

When Punk Was A Threat

Bill Brown

a review of

We're Not Here to Entertain: Punk Rock, Ronald Reagan, and The Real Culture War of 1980s America by Kevin Mattson.
Oxford University Press 2020

This book reminds us that the 1980s—in addition to being a period of reactionary politics (Reagan's efforts to "make America great again") and reactionary music (synthesizer-dominated pop and MTV videos)—was also the decade of hardcore punk.

Music that was fiercely radical in its stripped-down, jet-propelled sound, its politically conscious and sometimes openly anarchist lyrics in songs like "Nazi Punks Fuck Off," and jarring album covers. As well as in its intense rejection of corporate culture, mass-produced commodities, and top-down decision-making.

The punk rock world, a phrase that Mattson borrows from the late Kurt Cobain, not only included self-managed bands and homemade recordings, but also hundreds of fanzines, alternative spaces, and tour networks (friends with couches). It wasn't only centered in New York and Los Angeles, but extended into many suburbs and small towns all over the country. And though it is sometimes thought to have been limited to straight white males, the punk rock world included many women, Latinos, Blacks, gays and lesbians.

Written by an active participant in the scene—Mattson was a punk musician in the early '80s—this book carefully documents the hardcore punk eruption in chronological fashion. An excellent researcher and scholar, now a history prof at Ohio University,

Mattson poured through libraries, but also interviewed more than a dozen fellow participants.

Though there are some weaknesses in the writing, especially when music or political theory is being described, this book is sympathetic to its subject, packed full of interesting details, and brings the scene to life.

Bill Brown has published *Not Bored!*, that started out as a punk fanzine, but quickly became a pro-situationist rag. notbored.org.

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