

Punk Rock

Musical Fad or “Radical Kernel?”

A. Punk

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Thinking about punk rock gives one the strange sensation of witnessing a phenomenon and trying to make intellectual sense of it rather than being immersed in it. That of course ages you immediately. No matter what your “sympathies” are toward the music and the social critique it carries with it, if you are writing about it in the manner of this article, you are obviously not of it.

Although features on this new music trend have appeared in every magazine from *Time* to *Rolling Stone* to the *Fifth Estate* (see “Anarchy in the U.K.: The Power & the Punk” by Bob Nirkind, FE #287, October 28, 1977), it’s not entirely clear what is always at issue or under discussion. There appears to be at least three separate punk currents, each with a different approach and all with a somewhat different sound.

The English working class punk variant, with its most notable exponent being Johnny Rotten and the Sex Pistols, has received the most publicity and notoriety, but as Mick Jagger of the *Rolling Stones* pointed out recently, now that Rotten has appeared on the cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine and the Pistols have released their first album on the Warner Bros. label, it’s only a matter of time before they (or some band like them) begins to exhibit all of the characteristics the Pistols once reviled.

The second center for punk is the neo-deco scene centering on the CBGB’s nightclub in New York City where groups like the Dictators merge right-wing lyrics (“Manifesto Destiny Disco”) with not so subtle appeals to the faddish sadomasochism now so popular in The Big Apple. Not much there.

While New York and London get the big splashes in the media, a lesser known scene (or perhaps little known would be better said) has developed around the Los Angeles and San Francisco Bay Area that does appear to contain what some of our California friends call the “radical kernel” of punk. Centering on several bands and a few newsletters and magazines, West Coast punk has expressed a contempt for the recording industry and has generally produced its own independently released records, meanwhile voicing a critique in both their music and interviews that attacks the whole structure of capitalist society—its values, its sacred institutions and its sensibilities.

But more on this later; let’s back up a minute and look at the form—the music.

Music Captures the Mood

The music of the ‘sixties was inseparable from its politics. If we could have taken amplifiers along with us during demonstrations against the war in Vietnam, I’m sure you would have heard “Light My Fire” by the Doors or “Dancing in the Streets” by Martha and the Vandellas booming across the lines of march. But as the massive social movements of the last decade began to fizzle, so the music began to lose its capacity to capture the mood of a whole generation of young people.

Contrary to what Eric Burdon sang, they could and did “take away our music.” Jefferson Airplane and Janis Joplin songs have become “Golden Oldies” and much of what we are left with today is the overpowering noise of

bands like Foghat and Deep Purple whose roots in people's lives seem to go no deeper than an accompaniment to the downers taken before a concert or party.

Music during the 'sixties had grabbed me at my depths and the first reports of a "new wave" in the 'seventies excited me. The possibility that punk could thrill me like Hendrix had at the Fillmore or Cream at the Grande created an anticipation that was quickly deflated when I heard the available recorded so-called punk bands like Talking Heads, the Ramones, and the Stranglers. The music sounded terrible and the lyrics contrived, and I was quite ready to dismiss it all as just a new wave of the record industry's next hype.

Still, it is most certainly the time for a new popular music. As Johnny Rotten has pointed out, Charlie Watts, drummer for the Stones, is 41 years old and the Who are in their middle-thirties. And while age is certainly not the determinate factor in the capacity to be innovative (evidenced by someone like John Coltrane in the jazz field) it is still indisputable that most of the top rock groups and those who control the media are people whose origins begin ten and twelve years ago.

This domination by a wealthy, self-assured group of entertainers (and the business structure that supports them), once were considered musical and social rebels themselves, but now make up the mainstream of popular music. This is what is almost certainly the pre-condition for the entrance of a new wave of angry young innovators. What remains to be seen is whether it will be punk and whether punk is to the Stones what Elvis was to Perry Como.

New Trends Always Crude

To make the observation that punk "sounds terrible" only echoes in our heads what our parents said about Chuck Berry and the Beatles. The music coming from a new trend always sounds crude and inexplicable ("It all sounds the same!") when compared with the dominant style. As an example, listen to old recordings of the first wild days of bee-bop jazz when the mad playing of Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker at Minton's in Harlem in the mid 'forties had many people thinking these two innovators had simply lost their wits.

Still, punk may not be the wave to crack the monolith; reggae, music with authentic folk rhythms and a message of revolution didn't do it. A major marketing research firm which programs the music for a popular Detroit rock station calls punk a "fad" that has failed to sell records (their major criterion) and lacks "musical excellence." But the latter observation says little.

Technique is what capitalism excels at, so on one hand you have a group like Blue Oyster Cult coming to Detroit to play a concert bringing their equipment in three semi-vans and needing a crew of technicians to produce their sound; compare that to groups on the West Coast who boast about having a drummer who has only been playing for three months or of having a song with only three chords in it. Well, we are talking about two different types of music and performers—one group is on the inside; the other the outside.

Part of our inability to make a full assessment of the impact of punk lies in its inaccessibility to us—both in being far from the three major scenes and also that the bands describing themselves as authentic punk, will have nothing to do with the major recording labels and prefer to issue independently released singles. There also is a major class difference between participants in the English scene and its U.S. counterpart. Whereas English punk rose out of the rejection by British youth of the grinding working class roles ordained for them, many of the West Coast participants come from the white middle-class though they reject their expected class roles with equal vigor.

In the same way that English punk is a vehicle for the disdain of all that would rob them of their lives, so the Los Angeles and San Francisco punk scene contains a self-conscious and articulate critique, not only of the sterile suburbs many of them came from, but also of the total society. On the face of it West Coast punk seems to be based on a "complete assault on the culture" as John Sinclair used to say back in the old White Panther days.

These affronts go from the names of groups (Crime Death, Voms, Gran Mal, etc.) to their song titles ("I Hate the Rich," "Baby, You're So Repulsive," "(I Wanna) Fuck You," etc.) to a celebration of anti-technique music as mentioned above, and even to the accompanying dancing. Rock and roll dancing in the 'sixties had developed into total free form, moving away from the stylized ballroom dancing and intricate jitterbugging of the previous 25 years, but in the last seven years or so, complex dances, a la "Soultrain," have been resurrected leaving most people watch-

ing the cool “experts” or listening to absolutely non-danceable music like that issuing forth from a band like R.E.O. Speedwagon.

Punk has brought back dancing that everyone can do—the Pogo—where everyone simply jumps up and down in time to the music. It’s not recommended after having just eaten a large meal, but at least it’s accessible and does carry with it a further assault on technique. (The importance of skill, craft, and excellence as it applies to life in a human community outside of the demands of capitalist society is a larger discussion which would be inappropriate here.)

Network of Publications Developed

Just as the counter-culture and New Left of the ‘sixties began to develop a network of publications, so has the punk scene of the West Coast. Although some of them are just music mags, others like *New Deseases* (754 Divisadero, San Francisco CA 94117, \$.75) include a whole range of topics beyond just the music played by the bands.

An example from a recent *New Deseases* is an editorial condemning fascism and the wearing of nazi paraphernalia (right-wing punk) to concerts. The article is hand-printed and accompanied by a simple antifascist cartoon; words are misspelled, but the message clearly separates it from the Melody Maker and Creem magazines of the world: “Fascism is on the rise. The time is to renounce it FOREVER. Fascism is negation and the end of the individual—the end of creativity. Punk and anarchism is the shout of the individual. It’s creativity brought into our lives. It’s the end of the oppressor and not the myth of the fascist dictator. It’s not coy posing—it’s revolution!”

In the same issue, in an interview with the Avengers (also hand lettered) *New Deseases* asks:

“Do you like money \$?”

A: Yeah, but I HATE THE RICH.

Q: Do you vote in elections?

A: ARE YOU KIDDING? I didn’t even know they still did that.”

In an article on Elvis, a *New Deseases* writer states: “Somebody said ‘The King is deed!’ Well, this ain’t no monarchy! Elvis was 20 years ago, FUCK! even before I was born. People have been telling me what a PUNK Elvis was. I was looking at some pictures and I say to myself, ‘He looks pretty cool—I mean that was ’56. Then I come across this other picture where this ‘punk’ is in uniform and HE’S SMILING! I see a string of movies, Xmas albums, cowboy hats, religious songs, fleets of cadillacs—& ever growing poundage. REAL PUNK, THIS BOY.”

What came as perhaps one of the more startling utterances of the publication was in an interview with Chip and Tony of the Dils (latest release “I Hate the Rich” b/w “You’re Not Blank”), in which Tony, when asked, “Why are you so opposed to drugs?” answered, “Drugs make you easily controlled. They dissolve your intelligence. PUNK is a confrontation; drugs are a REMOVAL.”

This is startling because it is a 180-degree reversal from what many of us took as a matter of course: weed, acid, nitrous oxide, etc. opened you up, made you more aware and receptive to change. John Sinclair and others even went so far as to say that marijuana use was in itself revolutionary.

Well, of course it didn’t work out that way, and getting high is now quite a socially acceptable thing to do. But does dope play the socially reactionary role of a palliative much like that of the soma tranquilizer in Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*? There’s every indication that it does. Drugs have become one of the many things that make our existence “tolerable”—our willingness to trade living a truly human existence for mere survival. Drug usage pervades the factories of Detroit, becoming the only way many young workers can make it through the days and weeks and years of tedious, anti-human labor. This very nearly re-creates the Huxley model of the “Beta type” who is designed especially to do routinized, onerous work. Nothing can be so diametrically opposed to a human vision of the world than an anaesthetized work force plodding through the day’s drudgery and then after work to hypnotically consume the entertainments provided for while also in a drugged state.

The Fate of Punk

Well, so what of punk? If it maintains itself only on the terrain of entertainment, it will either disappear as the music marketing research people predict or, if contrary to their assessments the music takes on a popular following, punk will simply become the newest commodity on the music market, and all of its exponents the next rock stars—complete with appearances on “Midnight Special” and finally the Emmy awards completing the next cycle of music commercialism.

In many ways, it’s not really up to the bands, but is equally our-responsibility. If we are just passive consumers of entertainment, digging the rebellious aspects of punk in a totally voyeuristic manner, that leaves the bands no route to travel other than the traditional one. The only real alternative is the creation of communities of rebels that includes musicians, which does what it can to eliminate the relationships of capital that attempt to transform all of our creative acts into salable commodities. To the extent that this does not appear to be on the agenda only means that we are cutting our own throats that much more. If we are not capable of creating activity which we define ourselves, our entire lives will be determined by the culture of capital—a world of things, not people.

—A. Punk (he wishes)

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