

It's A Noise That's All:

Development of London's Punk Aesthetic

“The scene is in the bands, in the fans who will go anywhere in London to hear the music they relate to...they’re the ones that it’s all about, the music the clothes, everything.”¹ Written in 1976 following the 100 Club Punk Special, an event seen as the marker of London Punk’s beginning, Mark Perry described the basis for what allowed the Punk scene within the city to thrive and develop into the primary aesthetic of Punk. Referred to as a mythic year zero, 1976 was a convergence of anger, economic strife, social turmoil, and disillusioned youth who were searching for an outlet. Described as a desert with nothing to do and nowhere to go by the Clash’s Joe Strummer, the state of London and England as a whole would be the catalyst for a movement going against the situation that had birthed it.² Its lifespan was as tumultuous as its beginnings, Punk quickly evolved from a mindset to a movement and subculture at the forefront of rock. Outliving the original scene and bands that brought Punk into the mainstream, the aesthetic of Punk remains one of the most recognizable among subcultures. The aesthetic of Punk is easily mimicked now; ripped and torn, safety pins and ransom note letters arranged haphazardly yet perfectly. However, at its inception, Punk was all-encompassing in its meaning. Found in art, music, politics, lifestyle, and fashion; Punk was a subculture that developed via its interconnecting facets and the scene itself. The London Punk scene was the driving force behind the early days of Punk and was responsible for much of what made it unique. The mobilization by fans in London to establish their scene and build up their own bands allowed for the London Punk scene to become one of the most memorable and influential to the Punk movement worldwide. The beginnings of Punk as a working-class movement in response to the political and

¹ Mark Perry, “Ope I Die Before I Get Old” *Sniffin’ Glue*, no. 3 ½, 1976, 4.

² Paula Guerra and Henrique Grimaldi Figueredo, “Today Your Style, Tomorrow the World: Punk, Fashion and Visual Imaginary,” *ModaPalavra* 12, no. 23 (2018): 112–47, 119.

social changes within London created a space in which fans were able to cultivate a distinct aesthetic and ethos that would become the overarching idea of Punk.

The Punk subculture has been researched extensively with its various epicenters being placed under a microscope by many historians. The history of the London Punk scene specifically has been heavily researched due to its importance to the Punk aesthetic overall and the bands that sprang up in the turmoil of 1970s London. Jon Savage is among the most significant writers on this subject due to his proximity to the scene as a music journalist all of which is seen in his book *England's Dreaming: Anarchy, Sex Pistols, Punk Rock & Beyond*. Highly regarded as the definitive book on the London punk movement, Savage provides a comprehensive look at London Punk from Malcolm McLaren's early life to the end of the Sex Pistols.³ Works on the aesthetic developed within the London scene began as early as 1979 with Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, where he details the fashion and meaning behind the Punk aesthetic as it was then understood. Decades later the same aspects of the aesthetic have been discussed; Paula Guerra and Henrique Grimaldi Figueredo's article follows the evolution of 430 King's Road under Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood along with Jamie Reid's works to fully analyze the Punk aesthetic. These works show a clear history of the London Punk scene and provide a framework to analyze the development of the Punk aesthetic within the context of 1970s London. Comprehensive books on London Punk like *No Future* by Matthew Worley and *Young Punks* by Sheila Rock and autobiographies of those who were in the 1970 London scene such as John Lydon's *Rotten* and Adam Ant's *Adam Ant: Stand and Deliver* are just some of the hundreds of books written about the London scene and provide a closer look

³ Margot Mifflin, "England's Dreaming," *The New York Times*, April 26, 1992, <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/04/26/books/in-short-nonfiction.html>.

into the way the scene functioned along with how politics and the bands shaped the outward view on Punk.

While this paper will analyze the development of the Punk aesthetic as many have before, it will do so with the goal of demonstrating how the political and social factors of Punk contributed to the interdependency of the aesthetic and the Punk scene. This is what makes this paper unique as many works on Punk point to key figures as the epicenter of developments in the fashion and design without acknowledging the naturally developed aesthetic that existed in London before the music. In addition to discussing the interdependency of the aesthetic and Punk scene, this paper will also uniquely explore the mix of graphics with fashion and music to examine how the Punk ethos came to encapsulate and connect them with one another. To do so this paper will utilize a variety of secondary sources on Punk Fashion and design, such as the ones previously mentioned and others that discuss key parts of the London scene. Primary sources such as *Sniffin' Glue* fanzine, Johnny Rotten's autobiography *Rotten*, and various compilations of Punk art and fashion are key to this analysis in order to analyze Punk and its aesthetic from the perspective of those within the scene and how the Punk ethos was translated visually.

Punk aesthetic analysis has largely been discussed in tandem with the tumultuous career of the Sex Pistols. While many describe the Sex Pistols and the people alongside them as the beginning of the aesthetic, it would be more accurate to see them as an intersection of developments within the existing Punk movement. To discuss the development of the Punk aesthetic as only beginning and being influenced by the work of the Sex Pistols and their team does a great disservice to the identity of Punk as a movement of the working class and of individuality. To truly understand the development of the aesthetic along with the broader

political and social meaning behind the early years of Punk you have to look to the streets and clubs for what made the London scene so influential to the aesthetic and legacy. The influence of 1970s politics and the economic turmoil embroiling London at the time were a driving force in the beginnings of the movement and the development of the aesthetic through various means such as fashion and graphics. By considering the working-class beginnings in addition to the politics and social changes of the time, it is clear to see how the fans and those entrenched within the scene influenced the aesthetic development in broader and more staying ways than many may attribute to them.

The 1970s and London

The state of England in the 1970s was the result of many years of a steady decline in the economy and the industrial sector since the end of World War Two. The failure of the post-War government to invest in manufacturing caused England to fall behind other countries with the country producing little more than half of West Germany's manufacturing output per head from 1965-73.⁴ The beginning of the 1970s would see high inflation rates, rising from 5% in 1969 to double by the next year with little done to increase wages alongside the rising prices of goods.⁵ Unemployment also rose with inflation with unemployment hitting over 1 million in 1972 with more to come as the result of industry restructuring.⁶ These problems first came to a head with the 1972 National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) Strike that lasted from January 9th until February 28th with increased pay given to miners. Tensions, however, continued to rise as inflation increased with another NUM strike beginning in November of 1973. At the same time,

⁴ *World Development Report 1985* (New York: Published for the World Bank, Oxford University Press, 1985), 175.

⁵ Nick Tiratsoo, *From Blitz to Blair: A New History of Britain since 1939* (London: Phoenix, 1998), 165.

⁶ "BBC on This Day | 20 | 1972: UK Unemployment Tops One Million," BBC News, January 20, 1972, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/january/20/newsid2506000/2506897.stm>.

the OPEC Oil Embargo was in effect as a result of the Yom-Kippur War, specifically targeting nations who had sided with Israel in the conflict.⁷ Both of these events led to the implementation of the Three-Day Work Week as a means of energy conservation and caused inflation rates to continue to rise into the new year. The Labour government would be voted into power following the Conservatives' inability to fix the mounting problems England faced. A change in government did little to fix things as in 1975, inflation hit a staggering 22% and unemployment was the worst since World War II.⁸

In addition to economic turmoil, London specifically was facing a major shortage of acceptable housing. In 1969, the Greater London Development Plan (GLDP) was published and proposed a plan for the development of London via improved housing, transport, and

employment opportunities. Large areas of London were determined to be unfit for living due to the lack of three essentials: an exclusive water supply, a bath, and an indoor toilet; within the borough of Hackney, only 36% of houses had all three of these amenities.⁹

Those who lived in these houses were rehoused and



Figure 1: Savage, Jon. *Uninhabited London*. Photograph. 1977, London.

the houses were boarded up for demolition. Despite the attempts to fix the housing crisis, it only worsened going into the 1970s, with many London homes being left empty despite the fact many struggled to find affordable housing. In the London area, almost 100,000 public and private sector homes and over 50,000 residential homes lay empty while 189,000 people were listed on

⁷ *From Blitz to Blair: A New History of Britain since 1939*, 168.

⁸ Jon Savage, *England's Dreaming: Anarchy, Sex Pistols, Punk Rock, and Beyond* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), 108.

⁹ Christine Wall, "Sisterhood and Squatting in the 1970s: Feminism, Housing and Urban Change in Hackney," *History Workshop Journal* 83, no. 1 (2017): 79–97, 81.

the Great London Council's housing waitlist.¹⁰ This crisis would lead to a squatting movement of two branches within London, one born out of the inability to find affordable housing and one as a means to establish a base for political groups. Among these groups were the London Families Squatting Association (LFSA) and the London Squatters Campaign (FSC) with the primary goal of solving housing problems and protecting squatters who had nowhere else to go.

By 1975, at least 60% of England's squatters were in London.¹¹ By this point, squatting had become an ideological statement in addition to a necessity for some. The choice to squat instead of renting or buying a home came about as part of the growing disillusionment with the government and English society. Squatting culture would become integrated into the beginnings of the Punk movement as the choice to squat was seen as a "recognition of the futility and stupidity of work" and a means of going against society's standards.¹² This was just the beginning of the Punk movement and its aesthetic development, a continuous culmination of both statement and necessity.

What makes Punk?

As a movement and aesthetic, Punk is built on the cornerstone of Do-It-Yourself (DIY). Whether it be as a statement of anti-consumerism, going against the existing music scene, or out of necessity, DIY is a central part of the Punk aesthetic and ties the various facets of the movement together. The integration of DIY into every aspect turns Punk into an all-encompassing aesthetic that brings its various branches under the umbrella of the term "Punk". Seen in the fashion, graphics, and the music industry formed within the punk scene, DIY became

¹⁰ Milligan, Rowan. "The Politics of the Crowbar: Squatting in London, 1968-1977". *Anarchist Studies* (2016), 9.

¹¹ *England's Dreaming*, 112.

¹² *Ibid*

the marker of what is really and truly “punk”. This DIY ethos created a scene and culture that heavily pushed for authenticity, amateurism, and individuality. With widespread views and London newspapers showcasing Punk as only destructive and a danger to society, DIY turns the scene and aesthetic into one of creation.

The Punk aesthetic developed in London is linked by many to the previous art movements and political movements, specifically to avant-garde art and the political group the Situationist International. This is in large part due to how much of the credit for Punk’s beginning is given to Malcolm McLaren and the group that surrounded him. In their college years, both McLaren and Sex Pistols’ graphic artist Jamie Reid were members of the Situationist International, a European revolutionary movement based on Marxism and avant-garde art movements of the 20th century.¹³ Authors on Punk such as Jon Savage, Marie Arleth Skov, and a slew of others have described this tie to the Situationist International as the basis for the Punk aesthetic. John Lydon, known more widely as Sex Pistols frontman Johnny Rotten, however, denies all of this stating “ All the talk about the French Situationists being associated with punk is bollocks...Everything is just some kind of vaguely organized chaos.”¹⁴ Connections can be made between the collage style seen in Punk and Dada along with the general political similarities between both as anti-authoritarian movements, however giving all credit to this connection ignores the simple fact that Punk aestheticism had been developing before the Sex Pistols out of the circumstances in which the London working-class found themselves in.

¹³ *England’s Dreaming*, 31.

¹⁴ John Lydon, Keith Zimmerman, and Kent Zimmerman, *Rotten: No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs: The Authorized Autobiography: Johnny Rotten of the Sex Pistols* (London: Coronet, 1993),4.

Fashion that revolts

Before the music or graphics, Punk was based in the clothes.¹⁵ Its aesthetic beginnings in fashion reflect what became the Punk mentality of distinguishing oneself outside of the mainstream standards. Clothes that went against popular styles were filled with holes and statements against what was in the mainstream became the hallmark of Punk and the earliest way of being outspoken in these beliefs. The fashion now associated with Punk is largely tied to Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren's 430 King's Road boutique "SEX" later known by the name "Seditionaries". The Punk style however was being developed before the popularity of the Sex Pistols and Westwood's designs from secondhand clothes and DIY. Lydon notes that he would wear slashed suits fashioned back together with safety pins when he was younger¹⁶ and that "safety pins were not decoration, but necessity" due to the secondhand tattered nature of many of his clothes.¹⁷ So Catwoman and Jordan's iconic hair and styles are noted to have developed in their later high school years before fully stepping into the Punk scene. The clothes in the boutiques would reflect these established looks; T-shirts ripped and fashioned back together with large holes and rips, shirts cut up and fashioned back together with safety pins and

threadbare sweaters.¹⁸ Although McLaren and Westwood greatly influenced the Punk aesthetic, it was in how the later years of Punk transitioned towards the commodification of the aesthetic.



Figure 2: Long-sleeved mesh shirt with Swastika, *Seditionaries* pg. 98.

¹⁵ Cathi Unsworth and Pamela Rooke, *Defying Gravity: Jordan's Story* (Omnibus Press, 2019), 69.

¹⁶ *Rotten: No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs*, 92.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 102.

¹⁸ Takahashi, Jun, and Hiroshi Fujiwara. *Seditionaries*. Tokyo, 2005.

During the beginnings of Sex and eventually Seditonaries, those within the scene made the styles themselves due to the high prices of the store as many of them were working-class youth. Shock and provocation were further integrated into Punk fashion with the help of Westwood's designs and led to many seeing it as a "revolting style" comprised of "the most unremarkable and inappropriate items."¹⁹

Shock was a part of Punk from the very beginning, especially with the clothes. The ripped clothes, bright dyed hair, and phrases written on shirts were usually the limit, but 430 King's Road took that to a different level. Westwood's use of latex and designs of bondage into fashion were brought into the Punk fashion aesthetic with her and McLaren's boutiques. Rubber clothes, t-shirts with naked bodies, and swastikas on various items would make their way into the Punk scene and become a standard dress.²⁰ The use of the swastika was a point of conflict within the scene and out, with those who wore it saying it was used to be a "symbolic reminder of a previous descent into socioeconomic and political crisis."²¹ The media focused heavily on the controversial fashion of Punk before anything else, with news articles of Siouxsie Sioux and Steve Severin referring to Punk as a crazy cult and other early articles on Punk emphasizing the bizarre fashion.²² As Punk continued to grow as a movement and develop beyond fashion into music and art, the media focus shifted from the clothes to the music and the scene that supported them.

¹⁹ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (New York: Methuen, 1979), 107.

²⁰ *Seditonaries*.

²¹ Matthew Worley, *No Future: Punk, Politics and British Youth Culture, 1976-1984* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 229.

²² *Ibid*, 37.

Amateurs, Anger and Anarchy

The beginnings of Punk music existed as the intersection of cultural critique and a natural extension of the Punk movement. The end of the 1960s signaled rock's transition into popular music and toward serious artistry with the release of the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. Ushering in psychedelia, synthesizers, and the concept album took rock away from its skiffle band origins and turned it into a genre that many felt no connection with. NME writer Mick Farren would note this shift in an article he wrote in January of 1976, "There seems to be a kind of rule emerging that when rock and roll gets wrapped up in too much money, it begins to lose its guts. The kind of insulation that the corporate salesmen wrap around the musician tends to shut him off from the kind of essential street energy that is so vital to the best of rock and roll..."²³ Punk came out of this need to create something that could be related to and the need to say something about the state of England and London at this time.

"We had no money, no job, no nothing. So the Pistols projected that working-class hate."²⁴ Rock music had become over-engineered and devoid of reality while London was being consumed by the economic and political turmoil of the 1970s. Punk music sought to remedy this with a return to the beginnings of rock in England before it had lost its way. Punk music was concerned with a return to the basics of rock, to return to what could be easily replicated and easily accessed. At the end of the first issue of *Sniffin' Glue* fanzine in 1976, Mark Perry wrote exactly that "... it's all about rock in it's lowest form – on the level of the streets. Kids jamming together in dad's garage, poor equipment, tight clothes, empty heads..."²⁵ This back-to-basics idea was reflected in the sound of many punk bands and the rapid debut of new bands. Numerous

²³ Mick Farren, 'Is Rock 'n' Roll Ready for 1976?', *New Musical Express*, 3 January 1976, pp.18–19.

²⁴ *Rotten: No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs*, 109.

²⁵ Mark Perry, "The London Scene - Punk Wise!" *Sniffin' Glue*, no. 1 1976, 8.

bands like the Sex Pistols noted not being able to play or sing, “I could mime fine, but of course I couldn’t sing a note” said John Lydon (Johnny Rotten) in his autobiography regarding his “audition” for the Sex Pistols.²⁶ Siouxsie and the Banshees’ impromptu debut at the 100 Club Punk Festival following a different band dropping out reflects this mentality of Punk music. This idea that those on stage could play these instruments at the same level as the audience bridged the gap

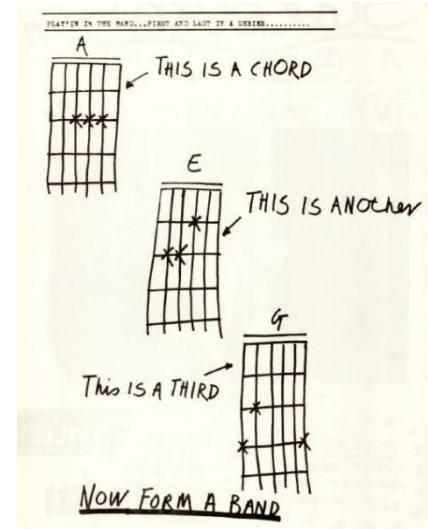


Figure 3: *Sideburns*, no.1 1977, p.2.

that had been formed with previous rock bands, creating a music scene centered on anyone who could play at any level. The encouragement of amateurism within Punk music became another facet of the DIY ethos of punk as seen in the first issue of *Sideburns* fanzine released in 1977 (Fig.3). A permanent marker drawing of three guitar chords with the phrase “NOW FORM A BAND” perfectly showcases how the Punk ethos translated into the musical facet of the movement: a quick, imperfect drawing calling for fans to form their own bands rather than remain fans.

In addition to Punk’s DIY ethos, the music and bands would adopt the political nature of the movement itself. Accompanying the simplified chords were lyrics that discussed race, capitalism, fascism, and the decline of England as a whole. The Sex Pistols’ “God Save The Queen” is among the most well-known with its opening lines “God save the Queen / The fascist regime” immediately setting the tone for the rest of the song. The song continues to reference Elizabeth II with lines such as “She ain’t no human being” and “our figurehead / Is not what she seems.” Calling the Queen inhuman and referring to her as simply a figurehead refers to a

²⁶Rotten: *No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs*, 95.

growing sentiment of the time that the Crown were mere puppets to Parliament and were a representation of a long-dead England.²⁷ A band often cited as among the most continuously political within Punk is The Clash, formed in 1976 in London. Their debut single “White Riot” while being misinterpreted by some as a call for a race war, was written to criticize racism and class economics. The lyrics “Black man gotta lot a problems / But they don't mind throwing a brick / White people go to school / Where they teach you how to be thick” praised black youth for fighting against systemic oppression within England while criticizing white youth for taking what they’re taught at face value.²⁸ The song goes on to criticize the power given to the wealthy and those who refuse to stand up against their oppressors. A later Clash song, “English Civil War”, is another example of the continued presence of politics in Punk music. Describing a future fascist England, the song is a criticism of the fascist group the National Front and a warning of what England would become if they continued their rise.²⁹ Punk music began out of the desire to express the distaste and disillusionment English youth had been experiencing and that was exactly what it had become. Using music to criticize the numerous problems within English society and to call for change brought more people into the movement but also made it more difficult for groups to find places to perform.

With the number of Punk bands rising, the need for a place to enjoy and support them continued to grow. Up until this point, the early Punk bands had been playing gigs at colleges and pubs. While this may have worked when there were few fans and even fewer bands, the increasing scale and reputation of Punk required clubs where Punks could come together and

²⁷ The Sex Pistols, “God Save The Queen.” Recorded October 1976, March-August 1977, Virgin Records AMS 7284, 7” vinyl.

²⁸ The Clash, “White Riot” Recorded February 1977, CBS S CBS 5058, 7” vinyl.

²⁹ The Clash, “England Civil War” Recorded 1978, CBS CBS 7082, 7” vinyl.

support their scene. The first London Punk club was The Roxy, with its first 100 days before management changed hands being instrumental in providing Punk bands with an outlet and exposure. Located in Covent Garden, the club hosted numerous bands who became synonymous with Punk such as Generation X, The Damned, The Buzzcocks, X-Ray Spex, and a slew of others.³⁰ The Roxy switched management following the first 100 days and many said it wouldn't regain the original atmosphere, but it had laid the foundation for the London Punk scene. More clubs such as The Vortex, founded by the co-founder of The Roxy Andrew Czewowski, sprang up as the scene continued to grow further cultivating the scene and providing a space for Punk to exist. The importance of these clubs to London Punk shows the importance of the community surrounding Punk to its development and very existence. Fans of Punk themselves filled in the blanks to create a space for themselves and what they love and in turn uplift the bands and culture they loved. This practice of fans creating the means to support the scene they loved continued into other aspects of Punk specifically in how fanzines were used to disseminate information on the scene.

Fresh off the Xerox

While not unique to Punk or music fan culture in general, fanzines and their designs have become ubiquitous with Punk music and aesthetics. The first Punk fanzine, *Sniffin' Glue* (Fig.4), was created by fan and future Punk musician Mark Perry following a gig in the summer of 1976 when he saw there were no British magazines for Punk.³¹ Made cheaply with a kids' typewriter and Xeroxed for free at his girlfriend's job, *Sniffin' Glue* would call for London punk fans to build their scene up and "make somethin' real happen."³² The look of fanzines also came to

³⁰ Paul Marko, *The Roxy, London WC2: A Punk History* (Punk77, 2007), 39-73.

³¹ Mark Perry, *Sniffin' Glue and Other Rock "n" Roll Habits: The Essential Punk Accessory*, 15.

³² *Sniffin' Glue and Other Rock "n" Roll Habits: The Essential Punk Accessory*, 16; *Sniffin' Glue*, no.1, 7.

represent and was absorbed into the well-known aesthetic. Other London fanzines such as *Sideburns*, *In The City*, and *Panache* came about in the wake of *Sniffin' Glue*, all continuing and further developing the quick DIY look. The addition of photographs to these zines as they continued to further develop the punk aesthetic by bringing in the now well-known ripped collage. Containing album reviews, gig stories, overall thoughts on Punk, and later on interviews, fanzines took the place of mainstream music journalism for the developing Punk scene. Reinforcing Punk as a challenge to the mainstream music industry and media, fanzines were a means of defining and discussing the scene with those surrounded by it. Perry's words from *Sniffin' Glue* issue 3 ½ share the sentiment of keeping everything Punk within



Figure 4: *Sniffin' Glue* no. 1, 1976.

the scene saying “This ‘new wave’ has got to take in everything, including posters, record cover, stage presentation, the lot! ...they’ll be coming soon, all those big companies out to make more money on the ‘new, young bands’.”³³ Fanzines played a crucial role in bringing up the Punk scene as they were the only means of getting information on Punk beyond word of mouth early on. They became mouthpieces of the Punk community providing information on local bands, and gig schedules while also discussing events in the scene and the world.

Fanzines became not only integral to the music industry built within the Punk scene but also to developing Punk’s identity within the realm of politics and social commentary. In addition to musical content, fanzines would have political content, much of it relating to the socio-cultural struggles that were taking place at this time. Much of it took the form of interview questions for various bands but it also was seen in editor columns and general articles which

³³ *Sniffin' Glue*, no. 3 ½, 4.

became almost an open forum debate. The ability to write into fanzines allowed for commentary on political issues and questions of how Punk as a mentality and movement fit into it. This can be seen at an almost extreme level in the various anarchist fanzines that were created, as in London fanzines *Kick* and *Kill Your Pet Puppy*. While they didn't reflect the political view of all punks, these fanzines showed what many saw as a natural extension of Punk's DIY and anti-establishment mentality. The same anti-establishment thought would see the creation of fanzines such as *Jolt* and *Drastic Measures* which focused on discussing sexism and racism in the larger world and in relation to the Punk/Rock



Figure 5: *Jolt* no.3, 1977.

scenes.³⁴ Notably *Drastic Measures* was a fanzine created by the organization Rock Against Sexism, an offshoot of Rock Against Racism (RAR). RAR centered itself around the reggae and punk scenes due to their rising popularity among youth and the National Front's attempts to recruit white youth within the Punk scene.³⁵

Founded in the late 1960s the National Front was a far-right group that had been steadily growing as England continued to experience hardship, with the group attributing it to the increase in nonwhite immigrants since the 1960s. In 1976, the National Front gained new support because of the continuing economic crisis and the welcoming of expelled Asian immigrants from Malawi into England. Increased public demonstrations by the group and rising racial violence against England's black population would lead to the founding of several anti-fascist and anti-

³⁴ Matthew Worley, "Punk, Politics and British (Fan)Zines, 1976-84: 'While the World Was Dying, Did You Wonder Why?,'" *History Workshop Journal* 79, no. 1 (2015): 76–106, 92.

³⁵ Evan Smith. "Are the Kids United?: The Communist Party of Great Britain, Rock Against Racism, and the Politics of Youth Culture." *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 5, no. 2 (2011): 85–117, 89.

racism groups.³⁶ Rock Against Racism formed the same year, however, it was be sparked by a racist outburst by rock and blues musician Eric Clapton where he demanded to “Keep Britain white.”³⁷ Music critics and journalists alike released a letter condemning Clapton’s comments and calling for a movement to fight against the “racist poison in rock music.”³⁸ Punk bands such as The Clash and X-Ray Spex would voice their support for RAR and perform at a number of events to help raise awareness. RAR and others' use of fanzines to further cultivate the politics Punk was founded on cemented these beliefs as part of the Punk aesthetic and the legacy of Punk as a whole.

Fanzines provide a window into the fan culture of Punk London and how fans filled in the missing pieces within the scene that were created because of Punk’s underground nature. The dedication to creating and uplifting this new scene by fans shows just how many people felt a connection to Punk and how needed it was. All of this goes to show how important fans were to Punk as creators, collaborators, critics, and journalists; all coming together to support the message and change Punk stood for.

In the end

Punk continued to coast on the edges of the mainstream consciousness until The Sex Pistols interview with Bill Grundy in December of 1976 would cement it as a shock culture in the eyes of the media and much of England. The incident in which Grundy provoked Steve Jones and Johnny Rotten of the Sex Pistols to swear on live TV³⁹ made Punk out to be violent and

³⁶ “Are the Kids United?: The Communist Party of Great Britain, Rock Against Racism, and the Politics of Youth Culture.”, 86-88.

³⁷ Ian Goodyer, *Crisis Music: The Cultural Politics of Rock against Racism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), 10.

³⁸ *New Musical Express*, September 11, 1976, 50.

³⁹ *England’s Dreaming*, 257-259.

crude and thrust it into the mainstream. Punk would continue into the 1980s with it now in the mainstream. At this point despite Punk's focus on authenticity and individuality, it became filled with cliches and standards that sought to "define" it for those who came after the initial years.

Hebdige describes this transition to the mainstream as the decline of Punk with what was once scrutinized in Punk fashion being turned into marketable goods, resulting in what was sold by Westwood and McLaren becoming the

blueprint for mainstream Punk. This resulted in the fashion that was once innovative and differing by the person becoming "frozen" as Hebdige puts it, understandable for the masses and going against what it originated from.⁴⁰ This is not to say that Punk is dead, this could not be further from the truth as the London Punk scene continued to thrive and Punk as a subculture is still prominent today. However, the London scene in its infancy was incredibly different due to the need for fans to provide what the mainstream media would not and because of how much Punk revolved around its core tenets of amateurism, individuality, and DIY. With a lack of mainstream attention and a smaller scene, Punk bands and fans relied on one another to keep Punk alive and progressing.

As Punk exploded following its entrance into the mainstream, the codependency between fans and bands became one-sided as record labels and media began to cash in. While recognition from mainstream media would normally be good for a new genre, providing opportunities and new fans for the bands, this cannot be said for Punk. The genre and aesthetic were commodified



Figure 6: The Daily Mirror, "The Filth and the Fury!", December 2, 1976.

⁴⁰ *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, 96.

while also being vilified in the media, bringing in fans while also leading to bans on performances. The new fans largely reflected the commodification of Punk rather than the original Punk mentality. Perry comments on this stating, “There were all these people starting to come in to it and they were dressing how they thought they had to dress and they were thinking the way they thought they should think because they thought that’s what you had to do to be a punk or be involved in it.”⁴¹ This shift within the scene signaled the Punk aesthetic going from one that existed as a statement to one that was used as proof. The cliches and development of a “Punk uniform” created a mold that new fans fell victim to and reinforced, removing the aesthetic from its foundation of individuality.

Throughout this paper, the nature of Punk has been explored and defined by the nature of its aesthetic. Built on authenticity, individuality, and doing any and all things yourself, Punk became an all-encompassing aesthetic and idea. Each facet of Punk’s development as a scene within London and as an aesthetic was intertwined with one another emphasizing this point. The nature of Punk meant a reliance on those usually not seen as key parts of development in many scenes or subcultures, the fans. The call for fans within the young London Punk scene to build it up rather than sit on the sidelines is evidence of the mentality that Punk encouraged. The desire to create a space where disillusioned youth could be heard led to an unapologetic subculture of who they had become in the midst of 1970s London. England’s continued economic crisis, housing shortage, and growing far-right created a generation who saw no future in their current way of life. The established government and culture provided no outlet, allowing Punk to take form as a lifestyle, music genre, graphic style, fashion, and political mentality.

⁴¹ *Sniffin’ Glue and Other Rock “n” Roll Habits: The Essential Punk Accessory*, 116.

All of this, like many other things, comes to one question: so what? What is the point of analyzing a youth subculture, especially one as well-researched as Punk within London? There are many conflicting views, thoughts, and opinions on Punk both among historians and those present at the beginning of the scene. The point that I present and the reason for this paper is to see how Punk acted as a working-class, on-the-street aesthetic rather than the art school one that many present. The differentiation between the two is important since without acknowledging the former, Punk loses much of its heart. Punk, especially within London at its beginning was made of people drawn together, a scene created to foster the mindset that became the basis for all that became associated with Punk. Presenting London Punk as a purposeful creation of art school graduates and intense philosophy removes and goes against much of what was written about Punk at the moment. To see the reality of Punk you have to look at the fans and what they created like fanzines, clubs, record labels, and an entire identity. The importance of youth subcultures is often diminished or looked over but ignoring them is to ignore the changing world. Youth subcultures have routinely been the marker of change coming to the world, created in the wake of continued strife in hopes of finding an outlet to express the need for change. Understanding how the Punk aesthetic developed allows one to understand how important youth and fans are to the larger scope of pop culture and the music industry which are in turn important to the social and cultural factors of the world.

Works Cited

Primary

“BBC on This Day | 20 | 1972: UK Unemployment Tops One Million.” BBC News, January 20, 1972.
http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/january/20/newsid_2506000/2506897.stm.

Clash, The. “England Civil War.” Recorded 1978. CBS CBS 7082, 7” vinyl.

Clash, The. “White Riot.” Recorded February 1977. CBS S CBS 5058, 7” vinyl.

Farren, Mick “Is Rock ‘n’ Roll Ready for 1976?”, *New Musical Express*, January 3, 1976.

Lydon, John, Keith Zimmerman, and Kent Zimmerman. *Rotten: No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs: The Authorized Autobiography: Johnny Rotten of the Sex Pistols*. London: Coronet, 1993.

Moon, Tony. *Sideburns* no. 1, 1977.

New Musical Express, September 11, 1976.

Perry, Mark. *Sniffin’ glue and other rock “n” roll habits: The essential punk accessory*. London: Omnibus, 2009.

———. *Sniffin’ Glue + Other Rock ‘N’ Roll Habits For Punks!* no. 1, 1976.

———. *Sniffin’ Glue + Other Rock ‘N’ Roll Habits For Punks!* no. 3 ½, 1976.

Sex Pistols, The. “God Save The Queen.” Recorded October 1976, March-August 1977. Virgin Records AMS 7284, 7” vinyl.

Takahashi, Jun, and Hiroshi Fujiwara. *Seditionaries*. Tokyo, 2005.

“The Filth and The Fury!” *The Daily Mirror*, December 2, 1976.

Toothpaste, Lucy. *Jolt* no. 3, 1976.

World Development Report 1985. New York: Published for the World Bank, Oxford University Press, 1985.

Secondary

Goodyer, Ian. *Crisis music: The cultural politics of rock against racism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019.

- Guerra, Paula, and Henrique Grimaldi Figueredo. "Today Your Style, Tomorrow the World: Punk, Fashion and Visual Imaginary." *ModaPalavra* 12, no. 23 (2018): 112–47.
- Hebdige, Dick. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. New York: Methuen, 1979.
- Marko, Paul. *The Roxy, London WC2: A punk history*. Punk77, 2007.
- Mifflin, Margot. "England's Dreaming." *The New York Times*, April 26, 1992.
<https://www.nytimes.com/1992/04/26/books/in-short-nonfiction.html>.
- Milligan, Rowan. "The Politics of the Crowbar: Squatting in London, 1968-1977". *Anarchist Studies*, 2016.
- Savage, Jon. *England's Dreaming: Anarchy, Sex Pistols, Punk Rock, and Beyond*. London: Faber and Faber, 2005.
- Smith, Evan. "Are the Kids United?: The Communist Party of Great Britain, Rock Against Racism, and the Politics of Youth Culture." *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 5, no. 2 (2011): 85–117.
- Tiratsoo, Nick. *From Blitz to Blair: A New history of Britain Since 1939*. London: Phoenix, 1998.
- Unsworth, Cathi, and Pamela Rooke. *Defying Gravity: Jordan's Story*. Omnibus Press, 2019.
- Wall, Christine. "Sisterhood and Squatting in the 1970s: Feminism, Housing and Urban Change in Hackney." *History Workshop Journal* 83, no. 1 (2017): 79–97.
- Worley, Matthew. *No future: Punk, Politics and British Youth Culture, 1976-1984*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.
- . "Punk, Politics and British (Fan)Zines, 1976-84: 'While the World Was Dying, Did You Wonder Why?'" *History Workshop Journal* 79, no. 1 (2015): 76–106.