands before punk, as Talcum shared how he was a fan of the Beatles, punk rock offered a style of music that anyone with the motivation to do so, could play.³⁴

Similar to the Dead Kennedys and numerous other punk bands throughout the 1980s, the Dead Milkmen’s name brought a negative perspective towards the group. Making them easy targets, the name suggested to outside observers that they should not be taken seriously. Addressing the issue of people who were quick to judge the band, high schooler Derick Lindquist wrote to the editor of Salt Lakes City’s *The Desert News* in November of 1987 after the newspaper had printed a negative review of a Dead Milkmen concert by a “Marnie Funk.” Lindquist argued that her review of the Dead Milkmen gave the perspective “that only a mindless imbecile would attend such a concert.” Countering this narrative, he declared: “However, I would have her know that I am a 17-year-old male, with a 3.75 G.P.A. in school. I do not drink, smoke, or take drugs. I do however, enjoy The Dead Milkmen’s music, and I loved their concert.”³⁵

While older music pundits dismissed the content behind the Dead Milkmen’s songs, America’s youth saw the importance behind the group’s lyrical content. Abby

³⁴ Jeff Sewald, “Just having fun with Dead Milkmen,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Jan. 31, 1986, W-15, news.google.com/newspapers.

³⁵ Derick Lindquist, “Likes the Dead Milkmen,” *The Desert News* (Salt Lake City, UT), Nov. 11, 1987, A-7, news.google.com/newspapers.

Klingbeil, a young middle school student, wrote to New London, Connecticut's *New Day* in February of 1989, and demonstrated a different look at the group from Philadelphia. Titled, "The cover: Looking past it at Dead Milkmen," Klingbeil discussed the group's 1987 album *Bucky Fellini*. The album, she suggested, revealed "an underlying problem society has had for hundreds of years: People judge a book by its cover." She shared that: "If people, instead of assuming that a group named the Dead Milkmen must be awful, took time to try to understand what they were saying, we would all be a lot better off." Furthering her point, Klingbeil discussed her "favorite song," from the album "Watching Scotty Die." The character in the song, "Scotty," according to the middle schooler, "represents the Earth, and all the events talked about in the song represent all the the terrible things humans are doing to ruin our earth as we know it." Underneath the humor that the Dead Milkmen presented, there laid an important message that youth, such as Klingbeil, saw. Bringing back originality and uniqueness to punk rock, groups like the Dead Milkmen found music that reached youth across the United States.³⁶

Reviving the content of suburban life, youthful humor, satirizing Americana, and nostalgia was only a part of what the Dead Milkmen brought back to the punk movement. They also revived the threat that punk rock posed to mainstream American culture. MTV gave the group's music video for "Punk Rock Girl" "heavy play," "and the video went to No. 1 on the Dial MTV request list — a status previously the domain of Top 40 and heavy-metal bands," wrote Parry Gettelman of the *Orlando Sentinel* in January of 1991. Their latest video for the song "Methodist Coloring Book," ("a song satirizing religious

³⁶ Abby Klingbeil [Mystic Middle School], "The cover: Looking past it at Dead Milkmen," *The Day* (New London, CT), Feb. 15, 1989, D6, news.google.com/newspapers.

bigotry”) however, was refused to be aired by the station. Reporting on an interview over the phone, Gettelman shared drummer Dean Clean’s claims of the controversial shots in the video: ““There was a close-up of some maggots, and there was a shadowy figure you can see with his arm outstretched holding a dagger . . . And Dave (Blood), the bass player, was dressed in a black robe holding a dead chicken. It was skinned, something anybody could go out and get at the butcher shop.”” However, as Clean was quoted: ““The main thing they objected to was at the beginning — we have a miniature town set up, and the camera does a slow pan through it. At the end of the video, we go through in different religious garb, we go through a hell sequence, and the town blows up in slow motion. One of the town buildings was a church.”” Evaluating the reasons behind the refusal to air the music video, Gettelman followed by suggesting that: “It seems like pretty tame stuff, compared to Madonna’s controversial sexcapades or the tight shots of writhing, scantily clad nymphets found in most heavy-metal videos.” No matter, however, “MTV refused to air ‘Methodist Coloring Book’ until the Milkmen took out the offending shots and reversed the footage of the toy town’s explosion.”³⁷

“Corporate prissiness” as Gettelman suggested, was “the kind of thing you have to face when you’re in a band like the Milkmen.”³⁸ The ambiguity behind MTV’s decision to censor the group’s music video for “Methodist Coloring Book” demonstrated the influence that conservatism had gained throughout the 1980s. The television station

³⁷ Parry Gettelman, *Orlando Sentinel*, “Dead Milkmen becoming more proficient but haven’t outgrown brattiness,” *The News* (Boca Raton, FL), Jan. 18, 1991, 22E-23E, news.google.com/newspapers.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 22E.

had given musicians a new form of communication with visual expression now accompanying music, but there was a cost. MTV had revolutionized music and youth culture, without a rival to challenge, however, it became more than just a television station aimed at a young audience. It had become a brand, and a brand that monopolized the marketing of youth rebellion to favor corporate interest.³⁹ While videos that exploited women were acceptable for the station to show, one that criticized religious bigotry was a topic that MTV dared not to challenge. The Dead Milkmen may have been seen as a group of immature pranksters, but poking fun at the negative aspects of religion was a stab at an aspect of American culture that votes supported corporate interest. had become a threat to the dominant American culture and they accomplished it through the revival of satire within punk rock.

“Burn Down the Malls” - Mojo Nixon

One of the largest impacts from Reagan’s deregulation during his first term as president was the dismantling of the Federal Trade Commission control over regulating trade. By pulling down the barriers that were in place to maintain a balanced market, the conglomeration of corporations unleashed an unrelenting force upon the American consumer market. Through mergers and collaboration between corporations, the market had been transformed. Businesses became more than a producer, an employer, or a cog in the economic system, they became a brand. Like MTV, the brand stepped into multiple walks of American life. From expressions of popular culture, to the force that controls

³⁹ Naomi Klein, *No Logo*, 44-45, 120-121.

those expressions and extends into social, political, and economic beliefs that sustain corporate self-interest.⁴⁰

The charges brought against Alternative Tentacles over the Dead Kennedys' *Frankenchrist* album, demonstrated how corporate interest impacted free speech. It was the Warehouse record store—the largest of its kind in California—who although was the business that actually sold the controversial album (with the Giger poster being the main issue) to a minor. However, their negotiation and agreement to not sell any Dead Kennedys album, allowed for them to avoid any prosecution for their involvement in the case. As a result, their decision to withhold the sale of the entire Dead Kennedys' catalog censored consumers' ability to not only purchase the *Frankenchrist* album, but all of the group's albums. The shrinking ownership of record retail, from local ownership to national corporations, meant that the decisions by larger stores, such as the Warehouse chain, intensified their censorship by overtaking competition. The outcome of the standardized "parental advisory" label in 1991 after the controversy over the 2 Live Crew album, *As Nasty As They Wanna Be*, only extended the reasoning for corporations to further intrude on free speech.

The increasing corporate power in the 1980s reached beyond censoring music, however. The rising superstores and corporate influenced shopping centers, had taken over public space itself. Whereas local shopping was once centered in downtowns, a local area that communities shared: "The conflation of shopping and entertainment found at the superstores and theme-park malls has created a vast gray area of pseudo-public private

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 161-163.

space,” as Naomi Klein wrote in her 1999 book *No Logo*. “Politicians, police, social workers and even religious leaders all recognize that malls have become the modern town square. But unlike the old town squares, which were and still are sites for community discussion, protests and political rallies, the only type of speech that is welcome here is marketing and other consumer patter.”⁴¹ A decade before Klein discussion on this topic, a duo named Mojo Nixon—the comical country-background rock singer who debated Pat Buchanan on CNN’s “Crossfire”—and guitarist Skid Roper sang “Burn Down the Malls” in their 1986 song titled the same.⁴²

The deregulations that allowed for corporations to exponentially grow in profits and power, allowed for private-corporate interest to become more influential in American life. Mojo Nixon and Skid Roper’s, “Burn Down the Malls,” demonstrated more than comically inciting arson, it reflected the impact of shopping malls to their communities. The growth of shopping malls—a privately condensed consumer space that monopolized consumer selection to favor corporate-interest, from massive chain stores to the products available for consumption—indeed overtook the former consumer space that had been filled by the town square. When considering this relationship, the transfer of consumer space was also a lost of a long-held American value in community commons. As such a focal point of community interaction, this lost space was not just a transfer of consumer

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 182-183.

⁴² Mojo Nixon and Skid Roper, “Burn Down the Malls,” *Get Out of My Way!* (Restless Records, 1986).

space, but more importantly an extended loss of space for free speech in the community, due to private-interest.⁴³

Alexander Brash has related public parks to this long-valued space within communities, that has given a space for free speech through recreation, public speaking, and other activities within the commons. Like recreational spaces, consumer spaces such as locally and community owned spaces, offered a public forum to speak through consumption. With such locations, the store itself that acted as a medium for consumption may have been privately owned, but directly outside its location laid public grounds that allowed for other forms of speech to occur. Within malls, however, the entire space became focused on consumption. In addition, many of these stores were not locally owned, but large chain stores that extended far beyond the local site. As the mall overtook the former town square, a type of commons, to become the focus of consumer interactions of the community, they limited the community's speech through selection of products, ownership of local retail, and the activities that were allowed within the newly created consumer space. Whereas the town square represented a mix of locally owned and publicly owned space, the mall privatized the space towards outside forces—corporations.

By the 1980s, shopping malls had become a trademark representation of Americana. As one historian has written, the shopping mall represented “the common

⁴³ Alexander Brash, “The Unique Values of Our National Parks,” *Gateway: Visions for an Urban National Park*, ed., Alexander Brash, Jamie Hand, and Kate Orff (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2011), 76-77.

denominator of our national life, the best symbols of our abundance.”⁴⁴ Created during the postwar boom of the 1950s, the shopping mall developed as a result of growing suburban communities. With little consideration of consumer demands in these newly developed residential areas, the shopping mall offered a centralized space. These newly developed condensed consumer spaces, also benefitted from the booming automobile culture that allowed for them to be built in non-centralized locations to communities. Benefitting from the publicly funded roads, the privately created shopping malls offered massive concrete lots for free parking to accommodate for crowds of customers.⁴⁵

The Farm Crisis had set in motion the implementation of supply-side economics upon the Midwest causing the region to face economic restructuring. This restructuring meant that manufacturing and industries that relied on agriculture were altered and adjusted to shifts in ownership and labor within in the region. While the Farm Crisis had mostly impacted a single region, the economic restructuring of consumerism that shopping centers posed, eventually reached the whole United States. With their emergence in the 1950s, Lizabeth Cohen has written that shopping centers highlighted “three major effects of shifting marketplaces on postwar American community life.” Explaining the three effects, she continued:

in commercializing public space, they brought to community life the market segmentation that increasingly shaped commerce; in privatizing public space, they privileged the rights of private property owners over

⁴⁴ Kenneth T. Jackson, “All the World’s a Mall: Reflections on the Social and Economic Consequences of the American Shopping Center,” *The American Historical Review* 101 [4] (Oct., 1996): 1111.

⁴⁵ Lizabeth Cohen, “From Town Center to shopping Center: The Reconfiguration of Community Marketplaces in Postwar America,” *The American Historical Review* 101 [4] (Oct., 1996): 1050-1053.

citizens' traditional rights of free speech in community forums; and in feminizing public space, they enhanced women's claim on the suburban landscape but also empowered them more as consumers than producers.⁴⁶

As corporations were already meddling in the musical choice of consumers, their expansive influence on community life set the context of Mojo Nixon and Skid Roper's song that humorously encouraged arson to put their expansion to an end.

Titled after the catchy chorus that sang, "Burn down the malls," the 1986 song demonstrated an understanding of the consequences that malls posed. The first verse in the song asked: "Hey, you ever get the feeling that America is turning into some kind of sit-com?/ Lowest common denominator, shopping mall, marketing strategy from hell?" Posing the question and answering it himself, Nixon sang: "You ever get that feeling?/ Well, I got that feeling right now and it's kind of getting under my skin/ Yeah, so get some gas-o-line and," followed by the wild line from the chorus again, "Burn down the malls."

Discussing how such consumer spaces start, the following verse began with: "You know it just started out as a kind of corner store/ Then it turned into a shopping center/ Oh, I remember the shopping center openings man/ They used to have those big lights shining up/ But now," Nixon sang. "Now, where do the old folks go?/ Where do the young kids go?/ What's America, what's America turning into?/ Mondo-condo-shopping-mall-hell, I say!"

Continuing with Nixon ranting about multiple issues he saw with America: the comical musician questioned how an eighteen-year-old can get married, amass a

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 1053-1055.

staggering amount of credit card debt, “vote for one fool or another,” serve in the military: “But you can’t buy beer.” Suggesting that “if Reagan finally gets the war he’s looking for,” it would be youth under the age of twenty-one who would be drafted, the same youth who could do anything, especially debt, but could not “buy beer.”⁴⁷

What malls represented was the increasing privatizing of public space within the United States. The quasi-social space created center for corporate American to consolidate in one place to sell their products to consumers. For the punk movement, it would not only be music that became impacted by chain stores that limited the music industry’s market, but also the fashion of punks. Malls offered small spaces for niche store to focus on a primary product, fashion, and or consumer target. Eventually stores like Hot Topic, opened in 1988, found that there was a popular market for selling punk band shirts and even the style.⁴⁸

“Please Play This Song on the Radio” - NOFX

By the end of the eighties so much had changed in the United States. The Soviet Union was collapsing, Reagan was out of office, yuppies dominated the land, and public space had decreased. As corporate structures, such as malls, limited free speech through consumerism; artistic avenues of expression were also dwindling. Record labeling, and the impact it played on giving reason behind consumer censorship, made it even more

⁴⁷ Mojo Nixon and Skid Roper, “Burn Down the Malls.”

⁴⁸ By the early-2000s Hot Topic became known for its rock fashion selection. Much of this focused on punk rock with band’s own fashion line. For background history on the store, see <http://www.hottopic.com/customer-service/company-info/>.

difficult for independent music to be heard by a large audience. The FCC's new regulations towards the end of the decade had restricted the airwaves, setting the environment to allow the consolidation of oligarchic control over radio. While these changes restricted much of the popular music heard across the country, MTV had become the premier avenue that supported bands that America's youth desired to hear. With so much influence on youth culture, MTV itself became the overseer of rebellious music. Its decision to censor music videos—a new source of communication—such as the Dead Milkmen's "Methodist Coloring Book" music video, demonstrated the impact of Reaganism on American culture and how punk remained a threat to the hegemonic culture.

At the same time, the homogenization of punk music, with the hardcore sound and context, limited the musical expression of new artists. Before many of the punk bands who began in the late-1980s developed the songs that would become pop culture hits in the next decade, they began their roots with hardcore punk. "The songs took awhile. At first, 'They were horrible,'" as Dexter Holland of the band the Offspring, reminisced during the beginning of the group's plunge into mainstream culture in 1995. "'All punk bands then had an anti-police song, a death song, an anti-religion song, and an anti-war song. We had those four nailed within six months. Then it was, 'Boy, what do we write now?'"⁴⁹ The cultural landscape was blooming into a post-Reagan era and the darkness of the decade seemed to be lifting. Without the iconic face that punks had rallied

⁴⁹ Eric Snider, "The Offspring: Sons of punk's new surge," *Sarasota Herald-Tribune* (Sarasota, FL), March 8, 1995, 4E, news.google.com/newspapers.

to rebel against in office, it became more difficult to get the message of corruption across through such contexts.

Out of punk scenes across the United States, new bands began to break apart from the dominant hardcore sound. Like the Dead Milkmen, these groups adopted a new sound and brought back the diversity in punk rock music that had been a key feature during its earliest years from the mid-1970s to the early-1980s. While many of the earlier punks from the 1980s felt as if they were born too late and missed the Counterculture that emerged in the 1960s, the generation of new punks that emerged at the end of the 1980s experienced a similar dilemma. To the older punks, punk may have “died,” but music cannot die, and with a new sound much of the issues that punk bands spoke of continued. But they were no longer simply trying to play faster than the next band, or scream out lyrics.

The white satirical trio from New York City, the Beastie Boys, abandoned their hardcore punk style and broke taboos by playing hip-hop, something perceived as black music. On the opposite spectrum, location and race, the group, Fishbone, became a familiar name across the nation. Like the D.C. punk group from the earlier days of the punk movement, the Bad Brains, Fishbone was composed of all African American musicians who were greatly influenced by punk. Finding the Los Angeles punk scene as the only place they could perform, the group was an oddity among a largely white group of punks. Like other punk bands, the group had an anti-Reagan song “Ugly.” But unlike most anti-Reagan songs from the punk movement, their song became a hit played across

the United States. But this success came at a price, as the band had signed with a major label and struggled to maintain their success.

Punks had valued their independent production and distribution of their music, but by the end of the eighties, music found itself facing another stale moment, like that of the mid-1970s, and major labels had significantly gained influence over the market. As one article pointed out in October of 1991, there were “six conglomerates” that controlled over ninety percent of “records released” at the time. While many independent labels struggled to adjust to new technologies in the industry (cassettes and CDs), the challenges they faced also came from facing corporations that were becoming stronger than Goliath. The privatizing of the music industry allowed corporate influence over what type of music could be released, played on the radio stations, and sold to consumers.⁵⁰

While signing with a major label was a taboo concept to many punks, by the end of the eighties it demonstrated a difficult choice due to the state of the music industry. Either sign with an independent label and be barred from many stores, radio stations, shows, MTV, and other sources of communication: Or, the option of signing with a major label and the chance to reach a much larger audience to spread the ideas of punk working through the corporate structure that many punks despised—and the perk of possibly making a living from doing something one enjoyed, something many punkers from the eighties never managed to accomplish. Although Nirvana’s decision may have led to their end, the group opened up for once underground music to enter the mainstream—similar to what the Ramones, the Sex Pistols, and the Clash did in the early days of punk.

⁵⁰ David Browne, “The Independents See Vultures Circling Overhead,” *New York Times*, Oct. 27, 1991, H26, H35.

By 1992, once obscure punk bands were making newspaper headlines again. One article titled, “Releases show continuing evolution of punk rock,” shared how bands like The Mighty Mighty Bosstones from Boston, Murphy’s Law and 24-7 Spyz from New York, NOFX and Red Hot chili Peppers from California, and, of course, Nirvana; the band that opened up the music world for these groups that extended the punk movement into the nineties.⁵¹ Yet while these groups from the late-1980s punk scene gained national recognition following the breakthrough of Nirvana, the punk community itself was adjusting to a dawning new decade. Where violence, sexism, homophobia, and racism became an issue to many punk scenes in the mid-1980s, venues like ABC No Rio in New York City and 924 Gilman Street in Berkeley, California saw collective action to oppose such dividing and negative beliefs. These two venues functioned collectively to gain independence for their punk scenes from private venues and “to provide a safe atmosphere by confronting violence and oppressive behavior,” as Dawson Barrett has demonstrated.⁵² Even though these venues, and others like them across the United States, worked towards challenging the problems the punk movement faced throughout the eighties, issues remained.

Gender divides, for instance, sparked a new wave of feminism and to the punk movement the Riot Grrrl scene became an outcome of such. While the violence and physically demanding dance floors known as “mosh pits,” surely discouraged women

⁵¹ Jeff Vice, “Releases show continuing evolution of punk rock,” *The Deseret News* (Salt Lake City, Ut.), March 14, 1992, 6A.

⁵² Dawson Barrett, “DIY Democracy”: 23-33.

from punk shows, the Riot Grrrl movement was less about bringing feminism to punk, and instead bringing punk to feminism. As Viv Albertine, the guitarist of the all-female British punk band from the early breakthrough of punk in the mid-1970s, the Slits, showed; women were always a part of punk rock. Although women became less seen with the increased popularity of hardcore throughout the 1980s, punk was not simply “created by boys until Kathleen Hanna picked up the mic,” as Sarah Jaffe has pointed out.⁵³ While the Riot Grrrl movement brought young females across the nation together to oppose sexism, they had a larger impact on feminism than they did to punk. Becoming one of the leading figures in this new cultural expression and concepts of feminism, Kathleen Hanna and her band Bikini Kill showed that there was a larger issue than just the lack of female influence in punk. The problem was the society as a whole and the structures that oppress women and dictate their actions. As the revival of punk during the break of the 1990s became noticeable enough for news media to not ignore, so too did the new expression of feminism with the Riot Grrrl phenomenon. Hanna and other notable Riot Grrrl’s however, refused to have their movement co-opted and misrepresented by journalist hungry to exploit a story. Reports by news media had constantly altered the message of punk and presented a misleading perspective of its ideas and meaning to the youth involved to the general public. In an attempt to avoid such hampering reports, the young women who were gaining recognition as rebellious Riot Grrrls during the early 1990s conducted a media blackout.⁵⁴

⁵³ Sarah Jaffe, “Difficult Fun,” *Dissent* 62 [2] (Spring, 2015): 5-6.

⁵⁴ Stacy Thompson, *Punk Productions*, 58-61.

The Nineties

Decades are often perceived as falling neatly in line between the zero's, but that is not necessarily the case.⁵⁵ From a historical perspective, especially when examining culture in the way in which this study has, the nineties were no exception. Somewhere between the end of Reagan's presidency in 1988 and the emergence of Bill Clinton and the New Democrats in 1992, the nineties began. Such a pivotal moment: the end and collapse of the Soviet Union and the Cold War, 24-hour news stations, the beginnings of the internet, and the first U.S. invasion of Iraq with a new strategy for war that relied on airstrikes—and the start of a still ongoing quagmire within the region.⁵⁶ In a sense the nineties were not so much the end of a century, but the start of one.

Although the punk movement faced numerous obstacles throughout the eighties, the message and idea behind the movement continued into the next decade. Remaining a countercultural force, the punk bands who grew up during the hardcore era found themselves a part of the punk boom in 1994.⁵⁷ While many of these bands identified themselves as punk, the ideas of punk and creativity in music expanded to others who represented the concept of punk. Rage Against the Machine, for instance, played a mix of

⁵⁵ Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies*, 1-20.

⁵⁶ O'Mara, *Pivotal Tuesdays: Four Elections That Shaped the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 157-202.

⁵⁷ *One Nine Nine Four*, directed by Jai Al-Attas, released on YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mQmb70n5Cp0>; According to wikipedia entry, the documentary *One Nine Nine Four* narrated by Tony Hawk and featuring many of the major bands that marked the mid-1990s punk revival was never able to get full rights to release the documentary to theatres or for purchase. After years of struggling to release the film, the creator published the documentary on YouTube in 2012 where it can still be seen today.

music that contained punk's speed, heavy metal's intensity, and hip-hop's fluidity in their lyrics. More importantly, however, the lyrical content of their songs gave a political perspective that matched those of the Clash and Dead Kennedys.

Although the environment of the music industry towards the end of the eighties led many of the bands that, like Nirvana began their roots in the punk scene, to sign with major labels; there still laid the niche and opportunity for independent labels to remain as an alternative source for musicians. Fat Wreck Chords, the independent label created by Fat Mike—the lead singer and bass player for the band NOFX—in 1991 was one of the independent labels that became influential to the new generation of punks. Initially starting in a garage with the young punker taking out a \$20,000 loan that his father cosigned on, the label gained its share of success during the revived punk boom of the mid-1990s. Yet although many of the groups signed to the label became successful selling thousands of records, Fat Wreck Chords shared the generated wealth by giving bonuses back to bands and employees. As Fat Mike explained his business philosophy in a 2015 interview after the label's twenty-fifth anniversary (although he explained that it was really the twenty-fourth): "It's a choice you make in capitalism. You can make money and do it the right way. You don't have to ring out the rag and get every drop. You can just do what's fair." Compared to the business practices influenced by Reaganism, Fat Mike's management of Fat Wreck Chords shared the success of the company with employees compared to selfishly hoarding the profits.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Q on CBC, "NOFX frontman Fat Mike on 25 years of Fat Wreck Chords," August 25, 2015, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yMSKX2oxSXM>.

While punk found a revival with a new youth, the new generation of punks held with it remnants of the history before them. New contexts in American life shaped the young punk rockers who emerged at the end of the eighties and stepped into the nineties. Bands like Nirvana, one of the most iconic rock groups of the latter decade, fell apart due to their success like many of the bands before them. Others such as Green Day found a balance to remain a significant influence on American popular culture. Yet Green Day's decision to sign to a major label, like other punk bands from the 1990s, caused the continuation of division within the punk movement. Neil Strauss of the *New York Times* emphasized this point when discussing Bad Religion and NOFX, two of the bands that were influential in the mid-1990s punk movement, in a November 1994 article titled "Rebelling for the Sake of Rebelling." With punk rock gaining the national attention that it always seemed to denounce, but also hinted as a desire, Strauss discussed how the new generation of punks "not only rebelled against its traditional enemies—society and mainstream rock—but also itself." The Los Angeles band, Bad Religion were one of the few punk bands to survive the eighties and continue into the nineties. Much of this success had come for the group's founding of their own label, the legendary Epitaph Records that signed numerous successful bands, mostly from California. Even though Bad Religion released their 1993 *Recipe for Hate* on Atlantic—one of the major labels—just a year before Strauss' article, a member of the band described his belief that Green Day had sold out. Sharing the same perspective, the article discussed how NOFX had played a satirical version of the group's hit song "Basket Case."⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Bad Religion, *Recipe for Hate* (1993; Atlantic, 1993), CD; Neil Strauss, "Rebelling for the Sake

By the nineties it became difficult to see the rebellion behind the punk movement. While groups like NOFX and Bad Religion upheld the view that Green Day was one of the “sell-out” groups—also the name of a nineties song by the ska group Real Big Fish—the issue was not Green Day, but how Reaganism had influenced American culture. The nineties business culture found itself looking back to their predecessors from the 1950s who rebelled against the man in the grey flannel suit. The historian by training, journalist by trade, Thomas Frank highlighted this transition in his early writings during the new hip consumerism that he experienced during the nineties.⁶⁰ Instead of trying to fend off cultural changes, the business culture had once again commodified dissent and used rebellion to sell corporate goods. Like the Counterculture from the 1960s, the punk movement became one of the focuses behind this transition in advertising. Frank’s article “Why Johnny Can’t Dissent” demonstrated how the punk celebrity, Henry Rollins, had become an admired figure to businessmen. Rollins “worked hard,” sacrificed all—including himself—and rebelled against the man in the grey flannel suit. Being the model for the corporate world was never the aim of punk rock and shows the irony with gaining the attention and success that some punks always desired.⁶¹ If the world is full of people having unusual piercings, colorfully dyed hair, torn clothes, and buying their rebellion: How does one challenge such a culture?

of Rebelling,” *New York Times*, Nov. 23, 1994, C12.

⁶⁰ Real Big Fish, “Sell Out,” *Turn the Radio Off* (California: Mojo, 1996). Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 231-235.

⁶¹ Thomas Frank, “Why Johnny Can’t Dissent,” *Commodify Your Dissent: Salvos from The Baffler* (W.W. Norton Company), <https://www.nytimes.com/books/first/f/frank-dissent.html>.

What can be seen from this relationship is that as a cultural movement of dissent against Reaganism's rise to "cultural hegemony," punk reflected a changing United States towards the end of the twentieth century. Beginning as a rebellion against the music industry, the punk movement quickly began to attack other icons of wealth, power, and greed. The sudden explosion of a new musical style then found itself expanding internationally, adding to both style and politics within punk. To the American punk movement, the election of Ronald Reagan to the White House in 1980 offered a symbol that represented the changing paradigm in American culture. Becoming a symbol of the frustrations and anger of a new generation of youth, Reagan became an icon that youth across the United States attempted to tear down. The punk movement protested the changing landscape: first through cultural dissent, then later direct action protests, however, neither was able to unmask Reagan as the symbolic icon he represented. During Reagan's tenure as president, the punk movement faced constant hostility from the dominant culture and even tensions between various punks.

By the end of Reagan's presidency, it became clear that the impact of his time in office had greatly transformed the United States. New symbols continued to uphold the culture of Reaganism and with them punk remained and continued to dissent against the hegemonic culture. Although the punk movement of the eighties, 1978 to 1992, had attacked the symbols of power, it also created its own politics of identity—a reflection of the impact of Reaganism. Becoming a commodified product of popular culture in the emerging new century, punk found itself facing new obstacles. Although Reagan no

longer remained, punk groups have continued to tear down the barriers that have continued the culture of Reaganism in the United States.

AFTERWORD

It has been over forty years since Hilly Kristal first opened the New York City club CBGB's, the place where many say punk first started. Since that time punk rock has reached audiences across the world. Part of this longevity, and an explanation for this truly cultural phenomenon in the most descriptive sense, seems to be from the sincerity of a style that focuses not only on youth experiences, but also the experiences of the common person in the modern era. It is no surprise that in 2013, the famous New York club became incorporated into the National Park System to preserve and maintain for future generations to learn from and enjoy. Yet historicizing punk to the point of monuments and as historical sites, a symbol itself, may be unjust to the continuous struggle that was initiated decades ago.¹

Punk may deserve to die, but it is not dead yet. The longevity of the cultural movement may be due to the context of the music. As this study has argued, tearing down the symbols that have been used by the powerful to gain consent from subordinate groups has long been a feature of punk rock. The "Gipper" is long gone, however, his guise as a symbol for wealthy interests has been a feature that many politicians have held dear. The Midwest, a region where the impact of lost manufacturing and the Farm Crisis can still be seen, has had its hosts of Reaganesque politicians who have continued to persuade voters with their rural nostalgic rhetoric. Wisconsin governor Scott Walker has been a prime example. The motorcycle-riding politician has claimed to be on the side of working class

¹ For information of the club's history, see <http://www.cbgb.com/about>.

families, yet his assaults on education, healthcare, and labor has been at odds with his message, compared to reality. Walker has adopted the tools of hipness, of harnessing culture to hide who his policies actually support. But this hipness backfired on him when in January of 2015, the Boston band Dropkick Murphys found out that Walker had used their song during a speaking event. The celtic-punk group, and its pro-union stance, struck back against the labor-busting governor by posting a Tweet that could be read by the whole public:

@ScottWalker @GovWalker please stop using our music in any way...
we literally hate you!!!
Love, Dropkick Murphys²

For all the criticisms of social media—and there are plenty which can be argued—for a band whose song, “I’m Shipping Up to Boston,” is played in sports stadiums across the United States, to use this source of communication to publicly denounce the Wisconsin governor says a lot. Along with being able to be seen on Twitter, news coverage reported the conflict between the governor and band to an even larger audience. In the digital age, a print fanzine only has so far of a reach. What social media offers is the ability for groups, such as the Dropkick Murphys, to communicate with a larger audience than any punk band during the eighties could have.

Although many punk groups have become nationally recognized, much of the punk movement still lies in the underground. Since the economic collapse of 2008, it appears that the anger and frustrations are reviving the punk spirit throughout the United

² Paige Lavender, “Dropkick Murphys To Scott Walker: ‘We Literally Hate You,’” *Huffington Post*, Jan., 26, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/01/26/dropkick-murphys-scottwalker_n_6548316.html.

States. Punk is once again gaining national recognition and becoming an expression of protest by thousands of youth. The revived Chicago scene has taken notice, and the Downtown Boys, a multi-ethnic group from Providence, Rhode Island has been reported on by *Rolling Stone* and played on Pacifica's independent daily news program, *Democracy Now!*—hosted by the award-winning journalists Amy Goodman and Juan Gonzalez.³ Even a punk show in Waterloo, Iowa called “Shred for Bernie” was reported on by *Time* magazine just before the Iowa caucus in February of 2016. Unlike the “Rock Against Reagan” tour in 1984 discussed earlier; and the “Rock Against Bush” put together by NOFX that followed twenty years later in 2004; the “Shred for Bernie” show was to promote a candidate, not to challenge one.⁴

³ Mike Petrucci, “The Chicago Punk Scene is Weird, Passionate, and Really, Really Drunk,” *Noisey: Music by Vice*, Jan. 12, 2015, <http://noisey.vice.com/blog/chicago-punk-scene-report>. Democracy Now!, “Downtown Boys: ‘America’s Most Exciting Punk Band’ Performs & Discusses Making Change Through Music,” *Democracy Now!*, Jan. 13, 2016, http://www.democracynow.org/2016/1/13/downtown_boys_americas_most_exciting_punk.

⁴ Paul Moakley, “Seeing Politics: See Bernie Sanders’ Punk Rock Party,” *Time*, Jan. 28, 2016, <http://time.com/4197384/seeing-politics-see-bernie-sanders-punk-rock-party/>. For a story covering the “Rock Against Bush” tour in 2004, see Warren St. John, “A Bush Surprise: Fright-Wing Support,” *New York Times*, March 21, 2004, ST1.

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