

“We Accept You, One of Us?”:
Punk Rock, Community, and Individualism in an Uncertain Era, 1974-1985

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Abstract

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“We Accept You, One of Us?”:
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(Under the direction of Peter G. Filene)

This dissertation is a study of a musical subculture and how it illuminates changing ideas of self and society in a pivotal decade in U.S. history. Punk rock burst onto the Atlantic music world in the 1970s in defiance of existing rock aesthetics and practices but proceeded to challenge the status quo in many realms of society, culture, and politics. This work examines punk in New York, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C., and is interdisciplinary, drawing on cultural geography, literary theory, and performance ethnography. The project analyzes a variety of sources, including oral history, printed texts, and visual and audio culture. While this range of methods and theories is useful, they are grounded in history’s emphasis on context, narrative, and change over time. By examining punk in a historical context, the dissertation makes two broad claims. First, punks were descendants of an extended line of American cultural rebels – including bohemians, beats, and hippies – who rejected their middle-class roots and sought alternative forms of self-fashioning. Second, punk rockers belonged to an international cohort in the 1970s seeking new sources of belonging as trust in traditional sources of community waned. With its increased emphasis on self-actualization and self-definition, the 1970s – and punk rock – therefore marked a critical juncture in the history of the self in America. Punk rock began as simple efforts by individual, unconnected people to make music that fulfilled them,

something they hoped might revitalize the music industry. Over time, these discrete and disparate people and labors grew into a subculture whose music, publications, art, and lifestyle became a powerful critique of not only the music business but also the family, institutional authority, suburbia, dominant gender mores, and mainstream consumerism. Aesthetically diverse, a punk sensibility valued individuality above all else and allowed participants to be alternately angry, cynical, ironic, or hedonistically joyful. Despite punk rockers' best efforts, these attributes they wore on their sleeves – individualism, apathy, hedonism, and irony – could not mask their very strong desires for existential meaning, a yearning to belong to something worthwhile. Punks came together in an inherently unstable community celebrating individualism.

To my family:
Tom, Robin, Beck, Dad, Mom, Roger, Tracy, Matthew, Margaret, William.

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Mom someday. Tracy and Matthew: Your examples and support are always on my mind.

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Preface

This project has intense personal meaning for me, because punk rock was my first and greatest love in music. I discovered punk in a fashion similar to so many of my informants; my friend Phillip played a homemade tape of the Clash's first album for me in 1981. I was hooked. Doing recent history on a subject in which I have a deep personal investment invites criticism of the project as simply closet autobiography. Historians Michel de Certeau and Warren Susman offer advice in this area. According to de Certeau, the practice of history is "an endless labor of differentiation," the movement back and forth between "two poles of the 'real'," the past and the present. Historians never can escape the fact that they produce works of fiction that are to some degree autobiographical, but the "limits of the real" guide their interpretations. Warren Susman expresses a similar idea by stating that the "writing of history is as personal an act as the writing of fiction." This assertion is doubly true in studies of recent history. How do historians of the recent past avoid writing closet autobiography? De Certeau and Susman probably would say that they cannot avoid doing so to some degree. Susman reminds us, however, "if works of history can often be read as autobiographical, this does not mean that that is all they are."¹ Thus for me, my task as a cultural historian is to negotiate between the two poles of the real – the past and the present, my historical memories of punk and that of my informants – as I attempt to describe evanescent moments and patterns of meaning.

¹ Michel de Certeau, The Writing of History, trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 3, 36-7; Warren Susman, Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century (New York: Pantheon, 1984), xiii.

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INTRODUCTION

What is punk rock?

John: What is punk rock?

Legs: Rock 'n' roll that's raw and loud and minimal. ... Short + fast, minimal amount of chords, stuff that isn't polished - raw.

John: I think also it's like stripping rock down to the essentials. Less is more. ... It's a reaction to rock music bein' a corporate structure and to the stupid excesses and star trips rock stars exhibit.

John Holmstrom and Legs McNeil, founders of PUNK magazine.

You know, punk wasn't really just fast guitar music. In fact, every band had kind of their own sound at first. Punk was sort of like this idea to be different.

Mike Watt, bassist for the Minutemen.

Punk is saying fuck rock 'n' roll. Punk is saying fuck punk rock. ... Punk is passé. Punk is just a word dug by media. ... Punk is a meaningless word that everybody is sick to death of purporting to represent a state of mind and lifestyle which while not so very complex cannot be reduced any further than it has been already in inchoate preverbal practice.

Lester Bangs, rock critic and musician¹

Defining punk is like trying to nail Jello to the wall: you might be able to do it for a moment, but it won't stick. For more than thirty years, heated debates have raged in punk circles about what the term signifies and who has the right to define it, but no easy answers have emerged. Generally punks can agree to the loose notion that "punk is an attitude/ individuality is the key."² It was a yearning to be different, to distance oneself from the mainstream mass of society. But punk was also a desire for community, a hunger for

¹ John Holmstrom and Legs McNeil, "Exposing the Punk Menace," High Times, February 1977, 53; Mike Watt, interview for the Experience Music Project (EMP), transcript, 1999, 9; Lester Bangs, "Everybody's Search for Roots (The Roots of Punk, Part 1)," New Wave, August 1977; reprinted in Mainlines, Blood Feasts, and Bad Taste: A Lester Bangs Reader, ed. John Morthland (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), 338-9.

² Wrecks, "Punk is an Attitude," *Not So Quiet on the Western Front*, Alternative Tentacles, 1982. For examples of debates about punk's meaning in fanzines, see Claude Bessy, "Editorial," Slash, vol. 1 no. 4 September 1977, 3; and "Letter from Barbara Ritchie," Flipside, vol. 41, 1984, 7.

fellowship with like-minded souls who sought an alternative to mindless consumerism. As a community built on individualism and desires to be distinctive, punk was inherently unstable. If a definition of punk became too entrenched, punk rockers began to see within their own community evidence of the sheep-like conformity they detested in mainstream society, and they therefore felt the need to change. As rock critic and musician Lester Bangs suggested, “Punk is saying fuck punk rock.” As a result, “punkness” was always a moving target.

When even its most ardent participants found it difficult to articulate a clear definition of punk, how can scholars define it from a distance? According to its followers, punk was primarily “an attitude” or a sensibility. As cultural critic Susan Sontag advised, “a sensibility is one of the hardest things to talk about.” A historian “may capture the ideas (intellectual history) and the behavior (social history)” of an era or a phenomenon “without ever touching upon [its] sensibility or taste.”³ Efforts at capturing a punk sensibility are particularly fraught with difficulties, for punk rockers celebrated individual efforts at creating meaning, even – or especially – if the meaning was transient. The fact that punks understood themselves and their subculture primarily through individual outlooks makes it clear that they placed the self at the center of their project. What were the chief elements of punk rockers’ efforts at self-fashioning? Not surprisingly, first and foremost was a strong emphasis on individual subjectivity. For punks there was no ultimate truth or authority, no bible of punk;

³ Susan Sontag, Against Interpretation and Other Essays (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1966), 275-6. Historians themselves share Sontag’s concerns about the elusiveness of historical meaning. Michel de Certeau states that history “assumes a gap to exist between the silent opacity of the ‘reality’ that it seeks to express and the place where it produces its own speech.” The “reality” history seeks to express is, of course, the past, while the “place” where it produces its own speech is the present. The act of writing history, therefore, is “an endless labor of differentiation,” the movement back and forth between “two poles of the ‘real’,” the past and the present. [Michel de Certeau, The Writing of History, trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 10, 36-7.]

everything was subjective. Defining a punk mindset is nonetheless a task worth attempting, keeping in mind that it, like Jello, is slippery.

Because meaning in music is so subjective, George Lipsitz believes Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogic meaning through polyphony provides a particularly apt method of interpreting the history of popular music. For Bakhtin, ideas enter dialogue and thereby take on specific – if fleeting – meaning through the utterance. Once ideas become utterances, they always have both a “referential object” and another discourse, and thus meaning is dynamic. As soon as an idea takes on form as an utterance, it is in dialogue with another listener, another reader, and even with itself. Thus utterances yield an unending conversation with themselves and other ideas. For Bakhtin, “The idea *lives* not in one person's *isolated* individual consciousness – if it remains there only, it degenerates and dies.” Instead, the idea “begins to live,” that is to take on meaning, “to take shape, to develop, to find and renew its verbal expression, to give birth to new ideas, only when it enters into genuine dialogic relationship with other ideas, with the ideas of *others*.” Put simply, meaning never is; it is eternally becoming, ongoing, ever changing, sometimes yielding harmony, sometimes dissonance. Bakhtin's theories are especially appropriate for analysis of punk rock, a musical movement that wanted to “reinvent everything” and relied heavily on individualism and spontaneity.⁴

In addition to individual subjectivity, punk expression rested on a faith in do-it-yourself (DIY) efforts. The subculture celebrated effort and sincerity over professionalism

⁴ Italics in original. For Bakhtin, ideas “must clothe themselves in discourse, become utterance, ... in order that dialogic relationships might arise among them.” [Mikhail Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson, with an introduction by Wayne Booth (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1984), 86-7, 183.] George Lipsitz, Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1990), 99-132.

and polish; it called for people to do it now rather than wait to be able to do it perfectly. The DIY ethos grew out of a deep sense of boredom with mainstream popular culture.

Photographer Roberta Bayley commented on the origins of PUNK magazine, the first punk fanzine: “life was boring then! That's why we did this.”⁵ Doing it yourself might have meant forming a band before you even learned to play your instrument. Who said you had to be a virtuoso to play rock? It could have involved typing, cutting, pasting, and photocopying a fanzine in an era preceding personal computers. Why should Rolling Stone have exclusive rights to rock criticism? DIY might have necessitated recording your band in your mother's garage on a basic four-track recorder in order to release a single. Why wait for some record executive to decide you were “good” enough? Or it might well have required you to open an illegal underground club so your music could be heard. So what if you couldn't play at the Whisky a Go-Go? Rock ‘n’ roll was about rebellion, not making the big time.

Punk's DIY ideology and emphasis on amateurism went hand-in-hand with its beliefs that rock ‘n’ roll should be by and for young people and that it should emphasize the here and now. Label and fanzine owner Greg Shaw editorialized, “In America, punk rock is a musical statement about the way rock and roll ought to be played.” Punks wanted to move rock away from corporate boardrooms and rock stars' jets back to garages where – in their minds – it belonged. Exene Cervenka of the Los Angeles band X described punk as “a direct revolt against the excesses of the 70's and also of the 60's, and it was very anti-cocaine, anti-limo, anti-groupie.” The punk sensibility also relied heavily on a sense of immediacy. According to Arto Lindsay, guitarist for the New York No-Wave band, DNA, “[Punk] was ... about

⁵ Roberta Bayley quoted in Charlotte Robinson, “She Just Takes Pictures,” PopMatters, 30 August 2000, <http://www.popmatters.com/music/features/000830-bayley.html>, accessed 26 October 2007.

loosening up right then and there, in the moment.”⁶ This attention to the moment meant that punks, following in the Beats’ footsteps, often viewed live performance as the most authentic and valuable form of artistic expression, the one most fraught with cultural – and necessarily subjective and fleeting – meaning.

A punk sensibility included an odd mix of earnestness and fun, on the one hand, and anger and irony, on the other. These young people could be sincerely genuine in expressing their emotions and almost joyful in their decadence, but their anger or joy was often tinged with irony because – especially in early punk – they did not believe that society would change for the better. As Lindsay baldly phrased it, “It was self-evident to us that the system sucked.”⁷ Despite their recognition of serious social, political, and economic flaws in their world, punks were less likely to choose the sort of social engagement demonstrated by some countercultural rock of the sixties, nor did they seek the unabashed escapism of disco rhythms or stoner southern rock. Punk rock could be an escape, but even when it was, punks usually acknowledged the darker elements of American life. Their artistic output ranged from humorous to cynical, from angry to playful, and in an existential fashion, they highlighted the absurdity of modern life but partied on nonetheless.

Next in a punk sensibility was its love affair with pastiche. As the true postmoderns they were, punks drew freely from highbrow culture, lowbrow culture, and places in between, picking and choosing as they went, bound by no formal ideology. Punks looked to French symbolists like Arthur Rimbaud as well as kids’ shows like the *Banana Splits*

⁶ Greg Shaw, “Punk Politics: The Kids are Mostly Right...,” *Bomp!*, vol. 3, no. 7, November 1977, 16-7; Exene Cervenka, interview by the Experience Music Project (EMP), transcript, Los Angeles, Calif., 29 April 1998, 2; Arto Lindsay, interview by author, tape recording, New York, N.Y., 26 June 2002.

⁷ Lindsay, interview by author, 2002.

Adventure Hour and *Wallace and Labmo*; they were inspired by both German expressionist film and Mad magazine; they drew on noir fiction as well as B-grade horror movies.

Furthermore, unlike the moderns who, despite their efforts to escape the cultural canon, mourned the loss of unity and a grand narrative, punks embraced the confusion and diffusion of their era, celebrating it in sardonic, self-destructive, and funny ways, because, well, “we all gotta duck when the shit hits the fan.”⁸ They thus lived relatively comfortably with a postmodern epistemology that dictated their inability to provide an adequate objective account of reality.

Why study punk?

For scholars of rock history, punk is important in and of itself. It burst onto the Anglo-American music world in the mid-1970s as a challenge to rock aesthetics as well as the corporate structures of the music industry. Initially punk rockers wanted to transform and revitalize a “diseased” industry that they believed no longer represented rebellion or youth. Despite the success of a few early punk groups like the Talking Heads and Blondie, punks failed to revolutionize the music industry and popular tastes. Over time they therefore abandoned their efforts at large-scale reform and contented themselves with fostering a permanent underground built on do-it-yourself fanzines, record labels, and touring circuits, an underground that continues today. Although punk remained culturally marginalized

⁸ Quote is from the Circle Jerks, “When the Shit Hits the Fan,” *Golden Shower of Hits*, LAX, 1983. Sociologist Ryan Moore, influenced by Jean-François Lyotard, looks at punk “as a response to ‘the condition of postmodernity,’ defined as a crisis of meaning caused by the commodification of everyday life” in “Postmodernism and Punk Subculture: Cultures of Authenticity and Deconstruction,” Communication Review 7, no. 3 (July-September 2004): 305-27; and “Anarchy in the USA: Capitalism, Postmodernity, and Punk Subculture Since the 1970s” (Ph.D. diss., University of California-San Diego, 2000). Benard Gendron sees in punk an alliance, or a “friendly encounter” between high and low culture, a conscious appropriation across boundaries, with a positive view of that appropriation. [Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club: Popular Music and the Avant-Garde (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 17-9.]

through the early 1990s, punks laid the groundwork for the development of “indie rock” in the 1980s and 1990s, a musical movement that picked up punk’s DIY torch.⁹ And when Nirvana and grunge rockers emerged in the early nineties, they acknowledged their roots in punk and thereby introduced punk to mainstream rock audiences.

For scholars less interested in the history of rock ‘n’ roll, punk rock bears significance for what it tells us about youth cultures, consumerism, gender, and place in the 1970s and 1980s. First, punks were descendants of an extended line of American cultural rebels – including bohemians, beats, and hippies – who rejected their middle-class roots and sought alternative forms of self-fashioning. For punk rockers, this self-determination came most obviously through the music they played and listened to, but it also emerged through the clothes they wore, the fanzines, flyers, and other art they created, and their lifestyles as a whole. They strove to be “self-invented” people in every aspect of their lives.¹⁰ Punk rockers had ambivalent relationships with previous youth cultures, particularly the counterculture of the 1960s. They simultaneously admired and distanced themselves from their predecessors as they struggled to adhere to punk’s admonition to be entirely new.

Punk rock also has an important place in intellectual history’s concern with the history of the self. The subculture was one of the brashest and most thoroughgoing expressions of disillusionment and discontent in post-Vietnam, post-Watergate America. Despite being a relatively small subculture, as one of the more overtly rebellious cultural expressions of the period, punk offers a prism through which to examine both margins and center. In the words of anthropologist Barbara A. Babcock, “What is socially peripheral is

⁹ For insight into indie rock, an excellent source is Michael Azzerad, Our Band Could Be Your Life: Scenes from the American Indie Underground 1981-1991 (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2001).

¹⁰ Duncan Hannah, interview by author, tape recording, New York, N.Y., 26 June 2002.

often symbolically central.”¹¹ Punk rock was one of the many ways in which Americans reconfigured community as they lost faith in authority figures, including politicians, the church, and their elders. Punk rockers made it abundantly clear they had little confidence in the government, their parents, or their schools. Without trust in such traditional sources of belonging, to whom or what would they – or other Americans – turn? The primacy punk rock placed on a “self-invented” individualism is illustrative of a broader trend in American society toward self-actualization and self-definition. The 1970s therefore marked a critical juncture in the history of the self in America, and punk was part of that story.

Punk rockers’ efforts to achieve individual self-invention in a community setting predictably yielded conflicts. These tensions between individualism and community expressed themselves in a number of areas, including debates over mass culture and consumerism, localism and staking a place within the subculture, what it meant to be young in the seventies and eighties, and the various femininities and masculinities articulated in the subculture. Sometimes these tensions caused serious friction or even factionalism within the community. More often, however, punks simply allowed the tensions to exist, because – like many artistic expression of the era – their subculture expected and even valued internal contradictions. Life simply wasn’t neat and tidy in their worldview.¹²

¹¹ Barbara A. Babcock, The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1978), 32.

¹² Shelton Waldrep, “Introducing the Seventies,” in The Seventies: The Age of Glitter in Popular Culture, ed. Shelton Waldrep (New York and London: Routledge, 2000), 3.

Why write about punk?

As only the second book-length study of American punk by a historian, my dissertation most basically stakes a claim for historians in punk studies.¹³ Previous work on punk has emerged most markedly from music journalism and cultural studies. Journalistic work has tended to take the form of genre history, focusing on questions such as: Who pioneered the field? Where did it start? Who has had the most important impact on rock? While these questions are important for historical work, they limit investigation to something akin to the outdated “Great Man” approach. Early cultural studies and sociological work supplemented journalistic methods by focusing on fans, thus placing punk studies within scholarship on consumerism and leisure. Dick Hebdige’s germinal Subculture: The Meaning of Style (1979), the first major study of punk rock, represented a key example of British cultural studies’ dual focus on (working-class) agency and Saussurean semiotics. According to Hebdige, the rise of youth cultures after World War II in Britain demonstrated the collapse of consensus, but their “challenge to hegemony” was “expressed obliquely, in style.” Therefore “the struggle between different discourses,” between dominant social values and subcultures, was always “a struggle for possession of the sign.”¹⁴ In other words, Hebdige

¹³ Dewar MacLeod wrote the first history dissertation on punk, “‘Kids of the Black Hole’: Youth Culture in Postsuburbia,” (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 1998). Historian Jonathyne Briggs includes punk in his study of French popular music, “Anarchie en France: Hypermodernity and French Popular Music, 1958-1981,” (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 2006).

¹⁴ Dick Hebdige, Subculture: The Meaning of Style (London and New York: Routledge, 1979) 17. For other early cultural studies work on punk, see also Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson, eds., Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain (London and New York: Routledge, 1976); Mike Brake, The Sociology of Youth Culture and Youth Subcultures: Sex and Drugs and Rock’n’Roll? (London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980); and Steve Redhead, The End-of-the-Century Party: Youth and Pop Towards 2000 (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1990). Examples of “great-man” journalistic work on punk includes Brendan Mullen, Don Bolles, and Adam Parfrey, Lexicon Devil: The Fast Times and Short Life of Darby Crash and the Germs (Los Angeles: Feral House, 2002); Yvonne Sewall-Ruskin, High on Rebellion: Inside the Underground at Max’s Kansas City (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1998); David Bowman, This Must Be the Place: The Adventures of the Talking Heads in the Twentieth Century (New York: Harper Entertainment, 2001); James Parker, Turned On: A Biography of Henry Rollins (New York: Cooper

and much work on subcultures through the mid-1980s focused on reception of cultural artifacts and how groups altered the meaning of everyday objects and symbols, thereby offering real resistance to dominant power structures.

My research builds on cultural studies subcultural scholarship, bringing a historian's longer view and thus understanding punk as the latest in a long line of cultural rebels stretching from turn-of-the-twentieth-century bohemians through 1950s Beats and sixties hippies. In doing so, my work contributes most directly to three bodies of literature: the intertwined histories of individualism and youth cultures; the history of consumerism; and the budding historiography of the 1970s and 1980s. These lines of inquiry intersect most notably in tensions between individualism and community. Many scholars see the nineteenth century as "the golden age of individualistic thought and expression in American society," with the result that a disproportionate amount of work on individualism and the self has been devoted to that period.¹⁵ My work joins scholars such as James Collier, Richard Curry, Lawrence Goodheart, and Shelton Waldrep in arguing that the 1970s and 1980s marked a key era in the history of individualism and understandings of the self. Waldrep's work is

Square Press, 1998). Journalistic interpretations of punk in specific cities during my era include Legs McNeil and Gillian McCain, Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk (Grove Press, 1996; reprint, New York: Penguin, 1997); Clinton Heylin, From the Velvets to the Voidoids: The Birth of American Punk Rock, 2d ed. (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2005); Marc Spitz and Brendan Mullen, We Got the Neutron Bomb: The Untold Story of L.A. Punk (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001); Don Snowden, ed., Make the Music Go Bang!: The Early L.A. Punk Scene (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1997); Mark Andersen and Mark Jenkins, Dance of Days: Two Decades of Punk in the Nation's Capital (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2001); Cynthia Connolly, Leslie Clague, and Sharon Cheslow, Banned in DC: Photos and Anecdotes from the DC Punk Underground (79-85) (Washington, D.C.: Sun Dog Propaganda, 1988).

¹⁵ Richard O. Curry and Lawrence B. Goodheart, introduction to American Chameleon: Individualism in Trans-National Context (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1991), 1; James Collier, The Rise of Selfishness in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

particularly salient for my research because he argues that artistic forms in the 1970s

“constitute[d] a laboratory for experimenting with self-creation.”¹⁶

The punk project of individual self-fashioning often centered on the goods punks produced and consumed, and thus the subculture can reveal much about consumerism in the period. While recent scholarship illustrates the need to move away from a binary debate about consumer culture as oppressive or liberating, punk rock and DIY ideas have the potential to explode that debate altogether by fundamentally changing the consumer/producer relationship. Early punk scholars’ attention to reception and resistance was appropriate and understandable, because in many ways punk was an “anti” movement: anti-hippie, anti-corporate establishment, anti-suburban middle class. But punk contained constructive as well as deconstructive threads, as historian Kevin Mattson notes, and in the nineties, scholars began to examine subcultures as forces of production and pro-action as well as reception and reaction. This scholarly trend is particularly apt with regard to punk, because its DIY thrust aggressively blurred boundaries between performers and fans and specifically urged punk rockers to create meaning and community themselves rather than wait for “some big machine ...to do it for” them.¹⁷ By producing music, magazines, and other goods themselves, punks challenged a dominant ideal in twentieth-century America: the notion that an individual was more valuable more for what s/he consumed than what s/he produced.

¹⁶ Waldrep, “Introducing the Seventies,” 2.

¹⁷ Quote is Cynthia Connolly, interview for the Experience Music Project, transcript, 2 Nov 1998, 37, 34; Kevin Mattson, “Did Punk Matter?: Analyzing the Practices of a Youth Subculture During the 1980s,” American Studies 42 (Spring 2001): 70; Michael Nevin Willard, “Cutback: Skate and Punk at the Far End of the American Century,” in America in the Seventies, ed. Beth Bailey and David Farber (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2004), 181-207. Movement toward seeing punk as production is evident also in Greil Marcus, Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989); and Jon Savage, England’s Dreaming: Anarchy, Sex Pistols, Punk Rock, and Beyond (New York: St. Martin’s, 1992).

The growing historiography on the 1970s and 1980s represents a third major body of literature my work engages. The first major history of the 1970s, Peter Carroll's It Seemed Like Nothing Happened (1982), followed an early-1980s journalistic trend of defining the decade by its failures and omissions. Still, Carroll raised vital questions centering on themes of political disaffection, cultural fragmentation, and a sense of society at drift. More recently, journalist David Frum and historian Bruce Schulman describe the decade as not only historically important on its own terms, but, as Schulman states, "the most significant watershed of modern U.S. history, the beginning of our own time."¹⁸ I agree that the period from about 1968 to 1984 is one of the most critical moments in modern American history. It will be some time before historians can truly assess the impact of the era, but its political cynicism, the turn away from traditional communities, and the rise of identity politics all remain with us today and will have historical implications for some time to come.

Carroll, Frum, and Schulman each offer important precedents in their willingness to take seventies culture seriously. For example, rather than offering pejorative cracks about pet rocks and leisure suits, Carroll thoughtfully investigates such disparate cultural artifacts as *Jaws* (1975), Erica Jong's Fear of Flying (1973), and disco as reflections – respectively – of a fascination with disaster, an increased willingness to engage in frank sexual expression, and pressures on youths to conform to adult patterns and expectations. Schulman, for his part, strives for comprehensiveness in his discussion of 1970s popular culture, peppering the book with references to movies, songs, and books. Interestingly, punk rock assumes a much more prominent place in Schulman's work than in Carroll's, perhaps because punk's

¹⁸ Peter N. Carroll, It Seemed Like Nothing Happened: The Tragedy and Promise of America in the 1970s (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1982), ix; David Frum, How We Got Here: The 70s: The Decade that Brought You Modern Life – For Better or Worse (New York: Basic Books, 2000); Bruce Schulman, The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics (New York: Free Press, 2001), xii.

repercussions continued to be seen in the rock music of the '80s, '90s, and today.

Schulman's interpretation of punk emphasizes its shock value, its democratic ethos, its "ascetic" sound, and its anti-corporatism. While I agree with much of Schulman's interpretation, it is – of necessity, being in a comprehensive monograph of the seventies – a superficial discussion. Furthermore, not only does he wrongly believe "American punk grew out of and mimicked" British music, he fails to address some of the key issues in punk, including its attempt to reshape consumerism, its endeavors to empower young people, and the way it offered new possibilities for gender self-fashioning.¹⁹

In an era of political, economic, and social uncertainty, culture and cultural expressions take on heightened importance in the formation of individual and social identity. This is a bedrock assumption of my work and a viewpoint shared by a growing group of scholars and writers. For example, Louis Menand suggests (albeit pejoratively) that "a seventies person thinks that hairdos and pop songs and television commercials are truer, deeper, more complete articulations of the national condition than, say, editorials and poems and works of political philosophy. Seventies people think that changes in style and taste are where meaning is really lodged." Similarly, Stephen Miller argues that in the seventies discrete codification of identity, through vehicles like People magazine, and cultural energies became paramount in Americans' lives.²⁰

¹⁹ Schulman, The Seventies, 152-8, quote is 152. There remains some debate about whether punk originated in England or the United States. Through the mid-1980s, more accounts of punk attributed its origins to England. This was due largely to the higher visibility of British punk through the late seventies, beginning with the media frenzy surrounding the Sex Pistols, a furor orchestrated in part by their very savvy manager, Malcolm McLaren. See, for instance, Tricia Henry, "Punk and Avant-Garde Art," Journal of Popular Culture 17 (Spring 1984): 30; and Greil Marcus, Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 6. Since then, writers more often credit U.S. beginnings of punk.

²⁰ Louis Menand, "The Seventies Show," New Yorker, 28 May 2001, 128-33; Nick de Genova, "Check Your Head," Transition 67 (1995): 123-37; Stephen Paul Miller, The Seventies Now: Culture as Surveillance (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999), 18-20.

Methods and Theory

At heart, I am a cultural historian, and my goal, therefore, is to understand how historical actors invested the world around them with meaning. I want to see not only what they thought and did but also why those thoughts and actions came to be and how they were manifested in the world. In the second half of the twentieth century, I believe the two most important cultural forms – in terms of how the average American made meaning in his/her life – were popular music and television. And for many young people, especially those involved in subcultures like punk or hip hop, music was undeniably the most important touchstone of their world. Being a cultural historian involves taking cultural artifacts seriously. In the words of the eminent cultural historian Warren Susman, “If we want to know how people experienced the world, FDR had his role but so did Mickey Mouse.”²¹ Thus the Ramones’ inane lyrics, the testosterone-fueled thuggery of adolescent hardcore punks, and the noir sensibility of the band X all are worthy subjects for the cultural historian.

As a cultural historian of the early twenty-first century, I have been influenced by the “cultural turn” in history of the 1990s, which itself grew out of the “linguistic turn” of the 1970s. A number of factors shaped the linguistic turn, the most important of which was the body of disparate work rising out of Claude Lévi-Strauss’ structural anthropology of the

²¹ Warren Susman, Culture as History: the Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 102. My understanding of cultural history is influenced in particular by Robert Darnton, The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 3-7; Susman, Culture as History, xi-xiii; 101-2; and Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt, introduction to Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 1-23.

1950s and 1960s.²² Structuralism, a reaction in part to existentialist assertions of life's ultimate absurdity, positions meaning back in the center of the cultural analysis by viewing the world as systems of knowledge, language, and symbols that created webs of signification. Human choices, in this view, are deeply embedded in these systems and, therefore, limited by them. Furthermore, structuralism interprets these systems as binary oppositions (e.g. male and female) that may be studied through semiology, a linguistic methodology whereby the study of signs and systems of signs yields accurate, even scientific, descriptions of cultural meaning. Thus, structuralist analysis sets science above interpretation and calls liberal humanism into question, especially the idea of a completely autonomous human being.

Beginning in the 1960s but gaining steam in the 1970s and 1980s, poststructuralism criticized, first, structuralism's reliance on fixed, binary structures and, second, its claim to scientific validity. Poststructuralism claims instead a multiplicity of perspectives, meanings, and interpretations: there is no such thing as any one scientific, objective truth or even a coherent individual identity. Both structuralism and post-structuralism, however, de-emphasize "the social in favor of culture viewed as linguistic and representational."²³ Poststructuralist and other postmodern analyses often focus on cultural topics more so than politics or other traditional issues, and they tend to emphasize individual (often futile) acts of resistance.

With its emphasis on hybridity, multiplicity, and contingency, poststructuralism helped create a place for formerly marginalized voices, such as women and people of color

²² These works include Clifford Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays (New York: Basic Books, 1973); and Hayden White, Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

²³ Bonnell and Hunt, introduction, 9.

(and punk rockers), and as a cultural historian I value this achievement. At the same time, both structuralism and poststructuralism efface the self, rendering it, in structuralism, irrelevant or, in poststructuralism, so slippery as to be beyond the reach of analysis. More than one scholar has called attention to an irony of postmodernism: just as these previously marginalized voices are heard, poststructuralism discredits the notion of a coherent self, a coherent voice, and, thus, the efficacy of these previously marginalized individuals.²⁴ I want to bring the self – including the embodied social self – back to the fore. Of course, my notion of the self allows for ambiguities and ambivalences as well as change over time; I will not argue for any archetype “punk-rock self.”²⁵ By looking at the self and issues of identity, I want to marry concerns of cultural historians and cultural studies scholars, such as representation and systems of meaning, to those of intellectual historians, including analysis of the transmission of ideas and the study of individual epistemology.

While I reject poststructuralists’ most radical obliteration of the social and the self, they provide models of interdisciplinarity that are fruitful for cultural history. I draw on methods and theory from anthropology, literary studies, and cultural geography. First, I am profoundly influenced by performance ethnography and the idea that meaning is performed and embodied. Performance ethnography emerged in the 1970s, tendering a much-needed corrective to structuralist and poststructuralist over-reliance on textualism, an approach that

²⁴ See, for instance, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, “To Write My Self: The Autobiographies of Afro-American Women,” in Feminist Issues in Literary Scholarship, ed. Shari Benstock (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 162; Bonnell and Hunt, introduction, 22.

²⁵ For examinations of whether there is “such a thing as the ‘self’” and whether it is knowable, see, for instance, Shari Benstock, “Authorizing the Autobiographical,” in The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women’s Autobiographical Writings, ed. Shari Benstock (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 11; Felicity A. Nussbaum, “Toward Conceptualizing Diary,” in Studies in Autobiography, ed. James Olney (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 128; and Susan Groag Bell and Marilyn Yalom, introduction to Revealing Lives: Autobiography, Biography, and Gender (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 2.

encouraged top-down interpretations. Performance-studies theory encourages us to see epistemological pluralism and asserts that performance can create – not just mimic – meaning. For a scholar studying a subculture in which bands or clubs might exist for weeks rather than years, performance ethnography’s insistence upon meaning through immediacy and intimacy provides a valuable approach to research. Additionally, a major pillar of my research has been oral history, a methodology bridging the disciplines of history and anthropology. From anthropology, I attempted to bring the admonition to be a self-reflexive and vulnerable observer to the process of interviewing.²⁶ As a historian, I see oral history as an opportunity to hear the voices of people who traditionally have not had access to positions of power or the vehicles with which to express themselves. I followed a strategy of “saturation” interviewing – researching until seeing recurrent themes.

From literary studies, I use the idea of textual self-fashioning to explore how punks molded new identities through writing and performance. Literary scholar Stephen Greenblatt views the process of self-fashioning as most critical at times of tension for individuals, or, as he describes it, moments of self-fashioning occur at the "point of encounter between an authority and an alien."²⁷ For punk rockers the point of encounter was the music and other punk art, and the alien was mainstream consumer society. Punks fashioned new identities in opposition to a world from which they felt estranged. Additionally, cultural geography

²⁶ Dwight Conquergood, “Beyond the Text: Toward a Performative Cultural Politics,” in The Future of Performance Studies: Visions and Revisions, ed. Sheron J. Daily (Annandale: National Communication Association, 1998), 25-36; and “Performing Cultures: Ethnography, Epistemology, and Ethics,” in Miteinander Sprechen und Handeln: Festschrift für Hellmut Geisner, ed. Edith Slembeck (Frankfurt: Scriptor, 1986), 55-66; Ruth Behar, The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996); Della Pollock, Telling Bodies, Performing Birth: Everyday Narratives of Childbirth (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); and Charlotte Aull Davies, Reflexive Ethnography: A Guide to Researching Selves and Others (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).

²⁷ Stephen Greenblatt, Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 9.

helped me comprehend how punk rockers made meaning through their interactions with their physical environment. Punks' spatial practices and bodily performances created cultural landscapes specific to their respective scenes.²⁸

While the methods and theories I found in anthropology, literary studies, and cultural geography have broadened my interpretive vision, I ground them in the historian's emphasis on context, narrative, and change over time. Finally, I chose to write history in a style and language that I hope will be accessible to not only scholars but a broader intelligent audience, including punk rockers themselves.

Cities and Key Terms

Punk rock was a transatlantic phenomenon, an important example of international cultural exchange. Punk had its roots in mid-1970s New York, was seized by promoters and artists in England, and, after the explosion of the Sex Pistols, returned to the U.S. in revitalized forms. This dynamic process of cultural sharing meant that punk rock shared certain stylistic and musical characteristics across very diverse geographical and social milieus. At the same time, there were important regional variations – in chronology, aesthetics, and knowledge about the wider world of punk. To help understand these differences and the importance of these distinctions, we must understand that punk functioned both globally and locally.

For the purposes of this project, I use the phrase “punk rock community” to refer to the transnational group of fans, musicians, artists, and record label and fanzine owners who participated, more or less consciously, in the international phenomenon of punk as it

²⁸ Heidi Scott, “Cultural Turns,” in *A Companion to Cultural Geography*, eds. James S. Duncan, Nuala C. Johnson, and Richard H. Schein (Oxford, Eng.: Blackwell, 2004), 24-37.

developed in the mid- to late-seventies. In this sense, the punk rock community operated in a manner similar to an “affective alliance,” to use cultural-studies scholar Lawrence Grossberg’s words. Grossberg uses this phrase to explain how emotional involvement in music may yield a sense of community even when participants do not occupy the same geographic spaces. In the case of punk rock, a transatlantic affective alliance based on the music and a few fanzines emerged by 1977. By the early 1980s, punk rockers had translated this emotional bond into physical expressions of an international punk-rock network built on dozens of DIY ‘zines, college radio, a few handfuls of labels, and an established – but insecure – touring circuit.²⁹

In addition to a far-flung punk “community,” I speak of “scenes,” a contested term in the study of popular culture. My use of the term – as designating a local music community – is similar to that of sociologist and American Studies scholar, Barry Shank. For Shank, a scene is an “overproductive signifying community” that interrogates and “transforms dominant cultural meanings” for their own purposes. That is to say, scenes develop systems of meanings specific to their constituency.³⁰ Like Shank, I seek to understand and describe

²⁹ Lawrence Grossberg, “Another Boring Day in Paradise: Rock and roll and the Empowerment of Everyday Life,” *Popular Music* 4 (1984): 225-58. Sociologist Simon Frith also explores the emotional investment in popular music: “the intensity of [the] relationship between taste and self-definition seems peculiar to popular music – it is ‘possessable’ in a way that other cultural forms ... are not.” [introduction to *Music and Society: The Politics of Composition, Performance and Reception*, ed. R. Leppert and S. McClary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 144.] For example, *D.I.Y. The Do-It-Yourself New Music Magazine* demonstrated the maturing national punk network. It devoted columns to scenes in Toronto, New York, Los Angeles, Cleveland and several other cities. It also included nationwide lists of independent record stores, college radio stations, and clubs friendly to punk and DIY musicians. [*D.I.Y.*, Manhattan Beach, Calif., July 1981. This was its seventh issue.]

³⁰ Barry Shank, *Dissonant Identities: The Rock’n’Roll Scene in Austin, Texas* (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 122-36, *passim*. Will Straw builds on Shanks work, using the abstract conception of “scenes” in place of the term “subculture” to designate the constantly negotiated meanings and membership in musical communities like alternative rock and dance club cultures. While these scenes designate a “cultural space,” they may or may not have discrete geographical locales. [“Systems of Articulation, Logics of Change,” *Cultural Studies* 5 (1991).] Kevin Mattson’s use of the term scene is similar to mine. [“Did Punk Matter,” 72.] See also Donna Gaines, “The Local Economy of Suburban Scenes,” in *Adolescents and Their Music: If It’s Too Loud, You’re Too Old*, ed. Jonathan S. Epstein (New York and London: Garland, 1994), 52-3.

how punk rock developed and changed over time in specific, geographically discrete, localities. Of course, any attempt to study a cultural phenomenon in geographic isolation is specious – especially when taking into account late-twentieth-century personal and ideological mobility. Therefore, I investigate the ongoing interchanges between three punk scenes that comprise part of the broader punk rock community. While informed by scholarship on popular music, my use of the term “scene” is based fundamentally on how my informants used the word. Most often when they referred to a “scene,” they meant a local body of fans, musicians, etc. brought together by common enjoyment of a particular musical style.

Mine is the first scholarly effort in any discipline to cover punk in such broad geographic and temporal terms, by exploring New York, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C. punk ca. 1974-1985. To date, most studies of punk – by journalists as well as academics – have been limited to a specific city, venue, or rock group, span only a few years, and often do not historicize the topic fully.³¹ My dissertation, in contrast, encompasses three cities, covers the years 1974 to 1985, and situates punk in the historic context of twentieth-century youth cultures, consumerism, and gender. I chose to study punk through these cities for several reasons. First, a broad geographic scope permits exploration of how cultural phenomena function differently in various locales. Second, such a large perspective places punk within broad national movements more accurately than a narrow geographic point of view. Finally, each city marked a major turning point in punk, allowing me to offer a chronological

³¹ Dewar MacLeod’s forthcoming “Kids of the Black Hole”: Punk Rock in Postsuburban Southern California (Rutgers University Press) will be the first book on punk by an academic historian. See note 14 for a selected list of journalistic studies of punk. Academic studies of specific cities include, Gendron, Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club; Savage, England’s Dreaming; and Shank, Dissonant Identities. Gendron and Savage historicize their topic much more than some other studies.

narrative of punk's development. I have not tried to give a comprehensive narrative of punk in these cities, but I tried to be true to the general tenor of their histories.

Punk first coalesced into a recognizable community in New York around 1975, based around the music that was being performed at a Bowery dive called CBGB and – later – Max's Kansas City near Union Square. Because the scene remained largely undiscovered for a few years, it was characterized by great diversity and camaraderie. American punks tended to be white, middle-class urban or suburban youth and came to music for two reasons. First, they viewed themselves as social outsiders, expressing a sense of being “powerless and disconnected,” “while those around you seemed plugged into something,” in the words of Maryland punk rocker Shawna Kenney. Second, punks turned to or created punk because popular culture did not fulfill them. Many punks were attracted to the music after listening to 1970s hard rock, progressive rock, or glam rock but finding commercial music ultimately spiritless and inadequate. Over and over, punks expressed boredom, their lack of engagement with mainstream culture.³²

English promoters and musicians discovered the New York punk scene and blended it with their own pub-rock tradition to create a form of the genre that fit their unique social and political situation. English punk managed to make the “Top of the Pops” as well as lurid tabloid headlines in Great Britain in 1977. By this time, would-be punks came together in Hollywood and began their own DIY music culture. L.A. quickly became the new Mecca of

³² Shawna Kenney, telephone interview by author, tape recording, 28 February 2002. Similarly, Jeff Nelson, Dischord Records co-owner and Minor Threat drummer, described himself as “hopelessly unhip.” [Jeff Nelson, interview by author, tape recording, Arlington, Va., 9 September 2002.] Similarly, Henry [Garfield] Rollins stated, “A lot of us feel rejected, different, lower.” [Richard Harrington, “Slam Dancing in the Big City,” Washington Post, 19 July 1981, G1-2.] Lyrics in songs by the Ramones, the Adolescents, the Teen Idles, and the Dead Boys, to name just a few, illustrate punks' severe ennui and resulting disaffection. For example, Agent Orange bemoans conformity and Americans' lack of imagination, “I'm so bored of television/ TV dinner on a TV tray/ join the Pepsi generation/ that's the American way.” [Agent Orange, “America,” *Living in Darkness*, WEA, 1981.]

American punk, as the number of participants skyrocketed and semi-autonomous scenes sprouted up all over the greater metropolitan area. As a whole, therefore, the development of punk in Los Angeles was analogous to the broader development of the genre. Punk sprawl in Los Angeles paralleled the growth of scenes – of varying size – in cities throughout North America and Europe. Additionally, southern California gave birth to hardcore, the subgenre of the subculture that by the early eighties dominated the public face of punk. Thriving punk scenes emerged all over the United States in the late seventies and early eighties, in such seemingly unlikely places as Lansing, Michigan, Austin, Texas, and Washington, D.C. Simultaneously punk’s fan-base became younger. The first legion of punks were usually in their early- to mid-twenties when they discovered or created punk in the mid-1970s. By the early eighties, twenty-something punks were less common, and teens began to dominate the genre – both as performers and fans. Punk rock in Washington, D.C. exemplified both the DIY nature of the national community and the increasingly young age its members. Indeed, D.C., with the label Dischord Records, came to rival Los Angeles in importance in hardcore circles.³³

Topics

After deciding to look at punk rock in New York, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C., I faced the quandary of organization. Should I proceed temporally, as is most traditional in a historical narrative? Should geography provide the organizational construct, with a chapter or two devoted to each city? In the end, I chose to work topically, based on the most salient issues to emerge from my research. I began to see that my broadest claim –

³³ “1982 Poll Results,” Flipside, 37 January 1983, 17.

the fact that punk rockers belonged to an international cohort in the 1970s seeking new sources of belonging as trust in traditional sources of community waned – expressed itself through several themes within punk. Punks sought belonging, but they also voiced fierce commitments to individualism. This tension between individualism and community emerged in punk’s critique of consumerism, punk rockers’ interactions with their physical environments, their conceptions of themselves as young people, and in gender roles.

Chapter 1 lays the historical groundwork for the chapters that follow. Punks, like many Americans of the 1970s, faced a “personality crisis” as they tried to reconceive themselves, their society, and the relationship between the two. To punks, America seemed to be on a “road to ruin” through – to name just a few matters – political debacles, rising divorce rates, and stagflation. Disgust with vapid consumerism gave rise to punk’s central themes of boredom and cultural alienation, which in turn highlighted the degree to which punk rockers viewed the self as the primary site of cultural expression. Additionally, punk was in conversation with various youth cultures that had come before, including the Bohemians, fifties rockers, the Beats, and hippies. Punks selectively drew on and rejected various aspects of these earlier subcultures as they set about creating their own scenes in New York, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C.

Chapters 2 and 3 explores some of the sources of punks’ anger and alienation, including the family, traditional education, suburbia, and the material embodiments of middle-class success, which punks saw as inauthentic expressions suitable only for the mindless masses. While many contemporary critics saw punks as nihilistic, the subculture did indeed offer alternatives to many of the things they criticized. Most importantly punks wanted to reconfigure consumerism. They saw that the counterculture of the sixties failed to

achieve its broadest social and political goals, so punks lowered their expectations. They seemed to say, “If we can’t have revolution, we should at least be able to control our interactions with consumer culture, especially that part which is geared toward young people.”³⁴ In place of mindless engagement in the consumer economy, punks advocated a thoughtful form of consumerism based on localism, authenticity, and DIY.

The role of place in punk rock provides the focus for Chapter 4, which traces the emergence of a broader, national punk community as well as local cultural landscapes. In the process we see that New York punk, as a brand new community without pre-existing aesthetic standards, demonstrated remarkable stylistic diversity. It also remained confined in geographic terms and was influenced by the city’s contemporary financial crisis. In Los Angeles, punk was characterized by sprawl and a noir sensibility. Washington, D.C. punks were anxious provincials who sought belonging in a placeless place and a city that offered little for white youth. Most broadly the chapter claims that – despite being no more mobile than in recent decades – Americans of the era felt geographically unmoored and therefore transferred anxieties about other issues – politics, the economy, changes in the family – onto place. In response to these anxieties punks tried to make their urban subcultures potential sites of self and attempted to reinscribe place on consumer capitalism by creating locally informed versions of popular music.

The fifth chapter explores the experience of being young in the seventies and eighties by examining, first, punk rock’s relationship to earlier youth cultures, especially the 1960s counterculture, and, second, certain defining elements of 1970s and ‘80s American youth, including boredom and the Cold War. The media bombarded punks with contradictory

³⁴ Greg Shaw’s contrast between American and British punk led me to this insight. [“Punk Politics: The Kids are Mostly Right...,” *Bomp!*, vol. 3, no. 7, November 1977, 16-7.]

messages about their position as young people: recent history and advertisers offered a rhetoric of power while parents and the economy offered boundaries and limitations. Additionally, punk rock had an interesting foil in the burgeoning New Age philosophies of the 1970s. Despite ridiculing new-agers, punks had much in common with them. In fact, both movements illustrated that the seventies and its focus on self-definition was an important episode in the history of the self.

Chapters 6 and 7 interrogate gender in punk rock. Rock historiography generally has celebrated women's gains in punk uncritically. Punk women did make great strides in punk, appearing on stage in numbers never before seen in rock. Women asserted themselves even more off-stage, in their roles as photographers, writers, and scenemakers. At the same time, women's gains in punk were limited by their own mindsets as well as the rise of the hypermasculine punk subgenre of hardcore. Punk men challenged dominant gender mores less thoroughly than their female counterparts, but they did offer several alternatives to the prevailing rock masculinities, including self-conscious asexuality, a masculinity that was intellectual or effete, and an anxious manhood.

CHAPTER 1

PERSONALITY CRISIS: PUNK ROCK COALESCES

All about that personality crisis
You got it while it was hot
But now frustration and heartache
Is what you got
New York Dolls, "Personality Crisis," 1973¹

In 1973, the New York Dolls, a proto-punk band from New York City, satirized a fictional friend whose life was "All about that personality crisis/ you got it while it was hot." While they may have been poking fun at this "prima ballerina," personality crises were indeed hot in this period. In fact, the 1970s and 1980s would prove to be a crucial period for many Americans in terms of self-discovery and reconfiguring the relation of the individual to both specific communities and society in general. In these efforts, Americans expended a great deal of energy, expressed deep anxieties, and demonstrated a heart-felt urge to reconcile desires for both fellowship and individual expression, belonging and self-reliance. Historian Bruce Schulman has observed that Americans of the 1970s sought alternative sources of belonging and support as trust in traditional sources of community, such as neighborhood, religion, and nation, waned. Indeed, scholars are beginning to view the 1970s and 1980s as a crucial period in the history of American individualism. Americans sought new personal foundations in this period as numerous political, social, and cultural transformations, both long-term and more immediate, challenged their traditional sense of self and community. Like est (Erhard Seminars Training), Moonies, exercise, the Moral

¹ New York Dolls, "Personality Crisis," *New York Dolls*, Polygram Records, 1973.

Majority, and identity politics, punk rock was a way Americans of the era sought to understand themselves and their places in the world. This chapter explores the roots of punk in both its immediate historical milieu and its antecedents in earlier rebellious youth movements.²

“Road to Ruin”: Punk’s Roots in 1970s America³

Domestic and international political turmoil was a prominent reason Americans reevaluated self and society in the 1970s and 1980s. Vietnam and Watergate dealt death blows to the sort of patriotism and faith in authority that had characterized much of American society from the Great Depression through the early 1960s, a vision of the federal government that had provided a sense of unified purpose and identity for many people. With the Tet Offensive 1968, Americans realized that Washington had been misleading them for years about the progress of the Vietnam War. In 1971 Daniel Ellsberg leaked the Pentagon Papers, a secret Defense Department account of American involvement in Vietnam, to the press, exposing the lies and faulty assumptions that had guided the steady expansion of the conflict. And Richard Nixon’s January 1973 claim that he had achieved “peace with honor” in ending the war could not disguise the sure fate of South Vietnam, which fell to North Vietnam in 1975, and thus did nothing to erase the widespread mistrust of government that had matured during the conflict. Next, of course, came Watergate, a scandal created by the

² An increasing number of scholars see the 1970s and 1980s as a key era in the history of individualism. See, for example, James Collier, The Rise of Selfishness in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Richard O. Curry and Lawrence B. Goodheart, eds. American Chameleon: Individualism in Trans-National Context (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1991); and Shelton Waldrep, “Introducing the Seventies,” in The Seventies: The Age of Glitter in Popular Culture, ed. Shelton Waldrep (New York and London: Routledge, 2000). Bruce Schulman, The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics (New York: Free Press, 2001), 76-7, 142.

³ Ramones, *Road to Ruin*, Sire, 1978.

paranoia and insecurities of an American president. Nixon's use of illegal measures in order to buttress his own power came to light when several of his "plumbers" were arrested after breaking into the Democratic National Headquarters in the Watergate apartment complex. Vietnam and Watergate changed Americans' understanding of their country and created a distrust of authority that permeated the 1970s.

Punk rockers generally expressed the political disillusionment typical of the mid-1970s but did so in a particularly virulent and ironic fashion. In a recent interview Jenny Lens, a photographer active in the Los Angeles punk scene of the late 1970s, borrowed the title of a Ramones album to say that "Vietnam demonstrated that America was on a political, moral, and economic road to ruin." Similarly, the Screamers held nothing back in their scathing attack on government in "Government Love Affair (Don't Pay the Whore)" (1978):

First you make up,
And then you break up,
And then you hang around outside her door.
Your love affair with the government is over...
But you're still getting butt-fucked!⁴

The Screamers, offering their message in language few could ignore, spoke for many Americans whose "love affair with the government [was] over" in the 1970s.

If many Americans of the 1970s looked less frequently to the nation and national politics as bases of identity and belonging, they also found it more difficult to define themselves through traditional notions of neighborhood, family, and career. Certain demographics and intellectual trends explain why neighborhood was a less important identity marker for many in this period. Over the course of the twentieth century, the U.S. became an increasingly suburban nation. At the same time, an ever more vociferous body of critics,

⁴ Despite the fact that the Screamers were one of the most important bands of the early Los Angeles punk scene, they released very little vinyl. I believe this song was released on Screamers, *Demos 1977-78*, SOB, 1978.

especially in the post-World War II period, denounced suburbia, believing it destroyed the sense of community and belonging earlier Americans had found in urban neighborhoods and rural towns. These critics taken together represented a general shift away from viewing suburbia as a positive force, a “middle landscape” in which Americans could nurture themselves and their family by accessing the best of both urban and rural life.⁵ In this earlier view, ascendant among many social critics, social scientists, and middle-class Americans through the 1930s, suburbs allowed Americans to accrue the spiritual, physical, and economic benefits of rural republicanism and land ownership even as the United States moved away from its rural past. By the 1950s, the pendulum had swung the other way, at least among left-wing intellectuals and social scientists, who condemned suburbs as conformist and vapid centers of “ticky tacky” where the houses and people “all look just the same.”⁶ In this later analysis, postwar suburbs like Levittowns offered only crushing conformity and isolation in place of the more authentic cultures found in traditional urban and rural life.

In the 1970s and 1980s, punk rockers joined the anti-suburbs brigade, deriding suburbia as an “empty plastic culture slum.”⁷ Punk rockers’ condemnation of suburban life was not new, but it differed from earlier censure in two important ways. First, punk’s

⁵ The search for this elusive middle landscape was not unique to suburban planners but had been part of European expansionism long before the colonies became the United States. See, for example, Leo Marx, The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).

⁶ There were earlier critics to be sure, but overall positive interpretations dominated discussions about American suburbs through the 1930s. [Kenneth T. Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Arlene Skolnick, Embattled Paradise: The American Family in an Age of Uncertainty (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 58-64; Dolores Hayden, Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000 (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003), 100-120.] The lyrics are Malvina Reynolds, “Little Boxes,” Schroder Music Company, 1962.

⁷ Dead Kennedys, “This Could Be Anywhere, This Could Be Everywhere,” *Frankenchrist*, Alternative Tentacles, 1985.

assessment was even more strident than past commentary partly because of changing demographics. According to urban historian Kenneth Jackson, American suburban population more than doubled between 1950 and 1970, from thirty-six to seventy-four million people. Even more remarkable is the fact that eight-three percent of total American population growth during this period took place in the suburbs. Indeed by 1970 there were more suburbanites than city dwellers or farmers. Thus punk rockers, overwhelmingly a suburban group, found themselves in the midst of a suburban explosion. A second reason punks' critique was so strident was that they were among the first to criticize suburbia from within, being part of the first generation to have grown up in post-World War II suburbs. The punks' damning appraisal emerged in part because they, at least until a certain age, had no control over the fact that they lived in the suburbs, a place they found vapid and confining. In their song "Suburban Home," southern California punk rockers the Descendents stated baldly, "I want to be stereotyped/ I want to be classified/ I want to be a clone/ I want a suburban home." These lyrics place punks within the tradition of William H. Whyte and other 1950s critics who believed suburbia fostered mindless conformity, but the Descendents and other punk rockers complicate the critique by adding generational conflict. "Suburban Home" goes on to say sarcastically, "I want a house just like mom and dad."⁸ This generational conflict, though typical of youth culture of the twentieth century, was more specifically part of punk's broader critique of the family in the 1970s.

While suburbia left punks feeling they lived in a placeless place, changes in family life often left them and many of their contemporaries confused, unsure where to seek

⁸ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 283-4; Descendents, "Suburban Home," *Milo Goes to College*, New Alliance/SST Records, 1983; William H. Whyte, *The Organization Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956).

belonging and identity. According to the U.S. Census, from 1920 to 1935 1.5 to 1.7 divorces occurred for every one thousand Americans — men, women, and children. Perhaps because of postwar upheavals and rash wartime marriages, the rate shot up to 3.5 in 1945, dropped below 3.0 again during the baby boom, and dove to 2.1 in 1958. Between 1965 and 1980, the period during which most punk rockers came of age, the divorce rate doubled, and in 1981 the divorce rate reached an all-time high of 5.3.⁹ During that same period, the number of single-parent households rose by from eleven to thirteen percent. Many young people found these upheavals stressful and disorienting. Punks dealt with the uncertainties of family life in a number of ways, including anger, satire, and anomie. For instance, the Ramones lampooned suburban family life in “We’re a Happy Family.” In this version of the modern family, the family unit remained intact. Instead of divorce, dysfunction manifested itself in a number of ways: through drugs: “Sitting here in Queens/ Eating refried beans/ We’re in all the magazines/ Gulpin’ down Thorazine”; sexual confusion: “We ain’t got no friends/ Our troubles never end/ No Christmas cards to send/ Daddy likes men”; and a lack of proper authority figures: “Mommy’s on pills/ Baby’s got the chills/ I’m friends with the President/ I’m friends with the Pope/ We’re all making a fortune selling daddy’s dope.” The child/singer attempted to wish it away, singing over and over “We’re a happy family/ We’re a happy family/ We’re a happy family/ Meet mom and daddy.”¹⁰

Concerns about fiscal health joined distrust of authority, antipathy toward suburbia, and anxieties about family life as a source of apprehension for 1970s and 1980s Americans. For the first time since the Great Depression, 1970s Americans could no longer depend on a

⁹ Michael Schaller and George Rising, The Republican Ascendancy: American Politics, 1968-2001 (Wheeling, Ill.: Harlan Davidson, 2002), 72.

¹⁰ Ramones, “We’re a Happy Family,” *Rocket to Russia*, Sire, 1977.

growth economy as they set about planning their lives. Twentieth-century changes in consumerism meant this decline in economic confidence had a particularly strong psychological impact during the 1970s. During the 1920s, a national consumer economy had begun to mature, fostering a consumer ethic that increasingly promised immediate gratification rather than the older, traditional values of delayed gratification and restraint. While the Great Depression and World War II stalled this consumer economy and the concomitant change in attitudes, affluence returned in the postwar era, and Americans defined themselves more and more through the goods and services they purchased. During the 1970s, however, stagflation, unemployment, and the rust belt vividly informed Americans, especially young people, that they no longer had access to the relative economic ease and straightforward career choices of the last generation. Punk rockers responded with a typical mix of humor, anger, and irony, as illustrated in these lyrics by the Circle Jerks: “In a sluggish economy/ inflation, recession hits the land of the free ... we just get by however we can/ we all gotta duck when the shit hits the fan.”¹¹ During an era of uncertainty and disillusionment, the singer offered no proposals for positive change, suggesting instead the best we can hope for is to “get by however we can,” even if that simply means ducking out of the way of the worst of it.

In an era with so much insecurity – political, geographic, familial, fiscal – culture and cultural politics assumed greater meaning, explaining why punk rock, a cultural expression mixing stridency and apathy, anger and fun, irony and earnestness, emerged when it did. While immersed in the subculture, punks varied in their self-reflexivity and the degree to which they acknowledged the relationship between their personal lives and wide-ranging

¹¹ Circle Jerks, “When the Shit Hits the Fan,” *Golden Shower of Hits*, LAX #1051, 1983.

social, economic, and political influences such as those outlined above. Some punks were not fully conscious that the music functioned as a surrogate source of belonging, but more than a few punks articulated their awareness that the music and community filled spiritual holes in their lives. In 1982, Shawn Stern, guitarist and singer for the Los Angeles hardcore band Youth Brigade, observed,

The traditional things we were brought up with – the government, the family system, the American dream, the whole religion thing that’s so important to our society – they just don’t work anymore. ... The American dream that our parents realized – [suggested] going to school and getting a good job and getting married ... would make you happy. But that didn’t make them happy. Most of our parents are getting divorced. Most of the punks come from broken homes, and they look at their parents and they say, “Well, if that’s the way they turned out, I don’t want to turn out like that.”¹²

For Stern and others, punk offered a viable alternative to “going to school and getting a good job and getting married.” They saw punk as a more positive path than their parents’ failed efforts at traditional definitions of success.

“We’re the modern youth history warned you of”: Punk’s Cultural Predecessors¹³

While punk rock was a product of its immediate social, political, and economic milieu, it also drew on long-term cultural trends. Punks were the latest in a long line of American cultural rebels, inheriting various aspects of the legacies of turn-of-the-twentieth-century bohemians, 1950s rock-and-rollers, the Beats, and the counterculture of the 1960s. Bohemians were one element in a group of movements in literature, music, and lifestyle collectively known as modernism, which rebelled against the dominant culture of Victorianism and its emphasis on rationality, moral purity, innocence, and self-restraint. For

¹² *Another State of Mind*, videocassette, 78 min, Time Bomb Filmworks, Los Angeles, 1983.

¹³ Dead Boys, “Third Generation Nation,” *We Have Come for Your Children*, Sire, 1978.

Victorians, the purpose of “Culture” was moral and intellectual edification that furthered moral probity and, more broadly, the progress of civilization. In this view, art was more about improving the individual and society than about self-expression or interpretation. While the Victorians valued restraint and order above all else, the moderns accepted and even embraced the irrational and the turbulent as important aspects of the modern psyche and existence. For the purposes of this project, the moderns are most important for two reasons. First, they challenged the idea that modernity was unequivocally a good thing, marked by uninterrupted, unambiguous progress. Punk rockers and many Americans of the 1970s recognized the perils of their era. Second, in the realm of the arts, modernism signaled a move away from positivist beliefs in some verifiable, observable, external truth toward more self-reflective expressions and forms. In other words, moderns placed the self and subjectivity at the center of their project thereby challenging classic liberalism, which had assumed a universal truth in the external world. According to modernists, truth must be found within, through individual subjectivity. Art, therefore, should be the personal vision of an artist, expressing an internal truth rather than some specious external ideal of beauty, truth, or reality. Moderns practiced their beliefs in areas outside art narrowly defined, applying them to areas of sociability and everyday life. As historian Christine Stansell so eloquently demonstrates, for the moderns of Greenwich Village, ca 1880-1920, the bohemian lifestyle, experiments with working-class life, radical sexual politics, and, most importantly, free speech allowed them to turn culture into politics. Moderns’ emphasis on subjectivity and their method of turning everyday life – conversation, dress, sex – into modes of personal expression would prove very important to future cultural shock troops, including punk rockers.¹⁴

¹⁴ Raymond Williams, Marxism and Literature (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 11-20; Christine

The next important cultural predecessor to punk rock was rock and roll. During the relative abundance of the 1950s and a revitalized national consumer economy, consumer goods increasingly provided a vehicle for identity. This process began during the 1920s but was stalled by the privations of the Great Depression and World War II. After World War II, music consumerism in particular played a large role in self-fashioning among young people, and total annual record sales rose from \$191 million in 1951 to \$514 million in 1959. While flapper culture and the jazz age had been about youth, predominately people in their twenties, rock and roll was about teenagers. Indeed, the notion of the teenager was new, with the word first used in print in 1941. The combination of affluence and the baby boom created an unprecedented market niche, that of the teenager. In 1956 thirteen million teenagers spent seven billion dollars a year, up twenty-six percent from 1953.¹⁵

The media and Madison Avenue were quick to notice possibilities of the burgeoning teen market, and their attention to niche advertising and marketing campaigns would have important consequences on successive youth generations, including our punk rockers. Over time, the entertainment industry targeted younger and younger audiences. For instance, Frank Sinatra's bobbysoxers of the mid-1940s tended to be fifteen to eighteen years old, while Beatles teenyboppers two decades later were twelve to fifteen. Teens of late-twentieth century thus had more experience with popular culture than their earlier counterparts. This more mature and potentially sophisticated relationship meant they were ever more aware of

Stansell, American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000).

¹⁵ The word "teenager" first appeared in the April 1941 issue of Popular Science Monthly. The adjective "teen age" appeared earlier, in 1921. [Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed. 1989.] David Sanjek, "They Work Hard for Their Money: The Business of Popular Music," in American Popular Music: New Approaches to the Twentieth Century, eds. Rachel Rubin and Jeffrey Melnick (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 15.

their range of choices as consumers and had more time in which to make these selections – or to reject these choices and change their status from consumers to producers, as punks did.¹⁶

While parents, sociologists, and journalists of the 1950s worried about rock and roll's relationship to juvenile delinquency, intellectuals and cultural critics generated loftier discussions about the relative merits of mass culture, including suburbia. These debates, voiced by critics such as David Riesman and John Kenneth Galbraith, continued a critique of capitalism and consumerism started in the early twentieth century, but the 1950s commentators gained a wider audience in this era of affluence and mass production.¹⁷ For Riesman, the “inner-directed” individual, more typical of the nineteenth century, represented a healthy, more authentic model of independence and self-reliance, while the “other-directed” person more typical of twentieth-century mass society relied on external cues to make his way through life. These debates about the pros and cons of self-fashioning through goods in a consumer society would take on new meaning in the 1970s in an era of fiscal uncertainty. Over time, punks would attempt to reject commercialism and celebrate instead authenticity as expressed in self-produced music, scenes, and cultural institutions.

Concurrent to fifties-era rock and roll, the Beats provided a link between turn-of-the-twentieth century moderns and seventies punks. The Beats were part of a broader intellectual

¹⁶ Joseph Kett, Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America 1790 to Present (NY: Basic Books, 1977), 3, 265. Ronald Strickland notes about youth in the late-twentieth century, “Contemporary youth are prematurely affluent – they have the money for consumer electronics, fashion...music CD's, but they linger in dependence upon their parents' assistance for basic living expenses, educational costs, etc. ... These chronic problems of modernity have become the accepted status quo of postmodernity.” [Ronald Strickland, “Introduction: What's Left of Modernity?” in Growing Up Postmodern: Neoliberalism and the War on the Young (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 2.

¹⁷ The most notable participants in the early twentieth-century debate were the members of the Frankfurt School, including Theodor Adorno. See, for example, Tom B. Bottomore, The Frankfurt School and Its Critics, rev. ed. (London: Routledge, 2002). David Riesman, The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1950); John Kenneth Galbraith, The Affluent Society (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958).

milieu that included the abstract expressionism of Jackson Pollock and the new journalistic style of Normal Mailer. Like the moderns before them, this group valued self-expression and inner feelings. They were not social reformers, but the Beats did want the examples of their lived lives to make Americans question their accepted values. In other words, like the moderns, the Beats strove to make everyday life a social statement and an art form. The Beats melded a thirst for physical pleasures with a belief that the highest form of spirituality would be found among the dispossessed, yielding a sometimes self-destructive hedonism involving gratification through sex and drugs. Finally, the Beats cherished “spontaneous prose,” taking an approach to writing that frowned on revisions and held the first expression of a thought or an emotion to be the most authentic.¹⁸

Punks explicitly and implicitly drew on the Beats’ antecedents. A few punks, including Patti Smith and John Denney, were outspoken in their admiration of the Beats. For example, Denney of the Los Angeles band the Weirdos, in describing his high school days with pal and future band-mate Cliff Roman, stated, “We fancied ourselves as some sort of new neo-Dada Beatniks.”¹⁹ While Denney and many additional punks studied, formally or otherwise, art, music, and literature and thus were aware of the historical context of their artistic contributions, many more punks simply embodied an unconscious inherited tradition.

Like the Beats, punk rockers believed unmediated artistic expressions were more valuable

¹⁸ Steven Watson provides an engaging and thorough assessment of the Beats in The Birth of the Beat Generation: Visionaries, Rebels, and Hipsters, 1944-1960 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995.) Peter Filene has also influenced my view of the Beats.

¹⁹ John Denney quoted in Bryan Ray Turcotte and Christopher T. Miller, eds. Fucked Up + Photocopied: Instant Art of the Punk Rock Movement (Ginkgo Press, 1999), 67. Other punks who cite the direct influence of the Beats include Patti Smith, Victor Bockris, Stephanie Chernikowski, Duncan Hannah, and Arto Lindsay. [Victor Bockris, Beat Punks: New York’s Underground Culture from the Beat Generation to the Punk Explosion (New York: Da Capo Press, 1998); Victor Bockris, interview by author, New York City, tape recording, 27 June 2002; Stephanie Chernikowski, interview by author, New York City, transcript, 26 June 2002, 2; Duncan Hannah, interview by author, New York City, tape recording, 26 June 2002; and Arto Lindsay, interview by author, New York City, tape recording, 28 June 2002.]

than highly edited or manipulated works. So, for example, many groups wanted studio recordings to reflect the “spontaneity of the band” rather than a sound engineer’s skill at producing sound and thus “were recorded as quickly as possible.”²⁰ Additionally, punks knowingly or otherwise viewed everyday choices, including a thrift-store wardrobe, the books they read, and the mix-tapes they made and exchanged, as acts of self-fashioning and art. The degree to which punks strived to be re-create themselves is evident in the new names they assumed in the punk world, such as Jack Rabid, Jenny Lens, and Kickboy Face. And while some punks truly wanted to make it big (especially early in punk) or influence politics (especially later in punk), many followed the Beats in eschewing direct engagement with broader society. For example, Richard Hell believed “People who need power over other people are like anti-matter – anti-human -- they cancel out humanity like a negative form.” In contrast, “[r]eal power is the ability to shape – will – the form of your own self which is your life” by focusing on the self.²¹ Therefore, like the Beats, most punks did not explicitly attempt social reform, but they did want those around them to question their everyday choices assumptions and to investigate the self as intensely as punks themselves did.

The most important legacy passed from the Beats to punks was an outsider mentality. More than one punk band took the name “Anti-Heroes.” The position of the social outsider had changed since the Beats of the 1950s, however. While the Beats emerged from an era of so-called consensus marked by strong social pressures to conform, punks came out of an era

²⁰ Mike Palm, liner notes to Agent Orange, *Living in Darkness*, Rhino Records, 1992. Palm refers to the recording of the original album *Living in Darkness*, which was issued on Posh Boy in 1981.

²¹ This quote is from Hell’s diary, 22 February 1977. [Richard Hell (Meyers), Artifact: Notebooks from Hell 1974-1980 (Madras and New York: Hanuman Books, 1992), 96.]

of turmoil. In a period when everything – the government, the family, and the economy – seemed tainted or flawed, the status of the “outsider” rose. Hence Jimmy Carter as president, the rise of new age religions, and, of course, punk rock. Punks overwhelmingly identified themselves as social outsiders. Joan Jett, guitarist for the Runaways, a proto-punk Los Angeles band, voiced the feeling of innumerable punk rockers by stating, “A defining moment for any teen misfit is finding others like yourself, even if the only thing you share is the feeling of not belonging anywhere else.” Alice Bag, also of Los Angeles, described punk as being “like the Island of Misfit Toys” because it contained “all these people that had been ostracized and ... had been considered geeks and nerds in school.” But “you put us all together, and we felt accepted, and we felt like we were in an environment where we could thrive and be creative without being criticized.”²² In these two quotes lies the central tension of punk rock: it was built on individualism and an anti-hero ethos, yet expressed itself as a community. The motivation for punk was individualistic artistic expression, but the glue for the subculture was the experience of finding like-minded misfits.

Before the outsider became anti-hero in the 1970s, Americans experienced the more optimistic 1960s. And while punks were loathe to admit any ties to hippies (preferring simply to loathe them), punk rock owed much to the counterculture. Punkers derided hippies, conveying a sense that hippies had failed the seventies youth generation; hippies had stirred the pot of social ills, bringing many problems to the surface, but then abandoned the stew before the quandaries had been solved. By the early 1980s, “yuppie” culture was in

²² There was a band called the Anti-Heroes in Atlanta, Georgia in the early 1980s. Currently a young group of punks play as the Anti-Heros out of Newcastle, Pennsylvania. The best-known configuration of Anti-Heros was the Oi! band formed in New York in 1984. Bruce Schulman explores the outsider theme in 1970s popular culture. [*The Seventies*, 144-58.] Joan Jett, quoted in Marc Spitz and Brendan Mullen, *We Got the Neutron Bomb: The Untold Story of L.A. Punk* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001), 35; Alice Bag, interview by the Experience Music Project, 1999, 26.

ascendancy, confirming – in punks’ minds – their belief that hippies had sold out.

Nonetheless the punk subculture and the sixties counterculture had a great deal in common, including a commitment to both communalism and individualism, rules that are not competitive or hierarchical, and an emphasis on play and self-actualization through play. But neither the counterculture nor its cultural heir was able to balance easily a dual emphasis on communalism and the self. As James Collier wryly described the counterculture, “In the end, this contradiction at the heart of the commune ideal killed it. The *group*, which needed wood cut... could not be reconciled with *selves* who needed to write novels or play Frisbee or smoke dope or lie in the sun.”²³ The punk subculture dealt with similar issues; tensions between individualism and community and debates over who had the right to define punk threatened to tear the community apart.

Like the counterculture, punk ostensibly relied on a non-hierarchical structure and an egalitarian atmosphere. Where the counterculture challenged many forms of “the establishment,” including institutional racism, traditional patriarchal authority, and the draft, punk rock’s egalitarianism generally had a narrower focus. Punk did target some of the same broader concerns tackled by the counterculture, including consumerism and censorship, but punk initially was more concerned with creating a musical democracy in which every teenager in every town could get together with a few friends and make music. Mark Perry, who was inspired by a Ramones performance to found Sniffin’ Glue, the first British punk ‘zine, famously instructed his readers to follow do-it-yourself (DIY) ideology. He printed simple diagrams of three guitar chords, advising: “Here’s a chord. Here’s another. And

²³ Collier, The Rise of Selfishness in America, 213.

another. Now go start a band.”²⁴ In practice, punk did not always live up to its egalitarian ideal, but the ethos was enough to inspire many amateurs to pick up guitars, pens, cameras, or microphones and begin creating now.

Hippies and punks took the Beat view of everyday life as art a step further by embracing play as an opportunity for creativity and self-actualization. For example, John Sinclair, who founded the Trans-Love Energies Unlimited Commune in Detroit in 1967 and managed the MC5, had been influenced in his efforts by the Living Theatre, an avant-garde theatre group that used “nonfictional acting” in efforts to further social change. Sinclair’s self-defined “total cooperative tribal living and working commune” produced dance concerts, rock-and-roll light shows, books, pamphlets, posters, and a newspaper. One aspect of the commune was the White Panther Party and its rock-and-roll arm, the MC5, who embodied a pseudo-political platform designed to bring “economic and cultural freedom” to all. According to the White Panther Manifesto, “Our program of rock and roll, dope and fucking in the streets is a program of total freedom for everyone. ... We breathe revolution. We are LSD driven total maniacs of the universe.”²⁵ Many of Sinclair’s closest associates debated whether Trans-Love Energies and the White Panther Party were at least partly a goof and exactly how sincerely Sinclair believed in his doped-up, sexed-up, armed revolution and how much of it was just stoned street theater remains unclear. Either way, it had the ability to effect change. While Sinclair’s aggressive approach and use of satire and irony were unusual for the 1960s counterculture, these became some of the most oft used tools in the punk-rock

²⁴ Perry quoted in Laing, One Chord Wonders: Power and Meaning in Punk Rock (Philadelphia : Open University Press, 1985), 54.

²⁵ Steve Waksman, Instruments of Desire: The Electric Guitar and the Shaping of Music Experience (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 207-36; John Sinclair, “White Panther Statement,” Underground Press Anthology, ed. Thomas King Forcade (New York: Ace Books, 1972), 72.

garage. Punk rockers, functioning in an era rife with disillusionment, found the earnestness of the moderns and the hippies – even the Beats to some extent – an inauthentic expression for an inauthentic era. At their most serious (at least before hardcore), punks tended toward irony and exaggeration rather than the gravity and realism that had characterized 1960s social criticism in rock form. Thus while hippies wore peace signs and put flowers in National Guardsmen's gun barrels as heartfelt protests against the Vietnam War, punks acknowledged the absurdity of modern life by paying homage to the dictatorial mad man Idi Amin.²⁶

Although modernism, the Beat generation, and hippies all bequeathed important legacies to punk, changes in the rock world were the most immediate catalysts for the movement. Many people who found meaning through rock viewed the early seventies as a bleak period. In the late sixties, there had been a sense that rock had the potential to be a force of revolution and a focal point of unity. From the vague possibilities of spiritual advancement offered by Jerry Garcia, who said the Grateful Dead “are trying to make things groovier for everybody so more people can feel better more often, to advance the trip, to get higher, however you want to say it,” to the more direct social protests of Creedence Clearwater Revival's classist attack on the draft, “Fortunate Son,” rock music seemed to have the capacity to change the world. The degree to which this optimism obscured the reality of divisions even within the counterculture and the lack of real change in society at large is less important here than the hope rock offered. By the early 1970s despondency had replaced optimism for many rock fans. Not only did a sense of futility permeate society, as noted above, because of events at the level of national or international politics, but circumstances within the rock world shook people's confidence as well. The supposed unity and love of

²⁶ Black Randy and the Metrosquad, “Idi Amin” and “I'm Black and Proud” b/w “I'm Black and Proud Part 14” and “I Wanna be a Nark,” EP, Dangerhouse Records, 1978.

Woodstock in August 1969 gave way just four months later to the confusion and violence of Altamont. Then major rock icons burned themselves out, with Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, and Jim Morrison dying in alcohol- or drug-related events. And the Beatles brought heartache to many rock fans when they disbanded in 1970.²⁷

Even for many fans less interested in rock as force of change, the music's meaning had changed by the mid-1970s. To future punks, the rock milieu seemed overrun by either megalomaniacal rock gods like Led Zeppelin and Ted Nugent, who literally and figuratively stood apart from their fans on massive stages in arena shows, or "prog" (short for progressive) rock artists like King Crimson and Gentle Giant, who wanted to "progress" rock into a higher art form through complicated compositions that could be mastered only by highly trained and skilled musicians. Punks, on the other hand, usually valued minimalism and wanted to return to basic garage rock by and for young people, a DIY style of music that anyone could learn to play in a short amount of time and that was best appreciated in intimate venues. Hence John Denney of the Weirdos announced that he had "Burned my tickets to see ELO" in the song "Destroy All Music" (1977). And John Holmstrom, co-founder of Punk magazine, observed, "this punk thing [is] a reaction to rock music bein' a corporate structure and to the stupid excesses and star trips rock stars exhibit."²⁸

Holmstrom's comment suggests that although punk's DIY tactics emerged in part as a reaction to rock's changing styles in the 1970s, they also came about because of changes in

²⁷ Jerry Garcia, quoted in "Haight Ashbury," Village Voice, 6 March 1969, 15; Creedence Clearwater Revival, "Fortunate Son," *Willy and the Poor Boys*, Fantasy Records, 1969. Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, and Jim Morrison died in September 1970, October 1970, and July 1971 respectively. Woodstock took place August 15-17, 1969, while Altamont occurred December 1969.

²⁸ Weirdos, "Destroy All Music" b/w "Why Do You Exist," Bomp!, 1977, 7" EP; John Holmstrom quoted in "Exposing the Punk Menace," High Times, February 1977, 54.

the music industry's constitution. During the early to mid-fifties, independent labels fared well in rock 'n' roll. Indeed, they played a major role in recognizing the talent of artists such as Chuck Berry and James Brown and the marketability of rock 'n' roll in general. By the end of the fifties, most independent labels were gone, however, bankrupt or purchased by the larger labels, especially the big three of that era: RCA Victor, Decca, and Columbia (CBS). After further shuffling, in the mid-seventies, there were five "majors," all owned by conglomerates: CBS, RCA Victor, Warner Communications, MCA, and Capitol Records, with a combined market share of over fifty percent. Even the so-called "indies" of the era, including United Artists, A&M, Motown, and MGM, targeted a mass market, making aesthetic, marketing, and organizational decisions that largely paralleled the majors.²⁹

Punk rockers dreamed of returning to a (somewhat overstated) golden era of rock vitality, in which profit margins were less vital than innovation and egalitarian opportunity was available to all. Alan Betrock, founder of the punk fanzine, the New York Rocker, lamented in 1977, "If TV is America's vast wasteland, then radio is its polluted waterway: stagnant, murky, diseased, and ultimately useless. Radio was once alive with energy and innovation, breaking new acts and records every day.... Now like the record companies ... the stations are ruled by the big business syndrome...." Punk's DIY ethic celebrated amateurish enthusiasm and intimate venues and challenged the music business' corporate structures. According to punk wisdom, mainstream rock had become a complacent, cookie-cutter, business-oriented shadow of its former self. Where rock once meant dynamic, spontaneous, rebellious music emerging from garages, juke joints, and youthful innovation, it

²⁹ Fredric Dannen, Hit Men: Power Brokers and Fast Money Inside the Music Business (New York : Times Books, 1990), 31-2, 46, passim; R. Serge Denisoff, Solid Gold: The Popular Record Industry (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1975), 94-5; Pekka Gronow, "The Record Industry: The Growth of a Mass Medium," Popular Music 3 (1983): 53-75.

now signified aging rock stars ungratefully enjoying lavish lifestyles at their fans' expense, artistic decision-making by "suits," lavish but impersonal stadium performances, and fans who unquestioningly accepted the pabulum streaming thinly from their radios. Punk rockers initially hoped their music would revitalize, even cure, a "diseased" industry, wrenching it from the hands of callous businessmen returning it to its original community: young people. This was a hallowed mission of great consequence. As Patti Smith's alter ego in the play Cowboy Mouth, observed, "I want it to be perfect, 'cause it's the only religion I got. ... Any great motherfucker rock 'n' roll song can raise me higher than all of Revelations. We created rock 'n' roll from our own image, it's our child ... a child that's gotta burst in the mouth of a savior."³⁰ In other words, early punks hoped to remake rock not forsake it; they hoped to be its saviors. Over time, however, punks would abandon their fantasy of transforming the music industry as a whole and attempt instead to establish a permanent underground that could exist outside the structures and strictures of mainstream rock.

Islands of Misfit Toys: Punk Scenes Coalesce

New York Punk: Diversity Finds a Name

Individual would-be punks might rail against the music business and tout the power of DIY youth, but several elements had to come together before a scene could be said to exist, before "cultural space" was cleared. First, a group of people had to become interested in playing and hearing punk, and they had to become aware of each other. In the process, they had to name and recognize, however loosely, punk as a genre. Involved in this

³⁰ Alan Betrock, "The Sad State of Radio and What to do About It," New York Rocker, vol 1, no 8, July-Aug 1977, 14. Smith's alter ego's name was Cavale. She co-wrote the 1971 play with Sam Shepard. [Cowboy Mouth, in Fool for Love and Other Plays, intro. Ross Wetzeon (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1984), 156; Stephen J. Bottoms, The Theatre of Sam Shepard: States of Crises (Edinburgh: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 68.]

recognition and naming was the second crucial element in creating a scene: some apparatus for spreading and sharing knowledge about the genre. Because punk rock did not receive mainstream radio airplay, its followers had to find alternative methods of communication, including college radio, “underground” measures such as homemade fanzines and flyers, and – most importantly – word of mouth. The final crucial element in a developing scene was the physical space in which punks played and listened to music. Punks often started very small, playing in basements, garages, or underground clubs. They might then begin to play off-nights at established bars. Eventually, the scene would grow to a size able to support live punk shows on a fairly regular basis. In hindsight, it is possible to see that almost as soon as these three elements – a constituency, communication, and physical space – achieved a level of maturity and a scene coalesced, that scene began to fracture, with various groups vying for the right to define punk. But that is jumping ahead. First, let us watch several scenes come together.

The artistic precedents and inchoate sentiments that grew into punk emerged simultaneously in many geographic locales but first coalesced into a recognizable musical movement in New York City in the mid-1970s.³¹ The most notable element of early New

³¹ For a discussion of the debate surrounding the origins of punk, see note 19 in the introduction. The full stories of the punk scenes in New York, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C., the three cities included in this study, are better left to other narratives. The most comprehensive coverage of New York punk can be found in Legs McNeil and Gillian McCain, Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of PUNK (New York: Penguin, 1997); and Clinton Heylin, From the Velvets to the Voidoids: The Birth of American PUNK Rock, 2d ed. (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2005). See also, Yvonne Sewall-Ruskin, High on Rebellion: Inside the Underground at Max’s Kansas City (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1998); Benard Gendron, Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club: Popular Music and the Avant-Garde (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); and Bockris, Beat Punks. For Los Angeles punk, the most extensive account is Spitz and Mullen, We Got the Neutron Bomb. See also, Don Snowden, ed., Make the Music Go Bang: The Early L.A. Punk Scene (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1997); and Claude Bessy et al., eds., Forming: The Early Days of L.A. Punk (Santa Monica, Calif: Smart Art Press, 1999). The most thorough telling of the D.C. story is Mark Andersen and Mark Jenkins, Dance of Days: Two Decades of Punk in the Nation’s Capital, 2nd ed. (New York: Akashic Books, 2003). See also, Cynthia Connolly, Leslie Clague, and Sharon Cheslow, Banned in D.C.: Photos and Anecdotes from the DC PUNK Underground (79-85) (Washington, D.C.: Sun Dog Propaganda, 1988).

York punk was the sheer variety of musical styles coexisting within one music scene. What brought these diverse artists together, indeed what encouraged the diversity itself, was a desire to counter the prevailing rock aesthetic of the 1970s, including a view celebrating highly polished studio and stage performances and the larger-than-life virtuoso musician. As long as an individual challenged the rock ‘n’ roll status quo, s/he should be accepted into the punk-rock fold. Participants strove to be “self-invented people,” according to New York scenester and artist Duncan Hannah, who “changed their names, changed their locale, [and] were reinventing themselves in New York City.” They molded a self-aware image through every aspect of life: music, clothes, books, even the venues they frequented and the apartments in which they lived.³²

From 1974 to 1976, the embryonic New York punk scene went through a period of self-definition and confidence building. Nascent punk rockers first had to find a place to play their music. In the early- to mid-1970s, very few venues in most cities hosted live original rock ‘n’ roll. Seeing live rock usually meant cheering rock gods from afar in arenas or hearing Top-40 covers in bars. New York offered more opportunities for new bands than most cities, yet proto-punks like the New York Dolls counted themselves very lucky to make the stage at Max’s Kansas City; more often they performed at places like Club 82, a drag bar, or the Mercer Arts Center, a venue that attracted “the art and drag crowd”³³ Punk rock’s DIY spirit overcame the dearth of venues, eventually finding the nascent subculture a home on New York’s Lower East Side. In 1974, as Hilly Kristal hung an awning outside his new

³² This phrase belongs to Duncan Hannah, interview by author, tape recording, New York, N.Y., 26 June 2002.

³³ Nina Antonio, The New York Dolls: Too Much Too Soon (London: Omnibus Press, 1998), 44. Max’s Kansas City moved into booking live music around 1969 but hired mostly signed acts until after Mickey Ruskin, the original owner, sold the business in 1974. [Sewall-Ruskin, High on Rebellion, 218-53. See also, McNeil and McCain, Please Kill Me, 117, 132, 155.]

club CBGB on the Bowery, he was approached by Tom Verlaine and Richard Lloyd of the band Television, who were looking for a “a bar where nothing [wa]s happening,” where they could establish themselves and install a following.³⁴ Misled by the band into believing they fit within his format of “country, bluegrass, and blues” (hence CBGB), Kristal agreed to let Television play regularly. A few weeks later, they and the poet-rocker Patti Smith began a run of six consecutive weekends, Thursday through Sunday, drawing increasingly large and enthusiastic crowds over time. These shows were an important turning point for New York punk because they not only proved to Kristal the economic viability of what was known at the time as “street rock” but also allowed fellow travelers to meet, thus marking for many “the official beginning of the scene.”³⁵ CBGB quickly became the physical center of the New York punk scene, bringing a wide variety of musical styles under one roof and into conversation with one another. During any given week in 1975 or 1976 one might have seen Television’s art-rock symmetry of dueling guitars, the Ramones’ soon-to-be-classic-punk three-chord minimalism, and the power-pop sounds of Blondie led by blonde bombshell, Deborah Harry.

By 1976 many people, including Hilly Kristal, agree that a self-identified “punk” scene had coalesced in New York.³⁶ The surfacing of CBGB as a punk institution was the first of several key factors that aided in the scene’s formation. The next important step was the creation of a name for the new scene. When CBGB opened in 1974, the disparate music

³⁴ Richard Hell, another member of Television, quoted in McNeil and McCain, Please Kill Me, 169.

³⁵ The phrase “street rock” comes from Hilly Kristal, interview by author, tape recording, New York, N.Y., 24 June 2002. The California fanzine Bomp! also referred to proto-punk like the Runaways as street rock. Terry Ork, who managed Patti Smith at the time, quoted in McNeil and McCain, Please Kill Me, 172.

³⁶ Kristal, interview by author, 2002. See also, McNeil and McCain, Please Kill Me, 229-42; and David Bowman, This Must Be the Place: The Adventure of Talking Heads in the 20th Century (New York: Harper Entertainment, 2001), 46.

emerging from within had no commonly accepted appellation, although some called it “street rock.” Increasingly, however, the scene’s participants began to refer to it as punk rock, drawing on the moniker given to 1960s garage bands such as the Seeds and the Standells by Bomp! Records and magazine owner Greg Shaw. As is often the case with new ideas or cultural forms, the use of the term punk rock was quite imprecise during these early years. According to John Holmstrom, a cartoonist and precocious New York punk fan, early 1970s popular music fans understood punk rock as “[b]asically ... fast, loud, and hard rock ‘n’ roll music. There was also the sense that punk was the opposite of hippie.” At the same time, he noted, “when Richard Nixon and Donny Osmond received votes in the 1973 Creem Readers’ Poll for ‘Punk of the Year’” it was clear “that people didn’t quite understand the word yet.”³⁷ With this confusion over the term’s meaning, it took sometime before the title became solidly associated with the music scene on the Lower East Side. In the early days of this scene, the phrases “punk rock” and “new wave” were used interchangeably; both were umbrella terms that encompassed a wide variety of music. It would be several years before participants began to argue over what music was more properly called punk or new wave. At that point, those who claimed the name punk saw themselves as the true inheritors of the original Lower East rebellion and New Wavers as pop-influenced sell-outs.

The most concrete early connection between the term punk and the New York scene came with the magazine PUNK, first published January 1976. Co-founded by Holmstrom and his friends Ged Dunn and Legs McNeil, PUNK was inspired in part by the underground press of the 1960s, magazines like the LA Free Press and the Village Voice as well as comics

³⁷ Exactly who should be credited with first referring to these 1960s garage bands as “punk” is open to debate. According to John Holmstrom, co-founder of PUNK magazine, the honor goes to the late Greg Shaw. [John Holmstrom, email interview by author, 29 July 2002.] For a revealing and sometimes hilarious take on the origins of the term punk, see McNeil and McCain, Please Kill Me, 200-8.

such as Zippy the Pinhead and The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers. The creators wanted “to make PUNK a modern-day underground magazine.” The most immediate muses for PUNK came in the forms of Harvey Kurtzman, Mad magazine cartoonist and Holmstrom’s mentor, and the testosterone- and alcohol-fueled proto-punk of New York rockers the Dictators. Referring to PUNK as “the MAD magazine of rock ‘n’ roll,” Holmstrom and crew, in keeping with the popular disaffection of the era, wanted a publication “that would reject the boring politics and focus on pop culture.” A bit later in 1976 Alan Betrock founded the New York Rocker, a relatively professional, polished fanzine dedicated to the dynamic music emerging from the Bowery. After discovering the burgeoning scene, Betrock was first amazed and then dismayed and frustrated at the extent to which the mainstream press, including the supposedly “alternative” Village Voice, ignored it. In true DIY fashion, he took matters into his own hands and began publishing the New York Rocker. With PUNK and the New York Rocker, the New York scene now had its own voice, publications devoted primarily to New York punk rock.³⁸

The final institutionalizing component of the New York punk scene came when several key bands signed to labels and released their first albums. In late 1975, Patti Smith put out her first album, *Horses*, bringing some attention to the scene. Smith had been performing for several years by that point, and her work owed as much to more legitimate art forms such as theatre and poetry as it did to rock ‘n’ roll, so the real breakthrough for punk rock came a bit later, with the Ramones. Early in 1976, Seymour Stein signed the band to

³⁸ Holmstrom, interview by author; McNeil and McCain, Please Kill Me, 200-8, 268. The “best of” PUNK has been published as John Holmstrom, ed., PUNK: The Original (New York: Trans High, 1996). For discussions of underground press in the 1960s, see, for instance, Robert J. Glessing, The Underground Press in America (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1970); and Abe Peck, Uncovering the Sixties: The Life and Times of the Underground Press (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985). For information on New York publications covering punk, see also, Heylin, From the Velvets to the Voidoids, 239-45.

Sire Records, a small label that soon entered a distribution deal with Warner Records that would prove to be very beneficial to punk rock. The Ramones spent less than a week in the studio to record their self-titled debut album at Plaza Sound in Radio City Music Hall. Released in April, the record cost a mere six thousand dollars in studio fees at a time when major acts regularly spent over two hundred thousand dollars to record an album. *The Ramones* went largely unnoticed by the mainstream music press and radio in the United States, but it had an enormous impact on incipient punk scenes across the U.S. and England. That summer, the band toured parts of the United States and Great Britain in support of the album, and countless future punk rockers cite a Ramones concert as a conversion experience and their inspiration for starting a band or a fanzine. For example, fan and music journalist V. Vale recalls his “first so-called ‘punk’ event” as “a real shock.” An August 1976 Ramones performance seemed the antithesis to 1970s rock, “age of the 30-minute, horrible, masturbatory guitar solo. There was all this contrivance and artiness ..., and the Ramones brought in a blast of something totally opposite, minimalist, ... challenging all established aesthetic values, and not only in music.”³⁹ Other important New York bands also made strides in 1976, further helping the scene to coalesce: Television released an EP on Stiff Records in Great Britain; Blondie put out their first album on Private Stock Records; the Talking Heads signed to Sire Records after a long courtship by Seymour Stein; and the Dead Boys moved to New York from Cleveland.⁴⁰

³⁹ For details of the Ramones early recordings, Sire Records’ history and its role in the New York scene, see, for example, Dee Dee Ramone, *Lobotomy: Surviving the Ramones*, 2d ed. (New York: Thunder’s Mouth, 2000), 108; “Ramones,” www.sirerecords.com/artist/info/ramones, accessed 11 November 2007; and Bowman, *This Must Be the Place*, 69-72, *passim*. V. Vale quoted in James Stark, *Punk ’77: An Inside Look at the San Francisco Rock ‘n’ roll Scene* (San Francisco: RE/Search Publications, 1999), 68-9. See also, David Arnson, email interview by author, 11 November 2007.

⁴⁰ Bowman, *This Must Be the Place*, 87-88.

The year 1976 marked not only the maturation of the New York punk scene but the blossoming of the genre in Great Britain, where promoters and artists seized punk and infused it with new meanings. British punk rockers politicized their music more overtly than their American peers in two ways. First, the scandalizing actions of bands such as the Sex Pistols, while not entirely new to punk, were much more visible in Great Britain due to the tabloid nature of its media as well as the publicity savvy of the Sex Pistols' manager, Malcolm McLaren. When the Pistols cursed live on the BBC, they daringly flaunted mainstream mores and decorum and garnered the attention McLaren craved. Second, the lyrical "social realism" of the Clash and other bands directly challenged official and unofficial British policies about topics such as the lingering effects of imperialism, the welfare state, the era's political right turn, and police harassment.⁴¹ After the media explosion of the Sex Pistols and the general fluorescence of British punk in 1977, the genre continued to develop in Great Britain but also returned to the United States in revitalized forms.

Los Angeles: Punk Rock Explodes

If punk in New York was characterized by intimacy, diversity, and the camaraderie of a newly-found common cause, Los Angeles punk represented punk's growth, both in terms of people and geography. By the late seventies, Los Angeles surpassed New York as the center of American punk. Paralleling developments in New York's seedy neighborhoods of the Lower East Side, punk found its first southern California home in run-down areas of

⁴¹ Jon Savage, *England's Dreaming: Anarchy, Sex Pistols, Punk Rock, and Beyond* (New York: St. Martin's, 1992), 234-40, *passim*; and Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, 128, *passim*.

Hollywood.⁴² And just as there were the New York Dolls and the Dictators in New York, Los Angeles had its proto-punk bands, such as the Dogs, the Pop!, and the Runaways. These bands struggled to be heard, however, because even in an entertainment mecca like Los Angeles few clubs booked original rock at the time. A change in formats at the famous Whisky-a-Go-Go vividly illustrated the dearth of venues in the mid-seventies. The Whisky had hosted riveting live performances by artists like Janis Joplin and the Doors in the late 1960s and early 1970s. But in 1975, the Whisky stopped booking live rock, switching to “a fare of lightweight musical revues” and disco, due to, management claimed, the lack of industry support for new hard rock and the lower costs of disc jockeys.⁴³ The few locations that did book original rock in the mid-1970s, like the Troubadour and the Starwood, tended to be “industry” clubs, fairly exclusive venues that showcased groups for major record labels. In other words, bands faced a catch-22: in order to make a name for themselves by playing live gigs, they needed an established profile.

Punks turned to DIY techniques to solve the dilemma. In June 1977, Brendan Mullen, a Scottish reporter and amateur musician, rented the gigantic basement of the Pussycat Theater, a strip club on Cherokee Avenue in Hollywood, where he and his “cronies [could] experiment with beating on drums and anything else that showed up, undisturbed by neighbors or cops, 24/7.”⁴⁴ Although the space was quite inexpensive, certainly by current Los Angeles standards, Mullen cut costs by subdividing it and renting out rehearsal space to

⁴² See Spitz and Mullen, Neutron Bomb; Pleasant Gehman, “Party at Ground Zero Zero,” in Make the Music Go Bang!: The Early L.A. Punk Scene, ed. Don Snowden (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1997), 129-41; and Bessy, et al., eds., Forming, 12-22.

⁴³ Robert Hilburn, “Homegrown Punk,” Los Angeles Times, 4 January 1977, sec. IV, 4; Dennis Hunt wrote about the Whisky’s shift away from live rock in “Whisky, on the Rocks, to Become a Disco,” Los Angeles Times, 23 March 1975, sec IV, p. 10.

⁴⁴ Mullen quoted in Spitz and Mullen, We Got the Neutron Bomb, 123-4.

other musicians. Some of his first takers were the Controllers, who agreed to rent during the least desirable late-night/early morning hours in order to get the cheapest rate: two dollars per hour. Eventually group jams developed into “early gigs” that “were no-cover, open-door BYO parties.” After the business-minded Weirdos, who became one of L.A.’s most important punk bands, demanded to be paid at one of these parties, Mullen hired a doorman and began regular weekend gigs, charging two to three dollars for customers to see a handful of bands each night. Thus – without the requisite permits and licenses – was born the infamous Masque, home to early versions of the Go-Go’s, X, and other L.A. punk rockers. This illegal, DIY club was “the real turning point” for the scene, according to John Doe, singer and bassist for X, because it provided a gathering place for musical nonconformists and, against all odds, helped break L.A. punk bands. Doe states that “[b]y the end of 1977, when the Whisky had ten people at their club and there were two hundred people at the Masque, our bands started getting booked at the Whisky.” Indeed, the Masque and local punk rockers helped kindle a “rock resurgence” in the area, according to Los Angeles Times music critic Richard Cromelin.⁴⁵

In addition to the Masque, a number of media outlets emerged as critical institutions in the L.A. punk scene: three music fanzines – Back Door Man, Slash, and Flipside – and Rodney Bingenheimer’s regular radio show on KROQ. The pre-punk Back Door Man was a relatively polished (by later punk standards) and professionally published ‘zine, founded by Fred “Phast Phreddie” Patterson. According to Patterson, Back Door Man was born “mainly out of frustration with the mainstream music press” that ignored the records “[m]y friends

⁴⁵ Johnny Stingray, interview by author, tape recording, Los Angeles, 21 July 2004; John Doe quoted in Spitz and Mullen, Neutron Bomb, 126-7; Richard Cromelin, “L.A. Rock Resurgence,” Los Angeles Times, 18 December 1976, sec. II, p. 10; and “L.A. Translation of ‘New Wave’ of Punk,” 22 June 1977, sec. IV, p. 8; Robert Hilburn, “Punk Searches for an Audience,” Los Angeles Times, 27 September 1977, sec. IV, p. 1.

and I were listening to The Patti Smith show at the Whisky in November '74 was the catalyst.” In collaboration with Don Waller, D.D. Faye, and several others, Patterson took a “broadminded” approach to rock journalism, although the magazine tended to focus on hard rock or edgier bands like the Stooges and Patti Smith.⁴⁶ Back Door Man ran from January 1975 to late 1978, thus entering the punk era in Los Angeles and providing an example to future ‘zinesters.

Back Door Man enthusiastically welcomed punk, in Los Angeles and elsewhere, but it wasn’t until Slash and Flipside emerged in 1977 that the L.A. punk scene had their own media organs. Slash beat Flipside to the streets by two months (one issue), appearing for the first time in May 1977 as a professionally published, tabloid-sized, newsprint fanzine. In his opening rant/editorial, co-founder Claude “Kickboy Face” Bessy welcomed punk rock, “the dirty primitive music” emerging primarily out of New York and England that challenged the “decade’s biggest musical fad ... the dreadful dripping sounds of disco music,” and hoped it would find a home in Los Angeles. For Bessy, Slash “was born out of curiosity and out of hope. Curiosity regarding what looks like a possible rebirth of true rebel music, hope in its eventual victory over the bland products professional pop stars have been feeding us.”⁴⁷ During Slash’s run from 1977 to 1982, Bessy and co-founder Philomena Winstanley tendered an insider’s take on the Hollywood punk scene. As important as its role as a publisher of punk art and music journalism was its function as a gossip rag, helping solidify the scene. People eagerly awaited the next issue of Slash to see whose chemical- and alcohol-induced antics had made the regular “Local Shit” column.

⁴⁶ Fred Patterson quoted in Spitz and Mullen, Neutron Bomb, 31-2. Don Waller called the magazine’s approach broadminded in interview by author, tape recording, Los Angeles, 21 June 2004.

⁴⁷ Claude Bessy, “So This Is War, Eh?” Slash, vol 1 no 1, May 1977, 3.

While Slash offered the Hollywood hipster's view of punk, Flipside – at least initially – afforded the voice of the suburban outsider, a stance that was “wonderfully uncool and naïve,” according to Patrick “Pooch” DiPuccio, one of Flipside's founders. Although Back Door Man, Slash, PUNK, and the New York Rocker were the first to cover their respective scenes, Flipside was nitty-gritty DIY, and thus more typical of the ensuing punk fanzine tradition. Flipside's first issue, July/August 1977, consisted of four 8 1/2” x 11” sheets of paper, folded and stapled in the middle to make sixteen smaller pages. It was hand-typed and photocopied. The first run was twenty-five copies, sold for twenty-five cents each. The founders, Pooch and his best friend Al (Kowalski) Flipside, found their first “distributor” in Lovell's record store in their hometown of Whittier, just east of Los Angeles. Over time, a number of other fanzines sprang up in southern California. Pleasant Gehman, along with Anna Statman, Kid Congo, and Randy Kaye, started Lobotomy, “the brainless magazine,” in 1977, where their “trademark was that the interviews would be about sex and drug experiences.”⁴⁸ Other ‘zines included I Wanna Be Your Dog (Hollywood and Paris), Raw Power (Woodland Hills), and Jade Zebest and Zandra's Generation X (Hollywood).⁴⁹

Punk fanzines proliferated, but Flipside “was like the Bible” for many punks.⁵⁰ Pooch and crew started Flipside for several reasons, the foremost of which was their sheer enthusiasm about rock music in general and L.A. punk in particular. Additionally, they wanted a down-to-earth ‘zine for everyday music fans, especially young people. While “rock

⁴⁸ Along with Pooch and Al, the three most important early faces at Flipside were X-8 (Sam Diaz), Larry Lash (Steve Schumacher), and George Torrez. Patrick DiPuccio, interview by author, transcript, Los Angeles, 21 July 2004, 3-7; Spitz and Mullen, Neutron Bomb (2001), 84; Pleasant Gehman, interview by author, tape recording, Los Angeles, 28 June 2004.

⁴⁹ G. Dewar MacLeod, “‘Kids of the Black Hole’: Youth Culture in Postsuburbia,” Ph.D. diss, City University of New York, 1998, 96-99.

⁵⁰ Hal Negro quoted in Spitz and Mullen, Neutron Bomb, 83.

criticism had become a high-art form, and bands were taking themselves too seriously,” Flipside “talked about stuff fans wanted to hear,” said Pooch. The pages were chock full of word-for-word transcriptions – however banal, irrelevant, or nonsensical – of band interviews and record reviews. The ‘zine’s DIY approach, along with its motto, “be more than a witness,” encouraged young people to take an active role in the scene, shaping it to their desires. Furthermore, being situated as they were in Whittier, Flipside’s staff was comprised of outsiders to outcasts, and therefore Flipside was well-positioned to appeal to dispossessed readers, especially teens spread across far-flung suburban Los Angeles. Over time, Flipside would encourage people not only to take part in the scene but to create their own scenes if they did not like the current one or lived too far away. It did not matter whether you lived in Hollywood, the Valley, Orange County, or the Inland Empire, Flipside advised, you could become more than a witness by picking up a guitar, a camera, or a pen and making your own punk life. Along with San Francisco’s Maximumrocknroll, Flipside became one of the two most important punk ‘zines of the 1980s. It finally folded in 1991 after its last distributor went under.⁵¹

Flipside owed part of its success to local radio personality Rodney Bingenheimer and his edgy radio show Rodney on the ROQ. Pooch and Al sent Bingenheimer a copy of their very first issue and were astounded when Rodney mentioned it on air. Bingenheimer, a long-time Los Angeles scenester and scene-maker played a crucial role in L.A. punk. Virtually everyone interviewed for this project mentioned Bingenheimer’s show as a key to his or her conversion to or education about punk rock. Kimm Gardner, guitarist for the Huntington Beach band Channel 3, described his entrance to punk culture: “We knew about [punk], and

⁵¹ DiPuccio, interview by author, 2004, 20.

we were listening to KROQ. ... Rodney Bingenheimer has been such a big influence on [our band] as well all of us out here in L.A. ... Rodney really was the only one spinning interesting stuff.”⁵² In the early 1970s, Bingenheimer was a rock journalist and ran Rodney Bingenheimer’s English Disco, a tiny but extraordinarily hip Los Angeles club. KROQ, an established FM rock station, eventually approached Rodney to do a radio show, and he went on the air for the first time August 22, 1976. With his long-standing interest in current trends, the obscure, and the avant-garde, Bingenheimer’s timing in becoming a disc jockey meant he was poised to unleash punk rock on Los Angeles. As he is proud to reveal, Bingenheimer was the first disc jockey in southern California to play Blondie, the Ramones, the Clash, and many other punk bands. More importantly for Los Angeles punk, he was the first to give airtime to local bands and happenings. Bingenheimer distinguished himself from most L.A. music industry people in his egalitarian approach to local music. Not prone to aesthetic snobbery or focused on the next big hit, he mentioned on air the handmade, Xeroxed Flipside as well as the arty, professionally published Slash, novice and raw suburban teen bands the Adolescents and Channel 3 as well as older, better trained Hollywood hipsters like X and the Weirdos. While New York City had not needed radio as a unifying force because of physical proximity and strong, early fanzines, in a sprawling metropolitan area, Rodney on the ROQ inspired many punk rockers and provided the tenuous thread of unity that ran through the many pseudo-independent scenes that popped all over Los Angeles and Orange County in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

⁵² Kimm Gardner, interview by author, tape recording, Huntington Beach, Calif., 12 July 2004. See also, Dez Cadena in Fucked Up + Photocopied: Instant Art of the PUNK Rock Movement, ed. Bryan Ray Turcotte and Christopher T. Miller (Corte Madera, Calif.: Gingko Press, 1999), 90. A great biography of Rodney is George Hickenlooper, *Mayor of the Sunset Strip*, DVD, 78 min, Caldera Productions, Perna Productions and Question Mark Productions in association with Kino-Eye America, 2004. For how important Rodney was to the relative success of their ‘zines or bands, see, for example, Tony Reflex, interview by author, tape recording, Sierra Madre, Calif., 23 June 2004; and DiPuccio, interview by author, 2004, 8.

In addition to a club, fanzines, and a radio show, labels played an important institutional role in Los Angeles punk. New York had not needed independent labels in its early days, because while none in New York's first punk cohort signed to the "big five" labels, many bands were able to get deals with smaller, relatively well-funded organizations like Private Stock, Sire, and Elektra. In Los Angeles, very few bands were so fortunate. In 1974 Greg Shaw of Who Put the Bomp! (or just Bomp!) magazine put out an independent single by the Flamin' Groovies, who were in between record deals at the time, thus launching Bomp! Records.⁵³ Over the next few years, Bomp! had a hand in disseminating L.A. punk, putting out music by the Weirdos, the Last, the Zeros, 20/20, DMZ and others. Shaw drew on an established career in the music industry, however, and thus Bomp! may not be seen as a truly "indie" label by some purists. For the more discerning, therefore, the Germs' single "Forming" on What? Records marks the first independent Los Angeles punk release, and a more baldly DIY effort cannot be found in all of punk's history. An inexpensive two-track recorder captured the band thrashing their way inexpertly through two songs in the guitarist's mother's garage. What? Records was short-lived, but like the Ramones in New York, the importance of the Germs – both live and on What? – was the example they set for other local punk rockers. The Germs and the Ramones made it evident that one did not need a great deal of talent, money, or technical know-how to get up on stage or into "the studio" to record.

While Bomp! and What? showed L.A. punks the way, the two most important L.A. punk labels in the long run were Dangerhouse Records and SST Records. In the summer of 1977 David Brown, Pat Garrett, and Black Randy founded Dangerhouse Records to put out local music, and they released their first record in December, The Randoms "ABCD" b/w

⁵³ Blondie signed first to Private Stock and then Elektra; the Ramones and the Talking Heads signed to Sire; Television signed to Elektra; Greg Shaw, liner notes, *Destination Bomp!* Bomp BCD 4048/2, 1994.

“Let’s Get Rid of New York.” According to David Brown, “The do-it-yourself aspect of the production and packaging spoke for itself. We created ideas for affordable products[,] which set the pace for imitators, like the clear plastic-bag 45 sleeves (because traditional sleeves cost more than the records to be pressed).” Dangerhouse functioned as the main vinyl outlet of Hollywood punk sounds from 1977 to 1980, when it folded. Meanwhile, in Hermosa Beach SST Records began to put out music in the style that would become known as hardcore, a subgenre of punk known for its “visceral, brutal sound” and an angry performative style based on expressive, vehement dissonance. An oft-repeated story in punk, SST was born out of frustrated attempts to release records through an established company. Eventually Greg Ginn, guitarist for the prototypical hardcore band Black Flag, founded SST, which independently released Black Flag’s first EP in 1978 and their first album in 1979.⁵⁴

A series of independent or small records stores scattered throughout urban and suburban Los Angeles and Orange County represent the final important factor in helping the Los Angeles scene coalesce. In a pre-internet era, word about punk rock spread primarily through word of mouth, fanzines, and records. Record stores provided a central location for the dissemination of all three. Record stores were still a relatively new phenomenon in the seventies. Through the mid-1960s there were few record stores in the United States, *per se*. Generally people went to department stores to shop for albums, and these stores tended to cater to high-brow tastes, stocking mainly jazz and classical music. In the late 1960s, Tower Records and Warehouse Records emerged, moving records into discrete stores and thereby

⁵⁴ Michael Azerrad, Our Band Could Be Your Life: Scenes from the American Indie Underground 1981-1991 (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2001), 4, 13; Bessy et al., eds., Forming, 52; Henry Weld and David Brown, “Dangerhouse,” <http://www.breakmyface.com/bands/dangerhouse1.html>, accessed 11 November 2007; Experience Music Project, “Punk Chronology,” http://www.emplive.com/explore/punk_chron/makemyday.asp, accessed 31 May 2002.

carrying a much wider range of musical styles, including a lot of rock and roll. We have seen already that Lovells was important to Whittier punks. Vinyl Solution played the same role in Huntington Beach, as did the Bomp! record store in North Hollywood and the Music Box in Fullerton. Various Licorice Pizzas scattered around the area were also vital to punk, especially the one in Hollywood, which employed a number of people active in the punk scene, including cartoonist Matt Groening, Chris Ashford of What? Records, and Anna Statman of Slash magazine.⁵⁵

By the late 1970s, punk in Southern California had become increasingly diverse stylistically and dispersed geographically. Semi-autonomous scenes emerged across the greater L.A. metropolitan area, in areas like Huntington Beach, the Inland Empire, and Fullerton. And fans and musicians began to express preference for particular subgenres of punk like hardcore or the Paisley Underground.⁵⁶ Additionally, as younger punks entered the scene, age sometimes became a divisive issue. To some extent, institutions like Rodney on the ROQ and Flipside smoothed over the cracks created by aesthetics, physical distance, and age, but Los Angeles's geography and the ever-increasing numbers of punks meant that the scattered and subdivided nature of the southern California scene(s) prefigured the development of scenes across the nation. By the early 1980s, thriving punk scenes had emerged all over the United States, in such seemingly unlikely places as Lansing, Michigan and Austin, Texas. One of the most important scenes to emerge was in Washington, D.C.

⁵⁵ Bob Say, interview by author, tape recording, Sherman Oaks, Calif., 28 June 2004; Anna Statman, interview by author, tape recording, Los Angeles, 19 July 2004; Cliff Roman, interview for the Experience Music Project, transcript, 19 September 1999, 26; Jim Kaa, interview by author, tape recording, Huntington Beach, Calif., 3 July 2004.

⁵⁶ Hardcore punk was spearheaded by Black Flag of Hermosa Beach. It was a subgenre claiming to be “harder, faster, and louder” than earlier incarnations of punk. The Paisley Underground was a neo-psychedelic subgenre of punk or new wave that included bands like the Dream Syndicate and the Three O’Clock.

Washington, D.C.: Youth and Provincialism in Punk Rock

Punk in Washington happened on a much smaller scale than it did in Los Angeles or even New York, but it illustrated the degree to which punk began to pervade the country and how new participants became younger over time. The District's punk scene also developed along similar tracks of those in L.A. and New York, with succeeding waves of young people becoming punk rockers and a resulting splintering within the scene. Through 1975, fans of bluegrass, folk, and country rock had plenty to entertain them in the nation's capital, but rock enthusiasts had fewer choices. Seeing original rock usually meant going to the Capitol Center or other large venues, while most bar bands played cover tunes. But a shift happened between 1976 and 1978, with more venues booking original rock and doing so more often, and proto-punk bands played an instrumental role in this process. The first wave of punks in D.C. was comprised of roots-rock bands such as the Razz, Overkill, and the Slickee Boys as well as art rock groups such as the Urban Verbs and Tiny Desk Unit.

As in New York and Los Angeles, the blossoming D.C. punk world needed certain institutions before it could come together into a recognizable scene. The most important unifying element in the early days of District punk was the Georgetown University radio station, WGTB, considered one of the most progressive stations in the country at that time. Several WGTB disc jockeys, including Steve Lorber and Chris Thompson, were regulars at the Keg, a bar located right across the street from the radio station that served as an early – but short-lived – home for D.C. punk. As with Rodney on the ROQ in Los Angeles, WGTB spread the word of punk to people who might not have immediate access to clubs like the Keg or insider word-of-mouth communication. Unfortunately, Georgetown University administrators shut down the radio station January 31, 1979, for reasons that remain unclear.

“When WGTB shut down, it was a tremendous blow” to the District’s growing punk scene, especially to suburban punks like Mike Heath, who said he cried when he heard the news.⁵⁷

With the loss of WGTB, D.C. punk had an even stronger need for institutionalizing components, but in the early days, these institutions remained more fluid than many punks might have liked. At first, the only venue open to them was the Keg, a dive bar in northwest D.C. – and only on off nights; managers saved busy nights for cover bands. Early in 1978 punk rockers were pleased when the Atlantis, a restaurant in a run-down area of downtown D.C., became the principal punk venue. That summer, however, the club alienated much of its punk clientele by refusing entrance to minors, claiming to do so because of low alcohol sales and property damage. In response, local punks organized a fairly successful – albeit incomplete – boycott of the club. Despite reconciling with the broader punk scene later that year, the Atlantis never got back on its feet and closed by early 1979. In May the Atlantis reopened as the 9:30 Club and remained for many years the top new wave/punk venue in D.C. Even under new owners, however, conflicts between the 9:30 and the younger members of the scene continued, a common issue in punk scenes across the U.S. Being underage, most of the younger punks, who happened to be hardcore fans, could not attend many bar shows, and once they formed their own bands, they had difficulty getting bookings because of their young fan base. Young fans could not drink, and liquor sales paid the bills. Over time, the younger punks would pursue any venue available: churches, community centers, even a Yippie commune.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Andersen and Jenkins, Dance of Days, 32-33; Arnson, email interview by author, 2007; Mike Heath quoted in Dance of Days, 33.

⁵⁸ Arnson, email interview by author, 2007.

Just as no single venue became the heart of the D.C. punk scene, no single fanzine emerged as the principal disseminator of information, perhaps because the relatively small community could rely more heavily on word of mouth. Mainstream media in the District was slow to cover hardcore punk, even though by 1976 it had taken notice of nationally or internationally recognized punk bands such as the Ramones and Patti Smith and soon covered local roots rockers and new wavers. The first review of a hardcore performance in the town's mainstream media came in July 1982, two full years after the first D.C. hardcore record was pressed. Certain 'zines attempted to step into the breach, including Mike (Livewire) Heath's, Vintage Violence, Mary Levy's Infiltrator, Xyra's Capitol Crisis, Howard Wuelfing's DisCords and DesCenes, and Barbara Rice's Truly Needy.⁵⁹ While none of these publications lasted long, they each served important functions and demonstrated local punks' deep emotional investments in their punk community as well as contestations over its meaning and membership. For example, a February 1981 letter from several younger punks called Xyra, editor of the 'zine Capitol Crisis, to task. The young "Georgetown" punks criticized the editor's dismissive discussion of local hardcore bands as "belated trendies" and her general lack of attention to the local scene, suggesting she "try interviewing some of the local bands to see what they're about instead of interviewing

⁵⁹ Mainstream newspapers began taking notice of hardcore punks early in 1981. See, for example, Kathleen Ennis, "Punks," Washington Post, 22 January 1981 Comics/D.C. sec. I, p. 3; Richard Harrington, "Slam Dancing in the Big City," Washington Post, 19 July 1981, sec G, p. 1-2, and "Recordings: Recent Releases from D.C. Rockers," Washington Post, 26 June 1983, sec. H, p. 7. Even the "alternative" press, the Unicorn Times, gives scant mention to the harder elements in the D.C. punk/new wave scene. For passing notice of the germinal Bad Brains, see March 1979, 6. They finally give the Bad Brains a full article in June 1980. Andersen and Jenkins, Dance of Days, 33, 140; Xyra, interview by author, tape recording, Washington, D.C., 21 August 2002; Arnson, email interview by author, 2007.

irrelevant out-of-town bands.”⁶⁰ The punks’ letter to the editor demonstrated just how seriously they took the limited print media available to them.

D.C. punks were much more successful in releasing records than they were in establishing enduring live-music venues or fanzines. The Slickee Boys released the seven-inch “Hot and Cool,” their first record in June 1976 on their own label Dacoit, an enterprise comprised entirely of optimism and some low-grade recording equipment owned by Slickee guitarist Marshall Keith. Similarly, White Boy, a two-person band made up of James Kowalski, a 36-year-old printing-company executive, and his teenage son, recorded their own EP in their basement. D.C. do-it-yourselfers would then receive help in producing their recordings from two crucial sources – Don Zientara and Skip Groff. Zientara’s basement recording studio, Inner Ear Studio, was a good bit more expert than that owned by the Slickee Boys or White Boy, but it was a far cry from most professional studios of the day. His interest in recording emerged from his love of music as well as his job at the National Gallery of Art, where by happenstance he helped create a small recording studio. Simply for his own enjoyment, he began to record live bar performances by D.C. proto-punk bands like the Look and the Slickee Boys, on a basic hand-held tape recorder. When the bands realized Zientara was documenting them, they began to ask him for help making records. One result was the Slickee’s “Mersey Mersey Me” single in 1978.⁶¹ Thus, almost by accident, Inner Ear Studios was born.

⁶⁰ The letter was written by Ian MacKaye of Minor Threat and Bert Queiroz of No Authority and endorsed by Henry Garfield (State of Alert), Jeff Nelson, (Minor Threat), Alec MacKaye (No Authority), Nathan Strejcek (Youth Brigade), John Stabb (Government Issue), and Mike Hampton (S.O.A.) [Ian MacKaye and Bert Queiroz to Xyra, 10 February 1981, Xyra private collection, Arlington, Va.]

⁶¹ Don Zientara, telephone interview by author, tape recording, 17 August 2002; Kim Kane, telephone interview by author, tape recording, 14 April 2002.

In addition to Zientara, District punk rockers benefited from the experience of two owners of local independent record stores. Skip Groff opened the Yesterday and Today record shop in Rockville, Maryland in September 1977. A long time fan of non-mainstream rock, Groff stocked a great variety of musical styles, and his store became a meeting place for punk fans and an important hub in a scene that lacked strong institutions. With Yesterday and Today, punk fans no longer had to mail-order albums or read about bands in British papers; now they had access to “about seven new punk singles and three new punk albums” a week.⁶² Groff also facilitated the scene by creating his own record label, Limp, a response in part to the great number of homemade demos musicians brought to him at the store. Thus, like Zientara’s Inner Ear Studio, Limp Records came into being in part because of grassroots efforts by punk rockers. Limp Records’ compilation of sixteen local acts, titled *30 Seconds over D.C.: Here Comes the New Wave!* (1978), was the first self-proclaimed local punk album. Another important label to emerge out of the D.C. punk scene was Wasp Records, founded by William Asp, who with his wife owned the Record and Tape Exchange (RTX), located first in Fairfax and then in Arlington. Like Yesterday and Today, RTX became a gathering spot for local punks. Wasp Records tended to put out music by bands in the “new wave” spectrum of punk, including local acts the Insect Surfers, Tru Fax and the Insaniacs, and the Young Caucasians.⁶³

Groff played an instrumental role in what would become D.C.’s most weighty and enduring legacy for punk rock: Dischord Records. A group of teenaged punks, drawing upon

⁶² Skip Groff quoted in Andersen, *Dance of Days*, 15.

⁶³ The name *30 Seconds* drew on a Pere Ubu song inspired by the movie *30 Seconds over Tokyo*, a film about the U.S. bombing of that city during World War II. [Andersen and Jenkins, *Dance of Days*, 25.] Skip Groff, telephone interview by author, tape recording, 19 and 21 February 2002; Jeff Zeldman, “Noise Gate,” *City Paper*, 12 May 1983, vol. 3, no. 17, 1.

a fledging national DIY network of fanzines, pen pals, and independent records labels, began to learn of and buy records by small, independent labels in the United States and Great Britain. With the example of Dangerhouse in Los Angeles and a few other pioneers, D.C. punks realized a band did not need a major-label deal to put out records. The young punks also found more proximate encouragement and guidance from Skip Groff, who put them in touch with Don Zientara. In December 1980, Dischord Records, founded by three members of the Teen Idles, released its first record, the Teen Idles' seven-inch EP, *Minor Disturbance*, recorded in Zientara's basement.⁶⁴ Dischord Records became one of the most successful punk labels of the 1980s and provided an invaluable service to local hardcore bands, getting their music out to a national audience. One of punk's most intransigent punk labels, Dischord remains strong today, despite the ongoing decision to stay small and local.

Conclusion

Punk rock grew out of a number of historical, social, and aesthetic factors. Punk, first, must be understood as an expression of the disillusionment of the 1970s and a concomitant desire for meaning. As Americans lost faith in government, family, and place, they sought belonging in newly created communities like New Age religions, fitness clubs, and punk rock. Even more, at a time of great political, social, and economic insecurity, culture and cultural expressions like punk rock take on heightened importance. In such a setting, culture generally – and punk rock more specifically – becomes a fundamental mode of self-fashioning. Culture can be the primary way in which an individual understands his/her place in the world.

⁶⁴ Ian MacKaye and Jeff Nelson, eds., Twenty Years of Dischord: Putting DC on the Map, with an introduction by Henry Rollins, (Washington, D.C.: Dischord Records, 2002), 10.

In addition to reacting to its immediate context, punk inherited of a tradition of cultural rebellion. Drawing consciously or unconsciously on the legacies of the bohemians, rock 'n' roll pioneers, the Beats, and hippies, punks melded various influences into a subculture that confronted mainstream America. And the element of the status quo they tackled most directly was that of the established music industry. Through DIY ideals and methods, punks challenged the prevailing rock stars aesthetics and music industry's lack of innovation. They wanted young people to reclaim rock music for themselves.

The aesthetic and ideological impulses that underpinned punk – faith in DIY individualism and a desire for something new and different – existed in many places in the mid-seventies but needed certain institutions in order for them to coalesce into recognizable music scenes. Although there were local variations, a pattern of institution and community building emerged. Punks needed to recognize each other and create a name for their movement. They had to discover or establish venues in which to perform. They then founded or courted media outlets to support them. And finally bands signed to or created their own record labels. These institutionalizing forces facilitated punks' *raison d'être*: the production and consumption of music. Functioning as both rebels and consumers in a society driven by consumer capitalism proved to be an interesting and contradictory task for punk rockers.

CHAPTER 2
**“I HATE MY FAMILY, HATE MY SCHOOL,
SPEED LIMITS AND THE GOLDEN RULE”:
PUNK TAKES ON SCHOOLS, FAMILY, AND SUBURBIA**

I hate my family, hate my school
Speed limits and the golden rule.
Hate people who aren't what they seem
More than anything else, American dream¹
Bad Religion, “American Dream” (1982)

An ocean of cars rests in the parking lot of that Mecca of twentieth-century American consumer culture, Disneyland. It is a hot summer day in 1980, and six teenagers have just spent two hours on public transit traveling from downtown Los Angeles to Anaheim. Hailing from Washington, D.C., most are visiting the Magic Kingdom for the first time. They eagerly approach the entrance, but as they near it, a well-dressed man moves toward them, saying “Thank you for coming to Disneyland; thanks very much for coming here today. Have a nice day.” One of the teens, Ian MacKaye, is confused but responds, “Thanks,” and continues toward the entrance. The man blocks their path, however, gesturing in the direction from which they came, saying, “No, no, thanks, have a nice day.” MacKaye finally understands and again speaks up, “No, we’re just coming.” The Disneyland employee states, “I’m sorry, you’re not welcome here today. I’m afraid you don’t meet the dress code,” explaining why: “This gentleman’s shirt is ripped. This gentleman has a Mohawk haircut. This [man has] green hair.” After a few minutes of arguing, Disney security guards

¹ Bad Religion, “American Dream,” *How Could Hell Be Any Worse?*, Epitaph, 1982.

appear and drive the group of teens out to the street, where they wait for the bus and a two-hour return trip on mass transit, angrily disappointed.²

These young punks, members of and roadies for the band The Teen Idles, were on “tour” in California, although their journey to the west coast was hardly a tour by most rock standards. Spending three days on a Greyhound bus traveling from Washington, D.C. to California, they played only two gigs, one each in Los Angeles and San Francisco. The tour grossed a whopping forty three dollars, with the net well in the red. After the L.A. date, the group had some time to kill before heading up to San Francisco, so they stashed their instruments in lockers at the Greyhound station, trekked to Anaheim, but found the four-hour round trip was for naught.

These six teens, their two-date Greyhound tour, and their thwarted visit to Disneyland illustrate a number of key principles regarding punk views on class and consumerism. First and most obviously, the teens’ literal exclusion at Disneyland (not an isolated event for punk rockers in the late seventies and early eighties) suggests their figurative “otherness” as consumers.³ Punks viewed commercial popular culture – such as that produced by major record labels – as vapid and irrelevant.⁴ Indeed, over and over they expressed boredom with

² Ian MacKaye, interview by Ben London for the Experience Music Project, November 1998, transcript, 16-7; Ian MacKaye and Jeff Nelson, “Teen Idles,” in *Twenty Years of Dischord: Putting DC on the Map*, with an introduction by Henry Rollins, eds. Ian MacKaye and Jeff Nelson, (Washington, D.C.: Dischord Records, 2002), 10.

³ Other punk rockers spoke of being denied entrance to Disneyland. See, for example, Tony Reflex, interview by author, tape recording, Sierra Madre, Calif., 23 June 2004; *Slash*, vol., 3, no., 5, summer 1980.

⁴ During the early to mid-fifties, independent labels fared well in rock ‘n’ roll. Indeed, they played a major role in recognizing the marketability of rock and recording artists such as Chuck Berry and James Brown. By the end of the fifties, most independent labels were gone, bankrupt or purchased by the larger labels, especially the big three of that era: RCA Victor, Decca, and Columbia (CBS). By the mid-seventies, there were five “majors,” all owned by conglomerates: CBS, RCA Victor, Warner Communications, Music Corporation of America (Decca, Kapp, UNI) and Capitol Records, with a combined market share of over fifty percent. Even the so-called indies, including United Artists, A&M, Motown, and MGM, targeted a mass market, making aesthetic, marketing, and business organization decisions that largely paralleled the majors. [Fredric Dannen, *Hit Men*:

conventional culture. On the other hand, as their Disneyland visit indicates, they did not reject popular culture altogether. These rebellious young men with green hair and ripped shirts still wanted to ride Space Mountain. Similarly, while seventies commercial pop or arena rock did not resonate with them, rather than abandon popular music outright, they created a modified form of it as the basis for new communities. Additionally, the fact that the Disneyland official rejected the young punks because they did not look like desired Disneyland patrons – a middle-class family out for some good clean fun – highlights the way punks rejected contemporary symbols of middle-class success, including a certain dress code.

While American capitalism and its critics have had a long relationship, stretching back at least to H. L. Mencken and Sinclair Lewis in the early 1900s, the volume of criticism accelerated throughout the twentieth century in response to the explosion of mass culture and consumerism. This criticism peaked during certain key periods, including the 1920s, 1950s, and – unsurprisingly – the economically bleak 1970s. During the seventies, intellectuals like Daniel Bell, Christopher Lasch, and Robert Bellah offered one level of critique, believing Americans’ dedication to what they saw as the excesses of consumer capitalism was destroying the nation’s economic and ideological well being. Their pessimistic laments offered little hope for a new way. On the other hand, some feminists and members of the counterculture reshaped an older “consumer as hero” sensibility into a perspective embracing consumerism as a possible site of liberation and self-actualization.⁵ Punk rock offered its

Power Brokers and Fast Money Inside the Music Business (New York: Times Books, 1990), 31-2, 46, passim; R. Serge Denisoff, Solid Gold: The Popular Record Industry (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1975), 94-5.]

⁵ H. L. Mencken called sheep-like consumers the “booboisie” in 1922; Sinclair Lewis wrote Babbitt (1922) about the mindless conformity and spiritual emptiness of a mid-western town whose inhabitants are driven by materialism and public image. Daniel Bell, The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism (New York: Basic Books, 1976); Christopher Lasch, Culture of Narcissism in an Age of Diminishing Expectations (New York: Norton, 1979); and Robert Bellah, The Broken Covenant: American Civil Rights in a Time of Trial (New York:

own evaluation of consumerism and contemporary middle-class mores, with an outlook falling somewhere between the intellectuals' dire pessimism and the buoyancy of the latter group. Through fashion, lifestyle, artistic creation, and entrepreneurial effort, punk rockers formulated a vigorous but contradictory critique of conventional views on class and consumerism. The primary targets of their ire were the nuclear family, traditional schooling, suburbia, and mass culture.

“We’re a happy family”: Punk and the Nuclear Family

We're a happy family, me mom and daddy
Sitting here in Queens, eating refried beans
We're in all the magazines, gulpin' down Thorazines
We ain't got no friends; our troubles never end
No Christmas cards to send; daddy likes men
Daddy's telling lies; baby's eating flies
Mommy's on pills; baby's got the chills
I'm friends with the president; I'm friends with the pope
We're all making a fortune, selling daddy's dope
Ramones, “We’re a Happy Family”(1977)⁶

Rock and roll is and always has been about rebellion, and one of the most common themes of rock rebellion is the adolescent challenge to parents and authority figures. For example, after “Rock Around the Clock” by Bill Haley and His Comets was used in The Blackboard Jungle (1955), a movie about rebellious teenagers, the song became a big hit and an anthem of teenage revolt. To some extent, punks simply continued this established premise of rebellion based in escapism. New York’s the Dictators created a prime example of traditional teen-rock fantasy in their song “Weekend”: “Oh Weekend/ Benny took downs

Seabury Press, 1975). For assessments of these writers, see, for example, Daniel Horowitz, The Anxieties of Affluence: Critiques of American Consumer Culture, 1939-1979 (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), 8, 206-23. In the 1940s and 1950s, consensus thinkers like Ernest Dichter and George Katona, for example, linked capitalism, consumerism, and democracy. [Horowitz, Anxieties of Affluence, 8, 48-78.]

⁶ Ramones, “We’re a Happy Family,” *Rocket to Russia*, Sire, 1977.

in class/ The principal found his stash/ His mother's gonna get his ass/ Oh Weekend/ In his room he'll stay/Dreamin' when he's king he'll say/Everyday is Saturday.”⁷ Benny dreamed of the day when he would be free of the intrusions and limitations set by his principal and mother, when he would be his own king, set his own schedule, and live every day as if it were Saturday.

Although some punk lyrics continued the relatively light-hearted pattern of anti-parent escapism and rebellion established in the 1950s, most punk added a heavy dose of anger and cynicism to the mix. Why were punks so angry at their parents? Part of the answer lies in their familial experiences. Between 1965 and 1980, the period during which most punk rockers came of age, the divorce rate doubled, and between 1970 and 1979, the number of American families with female household heads increased by fifty-one percent.⁸ Parents also provided a convenient scapegoat for anger about less tangible issues. Punks’ attacks on parents and the family may have been motivated in part by systemic issues over which the young people had no control. They may not have been able to identify or analyze the broader societal problems with which they were frustrated, such as a tanking economy and a government of dubious trustworthiness. But they vented their anger on the target most readily available and most emotionally charged: their family.

Punk rockers’ angry observations about family life were part of a broader crescendo of concern about the American family in this period, concern fueled by the very real changes

⁷ Todd Leopold, “The 50-Year-Old Song that Started It All,” <http://www.cnn.com/2005/SHOWBIZ/Music/07/07/haley.rock/>, accessed 4 April, 2007; Dictators, “Weekend,” *The Dictators Go Girl Crazy!*, Epic, 1975.

⁸ Michael Schaller and George Rising, *The Republican Ascendancy: American Politics, 1968-2001* (Wheeling, Ill.: Harlan Davidson, 2002), 72; “Women-Led Families Rise,” *New York Times*, 3 December 1980, sec. C, p. 15.

suggested by the above statistics.⁹ On the right, organizations like the National Federation for Decency (founded 1977) and the Moral Majority (founded 1979) sought to counter “the way many amoral and secular humanists and other liberals [we]re destroying the traditional family.”¹⁰ High on these fundamentalists’ agendas were elements they perceived as threats to the family: pornography, homosexuality, and the Equal Rights Amendment. On the left, critics were much less unified in their assessment of the American family and its problems, partly because of the divisive nature of identity politics. But many shared concerns about systemic issues like crime and poverty and their effects on the family. Apprehension about American family life pervaded even the executive branch. On January 30, 1978, President Jimmy Carter, acknowledging that “American families confront growing problems,” announced a White House Conference on Families in order “to examine the strengths of American families, the difficulties they face, and the ways in which family life is affected by public policies.” And in 1980 the American family entered significantly into explicit political discussion in a presidential campaign for the first time.¹¹

⁹ See, for example, “Norman Rockwell and the G.O.P.,” New York Times, 10 July 1980, sec. A, p. 18.

¹⁰ Quote is Jerry Falwell, “What is the Moral Majority?” Lynchburg, Va., 1980. The Rev. Donald Wildmon founded the National Federation for Decency in 1977, a grass-roots organization based on boycotts of television shows that they believed threatened American and family values through profanity, sex, and violence. [Patrick M. Fahey, “Advocacy Group Boycotting of Network Television Advertisers and Its Effects on Programming Content,” University of Pennsylvania Law Review 140, no. 2 (Dec 1991): 647-709.] For discussions of these organizations and their views on family, see, for instance, David Snowball, Continuity and Change in the Rhetoric of the Moral Majority (New York: Praeger, 1991), 14-6, *passim*; Thomas McLaughlin, Street Smarts and Critical Theory: Listening to the Vernacular (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 32-50; Sharon Linzey Georgianna, The Moral Majority and Fundamentalism: Plausibility and Dissonance (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989), 37-9. Falwell consciously excluded the issue of poverty as a possible Moral Majority agenda item, stating “If we go in there, create jobs, raise funds, and get involved with the local pastors, the problem is, which pastors? If we say the Mormon pastors, the fundamentalists are gone. If we say the Catholic pastors, the Jews are gone, and so forth.” [Christianity Today, 4 September 1981, 27.] Falwell also happened to believe, like many fundamentalists, that material wealth is God’s way of recognizing the faithful.

¹¹ The conference was originally scheduled for December 1979 but took place in June 1980 in Baltimore, Maryland. [John Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project* [online]. Santa Barbara, CA: University of California (hosted), Gerhard Peters (database). Available from World Wide Web:

In addition to living with the very tangible changes wrought by rising divorce rates and single-parent households, punk rockers wrestled with a less tangible reality regarding the position of youth in the 1970s and 1980s. The post-World War II baby boom had lowered the average age and swelled college enrollment, fueling the social movements of the sixties and increasing the importance of the under-twenty-five consumer demographic. In 1971, a constitutional amendment lowered the voting age from twenty-one to eighteen. The ideas of youth, creativity, and hipness associated with the counterculture entered the mainstream through the text and imagery of ad campaigns urging consumers to buy “the ’68 ‘youngmobiles from Oldsmobile” or become part of the “Pepsi Generation” by drinking the beverage of choice for “those who think young.” In other words, youth, both in literal statistics and as “a consuming position to which all could aspire,” in the words of journalist Thomas Frank, seemed increasingly important and powerful in the 1960s and ’70s.¹² Yet my research suggests this language of youth promulgated a myth. Instead of feeling empowered, many youths felt impotent, taught by teachers and parents to believe “a person is not ‘real’ until an adult,” in the words of one punk.¹³ That is to say, punks came of age at a time when irony and inconsistency surrounded the position of youth: recent history and advertisers offered a rhetoric of power while parents and the economy offered boundaries and

<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=29884>.] Mary P. Ryan, “The Explosion of Family History,” *Reviews in American History* 10, no. 4 (December 1982): 181-95.

¹² Whether business and consumer culture promulgated or co-opted countercultural ideas and rhetoric is open to debate. See, Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1997), 25, 171.

¹³ Ian MacKaye, interview by author, tape recording, Arlington, Va., 9 September 2002.

limitations. For some young people, unwilling to wait for adulthood's supposed authenticity, punk provided a voice in the here and now.¹⁴

Punk rock's aggressive, often angry stance suited adolescents who received these conflicting messages about their position and power as young Americans, sons and daughters, and consumers. In some songs, punks' rage at parents reached shocking levels. "I Saw Your Mommy," by California punk rockers Suicidal Tendencies, told the story of a son who had his mother killed:

Yesterday as I went out of the house
I saw a body lying down quiet as a mouse
She was lying face down in the sewer
I got up closer and realized that I knew her
All her organs coming from her insides
Slashed up skin, sliced-up hide
Turned her over and saw the tire tracks on her head
That's when I realized she was dead
(chorus) I saw your mommy and your mommy's dead
...
I wonder how much you had to pay
To get your mom killed in such a bloody way¹⁵

Undoubtedly, the lyrics were used for shock value and intended as humorous hyperbole, but they nonetheless provided a powerful outlet for punk fans' familial anger.

Most often punk lyrics walked a line somewhere between the Suicidal Tendencies' extreme violence and the relatively light-hearted protest of older songs like the Beach Boys' "Fun, Fun, Fun" ("Well, she'll have fun, fun, fun 'til her daddy takes the T-bird away"). In "Mommy's Little Monster" by Social Distortion, "Mommy's little monster shoots Methadrine/ mommy's little monster had sex at fifteen/ She left home for the streets/ She

¹⁴ Tricia Henry notes punk's similarity to expressionism: both emphasized the "inner emotional experience of a person" and were "assertive, assaultive and very much here and now." ["Punk and Avant-Garde Art," *Journal of Popular Culture* 17 (Spring 1984): 34.]

¹⁵ Suicidal Tendencies, "I Saw Your Mommy," *Suicidal Tendencies*, Frontier, 1983.

couldn't deal with all the heat/ She has fun with the boys in the band/ In her eyes it will never end.” This song continues teen rebellion themes found in earlier rock and roll, especially freedom and escape from parental and moral strictures, but it is more explicit and extreme than most rock of the 1960s or earlier. The protagonist is not just “rocking around the clock”; she is sexually active at fifteen and shooting speed intravenously. In “Parents,” southern California punk rockers the Descendents baldly say what many teens wish they could: Parents, why won't they shut up?/ Parents, they're so fucked up.”¹⁶

Some of punk's challenges to parental control took place within its general “question authority” stance, an admonition that rivaled DIY as the central ethos of the punk-rock creed. Much “question-authority” rhetoric did not specifically mention parents, but mothers, fathers, teachers, and anyone in positions of power were the implicit targets of the rants. Perhaps the most famous and succinct of these is the Circle Jerks song, “Question Authority”: “Question authority/ Have they the right/ To say how it should be?/ Should one man be able/ To write it all down?/ When half the time/ He can't tell right from wrong?/ Question authority/ Another man's law is not right for me.” Those authority figures that should be questioned (“they” and “one man”) are never named specifically in the song, but I interpret them to be all forms of authority, including government, parents, the established music industry, and even “stars” within punk.¹⁷

¹⁶ Beach Boys, “Fun, Fun, Fun,” *Shut Down Volume 2*, Capitol Records, 1964; Social Distortion, “Mommy's Little Monster,” *Mommy's Little Monster*, 13th Floor, 1983; Descendents, “Parents,” *Milo Goes to College*, New Alliance/SST, 1983.

¹⁷ Other calls to question authority can be found in Agnostic Front, “Remind Them,” *Victim in Pain*, RatCage, 1984; and Agent Orange, “The Last Goodbye,” *Living in Darkness*, Posh Boy, 1981. The germinal hardcore band Black Flag was famous for refusing to take a stand against violence at their shows. Guitarist Greg Ginn: “We don't want to get on stage and be authority figures and tell people what to do, we feel that that's wrong. We want to get up on stage to create an atmosphere where people can think for themselves. They're not always gonna do the right thing.” [“Black Flag Interview,” *Flipside*, vol. 22, December 1980, 18.]

Even more common in punk than the theme of rebellion against parents specifically was a more general critique of the attitudes and values of contemporary American families. Shawn Stern, singer for the California band Youth Brigade and co-founder of the Better Youth Organization, articulated explicitly what was unspoken in the actions and words of many punks:

And the whole family system that we were brought up on: the American dream that our parents realized – going to school and getting a good job and getting married – and that [was supposed to] make you happy. But that didn't make them happy. ... Most of the punks come from broken homes, and they look at their parents and they say, 'Well, if that's the way they turned out, I don't want to turn out like that.'¹⁸

Stern employs the expression “broken home,” a commonly used phrase in the 1970s, as Americans struggled to re-conceive the changing American family. The frequency with which a variation of the word “broken” appears in punk lyrics and interviews reflects the pervasive position in punk that the family, society, or the government were indeed in need of (or beyond) repair.¹⁹ Sometimes punks specifically mentioned the consequences of broken homes. Bad Religion, in “White Trash (2nd Generation),” blamed the rise of white-power youth at least in part on “broken homes” with a “beer-stained dad” and “compliant mom.” Perhaps the most shocking punk-rock attack on the family was the song “I Saw Your Mommy” mentioned above. The mother’s “twisted” and “broken” body symbolized the rage and disgust many punks felt toward family life.

I saw your Mommy, and your Mommy's dead
Twisted body, chopped-off feet
Her body was minced meat
Bugs crawling on her arms

¹⁸ Shawn Stern, quoted in *Another State of Mind*, 78 min, Time Bomb Filmworks, Los Angeles, 1983, videocassette.

¹⁹ The phrase “broken home” appeared in print in the mid-nineteenth century but came into more common use in 1950s. [Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed., s.v. “broken home.”]

She's dead, can't do no harm
Gnarled-up legs, broken and bent
Her last breath has been spent

Other bands spoke of “broken jaunts” (T.S.O.L.), “broken days” and – very suggestively – “broken ideals” (The Germs). Many bands used the word broken in a more symbolic or metaphoric manner; Blondie sang of “broken glass,” “broken wire,” and “broken code” to suggest alienation, addiction, and violence in various songs.²⁰ That punks would be so concerned with the “broken” state of relationships, ideals, and actions, comes as no surprise in a group of young people struggling with identity in an era of familial, economic, and political upheaval. The New York hardcore band Ism explicitly called television to task for its lack of engagement with serious social issues in their satirical song “Life Ain’t No Bowl of Brady Bunch” (1983): “Life ain’t no bowl of Brady Bunch/ When I turn on my TV/ There’s not enough sex and violence for me.” (The song also undoubtedly pokes fun at critics of the era who expressed concern about sexual and violent content in popular culture.)²¹

²⁰ Bad Religion, “White Trash (2nd Generation),” *How Could Hell Be Any Worse?*, Epitaph, 1982. The album also contains “Latch-Key Kids,” a song that calls to task parents (and others) who blame society’s ills on youth while at the same time offering little in the way of support or guidance to those same youth. Two punks who specifically mention being from “broken homes” are Pleasant Gehman and Joey Ramone. [Gehman, interview by author, tape recording, Los Angeles, Calif., 28 June 2004; Jim Bessman, *The Ramones: An American Band* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1993), 3. Most of the characters in Penelope Spheeris’ movie *Suburbia* (1984) come from “broken” homes. Suicidal Tendencies, “I Saw Your Mommy,” *Suicidal Tendencies*, Frontier, 1983; T.S.O.L., “Send My Thoughts,” *Beneath the Shadows*, Alternative Tentacles, 1982; Germs, “Going Down” and “Lion’s Share,” *Cruising*, Lorimar Pictures Soundtrack, 1979; Blondie, “Youth Nabbed As Sniper” and “Contact In Red Square,” *Plastic Letters*, Chrysalis, 1977; and “Live It Up,” *Autoamerican*, Chrysalis, 1980. See also, Black Flag, “Nothing Left Inside,” *My War*, SST, 1984; X, “Little Honey,” *Ain’t Love Grand*, Elektra, 1985.

²¹ Ism, “Life Ain’t No Bowl of Brady Bunch,” *A Diet for the Worms*, S.I.N., 1983. In 1984 the National Parent/Teacher Association saw the need for warning labels on records with explicit lyrics. To publicize their cause, they sent letters to a number of influential people, including Susan Baker, one of the “Washington Wives” who eventually founded the Parents’ Music Resource Center (PMRC) in 1985. The PMRC wanted “to educate and inform parents of this alarming new trend . . . toward lyrics that are sexually explicit.” After Senate hearings on the issue in September 1985, the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) agreed to place “parental advisory: stickers on records deemed to have ‘explicit lyrics.’” In 1986, the state of California charged Dead Kennedys front man Jello Biafra with “distribution of harmful material to minors” after including a poster by the Swiss artist H. R. Giger, which displayed male sexual organs, in the DK’s album *Frankenchrist*. The charges were eventually dropped but only after Biafra incurred large legal debts. Claude Chastagner, “The

Rather than focus on the broad social implications of “broken homes,” punk rockers tended to focus on issues of self-actualization and inter-personal relationships. These young people wanted to avoid the superficiality, ineffective communication, hypocrisy, cowardice, and conformity they saw as chief characteristics of the American family. At the center of punk’s critique of the family was disdain for those who unthinkingly followed a placid path to the American dream outlined in advertising campaigns and television shows from *Father Knows Best* to *Eight is Enough*. To some extent punks therefore merely continued a viewpoint popularized in the 1950s by the likes of David Riesman and William Whyte who attacked the conformity and superficiality they saw dominating middle-class culture.²² Washington D.C.’s Urban Verbs offered such a critique in their song “The Good Life.” For the lyricist, Roddy Frantz, Los Angeles symbolized the epitome of the conformist American dream and the spiritual barrenness of those who live inauthentic lives in order to pursue it, as he tells the story of his friends Jan and Larry, who “bought a ranch house in L.A.” Now “they lead the good life” with “Health foods and houseplants, limitless credit/ Friends with smiles from a cigarette ad,” promotions, New Age spirituality, “Tennis and golfing, weekends in Vegas/ The benefit of a year-round tan.” But all these superficial banners of success cannot conceal the fact that Jan and Larry are playacting, attempting to live out a life scripted for them by banal middle-class values:

Watch them as they play man and wife
But don't invite me I will never pay the price

Parents’ Music Resource Center: From Information to Censorship,” *Popular Music* 18, no. 2 (May 1999): 179-192; Lawrence Grossberg, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 192-3.

²² Sociologist David Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) laments the degree to which Americans had become “other-directed,” seeking approval from groups or society rather than guiding themselves by their own internal moral compass. William H. Whyte, Jr., wrote *The Organization Man* (1956) as a protest against the rise of a work culture that valued conformity over self-reliance.

I've no desire for your good life

...

Near the end Jan secretly confided
Of their desire to raise a family
Certain pictures came rushing up at me
Two-point-two children and a camping van
That's the good life, now they're going to pay the price
For L.A.

Oh no that's the good life
Watch them, now they're man an wife
But don't invite me, I refuse to pay the price
I wouldn't take a piss on your good life.

The singer contrasts his friends' current materialism and shallowness with memories of the past: "They used to get down, they used to get high ... They used to laugh, they used to drink wine," closing – significantly – with the line "they used to love, they used to cry."²³ Thus in the end, he sees no genuine emotion in his friends current lives, and this, more than anything else, indicates they do not live the sort of authentic life the singer cherishes.

Circle Jerks add hypocrisy and the lack of meaningful communication to their analysis of the typical American family. "Murder the Disturbed" (1982) lampoons a backyard, suburban dinner party:

Really queer me sitting here
You seem so sincere
Your daughter flips the burgers
As you reach for a second beer
Mom says grace; she's learned her place
The cruelest years are on her face
Two-car garage, a Mastercharge
Her tits aren't firm; at least they're large
...
You served a meal; you spoke with zeal
You think you still have sex appeal
Your daughter serves dessert
As you enact your biggest deal

²³ Urban Verbs, "The Good Life," *Urban Verbs*, Warner Brothers, 1980.

Success has shown a second home
The kids are cute, how they've grown
One is dead, one's on reds
She goes to school; she's too well fed.²⁴

The subject of the song is an old friend, a man who is now married with two kids, a big shot who wheels and deals even at the dinner table. He has all the outward signs of success, but the man seems to be too obsessed with appearances and material success to have real connections to his family. His wife, rather than being an emotional partner and helpmate, has “learned her place.” One child is dead, and the father does not seem to notice that his other child is an overweight speed addict. Punks believed it took courage to overcome society’s pressures to conform and to achieve meaningful relationships. Most Americans, however, found it easier to believe “comfortable lies,” as California punks Bad Religion put it in “American Dream.” The average American wanted someone to “Promise me today I'll have a Chevrolet, with whitewalls on the side/ One boy, one girl, comfortable lies.” Punks doubted an easy way to happiness through the path typically prescribed by middle-class mores. The Minutemen, in their typically terse and sardonic fashion, bring this message home in “More Joy.”

He's got his head; he's got his wife
He has his condo, what a wonderful life
He's got his mother; he's got his father
He has no worries, and he needs no problem²⁵

The Minutemen’s satire implied the only reason the protagonist has “no worries” or “no problem” is his willingness to accept an unquestioning, superficial existence.

²⁴ Circle Jerks, “Murder the Disturbed,” *Wild in the Streets*, Faulty Products, 1982.

²⁵ Bad Religion, “American Dream,” *How Could Hell Be Any Worse?*, Epitaph, 1982; Minutemen, “More Joy,” *Joy EP*, New Alliance, 1981.

“Your institutional learning facilities: Punk and Traditional Education”

What are you trying to say, I'm crazy? When I went to your schools, I went to your churches, I went to your institutional learning facilities?! So how can you say I'm crazy?

Suicidal Tendencies, “Institutionalized” (1983)²⁶

While punk rockers focused their initial venom on their most immediate environment, their families and peers, their critique spread gradually outward to the wider world, targeting next schools, the second largest presence in a young person’s life. Despite significant pressures to the contrary, punk rockers generally refused the notion that formal education represented the only possible logical culmination of a middle-class upbringing and the best avenue to personal achievement. Dee Dee Ramone wrote in his memoir, “I was a high-school dropout, which was kind of lower class for Forest Hills [Queens]. The key to survival seemed to be a college education, but I had already graduated to my role in life – that of social deviant.” Mike Ness of Social Distortion wrote “Mommy’s Little Monster,” a song that could have described any number of punks: “Mommy's little monster dropped out of school/ Mommy's little monster broke all the rules/ He loves to go out drinking with the boys/ He loves to go out and make some noise/ He doesn't wanna be a doctor or a lawyer, get fat and rich.” Many punks viewed high school and college – but especially high school – as oppressive, boring, and limiting. Mike Palm of Agent Orange sang, “I’m so bored of education.” When punks took high school seriously, they often were selective in their pursuits of knowledge. Scenester and writer Pleasant Gehman claimed to do well in “advanced-placement art and English even though ... I was not around and failing practical things like math.” Similarly, Debbie Harry of Blondie only liked art class. By many accounts, the D.C. punk scene contained a number of young people who failed to

²⁶ Suicidal Tendencies, “Institutionalized,” *Suicidal Tendencies*, Frontier, 1983.

“assimilat[e] into the normal high-school society precisely because of their intelligence,” as Kenny Inouye of Marginal Man put it. “Because, let’s be honest with ourselves, ... no matter what they’d like to tell you years after the fact, high school society didn’t embrace the idea of being smart. They embraced the idea, generally, of being a football player or being a school athlete or whatever.” Students who “had enough brains to think things through and maybe challenge the status quo” were “looked at as weirdos.”²⁷

More than learning itself, punks chafed at anything that restricted individual freedoms and expression. Orange County’s Bad Religion stated it simply: “I hate my family, hate my school/ Speed limits and the golden rule.” Debbie Harry, despite being a baton twirler and being voted prettiest girl her senior year, hated and feared school. Dez Cadena of Black Flag wrote, “High School was a major lesson in social retardation. The only escape from that banality was music and art.” Thankfully, he “stumbled onto this form of expression [punk rock] via Rodney Bingenheimer’s radio show in ’78 and ’79.” In addition to disliking the ordinariness and restrictiveness of high school, punks distrusted both teachers and those people (students and parents) that accepted the system as it was, an unsurprising detail given punk’s general admonition to question authority. Keith Morris pursued this theme while in

²⁷ Curry Malott and Milagros Pena discuss the lyrical theme of boring and limiting education in Punk Rockers’ Revolution: A Pedagogy of Race, Class, and Gender (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 26-7. This was a common theme in the oral history I conducted. See, for instance, Frank Agnew, interview by author, Fullerton, Calif., 3 July 2004. Dee Dee Ramone, Lobotomy: Surviving the Ramones, 2d ed. (New York: Thunder’s Mouth, 2000), 42; Social Distortion, “Mommy’s Little Monster,” *Mommy’s Little Monster*, 13th Floor, 1983; Agent Orange, “America,” *Living in Darkness*, WEA, 1981; Pleasant Gehman, interview by author, Los Angeles, tape recording, 28 June 2004. Gehman submitted stories to various fanzines before starting her own ‘zine, *Lobotomy*, in 1977. Later she wrote a column called “La Te Da” for the Los Angeles Times. Debbie Harry, Chris Stein, and Victor Bockris, Making Tracks: The Rise of Blondie (London: Elm Tree Books, 1982; reprint Da Capo, 1998), 7; Kenny Inouye, telephone interview by author, tape recording, 21 February 2002.

both Black Flag (“I ain’t got time for this school ‘cause the fuckers are fools”) and the Circle Jerks (“schools and teachers were never my friends”).²⁸

The most famous punk indictment of “institutional learning facilities” came from the southern-California band Suicidal Tendencies. Their song, “Institutionalized,” at the heart of their self-titled 1983 LP, was a mixture of spoken and sung lyrics, detailing a conversation between a teen and his parents. As rock critic Ira Robbins so eloquently stated, the song was “[o]ne of the era’s quintessential expressions of teen dislocation, it converts generation gap misunderstandings into a complete communications breakdown, encapsulating all the punk sociology of such films as *Repo Man* and *Suburbia* in four minutes.”²⁹ It is story of “Mike’s” (also the lead singer’s name) relationship with his parents, told in segments that alternate between narration backed by unobtrusive music and enraged singing accompanied by frenzied musical thrash that blurs the line between punk and heavy metal. Mike’s friends and parents have “been noticing [he’s] been having a lot of problems lately ... maybe [he] should talk about it, maybe [he]’ll feel a lot better.” Eventually Mike’s parents approach him, as he explains during a narrative segment:

They go: Me and your mom have been noticing lately that you’ve been having a lot of problems. You’ve been going off for no reason, and we’re afraid you’re gonna hurt somebody. We’re afraid you’re gonna hurt yourself. So we decided that it would be in your best interest if we put you somewhere where you could get the help that you need.

²⁸ Bad Religion, “American Dream,” *How Could Hell Be Any Worse?*, Epitaph, 1982. Other songs that attack the limits and banality of school include, Avengers, “Teenage Rebel,” *The Avengers Died for Your Sins*, Lookout Records, 1999, song was recorded ca. 1978; and Agent Orange, “America,” *Living in Darkness*, compact disc, Rhino Records, 1992; song was recorded in 1979. Harry, Stein, and Bockris, *Making Tracks*, 7; Dez Cadena quoted in Bryan Ray Turcotte and Christopher T. Miller, eds., *Fucked Up + Photocopied: Instant Art of the Punk Rock Movement* (Corte Madera, Calif.: Gingko Press, 1999), 90; Black Flag, “I’ve Had It,” *Nervous Breakdown* EP, SST, 1978; Circle Jerks, “Product of My Environment,” *Golden Shower of Hits*, LAX, 1983.

²⁹ Ira Robbins, “Suicidal Tendencies,” http://www.trouserpress.com/entry.php?a=suicidal_tendencies, accessed 29 March 2007.

And I go: Wait, what do you mean? What are you talking about? We decided!? My best interest?! How can you know what my best interest is? How can you say what my best interest is? What are you trying to say, that I'm crazy? When I went to your schools, I went to your churches, I went to your institutional learning facilities?! So how can you say I'm crazy?

The musicians then tear into one of the song's furious, manic segments, while Mike roars at breakneck speed: "They say they're gonna fix my brain/ Alleviate my suffering and my pain/ But by the time they fix my head/ Mentally I'll be dead/ I'm not crazy – institutionalized/ You're the one who's crazy – institutionalized/ You're driving me crazy – institutionalized."³⁰

While the song talks most explicitly about emotional and psychological issues and a psychiatric "institution," the lines regarding "your schools" and "your institutionalized learning facilities" represent sentiments felt by many punk rockers, making it one of the most quoted songs of the subculture. Punks wondered how parents, the teachers, or politicians could expect them to grow up to be successful members of society – to even want to do so – when so much of "the system" (schools, churches, government) was flawed.

Punk rockers were not alone in their belief that the contemporary educational system was unsound. During the late 1970s and increasingly in the 1980s, parents, educators, and the media expressed concern over declining performances and standards in the nation's schools. For example, much was made of the fact that from 1963 to 1980, scores on the College Board's SAT careened downward ninety points. The College Board attributed about thirty-eight percent of that decline to compositional or demographic factors (more poor and minority students took the SAT), but the remaining drop was "real." While changes in the family, a purported flagging of the work ethic, and the rise of teen pregnancy and drug use can explain some of the differential, the public in the seventies saw the weakening scores –

³⁰ Suicidal Tendencies, "Institutionalized," *Suicidal Tendencies*, Frontier, 1983.

along with the era's stagflation and the economic success of German and Japanese competitors – as evidence of a failing public school system. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Time and Newsweek ran frequent stories discussing “city schools in crisis,” the “mess in the public schools,” “high schools in trouble,” and “why public schools fail.”³¹ And in 1983, the National Commission on Excellence, appointed by Secretary of Education Terrel Bell and chaired by Daniel P. Gardner, president of the University of California, issued “A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform,” stating “the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people.”³² This report epitomized the “educators for educational excellence movement” that saw educational degeneration rooted in the “permissive, child-centered pedagogical strategies” that began in the 1960s.³³ Whatever the merits or faults of the argument of the “excellence advocates,” their voices and media coverage of schools meant crisis rhetoric was a regular part of public discourse on education in the period.

Just as punk rockers repudiated formal education as the only measure of worth and advancement, they rejected canonical and institutionalized artistic training as the sole course to successful and authentic artistic self-expression. Alice Bag summed up the punk view on

³¹ William H. Jeynes, American Educational History: School, Society, and the Common Good (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2007), 364-71; Gerald L. Gutek, Education in the United States: An Historical Perspective (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1986), 338. Merrill Sheils, et al, “City Schools in Crisis,” Newsweek vol. 90 (September 12 1977): 62-70; “High Schools in Trouble: A Tale of Three Cities,” Time, vol. 110, no. 20 (Nov 14, 1977): 1, 62-75; Melinda Beck and Donna M. Foote, “Chicago: A Mess in the Public Schools,” Newsweek, vol. 94 (December 17 1979): 56; Dennis A. Williams, et al, “Why Public Schools Fail,” Newsweek, vol. 97 (April 20 1981): 62-5. Between 1975 and 1982, the two magazines ran at least thirteen major stories on problems in primary or secondary education. The Time article listed here was a cover story.

³² Gutek, Education in the United States, 339.

³³ Wayne J. Urban and Jennings Wagoner, American Education: A History, 2nd ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2000), 352; Jeynes, American Educational History, 350.

education in 1978: “The thing is whats [sic] felt, whats felt is whats important, ... not how educated you are or how well you play.” Photographer Roberta Bayley described punk as “just the idea that you didn't need to be an expert in your field. I didn't go to art school, I just took pictures.” Similarly, Susan Mumford, vocalist for Washington, D.C.’s Tiny Desk Unit, explained, “You’re not cut off from this music because you can’t sing.” “Musical ability and instrumental technique” were “not nearly as important as feeling – authentic feeling.” There were also, however, a relatively large number of punk rockers who attended art school or sought some sort of formal artistic instruction. But many of them found that the techniques and education offered at art school were not necessarily the best outlets for their creativity. David Byrne of the Talking Heads enrolled and dropped out of art school (Rhode Island School of Design and the Maryland Institute) several times. He finally completed the course of study at RISD but never sat for exams. Pleasant Gehman turned down two scholarships to art school in order to remain active in the Los Angeles punk scene as a writer. Tomas Squip, who would go on to form the D.C. punk band Beefeater, recalled, “I went to a right-wing art school located in a tourist area in Georgia. So they wanted art that tourists could look at. The whole time I was there I was belligerent and did art causing controversy.” The Dean eventually asked Squip to leave the school after he stripped naked on a school beach trip.³⁴

³⁴ Alice Bag quoted in “Interview with the Bags,” *Flipside*, vol. 16, January 1978, 16; Roberta Bayley, email interview by author, 27 February 2007; Susan Mumford quoted in Blaine Harden, “The Good, the Bad, & the Ugly: Washington’s Punk/New Wave Scene,” *Washington Post Magazine*, 3 March 1980, sec. G1, p. 14; David Bowman, *This Must Be the Place: The Adventures of the Talking Heads in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper Entertainment, 2001), 26-8; Clinton Heylin, *From the Velvets to the Voidoids: The Birth of American Punk Rock*, 2d ed. (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2005), 207; Gehman, interview by author, 2004. Squip claimed he merely “went swimming in [his] underwear” then “took [his] underpants off to wring them out.” [Cynthia Connolly, Leslie Clague, and Sharon Cheslow, *Banned in DC: Photos and Anecdotes from the DC Punk Underground* (Washington, D.C.: Sun Dog Propaganda, 1988), 138; Andersen and Jenkins, *Dance of Days*, 162.]

Since punk rockers often rejected conventional educational paths, it comes as no surprise that they frequently opted for non-traditional careers. Bad Religion offered an explanation for this trend in their song “Damned to be Free.” While discussing “death and the shadow it casts on life,” the singer advises the listener to spend his/her time well: “freedom is responsibility, pay more than it's worth.” Because if “you learn their rules, play their game” you’ll “deceive yourself in haste” and waste your life. Even more explicitly, the singer states, “working... 8 hours, that's not for me.” To some extent, this statement was ironic, coming as it did from one of the hardest working bands in punk history. Since its founding in 1980, the band has released sixteen LP’s or CD’s and two EP’s, mostly on Epitaph, a label organized by singer Greg Graffin in 1981. (Graffin also found time to earn a Ph.D. in evolutionary biology, awarded in 2003.)³⁵ On the other hand, the song was an earnest rejection of “working eight hours” a day in an unfulfilling job – a call to live by your own rules at your own game. Punks not only sang about alternative lifestyles but expressed their rejection of mainstream employment through their outward appearances. According to Exene Cervenka, early punks did not see being in a band as “a career move” or a stab at achieving fame. And by looking the part, punk rockers marked themselves as outcasts:

The only people that wanted to be in punk rock bands were people that wanted to be in a punk rock band. There was no career motivation. It was the worst thing you could possibly do, it was the most rebellious, rebellious thing you could possibly do. When I got my first couple of tattoos or did weird things with my hair, it was saying, “I’m no longer employable within society. I no longer can be a part of society. I’ve taken myself out permanently by looking like this.”³⁶

³⁵ Bad Religion, “Damned to be Free,” *How Could Hell Be Any Worse*, Epitaph, 1982; “Band History,” <http://www.badreligion.com/history/>, accessed 21 April 2007; Gregory W. Graffin, “Monism, Atheism and the Naturalist World-View: Perspectives from Evolutionary Biology,” (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 2003).

³⁶ Exene Cervenka, interview by the Experience Music Project, transcript, Los Angeles, Calif., 29 April 1998, 3.

“Suburban Home”: Punk and Suburbia

I want to be stereotyped
I want to be classified
I want to be a clone
I want a suburban home
...
I don't want no hippie pad
I want a house just like mom and dad
Descendents, “Suburban Home,” (1983)³⁷

Having lashed out at the two institutions with the most power over their lives – family and schools, punks then turned to their physical environment. Since the 1950s, American suburbs have attracted the ire of numerous intellectuals and cultural critics. In the fifties, writers like Betty Friedan and Vance Packard provided intellectual clout to the position attacking suburbia, but one of the most concise and elucidatory condemnations came in “Little Boxes,” the Malvina Reynolds song performed by folksinger Pete Seeger in the early sixties:

Little boxes on the hillside, little boxes made of ticky tacky
Little boxes on the hillside, little boxes just the same
...
And they all play on the golf course and drink their martinis dry
And they all have pretty children, and the children go to school
...
And the boys go into business and marry and raise a family
In boxes made of ticky tacky, and they all look just the same.

As the song suggests, critics of the baby-boomer era decried the suburbs as evidence of and an impetus to conformity. In some ways, punk rockers simply built on this earlier perspective, updating it for the late 1970s and early 1980s. In particular, punks continued a thread of the argument attacking the suburbs as embodying a specious version of the American dream in which individual wants and needs can be satisfied through a conformist allegiance to consumerism. For example, Devo offered a 1970s complement to “Little

³⁷ Descendents, “Suburban Home,” *Milo Goes to College*.

Boxes” with their suburban critique in “Smart Patrol”: “We’re the smart patrol, nowhere to go/ Suburban robots that monitor reality/ Common stock, we work around the clock/ We shove the poles in the holes.”³⁸ Although taking anything Devo said at face value is problematic, being, as they were, fond of half-formed and deliberately obfuscated symbolism, the song undoubtedly satirizes middle-class Americans who go through the motions in a daily drudgery that masquerades as success (never mind the double entendre).

What made punk rockers’ assessment of suburbia different from earlier critics? First, one must consider the demographics of the 1970s and 1980s. For the first time in U.S. history, the 1970 census showed more Americans living in suburbs than in rural or urban areas.³⁹ Second, unlike the critics writing and singing in the 1950s and early 1960s, punks themselves came of age in the post-war automobile suburbs. Thus their voices emerged from within the culture they condemned. The demographics of the era together with the youths’ positions as insiders combined to make their assessments of suburbia particularly strident. The most strident of the bunch were the progenitors of hardcore, a subgenre of punk that emerged “out of suburban LA beach towns, probably ‘cause there they lived as close to The American Dream as you could get. Born of a doomed ideal of middle-class utopia, Punk juiced their nihilism.”⁴⁰ To some extent, punk condemnation of suburbia can be taken as a rejection of their parents’ values, a common historical aspect of youth rebellions. Thus the

³⁸ Pete Seeger, *Little Boxes and Other Broadsides*, Verve/Folkways FV/FVS 9020, 1963. This song was written by Malvina Reynolds. For discussion of intellectuals’ critiques of suburbia and conformity, see, for example, Horowitz, *Anxieties of Affluence*, 111-3, 122, *passim*. Devo, “Smart Patrol,” *Duty Now for the Future*, Warner Brothers, 1979.

³⁹ By the 2000 census, more Americans lived in suburbia than central cities and rural areas combined. Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003), 10.

⁴⁰ Steven Blush, *American Hardcore: A Tribal History* (Los Angeles: Feral House, 2001), 13.

Descendents, like most punks, attempted to distinguish themselves from their parents as well as their more mainstream, success-seeking peers in their sarcastic paean to suburbia, “Suburban Home”: “I don't want no hippie pad/ I want a house just like mom and dad.” San Francisco punks the Dead Kennedys also distanced themselves from those who would soon be called yuppies: “some day I'll have power/ Some day I'll have boats/ A tract in some suburb/ With thanksgivings to host (chorus:) I'm a terminal, terminal, terminal preppie.”⁴¹

Punk rockers' most prevalent complaint about suburbia was the boredom they experienced as they lived among conformist automatons. When asked how he chose song topics, Boyd Ferrell of D.C.'s Black Market Baby responded, “I live in suburbia, boredom gives me a lot of time to reflect.” John Doe of the band X recalled, “The rage we had came from bad parenting and the nothingness of suburbia, and that's also where the lust for life came from.”⁴² Punks reacted in two basic ways to the boredom they found in the suburbs: they moved to a city or created a music scene where they were. Individuals involved in the early (pre-1980) punk scenes were much more likely to move into the city. Conversely, those active in the later punk scenes, especially the hardcore scenes of Washington, D.C. and suburban Los Angeles, relocated in smaller numbers.

“TV Dinner on a TV Tray”: Punk Critiques Mass Culture

I'm so bored of television
TV dinner on a TV tray
Join the Pepsi generation
That's the American way

⁴¹ Descendents, “Suburban Home,” *Milo Goes to College*; Dead Kennedys, “Terminal Preppie,” *Plastic Surgery Disasters*, Alternative Tentacles, 1982.

⁴² “Interview with Boyd Farrell,” *Flipside*, no. 43, 1984: 27. John Doe quoted in Claude Bessy et al., eds., “The Way We Weren't: A Conversation with Exene Cervenka and John Doe,” in *Forming: The Early Days of L.A. Punk* (Santa Monica, Calif.: Smart Art Press, 1999), 87.

“America,” Agent Orange (1979)⁴³

The tract homes of suburbia were just one of a number of aspects of mass culture rejected by punks. The Circle Jerks demonstrated punk’s general disdain for conventional status symbols in their song “Don’t Care” (1980): “Don’t care where you’re from anyway/ I don’t care, Lots of money anyway/ I don’t care what you say anyway/ I don’t care, lots of clothes anyway/ I don’t care ... nice car anyway/ I don’t care, nice parents anyway.”⁴⁴ For punks, living in the best neighborhood, having lots of money and clothes or respectable parents were not the markers of achievement by which they judged each other. As the song suggests, one of the most visible ways punks rebelled against mainstream consumer culture was in their clothing. In 1982, at the height of the popularity of the “preppy” look, a Seattle punk named Jim recognized the importance of consumerism in modern society, commenting,

You define yourself in society to a large degree by how you look. And if I wore Topsiders and polo shirts and something like that, I would define myself as the nice middle-class kid who’s ready to take up where my parents left off. And the fact is that I don’t look like that, [which] means that I’m not willing to do that. And my look is a direct reflection of my attitude. I could no more change my look than I could change my attitude. I would feel unclean, virtually, going around looking like a prep.⁴⁵

Numerous punks lampooned the fashion industry and their fashion-conscious peers in song. The Teen Idles and Social Distortion targeted fashion-obsessed girls in “Fiorucci Nightmare” (1980) and “Anti-Fashion” (1983), respectively. The Teen Idles made it clear that women who spend lots of money on clothes and other aspects of their appearance do not

⁴³ Agent Orange, “America,” *Living in Darkness*, Rhino Records, 1992. The track “America,” along with several others on the compact disc, was recorded in 1979 during Agent Orange’s first recording session.

⁴⁴ Circle Jerks, “Don’t Care,” *Group Sex*, Frontier, 1980.

⁴⁵ *Another State of Mind*. For evidence of the popularity of preppy clothing, note the publication of The Preppy Handbook by Lisa Birnbach (New York: Workman Publishing, 1980), a humor book that mocked the preppy look and lifestyle.

make themselves into “dream” girls: “Fiorucci nightmare, asshole's dream/ Spend all your money on the fashion machine/ Spots and stripes and spandex pants/ Pay a hundred dollars to learn how to dance ... Learn your fashion from a magazine/ Do you really think you're in our dreams?” Social Distortion defined what they saw as the falseness of fads and fashion: “You are so plastic you could be a Barbie doll/ You walk and you talk just like them all/ ... Anti-fashion and where did you get those \$100 pants?/ A shiny red sports car takes you to the mall/ You shop with the elite and compare them all.” “Barbie dolls” live an inauthentic life because they do not think for themselves; instead they are sheep who “walk and ... talk just like them all,” unable to distinguish themselves from the pack. The Circle Jerks also highlight the plastic superficiality of certain elements of Los Angeles society in their song “Beverly Hills” (1980): “Beverly Hills, Century City/ Everything's so nice and pretty/ Because all the people look the same/ Don't they know they're so damn lame?/ Three piece suit, spandex pants, cowboy boots, Fiorucci, too!”⁴⁶

While punk rockers enjoyed satirizing fashion drones, their favorite target by far in mass culture was the established rock industry. In their view the mid-1970s “music industry with its various legions such as mindless disco, insipid singer songwriters, and of course the Arena Dinosaur Bands” no longer reflected the true spirit of rebellion, especially youth rebellion, embodied by original rock ‘n’ roll. According to John Denney of the Weirdos, “We felt alienated from the older rock establishment, which to us had become hypocritical and a downright contradiction in terms. Rock music didn’t seem to speak to us anymore. Our favorite bands, the Stones, the Who, and Led Zeppelin seemed more interested in

⁴⁶ Teen Idles, “Fiorucci Nightmare,” *Minor Disturbance*, EP, Dischord, 1980; Social Distortion, “Anti-Fashion,” *Mommy’s Little Monster*, 13th Floor, 1983; Circle Jerks, “Beverly Hills,” *Group Sex*, Frontier, 1980.

herding people into enormous arenas.”⁴⁷ Similarly, L.A. scenester Trudie (Arguelles) Plunger observed: “All of that now seemed old, boring, useless and unhealthy even! There were no bands speaking to me before [punk], no women even performing, no one ever just being angry except Iggy.”⁴⁸ And because would-be punks viewed themselves as rebels and saw rock as the most appropriate outlet for rebellion, they felt they had no voice in popular music or popular culture in general. Instead, they saw themselves as “people who [we]re disenfranchised from society.”⁴⁹ “Disenfranchised” recurs again and again in punk interviews and memoirs. Music critic Richard Cromelin described latent punks as a “musically disenfranchised audience looking for an alternative to the bland record industry product.” Skip Groff, owner of the Yesterday and Today record shop in Rockville, Maryland, believed the punk subculture gave this group of young people “a voice that they didn’t have” in current popular music.⁵⁰ Because punks felt disempowered and disengaged, they also felt bored, another recurring theme in punk interviews and lyrics.

Conclusion

Like so many cultural rebels before them, punks rejected (or attempted to reject) their middle-class roots. Punk rockers excoriated embodiments of middle-class notions of success, including the nuclear family, traditional higher education, suburbia, and consumer

⁴⁷ John Denney, interview by the Experience Music Project, transcript, 1999, 1.

⁴⁸ Trudie Arguelles, email interview by author, 2004.

⁴⁹ Cervenka, interview by the EMP, 1999, 2. For references to feeling disenfranchised or needing to find a voice, see, for instance, Hilly Kristal, “CBGB History,” Installment Vol.5 Page 1, <http://www.cbgb.com/history/history25.html>, accessed 25 January 2005; Chernikowski, interview by author; Pleasant Gehman, liner notes to *Germes*, (MLA) *The Complete Anthology*, Slash, 1993.

⁵⁰ Richard Cromelin, “L.A. Translation of ‘New Wave’ of Punk,” *Los Angeles Times*, 22 June 1977, sec. IV, p. 8; Skip Groff, interview by the Experience Music Project, transcript, 1998, 8.

culture. Punks believed finding one's own source of fulfillment or enlightenment was a more authentic process of self-actualization than blindly following a path laid out by one's parents or society at large. Middle-class Americans historically are most likely to disavow their class habitus – the set of internalized group norms that tend to guide that group's social structure and conscious actions – perhaps because they are more economically and psychologically secure in the social position than poorer Americans and have less of a stake than the upper classes in defining the terms of class struggle.⁵¹

Observers have frequently portrayed punk rock as a nihilistic subculture, and at first glance, punks' angry attacks on the family, schools, suburbia, and mass consumerism support this assertion. But punk rock did not stop at cataloging the problems with contemporary society. Although they were more vocal and coherent about the things they disliked than the things they liked, punks did articulate – piecemeal and over time – alternatives to the dominant form of consumer capitalism and the middle-class values that supported it. As we shall see in the next chapter, punks championed a do-it-yourself ethos that allowed them to feel empowered and independent. They created their own forms of community in place of the traditional nuclear family. They valued street smarts and self-education over conventional schooling, and they rejected or reshaped suburbia to fit the needs of their subculture.

⁵¹ Pierre Bourdieu hints that the middle classes are more flexible in the “reproduction of the social structure.” [*Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, translated by Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 101-2, 165-8.]

CHAPTER 3

“GET UP AND GO!”: DO-IT-YOURSELF CONSUMERISM

You keep talking about talent
Talent? What do you know?
Instead of studying theory
We're going to get up and go

Get up and go
Get up and go
Get up and go
Get up and go

A bit too much distortion
The feedback hurts your ears
You say we need more practice
Maybe in a couple of years

We've got no time for judgment
Not interested in what you say
Keep up your verbal criticism
We'll go out and play

“Get Up and Go,” Teen Idles (1980)

According to Nathan Strejcek, the Teen Idles’ lead singer, the band’s primary message was that young punks should “get up and go” rather than wait for the music industry to revitalize itself or for others to create a scene. As we saw during their Greyhound trip to California, these teens were indeed willing to get up and go in order to make their music heard, illustrating one of the fundamental tenets of the punk creed: the Do-It-Yourself (DIY) mentality. This DIY ethos would help take punks from consumer-only status to positions as both consumer and producer. The Teen Idles exertions on tour and their visit to Disneyland illustrated a commitment to capitalism but also efforts to make it more personally fulfilling. They wanted to experience Disneyland, but on their own terms – with Mohawks, green hair and ripped shirts. The cornerstone for punk’s critiques of consumerism and class and the basis of the alternatives it offered was its DIY approach. Because punks believed so strongly in DIY, the subculture rarely exhibited the complete nihilism many critics wanted to attribute to it. DIY mitigated the worst cynicism by allowing punks the sense of ownership and pride of self-creation.

Punk's DIY ethos can be understood as part of a larger cultural impulse of the seventies that extolled individual creativity over mass-produced cultural forms. This drive was manifest in rock by the late 1960s as most rock performers began to write and perform their own material rather than rely on professional songwriters. Hollywood also displayed this trend as the idea of the director as auteur arose from the wreckage of the studio system; Roman Polanski, Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, and Robert Altman exercised a great deal of control over such *tours de force* as *Chinatown*, *Taxi Driver*, *The Godfather Parts I and II*, and *Nashville*, respectively. The individualistic thrust was also evident in country music, where Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings offered their brand of "outlaw country" as an answer and alternative to Nashville's Music Row, a system of production they viewed as an insipid music factory. Indeed historian Bruce Schulman finds the predominant "theme in Seventies popular culture" to be "the battle between" rebellious cultural outlaws and "large, constituted authority," including "the massive global conglomerates that were coming to dominate the culture industries."¹

The DIY impulse in punk entered not only into the process of creating a cultural form (like music or a fanzine) but also into the process of being a consumer. First, punks were supposed to think for themselves and decide whether to buy or trade a cultural product based on their own likes and dislikes rather than on an advertising campaign or some record exec's cocaine-fueled boardroom decisions. Second, the DIY effort entered into the consumption

¹ Steve Chapple and Reebee Garofalo, Rock 'n' Roll is Here to Pay: The History and Politics of the Music Industry (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1977), 77-8; Bruce Schulman, The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics (New York: Free Press, 2001), 148-50; Robert Sklar, Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies (New York : Vintage Books, 1994), 322-3; Barbara Ching, Wrong's What I Do Best: Hard Country Music and Contemporary Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 119-25.

process because punk products, be they fanzines or records, could be difficult to find. Punk fans had to seek out small record stores or mail-order items.

Punk's DIY celebration of individual creativity and consumption depended on several key components, including authenticity, localism, and changing technology. These ideas fed into each other and into the larger project of DIY. The most important ideological argument in support of punk DIY had to do with authenticity: punks viewed DIY as the most authentic mode of self-fashioning and self-expression. For punks, the issue of authenticity related to both things and people. A thing, such as music or a magazine, was considered to be more authentic if it was not mass-produced or mass media-mediated. So, for example, live performances, especially those in small venues, were considered more authentic than recordings. In small venues, "you're feeling the music because the amp[lifier] is five feet away from you, and the singer literally is sweating on you."² At the next level, low-budget recordings unmarred by the "expert" interference of a sound engineer or record executive were deemed more authentic than top-dollar, big-label, high-production albums. According to Tish Bellomo of the Sick F*cks, "do-it-yourself" music was much more rewarding than the "overly produced, boring, soulless music" of the day. A prime example of this aesthetic can be found in the Ramones' first album, which was recorded in under a week at a cost of \$6400 in 1976. In contrast, the Eagles' *The Long Run* (1979), the follow up to their opus *Hotel California*, "took three years and cost \$800,000" to record.³ Similarly, when the Teen

² Henry Rollins, interview by the Experience Music Project, transcript, 1998, 4. For similar comments, see, for instance, Ian MacKaye, interview by the Experience Music Project, transcript, 1998, 5-6; Diane Donnelly, "Psyche Delly," *Unicorn Times*, February 1976, 1; Mark Jenkins, telephone interview by author, tape recording, 26 February 2002.

³ Tish Bellomo and Snooky Bellomo, telephone interview by author, transcript, New York, N.Y., 24 June 2002; Dee Dee Ramone stated the "first album took only a couple of days to record in February 1976 at Plaza Sound in Radio City Music Hall." [Dee Dee Ramone, *Lobotomy: Surviving the Ramones*, 2d ed. (New York:

Idles recorded their EP in Don Zientara's basement studio, the band had already broken up, but they "wanted to document this [their experience as a band] because," they believed, "this is really, really important to us." Zientara "didn't have any kind of preconceived notion about recording." Instead, "he was just laying stuff down that seemed like the way he heard it, the way he thought it was supposed to sound."⁴

This aspect of punk's obsession with authenticity – a belief that something, especially music, was more real if people experienced it as directly as possible and in its original form – harkens back to early-twentieth-century modernism as well as the Beats of the 1950s, for the issue of authenticity has been an object of debate for many twentieth-century cultural groups. Modernist critiques of mass consumer culture "sought to restore the lost sense of 'the real thing'" by "reconnect[ing] the worker with the thing made, and yet celebrat[ing] the positive attributes of machine." According to this aesthetic, items were more authentic if people could comprehend the manufacturing process. Thus the furniture designer, Gustav Stickley, preferred simply designed furniture made in the Arts-and-Crafts style rather than objects "made by machinery with intricate processes which we cannot understand."⁵ For the Beats, their name itself shed light on their values. They adapted the word "beat" from the slang of the carnie and drug worlds, where it had meant harsh circumstances or to be robbed or cheated, into a more positive connotation. For them, being "beat" meant laying bare the soul

Thunder's Mouth, 2000), 108.] Arturo Vega, the Ramone's graphic designer reports the album was recorded in three days, while Joey Ramone said it took "a week." [Legs McNeil and Gillian McCain, Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk (Grove Press, 1996. Reprint, New York: Penguin, 1997), 229.] Everett True reports that the Ramones recorded their first album February 2-19, 1976 at Plaza Sound in NYC for \$6200 or \$6400. [Hey Ho Let's Go: The Story of the Ramones (London: Omnibus Press, 2002), 53.] Mikal Gilmore, "Don Henley," Rolling Stone, no. 512, 5 November - 10 December 1987, 291.

⁴ Ian MacKaye, interview for the Experience Music Project, transcript, 1998, 14; Ian MacKaye, interview by author, tape recording, Arlington, Va., 9 September 2002.

⁵ Gustav Stickley quoted in Miles Orvell, The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 155, 160.

or the bedrock of consciousness, a state of being that allowed fuller self-awareness and purer artistic creation. In such a state, the artist was incapable of artifice.⁶

While punks tended to see cottage-industry items as more authentic than mass consumerism, mass-produced objects could be made more authentic if employed in a certain manner. If an individual used an article against mainstream wisdom or re-used a discarded or outdated item, punks probably viewed that object (and the person using it) as more authentic than they might otherwise. For instance, wearing crucifixes or rosaries in combination with punk clothing or makeup subverted a traditional image of piety and faith. Wearing purposely ripped old jeans or T-shirts, buying vintage or thrift-store clothes, or squatting in a condemned building were considered authentic expressions of self; wearing brand new Fiorucci jeans or living with one's parents in the suburbs were not. Similarly, although punk put a premium on individual creativity and original music, cover songs could be seen as authentic if they were performed in such a way as to deconstruct or undermine the conventions and meaning of the original version. The Dickies' revved-up, demented cover of "The Banana Splits Theme," for example, sounds like amphetamine-driven pogo music rather than a Saturday-morning sing-along.⁷

While determining whether some "thing" was authentically punk was a complex and subjective process, establishing whether someone was authentic was even more difficult and

⁶ Steven Watson, The Birth of the Beat Generation: Visionaries, Rebels, and Hipsters, 1944-1960 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995), 3-4.

⁷ Dick Hebdige's classic early study of punk places appropriation of objects at the center of his analysis. For him, the "struggle between different discourses, different definitions and meanings within ideology is therefore always ... a struggle within signification: a struggle for possession of the sign which extends to even the most mundane areas of everyday life. ... 'Humble objects,'" like safety pins and tubes of Vaseline, "can be magically appropriated; 'stolen' by subordinate groups and made to carry 'secret' meanings." [Subculture: The Meaning of Style (London: Routledge, 1979), 17-8.] The Dickies, "Banana Splits," *The Incredible Shrinking Dickies*, A&M, 1979. For further discussion of how punks deconstructed rock and roll through cover tunes, see Chapter 7, pp. 302-3.

fraught with emotion for the participants. To be seen as a true punk rather a “poseur” (to use punk vernacular) was of immense importance to the people immersed in the various scenes. A flyer for an evening of music at the Masque in Los Angeles illustrates what punks thought of poseurs. The event was a benefit for the Germs, an effort to help them buy their own equipment (until then, they always had borrowed equipment), and the flyer listed admission fees as follows: “People \$3.00, hippies \$4.00, poseurs \$5.00, Weirdos \$6.00, Nicky Beat \$7.50.”⁸ In this social hierarchy, poseurs ranked worse than hippies, who were a favorite target in punk rock. (The listings for the Weirdos and Nicky Beat poke fun at scene insiders.)

Punk rockers spilled much ink in fanzines attempting to define punk rock and decide who belonged and who did not. Barbara Ritchie of Los Angeles wrote to Flipside in 1984: “I’m sick and tired of all these letters you get from the self[-]proclaimed punk authorities who try to define ‘punk’ and to tell others they’re hot [sic] punking correctly. ... I’m not denying that a movement exists, but it can only be described as an anti-movement.” It was, she said, only possible to describe what was not punk, rather than what was. Therefore Ritchie advised moving “away from simplistic labels and towards individuality.” Despite her emphasis on individuality, it is important to note that she also acknowledges that punk was “a movement.” The Wrecks of Reno, Nevada recorded a song in 1982 that lyrically reflects the most common definition of punk rock: “Punk is an attitude/ Individuality is the key.”⁹ This straightforward epigram demonstrates both the simplistic beauty of punk’s ideals and the

⁸ Brendan Mullen, interview by the Experience Music Project, transcript, 2d of three segments, 30 March 2000, 17.

⁹ Barbara Ritchie, in “Voice of the Reader,” Flipside, no. 41, early 1984, 7. See also, Stephen Jay Morris, “Letter to the Editor,” LA Weekly, 8-14 February 1981, 3; Louise Burkholder, “The Mail,” City Paper, no. 9, 12-25 June 1981, 19; Kathy, “The Mail,” City Paper, 26 June-2 July 1981, 19. The Wrecks, “Punk is an Attitude,” *Not So Quiet on the Western Front*, Alternative Tentacles, 1982.

complex centrifugal force that threatened to rip punk apart. With attitude, a very subjective item, as the *sine qua non* for punk rock, judging an individual's authenticity became very problematic. The task was simplified – somewhat – by the view that an authentic punk “attitude” involved an embodied position. Through lived experiences and choices involving a range of everyday matters including home, family, clothes, and education, punk rockers enacted implicit and explicit critiques of middle-class life in the 1970s and 1980s.

A second vital characteristic of punk DIY, one closely related to the issue of authenticity, was localism. Punks tended to value a product more when they were able to know the where and who behind it. They sought a more tangible version of popular culture than that provided by, as they saw it, faceless corporations like Capitol Records or Warner Communications. Punk's faith in localism grew as the movement matured in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The punk rock ethos tried to accommodate both a belief in the importance of local scenes and recognition of a national or international punk rock community. While punks across the U.S. and abroad found excitement in the idea that a far-flung but growing group of like-minded radicals shared the punk-rock faith, those outside New York and London, the major centers of punk rock, worried about perceived provincialism. These punks chafed at suggestions that someone from, for instance, the middle-class suburbs of Los Angeles could not be a true punk rocker. The subculture's DIY ethos purportedly meant that anyone anywhere could and should pick up a guitar, a pen, or a camera and express himself. Thus localism became an increasingly important aspect of punk culture.

A third key aspect of punk's DIY mentality was the changing technology of the era. Punks were more able to “do it themselves” because of changes in the way people recorded and listened to music. First the introduction of smaller and more user-friendly audio cassette

tapes in the 1960s made personal recording for a range of uses much more popular. Additionally, as recording equipment became smaller and less expensive, more recording studios opened, offering services at lower prices, and bringing studio time into the financial reach of a broader swath of bands and individuals. Furthermore, four-track cassette-tape recorders came into the economic reach of individual musicians who could then record themselves or their bands without visiting a formal studio. In 1979, TEAC introduced the M-144 Portastudio, the first portable four-track recorder, retailing for \$1100. TEAC's sales manager claimed the Portastudio "had the same technical capabilities as" the equipment used by the Beatles for *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. "The only difference is that their set-up cost thousands of dollars and filled several rooms, while our unit costs \$1100 and can be carried under your arm."¹⁰ This equipment in itself allowed vast improvements in home-recorded sound quality, but when combined with improvements in (and declining prices of) equipment like microphones and amplifiers, a garage band had a decent shot at producing a quality recording of themselves. Musicians could then shop these tapes as demos to record companies or sidestep the record companies altogether and go straight to record pressing plants. One New York label, ROIR, even bypassed the pressing plant by releasing their recordings on cassette tape only.

The cassette tape not only revolutionized how people recorded music in the 1970s, it helped revolutionize how people listened to music. Through the 1960s, most fans bought music exclusively on vinyl, although wealthy aficionados could buy, record, and listen to

¹⁰ "Redefining Recording," Music Trades, 25 November 1979, 50-52; "Battle of the Four Tracks," Melody Maker 3 October 1981, 34-5. The latter article compared the TEAC, which "[f]or many years ... had the four track market sewn tighter than a wrestler's handshake," with the relatively new Fostex Multitracker. The Philips cassette was introduced in 1963. [Carl Benson, "Home Recording," The Routledge Guide to Music Technology, ed. Thom Holmes (New York: Routledge, 2006), 140; Guy A. Marco, ed., "Disc," Encyclopedia of Recorded Sound in the United States (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993), 203.]

music on reel-to-reel tape players. The arrival of the 8-track tape made music more portable, but it wasn't until the rise of cassettes in the mid-1970s that the average person could make copies of an LP or record a live show. For punks, trading homemade cassette tapes of entire albums or "mix-tapes" of various punk songs was a crucial method of information exchange. Punk-rock records usually were pressed and released in very small batches (a few hundred to a few thousand) and could be very challenging to find. Access to these records and the ability to tape them for one's friends was highly valuable cultural capital for punk rockers, or, put another way, quite a symbol of one's punk-rock authenticity. Punks had to mail order these records or find them in small, independent records stores, like Bill Asp's Record and Tape Exchange in Fairfax and Arlington, Virginia and the Music Box in Fullerton, California.¹¹ Major metropolitan areas would have several such stores, while smaller cities might only have one, and rural areas likely had none. When I was a teenager in Tampa, the only game in town was the record store Vinyl Fever.

"WE ARE THE ONE": ALTERNATIVES TO FAMILY, SCHOOL, AND SUBURBIA¹²

"The Connected": Punk Rock Community

Employing DIY efforts built on notions of authenticity and localism, punks fashioned alternatives to the nuclear family, traditional higher education, and suburbia. In place of the conventional nuclear family that they saw as hopelessly flawed, punks sought and created community in a number of forms. Most broadly, punks found belonging in an intangible, far-

¹¹ Jeff Zeldman, "Noise Gate," *City Paper*, 12 May 1983, vol. 3, no. 17, 1. For discussion of the importance of trading cassette tapes in punk rock, see, for example, Jack Rabid, interview by author, transcript, New York, N.Y., 27 July 2002; and Shawna Kenney, telephone interview by author, tape recording, 25 February 2002.

¹² The Avengers, "We Are the One," *The Avengers CD Presents*, 1981. Recorded sometime between 1977 and 1979.

flung community of punks through their emotional investment in the music. Cultural Studies scholar Lawrence Grossberg calls this phenomenon an “affective alliance.”¹³ Connected through fanzines and pen-palling, punks took comfort in knowing other like-minded misfits shared their love of punk. Local community was even more important. Time and time again punks mention the degree to which the face-to-face relationships that together comprised their particular punk scene felt like family. Exene Cervenka recalled that shortly after moving to Los Angeles, she “got into the punk scene really early, which was such a great family.” Dodie [Bowers] Disanto, owner and manager of the original 9:30 Club in Washington, D.C., a home to D.C. punk, spoke of the “incredible ... family aspect of the club,” due in part to the club’s all-ages policy, a concession punks procured from many D.C. venue owners through a boycott in 1978. Jan Pumphrey described the D.C. punk scene as being “like a family group. Everybody knew each other. That was the great thing about it.”¹⁴

Within local scenes, punks developed even smaller, more intimate fellowships. Sometimes these smaller punk communities were attached to a physical location. For example, all the members of Blondie lived in a group apartment on the Bowery; Jeff Nelson, Ian MacKaye, and others moved into the Dischord house in Arlington, Virginia; and several dozen Los Angeles punks, including Trudie [Arguelles] Plunger, Lorna Doom, Hellin Killer,

¹³ Lawrence Grossberg, “Another Boring Day in Paradise: Rock and roll and the Empowerment of Everyday Life,” *Popular Music* 4 (1984): 225-58. See also Simon Frith, introduction to *Music and Society: The Politics of Composition, Performance and Reception*, ed. R. Leppert and S. McClary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 144; and Will Straw, “Systems of Articulation, Logics of Change: Scenes and Communities in Popular Music,” *Cultural Studies* 5, no. 3 (October, 1991): 361-75.]

¹⁴ Exene Cervenka, interview by Amy Phillips, September 2002, <http://www.furious.com/perfect/exene.html>, accessed 17 February 2007; Dodie Disanto, interview for the Experience Music Project, transcript, 1998, 12; Mark Andersen and Mark Jenkins, *Dance of Days: Two Decades of Punk in the Nation’s Capital* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2001), 24, 70; Jan Pumphrey quoted in Cynthia Connolly, Leslie Clague, and Sharon Cheslow, *Banned in DC: Photos and Anecdotes from the DC Punk Underground (79-85)* (Washington, D.C.: Sun Dog Propaganda, 1988), 15.

Rod Donahue, and members of the Bags, the Screamers, the Go-Go's, and Youth Brigade, resided in or rehearsed at the Canterbury Apartments, an "old Hollywood" style apartment building on N. Cherokee Avenue just north of Hollywood Boulevard. Margot Olaverra of the Go-Go's called the Canterbury "a haven for underclass marginals, especially punk rockers like myself." About the Canterbury and the early Hollywood scene in general, she remembered, "The whole thing was such a close-knit community – that's what I value about those days so much. We were really supportive of each other..." Other infamous punk-rock group homes included the Church in Hermosa Beach, California and Skinhead Manor in Hollywood. Additionally, "the Black Hole was an apartment in the heart of Fullerton" rented by Mike Ness of Social Distortion and others that became "a punk rock crash pad" for a number of teens. Not only was it "a paradise" with "no parental supervision," it was a "place you could go, where you could belong. Where the other people that were there ... were ... in your boat," according to Tony Reflex of the Adolescents.¹⁵

Other times these smaller punk-rock communities were not necessarily linked to a specific physical setting. For example, the Connected (the TC) was a group of young punk rockers in Los Angeles, mostly aged fifteen to twenty-one, who banded together for friendship and survival in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Many were runaways, and they crashed together when they could at friends' houses or on the streets. In her memoir, Aimee

¹⁵ Andersen and Jenkins, *Dance of Days*, 98. Margot Olaverra quoted in Marc Spitz and Brendan Mullen, *We Got the Neutron Bomb: The Untold Story of L.A. Punk* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001), 167, 169. Other punks distinctly recall the clique-ishness of the Canterbury scene. For descriptions of the Canterbury, see, Spitz and Mullen, *Neutron Bomb*, 166-71; Craig Lee, "Los Angeles," in *Hardcore California: A History of Punk and New Wave*, eds. Peter Belsito and Bob Davis (Berkeley: The Last Gasp of San Francisco, 1983), 22. For description of the Church, see, for instance, Shreader, "Los Angeles," in *Hardcore California*, 45. The Better Youth Organization (BYO), founded by brothers Mark and Shawn Stern (members of the band Youth Brigade), ran Skinhead Manor in Hollywood during the summer of 1980. <http://www.byorecords.com/index.php?page=history>, accessed 30 March 2004. Tony Reflex, interview by author, tape recording, Sierra Madre, Calif., 23 June, 2004.

Cooper described the emotional sustenance provided by the Connected: “The TC had become an instant, extended family to me, and I quickly learned that no matter where I went ... if a member of The Connected was there, I was welcome.” Likewise, bands could serve as surrogate families. Tony Alva, best known as a professional skateboarder, also played in several bands, including the Skoundrelz. According to Alva, “being in a band ... is like being in a family, and you really have to grow and just get along with those people, and it can’t be just a bunch of trivial, you know, B.S. ... You learn how to communicate, not only by playing music.”¹⁶ Additionally, by the early 1980s, groups that functioned more like pseudo-street gangs also arose in punk, including the Rat Patrol of D.C. and numerous southern California groups like the Family of Orange County, led by John Macias, The Suicidals (fans of the Suicidal Tendencies out of Venice), FFF (Fight for Freedom from the Valley), the LADS (L.A. Death Squad in Hollywood), and the HB’s (of Huntington Beach).¹⁷

¹⁶ Aimee Cooper, Coloring Outside the Lines: A Punk Rock Memoir (Elgin: Texas: Rowdy’s Press, 2003), 33. According to Cooper, Penelope Spheeris’ movie *Suburbia* (1984) was loosely based on the Connected. See also, James Parker, Turned On: A Biography of Henry Rollins (New York: Cooper Square Press, 1998), 75. Tony Alva, interview by the Experience Music Project, 1999, 14. For discussion of Alva’s very important position in the history of skateboarding, see, for example, Glen E. Friedman, Fuck You Heroes: Photographs 1976-1991 (New York: Burning Flags Press, 1994); and Michael Brooke, The Concrete Wave: The History of Skateboarding (Toronto: Warwick Publishing, 1999), 78-80, *passim*. The histories of skateboarding and punk became intertwined by the late 1970s. As C. R. Stecyk states in the introduction to *Fuck You Heroes*, “Music was an integral part of the skate scene. After the once-favored early heavy metal faded away, hardcore punk tended to be the choice of most; the distilled, potent chaos of the DogTown [skateboard] scene meshed perfectly with the unrestrained music of the punks. At that point, both activities were decidedly non-commercial in a mainstream societal sense, and were exclusively youth-generated.” [C. R. Stecyk III, introduction to *Fuck You Heroes*, 6.] Ian MacKaye explained the relationship between punk and skateboarding in the way both emphasized action: “We are the kinds of kids who are active. A lot of us were skateboarders, action kids.... A lot of kids pick up instruments, they want to play in a band and get their thoughts out.” [Richard Harrington, “Slam Dancing in the Big City,” Washington Post, 19 July 1981, sec. G, p. 2.

¹⁷ For discussion of punk gangs, see Ink Disease, no. 6, 1984, 3; Flipside, no. 44, late 1984, 57; Andersen and Jenkins, Dance of Days, 127-8; Steven Blush, American Hardcore: A Tribal History (Los Angeles: Feral House, 2001), 97-9; and Susan M. Ruddick, Young and Homeless in Hollywood: Mapping Social Identities (New York: Routledge, 1996), 102-3.

Cooper's and Alva's words, together with song lyrics, suggest that many punks believed their subculture – and the various subgroups within the subculture – offered a more authentic form of family or community than a traditional, nuclear family because membership came through choice, action, and a shared philosophy rather than an accident of birth. This principle is evident in the Adolescents' song, "Kids of the Black Hole," which pays homage to Ness's Fullerton apartment. No doubt the apartment earned its name from – as the song states – the "nights of endless drinking," "chaos," and "violence" that marked the passing of time as well as the "clutter," "destruction," filth, and graffiti adorning the small space. The name also reflects, however, the emotional state of some of its denizens. Tony Reflex, who sang "Kids of the Black Hole" for the Adolescents, came from a difficult family situation, where the police came to his house on more than one occasion because of domestic violence. In the song, the apartment is described as the "House that belonged to all the homeless kids/ Kids of the black hole."¹⁸ "The black hole," therefore, may be interpreted as not only the apartment itself but the spiritual abyss into which some emotionally starved punk rockers fell as adolescents. The music introduced them to a community they had not known through their families and mainstream peers.

**"Rock 'n' Roll High School":
Punk Self-Education and the Collector Aesthetic¹⁹**

¹⁸ The Adolescents, "Kids of the Black Hole," *Adolescents*, Frontier, 1981. The band's guitarist Rikk Agnew wrote the song. [Tony Reflex, interview by author, tape recording, Sierra Madre, California, 23 June 2004.] Ness composed another song about a different short-lived punk crash pad called "Playpen," released with "Mainliner" on the Posh Boy label as Social Distortion's first single. [<http://www.socialdistortion.com/history.html>, accessed March 28, 2007.]

¹⁹ Ramones, "Rock 'n' Roll High School," *End of the Century*, Sire, 1980.

Just as punks sought alternatives to the nuclear family, they embraced self-education as a replacement for or supplement to traditional education. Kim Kane's musical career sheds light on the populist implications of punk's take on education and how it helped some people achieve self-actualization. Kane, born in Germany in 1951, had parents who worked for the federal government, as did many members of the D.C. punk scene. Because his father was a diplomat, Kane lived overseas until he was sixteen. As a teenager in Korea, Kane tried to form a band, calling two of his friends to a meeting in 1967. It did not occur to him until he had assembled the group that in order to form a band, he would need to sing or learn an instrument. Over the next few years, Kane taught himself to play guitar, with no aid from instructors or even books. When the Kanes moved to Washington in 1968, Kim lacked a solid American cultural base, being only marginally aware of "baseball and Elvis." But he became enthralled with rock 'n' roll and turned into an avid record collector. He enjoyed a wide range of musical styles, including psychedelia and folk but became especially enamored with 1960s garage bands such as The Castaways and The Seeds. As he became aware of punk in the mid-seventies, he was drawn to its enthusiasm and simplicity, a spirit reminding him of 1960s garage bands. And it was not until 1975, after he began trying to form a band (the band that became the Slickee Boys) in earnest, that he learned the names of self-taught guitar chords.²⁰

Punks' DIY educational efforts entered realms outside music. Some punk rockers, like Patti Smith and Television's Tom Verlaine, were remarkably erudite, referencing Symbolist poets, for example. Richard Hell toyed with the idea of doing a fanzine devoted to writers like Edgar Allen Poe, Charles Baudelaire, Joris-Karl Huysmans, and Arthur

²⁰ Kim Kane, telephone interview by author, transcript, 14 April 2002, 3-9.

Rimbaud.²¹ The fact that these punks had studied this material on their own, rather than in an institutional setting, made them value the edification that much more. They had emotional investments in this knowledge in the same way they did with the music of punk, as if saying to themselves, “I sought it out, not many people know about it, therefore it is mine, and it is special.” In other words, DIY applied not only to music but to education as well.

More common than occasional highbrow references by the likes of Smith and Hell were allusions to a broad swath of popular culture that together might be thought of as a darker and/or kitschier side of Americana. Instead of baseball and Norman Rockwell, punks were fascinated, for example, by horror movies and cartoons. Los Angelena Pleasant Gehman found it “really exciting to meet a lot of other people with the same shared frame of reference. [To] know that if I said *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, they wouldn’t have a blank look on their face. They would have seen that movie. They would have read the same things that I read. I was so not used to that happening.”²² Cultural capital accrued to those punks fluent in the language of comic strips, Saturday-morning television, and Bela Lugosi. In bringing all these items to bear on the music, punks’ pastiche approach was typical of postmodern artistic expressions of the 1960s and 1970s.²³

²¹ Patti Smith explicitly calls out to Rimbaud in “Land,” *Horses*, Arista, 1975; Hell diary entries for December 17, 1974 and January 27, 1975. [Richard Hell (Meyers), *Artifact: Notebooks from Hell 1974-1980* (Madras and New York: Hanuman Books, 1992), 24, 29-30.]

²² Gehman, interview by author, tape recording, Los Angeles, Calif., 28 June 2004. *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, a German expressionism film originally released as *Das Kabinett des Doktor Caligari* in 1919, was put out in the United States by Goldwyn in 1921. It was a commercial failure in the United States but “was widely perceived to be the first art film by many in the little theatre movement.” [Tony Guzman, “The Little Theatre Movement: The Institutionalization of the European Art Film in America,” *Film History: An International Journal* 17, no. 2/3 (2005), 263.] This movie and German expressionism in general are seen as precursors to American film noir, which influenced Los Angeles punk. See Chapter 4 for further discussion of noir.

²³ Benard Gendron sees in punk an alliance, or a “friendly encounter” between high and low culture, a conscious appropriation across boundaries, with a positive view of that appropriation. [*Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club: Popular Music and the Avant-Garde* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 17-9.]

Punk rock's fascination with horror genres fit well in a subculture tendering a frequently pessimistic view of the world. The Ramones were one of the first groups in punk obsessed with horror. "I Don't Wanna Go Down to the Basement," on their first album, reflected Joey and Dee Dee's shared delight in B-grade horror movies: "Hey, daddy-o/ I don't wanna go/ Down to the basement/ There's somethin' down there." Additionally, their now-classic tune "Pinhead" was inspired by *Freaks*, a 1932 horror film about sideshow performers, in which the characters with physical deformities (the "freaks") were shown to be more honorable and trustworthy than the two "ordinary" people in the plot. At one point, the sideshow entertainers enact a ritual signifying their acceptance of Cleopatra, a "normal" outsider, chanting, "We accept her! We accept her! One of us! One of us! Gooble, gobble, gooble, gobble!" The Ramones' "Pinhead" begins with the chant "Gabba gabba we accept you, we accept you, one of us!/ Gabba gabba we accept you, we accept you, one of us!" Tommy Ramone described the song as a way of saying "that all the freaks were welcome to join the Ramones. It was our way of goofing on the media, for saying we were not too bright."²⁴

Bands that shared and amplified the Ramones' fascination with horror culture included the Misfits, the Cramps, 45 Grave, and 9353. The Misfits blended over-the-top lyrics evoking B-grade horror and science-fiction movies, Goth make-up (in a pre-Goth era), and metal-inspired power chords to achieve a hokey yet compelling presence.²⁵ 45 Grave led the way for a mini-explosion of horror/goth punk in the Los Angeles area in the early 1980s.

²⁴ Ramones, "I Don't Wanna Go Down To The Basement," *Ramones*, Sire, 1976; Tod Browning directed *Freaks* (1932) for MGM; Ramones, "Pinhead," *Leave Home*, Sire, 1977; Tommy Ramone quoted in True, *Hey Ho Let's Go*, 83.

²⁵ For several years, the Misfits released singles on their own label, Plan 9, including *Bullet*, EP, 1978; *Evilive*, EP, 1982. Then they produced their classic *Walk Among Us*, Ruby, 1982.

Their songs included “Evil,” “Phantom,” and a cover of Don Hinson and the Rigamorticians’ 1964 cult classic “Riboflavin Flavored, Non-Carbonated, Poly-Unsaturated Blood.”²⁶ Washington, D.C.’s 9353 offered their own take on horror with tunes like “10 Witches” and “Ghost.” The Cramps, who formed in New York in 1976, sit atop the horror-punk pantheon. They combined a love of rockabilly with a “monster movie/junk food/swamp-creature aesthetic” in songs like “Goo Goo Muck,” “Zombie Dance,” “TV Set,” and “Human Fly.” The cover of their 1980 EP “Garbage” b/w “TV Set” featured a giant spider and the Cramps’ logo, which – like lettering in B-movie posters – seemed to drip blood.²⁷ In a 1979 interview, the Cramps front man Lux Interior discussed their pastiche approach, one that could apply to many punk bands: “Rock ‘n’ roll is so all encompassing; it’s got little to do with music. ... Most bands can’t play rock ‘n’ roll because they think they must make it *mean* something. ... This band since we started has always had a lot of fun.” The interviewer noted that the “Cramps grew up on TV, comic books and horror movies. They’ve turned their input into a really passionate, polished output.”²⁸ In other words, despite Interior’s protestations against attempts at higher meaning in rock, the Cramps’ music did denote something; they, like the other bands listed above, validated and

²⁶ Don Hinson and the Rigamorticians, “Riboflavin Flavored, Non-Carbonated, Poly-Unsaturated Blood,” *Monster Dance Party*, Capitol 5314, 1964; 45 Grave, “Evil,” “Phantom,” and “Riboflavin,” *Sleep in Safety*, Enigma, 1983; Ira Robbins and Greg Fasolino, “45 Grave,” *Trouser Press*, http://www.trouserpress.com/entry.php?a=45_grave, accessed 27 April, 2007.

²⁷ Lux Interior (Ohioan Erick Purkhiser) and guitarist Poison Ivy (Californian Kirsty Wallace) led the band. Other members came and went. Despite roots elsewhere, the Cramps came together in New York in 1976. [J. H. Sasfy, liner notes, The Cramps, *Gravest Hits*, Illegal/IRS, 1979.] The Cramps, “Garbage” b/w “TV Set,” EP, Illegal Records, 1980. The songs listed here are from *Songs the Lord Taught Us*, (Illegal/IRS, 1980; *Psychedelic Jungle*, IRS, 1981; and *Bad Music for Bad People*, IRS, 1984. The quote describing their aesthetic is Scott Isler and Ira Robbins, “Cramps,” *Trouser Press*, <http://www.trouserpress.com/entry.php?a=cramps>, accessed 4 April, 2007.

²⁸ Jim Dawson, “The Rockabilly Renaissance,” *LA Weekly*, 23-30 March 1979, 6. Clarissa Ainley interviewed the Cramps.

rewarded listeners who shared their knowledge of twentieth-century sci-fi and horror culture. Interior lost sight of the fact that band and fans could have “a lot of fun” and “make it *mean* something.”

In addition to drawing on (and creating) horror schlock, punks demonstrated an affinity for comic strips and cartoons. They thus continued a trend identified by Norman Mailer in his description of the post-World War II hipster as someone who pursued independent enrichment through eclectic sources like Arthur Rimbaud, jazz, science fiction, MAD comics, and Henry Miller rather than some stale literary canon.²⁹ In 1976 John Holmstrom and Ged Dunn, desiring a creative outlet for their obsessions with comics, rock and roll, and pop culture in general, began publishing PUNK magazine, the publication that more than any other single factor named and institutionalized the disparate body of music emerging from New York’s lower east side in the mid-1970s. Holmstrom studied at the School of Visual Arts in New York City where Harvey Kurtzman (of MAD magazine fame) “was his teacher ... and ... mentor.” Holmstrom also corresponded with Zippy the Pinhead’s creator Bill Griffith. Both men encouraged Holmstrom’s crack at starting a humor magazine. Holmstrom “thought PUNK was like a modern version of MAD, we often referred to it as the MAD magazine of rock 'n' roll. ... I had read a lot – I mean a lot – of underground newspapers, magazines and comic books from 1967-1975. I tried to make PUNK a modern-day underground magazine. One that would reject the boring politics and focus on pop culture.” In a weary and cynical post-Vietnam, post-Watergate era, pop culture was far more important to Holmstrom than “politicians [who] were always up to dirty tricks.” Holmstrom’s favorite issue was, in his words, “Mutant Monster Beach Party. Two years in

²⁹ Watson, The Birth of the Beat Generation, 121.

the making, cameos by Andy Warhol, Peter Wolf and Edith Massey, starring Joey Ramone and Debbie Harry. It was the ultimate collaboration from the NYC punk rock scene.”³⁰ The “Mutant Monster Beach Party” drew on B-grade science fiction but did so in the style of a *fumetti*, a genre of American comics illustrated with photos. Roberta Bayley took photos of the “characters” (Deborah Harry, Joey Ramone, some bikers, some “aliens,” Edith Massey, Andy Warhol, and some extras) acting out vignettes. Holmstrom then embellished the photos with speech balloons, motion lines, symbols, or other illustrations.

The comic-strip aesthetic entered into areas other than publishing as well. Punk bands that were influenced by comics included Blondie, the Slickee Boys, and the Weirdos.³¹ Debbie Harry reflected, “If there was one, the Blondie concept was akin to comic strips. Chris [Stein, guitarist] was a collector, Gary [Valentine, bassist] always had his nose buried in comics, and from my point of view the idea of a drawing coming to life and stepping onto the stage had a terrific surrealness about it.” The band also referenced comic-strip character Brenda Starr in “Rip Her to Shreds.”³² Washington D.C.’s the Slickee Boys incorporated Asian animation styles into their album and publicity artwork. For example, the cover of the

³⁰ John Holmstrom, email interview by author, 29 July 2002. Kurtzman, a native New Yorker, co-founded *MAD* magazine in 1952. Bill Griffith’s Zippy the Pinhead first emerged in print in 1971 in the underground comic book *Real Pulp*. Zippy became a syndicated comic in 1986. [Nicky Wright, *The Classic Era of American Comics* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 2000), 196; Brian Walker, *The Comics since 1945* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2002), 223-4.] “Mutant Monster Beach Party,” *PUNK*, no. 15, July 1978. Other important punk cartoonists include Gary Panter and Raymond Pettibon of southern California. Matt Groening was also associated with the Los Angeles punk scene; he worked at the Hollywood Licorice Pizza record store frequented by many punk rockers. He and Gary Panter were good friends. [Nicole Panter, interviewed by Alice Bag, <http://www.alicebag.com/nicolepanterinterview.html>, accessed January 11, 2007.]

³¹ There are many other punk bands that could be discussed here. The Dickies’ obsession with cartoons is chronicled in Michael Salkind, “The Dickies Exposed,” *Truly Needy*, 1984, no. 8, 32. “Forming,” an exhibit about L.A. punk, mentions punk’s affinity for comics. [Claude Bessy, et al., *Forming: The Early Days of L.A. Punk* (Santa Monica, Calif.: Smart Art Press, 1999) 31.] Stiv Bators and Cheetah Chrome of the Dead Boys told an interviewer of their love for John Willie’s “Sweet Gwendoline” erotic comics. [Stiv Bators and Cheetah Chrome, interview by Lee Paris, n.d., <http://deadboys.hypermart.net/>, accessed 2 June, 2002.]

³² Deborah Harry, Chris Stein, and Victor Bockris, *Making Tracks: The Rise of Blondie* (London: Elm Tree Books, 1982; reprint Da Capo, 1998), 29; Blondie, “Rip Her to Shreds,” *Blondie*, Private Stock, 1976.

band's first single, *Hot and Cool* (1976), featured a young man's cartoon face with the angry eyes and other features typical of Japanese incorporated Asian animation styles. Founder and front-man Kim Kane, who spent a significant part of his childhood in Germany, Korea, Burma, and China, came up with the band's name; "slickee boy" was Korean slang for a street tough.³³

The Weirdos of Los Angeles, one of the most publicity-adept bands in punk, used a comic graphic in their best-known image, a cartoon panel of a man speaking to a woman. Dave Trout, the Weirdos' original bassist and a student at California Arts, reworked a comic-strip panel into an homage to their band. Guitarist Cliff Roman (also a student at Cal Arts) recalled, "He used this picture because the actual type in it said, 'Think of it ... a world full of Weirdos.'" The woman responded, "That would be wonderful." Roman continued, "He turned the guy into a punk-rock looking guy." Then Trout and Roman, who "were working at a place where they had access to cameras and silkscreen supplies," photographed the graphic, enlarged it, and "made this calendar out of it" for the year 1978. "We silk-screened it right there. And it became part of our little press kit."³⁴

Punk's appropriation and appreciation of horror and cartoons built on a collector aesthetic many punk rockers brought with them to the subculture. This penchant for collecting was visible in many of the fanzines related to punk. Rock Scene had collectible comics section, as did D.C.'s Truly Needy. Bomp!, Trouser Press, and the New York Rocker all were started by or functioned as music collectors' 'zines. Seymour Stein, founder of Sire records, was a record collector and started the label as a fan. One of the most important

³³ Kane, interview by author, 2002; Slickee Boys, *Hot and Cool*, EP, Dacoit, 1976.

³⁴ Cliff Roman and John Denney, interview by Experience Music Project, 1999, 36-7. Quotes are Roman.

institutions of knowledge exchange in punk was the local, independent record store, which was usually owned and/or frequented by record collectors. For example, Skip Groff, owner of Yesterday and Today Records store in Rockville, Maryland, was a record collector who originally had been “interested in monster movies, and science fiction, and comic books, baseball trading cards.”³⁵ Many of the punks interviewed for this project said they recognized that punk was unique and new as it was happening. Their backgrounds as collectors encouraged them to keep a record of their scenes. Ian MacKaye stated that the Teen Idles’ decision to record what would become Dischord’s first record came out of a wish to document themselves and the scene more than a desire to sell records. Similarly, photographer Jenny Lens reflected: “I always looked at this as something that needed to be documented, and that as many things as I missed, whoof, I sure got a lot of really good stuff that I felt was historically important, culturally, musically, artistically. I felt that the fashions, the hair, the makeup, the whole scene, and especially, as I said, the music and the lyrics, all of it would change our culture.”³⁶

“Find myself a city to live in?”: Punk Responds to Suburbia³⁷

The fact that punks were ready to take an active role in their education meant that finding an alternative to suburbia came easily for many of them. As will be explored more fully in the next chapter (devoted to place and punk), many punk rockers continued a tradition stretching back to turn-of-the-twentieth-century bohemians by viewing the city as a

³⁵ See, for example, “Comics Report,” *Rock Scene*, March 1975, 40; True, *Hey Ho Let’s Go*, 47; Skip Groff, interview by the Experience Music Project, transcript, 1998, 1.

³⁶ MacKaye, interview by author, 2002; Jenny Lens, interview by author, transcript, Santa Monica, Calif., 29 June 2004, 17.

³⁷ Talking Heads, “Cities,” *More Songs about Buildings and Food*, Sire, 1978.

potential site of self-fashioning, a place to go to reinvent themselves. To that end, suburban punk rockers flocked to urban settings, settling in shabby, marginalized districts like New York's Lower East Side and parts of Hollywood. Several punks usually rented an apartment or a house together, making the already cheap rents of the recession-stricken, derelict sections even more affordable.³⁸

Trudie Arguelles, member of the L.A. non-band the Plungers, was one of innumerable punks who moved to the city. She first discovered New York and London punk through magazines, and it energized her: "this new music movement, it really got me excited and I went telling my friends all about it." To immerse herself in the burgeoning L.A. scene of the late 1970s, Arguelles had to leave the South Bay area (southwest Los Angeles County). She moved into a one-bedroom apartment with two friends: "The Plungers were just 3 girlfriends who planned to leave home and move to Hollywood to be near the action." For Arguelles, punk

inspired me, made me feel a part of something and a part of something bigger and more encompassing than just myself. I bloomed during that time into being comfortable with myself and confident that I would be accepted for myself. ... I did feel lucky that I had found and formed a little society with people like me, people who wanted something more, who just didn't fit in.

Living in the city as part of a new subculture, Arguelles was able to re-imagine herself:

"punk was a movement that meant for me rejection of what went before, burning down the past to be born anew, cleaning out the old crap to have new fresh clean music, stripped-down

³⁸ Aimee Cooper rented a duplex apartment on St. Andrews Place in Hollywood with her friend Leslie, whom she met at a Black Flag and Adolescents gig; Cooper described the neighborhood as somewhat run-down. Jet Compton rented a house in North Hollywood with several other people for \$600 per month. [Aimee Cooper, *Coloring Outside the Lines*, 22-8; Skip King, email to author, 26 September 2005.]

to pure joy and emotion. Away with session musicians and production technique, hello to noise and chaos and art! Punk to me was clarity, confrontation, revolution, creativity.”³⁹

Other punks opted for squatting, out of necessity, convenience, or – for a few – as a political statement.⁴⁰ The Los Angeles punk scene had more squatters than New York or Washington, D.C., not a surprising fact given L.A.’s role in a larger runaway circuit. According to geographer Susan Ruddick, “punk squatters living in [Hollywood] between 1976 and 1982 numbered well over two hundred at their peak.” This period coincided with a gap in organized services for homeless youth. Young runaways were “deinstitutionalized” in the mid-1970s, resulting in a massive expulsion of runaways from juvenile facilities, and it took some time for a coherent private service network for homeless youth to emerge. Ruddick, drawing on Dick Hebdige’s theoretical approach in his germinal 1979 book on punk, notes the degree to which homeless L.A. punks sought out spaces that “were *homologous* with the subculture as a whole.” By this she means that punks lived and socialized in spaces that reflected and reinforced their ethos or lifestyle. This homology helps explain why punk rockers, members of a subculture that loved to shock and had a fascination with violence, squatted at the Errol Flynn and Doheny manors, sites renowned for sexcapades (Flynn) and a double murder (Doheny).⁴¹ Similarly, Pleasant Gehman recalled that members of the L.A. glam-punk outfit, the Joneses, “had sort of taken over the Montecito Hotel and were squatting there in a variety of rooms. There was supposed to be a

³⁹ Trudie Arguelles Barrett, email interview by author, 2004.

⁴⁰ San Francisco was known for squatter activism as was the British punk band Crass. Early (ca 1977-79) L.A. squatters published political tracts. [Jeff Goldthorpe “Intoxicated Culture: Punk Symbolism and Punk Protest.” *Socialist Review* 22 (April-June 1992): 49; Susan M. Ruddick, *Young and Homeless in Hollywood: Mapping Social Identities* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 108-10.]

⁴¹ Susan Ruddick, *Young and Homeless*, 94-6, 99-100, 113.

guy guarding the place, but they partied him down one night, and after that, he never bothered them.” The Montecito, with its “cool Murphy beds” and hotel setting, implied holiday festivity, transience, and transgressions and thus fit well with the party-time, escapist aspect of punk rock. “It was like a multistory private playhouse,” according to Gehman.⁴² At the same time, sometimes choices of where to squat had less to do with homology than convenience. After the police repeatedly chased punks out of the manors, squatters found condemned buildings ideal places to squat because no one cared if the punks damaged buildings slated to be demolished. They chose buildings close to established punk hangouts like the Masque and Oki Dogs.

Punks involved in the post-1980 explosion of the subculture did not necessarily have to move into urban areas to find or create the music because the punk community as a whole – while still quite small – had grown much larger. The distribution numbers for Flipside, one of the two leading punk ‘zines of the eighties, lend some perspective here. The first five issues of Flipside (1977) had press runs of three hundred or less; 1978 issues ran four or five hundred. October 1979 was the first issue to have a press run of one thousand; in 1980, they jumped to fifteen hundred (August) and then two thousand (November). Then Flipside ran three thousand December 1981 and four thousand March 1982. In November 1984 distribution reached eight thousand.⁴³ These numbers suggest that by the early 1980s punks were more able to find fellow travelers within their suburban enclaves. Additionally, later punks tended to be younger overall than those involved in the original urban punk scenes and

⁴² Gehman, “Party at Ground Zero Zero,” in Make the Music Go Bang!: The Early L.A. Punk Scene, ed. Don Snowden (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1997), 140. According to Jenny Lens, some of the residents of the Canterbury Apartments were squatters. [Lens, interview by author, 2004.]

⁴³ These numbers are from the Fanzine Database pages by Michelle Flipside, <http://www.flipsidefanzine.com/>, accessed 27 April 2007. Patrick di Puccio stated circulation peaked around 20,000 in 1991. [Interview by author, transcript, Los Angeles, Calif., 21 July 2004, 15.]

thus were less able financially and emotionally to relocate. Also many young suburban punks felt snubbed by, for example, “the Hollywood 50” that had become, according to some, “very in-bred and cliquish.” Mike Watt of San Pedro’s Minutemen observed that he felt “safe enough” around the Hollywood punks, because “they were weirdoes too.” He nonetheless “felt like a foreigner ... like a hick or ... somebody [from] the outside.”

Similarly Hermosa Beach-based Black Flag “wanted to play the L.A. scene, the Hollywood scene, which was very clique-ish.” They could not break into the scene so they “had to go out and find [their] own venues,” according to Keith Morris.⁴⁴ Scenes across the country replicated these insider cliques. Suburban punks of the second wave continued punk’s earlier critique of the suburbs; indeed they were the most vocal critics of all. But instead of leaving the suburbs to find or reinvent themselves in the city, they – by choice or necessity – shook things up where they stood. According to some suburban punks, they – not the “Hollywood 50” – were the more authentic punks because the newer group was less concerned with fashion and “art-damaged” music (a term used to refer to some of the more intellectual, art-school influenced music and art that emerged from the early L.A. scene).⁴⁵

Punk rockers’ attacks on suburbia – by both those who migrated and those who stayed – reflected not only their boredom and their dismissal of middle-class symbols of success but also some anxiety about their fiscal future during a dismal economic present. Through much of the 1970s and early 1980s, the United States wrestled with stagflation, a demoralizing combination of soaring inflation, minimal economic growth, and high

⁴⁴ Mike Watt, interview by the Experience Music Project, transcript, episode 9949-B, 1999, 9; Keith Morris, interview by the Experience Music Project, transcript, 1998, 4.

⁴⁵ Dewar MacLeod discusses the issue of authenticity in the increasingly fragmented world of Los Angeles punk ca. 1979-1980 in “Kids of the Black Hole’: Youth Culture in Postsuburbia,” (Ph.D. diss, City University of New York, 1998), 144-51.

unemployment. Inflation peaked at an astonishing 13.5 percent in 1980 (compared to 1.3 percent in 1964, 5.7 percent in 1970, and 3.6 percent in 1985). In 1975, unemployment reached 8.5 percent, its highest point since the Great Depression, then improved over the rest of the decade only to skyrocket again to 9.6 percent in 1983. Additionally, unemployed people found themselves unemployed for longer periods than had their counterparts of earlier postwar decades. Perhaps punk rockers' attacks on "suburban robots" and the tracts on which they lived reflected punks' unacknowledged realizations that they might not be able to achieve the standard of living their parents had attained. From 1970 to 1980, the median home value in the United States increased from \$17,000 to \$47,200, the largest jump of any decade in the twentieth century. Even adjusting for inflation, that represented a jump of almost thirty percent. Meanwhile income in the same period increased only about ten percent. Similarly, during the fifties and sixties, a thirty-year-old man spent about fifteen to eighteen percent of his income on the principal and interest portion of his mortgage payments; his counterpart in 1983 spent about forty percent of his paycheck on the same expenses.⁴⁶

"I DON'T WANT YOUR RECYCLED TRASH": PUNK ALTERNATIVES TO MASS CULTURE

⁴⁶ Michael French, U.S. Economic History since 1945 (Manchester, Eng.: Manchester University Press), 45-6; James T. Patterson, Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 783-6; Elliott West, Growing up in Twentieth-Century America: A History and Reference Guide (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996), 262. Regarding the quoted home values: "These values refer to owner-occupied, single-family residences. On less than ten acres without a business or medical office on the property." [U.S. Census Bureau, "Historical Census of Housing Tables: Home Values," <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/housing/census/historic/values.html>, last revised 2 December 2004.] What cost \$17,000 in 1970 would, due to inflation, cost \$33,723 in 1980. Mean family income was \$11,106 in 1970 and \$23,974 in 1980. In 2005 dollars, those values represented \$48,353 and \$53,795 respectively. [U.S. Census Bureau, Historical Income Tables – Families, table F-5. Race and Hispanic Origin of Householder-Families by Median and Mean Income: 1947 to 2005, <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/income/histinc/f05.html>, last revised 7 March 2007.]

Just as punks offered alternatives to family, education, and suburbia, they created substitutes for popular sartorial trends, as had generations of cultural rebels before them. In fact, one of the most important points of departure for punks regarding clothing came from the most recent episode of cultural rebellion: the laid-back hippie/post-hippie style of the 1970s. John Denney: “The first rule [of punk] was don’t do what has already been done. That’s easy; no bell-bottoms, no shags.” As will be discussed in depth in chapter 5, punks held deeply ambivalent views of hippies, loudly proclaiming disdain for the counterculture while simultaneously building on its legacy. Punks vilified hippies, in part, because punks believed the counterculture had entered the mainstream by the mid-1970s. Darby Crash of the Germs decried this trend: “I want a future that’s not in the past/ I don’t want your recycled trash...kill it!” in the song “Street Dreams.”⁴⁷ Crash and many other punks believed the 1960s counterculture had been commercialized. They shrewdly, therefore, seemed to adopt looks that would defy cooptation (or “recycling”). Punks’ prickly hair, chains, and studded outfits seemed to say, “I dare you, Madison Avenue, to attempt to swallow and regurgitate us.”

Punk clothing tended to reflect the subculture’s confrontational message and fascination with the darker side of life. John Doe of the L.A. band X observed, “The hippies had anger, but we saw them as kind of running away from things” by this time. Conversely, “the punk scene was confrontational; we thought of hippies as weak.”⁴⁸ In the post-Vietnam, post-Watergate 1970s, punks found the ubiquitous bright-yellow smiley faces and “Keep On

⁴⁷ John Denney quoted in Jonny Whiteside, “The Weirdos: American Barbarians,” *LA Weekly*, 5-11 December 2003; <http://www.speakeasy.net/~btanaka/weird.world.web/articles/laweekly03/>, accessed June 1, 2004; Germs, “Street Dreams,” *Germicide: Live at the Whisky*, ROIR bootleg, 1981.

⁴⁸ John Doe quoted in Claude Bessy et al., eds., *Forming: The Early Days of L.A. Punk* (Santa Monica: Smart Art Press, 1999), 87.

Truckin’” bumper stickers absurd. Instead of mellow paisley and cheerful flowers, punks adopted black leather and metal spikes; instead of natural flowing hair and clear, tan skin, punks sported cropped locks, pale skin, and macabre or menacing make-up. These were dark, angry expressions for a dark, uneasy era. Punks were not content with the escapism of disco fantasy fashion or the blue-jean earthiness of soft rock. Instead their fashions were meant to confront. Even in their visage, they wanted to make their contemporaries think about the fact that, in their view, the world was going to hell in a hand-basket.

Black leather was not the only sartorial choice of punks. Some punks chose the simplicity of straight-leg jeans and plain T-shirts as an oppositional statement to the hippie attire of bell-bottoms, fringe, and lace or the disco get-ups of glitter and spandex. Indeed punks often commented on how difficult it was to find straight-leg or black jeans in punk’s early days; sometimes they sewed their bell-bottoms into straight-legs. Other punks opted for a thrift-store chic that could be molded into many looks: bohemian, goth, mod, or just plain eclectic. This affinity for thrift-store clothing represented one of the more explicit ways punks reconfigured consumerism. They were, in historian Michel de Certeau’s terms creative “poachers,” who made consumption an active process, a secondary form of production in which they used or reused spaces or commodities in unique ways. By these means, although they did not escape the dominant cultural economy, they refashioned it to their own ends.⁴⁹ Thrift-store chic allowed punks a significant means of self-fashioning, as L.A. punk roadie Seal remembered, “We so carefully cultivated our looks, whether it was

⁴⁹ Roberta Bayley discusses the difficulty of finding black jeans in True, *Hey Ho Let’s Go*, 49-50. On the popularity of thrift stores, see, for example, Exene Cervenka, interview by the Experience Music Project, transcript, Los Angeles, Calif., 29 April 1998, 1; Cooper, *Coloring Outside the Lines*, 33; Steve Alba and Duane Peters, interview by the Experience Music Project, transcript, 1999, 15; John Denney and Cliff Roman, interview by the EMP, 1999, 16-7; Ron Emery, interview by the Experience Music Project, transcript, 1999, 9; and Di Puccio, interview by author, 2004, 7. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), xii-xiii.

day-glo, spikes, our hair, our thrift store clothes!” John Denney and the Weirdos spent hours remaking thrift store finds: “We bought all these clothes, spray paint and colored electricians’ tape. We’d get together three hours before each show and put on the war paint. We’d use anything. Staples. Paint splatter. But we shaped it into a cool look, a sort of continental leisure look.”⁵⁰ Punks also (re)used clothing as celebrations of the elements of “trash” culture, including horror and cartoons. Cramps guitarist Poison Ivy Rorschach wore rubber snakes in her hair while performing. The B-52’s and the Stilettos combed thrift stores for looks reminiscent of 1960s girl groups. And the Go-Go’s wore day-glo colors that evoked pop art of the sixties.

Although punk fashion began as eclectic, individualistic protests against mainstream fashion and mass consumerism, over time, a limited range of established punk styles emerged, much to the dismay of many more open-minded punks. Certain manners of dress, popular among the branches of punk that would become known as “New Wave” came to be seen as too “soft” to be punk. Thus “true” punk men tended to adopt a skinhead style (shaved head, straight-leg jeans, a plain white or band T-shirt, and engineer boots or Doc Martens) or a British street-punk look (Mohawks or Liberty spikes, customized leather jackets, jeans or bondage pants, band T-shirts, and Doc Martens). Women had a little more freedom than their male counterparts in punk. They could choose a feminine version of the male skinhead or street-punk styles, anything that involved lots of black clothing and stark make-up, or a look that married sexuality and intimidation. Eventually stores, such as Washington, D.C.’s Commander Salamander, popped up to take advantage of the growing

⁵⁰ Seal, interview by Alice Bag, <http://www.alicebag.com/sealinterview.html>, March 2005, accessed 11 January 2007; John Denney quoted in Mark Addy, “Weirder than Thou,” *LA Weekly*, vol. 2, no. 13, 29 February-6 March 1980, 91. See also, John Denney, interview for the EMP, 1999, 16-7.

exposure punk received in the mainstream media, especially, of course, the tamer versions of punk that made it onto MTV.⁵¹

Punk styles became increasingly rigid as time passed, and some punks chafed at the limitations, the “strict conformity of Punk Rock's non-conformist manifesto,” as the southern California band Channel 3 put it recently.⁵² If individuality was “the key” to being punk, i.e., breaking away from the mainstream and asserting one’s uniqueness, couldn’t a “non-punk” action, if done within a punk subculture, be an expression of punkness? Jack Grisham, front man for T.S.O.L., and John Stabb, singer for the D.C. band Government Issue [G.I.], would have said yes. But their careers and actions illustrate the tensions such “non-punk” actions could cause. T.S.O.L. (short for True Sounds of Liberty) was a California hardcore band with a growing national profile among punkers in the early 1980s. Stabb, who played a show with T.S.O.L. at the 9:30 Club in D.C., admired the way Grisham tried to shake up the punk-rock fundamentalists, those who had come to view true punk rock as only that which provided a harder-faster-louder sonic assault by punks with shaved heads and Doc Martens (i.e., hardcore). In a 1998 interview Stabb recalled the D.C. show: “I remember [Grisham] just dressing up and try[ing] to irritate people; he was wearing this goofy horror make up ... and clothing. At that time D.C. people were really ... anal, in a way, about their musical images and everything, and they thought that T.S.O.L. were these glam fags. You know:

⁵¹ The skinhead style grew out of a branch of the British mod subculture of the late-1960s and early-1970s that embraced a working-class ethos and look. Skinheads, some of whom would go on to become flagrant white supremacist, ironically originally drew on both white working-class and West-Indian immigrant culture in England in the late-1960s. [Hebdige, *Subculture*, 54-9.] The street-punk look originated with English Oi! bands of the late 1970s like the Cockney Rejects and the Business and reached its apotheosis in the 1980s with the Exploited. Both Oi and skinhead bands tended to sing about working class culture and politics, drinking, street life, and police brutality. By the mid-1980s, a number of network TV shows, including *21 Jumpstreet* (1987) *Quincy* and *CHiPs* (both in 1982) had episodes about punks, usually depicting them as violent, criminally inclined thugs.

⁵² Channel 3, “In the Beginning,” <http://www.chthree.com/story.html>, accessed 25 April 2007.

‘why did they change their image from political hardcore to this horror-rock thing when they came out with this album called *Dance with Me?*’” Stabb, on the other hand, was inspired: “I thought it was great. ... I just knew that I wanted to go out there and just try to irritate the human eye with whatever I could pick up, wardrobe wise.” Stabb purposefully chose hippie clothes for his next tour with G.I.: “I was wearing all this 60’s [stuff], like Brian Jones striped pants, and this little plastic peace medallion, and, big frilly clown-type shirt; it’s got a big polka dots on it, and my engineer boots to be punk rock. I remember when we played ..., a lot of people just kind of were weirded out.”⁵³

While sartorial labors were perhaps the most visible way punks challenged mass culture, the heart of their efforts railed against the popular music industry. Punks’ initial efforts to find a voice or gratification in popular music were simultaneously endeavors to modify or revitalize the music industry. They gunned for large-scale change, hoping to reinvigorate a broad rock ‘n’ roll community. For example, Claude “Kickboy Face” Bessy, founder of the L.A. fanzine Slash, rallied the troops in 1977 in an opening editorial salvo entitled “So This is War, Eh?” He, like many other early punk rockers hoped that “punks [would] set this rat-infested industry on fire.” Similarly, Alan Betrock, founder of the *New York Rocker*, wanted punk to rejuvenate rock, a “diseased” industry, lamenting in 1977, “If TV is America’s vast wasteland, then radio is its polluted waterway: stagnant, murky, diseased, and ultimately useless. Radio was once alive with energy and innovation, breaking new acts and records every day.... Now like the record companies ... the stations are ruled by the big business syndrome.”⁵⁴

⁵³ John Stabb, interview by the Experience Music Project, transcript, 1998, 18.

⁵⁴ Claude Bessy, “So This is War, Eh?” Slash, vol 1, no 1, May 1977; Alan Betrock, “The Sad State of Radio and What to do About It,” New York Rocker, vol 1, no 8, July-Aug 1977, 14.

Early punks thought the best way to bring about change in the industry was by getting better music (i.e., their music) heard by industry executives and the American public. Many initial punk bands made no bones about their aspirations to lucrative deals with major record labels. They hoped their contributions, the “new wave,” would rescue the rock industry from itself. A 1975 Ramones flyer read: “The Ramones are not an oldies group, they are not a glitter group, they don’t play boogie music and they don’t play the blues. The Ramones are an original Rock and Roll group of 1975, and their songs are brief, to the point and every one a potential hit single.”⁵⁵ The text of the flyer demonstrates the degree to which the Ramones and the music that would become known as punk did not fit into – and did not attempt to fit into – the contemporary lexicon of rock. And yet, the Ramones thought they had many “a potential hit single” that would help reconfigure the music. Their revved-up minimalism went over well in the U.K., where they were treated like stars during their summer 1976 tour, and they scored a Top-30 U.K. hit with “Sheena Is a Punk Rocker” in 1977. But the Ramones fared less well at home; of their first three albums only two singles, “Sheena” and “Rockaway Beach,” crept onto Billboard’s Hot 100, and those managed only the chart’s lower reaches.⁵⁶

A few bands that fell under the early (and initially rather large) assemblage of punk did find commercial success in the late 1970s. Blondie, the Talking Heads, and the Go-Go’s achieved the greatest success, and all fell within the spectrum of punk that embraced pop, a

⁵⁵ Flyer shown in True, Hey Ho Let’s Go, 46.

⁵⁶ Tommy Ramone described their treatment in the UK in 1976 in True, Hey Ho Let’s Go, 64-9. Colin Larkin, ed., “Ramones,” in Virgin Encyclopedia of Popular Music, 3rd ed. (London, Virgin, 1999), 1017; Patricia Romanowski and Holly George-Warren, eds., “Ramones,” The New Rolling Stone Encyclopedia of Rock and Roll (New York: Fireside, 1995), 812. The Weirdos hoped for a major-label deal. Denny, interview by the EMP, 1999, 5.

subgenre that eventually would become known as new wave. Blondie, who like the Ramones made their commercial ambitions clear, did well in Britain with their second album, especially with the single “Denis” (1977) a song that also garnered them a Grammy in the United States. *Parallel Lines* (1978), their third LP, yielded the single “Heart of Glass,” which went number one in April 1979 and grabbed another Grammy. But it was three number one hits in 1980 and 1981 (“Call Me” from the soundtrack of the movie *American Gigolo*; “The Tide is High” and “Rapture” off their fifth album *Autoamerican*) that truly rocketed the band into American stardom. The Talking Heads, like the Ramones, signed to Sire Records (a large independent label) and released *Talking Heads: 77* (1977). They achieved critical acclaim and modest commercial success with their first five albums before selling over one million copies of *Speaking in Tongues* (1983), containing the #9 hit “Burning Down the House.” The Go-Go’s started out as “classic L.A. punk rock,” with a “lot of angry lyrics and stuff” but “evolved more and more into ... more of a pop band” and achieved a number one album with *Beauty and the Beat* (1981). The band’s bassist, Kathy Valentine, reflected on the band’s hard work and twelve-hour days in the studio, believing it all worthwhile because: “we wanted a hit record – we didn’t want a flop debut album like a lot of other band [sic] we’ve seen.”⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Blondie, *Plastic Letters*, Chrysalis, 1977; *Parallel Lines*, Chrysalis, 1978; *Autoamerican*, Chrysalis, 1980. [“Blondie,” in *The New Rolling Stone Encyclopedia of Rock and Roll*, eds. Patricia Romanowski and Holly George-Warren (New York: Rolling Stone Press, 1995), 89.] “Talking Heads Albums,” <http://www.talking-heads.net/albums.html>, accessed 21 April 2007; “Billboard Hot 100,” *Billboard*, 22 October 1983, 72; Jane Wiedlin, interview by the Experience Music Project, transcript, 1999, 14; Go-Go’s, *Beauty and the Beat*, IRS, 1981; Chris Lamson, “The Go-Go’s talk of ‘Beauty and the Beat’ – the summer release for 1981,” *D.I.Y. The Do-It-Yourself New Music Magazine*, Manhattan Beach, Calif., no. 7, July 1981, 21.

“Be More Than a Witness”: Localism

Blondie, Talking Heads, and the Go-Go's were the exception rather than the rule in punk. Their mainstream success raised the hopes of some of their peers, but few would follow in their footsteps. The L.A. band X chronicled punk musicians' frustrations in their song "The Unheard Music" on *Los Angeles* (1980), the first release by the newly founded independent label Slash: "We're locked outside the public eye/ Some smooth chords on the car radio/ No hard chords on the car radio."⁵⁸ Three years later, after some deserved critical acclaim and signing to Elektra, X was still frustrated, as they revealed in "I Must Not Think Bad Thoughts." The song listed "the facts we hate," including attention reaped by British new-wave music in the U.S. (a phenomenon some music critics called "the second British invasion"), while American punk bands, such as those mentioned in the song, remained unheard: "I hear the radio is finally gonna play 'new music'/ You know, the 'British invasion'/ But what about the Minutemen, Flesh Eaters, DOA, Big Boys and the Black Flag?/ Will the last American band to get played on the radio/ Please bring the flag? Please bring the flag!" This frustration led most punks to abandon broad reform efforts and try to find fulfillment in DIY alternatives to the established rock industry. This more circumscribed vision of reform paralleled a broadly held sense of diminished possibilities in the seventies and early eighties.⁵⁹

Punk rock's DIY output challenged one of the dominant paradigms of twentieth-century American culture. According to historian Warren Susman and others, one of the

⁵⁸ X, "The Unheard Music," *Los Angeles*, Slash, 1980.

⁵⁹ X, "I Must Not Think Bad Thoughts," *More Fun in the New World*, Elektra, 1983; Stephen Paul Miller, *The Seventies Now: Culture as Surveillance* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999), 1.

larger stories of the mid-twentieth century was a shift from a “producer-capitalist culture” in which the producer of goods was celebrated to a “culture of abundance” in which the consumer was valued.⁶⁰ Punk rock, however, emerged in an era of fiscal uncertainty, when the culture of abundance seemed either economically impossible or morally bankrupt. Instead of faith in a culture of abundance, punk rock relied on a DIY mentality that questioned the idea that an individual contributes to society more through his/her role as a consumer than a producer. This DIY ethos dovetailed with punks’ anger and frustration at their inability to break into or transform mainstream rock, making them all the more determined to make music, art, and their own community. John Denney of the Weirdos, recalled, “We naively thought that we would actually land a record deal. And make a whole lot of dough. How sadly mistaken we were. I guess by their standards, we weren’t good enough. So be it. By 1978, punk rock in L.A. was an all out war. A music war, a call to arms. And the enemy was everywhere.”⁶¹ The most notable outgrowths of punk’s war on mass consumerism were independent fanzines, record labels, and clubs.

Fanzines were the first DIY punk institution to emerge. Punks would not have wanted to admit it, but one of the counterculture’s bequests to its successor was the expansion of the underground press. Author Laurence Leamer sees the roots of the sixties underground press in The Masses and other writings by middle-class radical intellectuals of the early twentieth century. And indeed the underground press of the 1960s reflected an attempt to portray a “reality [that] was everybody’s” “instead of reality being fed downward

⁶⁰ Warren Susman, Culture as History: the Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century (New York: Pantheon, 1984), xix-xxx. Liz Cohen argues that consumerism is the central story of post-World War II America. [Lizabeth Cohen, A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 7-8.

⁶¹ Denney, interview by the EMP, 1999, 5. There was a 1981 film and LP entitled *Urgh, a Music War*, featuring live performances by about twenty punk and new wave bands from the U.S. and the U.K.

from the top.” That populist impulse, a legacy of the 1960s and earlier, was the most important intellectual element of punk publications. According to Stephen Duncombe, underground ‘zines embody “a radically democratic and participatory ideal of what culture and society might be.” Punk ‘zines represented an everyman’s (everypunk’s) alternative to the established music press of the day, which initially devoted little space to punk.⁶² While the example of the 1960s underground press was important to punk zinesters, it also helped in more concrete ways. Of the little attention given to early punk by established papers, much came from publications that originated in the alternative press of the 1960s: the Village Voice in New York and the Unicorn Times in Washington, D.C., for example. Additionally, later papers like the LA Weekly (founded 1978) and D.C.’s City Paper (founded 1981) were modeled in part on publications like the Voice and the Unicorn Times; these later weeklies offered a bit more coverage for punk than that seen from the established music critics of the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, and the Washington Post.

The motivation behind many punk fanzines, especially the earliest ones, was a belief that the more mainstream publications, including Rolling Stone and local newspapers, were

⁶² Laurence Leamer, The Paper Revolutionaries: The Rise of the Underground Press (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972). Leamer is best known for his books The Kennedy Men (2001) and The Kennedy Women (1994); quote is Thomas King Forcade, ed. Underground Press Anthology, (New York: Ace Books, 1972), 7; Stephen Duncombe, Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture (London: Verso, 1997), 2. The Village Voice began in October 1955, founded by Norman Mailer, Jerry Tollmer, Daniel Wolf, John Wilcock, and Ed Fancher. [Leamer, The Paper Revolutionaries, 21; Robert J. Glessing, The Underground Press in America (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970, 13.) Unicorn Times was first published in 1973 and focused predominantly on folk, southern rock, blues, and bluegrass. Early on it seemed targeted toward musicians and people involved (or who want to be involved) in the music business. [Unicorn Times, 1973-80, Washington, D.C. public library.] Certain writers for mainstream newspapers came to cover punk and helped legitimate the music. John Doe of the band X cites the importance to punk of mainstream reporters: “Without the L.A. Times (i.e., Richard Cromelin and Kristine McKenna) finally paying attention to a club scene that had been missing for so long, it would have died.” [John Doe quoted in Bessy et al, eds., Forming, 89.] By 1977 Robert Hilburn also started to include punk in his journalism for the Los Angeles Times. Richard Harrington, music critic for the Washington Post, began coverage of national punk or new wave bands like the Ramones and Blondie by 1977 but devoted little space to local punk until 1980. [See, for example, Richard Harrington, “Ramones: Empty Punk,” Washington Post, 13 October 1977, sec. B, p. 6; and “The Urban Verbs: Future Tense, Washington’s Former Basement Band Bursts Into the Big Time,” Washington Post, 2 March 1980, sec H, p. 1.

not giving local music scenes (and what would become known as punk rock) their due. For example, the avid music fan and record collector Alan Betrock founded the New York Rocker because he “thought it’d be important for [the New York bands] to get coverage.” Betrock described his goal: “When I did New York Rocker ... I thought the important thing was to get those New York bands known and publicized and signed and on the way...”⁶³ His first issue in February 1976 included features on the Ramones, Wayne County, Talking Heads, the Miamis, Blondie, Patti Smith, and the Heartbreakers, all part of the CBGB crowd. Scene insiders authored many of the articles, and thus the magazine was “at this stage more about propaganda than perspective.”⁶⁴ For the first year, Betrock and his writers devoted the vast majority of the magazine to supporting and promoting the burgeoning New York scene. And their “propaganda” had results; by 1976 several of the early New York bands signed to established record labels, and the Talking Heads and Blondie went on to have major hits. In part because he thought he had accomplished what he had set out to do, in the spring of 1977 Betrock turned the Rocker over to Andy Schwartz, who expanded coverage to include punk and new wave bands outside New York.⁶⁵

Another motivation behind punk ‘zines was the desire – on the part of the editors, writers, and photographers – to have a voice in popular music, to have a say in what mattered and how it should be covered. Just as many punks believed rock and roll had become an overblown parody of itself, full of twenty-minute drum solos and superstar excesses, they

⁶³ Betrock quoted in Clinton Heylin, From the Velvets to the Voidoids: The Birth of American Punk Rock, 2d ed. (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2005), 243, 244.

⁶⁴ Heylin, Velvets to the Voidoids, 243.

⁶⁵ Blondie signed to Private Stock, Talking Heads and the Ramones to Sire. Blondie was the most commercially successful of the early New York punk bands, with a number one U.S. hit by 1979. The Talking Heads eventually had top-40 albums in 1978 and beyond. Andy Schwartz, interview by author, transcript, New York, N.Y., 25 June 2002, 1.

also believed that rock “criticism [had] bec[o]me this high art form, and bands had gotten very over the top and taken themselves way too seriously,” in the words of Patrick (Pooch) Di Puccio. Pooch’s friend Al Flipside observed, “We had seen fanzines from England (Sniffin' Glue, Ripped & Torn) that covered their local underground, and were determined to do the same service to our scene which, at the time, lacked a real punk-directed publication. (Slash not having it's first issue out at Flipside's inception, but did beat us to the presses!)” Pooch, Al Flipside, and three of their friends Tory, X-8, and Larry Lash wanted to “cut everything down to basics” by founding the fanzine Flipside, which they first published in the summer of 1977. Their record reviews consisted not of “high art” but of verbatim transcriptions of their reflections while listening to a record. Pooch: “We’d just listen to the records, and rent the tape recorder, and we just transcribed what we said. And it might not even have anything to do with the record. We might just talk about the cover. We might talk about ... some girl one of the guys had gone out with or something like that. And we just transcribed that.”⁶⁶ The magazine’s style thus reflected the democratic aesthetic prevalent in punk.

The Flipside gang, located as they were in Whittier, California, between downtown Los Angeles and Anaheim, had a different perspective than the hip “Hollywood 50.” According to Pooch, the ‘zine “was very middle America, very uncool, and wonderfully so. Very naïve in certain things. [We thought,] ‘yeah, sure, let’s do this because we don’t see things the same way as someone from the west side of town and someone who’s around all the clubs and stuff like that.’” Flipside went on to become one of the two most important punk ‘zines (together with San Francisco-based MaximumRocknroll) of the 1980s, with a

⁶⁶ Di Puccio, interview by author, 2004; Al Flipside offered an overview of the inception of the fanzine in Flipside’s tenth anniversary issue.

circulation that peaked around twenty thousand in the early 1990s. Despite its eventual status, Flipside began nitty-gritty DIY; its first issue, July/August 1977, consisted of four hand-typed 8 1/2" x 11" sheets of paper. It was photocopied at "some little Xerox store," then folded in the middle to make sixteen small pages and stapled together. For the first issue, the Flipside guys "put twenty-five copies together, and ... sold them for a quarter" and found their first "distributor" in Lovell's record store in their hometown of Whittier. They had discovered a way to be active participants in the punk scene and to offer a different perspective. Pooch: "It [was] a way to get in to see bands for free. You get free products. ... really we did it just because we saw things differently."⁶⁷

Flipside's recognition that they "saw things differently," suggests that their efforts to find a voice in the popular culture of the day grew at least in part out of their sense of localism. They recognized that living in Whittier, California meant that their experiences with music were different than fans living in Hollywood, New York, or London. And they believed that this perspective was not only valid but valuable. Furthermore, while Betrock and others initially hoped punk would cure, a "diseased" industry, the Flipside gang was content to move in smaller circles, with smaller goals. They represented a larger trend within the subculture, in which punks gradually discarded (or never took up) a fantasy of transforming rock as a whole. Instead they focused on building an underground community of producers and consumers that could exist outside the structures and strictures of mainstream rock. This change in strategy involved corresponding prescriptions about consumerism: a shift to an ethic that increasingly rewarded localism and face-to-face production and consumption. According to Jello Biafra, singer for California punk rockers

⁶⁷ Di Puccio, interview by author, 2004. A website run by "Michelle Flipside," a Flipside contributor for many years, states the original issue's press run at one hundred copies. [Flipsidefanzine.com: the Official Memorial Website, <http://www.flipsidefanzine.com/Framespage.html>, accessed 28 September 2007.]

the Dead Kennedys, “Back in the late ‘70s and early ‘80s, a lot of bands changed punk rock for themselves from the media circus started by Malcolm McLaren and the Sex Pistols to something more personal and local, more about experimentation and tolerance. ... DIY, do it yourself, was in the air.”⁶⁸ Los Angeleno David Alan Brown took matters into his own hands after sharing the frustration of American punks everywhere who were unable to secure record deals even after seeing “the English musicians ... set upon by some of the top producers in the business.” Brown used his aggravation to co-found the independent label Dangerhouse Records in the summer of 1977. The three owners, Brown, Pat Garrett, and Black Randy, explicitly set out to release local music, and tellingly their first single’s B-side was entitled “Let’s Get Rid of New York,” a scathing appraisal of New Yorkers’ cultural haughtiness.⁶⁹

Punk spokespeople envisioned and encouraged a self-supporting community whose members both produced and consumed its cultural expressions. In 1978 Californian Greg Shaw, editor and owner of the fanzine and record label *Bomp!*, suggested it was time to “admit to ourselves that it’s too late for revolutionary rhetoric ... and get back to just having a good time.... We can support one another’s efforts.” A few months later Shaw clarified his position further, seeing new wave as potentially being “a permanent, self-supporting and self-protective microcosm within the overall rock industry.” He believed the rock “industry [wa]s too powerful” to revolutionize *in toto*, therefore “it comes down to the need for us to strengthen the underground culture on which rock and roll depends, to act as watchdogs and

⁶⁸ Jello Biafra quoted in Bryan Ray Turcotte and Christopher T. Miller, eds., Fucked Up + Photocopied: Instant Art of the Punk Rock Movement (Madera, Calif.: Gingko Press, 1999), 8.

⁶⁹ David Brown, “Dangerhouse,” liner notes to *Dangerhouse Volume 1*, Frontier, 1991.

offer alternatives to the industry. ...we must become protectors of an endangered life form.”⁷⁰ In other words, it was enough to produce quality ‘zines and records for the faithful few, and the community could be viable if everyone supported each other. Punks began to envision a permanent underground.

In addition to focusing on local bands and underground music, punks saw live shows in small, intimate settings as one of the primary methods by which to make music more personally fulfilling. Furthermore, the corporeal immediacy of punk shows contributed to one of punk’s most important cultural statements: its challenge to divisions between artist and audience, producer and consumer. According to Keith Morris, front man for the Circle Jerks and original singer for Black Flag, “We had a scenario where there were no walls between us and the people that came to see us. Our basic vibe was ‘we’re just like you, only we’re up here; we’re making noise.’ You know, ‘You can do it. Tomorrow go start your own band.’” One of the most visible ways punk broke down walls between artist and audience was stage diving, a ritual involving one of two actions: either an audience member pulled himself onto the stage, then threw himself back into the pit to be caught, hopefully, by fellow slam dancers; or a band member catapulted himself into the crowd, sometimes carrying the microphone or guitar with him and continuing the song. Either way, audience members themselves became part of the spectacle and thereby performed their belonging to the group. According to photographer Glen Friedman, “it was ... kind of like the door was open when you saw that you could actually step on the stage, you know, during the show, without there being a problem.” Morris describes this connection and sense of community in his account of playing at the Outhouse near Lawrence, Kansas, a “[l]ittle blue brick building

⁷⁰ Greg Shaw, “New Wave Goodbye?” New York Rocker, [no month given, Aug?] 1978, 35; and Greg Shaw, “The Beat,” Bomp!, vol. 4, no. 4 January 1979, 6.

in the middle of the corn fields”: “there were people all over ... the stage. And it was wonderful; it was great. It was like one vibe.”⁷¹

“Jamming Econo”: A New Music Industry

The way punks created opportunities for their music to be heard in live settings illustrated their intense need to be more than passive consumers of popular culture. With punk they began to find and create a voice; when it turned out that most of America could care less, punks remained undaunted. They established ongoing (but usually short-lived) DIY venues like the Outhouse in Kansas, the Masque, the Church, the Vex, and Godzilla’s in southern California, Madam’s Organ and the Wilson Center in D.C., and 171A and A7 in New York City. Many “promoters” were young punks who weren’t in it for the money but did what they did so their band or friends would have a place to gather and play music. According to Ken Waagner, a Detroit promoter, “What I did just needed to be done – never with a thought of the bottom line. Every once in a while I’d have a show I’d make 500 bucks on, but the next week I’d lose 300.” Punks expected the “professionals,” those who did turn a profit, to have modest economic aspirations, and they policed the scene with their dollars. Waagner noted, “The whole entrepreneurial spirit was amazing. The networking was amazing. If a promoter was bad, word traveled fast.” Many shows were one-offs, organized on the fly by inexperienced young enthusiasts who often found themselves and their fans banned after one gig by owners who finally realized what the punks were about. Steven Blush remembers being “a 19-year-old getting up shows in DC, it was all very primitive: no

⁷¹ Glen Friedman, interview for the Experience Music Project, transcript, 1999, 23; Keith Morris, interview by the EMP, 1998, 16.

liability insurance, liquor permits, bonded security.... When someone inevitably trashed the bathroom or tore out the plumbing, it was time to find a new hall.”⁷²

Individual punks’ willingness to be “promoters” at little or no profit hints at the way punks began to re-conceive capitalism. Punks did not necessarily reject consumerism or materialism, *per se*; what they could not abide was mindless or soulless materialism: pursuing the commercial trappings of the middle-class American dream because it was the anticipated path. Punk rockers repeatedly sang about breaking free from the constraints of middle-class expectations. As Circle Jerks singer Keith Morris sang: “Won’t fit, can’t conform ... Renegades with nothing left to save/ There’s no tomorrow; there’s no today/ No reward stands in our way/ Got a high price on our heads.”⁷³ By choosing not to conform, Morris opts for a lifestyle in which “no reward stands in [his] way.” In other words, by giving up the rat race and reclaiming the time and energy required to achieve the material “rewards” of the American dream, he chose a life with more freedom.

Punks varied in the extent to which they were conscious of their efforts to create a new version of capitalism. Some punks wrestled overtly with the ramifications of doing business in an alternative subculture. A 1983 article describes the owner of D.C.-based WASP records, Bill Asp: “That his means are capitalistic is, for Asp, no issue ... a contradiction which can only be resolved by another definition.”⁷⁴ In other words, Asp recognized that his *modus operandi* was capitalism, but he wanted a new name or understanding of it. The phrase permanent underground comes to mind.

⁷² Ken Waagner, quoted in Blush, American Hardcore, 276-7; for details of a Dead Kennedys show promoted by Blush, see Andersen and Jenkins, Dance of Days, 142-3. The D.C. fire marshal threatened to close the show because Blush lacked the necessary permits and had oversold the venue.

⁷³ Circle Jerks, “High Price on Our Heads,” *Golden Shower of Hits*, LAX, 1983.

⁷⁴ Jeff Zeldman, “Noise Gate,” City Paper, 6-12 May 1983, vol. 3, no. 17, 9.

Asp and others like him in the punk/new wave subcultures of the early 1980s were beginning to be able to operate as a permanent underground because a national or international network was becoming solidified. Local institutions with regional, national, or international influence – fanzines, record labels, and radio shows, especially college radio – linked clubs and bands in far-flung U.S. cities. D.I.Y., “The Do-It-Yourself New Music Magazine,” illustrated this development. A professionally published magazine, established in 1981 in Manhattan Beach, California, it printed lists of record stores, clubs, and radio stations around the United States that supported underground rock and had columns on various punk scenes including Toronto, New York City, Los Angeles, and Cleveland.⁷⁵ Similar lists, albeit in a less organized manner, appeared in smaller, more amateur fanzines as well. Thus by the early 1980s, punks with DIY impulses had increasing access to information on how to create a foothold in the underground.

The emergence of a national touring circuit was key in establishing a permanent underground. As Tim Kerr of Austin’s Big Boys stated, “Every state had a scene ... and every scene was individual, and all this stuff was connected by all of us.” This network, ushered in by punks, would eventually serve a number of musical subcultures that solidified in punk’s wake, including indie rock. The bands most often credited with pioneering a punk touring circuit are Black Flag, D.O.A. (Vancouver), and the Dead Kennedys (San Francisco). Other trailblazers included the Circle Jerks (L.A.), the Big Boys (Austin), the Minutemen (San Pedro), the Meat Puppets (Phoenix), and Hüsker Dü (Minneapolis).⁷⁶ These bands

⁷⁵ D.I.Y. The Do-It-Yourself New Music Magazine, no. 7, July 1981, 3-20; Holly Cecelia Kruse, “Marginal Formations and the Production of Culture: The Case of College Music,” (Ph.D. diss, University of Illinois, 1995).

⁷⁶ Tim Kerr quoted in Parker, Turned On, 61, 78; Michael Azerrad, Our Band Could Be Your Life : Scenes From the American Indie Underground, 1981-1991 (Boston: Little Brown, 2001), 23-4.

wanted to tour, but lacked major-label support and the concomitant professional booking agencies. Although they were walking blind, these bands – like the good punks they were – took matters into their own hands by simply calling anyone they could for information. They telephoned independent record labels and record stores, fanzines, and friends, asking if there were places they could play in their towns. They played high schools, VFW halls, virtually any venue that would have them. Sometimes the decision of where to play was determined by where they found a free place to crash.⁷⁷ These bands in the vanguard then helped each other. According to Black Flag’s Greg Ginn, “...we did a lot of networking, sharing information. We’d find a new place to play, then we’d let [the other bands] know because they were interested in going wherever they could and playing. Then we would help each other in our own towns.”⁷⁸ Black Flag’s work ethic and touring schedule soon became legendary. Said Tim Kerr: “Black Flag was literally *the band* that went to every little podunk town and opened it up. You know, nobody would’ve ever gone to Shreeveport [sic], Louisiana in 1979—but they did that. And people hated ‘em, but at the same time they definitely planted a seed in some kid’s head.” In order to facilitate this relentless schedule and the grueling work it entailed, the members of Black Flag lived together for several years, either in a van on the road or in a communal office space in which each member of the band or staff slept under a desk.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ See, for example, Parker, Turned On, 60; Rabid, interview by author, 2002.

⁷⁸ Greg Ginn quoted in Azerrad, Our Band, 23. For discussion of the development of a punk touring network, see, Azerrad, Our Band, 23, 147-8, passim; Blush, American Hardcore, 58, 63, passim; Parker, Turned On, 60-1; Greg Ginn, interview by the Experience Music Project, transcript, 1st segment, 1999, 11-13.

⁷⁹ For discussions of Black Flag’s intense work ethic, see, for example, Azerrad, Our Band, 38-41, passim; and Parker, Turned On, 78. Tim Kerr quoted in Parker, Turned On, 61. Description of the communal Black Flag office is included in Parker, Turned On, 76-7.

San Pedro's the Minutemen referred to this type of thrifty lifestyle as "jamming econo" ("we strip our tunes/ we jam econo").⁸⁰ Band members Mike Watt, D. Boon, and George Hurley toured endlessly and became renowned for their frugal living. Despite never drawing the same crowds as bands like Black Flag or Hüsker Dü, they always managed to turn a profit on tour, largely because of their willingness to sleep on floors (no motels), lug their own equipment (no roadies), and maintain the van themselves (no mechanics). The impulse to jam econo also came from their modest working-class backgrounds. Watt remarked, "You have to be econo so maybe when the hard times hit, you can weather them."⁸¹ A passionate thinker who loved to debate wide-ranging issues with his best friend D. Boon, Watt's references to the early-twentieth-century anarchist Emma Goldman in a 1999 interview help us understand how punk re-imagined industry and consumerism. According to Watt, Goldman's minority of individualists and original thinkers, struggled against "the mediocre, the ordinary, the commonplace" craved by the "mass spirit" of the mindless majority that "dominates everywhere, destroying quality." So Watt saw punk as a way to circumvent the "walls" that limited one's thinking. Like many California punks, he viewed strip malls and tract homes as the concrete symbols of voracious 1980s big business consumerism. But "the real building walls are in the head. The tract homes, the strip malls, they're up here. If it was physical – which they do have physical manifestations, too – you could easily tear them down. But then you know what you'd do? You'd build them up somewhere else, with the baggier clothes or with a thinner lapel or whatever. For Watt, the

⁸⁰ Minutemen, "The Politics of Time," *Double Nickels on the Dime*, SST, 1984.

⁸¹ Mike Watt quoted in Azerrad, *Our Band*, 75. According to Watt, "D. Boon's daddy, you know, put in radios at the Buick thing. George's dad worked at the shipyard. My daddy was a sailor, then did air conditioning." [Watt, interview by the EMP, 1st segment, 1999, 13.]

“synergies” of the punk movement – the bands, the guy “who puts on gigs, or someone who draws up flyers” – come together to provide a new way of thinking, a way to bypass the banal fads and built-in obsolescence of mass consumerism. Punks thereby defeat the “mass spirit” and assert a life beyond the mediocre.⁸²

The idea of jamming econo and the development of a national touring circuit call attention to some of the more important principles that characterized the ethos of a new type of consumerism that Watt saw in “synergies” and might be called a permanent underground. First and foremost, the new consumerism was thoughtful and deliberate in the way Watt described above, intended to counter the mindless mass consumerism punks saw rampant in the era. Not only did this mean that punks created and bought higher quality (in their view) products, but, even more importantly, they lived more authentic lives. For example, according to Watt, “Econo *is* an old concept. The punk rockers picked up on that – the idea of scarcity and just using what you got. And maybe more of you comes through because there’s less outside stuff you’re sticking on – all you got is you, so you have to make something out of it.”⁸³ In other words, the less detritus one picked up from mass culture, the more one’s authentic self shone through. This idea is similar to the meaning of the word “beat” as used by the Beats of the 1950s, who saw being “beat” as being beaten down to the point of being free of artifice and thus artistically pure.⁸⁴

Watt’s words also return us to the DIY ethic, a second element of punk consumerism. Flipside’s motto was “Be More Than a Witness,” admonishing punks to take an active part in

⁸² Watt, interview by the EMP, 1st segment, 1999, 17; Emma Goldman, Minorities Versus Majorities, Anarchism and Other Essays (1911; New York, Dover Publications, 1969) 69-78, quotes are 69, 72.

⁸³ Watt quoted in Azerrad, Our Band, 74.

⁸⁴ Watson, The Birth of the Beat Generation, 3-4.

their scenes in whatever way they could or – if there were no local punk scene – to create a new one. Create your own band, venue, fanzine, or record label. Buy music that you like, that reflects your true self, rather than passively accept that marketed by the major labels and radio stations. A third element of this new consumerism was an intense commitment to support fellow punks. As Greg Shaw of Bomp! suggested, if punks “support[ed] one another’s efforts,” the punk community could thrive, albeit in small numbers. This acceptance of an underground status signified by, for example, jamming econo and playing VFW halls illustrated a fourth aspect of punk’s views on consumerism: a readiness to make a modest living in order to do what you love. Jello Biafra reflected on his ongoing efforts with the label Alternative Tentacles in San Francisco: “it is possible to work on your own ... if you’re lucky [and] survive off your work, if you don’t have a drug problem or whatever, or get property ownership too far in the brain. And [you can] do it without having to make goofy lip synching videos for MTV or brown nose the so-called commercial alternative press.” Because of a commitment to modest living and economic inclusiveness, punks also had strong feelings about pricing. Bands, labels, and club owners should price tickets, albums, and other commodities as low as they could while still making a profit. In other words, fans and the rest of the community expected the bands and entrepreneurs to make a living – but not an extravagant one. For example, when Minor Threat was tapped to open for the Damned at the Ontario Theater in D.C. in June 1983, singer Ian MacKaye balked at the \$13.50 ticket price (which included a Ticketron service fee). MacKaye, despite the reservations of other band members, negotiated a largely symbolic price reduction to thirteen dollars, a compromise that reduced Minor Threat’s pay from \$1000 to \$500.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Jello Biafra, interview by the Experience Music Project, transcript, 1998, 24; Andersen and Jenkins, Dance of Days, 144-5; Howard Wuefling, “Americans Upstage British Rockers,” Washington Post, Style, p. C4.

While the ideas of a permanent underground and jamming econo became part of the dominant ethos in punk, there remained within the subculture tensions and contradictions about the notion of success. After a certain point in punk history – around 1980 – there were constant concerns within punk about selling out. Just what defined “selling out” was open to debate. D.C. punks accused the members of Minor Threat of selling out when they re-formed the band after a six-month hiatus. Many D.C. punks believed a band should live a natural, organic life span; it became a less authentic entity if it replaced members or broke up and re-formed. Most punks were more lenient in their definition of selling out. Some even continued to debate the benefits of trying to convert the masses. If punks were content to stay small, weren’t they simply preaching to the choir and running the risk of provincialism?⁸⁶ In 1983, when Al Flipside asked Social Distortion, “What do you want to do with [the band]?” Bassist Brent Liles replied, “Put out 100 albums, make a million dollars!” But then he backtracked, “We really are trying to get more progressive, but not sell out, we just want to always progress. Our newer songs are even dancable [sic] We want to get as big as we can without losing the side we’re playing for.”⁸⁷ By this point in the development of punk, Liles felt the need – unlike the Ramones or Blondie six or seven years earlier – to qualify his statement after admitting the desire to make a million dollars. He wanted to reassure Al and Flipside readers that the band did not want to “sell out” or lose their original punk-rock audience. Punks of the eighties did not have to wrestle often with

⁸⁶ According to Ian MacKaye, Minor Threat “caught a lot of shit, people said we were selling out, ... that we were just cashing in” on their popularity by reforming after breaking up. [Andersen and Jenkins, Dance of Days, 111-2; Ian MacKaye and Jeff Nelson, “Minor Threat” in Twenty Years of Dischord: Putting DC on the Map, eds. Ian MacKaye and Jeff Nelson (Washington, D.C.: Dischord Records, 2002), 16.] Duncombe talks about the issue of preaching the choir or selling out in the world of fanzines. Staying small meant staying pure. [Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture (London: Verso, 1997), 141-65.]

⁸⁷ Flipside, no. 38, May 1983, 35.

the question of whether it was possible to be commercially successful and remain punk because few bands chalked up hits. The bands that did, such as those mentioned above – Blondie, Talking Heads, and the Go-Go's – started out within the fold of a broadly defined punk genre, but by the early 1980s, with the solidification of subgenres, self-defined punks no longer embraced these bands.

Conclusion: A Permanent Underground?

At the heart of punk challenges to mainstream society was an aversion to mindless consumerism. Rather than rejecting consumer culture outright, however, punk sought to reshape it into a practice that reflected their principles. As historian Kevin Mattson suggests, seeing punk this way means scholars, who in the past have tended to view punks merely as consumers, must take a broader view of the subculture.⁸⁸ In place of the “soulless” commercialism punks saw around them, punk offered a modified form of consumerism based on intentionalism, “jammin’ econo,” do-it-yourself localism, and living modestly. They retained the individualistic impulses of consumer capitalism, including the right of each person to express him/herself through consumerism. In fact, they were trying to overcome the degree to which, as they saw it, mass culture erased or masked individual identity. Ironically, however, it was only when they came together as a community that they could enact and support the sort of homegrown and home-purchased goods they believed offered more individualistic and authentic alternatives to mainstream middle-class values and mass

⁸⁸ Kevin Mattson, “Did Punk Matter?: Analyzing the Practices of a Youth Subculture During the 1980s,” *American Studies* 42 (Spring 2001): 69-97. See also, Will Straw, “Consumption,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock*, eds. Simon Frith, Will Straw, and John Street (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 68.

culture. The only way punk could become a “permanent underground” was if the participants acted in concert.

How successful were punks in offering alternatives to the dominant patterns of consumer capitalism of the 1970s and 1980s? They used the most important tool in their possession, their DIY ethic and methodology, to pioneer an underground network that may indeed prove to be a permanent underground. An impressive number of the early labels thrive as of 2007, including Dischord (D.C., 1980); SST (Southern California, 1978); Epitaph (Southern California, 1981); Touch and Go (Detroit/Chicago, 1981); BYO (Southern California, 1982); and Alternative Tentacles (San Francisco, 1979). These labels made names for themselves in their early days, earning loyal followers and more recent devotees who buy records by bands they’ve never heard simply because they are on a label with the appropriate pedigree. Few people (at the labels or in the bands) are getting rich, but they are able to make a living or at least get their music heard because of the punk/indie network pioneered in the 1970s and 1980s.

There are fewer stories of long-term success among fanzines. Flipside managed to stay in print through 1991, but folded when its distributor went under, taking Flipside’s latest proceeds with it.⁸⁹ MaximumRocknroll (San Francisco, 1982-present) and the Big Takeover (1980-present) are two long-running ‘zines surviving from the early 1980s. Although few fanzines survived to today, punk ‘zines of the late ‘70s and early ‘80s served as launching points for many people who went on to have careers in photography and journalism. To name just a few: Anna Summa has published pictures in Fortune, People, Time, and others, Jenny Lens, Stephanie Chernikowski, Ruby Ray, and Roberta Bayley (PUNK) are currently

⁸⁹ Di Puccio, interview by author, 2004, 20.

professional photographers; Pleasant Gehman, who founded the Lobotomy fanzine in L.A., went on to write a regular column for the LA Weekly in the early 1980s and has published several books; Don Waller, who co-founded Back Door Man (L.A.), is a music journalist, contributing to Mojo and other magazines; Howard Wuelfing (Descenes and Dischord in D.C.) went on to write for the Washington Post, Creem, Spin, and the Village Voice, among others, and now runs a public-relations firm called Howlin' Wuelf Media; John Holmstrom (PUNK) became publisher at High Times magazine.⁹⁰

Punk venues tended to be even shorter-lived than fanzines. Some venues were seen as one-offs, designated for one performance only. Few punk devotees had the capital required to run and maintain a live music venue, but more than a handful tried, some with greater success than others: Brendan Mullen and the Masque (L.A.), the Stern brothers and Godzilla's (L.A.), Steve Mass and the Mudd Club (NYC). A few very important clubs have had much longer runs. D.C.'s 9:30 Club is still open, albeit not at its original location. And CBGB, the most famous punk-rock club of all, only recently closed its doors (October 2006) after a long lease dispute.⁹¹

It is easier to judge the success and longevity of institutions such as fanzines and labels than it is to assess how successfully individuals held onto that authentic "punk attitude." Any evidence I give will be anecdotal, but significant numbers of punks

⁹⁰ Howlin Wuelf Media, "Born for Music," <http://howlinwuelf.com/html/history.html>, accessed 27 April 2007.

⁹¹ Gendron, Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club, 299-310. Kristal had plans to reopen CBGB in Las Vegas, but he died August 28, 2007. According to John Holmstrom of PUNK magazine, "CBGB didn't close because of a rent dispute." In 2005, "the club's lease ran out and when it became clear that the building leaseholder (Bowery Residents' Committee, a.k.a. BRC, who had been given the rights as leaseholders to CBGB several years before), refused to offer Hilly the opportunity to renew. He worked out a deal to close the club in October 2006 if he could remove the contents." ["CBGB epicenter of live punk closing its doors this week in New York City after 33 years," http://www.usatoday.com/life/music/news/2006-10-09-cbgb-closure_x.htm, updated 9 October 2006; John Holmstrom, "Hilly Kristal R.I.P. (1932-2007)," http://www.punkmagazine.com/stuff/stuff-hilly_obit.html, accessed 28 September, 2007.]

interviewed or discussed in this project currently work in “non-mainstream” jobs: record label owner; fanzine publisher; belly dancer; freelance journalist or photographers; small-business owners; and professional musicians. Another notable portion work within mainstream consumer capitalism but in positions that retain a high degree of individual autonomy: film art director; graphic designer; and publicist. There are also teachers, a certified public accountant, and stay-at-home moms.

As was the case with most aspects of punk rock, the subculture’s views on consumerism and commercialism were rife with contradictions, but overall punks made great strides. They used individual creativity, new technology, and a commitment to localism to launch labels, fanzines, and new clubs that institutionalized and supported a subculture that stood in opposition to mainstream middle-class values they viewed as vapid or specious. Punk consumerism was also a celebration of youth and the idea that young people can create their own cultural expressions, as we shall see in the next chapter. The subculture offered punks a way to make youthful rebellion a challenge to the crass or corrupted adult worlds of commerce and politics.

CHAPTER 4
LET'S GET RID OF NEW YORK:
LOCALISM AND EXTRA-LOCALISM IN AMERICAN PUNK ROCK

New York, what a town
About the biggest shit around
All the people think things happen there
Well, if it ain't New York, it's really square
The Randoms, "Let's Get Rid of New York," 1977¹

New York City may have been the birthplace of 1970s punk rock, but as the genre grew and spread across the United States, far-flung punk rockers developed strong allegiances to their local punk scenes. In their 1977 recording, "Let's Get Rid of New York," L.A. punks, the Randoms, demonstrated an emerging characteristic of late seventies punk rock: tensions within the subculture resulting from punk's simultaneous function as local scenes and a transnational cultural phenomenon. The Los Angelenos use sarcasm to acknowledge New York's central role in American culture, noting, "All the people think things happen there/ Well, if it ain't New York, it's really square!" For punk rockers everywhere in 1977, there was no denying that certain places – specifically New York and London – were the epicenters of the movement.

The participants reveled in the notion of a broader punk rock community, the idea that young people everywhere, albeit in very small numbers, shared their alienation from mainstream politics and popular culture, their desires to be self-invented people, and their hopes for a community of nonconformists. Punk rock's DIY ethos, however, meant that

¹ Randoms, "Let's Get Rid of New York," B-side to Dangerhouse 1, 1977. Chris Ashford's What? Records, formed fall 1977, released the first Los Angeles punk single, The Germs, "Forming," but What? Records didn't last long.

punks celebrated these ideas of commonality and collectivity in local arenas built on face-to-face, underground interactions, and hard-fought battles to establish local music scenes.

Punks therefore struggled to reconcile allegiances to a larger punk rock community with fierce local loyalties, with resulting anxieties that expressed themselves in a number of ways, including songs like “Let’s Get Rid of New York.” That song – tellingly – was on the first record released by Dangerhouse, the most important of the early L.A. punk labels. Punks in Los Angeles and across the U.S. avidly read the New York Rocker and England’s Melody Maker to get their news about the meccas of punk rock, but they also – through their own clubs, fanzines, record labels, and songs – expressed their frustration at not being in the thick of the excitement, their simultaneous sense of living on the periphery, on the one hand, and their pride in and hopes for their own scenes, on the other. Hence the Randoms’ epithet: “King Kong knew what he was doing/ When he left the town in ruins/ Let’s get rid of New York.”

This chapter sketches first the contours of the broader national punk community emerging in the late 1970s, then details the local cultural landscapes of the New York, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C. punk scenes, and along the way examines the resulting tensions between localism and extralocalism. While punk rockers shared a certain mindset across space, they also moved in the social, cultural, and geographic specifics of a particular locale, and the resulting scenes exhibited significant differences. New York punk emerged at a time of economic crisis for both city residents and the municipal government. While it was breaking very new ground and thus evidenced great stylistic diversity, it nonetheless remained concentrated in a small physical area. Los Angeles punk, meanwhile, shared with its home city the tendency toward sprawl and a fascination with noir. In Washington, D.C.,

punk rockers demonstrated an extra dose of anxious cultural inferiority and struggled to find belonging in a placeless place, a city whose identity seemed to have nothing to do with being young and white.

The role of place for American punk rockers, including the interaction of localism and extralocalism, sheds light on Americans as a whole in this era, highlighting several important themes regarding the function of place in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Put very simply, punk rockers, like many Americans of the era, experienced great anxiety about place and belonging. One explanation for this anxiety might be that Americans moved more during the 1970s than in earlier periods. This was not the case, however.² Instead, it seems that many Americans, punks included, transferred worries about other issues in their lives onto place, expressing a sense of being geographically unmoored. In punk rock, this displaced apprehension articulated itself through efforts to make punk rock a site of potential self and through attempts to re-inscribe place on consumer capitalism.

“The Big Takeover”: A National Punk-Rock Affective Alliance³

By the 1970s, a mature national consumer economy worked to shape people’s interactions with popular culture. Companies like Mattel effectively marketed the latest toys to children across the United States. Radio stations nationwide simultaneously played the latest singles by the hottest groups championed by major record labels like MCA. This national consumer economy made it possible for individual young people across the nation to share similar cultural experiences, to create a common bond across space through a piece of

² Robert D. Putnam, Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 205.

³ Bad Brains, “The Big Takeover,” *Bad Brains*, ROIR, 1982.

popular culture like a Big Wheel or the song “Sweet Home Alabama.” Cultural studies scholarship uses abstract ideas of space to describe these collective experiences or, put another way, communities whose members do not necessarily occupy a common discrete physical place. Most notably for the purposes of this project, Lawrence Grossberg uses the term “affective alliance” to explain the way an attachment to a particular genre of music may yield a sense of community even when the members of that community live far apart. According to Grossberg, individuals create an affective alliance by translating specific material practices (such as purchasing albums or fanzines), cultural forms (such as specific musical styles), and social experiences (such as attending concerts) into emotional investments in the world. Fans of particular forms of popular music thus create imagined communities that may or may not have concrete expression in either physical localities such as clubs and local scenes or in verbal expressions such as online discussion groups or fanzines.⁴ In the 1970s perhaps the most visible and vibrant examples of such affective alliances were the Kiss Army, whose membership of card-carrying avid fans of the rock band Kiss reached over 100,000 in the late 1970s, and the original Star Wars Fanclub, established in 1977, whose members reveled in the characters and details of one of the biggest blockbuster movies of all time.

While not denying that Kiss fans and Star Wars aficionados bonded strongly within their respective groups, a common experience is arguably even more meaningful for the

⁴ Lawrence Grossberg, “Another Boring Day in Paradise: Rock and roll and the Empowerment of Everyday Life,” *Popular Music* 4 (1984): 225-58. Sociologist Simon Frith also explores the emotional investment in popular music: “the intensity of [the] relationship between taste and self-definition seems peculiar to popular music – it is ‘possessable’ in a way that other cultural forms ... are not.” [introduction to *Music and Society: The Politics of Composition, Performance and Reception*, ed. R. Leppert and S. McClary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 144.] In the twenty years since Grossberg outlined his theory of affective alliances, scholars have used his work to explore many communities built on emotional identification with cultural forms. See, for example, Will Straw, “Systems of Articulation, Logics of Change: Scenes and Communities in Popular Music,” *Cultural Studies* 5, no. 3 (October, 1991): 361-75.

participants if it is one they have to seek out, one that is not readily available to broader society. Certainly this was how far-flung punk rockers viewed their shared experiences. According to Joan Jett, member of the Runaways and a pivotal member of the early Los Angeles punk scene, “A defining moment for any teen misfit is finding others like yourself, even if the only thing you share is the feeling of not belonging anywhere else.”⁵ Realizing there were other small groups of nonconformists in other towns and cities was even better. Jack Rabid, member of the New York hardcore band Even Worse and founder of The Big Takeover fanzine, in describing the national punk-rock community of the late 1970s, noted, “there probably weren’t more than seven hundred punk rockers in all the United States, people who lived the life and thought of themselves as a full-time punk rock guy or girl. But the ones who were there were definitely in it and loved it, and [were] ready to go.” He and his friends were hungry for news from across the punk world, avidly reading fanzines from other cities and eager to share their couches and floors with punk visitors from other scenes, grilling them for the latest developments: “We may have been having this kind of fun freak show thing together, but the emphasis was always on the sociality, people exchanging ideas and information, and [it was] pre-internet and pre-MTV. The last pre-MTV scene. Everything was organic. Everything was word of mouth. It was exciting.”⁶

Rabid’s descriptions of punk suggest the emergence of a national or international punk rock affective alliance, built on common experiences and communication between punk scenes, yet few studies of punk rock examine these interactions. Indeed most studies of punk rock focus on discrete scenes, outlining them in detail rather than attempting to understand

⁵ Joan Jett quoted in Marc Spitz and Brendan Mullen, We Got the Neutron Bomb: The Untold Story of L.A. Punk (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001), 35

⁶ Jack Rabid, interview by author, transcript, New York, N.Y., 27 July 2002, 10.

how the various scenes interacted or differed.⁷ But punk rock was an ongoing dialogue that depended on a range of activities, including individual efforts like pen-palling and trading mix-tapes, as well as the relatively more formal information exchange found in fanzines and record labels. The latter, more structured activities are detailed in chapter 2. Here I focus on the informal, less organized activities that were vital for the development of a transnational punk scene.

The most traditional method of community building across space was letter-writing, a technique used by innumerable historical social, political, cultural and other groups. This strategy was particularly important in a time before Internet and email. Additionally, pen-palling was less expensive than long-distance telephoning, an option out of financial reach for many punk rockers who still lived at home (and whose parents were not willing to cover long distance bills to chat about punk) or were out on their own but often working part-time or had low-paying, low-responsibility jobs in order to focus their time and energy on their true passion, music. A ten-minute daytime telephone call to someone two hundred miles away cost \$3.34 in 1978, a sizeable chunk of money when the minimum wage was only \$2.65 per hour. Not only was letter-writing an easy and inexpensive way to participate in the subculture, it had an important role in the discursive formation of an individual's punk identity. These letters served as a mode of cultural construction of self in a community or shared forum. In other words, individual self-fashioning occurred at the community level.⁸

⁷ Unquestionably the detail of these local studies is much appreciated. See, for example, Spitz and Mullen, Neutron Bomb; Mark Andersen and Mark Jenkins, Dance of Days: Two Decades of Punk in the Nation's Capital (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2001); and Legs McNeil and Gillian McCain, Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk (Grove Press, 1996; reprint, New York: Penguin, 1997).

⁸ For example, letter-writing was extremely important to the transcendentalists. Tracy Waldon and James Lande, The Industry Analysis Division's Reference Book of Rates Price Indices and Household Expenditures for Telephone Service (Washington, D.C.: Federal Communications Commission, 1997), 131; United States Department of Labor, "History of Changes to the Minimum Wage Law,"

Fanzines, pen-palling, tape exchange, and early touring networks demonstrate how a theoretical construct like an affective alliance finds embodiment in a physical reality.

Fanzines greatly facilitated the development of punk letter-writing, especially letter-writing across large geographic distances. First, most 'zines had sections devoted to letters from readers. Fanzines that were just getting started often published virtually every letter they received, happy to have copy that required no work. Even in more established 'zines, many editors felt an obligation to print as many letters as possible, taking to heart punk's message of equality and valuing every reader's voice or opinion as important. This practice gave punk rockers in large and small towns across the U.S. an opportunity to participate actively in and even help shape the broader punk community. Readers wrote in for many reasons. They gave reactions to earlier articles, touted their own local scenes or disparaged others, or attempted (endlessly) to define punk. They also occasionally used this forum to find or establish more personal, one-on-one relationships and thus deepen their involvement in the punk world. Given the personality of the average punk fan – a shy or angry outsider who could not or did not want to belong to typical youth groups such as sports teams – this activity provided access to the type of belonging they failed to find elsewhere. For punks located in small towns or rural areas, these fanzines often provided the only opportunity for direct involvement in the subculture.

Pen-palling was important not only for the act itself, an act that solidified a sense of self and community, but also for the information contained in the letters. Punks in Urbana-Champaign could alert punks elsewhere to the new hot band or club in their area by writing

<http://www.dol.gov/esa/minwage/coverage.htm>, accessed 17 October 2007. My notion of discursive self-fashioning is influenced by Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

to a ‘zine or to other friends directly. This sort of personal endorsement could be very important in a world that revolved around hard-to-find music. As we saw in chapter 2, independent record labels – usually due to financial constraints, such as small capitalization, lack of access to credit from pressing plants, and being required to sell their products on consignment – almost always produced imprints in very small batches. A typical initial pressing might run one thousand copies, while an extraordinary venture might entail ten thousand copies. For example, BYO [Better Youth Organization] Records, out of Los Angeles, released one thousand copies of its first LP in 1982, a hardcore compilation called *Someone Got Their Head Kicked In*. If a punk in Tampa, Florida, for example, heard about the LP from a pen pal or fanzine, she most likely could not depend on any distribution network to get this obscure record to her town, because independent labels only slowly and haphazardly began to make connections with distributors like Jem in the early 1980s. What she could do was ask Vinyl Fever, her local independent record store, to order a few copies of *Someone Got Their Head Kicked In*. Or, if one were lucky enough to live near a punk epicenter, like Jack Rabid from Summit, New Jersey, he could travel in search of punk treasures. Rabid remembers hearing about records by Los Angeles bands like the Dils and others, “But to find those records it ... necessitated going to New York [City] because they weren’t at your local Scottie’s [Record Store] the way Iggy Pop and Lou Reed were, [who were] on RCA and stuff.”⁹ Moreover, the quality of early DIY punk releases could be very unpredictable, based on the band’s skill or talent or on the recording and production quality of the record. Having an endorsement from a pen pal or ‘zine made the purchase of a little known record a less risky venture for cash-strapped punks.

⁹ Shawn Stern, interview by author, tape recording, Marina del Ray, Calif., 23 June 2004; Bob Say, interview by author, tape recording, Thousand Oaks, Calif., 28 June 2004; Rabid, interview by author, 2002, 4.

Pen-pal networks were important not only in developing a national punk community but in solidifying local or regional networks as well. Kid Congo, guitarist for the L.A. band the Gun Club, talked about his experience with early punk rock, while still in high school in 1975: “In the days before email and the Internet we’d handwrite letters to each other about what was happening and what shows were going on. Me and Trudie [Plunger] used to write to each other all the time. It was about a lust for music and what was going on and not wanting to miss out on anything.” Congo’s reminiscences demonstrate how pen-palling helping create and bring together a Los Angeles punk underground. This activity was particularly important in L.A., a city whose geography was dominated by sprawl, as Congo himself suggests: “We were spread out all over L.A. County and we’d meet up and get drunk at parties and see bands and it was really very underground.” Unlike New York, where a legal nightclub emerged right away as the home for what became known as punk rock or the new wave, in Los Angeles punk rockers initially had to seek alternative venues. This lack of “legitimate” venues made traditional advertising difficult. Thus word of mouth and flyering were very important in disseminating information about the early punk scene. And while flyers may have helped the few people who frequented the area of the upcoming event (usually Hollywood in the early days), flyers did not directly reach punks who lived in the Valley, Orange County, or other more remote areas.¹⁰

In addition to spreading the word about bands and albums, punk pen pals were a critical element in the establishment of early punk touring networks, a system and set of contacts that laid the groundwork for the indie rock movement of the 1980s and 1990s. As

¹⁰ Kid Congo quoted in Spitz and Mullen, *Neutron Bomb*, 39; Say, interview by author, 2004. Tony Reflex and Pleasant Gehman also note the importance of pen-palling in the greater Los Angeles punk scene. [Tony Reflex, interview by author, tape recording, Sierra Madre, Calif., 23 June, 2004; Pleasant Gehman, interview by author, Los Angeles, tape recording, 28 June 2004.]

incredible as it seems today, touring decisions for early punk groups could be based on nothing more than the promise of any sort of venue and a floor on which to crash. Jeff Nelson, co-founder of D.C.'s Dischord Records and drummer for Minor Threat, remembers,

Back then when we were touring, and when there was just small scenes in different cities, there was a real sense of community, friends that you had made, pen pals, you know swapping records with other guys who are in bands, or deejays, or somebody at the record store, whatever the connection was; you didn't have a choice, and ... you just would crash on people's floors, and it was... just pretty dinky.¹¹

Sometimes a fan would write a band directly, asking them to come play their town.

Southern California's Black Flag was one of the most important trailblazers in punk touring circuits. The band's guitarist, Greg Ginn, also founder of SST Records, recalls, "We ...very much relied upon people. A lot of times it was a young kid in high school ... renting out a place or convincing a club that they want to do a show there. And they would really go out on a limb, and not for money. Just because they want to bring that to their town. That's what, I think, got Black Flag started touring early is just so many people like that in various towns."¹²

In addition to letter-writing, the exchange of home-recorded cassette tapes represented an important method of community building and information exchange for punk rockers. Philips introduced compact cassette tapes and tape recorders in 1963, and with improvements to sound quality in the early 1970s, cassette tapes became an increasingly popular format for pre-recorded music and recording at home. They were more portable than LP's and smaller than eight-tracks, and with the increased popularity of devices such as the

¹¹ Jeff Nelson, interview by the Experience Music Project, transcript, 1998, 33-4.

¹² Greg Ginn, interview by the Experience Music Project, transcript, 1999, 1st segment, 12-13. For an excellent account of early touring in punk, see Michael Azzerad, Our Band Could Be Your Life : Scenes From the American Indie Underground, 1981-1991 (Boston: Little Brown, 2001), 50-1, 73-6, passim.

Sony Walkman and “boomboxes,” cassettes provided a way to listen to music on the go. Furthermore, cassettes were longer and the sound quality was better than eight-tracks. Most importantly to many, one could record onto cassettes, a fact that frightened the music industry, and indeed may have contributed to a serious slump in the music industry from 1979 to 1982, the first major recession in that industry in thirty years.¹³

While home taping – that is, making copies of albums onto cassettes – became a common, albeit illegal, occurrence among music fans of all stripes, this practice was particularly important to fans of obscure or new musical genres such as punk rock and, eventually, hip-hop. For these enthusiasts, the exchange of home-recorded tapes served several functions. First and most importantly, this exchange made punk music available to more people. As noted above, punk records could be very hard to come by because they were released in small numbers and may or may not have been picked up by one’s local independent record store. According to Jack Rabid,

We were all Pied Pipers. We were all trying to get everybody we knew interested. It was never like, “I found this and you can’t have it.” It was the opposite. ... I started making tapes for everybody. ... I’d get surrounded by five tough guys [at a party] who wanted to beat the living shit out of me. “What’s this punk rock shit anyway?” And instead of giving them attitude and letting them beat me up, I’d go like, “Man, it’s the greatest music. You ought to check it out. I’ve got a tape right here. Here take it.” And they weren’t prepared for that. They were prepared for punk rock attitude, [But] I was like Don Kirshner or something: “It’s the greatest. It’s the most amazing music ever made.” Because I really believed it. I still believe it.¹⁴

¹³ Home recording was only one of a number of factors creating this slump. An ongoing national recession, a contraction of the music industry after disco’s success, and competition from other forms of entertainment such as VCR’s and video games also contributed to the music industry’s difficulties in this era. For details, see, for example, Larry Starr and Christopher Waterman, American Popular Music: From Minstrelsy to MTV (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 369; Fredric Dannen, Hit Men: Power Brokers and Fast Money Inside the Music Business (New York : Times Books, 1990), 155, 161, 176, 208, 224; R. Serge Denisoff, Tarnished Gold: The Record Industry Revisited (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1986), 114-28.

¹⁴ Rabid, interview by author, 2004, 17.

While home recording allowed some people like Rabid to be ambassadors of punk, these tapes could also be signs of distinction within the punk community. Recording and giving cassette tapes to friends could show that you were the first to get your hands on the latest X-Ray Spex or Dickies single. In other words, exchanging tapes could be a very tangible example of cultural capital.

Fanzines, labels, pen-palling, and tape exchange fostered a national punk community, but punk was first and foremost a local phenomenon built on individualism. Despite a sophisticated and diverse body of work articulating space and place in subcultures, few scholars have interrogated the tensions or conflicts emerging from within affective alliances. While punk rockers eagerly sought belonging and “anything to believe in,” as L.A. punk rocker Shawn Stern asserted, their *raison d’être* was individualistic, do-it-yourself cultural expressions.¹⁵ They thus created a paradoxical and inherently unstable community. While punks celebrated the fact that punk was becoming a transnational phenomenon, their embodied position and lived experience in specific locales invented or interpreted the broader subculture in locally specific ways.

Cultural geographers and cultural studies scholars offer useful tools to help us understand punk rock at the local level. For the former, the term “cultural landscapes” refers to the interactions of humans and environment. In their work, landscape is a “socio-natural process” that “refers to an ensemble of material and social practices and their symbolic representation,” the meaning of which is ongoing and ever changing. Furthermore, local landscapes should not be studied in isolation but rather should be understood as linked to and

¹⁵ Shawn Stern, guitarist for the California hardcore band Youth Brigade, videotaped in *Another State of Mind*, videocassette, 78 min, Time Bomb Filmworks, 1983.

influenced by other landscapes and regions.¹⁶ Cultural studies scholarship has employed historian Michel de Certeau's concept of "space" to designate something similar to the cultural geography notion of cultural landscape. For de Certeau, a physical location or "place" becomes "space" when humans act upon it, thereby creating meaning through "practiced place." According to de Certeau, through everyday actions "users make ... innumerable and infinitesimal transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt it to their own rules." In this elucidation, consumption more broadly becomes a form of secondary production, and the term space designates something beyond a specific physical locale.¹⁷ Thus, constructing a punk rock space or its cultural landscape entails investigating local punks' interactions with their physical surroundings, on the one hand, and the interactions of various locally specific landscapes with each other in a larger punk community. In other words, each punk rocker experienced and created art and music from the perspective of a local cultural landscape that was in conversation with a larger punk rock community. "Cultural landscape" or "space" in this sense is equivalent to a local scene.¹⁸ As we shall see below, the specifics of local geography, demography, and economy had important influences on the development of local punk scenes.

¹⁶ Heidi Scott, "Cultural Turns," in James S. Duncan, Nuala C. Johnson, and Richard H. Schein, eds., A Companion to Cultural Geography (Oxford, Eng.: Blackwell, 2004), 25-8. See also, for example, Anthony Giddens, The Consequences of Modernity (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990); Marie Price and Martin Lewis, "The Reinvention of Cultural Geography," Annals of the Association of American Geographers 83, no. 1 (March 1993): 1-17; Sara Blair, "Cultural Geography and the Place of the Literary," review essay in American Literary History 10, no. 3 (Autumn 1998): 544-67; Richard H. Schein, "The Place of Landscape: A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting an American Scene," Annals of the Association of American Geographers 87, no. 4 (Dec 1997): 660-80; and Doreen Massey, "Space-Time, 'Science,' and the Relation between Physical Geography and Human Geography," Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, New Series 2, no. 3 (1999): 261-76.

¹⁷ Michel de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), xiii-xiv.

¹⁸ For a fuller explication of my use of the terms "scene" and "punk rock community," see introduction, pp. 18-20.

“New York City Really Has It All”: Punk’s Birthplace¹⁹

Punk rock originally coalesced in New York’s lower east side in the mid 1970s. Economic and demographic factors – and their concomitant physical manifestations – help explain why a punk rock cultural landscape emerged when and where it did. Many people see the 1970s as New York City’s most dismal historical moment, an era of financial crisis, high crime, and white flight. This crisis mindset would influence punk in both general and specific ways. Between 1961 and 1975, the city’s debt almost tripled, and it struggled to provide the services citizens demanded. In 1975, when New York considered turning to the federal government for debt assistance, President Gerald Ford said he would veto any vote to bail out the city, prompting the New York Daily News to print the headline “Ford to City: Drop Dead.” Additionally, during the 1970s, New York City’s population declined by nearly one million, marking a climax in the post-World War II trend of white flight to the suburbs. By 1981, as the more affluent and their tax dollars left the city and its coffers, about twenty-two percent of New Yorkers lived below the poverty line. New York and its social ills, including chronically high unemployment, soaring crime rates, and a large population on municipal welfare, had become a national symbol of all that was wrong with urban America.²⁰

For punks, a positive by-product of white flight and the decline in manufacturing was the availability and affordability of rental space in Manhattan in the 1970s, a situation similar

¹⁹ Ramones, “Sheena Is a Punk Rocker,” *Leave Home*, Sire, 1977.

²⁰ George J. Lankevich, American Metropolis: A History of New York City (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 208-31.

to that experienced by hippies in Haight-Ashbury in the 1960s. For example, Duncan Hannah, artist and punk scenester, shared with one roommate a railroad apartment on Thompson St. in Greenwich Village in the mid-1970s; together they paid \$214 per month. If one were willing to leave the established hip areas like the Village, rents became even more affordable. Jack Rabid rented an apartment on the Lower East Side, just off the Bowery for about \$100 per month. The members of Blondie, invited by an artist friend who resided in the building, moved into an apartment on the Bowery in summer 1975, where they lived virtually like squatters. They had no gas, but according to lead singer Debbie Harry, the electricity “was free and we didn’t know where it came from.” Despite it being an “unheated funk” of an apartment, Harry fondly remembered, “Our place on the Bowery became a center of action as the punk scene quickly began to develop.”²¹ With such low living expenses, aspiring artists, musicians, and fanzine publishers found it fairly easy to pay their bills with part-time jobs and devote the bulk and best of their time and energy toward their true passions and the development of a local punk scene.

Not only did punks benefit from inexpensive residential space, but the commercial enterprises that became the institutions of the scene benefited from New York’s poor economy. In 1977, when Tish and Snooky Bellomo opened “the first punk rock store in America” at 33 St. Mark’s Place in the East Village, their rent for the small space was \$250 per month. In 1988 they finally left that location, and the street they helped make hip and desirable, upon hearing that the new landlord wanted to move them upstairs and raise their

²¹ Duncan Hannah, interview by author, tape recording, New York, N.Y., 26 June 2002; Rabid, interview by author, 2002, 12-13; Debbie Harry, Chris Stein, and Victor Bockris, Making Tracks: The Rise of Blondie (London: Elm Tree Books, 1982; reprint Da Capo, 1998), 35. Others who mention the importance of low rents or squatting include, John Holmstrom, email interview by author, 29 July 2002; Roger Miret and Vinnie Stigma of the New York hardcore band Agnostic Front, interview by author, tape recording, Chapel Hill, N.C., 2005.

rent to \$5000 per month.²² But undeniably, the most important tale of cheap rent in New York punk was that of CBGB, the birthplace of punk and its physical center in the United States for several years. Owner Hilly Kristal paid \$600 per month for his club located street level below a Bowery flophouse. According to Kristal, the Palace Hotel had the distinction of being “the largest flophouse on the Bowery. ... The derelicts and alcoholic bums would line up only to stagger into the Palace Bar at 8 a.m. for their eye opener, their first drink of white port or muscatel.”²³

In addition to cheap rents, a second by-product of financial depression and white flight was the deserted nature of certain parts of Manhattan, caused in part by the broad economic transformations affecting the entire “rust belt” of the industrial Northeast and Midwest. Between 1972 and 1987, New York state lost over half a million manufacturing jobs, a decline that was only partially balanced by a rise in lower-paying service jobs that often did not come with the hard-won benefits attached to traditional industrial union jobs. And in the early to mid 1970s, New York experienced a glut of office space. New York City’s desolate bleakness in the mid-1970s fostered a sense of ownership in punk rockers. Duncan Hannah remembered walking for blocks late at night without seeing another person as he traveled from the Lower East Side to his midtown apartment in 1977. Everyone else seemed to have forsaken the barren streets of lower Manhattan, but not the punks. Punks felt this was their world, and they were able to make of it what they wanted.

²² Tish and Snooky Bellomo, telephone interview by author, transcript, New York, N.Y., 24 June 2002, 17-18.

²³ John Holmstrom, “Hilly Kristal R.I.P. (1932-2007),” http://www.punkmagazine.com/stuff/stuff-hilly_obit.html, accessed 22 September 2007; Hilly Kristal, CBGB history, <http://www.cbgb.com/history/history5.htm>, accessed 15 February 2006; Hilly Kristal, interview by author, tape recording, New York, N.Y., 24 June 2002.

The barrenness of many New York streets paralleled punks' perception of cultural sterility in the 1970s and fostered their creative freedom. Harry of Blondie lived on the Bowery with her bandmates, but their second home was down the street at CBGB. She wrote in 1975 that she and the "rock and roll sub-culture [at CBGB] coexists easily with the wraith-like alkies; the angry young black men; with the emptiness and ruin of America's attics, basements, and secret corners. Places where the out takes and out casts collect."²⁴ The "out takes and out casts" would fill those vacuums with not only their bodies but their subculture as well. The blank canvas offered by the geographic and cultural void surrounding them spurred New York punks to rock offerings of unrestrained variety. Patti Smith combined spoken-word poetry with rock 'n' roll; the Ramones' straight-ahead, relentless, 1-2-3-4 rock bombarded the listener; Television fused a psychedelic guitar sound with an allegiance to French Symbolist writers; Wayne/Jayne Country showed that transsexuals could rock as hard as anyone else; and in Suicide, Alan Vega and Marty Rev not only deliberately provoked the audience through sound and performance, they prefigured the techno rage of the 1980s.

The lack of a strong local tradition of original live rock was another reason New York punks let loose their cacophony of diversity. Many more clubs of the era were open to folk or acoustic music than electrified rock and roll, in part because of the lingering effects of the folk explosion of the 1960s. Additionally, acoustic music did not require the same sort of sound system or soundproofing, nor did it tend to alarm a business's residential or commercial neighbors. Even more importantly, acoustic performers took up less space. With a singer with a tambourine accompanied by an acoustic guitarist, an owner could pack in more tables than he could with an ensemble consisting of guitarist, bassist, singer, large

²⁴ Quote is from a 1975 article in 51, a short-lived magazine promoting the idea that New York City should be the fifty-first state, reprinted in Harry, Stein, and Bockris, Making Tracks, 27.

drum kit, several amplifiers, monitors, microphone stands, and possibly even a soundboard and attendant. Furthermore, the few smaller rock venues that did exist tended to be either industry showcases, booking only bands with connections to major labels, or venues for cover bands. For example, in New York City, Max's Kansas City moved into booking live music around 1969 but hired mostly signed acts through the mid 1970s. The lack of clubs created short-term hardships for the nascent punk scene but was a boon in the long run; participants of the blossoming punk genre were free to create without having to fit themselves into an established cultural landscape, such as that of the mature folk music scene in Greenwich Village. As a result, New York's soon-to-be punk rockers took their music in many directions. According to Lenny Kaye of the Patti Smith Group, "The scene at CBGB stayed out of the mainstream for so long that all the bands were fully able to explore their personalities, including us. ... CB's was so important to us for giving us a place to really understand who we were, especially in the improvised songs." By 1975-76, CBGB had demonstrated the viability of original rock, and Max's followed CBGB example of booking local, unsigned acts.²⁵ Max's and CBGB would remain the central venues for punk rock through 1979, then were joined by others, including the Mudd Club, Peppermint Lounge, A7, and 171A.

The cheap rents that attracted cultural rebels from all over the U.S. to New York and – as we shall see – Los Angeles allowed the punk scenes to serve a function with an extended history in the American intellectual tradition: the city as both physical destination and metaphysical origin. During much of the nineteenth century, American intellectuals

²⁵ Lenny Kaye quoted in *The History of Rock 'n' Roll, Volume 9: Punk*, Time-Life Video and Television and Warner Brothers, VHS, 1995; Yvonne Sewall-Ruskin, High on Rebellion: Inside the Underground at Max's Kansas City (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1998), 218-53.

occupied themselves with detailing and condemning the social evils they saw proliferating in cities – problems such as violence and the sort of loose morality exemplified by alcohol use and prostitution – rather than looking at the intellectual and cultural life found therein.²⁶ By the turn of the twentieth century, this changed somewhat. At that time, bohemian enclaves emerged in various American cities, most notably New York, and their members adopted and promulgated the “view of the metropolis as the cradle of liberated personae [that] is now so familiar to us,” breaking “with a long tradition that cast the city as threatening and harsh, a place that shattered romantic illusion,” as historian Christine Stansell so eloquently states.²⁷ In other words, bohemians saw the city as a place in which they could smash the restraints of bourgeois Victorianism and refashion themselves into modern, enlightened, and – most importantly – more authentic individuals. Thus turn-of-the-twentieth-century Greenwich Village became both a destination and an origin; young Americans traveled there, but they did so only to begin a new journey of selfhood. The 1970s punk scenes served similar functions for newer groups of cultural rebels, and nowhere was this more true than in New York City.

A few New York punk rockers were born-and-raised Manhattanites, but the majority migrated to the city from nearby suburbs like the Bronx and Queens or from more remote places like Texas and Rhode Island. For example, Jayne County, the transsexual who originally performed as Wayne County, grew up in rural Dallas, Georgia. She first moved from Dallas to Atlanta, where she became part of the drag-queen scene. “But,” she says, “I

²⁶ See, for example, Lewis Perry, Boats against the Current: American Culture between Revolution and Modernity, 1820-1860 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); David S. Reynolds, Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 131-32; 82-7, 191, passim.

²⁷ Christine Stansell, American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century (New York: Henry Holt, 2000), 16.

was considered strange, even by the other drag queens, because I was into rock & roll. ... Eventually I left Atlanta and got a Greyhound bus to New York City.”²⁸ What Jayne and the rest of the punk migrants shared was a desire to come to New York to remake themselves into something new. Patti Smith perhaps said it most directly in “Piss Factory,” a tirade set in her New Jersey hometown, in which she rails against the disempowering monotony of factory work. What gets her through the day, keeps her from fainting in the factory heat, and prevents her from succumbing to the mediocrity of her co-workers’ lives is her desire to “be somebody”:

And I got nothin' to hide here save desire
And I'm gonna go, I'm gonna get out of here
I'm gonna get out of here, I'm gonna get on that train,
I'm gonna go on that train and go to New York City
I'm gonna be somebody, I'm gonna get on that train, go to New York City,
I'm gonna be so bad I'm gonna be a big star and I will never return,
Never return, no, never return, to burn out in this piss factory.

Punks seemed to be implicitly aware of ideas made explicit by subcultural theorists.

According to sociologist Claude S. Fischer, because cities have denser populations, they are more likely to develop subcultures based on unconventional behavior. Fischer disagrees with earlier scholars who believed urban life frayed social ties and moral codes, which in turn caused unconventionality, but he does think that concentrations of more diverse economic, spatial, cultural, and social features in cities means that subcultures have increased opportunities to form. Greater numbers mean a greater concentration of diversity, which allows people to meet, then build and maintain their subcultural institutions even in the face of outside pressures.²⁹

²⁸ Jayne County quoted in McNeil and McCain, *Please Kill Me*, 270-1.

²⁹ Claude S. Fischer, “The Subcultural Theory of Urbanism: A Twentieth-Year Assessment,” *Journal of Sociology* 101, no. 3 (November 1995): 543-51.

Like the bohemians seventy-five years earlier, many early punks had an optimistic view of the possibilities of personal transformation or becoming “liberated personae.” Perhaps most emblematic of this optimism was Richard Hell’s anthemic song, “Blank Generation,” first played publicly in April 1976. The lyrically simple song declares in its chorus, “I belong to the blank generation and/I can take it or leave it each time.” What “it” might be is not entirely clear, but “it” could be life as a whole, for the first line of the song states, “I was sayin’ let me out here/before I was even born.” Indeed listeners have most often interpreted the song in a bleak manner, seeing the phrase “blank generation” as a descriptor for a cohort unwilling or unable to think, create, or offer something meaningful to society. In 1977, the Sex Pistols, a band that would achieve far greater fame (or infamy) than Richard Hell and the Voidoids, released their song “Pretty Vacant,” probably drawing inspiration from Hell’s “Blank Generation.” “Pretty Vacant” and the Sex Pistols’ aggressively hopeless critique of society fueled an interpretation of punk rock as nihilistic and apathetic, a view that would be retroactively imposed on Hell’s song. But over the years Hell has insisted that “Blank Generation” has a more positive bent, an assertion supported by the song’s musical composition. The complete chorus is as follows:

I belong to the blank generation and
I can take it or leave it each time
I belong to the [*pause*] generation but
I can take it or leave it each time.

In the chorus, when Hell repeats the phrase beginning with “I belong,” there is a vocal gap, emphasized by a single beat, before the word generation, implying that the listener (or singer) can fill in the blank. The listener can and should define his own generation, fashion his own selfhood. Indeed Hell wrote in his journal in 1977, less than one year after he first performed

the song, “Real power is the ability to shape – will – the form of your own self which is your life.”³⁰

While punks like Hell often espoused optimism about the possibility of personal transformation in an urban setting, they, like the Beats of the 1940s and 1950s, ultimately demonstrated an ambivalent relationship with the city. The Talking Heads, one of the most successful of the early CBGB bands, moved to New York City from Rhode Island. In their 1978 song “Cities,” they suggest to the listener, “find yourself a city to live in,” and in “The Big Country” on the same album, they express derisive opinions about small-town America, finding it bland and unappealing:

I wouldn't live there if you paid me.
I couldn't live like that, no siree!
I couldn't do the things the way those people do.
I couldn't live there if you paid me to.

Overall, however, their tone is one of irony, expressing finally a belief that finding oneself through place is an unsure proposition. In “Cities,” David Byrne sings that people may travel and search, “They go up north and come back south,” and yet they “still got no idea where in the world they are.” Similarly, another CBGB band, the Dead Boys, who resettled in New York from Cleveland, vacillate between hope and resignation in their song “Big City.” At times, the singer doubts his ability to achieve success: “No chance to make the big time/ I been tryin’ hard” and even – though we doubt it—professes he “don’t care to be a star.” Yet he also asserts that it is “Too late to go back home,” so he is “gonna win/ fight the

³⁰ Richard Hell and the Voidoids, “Blank Generation,” *Blank Generation*, Sire, 1977; entry for 22 February 1977, Richard Hell (Meyers), *Artifact: Notebooks from Hell 1974-1980* (Madras and New York: Hanuman Books, 1992), 96.

odds/against gods/ here in the city of sin.”³¹ In the end, the singer feels compelled to stay in the city of sin because of his “many schemes” and “many dreams.” In other words, the city represented a site of both hope and despair for the Dead Boys; they came to New York to achieve their dreams, recognizing it as a mecca of rock ‘n’ roll possibilities, but it “ain’t too pretty,” and the band found it difficult to distinguish themselves from the crowd.

This recognition of the dark side of city life was – after sheer diversity – the most salient characteristic of New York punk’s cultural landscape. But these were not moral crusaders out to cure the city or the world of its ills. Indeed, they seemed to embrace the dark underbelly of New York during the crisis years of the 1970s. As Richard Hell wrote in his journal, “I want a positive method for believing in the worth of life that doesn’t exclude the horror.”³² Punks chose to live, socialize, and perform in seamy sections of town; they participated in some of the more unsavory aspects of street life, including drugs and prostitution; and the theme of violence pervades their lyrics and their lifestyles.

Choosing to live, work, and recreate on the Lower East Side or the East Village in the mid-1970s was a commitment to living with the realities of poverty and crime. David Byrne noted that “living in Alphabet City” (a seedy section of the East Village) provided the inspiration for “Life During Wartime” (1979) with its gritty urban locale.³³ Despite its fictional post-apocalyptic setting, one can see the influence of New York streets: “The sound of gunfire, off in the distance/ I’m getting used to it now/ Lived in a brownstone, lived in the

³¹ Talking Heads, “Cities” and “The Big Country,” *More Songs about Buildings and Food*, Sire, 1978. David Bowman suggests that homesickness is a frequent theme in Talking Heads songs. [*This Must Be the Place: The Adventures of Talking Heads in the 20th Century* (New York: Harper Entertainment, 2001), 241.] Dead Boys, “Big City,” *We Have Come for Your Children*, Sire, 1978.

³² Entry for 29 August, 1977, Hell, *Artifact*, 108.

³³ Alphabet City is in the East Village of New York City, just north of the Lower East Side. David Byrne quoted in Bowman, *This Must Be the Place*, 152.

ghetto/ I've lived all over this town.” Deborah Harry of Blondie grew comfortable with her Bowery surroundings. Living on the Bowery fit the circumstances of Blondie’s day-to-day lives and their struggles to become successful musicians. They lived with very little money, no heat, always worried about their next meal, and found themselves “surrounded by the symbols of our struggle,” the homeless or almost homeless alcoholic, addicted, or mentally challenged denizens of the Bowery. Despite the unsavory character of many of her neighbors, Harry found solace in her milieu: “The view out our front window often had the surreal look of a Fellini set, though the rotting decay of the Bowery was eerily peaceful after the local restaurant supply store closed in the evening.”³⁴ This quote highlights the degree to which punks identified with the darker side of life. Harry seems to have been more at ease with the homeless men and “rotting decay” of the Bowery than the work-a-day bustle of a viable commercial enterprise.

Although Blondie was ostensibly the most pop-oriented band in the early New York punk scene, with their proximity to the Bowery, perhaps it is unsurprising that they, like many of their cohort, demonstrated a fascination with violence and danger. They often explored themes and styles of the 1960s girl-groups like the Ronettes and the Shirelles, but added dark twists. Take, for example, the song “X-Offender,” on Blondie’s first album. Structurally, the song follows an established girl-group formula. Harry opens the song in a breathless spoken voice: “I saw you standing on the corner, you looked so big and fine. I really wanted to go out with you, so when you smiled, I laid my heart on the line.” A drum break follows, and the melody leads into a classic lament about unrequited love told from a

³⁴ Talking Heads, “Life During Wartime,” *Fear of Music*, Sire 1979; Roberta Bayley discusses how rough Alphabet City in the East Village was during punk’s heyday in her interview with Charlotte Robinson, “She Just Takes Pictures,” *PopMatters*, 30 August 2000, <http://www.popmatters.com/music/features/000830-bayley.html>, accessed September 26, 2006. Harry, *et al*, *Making Tracks*, 33.

female perspective. The curve ball comes, however, when we realize that the forlorn protagonist is a “sex offender,” a prostitute who has just been arrested by her love object, her “vision in blue.”³⁵ This is not a song about “the boy next door” who is “going to the chapel” with a proper young lady. Instead Blondie pushed the bad-girl image pioneered by such 1960s girl groups as the Shangri-Las to an extreme by recounting a love story between a hooker and a policeman. To some extent “X-Offender” is simply a humorous tale of a very unlikely situation, a hyperbolic rendition of an old girl-group theme. Yet the story is not entirely ironic or tongue-in-cheek, demonstrating instead an empathy for life on the street, acknowledgment that even those who are faceless and nameless to middle America have real emotions.

Prostitution and the sex trade provided not merely lyrical fodder for New York punk, but was a real source of income for some members of the community. Some performers themselves were purportedly prostitutes or strippers, as the Ramones song “53rd and 3rd” suggests. Dee Dee Ramone claimed to write this song based on first-hand experience as a male hustler working to feed his heroin habit.

53rd and 3rd, I'm tryin' to turn a trick
53rd and 3rd, you're the one they never pick
53rd and 3rd, don't it make you feel sick?

Then I took out my razor blade
Then I did what god forbade
Now the cops are after me
But I proved that I'm no sissy

On the one hand, the protagonist in the song is “sick” at having to turn tricks and eager to prove that he is “no sissy” and only works because he needs the money. On the other hand,

³⁵ Blondie, “X-Offender,” *Blondie*, Private Stock, 1976. In fact, the single was produced by Richard Gottehrer, who likewise produced the 1963 hit by the Angels, “My Boyfriend’s Back,” which also had a spoken word introduction.

he is humiliated by his lack of success as a prostitute, being “the one they never pick.”³⁶

Punks who labored as hookers or dancers, however, most often were not punk performers, although their role and labor was of critical importance in the New York punk scene.

Usually these were women who supported their “starving artist” boyfriends by working as strippers or prostitutes. Stiv Bators asserted in a 1977 interview, “In New York City ... almost all the [girls] that go with the guys in bands support them cause you don’t make much money in the beginning – [they] work in massage parlors, or are hookers or strippers.”³⁷

While Bators’ claim was probably somewhat hyperbolic, evidence suggests that a significant number of New York punk women did support themselves and/or their men through sex trades: Nancy Spungen, who would achieve infamy as Sid Vicious’ murdered girlfriend, was an exotic dancer; Dee Dee Ramone’s girlfriend Connie also danced and eventually turned tricks to support her heroin habit; and Pleasant Gehman, a Los Angeles punk who moved to New York for a few months in 1977, said that she “and all the girls in the scene there, like Anya Phillips, who used to be James White’s girlfriend, and Lydia [Lunch] [were] working at Times Square stripping in clubs.”³⁸

Dee Dee Ramone’s tale of heroin addiction was one of many such stories in New York punk. Indeed, accounts of drug use in New York punk are legion, outstripping those of any other punk scene, even decadent London and Los Angeles. The details of these stories are documented elsewhere, but for the purposes of this project, it is worth asking why many

³⁶ Ramones, “53rd and 3rd,” *The Ramones*, Sire, 1976; McNeil and McCain, *Please Kill Me*, 174-5.

³⁷ Interview with Stiv Bators of the Dead Boys, *Search and Destroy*, no. 4, 1977; reprinted in *Search and Destroy #1-6: The Complete Reprint*, ed. V. Vale (San Francisco: V/Search Publications, 1996), 77.

³⁸ Dee Dee Ramone, *Lobotomy: Surviving the Ramones*, 2nd ed. (New York: Thunder’s Mouth, 2000), 85-93, 190-3; Gehman, interview by author, 2004; McNeil and McCain, *Please Kill Me*, 148; see also, Roberta Bayley, email interview by author, 27 February 2007.

punks used drugs and how drugs affected the New York punk scene.³⁹ Certainly punks were influenced by previous youth cultures and their engagements with drugs, most notably the Beats and the 1960s counterculture. The Beats experimented with a variety of drugs, including marijuana, alcohol, psychedelics such as peyote, and opiates like heroin, but they were perhaps most famous for their adventures using prescription speed. Sixties hippies also dabbled widely but were, of course, best known for their use of marijuana and LSD. Certain outspoken Beats and hippies such as Allan Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and Timothy Leary extolled the creative advantages offered by drugs. Few punks embraced such ideas uncritically, but some, like Richard Hell and Dee Dee Ramone, vacillated between justifying drug use for creative purposes and deploring their own excesses. Dee Dee noted, “When I started taking drugs, my manic nervous energy turned from nervous twitches ... into inspirations for songs.” But he also observed about heroin, “I wonder if there wasn’t some systematic plan from somewhere to fuck up people in America. Letting dope into the country on purpose to fuck up fools like me, who they saw as the burdens of society.”⁴⁰ Few punk drug users unequivocally endorsed drugs as artistic enhancers, instead either seeing drugs and alcohol as escape or struggling with – and abhorring – addiction and its side effects. One reason for this attitude, perhaps, was one of the marked differences between punk and earlier youth cultures: the sheer volume and variety of drugs available in the 1970s. In addition to all the drugs mentioned above that were associated with earlier youth cultures – alcohol, weed, psychedelics, heroin, and speed – the New York punk scene saw its share of

³⁹ See, for example, McNeil and McCain, *Please Kill Me*, 129, 175-8, 193, *passim*; Ramone, *Lobotomy*, 35, 67, 103-5, *passim*; *Sid and Nancy*, videocassette, 111 min., Los Angeles: Embassy Home Entertainment, 1987.

⁴⁰ See, for instance, Steven Watson, *The Birth of the Beat Generation: Visionaries, Rebels, and Hipsters, 1944-1960* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995), 38-53, 121, 192-204, *passim*. Hell, *Artifact*, 62, 170, 172; Ramone, *Lobotomy*, 35.

Quaaludes and cocaine. Drug use in general had been on the rise since the mid-1960s, and cocaine and heroin in particular entered the United States in much greater quantities in the 1970s. Cocaine, initially exorbitantly expensive, fell in price over the decade, until by 1977 a Newsweek article discussed the rising popularity of this “Cadillac of drugs.” Furthermore, punk rock was beginning to coalesce at the tail end of the second peak of New York City heroin use in the twentieth century, 1965 to 1974.⁴¹

Drugs and sex were two ways punks embraced society’s darker side; the simple and obvious fact that the majority of the performing, socializing, and creativity that made up their scene took place at night was another. New York punk performances generally transpired in nightclubs, and the shows often ran even later than the average rock show. As Andy Schwartz, second owner and editor of the central New York punk fanzine, the New York Rocker, observed, “those clubs ran late, some of them. To see Johnny Thunders and the Heartbreakers, that was like a commitment. I mean they weren’t going to get on stage until two a.m.; in a place like Max’s [Kansas City], maybe later. Those guys lived on their own clock.”⁴²

As people of the night, many New York punks also prided themselves in having a common bond with street life. In 1974-75, before the scene solidified into something known as punk, participants and observers called the type of music emanating from CBGB “street rock,” meaning that it grew out of a street-wise life.⁴³ The petite photographer Stephanie

⁴¹ David F. Musto, ed., Drugs in America: A Documentary History (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 305, 382-4; Richard Steele with Susan Agrest, Sylvester Monroe, Paul Brinkley-Rogers, and Stephan Leshner, “The Cocaine Scene,” Newsweek, 30 May 1977, 20-22, 25; reprinted in Musto, ed., Drugs in America, 384-7; Bruce D. Johnson and Andrew Golub, “Generational Trends in Heroin Use and Injection in New York City,” in One Hundred Years of Heroin Use, ed. David F. Musto (Westport, Conn.: Auburn House, 2002), 116.

⁴² Andy Schwartz, interview by author, transcript, New York, N.Y., 25 June 2002, 15.

⁴³ Kristal, interview by author, 2002.

Chernikowski moved from the West Village to the Bowery in the mid-1970s, living alone in her “totally rough” neighborhood. She would “take the subway in the middle of the night, like three, four in the morning, carrying cameras, and, knock wood, never had anything happen.” She attributed this in part to the “whole head space of the time, ... that street thing,” noting “I was never rude to people or frightened of people, so it was easier to get along. ... I mean, you identified with the street people rather than condemning them of anything.” Additionally, a great deal of lyrical action took place on the streets. Punks literally and figuratively saw street life as an exciting alternative to a mundane “straight” life. As the Dead Boys sang in “Ain’t Nothing to Do,” because they were “sick of TV...bored of the tube ... so sick of romance ... real sick of you,” they “just wanna get out on the street ...find me something to do.”⁴⁴

Punk’s affinity for street-life dovetailed with its view of itself as a downtown phenomenon. As the New York punk scene grew, certain “bridge and tunnel” clubs became occasional and important venues for punk, including Mothers in Queens and Maxwell’s in Hoboken, but for the most part punk was a “downtown” scene, with the three most important clubs – Max’s Kansas City (213 Park Avenue South), CBGB (315 Bowery), and the Mudd Club (77 White St.) – lying south of 18th Street. Being “downtown” meant much more than living and being in a particular geographic location; it signified an alliance with nonconformist art and lifestyles. Thus when Blondie sang of “follow[ing] your bus downtown” or the Ramones “took the car downtown” they symbolically rejected the mainstream material and professional trappings of success to which uptown New Yorkers

⁴⁴ Stephanie Chernikowski, interview by author, transcript, New York, New York, 26 June 2002, 9-11; Dead Boys, “Ain’t Nothin’ To Do,” *Young, Loud, and Snotty*, Sire, 1977.

aspired. As the New York Dolls said, “When uptown comes downtown, better take her for a ride.”⁴⁵ The three main clubs also were within two miles of each other, another way in which function followed form in the scene. Despite the musical diversity of New York punk, the scene was generally very tight. According to Lenny Kaye the disparate musicians were bound together by a common cause of trying to revitalize the music industry, and therefore they supported each other: “And we all felt like there was a real mood of not only us against them, but a sense that it was a time for rock’s regeneration.”⁴⁶ Certain divides did emerge within the scene: some people preferred the vibe at Max’s over CBGB or vice versa; and there were tensions between bands like the Dead Boys, who played straight-ahead rock, and groups like the Talking Heads, who were seen as art rock. But in general New York City punk – at least until the advent of hardcore – did not atomize the way later scenes would, especially, as we shall see, in Los Angeles.

“In the Dirty City”: Sprawl and Noir in Los Angeles Punk Rock⁴⁷

The cultural geography of Los Angeles punk was both similar to and very different from that of New York punk. Both scenes benefited from low rents and started out in a very concentrated area. Punk rockers in both places embraced the grittiness of urban life and viewed the city as a site for both physical destination and metaphysical origin. Conversely, while the New York subculture remained concentrated primarily in downtown Manhattan, L.A. punk spread quickly throughout the greater metropolitan area and eventually splintered

⁴⁵ Blondie, “One Way or Another,” *Parallel Lines*, Chrysalis, 1978; Ramones, “Oh, Oh I Love Her So,” *Leave Home*, 1977; New York Dolls, “Private World,” *New York Dolls*, Mercury, 1973.

⁴⁶ Lenny Kaye quoted in *The History of Rock ‘n’ Roll, Volume 9: Punk*.

⁴⁷ Bad Religion, “Losing Generation,” *Into the Unknown*, Epitaph, 1983.

into a number of semi-autonomous scenes. Furthermore, while punks in both cities celebrated street life and its darker side, L.A. denizens did so in a particularly ironic fashion, a thrust following L.A.'s long-standing noir tradition.

As in New York, Los Angeles punk rockers benefited from cheap rents and thus found it easy to get by on rather modest incomes. Although by the mid-1970s Orange County and other suburban areas began to exhibit the soaring real estate values that would mark late-twentieth-century southern California, certain in-town areas of Los Angeles remained quite reasonable or even fell in value. For example, Hollywood, L.A.'s first punk center, suffered a decline in the 1960s and early 1970s. Its office buildings saw fifty to sixty percent occupancy at best, and many high-end specialty shops deserted the area for more prestigious locations like Beverly Hills. This degeneration was good news for punk rockers. For example, X band-mates Billy Zoom, John Doe, and Exene Cervenka shared a Hollywood bungalow for under \$400.⁴⁸

L.A. punk, like its New York counterpart, began as a small movement concentrated in a focused geographic area: Hollywood. But this was not "the Hollywood that was known and revered throughout the world as ... Glamour City, Tinsel Town, the Dream Factory," as L.A. punk writer and fan Pleasant Gehman recalled. Instead "my Hollywood was a forgotten section of town" that "resembled a seedy carnival midway more than a touristy thoroughfare."⁴⁹ This Hollywood was rarely seen by national audiences; instead this was the sordid underbelly described in the writings of Charles Bukowski and sung about by Jackson

⁴⁸ Bruce T. Torrence, *Hollywood: The First Hundred Years* (New York: Zoetrope, 1982), 263; Vicki Arkoff, "X-Posé," *On Music and Media* 1, no 3 (August 1982): 29. The way the article reads, the whole bungalow might rent for \$131, but I interpreted it to mean they each paid \$131. Lisa Fancher also talks about reasonable rents. [Fancher, email interview by author, email, June 2004.]

⁴⁹ Pleasant Gehman, "Party at Ground Zero Zero," in *Make the Music Go Bang: The Early L.A. Punk Scene*, ed. Don Snowden (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1997), 129.

Browne in “Boulevard,” where runaways’ dreams of stardom were exchanged for the grim realities of prostitution and homelessness.⁵⁰ Like New York punks, their counterparts in Los Angeles – by necessity and choice – embraced the darker side of life in a big city – in the places they lived and frequented, in their lifestyles, and in their music. Perhaps most emblematic of this allegiance was punk’s first physical habitat in L.A., the Masque, an illegal and impromptu club that was analogous to New York’s CBGB in symbolism. Whereas CBGB sat on the Bowery below a flophouse hotel, the Masque occupied an enormous basement below the Pussycat Lounge, a strip club that “was just loaded with burn outs and ... sleaze bags” on North Cherokee Avenue, just south of Hollywood Boulevard.⁵¹ As detailed in chapter 1, the Masque had no business licenses, emerging ad hoc in June 1977 from Brendan Mullen’s desire to secure rehearsal space for his band. In order to make the spot more affordable, he subleased portions of it to other musicians, and eventually the musicians’ interactions led to spontaneous jam sessions and weekend performances. Within a few months, Mullen began charging a cover and an underground club – literally and figuratively – was born.

That the movement’s first home in Los Angeles sat below a business devoted to adult entertainment was not surprising given developments in Hollywood just prior to the punk era. Since the mid-1960s, the area saw more and more “[f]estering pockets of sexbook [sic] stores, sex shops, strip joints, ... sex-movie houses, massage parlors, and the like.” Prostitution flourished, and from 1969 to 1975 Hollywood’s crime rate increased 7.6 percent,

⁵⁰ See, for example, Charles Bukowski, Notes of a Dirty Old Man (North Hollywood: Essex House, 1969); Jackson Browne, “Boulevard,” *Hold Out*, Elektra, 1980.

⁵¹ John Doe, interviewed for the Experience Music Project, transcript, 1998, 10.

nearly double that of Los Angeles as a whole for the same period.⁵² Two well-known male hustler – and eventually punk – hang outs, the Gold Cup and Arthur J.’s, became a “Hollywood in-joke” for punks when Brendan Mullen, Geza X, and Hal Negro formed Arthur J. and the Gold Cups, “the Masque house band.”⁵³ Additionally, one of Hollywood’s most outrageous punks, Black Randy, “romanticized the whole street-hustler, drug-culture, criminal dark side of L.A. in his writing,” according to John Doe, “But he didn’t live on the street and he wasn’t a hustler. ... Still, he totally embraced it, saw it as something that was pure and totally countercultural.” Randy said he wrote “Trouble at the Cup” about “this fantasy [he] had that all the male prostitutes in Hollywood would become punks and overthrow the LAPD.” Some of the young male prostitutes (mostly runaways) Black Randy immortalized in song were participants in the Hollywood punk scene.⁵⁴

Punk rockers’ happy home under the Pussycat Lounge and their affinity for seedy eateries were evidence of what structural anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss calls homology: a symbolic fit between a subculture’s values and its lifestyles, including the places they frequent or spaces they create. At the Masque and with their interaction with male-hustler street culture, punks actually and metaphorically embraced Hollywood’s underground street culture. Geographer Susan Ruddick discusses other ways in which Hollywood punks “made use of spaces that reinforced notions of the appropriation of the forbidden, the use of objects in a way that emphasized the sartorial, the heretical, or the profane,” by treating the

⁵² Torrence, Hollywood, 263-4.

⁵³ Spitz and Mullen, Neutron Bomb, 142-3.

⁵⁴ John Doe quoted in Spitz and Mullen, Neutron Bomb, 104; Black Randy quoted in Spitz and Mullen, Neutron Bomb, 142; for a very disturbing account of young prostitutes in Hollywood, see Brendan Mullen, Don Bolles, and Adam Parfrey, Lexicon Devil: The Fast Times and Short Life of Darby Crash and the Germs (Los Angeles: Feral House, 2002), 149-51.

Hollywood cemetery as a “living room” and squatting at manors infamous for purported murders or outrageous sexual activity.⁵⁵

Another symbol of L.A. punk’s commitment to street life and evidence of homology between lifestyle and ethos was the Canterbury Apartments, located at 1746 Cherokee Avenue, about one block north of the Masque. According to Margot Olaverria of the Go-Go’s, “The Canterbury was this classic old Hollywood apartment building, but it was so run-down. It was a haven for underclass marginals, especially punk rockers like myself with no regular income.” In 1978 there were, according to bandmate Belinda Carlisle, “at least fifty punks ... living at the Canterbury,” including Trudie Plunger, Hellin Killer, Alice Bag, Nicky Beat, Lorna Doom, and Jane Wiedlin. “There were a few homeless street people hanging out there, too, but there was music coming from every room. You’d walk into the courtyard and there’d be a dozen different punk songs all playing at the same time. It was an incredible environment.” Writer and punk fan “Phast Phreddie” Patterson described the building as “a wreck. The neon sign on the side of the building was broken and, appropriately, only ‘Cant’ lit up.”⁵⁶ The building manager, known as the Reverend because of his association with an obscure Islamic sect, let resident punks use a basement room as rehearsal space. Those who took advantage of this space included the Stern brothers and their band the Extremes, the Screamers, and the Bags.

⁵⁵ Dick Hebdige surveys the literature on subcultures that uses homology in his study of British punk, Subculture: The Meaning of Style (London: Routledge, 1979), 113-4; Stuart Hall, et al., “Subculture, Culture and Class,” in Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain, eds. Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (London: Hutchinson, 1976), 3-59; Susan M. Ruddick, Young and Homeless in Hollywood: Mapping Social Identities (New York: Routledge, 1996), 101-4.

⁵⁶ Fred Patterson gives the Canterbury address in “Like Everything Else in Los Angeles, It is Now a Mini Mall,” in Make the Music Go Bang!: The Early L.A. Punk Scene, ed. Don Snowden (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1997), 26; Margot Olaverria and Belinda Carlisle quoted in Spitz and Mullen, Neutron Bomb, 167, 169.

Los Angeles punks, like their New York counterparts, embraced a dark lifestyle, one that functioned at night and centered on music, drugs, and alcohol. Shortly before the Canterbury community coalesced, the Plunger Pit served as punk central. An apartment on La Jolla, it was occupied by “the cutest girls on the scene,” Trudie and Trixie Plunger, Hellin Killer, and Mary Rat, known collectively as The Plungers, “a band that never played.”⁵⁷ Said Trudie: “We had an idea to start a band but found no time to practice or do anything practical though, we were busy managing the social scene from our apt.” In a 1999 interview, Trudie recalled that they preferred gin but could not remember “what kind of jobs most people had,” a telling insight into the gang’s priorities at the time. She expanded by saying that “Charlotte Caffey [of the Go-Go’s] had a job, and ... she almost wasn’t even like one of us. She was almost like a straight person even, because she was so together. ... But most people, I don’t even know if they had jobs, you know, they just kind of got by somehow, money from the parents. I don’t know how. Selling pot. Who knows?” Indeed several L.A. punk rockers interviewed for this project admitted they sold drugs to supplement their income or finance endeavors like recording an album or beginning a record label.⁵⁸

Although punk everywhere shared a certain fascination with the grittier side of life, this interest played a particularly important and ironic role in Los Angeles punk. While middle America envisioned southern California as a utopia of palm trees, beaches, beautiful homes, and happy families, punks gave witness to a dystopia, home to teenage prostitutes, violent crime, a brutal police force, and personal alienation. As geographer Mike Davis

⁵⁷ X8 and Hellin Killer, quoted in Spitz and Mullen, Neutron Bomb, 129-30.

⁵⁸ Trudie Arguelles Barrett, email interview by author, 2004; Trudie Arguelles Barrett, interview by the Experience Music Project, transcript, 1999, 32-3. Predictably, most interviewees went off the record to discuss their tenures as dealers.

points out, this dialectic of sunshine and noir has a long history in discourse about Los Angeles.⁵⁹ L.A. punk offered a bleakly ironic interpretation of their city, as we see in the Screemers' "The Girl in the Car with the Glasses and the Gun (She's the Girl)," which juxtaposes utopia and dystopia:

A small boy spotted her by the beach,
By this time she had the top of her car down
A green scarf was blowing from around her neck
Latin rhythms were blaring from the radio
Only the sound of her laughter can be heard

She's the girl in the car with the glasses and the gun.
She's the girl in the car with the glasses and the gun

She pulled into a service station.
She checked out her face in the mirror
The blood above her left eye had dried
She heard a voice outside
In her haste, she left behind a red slicker raincoat

She's the girl in the car with the glasses and the gun.
She's the girl in the car with the glasses and the gun

It was nighttime when she entered the city
The old man at the toll bridge tried to stop her
By that time she was only sound in the distance
The giant that is the city swallowed her up.

The idyllic southern California setting of an early verse – a carefree drive to the beach in a convertible – contrasts with the hints of violence and urban alienation that follow. The listener receives no dramatic resolution, learning only that the character disappears into the city night. The song's dark realism and its portrayal of the anomie of modern urban life place it in the noir tradition of fiction and film. Indeed noir was one of the primary ways Los

⁵⁹ Los Angeles as utopia or dystopia is a common theme both in popular culture and academe. See, for instance, Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London and New York: Verso, 1990), 15-40; William Alexander McClung, *Landscapes of Desire: Anglo Mythologies of Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 1-71.

Angeles punks coped with the irony of feeling alienated and unmoored while living in a city lauded as the pinnacle of the post-World-War-II American dream. L.A. punk noir cynically detailed life in a gritty, transient urban environment and foregrounded the alienation, absurdity, and cruelty of impersonal modern life. The subculture discussed crime and serious social problems without necessarily attempting to restore order or demonstrating a clear appreciation for the difference between good and evil.⁶⁰

The band that most consistently demonstrated noir themes was X, whose lyricists, John Doe (bassist and singer) and Exene Cervenka (singer) wrote from a literary background. Doe came to Los Angeles from Baltimore because he wanted a big change, but his first exposure to the city came from the likes of hard-boiled detective novelist James M. Cain and poet/journalist Charles Bukowski. Cervenka moved from Florida to California in the summer of 1976 and found a job at the Beyond Baroque Literary/Arts Center in Venice. It was there that she was exposed to “all this Bukowski stuff. Up till then, my sister was my only influence as far as writing and art.”⁶¹ Beyond Baroque was also host to the Venice Poetry Workshop, where Doe and Cervenka met. In a 1998 interview, Cervenka acknowledged that two of X’s most important influences were noir and a Beat sensibility: “we ... kind of had the Raymond Chandler thing happening, and the Charles Bukowski thing.”⁶² Drawing on Chandler, Cain, and the tradition of noir, X sang of the lack of

⁶⁰ R. Barton Palmer, introduction to Perspectives on Film Noir (New York: G. K. Hall, 1996), 3-17; Andrew Dickos, Street with No Name: A History of the Classic American Film Noir (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002), 62-5; Nicholas Christopher, Somewhere in the Night: Film Noir and the American City (New York: Free Press, 1997), 11-20, 44-8, 191-3.

⁶¹ Exene Cervenka quoted in Spitz and Mullen, Neutron Bomb, 97; “Beyond Baroque,” <http://www.beyondbaroque.org/> and <http://www.myspace.com/beyondbaroque>, accessed 19 October 2007; Robert Hilburn, “X Marks the Heart of L.A.’s Rock Scene,” Los Angeles Times, 22 June 1981, sec. CAL, pp. 1, 72-4.

⁶² Exene Cervenka, interview by the Experience Music Project, transcript, Los Angeles, Calif., 29 April 1998, 2.

meaningful personal connections in “Sex and Dying in High Society,” “Blue Spark,” “Poor Girl,” and “Painting the Town Blue” and death and violence in “Johnny Hit and Run Paulene,” “The Hungry Wolf,” and “Come Back to Me.” All the songs portray the complicated tangle of urban relationships typical of noir. In “Blue Spark,” a man and a woman lose and find each other amidst the thousands of distractions in the city.

He waits in a beach apartment – blue spark
Thousands of lights, thousands of people
She's forgotten him for the bodies around her
Blue shock, exchange blue shock, exchange blue spark
What goes between the eyes downtown – blue spark
Loudspeakers and searchlights, the boulevard
She comes home later just to give him blue spark

Doe and Cervenka wrote poetic lyrics that – like noir fiction – leave the listener a bit dazed, unsure of what just took place. Are the characters in the song lovers? If so, is “she” a wife, an illicit lover, a prostitute, or something else? “She” and “he” are connected only tenuously, through a blue spark, which seems to link her just as strongly (or weakly) to the faceless crowds that surround her on the boulevard.⁶³

X’s version of noir combined Raymond Chandler’s focus on death, betrayal, urban labyrinths, and the slipperiness of good and evil with Charles Bukowski’s dark personal take on Los Angeles. Bukowski seemed to be of two minds when he wrote of Los Angeles in Notes of a Dirty Old Man: “L.A., the greatest city in the universe. Where each man and woman had a special style and a natural cool. Even the fools had a certain grace. L.A. was the end of a dead culture crawled west to get away from itself. L.A. knew it was rotten and

⁶³ X, “Sex and Dying in High Society” and “Johnny Hit and Run Paulene,” *Los Angeles*, Slash, 1980; X, “The Hungry Wolf,” “Come Back to Me,” and “Blue Spark,” *Under the Big Black Sun*, Elektra, 1982; X, “Poor Girl” and “Painting the Town Blue,” *More Fun in the New World*, Elektra, 1983.

laughed at it.”⁶⁴ X, and many other L.A. punks, shared Bukowski’s ambivalence. Doe and Cervenka seemed simultaneously drawn to Los Angeles and repelled by it. In “We’re Having Much More Fun,” X chronicles life in the city:

Leave your sister home and come with us
It’s not dark enough, not yet
LOUDER THAN HELL WILL BE
We’ll love the black night falling with every unfamiliar scene

(Chorus) We’re having much more fun!
You don’t know where we gone
We’re having much more fun!

...
Los Angeles treats everyone like a drunk in bed
Washing dirty bums with rain like dishes on the floor
Four a.m. we couldn’t care less where we left home
See our shadows long and sweaty; we shall return next fall

(Chorus)

The black & white hotel has a stripper club on the bottom floor
"A GREAT PLACE TO BRING YOUR WIFE, GIRLFRIEND OR AN OUT-OF-TOWN GUEST"
In the hallways upstairs, everyone hangs out the doors
And the silhouettes act obscene across from where we stay.

The protagonists blossom at night, exploring their city in a seemingly adventuresome, carefree manner, but the darkness, shadows, and silhouettes reinforce the assertion that “Los Angeles treats everyone” in a harsh, impersonal manner. It was a great irony that punks would find the city – the place to which they migrated in search of belonging and self-actualization – an alienating, impersonal place. It is also a testament to the difficulties inherent in punk of building community based on an ethos of individualism. But tension or irony is an occurrence that found frequent expression in noir fiction and film. Andrew Dickos sees each of a host of noir characters on “a quest to locate the self lost in a world of

⁶⁴ Charles Bukowski, *Notes of a Dirty Old Man* (North Hollywood: Essex House, 1969). It is a collection of columns originally written for *Open City*, an alternative weekly paper in Los Angeles published by John Bryan.

clutter, distraction, and noise.... It is the loss of self among the masses that stimulates so many noir protagonists to confront themselves in a milieu that produces such anxiety and dispossession.”⁶⁵

As punk transitioned from being a Hollywood phenomenon to being a subculture spread throughout the greater metropolitan area, noir became less important. Los Angeles, like New York, lacked many venues for original rock. In 1977, the Troubadour and the Starwood soldiered along, doing pretty well as industry showcases. But with a poor rock market and the onset of disco, these clubs struggled. Perhaps the best indication of the difficulties faced by even established venues was the situation at the legendary Whisky a Go Go. Home to the Doors in the late 1960s and a showcase for many other legends like Janis Joplin and Buffalo Springfield, the Whisky stopped hosting live rock for a period in the mid-seventies, featuring instead a “crazy theatre group” akin to a rock ‘n’ roll variety show.⁶⁶ With few outlets for live rock and the examples of growing punk scenes in New York and London, L.A. punk rockers turned quickly to DIY spaces. The Masque, as shown above, was a happy accident. With little pre-planning, the Masque became a busy venue for punk in 1977, “pulling two, three hundred people any night they were open,” according to John Doe of X. Billy Zoom, X’s guitarist, observed, “There had been no live rock in Los Angeles for seven years. The Masque existed in lieu of anything else.”⁶⁷ The more established rock venues had heretofore been “industry” clubs, booking bands already signed to or being recruited by large labels. These clubs took note of the large crowds drawn to original,

⁶⁵ X, “We’re Having Much More Fun,” *More Fun in the New World*, Elektra, 1983; Dickos, *Noir in America*, 63.

⁶⁶ Gehman, interview by author, 2004.

⁶⁷ John Doe, interview for EMP, 14; Billy Zoom quoted in Rian Malan, “The Last Show at the Whisky: X Encounters the Beast,” *LA Weekly*, 24 April 1981, 59.

unsigned rock at the Masque fairly rapidly and “so these bands that were playing at The Masque and the bands from New York started playing at The Whiskey, started playing at The Starwood.”⁶⁸

According to Los Angeles Times music critic Robert Hilburn in 1979, the arrival of punk rock in Los Angeles helped created “a dramatic resurgence” in the city’s rock scene. Much of the credit for this revival must go to the do-it-yourself efforts of musicians, fans, and promoters. Hilburn notes the great increase in the number of bands advertising by DIY flyers, especially at clubs like “the Starwood, the Troubadour, Madame Wong’s, the Cuckoo’s Nest, Hong Kong Café, Gazzarri’s, the Bla-Bla, and the Sweetwater.”⁶⁹ While the Starwood, the Troubadour, and the Cuckoo’s Nest had longer histories of hosting live original rock, most of the venues in Hilburn’s list were either brand new establishments or existing enterprises that recently transitioned to hosting live rock. Take Madame Wong’s, for example. After the fire marshal and other city officials got wise to the Masque, shutting it down early in 1978 after only a few months of lively business, punk fan Paul Greenstein talked Madame Wong’s proprietors, an older Chinese couple, into letting him use the upstairs room in their Chinatown restaurant to book bands on the weekends. When Madame Wong closed her doors to the more hardcore punk bands in the spring of 1979, the nearby Hong Kong Café, recognizing the business punk brought to Wong’s, picked up her castoffs. Thus

⁶⁸ Doe, interview for EMP, 14.

⁶⁹ Another Times music critic, Richard Cromelin had claimed a “rock resurgence” in L.A. by December 1976, citing bands like the Runaways, Van Halen, and the Pop as leading the way as examples of “local teen-on-the-street talent,” but his was really wishful thinking at that point. [Robert Hilburn, “The L.A. Rock Scene: A Dramatic Resurgence,” Los Angeles Times, 24 July 1979, sec. V, pp. 1, 10-11; Richard Cromelin, “L.A. Rock Resurgence,” Los Angeles Times, 18 December 1976, sec. II, p. 10.]

began a spate of regular – but usually short-lived – clubs for punk.⁷⁰ Most were concentrated in the more urban areas of Los Angeles like Hollywood and Chinatown, but a few began popping up in the suburbs, like the Fleetwood in Redondo Beach and Rock Corporation in Van Nuys.⁷¹

Gradually, Hollywood lost its status as the exclusive center of Los Angeles-area punk, and by 1980 L.A. punk exhibited the same physical characteristic that dominated the urban geography of southern California: sprawl. Punk-rock sprawl developed for a number of reasons. First, by the late 1970s, the broader national or transnational punk rock community had grown greatly in numbers and sophistication. Relatively speaking, it was still a tiny subculture, but a skeletal network of fanzines, pen pals, and labels had developed to the point that young people outside hip, in-town neighborhoods like Hollywood or the Lower East Side could learn more about this underground subculture. Second, punk rock was built, of course, on the DIY ethos: don't wait until you are technically proficient on your instrument to start a band; do it today! Rather than whine about not being able to get to the hip Hollywood shows or play in their clubs, start a scene in your own area! The increased knowledge and numbers, on the one hand, and the DIY ethic, on the other, characterized punk everywhere in the late 1970s, not just in L.A. Thus, to some extent Los Angeles punk-rock sprawl paralleled the general growth and diffusion of punk as smaller scenes

⁷⁰ According to Flipside, the fire marshal closed the Masque Jan 17, 1978. [Flipside, no. 6 Jan 1978, insert.] G. Dewar MacLeod, "Kids of the Black Hole": Youth Culture in Postsuburbia" (Ph.D. diss, City University of New York, 1998), 106-24; Patterson, "Like Everything Else in Los Angeles, It is Now a Mini Mall," 28-9; Spitz and Mullen, Neutron Bomb, 175-7; "Music," LA Weekly, 8 December 1978, 11; Don Snowden, "L.A. Rock – A Club-ography," Los Angeles Times, 7 September 1980, sec. CAL, pp. 69-70.

⁷¹ Victor Bockris, "Some Strange Things about L.A.," LA Weekly, 5 March 1979, 4-5; advertisement for Hong Kong Café, LA Weekly, 7 June 1979, 13.

proliferated across the United States and Europe. Yet, the degree to which L.A.-area punk rockers developed semi-autonomous scenes was unusual. So why did this happen?

One locally specific potential explanation for L.A. punk rock sprawl can be found in the radio show “Rodney on the ROQ.” As noted in the first chapter, Hollywood hipster Rodney Bingenheimer parlayed his extensive knowledge of rock music and social networks into a regular gig on KROQ, a leading Los Angeles rock station, in August 1976. KROQ’s powerful signal reached young people throughout L.A.’s far-flung suburbs, and in interview after interview, memoir after memoir, L.A. punks cite Rodney’s importance in, first, turning them on to and educating them about local and extralocal punk rock and, second, getting local bands on the radio. John Denney of the Weirdos “became aware of the scene[s] in New York and London, just through reading the papers, and listening to Rodney on KROQ out here.” Similarly, Lisa Fancher, founder of Frontier records, recalled that as a teenager in the San Fernando Valley, the only place on the radio to hear the New York punk bands was “Rodney’s show.” Joe Suquette, who organized punk shows at the Vex in East Los Angeles acknowledged Rodney’s role in drawing attention to East L.A. bands like the Illegals, the Brat, the Undertakers, the Stains, and Violent Children.⁷²

Another reason for punk sprawl was the cliquishness among some of the original Hollywood punks. Punk snobbery certainly was not unique to Los Angeles (despite the egalitarian pretensions of its ethos), but it was more pronounced there than in New York

⁷² John Denney, interview by the Experience Music Project, transcript, 1999, 15; Fancher, email interview by author, 2004; see also Jeff McDonald quoted in Mullen, Bolles, and Parfrey, *Lexicon Devil*, 155; “Interview with Joe ‘Vex’ Suquette,” *Flipside* 22 (December 1980): 18-20. At the same time, Suquette observed, “A lot of [the bands] are into the politics of being segregated from the Hollywood bands. Or basically writing about what’s been going on in East LA.” In other words, the Illegals and the Brat were happy with the growing scene in their own part of town and didn’t necessarily want to be absorbed into the original Hollywood scene. For discussion of Rodney, see also Patrick Di Puccio, interview by author, transcript, 21 July 2004, 4; John Doe, interview by EMP, 7;

City. There were at least two reasons L.A. punk was more cliquish than its New York counterpart. First, Los Angelenos were relative latecomers to punk. This is not to say that proto-punk did not exist in L.A. prior to the fluorescence of the New York and London scenes, but punk did not coalesce into a coherent scene until after New York and London had established their dominant positions in the punk hierarchy. Thus, as is often the case with a new cultural phenomenon, participants attempted to claim distinction and importance through their tenure in the movement. Even relative insiders felt the sting of elitism. For example, Anna Statman, writer for Slash, said there was a social hierarchy within the Masque based on who had “discovered” the action first. “If you arrived even two weeks after the Masque shows began, you were made to feel you’d missed out.” Even Johnny Stingray, the very first musician to rent space in the Masque and someone who literally lived there during the height of the Masque action (summer of 1977), said he realized after the fact “that there was a clique of insiders to which I didn’t belong.”⁷³

Another reason Los Angeles punk tended to be more cliquish than the early New York scene was that Los Angelenos were less confident of their city’s status as a bohemian mecca. While Los Angeles had been a destination for Americans seeking celluloid fame for much of the twentieth century, it lacked the long bohemian history and well entrenched art scene of New York. Even within rock ‘n’ roll, L.A. had long demonstrated insecurity. According to the rock writer Harvey Kubernik, in the late 1960s “LA was treated like it was on the margins by Rolling Stone, even though they had a bureau here. ... Rolling Stone kind

⁷³ Anna Statman, interview by author, tape recording, Los Angeles, 19 July 2004; Johnny Stingray, interview by author, tape recording, Los Angeles, 21 July 2004.

of looked down on us from San Francisco.”⁷⁴ In a city like Los Angeles, whose image and economy depended to a large degree on two very image-conscious industries – film and real estate, even the hippie heyday of the Sunset Strip of the 1960s smacked of commercialism. L.A. punks were searching for the sort of more authentic urban bohemia found in Paris or New York; they bought into the century-old idea of cities as nurturing new, authentic, artistic milieus. And most Hollywood scenesters were recently transplants, from the suburbs or out of state. As Lisa Fancher journalist and founder of L.A.’s Frontier Records, put it, “everyone pretended to be from Hollywood; but let’s face it, we were all from the suburbs and moved into Hollywood, if possible. All the major punkers either moved here from another state or came from the Valley.”⁷⁵

If relative insiders like Statman and Stingray felt the pressures of Hollywood punk elitism, many outsiders were even more acutely aware of the punk social hierarchy (and the contradictions it suggested). According to Keith Morris, original lead singer of Hermosa Beach-based Black Flag and later front man for the Circle Jerks, “We wanted to play the L.A. scene, the Hollywood scene, which was very cliquish. They were all into the English fashion statement – nothing against that – but we were just [wearing] hand-me-downs, whatever we could pick up at the Good Will, you know, that kind of a fashion non-statement I guess.” Morris and his friends did not feel welcome in Hollywood, and thus, “we had to go out and find our own venues.” Black Flag and other suburban area bands like the Crowd and

⁷⁴ Harvey Kubaerik quoted in Paul Gorman, *In Their Own Write: Adventures in the Music Press* (London: Sanctuary Publishing, 2001), 55. L.A. punks also chafed at the notion that San Francisco rock was better. In her fanzine, *Generation X*, Jade Zebest wrote an editorial claiming L.A. punk should “wear the crown” of “punk rock supremacy” in response to a Howie Klein article in *Creem* magazine that lauded San Francisco punk over that in L.A. [Alice Bag website, <http://www.alicebag.com/images/sfvslaflyr.jpg>, accessed 20 October 2007.]

⁷⁵ Fancher, email interview by author, 2004. On Hollywood punkers as recent transplants, see, for instance, Jane Wiedlin, interview by the Experience Music Project, transcript, 1999, 1-2; Trudie Barrett, interview by author, 2004.

Channel 3 often found it easier to find gigs on their own turf, playing local parties, VFW halls, even community events.⁷⁶

In addition to elitism, age was another reason some newer punks found it difficult to become part of the existing Hollywood scene. As a more extensive network of fanzines, pen pals, and the occasional radio show like Rodney on the ROQ spread word of punk throughout southern California and the United States in general, punk's fan base grew younger on average. Many new participants in L.A.'s suburbs were still in high school, perhaps too young to drive or have the money to buy a car. Furthermore, Los Angeles lacked the extensive public transportation system of New York and other eastern cities. Youth, distance, and lack of transportation made it difficult for many suburban punks to travel into Hollywood to enjoy an existing scene. Jeff McDonald, who with his brothers would form the band Redd Kross, was fifteen years old living in Hawthorne when he "first read about The Masque and bands like the Germs. There was absolutely no punk rock where we lived whatsoever." His parents drove him to shows in Hollywood on occasion, but more often McDonald's experience was typical of his peers: "when you're a teen in the South Bay, 15 miles from Hollywood, and you don't drive and there's no rapid transit, you're basically just stuck there."⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Keith Morris, interview for the Experience Music Project, transcript, 1998, 5; Keith Morris, interview by author, tape recording, Los Angeles, Calif., 20 July 2004; Jim Kaa, interview by author, tape recording, Huntington Beach, Calif., 3 July 2004; Kimm Gardner, interview by author, tape recording, Huntington Beach, Calif., 12 July 2004.

⁷⁷ In the 1920s, the faction of business leaders who favored roads won out over that favoring expanding the interurban rail system. In the 1930s and 1940s, Los Angelenos planned and began a system of freeways that was sped up by the federal funding provided in the Interstate Highway Act of 1956. [Davis, City of Quartz, 122; Robert M. Fogelson, The Fragmented Metropolis: Los Angeles, 1850-1930 (1967; reprint, with a foreword by Robert Fishman, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 174-80; Jeff McDonald quoted in Mullen, Bolles, and Parfrey, Lexicon Devil, 155.

Hollywood punk's elitism and punk rockers' declining average age reinforced other pressures toward punk sprawl in southern California, including the area's existing geographic development. The most important locally specific reason for sprawl in L.A. punk was the area's development into what geographers term exurbia, edge cities, or postsuburbia, a topic Dewar MacLeod discusses in his work on Los Angeles punk.⁷⁸ In these geographic formations, outlying areas no longer function as simply bedroom communities for business and industry located in city centers. Instead these remote locales became self-contained, self-sustaining entities supplying not only residential services but ostensibly employment all the required economic, social, and cultural needs of their communities. The sprawl generated by an extensive freeway system and the ethos behind exurban self-sufficiency meant that, like their non-punk fellow exurbanites, punks in South Bay, the Inland Empire, or Fullerton, for example, did not necessarily choose to leave their communities for cultural fulfillment. They might travel all over the L.A. area to see bands and visit with other punks, but they concentrated their creative efforts within their own neighborhoods. Thus by summer 1980, Flipside, the most important southern California punk 'zine, began regular reports on local punk scenes in places like Huntington Beach and San Diego.

“Putting D.C. on the Map”: Washington, D.C. Punk⁷⁹

While New York and Los Angeles both had relatively extensive and established cultural traditions before the punk era, Washington, D.C. would be hard pressed to claim the same distinction. From its inception, D.C. was a boardinghouse town, temporary host to

⁷⁸ MacLeod, “Kids of the Black Hole,” 27-42, passim.

⁷⁹ “Putting D.C. on the Map” is the motto of Dischord Records, a Washington, D.C. punk label founded in 1980.

people coming and going with the political administrations of the day. Much of D.C. – or at least white D.C. – maintains this impermanent nature today. Because of this history, critics long have castigated D.C.’s lack of indigenous culture. Many members of D.C.’s punk scene were typical representatives of the city’s transient white population. As sons and daughters of politicians and diplomats, some had experienced life in exotic locales such as Afghanistan and Korea but yearned for a face-to-face culture they could call their own, one that would yield the sense of belonging they had yet to find. For them, punk rock provided such a community, and during the late twentieth century, these young people helped D.C. stake an undisputed cultural niche by establishing an important place in the history of punk rock.⁸⁰ Several factors shaped the city’s punk cultural landscape, most importantly young people’s efforts to find belonging in a placeless place, their heightened sense of being punk provincials, and eventually a degree of political and social activism that seemed to come naturally to a group of young people in the nation’s capitol.

Many scholars have argued for the diminished role of place in late-twentieth-century culture. For example, sociologist Sharon Zukin states, “most modern cultures either trivialize or ignore the idea of place. The language of modernism expresses a universal experience of movement *away* from place, and aspires to submerge or incorporate it into a ‘larger’ whole. ... In brief, as markets have been globalized, place has been diminished.”⁸¹

⁸⁰ Carl Abbott states that competing regional identities have held ascendancy at various points in D.C.’s history, but to some extent, D.C. is “a city that purchased power at the loss of soul and character.” [Political Terrain: Washington, D.C., from Tidewater Town to Global Metropolis (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 2-19.] For the most comprehensive discussion of D.C. punk, see Andersen and Jenkins, Dance of Days; see also, Steven Blush, American Hardcore: A Tribal History (Los Angeles: Feral House, 2001); Ian MacKaye and Jeff Nelson, eds., Twenty Years of Dischord: Putting DC on the Map, booklet accompanying compact disc of the same name (Washington, D.C.: Dischord Records, 2002); and The Experience Music Project’s history of punk, [Http://www.emplive.com/explore/punk_chron](http://www.emplive.com/explore/punk_chron).

⁸¹ Sharon Zukin, Landscapes of Power: From Detroit to Disney World (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 11.

While the incorporation of place into their cultural experiences was imperative to punks in all scenes, it was particularly important for those in Washington, D.C. Ian MacKaye, one of the leading figures of D.C. punk and co-founder of Dischord Records, summed up local punks' need to create their own cultural landscape quite well. He believed one important reason "Washington had such a strong [punk] scene [wa]s the isolation of this town." MacKaye grew up in D.C., but as a teen he found little there to hold his interest: "This is a town for people in their thirties and older." "There's plenty of museums and libraries, and there's all sorts of fascinating lectures, but kids don't give a damn [about that stuff]." MacKaye believed it was particularly difficult "if you're a white kid." "If you were a white kid growing up in this town, and you wanted to have something real that was your own, you're out of luck, unless you want to make it. ... If you want to believe in something, you better make it up and do it. I think that's why we [punks] became so intensely self-constructive and tribal."⁸²

The lack of emotional investment in place demonstrated by MacKaye could be even more profound for young people transplanted to Washington. Jeff Nelson, MacKaye's partner in Dischord Records, was the son of a Foreign Service employee. As such, his family moved back and forth between Washington and various diplomatic posts overseas until Nelson was fourteen, when he returned to D.C. for good. He observed that his "allegiance to D.C. came only with the punk thing," when he began attending shows in the eleventh grade. Prior to that his loyalty lay largely with New England, where his father grew up and still had

⁸² Ian MacKaye, interview by the Experience Music Project, transcript, November 1998, 24; Ian MacKaye, interview by author, tape recording, Arlington, Va., 9 September 2002.

family. According to Nelson, attending shows and eventually forming his own band “started to make, make me feel like I had an identity or something.”⁸³

MacKaye and Nelson chose punk over other musical genres as a source of belonging because they found that punk’s do-it-yourself aspect could yield the sense of camaraderie and immediacy they found lacking in a placeless place. A sense of intimacy in a face-to-face culture allowed them to feel more in control of their interactions with popular culture and stood in sharp contrast to how many punks had previously experienced consumerism. D.C. punk Henry Rollins remembered,

before punk rock happened in D.C., bands were something you saw at the Capitol Center; Zeppelin, Nugent, Aerosmith, You’d be like a hundred and fifty miles away looking at this little guy on stage, going, ‘Woah, that’s Eddie Van Halen,’ with the advent of punk rock all of a sudden you’re going to clubs, and you’re feeling the music because the amp[lifier] is five feet away from you, and the singer literally is sweating on you.⁸⁴

Certainly none of the early D.C. hardcore bands had the technical prowess of an Eddie Van Halen, but Rollins seems to say a participatory culture was more important to the D.C. punkers than musicianship. The tactile, embodied experience of punk rock shows – the viscerally pounding bass and the singer’s intimate perspiration – created a sense of involvement and immediacy lacking in the era’s arena rock. Furthermore, for punk rockers live performances at small venues served as the “social centers” of the scene.⁸⁵

Although small, live shows were vital to D.C. punk, the city, even more than New York or Los Angeles, lacked a club network for live rock, and thus punks struggled for a

⁸³ Jeff Nelson, interview by author, tape recording, Arlington, Va. 9 September 2002; Nelson, interview by EMP, 5.

⁸⁴ Henry Rollins, interview by the Experience Music Project, transcript, 1998, 5. For similar comments, see, for instance, MacKaye, interview by the EMP, 5-6; Diane Donnelly, “Psyche Delly,” *Unicorn Times*, February 1976, 1; Mark Jenkins, telephone interview by author, tape recording, 26 February 2002.

⁸⁵ MacKaye, interview by the EMP, 13.

couple of years in their efforts to establish a venue for regular live punk performances. From 1976 through 1978 proto-punk bands, including Overkill and the Slickee Boys, played off nights at clubs like the Keg in Georgetown, but they failed to find a welcoming and regular venue. Early in 1978 the Atlantis, a restaurant in a run-down area of downtown D.C., stepped into the breach and opened its doors to recurring punk shows. That summer, however, the club barred its doors to minors, ostensibly because of low alcohol sales and property damage, a move that alienated much of its punk clientele, who organized a fairly successful – albeit incomplete – boycott of the club. Despite reconciling with the broader punk scene later that year, the Atlantis never got back on its feet and closed by early 1979. In May 1980 the Atlantis reopened as the 9:30 Club and finally D.C. had one stable showcase for new wave and punk.

With the instability of the club scene, opportunities for punk bands in the D.C. area remained limited. This factor, combined with punk's DIY message and the fact that many in the scene were underage, meant that D.C. punks often sought out and created their own venues, which tended to be very small, temporary, or illegal. The example of how to go about creating DIY shows came from a surprising source – a group of black youths from southeast D.C. These men originally formed a jazz-fusion group called Mindpower in 1978 but regrouped early in 1979 under the name the Bad Brains, a moniker drawn from Ramones lyrics.⁸⁶ The Bad Brains were brothers Paul (HR Brain) and Earl Hudson, Darryl (Darryl Cyanide) Jenifer, and Gary (Doctor Know) Miller, and Sid McCray. McCray departed the group early on. They eventually relocated to New York and became an important part of that city's hardcore punk scene. They left an indelible legacy to D.C. punk in their DIY ethic and

⁸⁶ Ramones, "Bad Brain," *Road to Ruin*, Sire Records, 1978.

their performance style, which was based on speed, enthusiasm, and blinding, frenetic energy. The Bad Brains formed their own unique version of punk DIY activism by drawing on what seems an odd resource for punk rockers: a 1930s self-help book for businessmen with the central message of “success through a Positive Mental Attitude.” The Bad Brains transposed this idea directly into song: “Don’t care what they may say/ We got that attitude/ Don’t care what they may do/ We got that attitude/ Hey we got that PMA.” Another of the book’s tenets was “do it now.” But doing it now – playing out in public, that is – was difficult for the Bad Brains. Not only were they an undeveloped band in a city without a strong network of live venues for rock, they played an extremely aggressive version of a new musical style and, to top it all off, they were black men performing in a predominantly white musical genre. Having difficulty finding gigs, the Bad Brains, determined to “do it now,” held shows in their basement, advertising with intense flyering around town. Even after they began to get engagements at regular venues, they helped establish Madams Organ, a Yippie co-op in the Adams Morgan district, as a regular music venue. Because of its unofficial status – it had no business licenses – Madams Organ had no age limits and was a prime site for hardcore shows. D.C. punks, motivated by the lack of venues and their determination to control their participation in popular culture, held shows in virtually any space imaginable: in basements, art galleries or spaces like Corcoran Gallery of Art and District Creative Space (a/k/a dc space), and the basement of the Wilson Center, a non-profit community center serving the burgeoning Latino refugee community in central Washington.⁸⁷

⁸⁷ Information on the Bad Brains comes largely from Andersen and Jenkins, Dance of Days, 28-35. Song quoted is Bad Brains, “Attitude,” *Bad Brains/Self Titled*, cassette, ROIR, 1982. The self-help books that inspired the Bad Brains were Napoleon Hill, Think and Grow Rich (1937; new and rev. ed. New York: Hawthorn Books, 1966); and Napoleon Hill and W. Clement Stone, Success through a Positive Mental Attitude (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall, 1960). For excellent detail of the D.C. punk scene and its venues, see Andersen and Jenkins, Dance of Days, 2-76.

Washington, D.C. punks fought hard to “create our own thing,” as MacKaye put it, to create the sort of participatory culture for which they yearned. The venues remained small, DIY, and word-of mouth. But in the end, it was precisely this battle that gave the D.C. scene a level of intimacy found only briefly in the New York and Los Angeles scenes and then only in their very early days. Photographer Cynthia Connolly first experienced punk in Los Angeles, then moved to Washington in 1981 when she was fifteen. According to Connolly, “the punk community here, [in D.C.] it was pretty small I mean everybody just knew everybody and ... it seemed like there were like fifty or sixty people and that was it. When you went to a show it was always the same people, you know, it was just like sort of a big hang.” Her experience in D.C. stood in sharp contrast to “Los Angeles where it was so large.... In Los Angeles you’d always see the same friends when you go to shows, but there were definitely a lot of people you just never knew; you know it’s just a different scene. But here it was just so small.”⁸⁸

In addition to intimate performances in a face-to-face, underground culture, D.C. punks used fanzines and record labels in attempts to re-inscribe place on the consumer culture of their time. The desire to stake a claim for Washington, D.C. punk yielded the important punk label, Dischord Records. As co-founder Ian MacKaye remembered, “I was heavily inspired by Dangerhouse Records They just put out primarily ... local L.A. bands, And ... I was like that is exactly what I’d love to do, [for] D.C.-area stuff.” And so he did. MacKaye and his band the Teen Idles recorded a seven-inch EP, *Minor Disturbance*, which was released December 1980 as Dischord Records number 1. The label’s name and motto revealed much about the owners’ motivation, goals, and self-image.

⁸⁸ Connolly, interview for the Experience Music Project, transcript, 2 November 1998., 4-5.

The name Dischord played on the word discord, hinting at the punks' anomie, an emotion that – for the Teen Idles and their subgenre of punk known as hardcore – often found musical expression in angry, confrontational lyrics, dance, and fashion. The name also reflected punk rock's dissonant, harsh compositions. Even more importantly, however, the label's motto, "Putting D.C. on the Map," vividly demonstrated the contradiction inherent in punk's simultaneous celebration of the DIY ethic in creating local scenes and recognition of certain



Minor Threat, "Minor Threat EP," Dischord, 1981.

places as punk centers. MacKaye described the motto as somewhat tongue in cheek: obviously, D.C. was already "on the map" in many ways, primarily as the capitol of the world's most powerful nation. On the other hand, the founders were absolutely serious. Even more than their counterparts in L.A., D.C. punks felt the sting of provincialism. By 1978 or 1979, when the

Washington punk scene truly began to coalesce, the New York and London scenes were fully mature, and bands like the Ramones and the Clash were idolized by young punks everywhere. Tired of being dismissed by the major metropolitan centers of punk, Dischord Records – the founders hoped – would put D.C. hardcore on the punk-rock map. As MacKaye reflected,

... when I first got into punk rock a number of people told me that if you wanted to be a punk rocker you had to go to New York City, I couldn't understand what ...

geography had to do with anger, or rebellion, ... but I knew that New York had sort of the corner on it ... aesthetically So ... that ... really fueled our ... sense of rebellion, our sense of ... self-identity and creating something here in Washington that we felt like was unique to us, ..., why do we need to be legitimized by somebody else's scene, or somebody else's city?

Between December 1980 and summer 1983, when Dischord reached a distribution deal with Southern Records, Dischord sold about 32,000 records.⁸⁹

This fierce localism and the concomitant desire to overcome perceived provincialism also expressed itself when individuals or bands traveled to other cities. In 1980 a group of fourteen D.C. punks traveled to New York to see hardcore heroes Black Flag play at the Peppermint Lounge. MacKaye remembers being “laughed at, ridiculed for our social etiquette. We were definitely un-cool. How could we, coming from DC, have any idea of what it was like to be punk?” To prove that kids from the District could indeed be punk, MacKaye and his friends introduced slamdancing to New York, a phenomenon they had recently discovered during a trip to Los Angeles. Their actions angered many in the New York scene, but the D.C. punks had done what they set out to do: make an indelible impression in the name of their hometown. Rock critics Robert Christgau and Lester Bangs condemned the young punks, but in doing so only increased D.C.'s visibility. Bangs called them “a phalanx of big ugly skinhead goons imported from Washington, DC.” D.C. performers also sometimes used out-of-town shows to champion their own scene. John Stabb of the D.C. band G.I. (Government Issue) recalled with embarrassment, “the first time we ever played New York ... we opened up for The Bad Brains, and we were so sloppy, and

⁸⁹ MacKaye, interview by the EMP, 21, 8-10. MacKaye and the other founders of Dischord Records were aided by Skip Groff, proprietor of the Yesterday and Today record shop in Arlington, Virginia, who put them in touch with Don Zientara, owner of a home-based rudimentary recording studio. Another inspiring label included Groff's own Limp. [MacKaye, interview by author, 2002; Skip Groff, telephone interviews by author; tape recording, 19 and 21 February 2002; Don Zientara, telephone interview by author, tape recording, 17 August 2002; MacKaye and Nelson, eds., *Twenty Years of Dischord*, 10.] That number, 32,000, includes all records: singles, EP's, and LP's. [Ian Mackaye, telephone interview by author, tape recording, 1 March 2004.]

we were just a total mess, and we were really nervous about doing this whole show in front of the New York scene.” Stabb’s intimidation caused him to lash out on stage: “I was trying to be Mr. Punk Rock, and I just kept going like, ‘Yeah, New York sucks, and D.C. Rules,’ and yeah, that’s a real good thing to say to your audience. You’re basically just telling them they suck.”⁹⁰ In time, D.C. punks shed some of their more strident or reactionary strains of localism. They were able to do so in part because by 1982, Washington punk had achieved an unequivocal place in the punk pantheon. The readers of Flipside magazine, the preeminent punk ‘zine of the early 1980s, chose D.C. band Minor Threat as the “Best Band” of 1982 and the Dischord as the “Best Record Label.”⁹¹

Once D.C. punk had moved beyond their regional insecurities, some shifted their attention to larger concerns, including elements of the national and international politics that infused their immediate locale. Surrounded by physical reminders of political issues, D.C. punks began expending more energy on issues like racism, Reagan-era conservatism, and nuclear proliferation. A crossroads came in the summer of 1985, when members of the D.C. hardcore punk scene orchestrated “Revolution Summer,” a period marking the increased politicization of the scene. The band Beefeater began performing the song, “Apartheid No” and helped organize “punk percussion protests” outside the South African Embassy. Through the 1980s, D.C. punk remained one of the United States’ most vibrant spots of “positive punk,” punk rockers devoted to a range of social and political concerns, including environmentalism, vegetarianism, and anti-racism. And in the 1990s, D.C. became one of

⁹⁰ MacKaye and Bangs are quoted in Andersen and Jenkins, Dance of Days, 82-83. See also, Rabid, interview by author, 2002, 35. John Stabb, interview by the Experience Music Project, transcript, 1998, 25-6.

⁹¹ “1982 Poll Results,” Flipside, early 1983, 17.

the major centers of the Riot Grrrl movement, feminist punk that aggressively addressed issues like domestic abuse, female empowerment, and rape.

Conclusion

Through pen-palling, skeletal touring networks, fanzines, and record labels, a punk-rock affective alliance emerged in the late 1970s, an international community based on a commitment to DIY rock 'n' roll that challenged the status quo. Although punk rock was a transatlantic phenomenon, the particulars of the discrete scenes in New York, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C. had a great deal to do with each city's cultural geography. In mid-seventies New York, financial crisis and white flight meant living and commercial space were very inexpensive, and therefore struggling artists from across the United States found it relatively easy to move to and live in the City. Parts of the city were relatively deserted, especially in residential terms, encouraging a sense of ownership among those brave enough to live and work there. And punks there embraced the "darker side" of New York life, the violence, drugs, and transience of life on the streets, in both lyrics and lifestyle. In California, punk rock began in Hollywood, where it reflected Los Angeles' long dialectic between utopia and dystopia, sunshine and noir. Punk rock mushroomed in southern California, spawning a sprawl of semi-autonomous scenes that paralleled the exurban development of the region. Punk rockers in Washington, D.C. emphasized localism as they struggled to overcome feelings of cultural inferiority and establish identity in a placeless place. Eventually they found a voice in contemporary political protest.

Early punk rockers gunned for large-scale change, hoping to revitalize a broad rock'n'roll community, believing, in the words of Los Angeles 'zinester Claude "Kickboy

Face” Bessy that “punks [would] set this rat-infested industry on fire.” By the late 1970s, however, punk rockers had – by and large – given up hope that their music would revolutionize rock as a whole. Instead they turned inward, working for change on a smaller scale while retaining their hopes for community. This turn inward also signaled increased emphasis on localism, and punk rockers’ attempts to reestablish place within consumer capitalism echoed the widespread distrust of the era, including distrust of consumer culture. Reflecting on the 1970s, Jello Biafra at how sixties culture had been “mellowed out, paved over, sold back to us as what we now call yuppie culture.” Punks increasingly believed the only way to trust in the authenticity or worthiness of a product was to know the where and who behind it; and it better not come from someone in authority. A small, local label was much more trustworthy than the faceless “majors” like RCA. As a notice in the Seattle-based *Sub/Pop* fanzine indicates, punk rockers increasingly were “interested in a decentralized network of regional and local bums who refuse to get an honest job.”⁹² Punks never fully resolved the tensions inherent in a group built on do-it-yourself individualism, but by celebrating the local at the level of the national or transnational, punks developed an ethos that could allow such contradictions to exist more easily.

⁹² Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York: Free Press, 2001). Bessy rallied the troops in the first issue of *Slash* in his opening editorial salvo entitled, “So This is War, Eh?”: “May the punks set this rat-infested industry on fire.” Bessy, *Slash*, vol 1, no 1, May 1977. Biafra, quoted in Bryan Ray Turcotte and Christopher T. Miller, eds., *Fucked Up + Photocopied: Instant Art of the Punk Rock Movement* (Madera, Calif.: Gingko Press, 1999, 8; *Sub/Pop*, February 1982, 2.

CHAPTER 5
THE BLANK GENERATION?:
PUNK ROCK AND YOUTH IN THE 1970s AND 1980s¹

Both the idea of youth and young people themselves moved more and more into the center of American thought and culture throughout the twentieth century. G. Stanley Hall's germinal 1904 work, Adolescence, marked the official inception of this new obsession with youth; his work named and legitimated adolescence as a stage of life marked by transition and social vulnerability. According to this study, "Home, school, and church" as yet have 'fail[ed] to recognize [adolescence's] nature and needs and, perhaps most of all, its perils.'" Hall set the stage for the twentieth century's heightened concerns about this period of life in his assertions that "[n]ever has youth been exposed to such dangers of both perversion and arrest as in our own land and day" and that "[t]he whole future of life depends on how" the restless impulses of adolescence "now given suddenly and in profusion are husbanded and directed."² This alarmist mentality regarding the teen years took root and blossomed anew periodically throughout the century. During the 1950s, for instance, members of academe, the public media, and even Congress worried profusely about the rise – whether real or

¹ Richard Hell and the Voidoids, "Blank Generation," *Blank Generation*, Sire, 1977.

² G. Stanley Hall, Adolescence its psychology and its relations to physiology, anthropology, sociology, sex, crime, religion and education (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1904), xv. Very quickly, scholars challenged Hall's claims to universal applicability. For example, Margaret Mead discussed cross-cultural variation in the 1920s and Kingsley Davis attempted to historicize adolescence in 1940. [Glen H. Elder, Jr., "Adolescence in Historical Perspective," in Growing Up in America: Historical Experiences, ed. Harvey J. Graff (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987), 13.] Nonetheless, Hall's sense of crisis regarding adolescence remained a common theme throughout the twentieth century. For discussion of the importance of Hall for twentieth-century views on youth and adolescence, see Dorothy Ross, G. Stanley Hall: The Psychologist as Prophet (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972); Harvey J. Graff, Conflicting Paths: Growing Up in America (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 21, 177, 293, 302; and Paula S. Fass and Mary Ann Mason, eds., Childhood in America (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

imagined – of juvenile delinquency. Further evidence of the growing attention to this life phase can be seen in the emergence of the word teenager, which first came into use in the 1940s, and the recognition of teen markets as shown by developments like Seventeen magazine (1944). Hall's crisis rhetoric, along with an emphasis on play as a source of development and learning – a viewpoint shared by John Dewey and Maria Montessori –, meant that in the United States adolescence came to be viewed as an extension of childhood rather than training for adulthood.³

Like the increased public consciousness of teens and adolescence, the emergence of recognizable, nationally important youth cultures in the United States was predominantly a twentieth-century phenomenon. From the bohemians of the turn of the century to punk and hip hop in the 1970s and 1980s, eruptions of youth cultures have fueled Americans' imaginations, both in terms of dangers (teen pregnancy, gangs) and possibilities (hope after war time, racial harmony). The Flappers of the 1920s challenged gender roles and the Puritan work ethic, fifties rock-and-rollers raised the specter of juvenile delinquency, and the counterculture of the sixties – at its best – promised social justice and harmony (Port Huron Statement, Woodstock) and – at its worst – dire threats to the social order (Charles Manson, Altamont).

Consumerism represents another key element in the raised stature of youth in the twentieth century. By the late nineteenth century, advertisers recognized children as future

³ James Gilbert, A Cycle of Outrage: America's Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent of the 1950s (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Ronald D. Cohen, "The Delinquents: Censorship and Youth Culture in Recent U.S. History," History of Education Quarterly 37, no. 3 (Fall 1997): 251-70; The Oxford English Dictionary states the word teenager originated in the United States and first appeared in print in 1941 in Popular Science Monthly. [Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed., 1989, s.v. "teenager."] Bill Osgerby, "'A Caste, a Culture, a Market': Youth Marketing, and Lifestyle in Postwar America," in Growing Up Postmodern: Neoliberalism and the War on the Young, 1-14 (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 17-19; Paula S. Fass, Children of the New World: Society, Culture, and Globalization (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 211, 213.

buyers and thus worthy targets, but by the 1920s, advertisers came to see children as spenders of the present with significant influence over domestic purchasing decisions.⁴ After World War II, in an era of increased affluence and the sort of parental “permissiveness” advocated by Dr. Benjamin Spock, children and teenagers held even more power in the marketplace, as evidenced by television shows like *The Mickey Mouse Club* and rock ‘n’ roll record sales. In 1955 the typical teenager spent \$555 annually on things like records and cosmetics. In 1957, teenagers earned nine billion dollars, during the school year alone. And since the 1950s, advertisers have continued to recognize the importance of teen dollars (over \$39 billion in 1980) through their further segmentation of youth markets. Niche marketing allowed advertisers to market their wares more precisely and effectively. Historian Lisa Jacobson acknowledges an irony in late-twentieth-century youth consumerism: “Consumerism paradoxically allows children more control over fashioning independent identities, but it also increasingly binds them to a global commercial culture.”⁵

⁴ In fact, advertisers targeted children, especially girls, through trading cards in the late nineteenth century. [Ellen Garvey, *The Adman in the Parlor: Magazines and the Gendering of Consumer Culture, 1880s to 1910s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Lisa Jacobson, “Advertising,” in *Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood In History and Society*, vol. 3, ed. Paula S. Fass (New York: Macmillan Reference), 25; Lisa Jacobson, *Raising Consumers: Children and the American Mass Market in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 18-55.

⁵ Dr. Spock was the most influential author of childrearing advice in the twentieth century. He advocated warmth, spontaneity, and fun in contrast to earlier advice to parents to be strict disciplinarians and rigid schedule-keepers. Conservative critics later took Spock to task for what they saw as a permissive style of parenting. [Michael Zuckerman, “Benjamin Spock,” in *Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood In History and Society*, vol. 3, ed. Paula S. Fass (New York: Macmillan Reference), 781-2; Lynn Bloom, *Doctor Spock: Biography of a Conservative Radical* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1972). Gary Cross, “Consumer Culture,” in *Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood In History and Society*, vol. 1, ed. Paula S. Fass (New York: Macmillan Reference), 242-4. Jacobson, “Advertising,” 29. See also, Jacobson, *Raising Consumers*, 221; and Osgerby, “A Caste, a Culture, a Market,” 16. Ronald Strickland notes, “Contemporary youth are prematurely affluent – they have the money for consumer electronics, fashion ... music cd’s, but they linger in dependence upon their parents’ assistance for basic living expenses, educational costs, etc. ... These chronic problems of modernity have become the accepted status quo of postmodernity.” [Ronald Strickland, “Introduction: What’s Left of Modernity?” in *Growing Up Postmodern: Neoliberalism and the War on the Young* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 2.] “Where Byword is ‘Have Cash, Will Spend,’” *US News and World Report* 89, 29 December - 5 January 1981, 77; “Getting and Spending the Teen-Age Allowance,” *Life*, vol. 42, 13 May 1957, 147-52.

Disneyland, in many ways, symbolizes both the twentieth-century infatuation with youth and childhood and the maturation of national consumerism. If we return to the story of the Teen Idles' thwarted visit to Disneyland that opened the second chapter, we can find further illustrations of themes in punk, especially revelations about what it meant to be young in the late 1970s and early 1980s. As we saw in the vignette, officials at Disneyland in 1980 turned away the Teen Idles because of their punk clothing and haircuts. The event illustrated the company's efforts to present itself and its products as a clean-living embodiment of their version of the American family ideal. Through Disneyland, which opened in 1955, Disney and his planners hoped to reconstruct a "lost" (or never existent) utopia of small-town America in their wholesome "Main Street," through which patrons entered the park, complete with ice-cream parlors, penny arcades, and barbershop quartets. Main Street, based in part on Walt Disney's childhood in Marceline, Missouri, echoed his "sentimental populism," a faith in Americana and the average man, according to historian Steven Watts. One Disneyland planner reflected, "What we create is a 'Disney realism,' sort of Utopian in nature, where we carefully program out all the negative, unwanted elements and program in the positive elements."⁶ Apparently, patrons like the Teen Idles, who did not fit within the wholesome, family-oriented experience envisioned by planners, were among the items to be "programmed out."

The Teen Idles' outward appearance – their clothing and hair – suggests they wished to encounter consumer culture on their own terms, rather than in a mode engineered by adults

⁶ Steven Watts calls Disney a "sentimental populist." ["Walt Disney: Art and Politics in the American Century," *Journal of American History* 82, no. 1 (June 1995): 84-110.] See also Steven Watts, *The Magic Kingdom: Walt Disney and the American Way of Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997). Unnamed source (Disneyland planner) quoted in Sharon Zukin, *Landscapes of Power: From Detroit to Disney World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 222.

at the Gap or on Madison Avenue. And while Disneyland was supposed to be for young people above everyone else, the teen punks were turned away. The colossal amusement parks of Disneyland and Walt Disney World (opened 1971) were ostensibly derived from and geared toward the fantasies and desires of the child, but how children experienced the parks was carefully controlled – even policed as the Teen Idles’ story demonstrated – by adults.⁷ The Teen Idles’ experience at Disneyland is a metaphor for the contradictory messages young people received in the late twentieth century. On the one hand, advertisers, lawmakers, and the media touted the increased importance of both youth as a concept and young people themselves. In this view, spontaneity and fun were valid and valuable, and young people’s intelligence and creativity were to be encouraged. Conversely, young people often found themselves in limbo, in the relatively powerless temporal site of adolescence, a prolonged childhood without the full rights of adulthood, admonished to be obedient (even in recreation) and productive members of society. The seventies’ and eighties’ paradoxical messages about youth proved to be powerful catalysts for punk rockers. This chapter examines what it was like to be young in the era by exploring, first, punk rock’s relationship to earlier youth cultures, especially the 1960s counterculture, and, second, certain defining elements of 1970s and ‘80s American youth, including boredom and the Cold War.

“Kill the Hippies”: Punk and Previous Youth Rebellion

Hippies stink!
Kill, kill, kill the hippies
Kill, kill, kill the hippies
Be the first on your block to go away for life
Grab your weapon, kill a hippie tonight
Kill ‘em ‘cause their hair is too long

⁷ Elliot West explores this idea in Growing Up in Twentieth-Century America: A History and Reference Guide (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996), 283-7.

Kill 'em 'cause their views were wrong
 Kill, kill, kill the hippies
 Kill, kill, kill the hippies
 All they'll do is hand you a flower
 You can crush 'em, you demonstrate the power
 Kill, kill, kill the hippies
 Kill, kill, kill the hippies
 Always smelling flowers; they make me real sore
 There's no use for hippies no more
 "Kill the Hippies," The Deadbeats (1978)⁸

Punk rock had a deeply ambivalent relationship with certain earlier rebellious youth cultures. If taken at face value, punk wanted to break all rules, creating something unlike anything that had come before. John Denney of the Weirdos recalled: "The fact that there was no context was pretty exhilarating – we just made it up as we went along. The first rule was don't do what has already been done." In practice, however, punks consciously or unconsciously drew on previous youth cultures, with methodologies and ideologies marked by pastiche and *bricolage*.⁹ In other words, punks borrowed freely from previous youth cultures and dominant society, melding these elements into a new form of expression. A number of punks were highly informed about cultural history; some seemed to be selectively aware; others knew little of what had preceded them. That said, certain punk rockers admitted to great admiration for particular historical youth movements, or at least certain

⁸ The Deadbeats, "Kill the Hippies," *Kill the Hippies*, EP, Dangerhouse, 1978. The idea to kill the hippies, at least figuratively, arose frequently in my research. See, for instance, ML "Jet" Compton, interview by author, tape recording, Sherman Oaks, Calif., 24 June 2004.; Glen Friedman, interview by the Experience Music Project, transcript, 2d segment, 1999, 2. Later punk bands have used this phrase as well. The Casualties included their "Kill the Hippies" on *The Early Years 1990-1995*, Punkcore Records, 2001; and a band called Kill the Hippies out of Kent, Ohio has been together since 1993.

⁹ John Denney quoted in Jonny Whiteside, "The Weirdos: American Barbarians," *LA Weekly* 11 December 2003, <http://www.speakeasy.net/~btanaka/weird.world.web/articles/laweekly03/>, accessed June 1, 2004. The themes of pastiche and bricolage in punk have been explored extensively elsewhere. Dick Hebdige's germinal work on punk relied heavily on Claude Lévi-Strauss's concept of *bricolage*. [Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979).] See also, Mark Andrew Fenster, "The Articulation of Difference and Identity in Alternative Popular Music Practice," Ph.D. diss. University of Illinois, 1992, 139; Jude Davies, "The Future of 'No Future': Punk Rock and Postmodern Theory," *Journal of Popular Culture* 29 (Spring 1996): 3-25; and Bernard Gendron, *From Montmartre to the Mudd Club: Popular Music and the Avant-Garde* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2002).

ingredients of them. For example, they appreciated Dadaism's irrationality, irony, and irreverence, its predilection for shock tactics and low culture, and its emphasis on the viewer as interpreter of art.¹⁰ Or like turn-of-the-twentieth-century bohemians and the Beats, punks viewed the pedestrian actions of everyday life as potential expressions of art and ideology.¹¹

Of previous youth cultures, the one whose history loomed largest for punk rock was the counterculture of the 1960s. Punks expressed a great deal of animosity toward, even anger at, members of that youth movement. For example, the Deadbeats of Los Angeles released the song "Kill the Hippies" on Dangerhouse records in 1978, reflecting a common effort among punks to distance themselves from and denigrate so-called hippies: "Kill 'em 'cause their hair is too long/ Kill 'em 'cause their views were wrong/ Kill, kill, kill the hippies." Stiv Bators of the Dead Boys proclaimed he was "Gonna beat up the next hippie I see" in "Ain't Nothin' To Do" (1977). In the first issue of L.A.'s Slash fanzine, a cartoon featured a punk daydreaming about stabbing a peace-sign flashing hippie. To some extent, this rancor emerged out of the newer cultural rebels' figurative need to kill their cultural fathers in order to stake their own place in American culture. Most punk rockers were too young to have participated fully in the counterculture of the 1960s. Thus, they came of age in the shadow of the baby boomers, a generation that loomed large both in terms of actual

¹⁰ For punks who cite the importance of Dadaism, see, for example, Robert Lopez, interview by author, tape recording, Chapel Hill, N.C., 29 October, 2004; John Denney, interview for the Experience Music Project, transcript, 19 September 1999, 1; John Denney quoted in Bryan Ray Turcotte and Christopher T. Miller, eds., Fucked Up + Photocopied: Instant Art of the Punk Rock Movement (Madera, Calif.: Gingko Press, 1999), 67; David Keeps, "Buzzcocks," New York Rocker, August 1978, 43; Kristine McKenna, "Remembrance of Things Fast," in Forming: The Early Days of L.A. Punk (Santa Monica, Calif.: Smart Art Press, 1999), 31; and Brendan Mullen, "The Other Masque," LA Weekly, 1 February 1979, 11.

¹¹ On the importance of bohemians, see, for example, Jessamin Swearingen, "I Belong to the _____ Generation" in Blondie, From Punk to Present: A Pictorial History, ed. Allan Metz (Springfield, Mo.: Musical Legacy Publications, 2002), 34-5. Regarding the influence of the Beats on punk, see, for example, Duncan Hannah, interview by author, New York, N.Y., 26 June 2002; Arto Lindsay, interview by author, New York, N.Y., tape recording, 28 June 2002; Daniel Garber, interview by author, 24 February 2002; and Victor Bockris, interview by author, 27 June 2002; and Swearingen, "I Belong to the _____ Generation."

numbers and in terms of cultural legacies. Jello Biafra's memories of the 1970s are illustrative: "When we were coming of age, we weren't dazed and confused, we were disgusted. We missed the '60s! All that fire, all that promise, all that fun-mellowed out, paved over." Similarly, several people I interviewed remembered being aware as they grew up that they had missed out on a momentous period of American history, and they therefore wanted to find or create a new source of excitement in the seventies. For example, Kim Kane, of D.C.'s Slickee Boys, grew up overseas with diplomat parents and only later realized what had passed him by: "I was mad at all the great records and everything [from the sixties] I missed. So that was my motto, [my] vow when the punk thing [came]: 'I ain't missing anything this time around.'" Similarly D.C. punk Laurie Liebowitz, who was born in 1955, believed it "was an exciting time to be young, but at the time, I always wished I was five or ten years older, so I could really be part of the hippie movement. I felt like I was at the tail end of it." Trudie Plunger "want[ed] to be a hippie, but it was way too late. I just wanted something to belong to, and there was nothing there for people my age."¹² Some punks may even have resented the attention showered on the sixties counterculture, while their own movement remained largely underground, because they knew punk was culturally important. L.A. punk photographer Jenny Lens reflected recently,

I always looked at [punk] as something that needed to be documented, and ... I sure got a lot of really good stuff that I felt was historically important, culturally, musically, artistically. I felt that the fashions, the hair, the makeup, the whole scene, and especially, as I said, the music and the lyrics, all of it would change our culture. It was reflecting where we were coming from and where we were going.¹³

¹² The Deadbeats, "Kill the Hippies," *Kill the Hippies*, EP, Dangerhouse, 1978; Dead Boys, "Ain't Nothin' To Do," *Young, Loud, and Snotty*, Sire, 1977; *Slash*, vol. 1, no. 1, July 1977; Biafra, quoted in Bryan Ray Turcotte and Christopher T. Miller, eds., *Fucked Up + Photocopied: Instant Art of the Punk Rock Movement* (Madera, Calif.: Gingko Press, 1999), 8; Kim Kane, telephone interview by author, tape recording, 14 April 2002; Laurie Liebowitz, telephone interview by author, tape recording, 9 August 2002; Trudie Arguelles Barrett, email interview by author, June 2004.

¹³ Jenny Lens, interview by author, transcript, Santa Monica, Calif., 29 June 2004, 17.

At some level, therefore, punk's relationship to the counterculture was defined by a generational expression of difference, an attempt at self-fashioning based on the oppositional figure of the hippie, but punkers also identified what they saw as real failures in hippie culture, especially the remnants that had survived into the seventies. In particular, punks believed their older counterparts had either sold out or burned out. According to D.C./NYC punk Steven Blush, hippies "had opened the doors for so much stuff and then packed it in so fast as yuppies or gross, overblown, drugged-out guys. And that was why punk was so immediate and primal and really earth-shattering."¹⁴ Blush and his colleagues were particularly bitter about the way, as they saw it, hippies had abandoned certain cultural institutions as forces of change. Where Rolling Stone magazine had once been seen as an organ of the cultural left, punks now viewed it as a "sanitized publication," part of the bloated rock 'n' roll establishment. Similarly, Stiv Bators alleged that "the hippies that fought AM" radio "won't support us 'cause" they had sold out. Abandoning the idea of radio as a pioneering force in popular music, they now lined their pockets with advertising dollars. "Everything they fought [against] they turned into." Black Randy of L.A. "was very frustrated by ... the hippie culture that had grown up and given up." And if hippies hadn't sold out, punks believed they had burned out. In a song called "Wasted" (1980), the Circle Jerks lampooned hippies (and others) who glorified being "wasted" to the point of incapacitation: "I was wasted/ I was a hippie/ I was a burnout/ I was a dropout you know/ I

¹⁴ Steven Blush, telephone interview by author, tape recording, 16 June 2002.

was out of my head.” Similarly, Los Angeles punk artist Steve Martinez described the central theme of his work as “anti-hippie and the burn-out lifestyle.”¹⁵

A 1979 Raymond Pettibon cartoon ably illustrated punks’ disgust with hippies. Pettibon, brother to Greg Ginn of Black Flag, produced some of the most well-recognized and critically acclaimed art in punk. He designed Black Flag’s famous four-bar logo, but he became known principally for his work on band flyers, especially for Black Flag and other bands on the SST label. He worked chiefly in ink on paper, often producing disturbing images with ambiguous or ironic captions. In one cartoon, drawn around 1979, a mustachioed worker on scaffolding paints Timothy Leary’s famous slogan “Turn On, Tune In, Drop Out” on the side of a tall building. This phrase, conceived by Leary in 1966, was part of his attempt to encourage the public to become self-aware, live harmoniously with the world around them, and disengage from unnecessary or harmful social entanglements.¹⁶ Critics, including many punk rockers, interpreted the phrase as an admonition to “cop out,” to use drugs to escape from the ugliness in life. In Pettibon’s illustration of this belief, a female hippie, festooned only in body-painted hearts, flowers, and stars, falls from above and is caught in the picture just above the painter who works on his slogan. She holds her hands outstretched in a carefree manner, seemingly unconcerned or unaware (too high to know?) that she surely plummets to her death. Here are the consequences of turning on and dropping

¹⁵ “Sanitized publication” quote is Patrick DiPuccio, interview by author, transcript, Los Angeles, Calif., 21 July 2004, 8. See also “Letter to the Editor,” *LA Weekly*, 8-14 February 1981, 3; Jad Fair, telephone interview by author, 29 August 2002; John Holmstrom, email interview by author, 29 July 2002; Andy Schwartz, interview by author, New York City, 25, June 2002; Richard Hell, interview by Jason Gross, December 1997, <http://www.furious.com/perfect/richardhell.html>, accessed November 25, 2006. Dead Boys interviewed in *Search and Destroy*, no. 4, 1977, reprinted in V. Vale, ed., *Search and Destroy: The Authoritative Guide to Punk Culture* (San Francisco: V/Search Publications, 1996), 76. Black Randy quoted in Marc Spitz and Brendan Mullen, *We Got the Neutron Bomb: The Untold Story of L.A. Punk* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001), 106; Circle Jerks, “Wasted,” *Group Sex*, Frontier 1980; Steve Martinez, interview by author, Los Angeles, Calif., 21 June 2004.

¹⁶ Timothy Leary, *Flashbacks: An Autobiography* (Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher, 1983), 253.

out. Taken in the context of the late 1970s, Pettibon seemed to suggest that hippies, by dropping out, were oblivious to the current dangers of the world, perils alluded to in some of his other works. For example, Charles Manson appears frequently in Pettibon's material, representing perhaps the dark side of hippie culture, what can happen when a disturbed individual gains control of a group countercultural youth unable to think for themselves.

If hippies had not burned out or copped out, punks often viewed them and their 1960s tactics – at the very least – as naïve or irrelevant in a post-Vietnam, post-Watergate era. The suggestion to “smile on your brother/ everybody get together, try to love one another right now” simply wouldn't cut it in a period marked by political disillusionment, economic despondency, and heightened Cold War tensions.¹⁷ In “A Growing Boy Needs His Lunch,” the Dead Kennedys demonstrate just how effective they believed “just lov[ing] one another” was in the current context:

Everyone should just love each other
Dip your toe into the fire
Drop your guns and lawsuits and love each other
Life begins beyond the bunker
And while you're busy hugging in the streets
Outgrowing your hatred for all to feel
Jiminy Cricket's found a game to play
...
Turn on, Tune in, Cop out
Drop kick, Turn in, Tune out

“Jiminy Cricket” represents the U.S. government and economic interests who – while everyone hugs in the streets – deviously found new overseas markets for pesticides, turned a blind eye to starvation in the world, and exported death squads.¹⁸ Not only are hippies naïve, they have abdicated their ability to change the world because they “turn on, tune in, cop out.”

¹⁷ The Youngbloods, “Get Together,” *The Youngbloods*, RCA Victor, 1967.

¹⁸ Dead Kennedys, “A Growing Boy Needs His Lunch,” *Frankenchrist*, EP, Alternative Tentacles, 1985.

Analysis of two versions of P. F. Sloan's "Eve of Destruction" illustrates two very different takes on the world, a shift from the optimism of the sixties to the disillusionment of the seventies. Barry McGuire recorded the best-known version of the tune, scoring a number one American hit in 1965. This song became one of the most prevalent and powerful protest songs of the 1960s, sparking heated emotions among both conservatives and reformers. In his recording, McGuire sings with urgency, but in a slow and patient manner, listing some of the crises he sees in this "crazy world," including war ("the eastern world, it is exploding ... the Jordan River has bodies floatin'"), the threat of nuclear holocaust ("If the button is pushed, there's no running away"), racial injustice ("marches alone can't bring integration"), and general intolerance and hypocrisy ("human respect is disintegratin' / ... "hate your next-door neighbor, but don't forget to say grace").¹⁹ The song, released in the still relatively hopeful days of 1965, came after the success of the Free Speech Movement and the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and before 1968 dealt terrible blows to the liberal social movements of the era through the Tet Offensive and the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bobby Kennedy. McGuire seems to be genuinely engaged with contemporary social and geopolitical issues and to offer sincere desire for change. And at 112 beats per minute and just over three and one half minutes in duration, the song's lyrics are clearly discernible and carefully enunciated, challenging the listener ("my friend") to question his/her belief that the world is not "on the eve of destruction."

¹⁹ On his webpage, McGuire states that when he first heard Sloan's song, he thought, "this song is based on reality." He did not think of it as a protest song but rather as "diagnosis of the human condition," a "societal mirror." [Barry McGuire, "FAQ," <http://www.barrymcguire.com/?page=faq#4>, accessed 23 May 2007.] This was McGuire's first solo venture after his participation in the folk-revival outfit the New Christy Minstrels. Barry McGuire, "Eve of Destruction," *Eve of Destruction*, Dunhill, 1965; Greg Prato, "Barry McGuire Biography," All Music Guide, <http://www.allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&sql=11:w9ftxq85ldje~T1>, accessed 22 May 2007; and Jason Ankeny, "P. F. Sloan Biography," All Music Guide, <http://www.allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&sql=11:3ifrxqq5ldhe~T1>, accessed 22 May 2007.

Unlike McGuire's earnestness, the Dickies offer little emotion in their 1979 recording of "Eve of Destruction," which careens along at breakneck speed, relentlessly delivering 202 beats per minute. The band performs the tune in an astonishing one minute, fifty-eight seconds (with precision and skill not often found in early punk) cutting McGuire's time by almost forty-three percent.²⁰ At such a pace, the vocals are only occasionally fully decipherable. The Dickies' rendering evokes a view of social and political problems far different from that offered by McGuire. McGuire may have been giving witness to a "crazy world" full of violence, war, fear, and disrespect, but his tone and cadence intimate that he also had hope, believing it worthwhile to try to coax his "friend" into awareness and action. Conversely, the Dickies' ridiculously fast interpretation suggests that the pace of change is such that maintaining meaningful engagement with social and political problems becomes impossible. And in a world where politicians and world leaders are corrupt or ineffectual, why bother to name the problems slowly and clearly? No one wants to listen or make change anyway. In McGuire's rendition, the vocals dominate the recording, with understated acoustic guitar and drums that function to encourage the listener to focus on the words and their meanings. In the Dickies' version, the excited, staccato vocals coexist with loud electric guitar, clanging piano, and frenetic drums, providing a rhythmic element as much as a lyrical one. At this point in history, punks do not need to be convinced that they were "on the eve of destruction"; they knew and accepted that fact.

Virtually all punks were derisive of hippies, especially the version of hippie culture they saw surviving into the seventies, where "the Doobie Brothers and Eagles were peddling

²⁰ The Dickies skip one of three verses but repeat the closing chorus three times, making the number of bars in each version very similar. Dickies, "Eve of Destruction," *The Incredible Shrinking Dickies*, A&M, 1979.

this soft drug culture, where we all get along and get mellow and stoned.”²¹ But age had a great deal to do with individual punk rockers’ views on the counterculture and their engagement with social or political issues. Older punks – or what I call the first punk cohort, who were usually at least in their early twenties by the mid to late seventies – were generally more pessimistic about the possibility of social change than their younger counterparts, a second cohort who were in their teens in the mid to late seventies and probably discovered punk a few years after the first group. But while members of the first cluster were deeply cynical, their disillusionment and anger would not allow them to simply “get along and get mellow.” They chose neither the social activism of the sixties (that they viewed as ineffective) nor the drugged-out coping out of the seventies (that they viewed as facile) but rather an alternative course of action in which they seized the dark side of human existence and – through angry, confrontational lyrics and music – thrust it in the listener’s face. When the Los Angeles band X was asked why they chose such dark themes for their lyrics, singer Exene Cervenka responded, “There’s enough music out there that doesn’t express anything. We’re trying to express the happiness and the bad things. ... I think people should face reality more and there is a lot of darkness out there.”²²

Punk rock’s willingness to embrace the dark side in a way that was not despondent can be seen as similar to Albert Camus’s concept of the absurd. Like Camus, older punks accepted the absurdity of modern life and yet found life worth living. According to Camus, if – like Sisyphus endlessly repeating his effort to roll his boulder to the top of the hill – we throw ourselves into the absurdity of our own lives, we might find happiness: “Happiness

²¹ Jack Rabid, interview by author, transcript, 27 July 2002, 20.

²² Exene Cervenka quoted in Robert Hilburn, “X Marks the Heart of L.A.’s Rock Scene,” Los Angeles Times, 22 June 1981, sec. CAL, p. 74.

and the absurd are two sons of the same earth. They are inseparable.” Sisyphus (and the punk rocker) “knows the whole extent of his wretched condition: it is what he thinks of during his descent. The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory.” Punk’s lucid engagement with the absurdity of contemporary life is aptly demonstrated by the song “Idi Amin” by L.A.’s incomparable Black Randy, a “man of questionable sanity who periodically pops up like a kamikaze to douse [L.A. punks] with sleazy, X-rated mayhem.” The song is a (tongue-in-cheek) paean to Uganda’s despotic and murderous leader, whose crimes had recently come under increased scrutiny after Henry Kyemba, Amin’s former health minister, published his 1977 exposé of Amin’s regime.²³ Neither the lyrics nor the music in Black Randy’s homage invite easy listening; the herky-jerky rhythms and stop-start vocals put the listener on edge, and the lyrics – for anyone who had heard the stories of bodies clogging the dams on the Nile – were simply offensive:

The panda from Uganda is my teddy bear
They say bad things about him, but I don’t care

Idi A-man
I am your fan
Idi A-man
I am your fan

Idi, Idi, Idi Amin
Idi, Idi, Idi Amin

Of course, we know about Hitler, but he was in the past
Idi, Idi we love you. We know you’ll make it last
Everything is better
Because Idi is dictator.²⁴

²³ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), 121-2; Kristine McKenna called Black Randy a man of questionable sanity in “Black Randy’s Venomous Patter,” *Los Angeles Times*, 1 January 1981, sec. VI, p. 8; Henry Kyemba, *A State of Blood: The Inside Story of Idi Amin* (New York: Ace Books, 1977); John Darnton, “The Inside Story of Idi Amin,” *New York Times*, 6 November 1977, sec. 7, p. 1.

Black Randy makes a fun “teddy bear” hero out of one of the most disturbed leaders of the twentieth century, turning absurdity into humor and song. Instead of the sort of passive listening in which the fan kicked back, smoked a joint, and got mellow to the likes of the Allman Brothers, punk rock got in the fan’s face, literally and figuratively requiring active engagement. Arto Lindsay of the New York No Wave band DNA stated that punks liked “music with a direct effect.” His band and other punks, in his view, wrote music in the same way that William Burroughs advocated writing poetry: “if you could write a poem that could lead to an immediate, physical reaction, you were successful.”²⁵

In addition to distinguishing themselves from the counterculture by denigrating hippies’ naiveté and paying homage to life’s underbelly, punks also demonstrated their difference through the drugs they chose and the clothes they wore. While the counterculture is remembered for bringing marijuana and LSD to the attention of the American public, punks tended to prefer alcohol and amphetamines. Not everyone in punk used drugs, of course, and not all punk rockers used the same drugs. Pot and acid could be found in the various scenes, but generally, participants in punk disdained marijuana because it symbolized the laid-back hippie lifestyle punks found moribund and out of date. Keith Morris of Black Flag and the Circle Jerks recalled, “we were opposed to the hippies because they were all smoking pot and laid-back and listening to The Grateful Dead.” Trudie Plunger agreed: “Smoking pot was always out for me, that was old hippy ways.” The time to be placid was gone. Just as the frenetic energy of the Dickies’ 200-plus beats per minute seemed an apt soundtrack for an era of rapid transformation and angry disillusionment, speed- and alcohol-

²⁴ Black Randy and the Metrosquad, “Idi Amin” and “I’m Black and Proud” b/w “I’m Black and Proud Part 14” and “I Wanna be a Nark,” EP, Dangerhouse Records, 1978.

²⁵ Arto Lindsay, interview by author, 2002.

induced frenetic energy seemed a better *modus operandi* than a mellow marijuana buzz. Furthermore, where long hair and bellbottoms had once marked the wearer's defiance of dominant mores, punks now viewed these signifiers as conformist. K. K. Barrett of the Screamers met future band mates Tomata Du Plenty and Tommy Gear at a concert at the Starwood. They stood out because "they had spiked hair, wrap-around sun glasses at night, and dark clothes," while "[e]verybody else had feathered hair cuts, soft yellow, or beige, or light blue bell bottoms." Archivist and filmmaker John Roecker recalled, "It is hard to explain to people now how hard it was being a punk back then. If you had short hair, didn't wear bell bottoms and walked down the street, chances are some asshole in an El Camino was going to kick your ass." Hardcore punk aficionados went to further extremes in appearance; instead of short or spiky hair, they sported shaved heads, which "provided the perfect fuck-you to Hippies and businessmen alike – not to mention moms and dads," according to promoter and author Steven Blush.²⁶

At the same time that punks distanced themselves from the counterculture of the previous decade, they – consciously or otherwise – drew on its examples and legacies, as the musical cover of "Eve of Destruction" itself suggests, no matter how much the Dickies altered it. Exene Cervenka of the Los Angeles band X, recalled, "... even though punk ... railed against everything that had come before – like 'kill the hippies,' etc. – it was actually a continuation of the freedom of expression of the hippie and beat movements, a rejection of the middle-class values, the hypocrisy, and the commercialism." Alice Bag similarly

²⁶ Keith Morris, interview by the Experience Music Project, transcript, 1998, 17; Frank Agnew expressed a similar viewpoint in interview by author, tape recording, Fullerton, Calif., 3 July 2004; Trudie Barrett, email interview by author, 2004; K. K. Barrett, interview by the Experience Music Project, transcript, Los Angeles, Calif., 29 April 1998, 2; John Roecker quoted in Katherine Turman, "Voices of L.A.'s Punk Past," LA Alternative Press, vol. 3, no. 6, 25 June - 9 July 2004, <http://www.laalternativepress.com/v02n25/feature/feature.php>, accessed 28 June 2004; Steven Blush, American Hardcore: A Tribal History (Los Angeles: Feral House, 2001), 31.

reflected: “it was really so funny because we were so anti hippie, and [yet] it was such a hippie feel, it was so community [oriented].” She found the Los Angeles punk scene very “accepting” and “loving.” And New York writer Robert Press saw punks rather than the jam/hippie bands of the 1970s as the next logical progression of youth culture after the sixties counterculture because punk more strongly questioned authority.²⁷

The willingness to question authority was just one of a number of ways that punk rock resembled the sixties counterculture. Both punk and the counterculture emphasized the possibility of self-actualization through play and everyday life. Louis Perez found punk to be “a community of bands and fans that were reclaiming music in its raw and primitive form.” It was “just pure unaffected energy that spoke directly to the soul.”²⁸ Additionally, like the counterculture, punks believed success came through living an authentic life rather than through material rewards. True punk authenticity, as discussed in detail in chapter 3, required daily dedication to punk ideals. It meant – among other things – doing it yourself, “jamming econo,” and questioning authority. Another way punk rock resembled the counterculture was in its (ostensible) commitment to egalitarianism and non-hierarchical structures. Much punk music was simple rock ‘n’ roll anyone could learn easily, and purportedly anyone was welcome in the subculture as long as s/he had an authentic punk attitude. The DIY component meant anyone with a few dollars and some stamina could start a band, a label, a fanzine, or a club.

²⁷ Exene Cervenka quoted in Claude Bessy et al., eds., Forming: The Early Days of L.A. Punk (Santa Monica, Calif.: Smart Art Press, 1999), 85; Alice Bag, interview by the Experience Music Project, transcript, 1999, 25-6; Robert Press, telephone interview by author, tape recording, 14 June 2002. For other remarks on punk’s debt to the counterculture, see, for example, Jeff Nelson, interview by author, tape recording, Arlington, Va., 9 September 2002.

²⁸ Louis Perez, “Weird Hair Pendejolandia,” in Make the Music Go Bang!: The Early L.A. Punk Scene ed. Don Snowden (NY: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1997), 112-113.

Despite their seventies-era disillusionment and professed apathy, punk rockers pined for stimulation and engagement, a yearning that would prove to be a powerful motivating force behind the punk movement. Black Randy, that self-destructive but highly entertaining member of the L.A. Masque scene, demonstrated punk's ambivalence toward the counterculture: "Like everybody else in the mid-'70s, I was wishing that something would happen that would shake us free of the legacy of the hippies, and that there would be something new and there would be excitement again instead of disillusionment and total apathy."²⁹ Randy wanted to be "free of the legacy of the hippies," yet seemed almost wistful for the action and ferment of their era.

"I'm Okay/You're Okay": Punk as a Human Potential Movement

Another "legacy of the hippies" that punk rockers had to face was the feel-good New Age culture of the 1970s. In an era that popularized the smiley face and turned Thomas Harris's transactional analysis phrase "I'm OK, You're OK" into a misused, simplistic mantra, punks angrily responded with assertions that seemed to say, "I'm not OK, you're not OK; in fact, it's all fucked up." Perhaps the most blatant of these assertions came from the kings of punk silliness, the Dickies, who lampooned the new age mindset in their nonsensical "I'm OK, You're OK" (1979). The tune mingles social taboo with teen concerns: "I'm in love with [Charles Manson devotee] Squeaky Fromme/ I'd like to take her to my high school prom"; chronicles life as a young L.A. punk: "I went into the Starwood/ everybody there told me it should have been good;" and ridicules L.A. hipsters: "I'm cruisin' down Sunset/ gonna mingle with the fun set." But what one remembers most clearly after listening to this song is

²⁹ Black Randy quoted in Spitz and Mullen, Neutron Bomb, 54.

the chorus, consisting solely of the frenetically repeated phrase “I’m OK, you’re OK.”³⁰ It is as if manic repetition might somehow make everything all right.

The Ramones supplied another effort at exploding feel-good conventions in “Today Your Love/Tomorrow the World” (1976), in which the band announced “I’m a shock trooper/ In a stupor/ Yes I am/ I’m a Nazi schatze you know/ I fight for Fatherland.” According to Legs McNeil, New York punk fan and co-founder of PUNK magazine, the song was a reaction to the fact that “the entire seventies culture was based on being ‘nice.’ You had to be nice. It’s no accident that smiley faces became the symbol of the seventies. So when the Ramones sang that they were Nazis, they were really saying, ‘We refuse to be nice.’” Punks in England similarly wore swastikas for shock value and as a generational statement. According to Siouxi Sioux, “It was always very much an anti-mums and anti-dads thing. We hated older people – not across the board but particularly in suburbia – always harping on about Hitler, ‘We showed him,’ and that smug pride.”³¹

Despite punks’ ostensible pessimism and their disdain for the touchy-feely world of new-age experience, the punk philosophy shared a great deal with what has become known

³⁰ Thomas Harris originally published I’m OK-You’re OK in 1969. It gained traction over time and entered the New York Times bestseller list in 1972, where it stayed for almost two years. Transactional analysis has as its goal ego building, and in Harris’s delineation, humans move through four “life positions,” from the “universal position of early childhood,” in which the child believes “I’m not OK - you’re OK” to the position of a mature adult at peace with him/herself and his/her surroundings: “I’m OK - You’re OK.” [Thomas Harris, I’m OK-You’re OK (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 66-7.] Lynnette “Squeaky” Fromme is a Charles Manson devotee who was convicted of an assassination attempt on President Gerald Ford in 1975. The Starwood was a hard-rock venue in Los Angeles that began booking punk bands regularly by the late 1970s. The Dickies, “I’m OK, You’re OK,” *The Incredible Shrinking Dickies*, A&M, 1979.

³¹ Ramones, “Today Your Love/ Tomorrow the World,” *Ramones*, Sire, 1976. Legs McNeil quoted in Legs McNeil and Gillian McCain, Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk. Grove Press, 1996. Reprint, New York: Penguin, 1997), 234; Siouxi Sioux quoted in Jon Savage, England’s Dreaming : Anarchy, Sex Pistols, Punk Rock, and Beyond (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), 241. For further discussion of the use of Nazi symbolism see, Jon Stratton, “Jews, Punk and the Holocaust: From the Velvet Underground to the Ramones – the Jewish-American Story.” Popular Music 24, no. 1 (2005): 79–105.

as the New Age or therapeutic cultures. At first glance, it is difficult to imagine two more dissimilar movements, but the parallels are there nonetheless. Scholars have yet to find – and perhaps shouldn’t try to find – a convenient, umbrella description of the New Age beliefs that emerged in the sixties and seventies. The Oxford English Dictionary refers to “new age” as “a name given to the Age of Aquarius ... which, according to astrological progression, the world entered in the late 20th or early 21st century, and which is believed to signal the beginning of a new spiritual awareness and collective consciousness.” Sociologist Robert Wuthnow coined three headings that offer useful distinctions among the disparate movements of the era: “Those that are offshoots of distinctly non-Western or non-Christian traditions will be termed *Countercultural*; those that are of Western origin but are essentially neutral to the Christian tradition will be termed *Personal Growth* movements; and those that represent relatively new Christian groups will be termed *Neo-Christian*.”³² For the sake of simplicity, I use the term “the New Age philosophies” to refer to the collection of disparate movements that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s (although many had roots in much earlier movements) devoted to individual development in terms of spirituality and self-awareness; often these groups blended elements of Western religions or intellectual traditions (like Christianity or psychotherapy) with non-Western components (like Zen or massage). While punks, like many Americans, belittled the clichés through which the New Age entered the mainstream, both punk and the era’s therapeutic cultures were part of the same intellectual

³² “new age, n. and a.,” OED Online, September 2003, Oxford University Press, 7 June 2007, <http://www.oed.com/services/citing.html>; Robert Wuthnow, “The New Religions in Social Context,” in Charles Y. Glock and Robert N. Bellah, eds. The New Religious Consciousness (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 268. James R. Lewis and J. Gordon Melton refer to them as “the emergence ... of a large-scale, decentralized religious subculture that drew its principal inspiration from sources outside of the Judeo-Christian tradition.” While it had roots in “the occult-metaphysical community,” it currently featured an “emphasis on transformation.” [Lewis, James R., and J. Gordon Melton, eds., Perspectives on the New Age (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1992), ix, xi.]

trend: a movement away from defining the individual through his or her relationships with other people toward an epistemology understanding the individual in a more phenomenological or even existential way. That is to say, both punk and the human potential movement believed individuals defined themselves through a lived life, through the choices they made and the actions they took as they faced the daily challenges of existence. Richard Curry and Lawrence Goodheart refer to this development as “expressive” or “lifestyle” individualism.³³

With an increased emphasis on self-actualization and self-definition, the 1970s therefore marked a critical juncture in the history of the self in America, and punk was part of this story. Religious-studies scholar Paul Heelas asserts, “New Agers make the monistic assumption that the Self itself is sacred.” And while punks would not have used the same language, their position was very similar. Both punks and New Age adherents drew on the more positive legacies of existentialist beliefs: the belief that individuals – not the world – gave meaning to their lives and emphases on personal existence, freedom and responsibility.³⁴ As we have seen elsewhere in this work, punks viewed distinctiveness as

³³ Richard O. Curry and Lawrence B. Goodheart, “A Confusion of Voices: The Crisis of Individualism in Twentieth-Century America,” in Richard O. Curry and Lawrence B. Goodheart, eds., American Chameleon: Individualism in Trans-National Context (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1991), 195-205. Social critics of the seventies and eighties worried that “narcissism” and individualism hurt America public life and community. See, for example, Robert N. Bellah, et al., Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); and Christopher Lasch, The Culture of Narcissism : American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations (New York: Norton, 1979).

³⁴ Paul Heelas, The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1996), 2. According to Robert Solomon, “figures are usually considered existentialists insofar as they resonate with certain Sartrean themes – extreme individualism, an emphasis on freedom and responsibility, and the insistence that we and not the world give meaning to our lives.” [“Existentialism,” The New Dictionary of the History of Ideas vol. 2, ed. Maryanne Cline Horowitz (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2005), 761.] See also, Robert C. Solomon, From Hegel to Existentialism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 238-45; and Robert H. Abzug, “*Love and Will*: Rollo May and the Seventies’ Crisis of Intimacy,” in The Lost Decade: America in the 1970s, ed. Elsebeth Hurup (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1996), 79-88.

the *sine qua non* of being punk: “punk is an attitude, individuality is the key.”³⁵ Similarly, Patrick Di Puccio states, “It was a state of mind. ... it’s not necessarily style. It’s a way of looking at things and being an individual.” Thus punks, like New Agers, put the self at the center of their projects. Eugene Robinson of the band Whipping Boy out of Palo Alto, California remarked about punk, “The individuals define the movement and not the other way around.”³⁶

Like New Age philosophies, punk assumed mainstream culture did not offer paths to full self-awareness or self-actualization. According to scholar Peter Clecak, “The therapeutic quest centers on salvation of the self from a variety of classic and contemporary conditions. ... A high percentage of those pursuing therapeutic modes of fulfillment focused exclusively on the unused possibilities of this life – *their* lives – rather than the prospect of life after death.”³⁷ The unused possibilities of this life would be found in things like “emotional intensity” and “mental wholeness.” In other words, while the mainstream world valued career and consumerism and tried to put individuals into neat ideological boxes like “housewife” or “lawyer,” new age philosophies believed one’s quality of life was of paramount importance, a much more important entity to be measured than, say, fiscal wealth or career advancement. Punks, likewise, saw emotional intensity and being true to oneself as being more accurate barometers of a life well-lived than, say, record sales or college degrees. And just as New Agers believed self-actualization required dedication and hard work, punk rockers believed true “punkness” came from serious commitment, from “liv[ing] the lifestyle

³⁵ Wrecks, “Punk is an Attitude,” *Not So Quiet on the Western Front*, Alternative Tentacles, 1982.

³⁶ Di Puccio, interview by author, 2004, 19; “Interview with Whipping Boy,” *Flipside*, no 42, summer 1984, 28-30.

³⁷ Peter Clecak, *America’s Quest for the Ideal Self: Dissent and Fulfillment in the 60s and 70s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 145. Clecak is professor emeritus at the University of California, Irvine’s School of Social Ecology.

24 hours” a day, seven days a week and not merely from “go[ing] to a punk-rock gear store ... and putting that gear on on Friday night [to] go out clubbing,” in the words of Daniel Garber, doorperson at D.C.’s 9:30 club in the mid-1980s. Living the lifestyle meant creating “an alternative to what was generally accepted in society” in every area, including “relationships,” “career,” “apartment,” “art,” and “poetry.” It meant “shak[ing] people by the fact that you had the freedom to be different, to think for yourself” and creating “your own standards about just about everything.”³⁸ Being punk, thus, was a conscious choice to find fulfillment through self-defined goals.

Self-actualization depended on quality of life, and quality of life rested on self-expression, a fact explicit in New Age movements and implicit in the punk movement. This emphasis on self-expression places both movements within a longer tradition of humanistic expressivism. Humanistic expressivists emphasize internal goals rather than external goals. They work on “human potential,” self-development and self-exploration, “seeking to express all that one can be” through values like “awareness, insight, empathy, creativity, autonomy, authenticity, being loving, and seeking fulfillment,” according to Heelas.³⁹ Punks might have scoffed at some of those values, but they certainly cared deeply about creativity, autonomy, and authenticity and held that those principles could only be achieved through individual expression. Punks believed one did not necessarily need to be profound in order to have a voice that counted. Expressions of boredom mattered; expressions of everyday frustrations mattered. What mattered was that you “get up and go,” in the words of D.C.

³⁸ Daniel Garber, telephone interview by author, tape recording, 24 February 2002.

³⁹ Heelas, The New Age Movement, 115; Clecak, America’s Quest, 145.

punks the Teen Idles, that you express yourself rather than depend on the rock establishment or “grown-ups” to say it for you.⁴⁰

In addition to self-expression, quality of life for New Agers came from living in the here-and-now. Frederick Perls, a key figure in the human potential movement in general and the Esalen Institute at Big Sur more specifically, developed gestalt therapy, a form of psychotherapy that tried to treat neurosis by concentrating on the present rather than the past. And Zen Buddhism, a powerful influence on the New Age, taught that “careful self-preparation for finding the truth at some future time or from some external source is putting off the issue of seeing the facts just as they are at the moment.” Punk also valued living in the moment; the effort was worth the journey alone. California ‘zinester Shredder summed it up nicely: “In punk there was no future, no money, no other place to go. It was all for the moment, and it was rad.” Living in the moment meant that punks valued live performances above all else. And studio recordings, rather than be a manipulated opus at the hands of a sound engineer, should capture the essence of the band’s live gigs. In 1980 Blaine Harden of the Washington Post astutely summarized punk’s take in 1980: “And while no one may be able to say precisely what authentic feelings are, nearly every punk knows they are not contained in the slick, elaborately engineered records of major pop groups such as the Bee Gees, the Eagles or Steely Dan.”⁴¹

⁴⁰ Teen Idles, “Get Up and Go,” *Minor Disturbance*, Dischord, 1980.

⁴¹ Walter Truett Anderson, The Upstart Spring: Esalen and the American Awakening (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1983), 11, 88-89, 130-7. Lawrence D. Plumb defines the human potential movement (HPM) as “ideas and activities that are oriented toward personal growth and fulfillment. He and others believe the movement, a “consciousness revolution,” began with the “expressivists” of the early 1960s. Plumb sees three “founding fathers” of the HPM: Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, who founded humanistic psychology, and Fritz Perls. [Lawrence D. Plumb, A Critique of the Human Potential Movement (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993), 4-5, 34.] Shredder (Danny Wiezmann) quoted in Fucked Up and Photocopied, 135. He published Rag in Chains. Don Bolles, drummer for the Germs, stated that Germs performances were “about

Being “fully present in the moment” meant that the New Age philosophies of the sixties and seventies placed a great deal of importance on the experiential nature of knowledge and belief. This was, in part, a reaction to the traditional emphasis on rationalism and intellect in Western epistemology and religion. For instance, Zen Buddhism emphasized experiential wisdom. Alan Watts, the writer who first interpreted Zen for a western audience, stated that Zen Buddhism taught him “nobody could expect to find enlightenment in a hermitage unless he was capable of finding it in the life of the world.”⁴² Punks did not generally speak of a path toward enlightenment, but they certainly cherished first-hand experience. As we learned in earlier chapters, doing it yourself (DIY) was one of the fundamental tenets of punk rock ideology. And DIY is a verb; it implies action or direct experience. Flipside’s motto was “be more than a witness,” telling its readers: create your own scene if you don’t have one, or alter the one you have if you don’t like it. It meant, in other words, taking responsibility for one’s happiness. Dez Cadena of Black Flag says, “get twisted and make your own scene.”⁴³

The similarities between New Age philosophies and punk were, of course, limited. And the experience of one punk, Darby Crash, illustrate this point. New Age philosophies enjoyed greater popularity and had more visibility in California than in most other parts of

the moment without being pretentious about it.” [Don Bolles, interview for the Experience Music Project, transcript, 1999, 15.] Blaine Harden, “The Good, the Bad, & the Ugly: Washington’s Punk/New Wave Scene,” Washington Post Magazine, 3 March 1980, G1, 14.

⁴² Quote is from Alan Watts, The Spirit of Zen: A Way of Life, Work, and Art in the Far East (1936; New York: Grove Press, 1960), 47. For more on Zen in the therapeutic cultures, see, for instance, Anderson, Upstart Spring, 36-9, 254; Robert N. Bellah, “New Religious Consciousness and the Crisis in Modernity, in Charles Y. Glock and Robert N. Bellah, eds. The New Religious Consciousness (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 344-45. Robert Wunthnow, “The New Religions in Social Context,” in The New Religious Consciousness, eds. Charles Y. Glock and Robert N. Bellah (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 282; Plumb, Human Potential Movement, 10-15.

⁴³ Dez Cadena quoted in Fucked Up + Photocopied, 90.

the United States, not a surprising fact given that several of the more important strands of the New Age had their origins in California. Darby Crash (born Paul Beahm) grew up in Los Angeles and attended West L.A.'s University High School (Uni High) in the mid-1970s. He, his friend Pat Smear (born Georg Ruthenberg), and several other soon-to-be punks attended the "Innovative Program School" (IPS) of Uni High, a "school within a school."⁴⁴ IPS was the brainchild of teachers Caldwell Williams and Fred Holtby, who drew on strands of the human potential movement, including est, Scientology, the Esalen Institute, Transactional Analysis, and yoga in their experimental approach to high-school education. IPS was intended for students who sought a non-traditional high school experience or who had faced disciplinary problems.

Much of the IPS curriculum relied on the encounter group dynamic prevalent in New Age philosophies. Encounter groups at IPS included "Body/Mind" sessions incorporating yoga and "TRs" ("training routines") from Scientology. Darby Crash benefited from and valued some of the IPS techniques and classes, especially rhetoric. Rhetoric certainly was useful for someone who, by all accounts, enjoyed manipulating people and "control[ling] reality with his words."⁴⁵ While Crash relished the power of rhetoric, he refused the basic underlying assumption of encounter groups: the belief that the group and the individual

⁴⁴ For example, the Esalen Institute, a center for the human potential movement, was in Big Sur; Scientology had a major presence in Los Angeles; and Werner Erhard and Erhard Seminars Training (est) were based in San Francisco. [Donald Stone, "The Human Potential Movement," in The New Religious Consciousness, eds. Charles Y. Glock and Robert N. Bellah, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 100; Anderson, Upstart Spring, 16.] The description of IPS is Caldwell Williams quoted in Brendan Mullen, Don Bolles, and Adam Parfey, Lexicon Devil: The Fast Times and Short Life of Darby Crash and the Germs (Los Angeles: Feral House, 2002), 13. For an overview of Crash at IPS, see Lexicon Devil, 11-24.

⁴⁵ Encounter groups also were called "growth groups," and "training groups (or T-groups)," Stone, Human Potential Movement, 106-7; Anderson, Upstart Spring, 80-85, 156-8; Richard Ofshe, "Synanon: The People Business," in Glock and Bellah, eds., 125-7. Pat Smear, Robin Boyarsky, and Paul Roessler quoted in Mullen, Bolles, and Parfey, Lexicon Devil, 15, 19, 20. In the Germs song "Circle One," Crash describes himself: "I'm Darby Crash/ A social blast/ Chaotic master." [Germs, "Circle One," Lexicon Devil EP, Slash Records, 1978.]

expand their potential by encountering each other. In other words, New Age philosophies believed that individual consciousness-raising enhanced the wellbeing of the group and vice-versa. Crash, conversely, was too narcissistic and rebellious to take the encounter process seriously. Instead, like the good punk he would become, Crash brought a great deal of irony and cynicism to the curriculum. IPS allowed the students to form their own classes and determine their own grades, and in response, Crash and Smear formed the “Fruit Eating class.” According to Smear, “It was an hour a day, where we’d walk up to the market, eat fruit from the produce department, and hang out in front for a while, and then walk back to the school.” “We, of course, gave ourselves A’s.” The school advocated a great deal of relativism regarding both intellectual knowledge and moral structures. Scientology, to which Crash was exposed at IPS and which he studied on his own, taught that “no one is asked to accept anything as belief or on faith. That which is true for you is what you have observed to be true.” Crash enjoyed using that mindset to his advantage. If he was admonished for being late, causing a disturbance, or getting “loaded” at lunch, he gleefully replied, “Okay, we caused it, we’re responsible ... there’s no right and wrong, so now what?”⁴⁶

Crash adhered to the hyper-individualism (at least for himself) that, at its best, drove punk. He was fascinated by religion but adhered to none. He wrote “No God,” a song performed by the Germs (a band he and Pat Smear formed), as a passionate assertion of this individuality: “I’ve read every book in the Bible Story/ And all it ever brought me was another worry/ ... See there’s no God to make up my mind/ No God givin’ me time.”⁴⁷ Here

⁴⁶ Pat Smear quoted in Mullen, Bolles, and Parfrey, *Lexicon Devil*, 18; “Introduction to Scientology,” <http://www.scientology.org/>, accessed 5 September 2007; Crash quoted in Mullen, Bolles, and Parfrey, *Lexicon Devil*, 19.

⁴⁷ Germs, “No God,” *Lexicon Devil* EP, Slash Records, 1978.

Crash vehemently declares his self-determination: he makes up his own mind and does it on his own schedule. In fact, Crash's resolve to control his own fate led to a successful suicide by heroin overdose in 1980.

Crash and Smear not only rejected the underlying tenet of encounter groups, they also seemed to reject the fundamental goal of encounter groups: to overcome individuals' increasing alienation from themselves, each other, and society at large. Punks, to some degree, accepted the alienation and chaos of modern life; sometimes they even reveled in it. One need look no farther than lyrics written by Crash for his band, the Germs, for evidence of this viewpoint. In "Street Dreams" Crash savors the chaotic messiness of street life: "I've got street dreams – together with plans/ I've got street dreams – chaotic new stands/ I've got street dreams – ultra magic mess/ ... Build me a world with nothing restrained." In "Vile Babies," Crash plays on the words vial/vile to describe test-tube babies – perhaps a metaphor for punk rockers – as "your vial babies/ Just your scrapings." In "Beyond Hurt – Beyond Help," written for the Darby Crash Band in 1980, Crash declares "all in all I'm fine," but later negates this statement by closing the song with "Beyond hurt – beyond help/ Beyond here – there's no one else/ No one else." Unlike New Agers, Crash saw no way around his alienation because he was "beyond help."⁴⁸

These characteristics that separated punk rock and New Age philosophies – irony, pessimism, and cynical alienation – manifested themselves in punk in an ironic way. Punks did not necessarily feel the earnestness that brought New Agers together, and they may have scoffed at the New Agers optimism but – like the New Agers – punk rockers sought

⁴⁸ Germs, "Street Dreams," *Germicide: Live at the Whisky*, ROIR bootleg, 1981; "Vile Babies" lyrics published in Mullen, Bolles, and Parfrey, *Lexicon Devil*, 283. According to the discography included in this book, "Vile Babies" was never released. Darby Crash Band, "Beyond Hurt – Beyond Help," lyrics published in Mullen, Bolles, and Parfrey, *Lexicon Devil*, 275.

belonging. They touted individualism, but did so in a group context. They sought to overcome their alienation in an ironic, backhanded way. They wore clothes that signaled difference and estrangement to outsiders but belonging to fellow travelers. And live shows, with loud music, plenty of booze, rough dancing, were their encounter groups. At concerts, punks achieved what anthropologist Victor Turner has called *communitas*, an active, almost magical performative expression of togetherness that emerges through active – but spontaneous – ritual based on common ideology.⁴⁹ Thus punks – although cynical and disillusioned – rarely reached a fully nihilistic stance.

“Fuck Armageddon ... This is Hell”: Boredom and Despair in the 1970s and 1980s

There's people out there that say I'm no good
'cause I don't believe the things that I should
And when the final conflict comes, I'll be so sorry I did wrong
And hope and pray that our lord god will think I'm good
Countries manufacture bombs and guns to kill your brother
For something that he hasn't even done
Smog is ruining my lungs
But they aren't sorry they've done wrong
They hide behind their lies that they're helping everyone
In the end the good will go to heaven up above
The bad will perish in the depths of hell
How can hell be any worse when life alone is such a curse?
Fuck Armageddon, this is hell
We're living in the denouement of the battle's gripping awe
So what's the use of being good to satisfy them all?
Bad Religion, “Fuck Armageddon ... This is Hell” (1982)⁵⁰

One of the primary motivations behind individual punks’ desire for community was the overwhelming languor many of them experienced in the 1970s and ‘80s. Indeed, it would be difficult to overemphasize the importance of boredom as a catalyst for and topic

⁴⁹ Victor Witter Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982).

⁵⁰ Bad Religion, “Fuck Armageddon ... This is Hell,” *How Could Hell Be Any Worse*, EP, Epitaph, 1982.

within punk. Young people who found little to engage them in current popular culture turned to or created punk rock as a solution to their ennui. For example, Henry Rollins, as a young “teeny punk” in Washington, D.C., explained the attraction of the subculture: “It’s just that I’m so bored I’ve got to have some kind of outlet.” Later, after moving to California to become the singer for Black Flag, he described the Orange County hardcore scene as containing “all kinds of kids, poor kids, rich kids, but the common thread was ‘we are so sick of being bored, we don’t even care’” about those sorts of differences. Similarly K. K. Barrett believed punk in general and his band the Screamers more specifically “fill[ed] a void of boredom and amusement.”⁵¹

Historian William Graebner sees the boredom of the 1970s as indicating an “existential despair” among many Americans. Unable to find anything worthy of faith or hope – not politicians, the economy, nor traditional gender roles – Americans experienced a crisis of meaning, purposes, and ideals. Faced with such overwhelming uncertainty and the anxiety it fostered, Americans simply shut down emotionally. Better to be bored than have thwarted expectations; better to be apathetic than experience frustrated ambitions. According to Graebner, Hollywood’s spate of disaster films in the 1970s, such as the *Poseidon Adventure* (1972) and the *Towering Inferno* (1974), represented efforts to solve this despair by developing characters that moved from despondency and apathy to earnestness and engagement. Sociologist Ryan Moore, on the other hand, explains seventies boredom by drawing on Jean Baudrillard’s social theories. For Moore, punks’ ennui was “fostered by a culture” that “promises novelty, amusement, and satisfaction but delivers repetition, banality,

⁵¹ Kathleen Ennis, “Punks,” *Washington Post*, 22 January 1981 sec. Comics/D.C., p. 1; Rollins, interview by the Experience Music Project, 1998, 14, 22. Later in the interview he states, “I write lyrics primarily to alleviate pain, boredom, frustration.” K. K. Barrett, email interview by author, 20 July 2004.

and frustration.”⁵² In other words, young people of the era had a plethora of options in terms of popular culture and entertainment, but punks found the choices, once made, delivered little gratification. Both scholars’ analyses contain elements of truth about punk. Punk rockers shared in America’s malaise of the era, finding themselves overwhelmed by corrupt politics, changes in family life, a depressed economy, and – very importantly – a seemingly hopeless future. Furthermore, little in current popular culture animated them. But they did not shut down completely, as Graebner suggests. Instead punks circumvented the tedium by creating new music and new communities.

It might be said that punk rock found a niche in spite of itself. Despite being frequently anti-commercial and self-destructive, punk music and ideology attracted people because of the widespread boredom of the era. According to David Brown, co-founder of L.A.’s Dangerhouse records,

Whereas the English musicians had been set upon by some of the top producers in the business [ca 1976], the very lack of commercialism implicit in L.A. punk seemed to drive away potential resources. Those were culturally weird times; Saturday Night Fever and burned-out super group remnants filled the airwaves. Clearly *something* was better than nothing. The early groups (like the Screamers, Germs, Weirdos, Black Randy) were ... able to almost immediately fill clubs and halls with folks who were just plain bored and curious.

In other words, stripped-down, do-it-yourself punk found an audience simply because people had reached overload with arena-rock spectacle and disco glitz. And if the audience showed up out of boredom, the musicians also sometimes created out of boredom. John Denney recalled his early days of musical experimentation with the future Weirdos: “We felt alienated from the older rock establishment.... ... Out of sheer boredom and disgust we

⁵² William Graebner, “America’s *Poseidon Adventure*: A Nation in Existential Despair,” in America in the Seventies, ed. Beth Bailey and David Farber (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2004), 157-80; Ryan Moore, “Anarchy in the USA: Capitalism, Postmodernity, and Punk Subculture Since the 1970s,” Ph.D. diss Sociology, UC-San Diego, 2000, 193.

essentially tried to re-invent the wheel for our own amusement.” Similarly, Louis Perez says, “We put together Los Lobos out of being ... bored out of our heads with the generic copy-band attitude that was spreading throughout the [East LA] music community.”⁵³

Punk rock not only emerged out of boredom, it also legitimated boredom as a song topic and validated listeners’ views of popular culture. Rock songs traditionally focused on such compelling topics as love, sex, and rebellion. And in the seventies, rock came to encompass such lofty matters as science fiction (e.g., Rush, *2112*, 1976), album-epics (e.g., Pink Floyd, *The Wall*, 1979), and even odes to classical music (e.g., Yes, “Cans and Brahms,” 1971). Punk rock, on the other hand, found the dreariness of teenage ennui a topic fit for discussion. Johnny Ramone stated the Ramones chose their song topics because they felt right: “We’d write about teenage problems ... songs about growing up, being nobody, having a hard time finding a girlfriend, teenage boredom, not knowing what to do with yourself. Songs, we felt comfortable with, not like what other bands were singing.” Put simply, punk rock, with its amateur, don’t-get-above-your-raising aesthetic, encouraged punks to write about things they knew, and they knew boredom. Dee Dee Ramone’s testament to teen boredom, “Now I Wanna Sniff Some Glue,” appeared on their first album in 1976: “Now I wanna sniff some glue/ Now I wanna have somethin’ to do/ All the kids wanna sniff some glue/ All the kids want somethin’ to do.” Many punk bands followed the Ramones’ example of chronicling teens’ languor and their desires for “somethin’ to do.” The Dead Boys cataloged all things uninspiring, including television, romance, FM, and their own stereo, in “Ain’t Nothin’ to Do” (1977). Agent Orange found the “American way”

⁵³ David Brown, liner notes to *Dangerhouse Vol. 1*, Frontier Records, 1991; Denney, interview by the EMP, 1999, 3; Louis Perez, “Weird Hair Pendejolandia,” in *Make the Music Go Bang!: The Early L.A. Punk Scene*, ed. Don Snowden (NY: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1997), 111.

tedious in 1979: “I’m so bored of television/ TV dinner on a TV tray/ join the Pepsi generation/ that’s the American way.”⁵⁴

The Teen Idles, who emerged out of a group of young punk fans in Washington, D.C., incorporated the theme of boredom into their name. This band of teenagers was part of a second wave of D.C. youths who became active in punk rock around 1979, a few years later than the earliest D.C. punks. Teen Idles, like most punks, felt at odds with mainstream contemporary society and popular culture, but they felt alienated within D.C. punk circles, too. Because of their young age, older D.C. punks did not necessarily welcome the youngsters with open arms, referring to them as “teeny punks” or “Georgetown punks.”⁵⁵ Excluded in their own town, these young punks initially found inspiration outside the District, especially in the British punk band, Sham 69, whose lyrics addressed everyday issues of youth, such as soccer, tensions with parents, or an unpleasant job. Sham 69’s songs validated youthful problems and spoke to the Georgetown punks’ boredom, anomie, and resulting anger. Most importantly, lead singer Jimmie Pursey offered a solution to monotony and alienation in the anthemic song “If the Kids are United”: “Just take a look around you/what do you see/kids with feelings like you and me/ understand him, he’ll understand you/ for you are him, and he is you/ if the kids are united then we’ll never be divided.”⁵⁶ The

⁵⁴ Johnny Ramone quoted in Jim Bessman, *The Ramones: An American Band* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1993), 51; Ramones, “Now I Wanna Sniff Some Glue,” *Ramones*, Sire, 1976; Dead Boys, “Ain’t Nothin’ to Do,” *Young Loud and Snotty*, Sire, 1977; Agent Orange, “America,” *Living in Darkness*, Rhino Records, 1991. “America” was recorded in 1979.

⁵⁵ Danny Ingram attributes the phrase teeny punk to Susan Mumford of Tiny Desk Unity, an art rock group. He says that while she used the term affectionately, others did not. [Danny Ingram, telephone interview by author, tape recording, 18 August 2002.] For evidence of the acrimony between older and younger punks, see a series of letters to the editor in the Washington, D.C., entertainment newspaper *1981*, which later changed its name to *The City Paper*: *1981*, 12 June 1981, 19; *1981*, 26 June 1981, 19; *1981*, 24 July 1981, 19. See also Henry Rollins, interview by the EMP, 1998, 6.

message was simple: young people should look to themselves for community, and the D.C. kids took this advice to heart by being loyal to other teeny punks and forming their own bands. Young D.C. punks also found inspiration in a surprising source – a group of black youths from the D.C. area who formed the Bad Brains, a powerful hardcore band. To a person, everyone reflecting on Bad Brains’ performances recalls being overwhelmed by their blinding, frenetic energy and enthusiasm, a powerful tour de force counteracting the prevailing boredom of the day. While the Bad Brains were accomplished musicians by punk standards, their legacy to D.C. hardcore was not their musicianship but their musical speed, sheer enthusiasm, and work ethic. The Bad Brains believed in doing it yourself and doing it now. Inspired in part by the Bad Brains’ example, in December 1979, the Teen Idles and another teeny-punk band, the Untouchables, debuted in a friend’s basement.⁵⁷

The name Teen Idles is significant in several ways. First, the name plays on the notion of teen idols, such as Leif Garrett and Rex Harrison who graced the pages of Tiger Beat in the late ‘70s. The moniker thus represents a sarcastic comment on the punks’ positions as teens estranged from their peers’ mainstream culture. Second, the word Idles emphasizes their ennui and the fact that ordinary consumer culture did not fulfill them, a state captured in their song “Teen Idles”: “hours in front of a TV set/ We’re as idle as teens can get/ Teen idles, teen idles fuckin’ bored to tears/ Teen idles, teen idles waste of 20 years.”

⁵⁶ For example, Pursey spoke to their boredom: “I’m sick and tired of this boring routine/ It’s the same everyday/ I’ve got me mum nagging/ ... I don’t really care.” He spoke to their alienation: “Morons all around me/ Not one of them can tell me what I should say or do ... they don’t wanna know me/ I don’t know what to do.” [Sham 69, “Leave Me Alone” and “That’s Life,” *That’s Life*, LP, UK Polydor, 1978.] Sham 69, “If the Kids are United” b/w “Sunday Morning Nightmare,” EP, UK Polydor, 1978. Sham 69 and Pursey were viewed with some derision in the U.K., ridiculed, in part, because they favored working-class drinking songs rather than politics and because Pursey, who was in his twenties, chose such youthful topics. [Jim Green and Jack Rabid, “Sham 69,” Trouser Press, http://www.trouserpress.com/entry.php?a=sham_69, accessed 30 May 2007.]

⁵⁷ Ian MacKaye and Jeff Nelson, eds., Twenty Years of Dischord: Putting DC on the Map, booklet accompanying compact disc of the same name (Washington, D.C.: Dischord Records, 2002), 10.

Being in a band and recording music was a way out of boredom. “Get Up and Go” on the Teen Idles’ 7” EP *Minor Disturbance*, Dischord Records’ first release, testified to the teens’ appreciation for initiative and effort over polish and skill: “You keep talking about talent/ Talent? What do you know?/ Instead of studying theory/ We’re going to get up and go!”⁵⁸

The “Teen” in Teen Idles provides a third clue to the band name’s symbolic meaning: “Teen” emphasizes that the primary element by which they understood their position in society and culture was their age. In one song, “Minor Disturbance (Too Young to Rock),” they bemoan what they perceive as their outsider status even within punk rock, a standing imposed by age: “Nine o’clock, no stamp on your hand/ It’s hard to rock when you can’t see the band/ You have enough money to pay the rates/ But you can’t get in because of your age ... You’re not eighteen and that’s what counts/ We’re too young to rock.” Needless to say, their performances and recordings were sarcastic efforts to prove that they were plenty old enough to rock. For teeny punks in D.C. and elsewhere, punk rock was a social weapon; it was a way to get peers and adults “to listen to them ... take them seriously as people, as individuals, as humans.”⁵⁹ Hardcore punk in general, and the Teen Idles specifically, created a wall of sound through thrashing, hyper-speed drums, guitar, and bass. The stridency with which the teeny punks expressed themselves suggests the powerlessness they felt. As teenagers situated in limbo between childhood and adulthood, they felt they had no outlet.

⁵⁸ Many second-wave punk rockers had been part of a skateboarding crowd, a group priding themselves on an active lifestyle. Teen Idles, “Teen Idles,” *Minor Disturbance*, Dischord, 1980; Nathan Strejcek, telephone interview by author, tape recording, 9 August 2002; Teen Idles, “Get Up and Go,” *Minor Disturbance*, Dischord, 1980. Danny Ingram, drummer for the Untouchables and several other D.C. punk bands, names the empowering aspect of punk very specifically: “Punk made me feel creative, powerful, invigorated, and energized. It made me want to get off my butt and do something rather than be a spectator. Danny Ingram was also drummer for Youth Brigade, Peer Pressure, Social Suicide, and Madhouse. The first two bands were hardcore bands. [Ingram, telephone interview by author, tape recording, 18 August 2002.]

⁵⁹ Teen Idles, “Minor Disturbance (Too Young to Rock),” *Minor Disturbance*, Dischord, 1980; quote is Skip Groff, interview by author, 19 and 21 February 2002.

Contemporary popular culture aimed at teens did not speak to or for them, and the adult world seemed to view them as too young to be taken seriously. So the teens created “weapons of the weak,” a loud, urgent, grating musical assault that simply could not be ignored by anyone within earshot.⁶⁰

“I keep thinking of World War III”: Punk, Youth, and the Cold War

A powerful factor contributing to younger punks’ sense of impotence was the Cold War and the nuclear arms race of the era. To be young in the 1970s and 1980s meant to have come of age with the Cold War as a given; it seemed that the Cold War had always existed and always would. While nuclear weapons and the possibility of nuclear war provided content for a few early punk bands, they were not terribly common lyrical themes during the 1970s due to the relative calm provided by détente. Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, and Jimmy Carter all pursued policies designed to improve relations with the Soviet Union, and, besides, the country and the media had bigger fish to fry during these years: the Watergate scandal, the end of the Vietnam War, the energy crisis, the Bicentennial, and stagflation all helped push the Cold War out of the headlines. When early punk bands did occasionally wrestle with the topic, they generally did so in a relatively lighthearted way.

The Ramones tendered one of punk’s earliest comments on the cold war in “Havana Affair” (1976). The song is typical Ramones fare: rapid-fire, 1-2-3-4 rock chops with silly lyrics.

PT boat on the way to Havana
I used to make a living, man, pickin' the banana

⁶⁰ This strident voice might be labeled as a “weapon of the weak,” similar to those described by James C. Scott in Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 1985).

Now I'm a guide for the CIA
Hooray for the USA!
Baby, baby, make me loco
Baby, baby, make me mambo
Sent to spy on a Cuban talent show
First stop - Havana au go-go

The tune offers the perspective of a Cuban commoner, who happily moved up in the world from “pickin’ the banana” to being “a guide for the CIA,” frequenting nightclubs and talent shows. While the song pokes fun rather than offering serious political commentary, the lyrics suggest that the average person is more concerned about everyday life than international power struggles. Blondie offered another early example of cold war commentary in “Contact in Red Square” (1977), which offers a James-Bond style story of love, intrigue, and death.⁶¹

The Weirdos’ “We Got the Neutron Bomb” (1977) is one of the finest pieces of political satire to emerge from punk, written in response to a media event that occurred summer 1977, when Walter Pincus of the Washington Post suggested the U.S. government was considering the development of enhanced radiation weapons (ERWs). Drawing on an Energy Research and Development Agency budget, Pincus, who was deliberately selective in his use of language, said a “neutron bomb” that “destroys people and leaves buildings intact” was being researched.⁶² Supporters of the weapon called Pincus’ articles misleading, but the damage was done. He created great public opposition to the weapon, both in the U.S. and

⁶¹ Ramones, “Havana Affair,” *The Ramones*, Sire, 1976; Blondie, “Contact in Red Square,” *Plastic Letters*, Chrysalis, 1977.

⁶² Pincus created an international uproar. After initially supporting the idea of production of ERWs, Carter ultimately decided to defer production (assuming the USSR “showed restraint” in arms programs). Supporters of the weapon pointed out that it was intended for use against a massive tank attack and was not intended for use against cities and civilians. During the summer of 1977, opposition to the neutron bomb led to a July 7 demonstration at the Pentagon; readers “flooded” papers across the country with letters to the editor opposing the weapon. In Western Europe, especially West Germany, broad public opposition to the weapon made it an important political issue there. [Walter Pincus, “Neutron Killer Warhead Buried in ERDA Budget,” *Washington Post*, 6 June 1977; Sherri Wasserman, *The Neutron Bomb Controversy: A Study in Alliance Politics* (New York: Praeger, 1983), 39-40; Raymond Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institute, 1985), 851.]

Europe, where ERWs and other tactical nuclear weapons were most likely to be deployed.

The Weirdos' song reacts in particular to the crass logic lying behind a bomb that when dropped left "the buildings stand[ing] but the people ... dead," as one punk remembered it.

Foreign aid from the land of the free
But don't blame me
We got the neutron bomb,
...
Don't understand you; don't know what you mean
We don't want you; we want your machines
United Nations and NATO won't do
It's just the red, white and blue
We got the neutron bomb⁶³

The song also highlights the irony in "the land of the free" offering "foreign aid" in the form of destruction wrought by nuclear weapons. The song closes with lyrics expressing the helplessness felt by citizens who do not agree with their nation's policies: "We don't want it, we don't want it, we don't want it. Don't blame me!" The Weirdos were one of the most politically charged early punk bands, producing other songs about nuclear weapons, including "Arms Race" and "Fallout," as well as the gun-control anthem "Fort USA."⁶⁴

While much of the 1970s offered glimmers of hope for better relations between the U.S. and the USSR, détente disintegrated with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979. Then, with Ronald Reagan's election in 1980, the United States entered a new era of heightened Cold-War rhetoric and action. Reagan believed the Soviets had surpassed the U.S. militarily and wanted to respond with the largest military build-up in peacetime history. He got it; in 1985 military spending had almost doubled that of 1980.

⁶³ Quote is Lens, interview by author, 2004; Weirdos, "We Got the Neutron Bomb" b/w "Solitary Confinement," Dangerhouse Records, 1978.

⁶⁴ Weirdos, "Arms Race," demo recorded at British Studios, Los Angeles, March 1981; "Fallout," demo recorded at Sound Investment, Los Angeles, February 1980; "Fort USA," *Who What Where When Why?*, EP, Bomp!, 1979.

Reagan took an aggressive public stance toward the Soviet Union, calling it an “evil empire” and “totalitarian evil” during his first term.⁶⁵ He pushed for an increased atomic arsenal, arguing that a nuclear war could actually be fought and won, and he promoted the Strategic Defense Initiative, popularly known as “Star Wars,” a high-tech, orbiting missile-defense system. The renewed arms race and menacing rhetoric under Reagan’s watch meant that the Cold War loomed more and more prominently in punk as the eighties progressed.

Some punk commentary on the Cold War retained more than a bit of the despair identified by Graebner, but at least the punks were frightened and angry enough to sing about it. On their 1980 debut EP *Paranoid Time*, the Minutemen released the song “Paranoid Chant,” a personal testament about living with the threat of nuclear war.

I try to work, and I keep thinking of World War III
I try to talk to girls, and I keep thinking of World War III
The goddamn six o’clock news makes sure I keep thinking of World War III
...
I don’t even worry about crime anymore
So many goddamn scared faces
I keep thinking of Russia, Russia
...
Paranoid, stuck on overdrive
scared shitless.

The song is delivered in typical Minutemen style, dispensing with verse/chorus/verse structure in favor of scattered bursts of lyrics and jagged guitar riffs driven by an aggressive rhythm section. It catalogs items of concern to most young men, including employment and women. But the singer cannot focus on the everyday because he keeps “thinking of World War III” and “Russia.” Even crime does not worry him anymore because he is “scared

⁶⁵ John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War* (London: Allen Lane, 2006), 225; Ronald Reagan, speech to the British House of Commons, 8 June 1982; on March 8, 1983, he called the USSR “an evil empire” in a talk to the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, Florida. [Paul Halsall, Ronald Reagan Speech to the House of Commons, 8 June 1982, Modern History Sourcebook, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1982reagan1.html>, accessed 4 June 2007; Gaddis, *The Cold War*, 224-5.]

shitless” by impending nuclear catastrophe. Another despondent view of the contemporary geopolitical system came in the Adolescents’ “Democracy” (1981): “They’re leading us into World War Three/ and this what you call democracy?/ It’s a cry for no government/ a cry to be free/ and I don’t see freedom in democracy ... We’re too far gone for democracy.” The band questioned the efficacy of the current democratic system, and although they did not name it specifically, they seemed to support the idea of anarchy, a moderately popular idea among punks in the early 1980s. Forty percent of readers who responded to a 1983 Flipside poll identified themselves as anarchists. (Thirty-six percent also said they received MTV, and sixty-six percent lived at home. In other words, most punks did not have a clear idea of what anarchy was or the fortitude to achieve it.)⁶⁶

The Minutemen and the Adolescents represented a shift by some within punk from escapism and despondency to anger and action. They also comprised part of what I call the second cohort in punk, young people who were teenagers in the late seventies to early eighties and who discovered punk in that time. This group showed themselves to be more willing than the original punk cohort to tackle social and political issues. Perhaps with the Cold War ramping up under Reagan, Graebner’s “existential despair” began to wear off, and punks could again feel the need to act. In 1984, Al Flipside of Flipside spoke for this growing cadre of punks who advocated social and political engagement: “You can say fuck the system, [that] who ever you vote for[,] government wins, but it’s like one government will kill you and [with] the other you may have a fighting change [sic] I have to agree with the Subhumans when they suggest that if we ‘bring up our kids wrong,’ meaning

⁶⁶ “Minutemen, “Paranoid Chant,” *Paranoid Time*, EP, SST, 1980; Adolescents, “Democracy,” *Adolescents*, Frontier, 1981; “Results of 1983 Polls,” Flipside, no. 41, early 1984, 3.

socially aware, conscious, caring, loving and responsible, then as time goes on things will get better.” In the same editorial, he notes, “...because if Ronnie Ray Gun does get the security of another 4 years he will probably get his war. And we’re talking life and death, perhaps of the whole planet, so I can see where, hmmm, that involves anarchists too.” Amy of Norfolk, Virginia, expressed a similar sentiment in her letter to Flipside early in 1984. Tired of being harassed at school for being a punk rocker, she identified her punkness as an expression of her increased politicization due to fears of nuclear war: “And I try & explain what the scenes [sic] about and why it’s important to me and why they should consider their future (because they may not have one).”⁶⁷

Punk’s increased consideration of nuclear weapons and possible war was part of a larger explosion of concern in contemporary media and popular culture. For example, on October 5, 1981, Newsweek’s lead story was “The Nuclear Arms Race,” covering the “balance of firepower,” Reagan’s “new strategy,” and a “scenario for limited war.” According to this scenario, in which the Soviet Union would limit its nuclear attacks by targeting U.S. intercontinental-ballistic-missile bases, in the “2-mile radius around each crater, the heat and pressure [from the bombs] would incinerate all living things and pulverize most brick, wood, and stone buildings. ... Within a 7-mile radius, the blast pressure would hurl an adult against a wall at two or three times the force of gravity and send debris flying at speeds up to 100 mph.” The “Congressional Office of Technology Assessment ... estimated” that “fourteen million Americans would die.”⁶⁸ Such grim

⁶⁷ Al Flipside, opening comments, Flipside, Halloween 1984, 2; Al probably refers to the Subhumans song “From the Cradle to the Grave,” *From the Cradle to the Grave*, Bluurg, 1984; Amy, “Voice of the Reader,” Flipside, no. 41, early 1984, 7.

⁶⁸ Several articles in that issue of Newsweek comprised “The Nuclear Arms Race,” the cover story. David M. Alpern, John Walcott, David C. Martin, “The Nuclear Arms Race,” 32-33; Peter McGrath, David C. Martin, Marilyn Achiron, Phyllis Malamud, and Tony Clifton, “Thinking the Unthinkable,” 34-39; and Melinda Beck,

predictions with their grisly detail fostered anxiety among many. A statistical search of newspapers further illustrates the era's heightened concern about nuclear war. The Washington Post, for instance, discussed "nuclear war" in eighty-two items between 1977 and 1980, an average of 20.5 items per year. From 1981 to 1985 nuclear war was discussed in 443 pieces, or an average of over eight-eight items per year.⁶⁹

As in the news media, popular culture's interest in nuclear weapons and nuclear war accelerated during the late 1970s and 1980s. A spate of movies such as Damnation Alley (1977), the Mad Max trilogy (1979-1985), World War III (miniseries on NBC, 1982), The Day After (1983), War Games (1983), Testament (1984), and Red Dawn (1984) explored the horrors and absurdity of the arms race and nuclear war. In fact, during the period from 1983 to 1985, the number of movies released in the United States with nuclear weapons as "a significant part of the film" reached an all-time high, according to cinematic scholar Jerome Shapiro.⁷⁰ While Shapiro cites Reagan's accession as a catalyst for antinuclear activism, he points out that this activism drew on long-standing, less visible antinuclear movements.

David C. Martin, and Marilyn Achiron, "Scenario for a Limited War," 36-37. Quotes are from "Scenario for a Limited War," 36. [Newsweek, New York, 5 October 1981.]

⁶⁹ A search of the Washington Post archives on Lexis-Nexis Academic on June 15, 2007, for the term "nuclear war" returned eighty-two items between 1977 and 1980, an average of 20.5 items per year. The same search for the years 1981 to 1985 yielded 443 items, or an average of over eight-eight items per year.

⁷⁰ Allan M. Winkler, Life Under a Cloud: American Anxiety about the Atom (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 190-5; Margot A. Henriksen, Dr. Strangelove's America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), xix; Spencer R. Weart, Nuclear Fear: A History of Images (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 376-82; and Mick Broderick, Nuclear Movies: A Critical Analysis and Filmography of International Feature Length Films Dealing with Experimentation, Aliens, Terrorism, Holocaust and Other Disaster Scenarios, 1914-1989 (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland and Company, 1991), 136-170. There also were a number of print fiction and nonfiction accounts published during the period under discussion, but these probably had less effect on punks than film and television works. Jerome Shapiro has compiled an extensive filmography cataloging films released in the U.S. in which "the bomb" is "a significant part of the film." From 1953 to 1969, an average of 4.55% of movies released in the U.S. fell into this category. During the first half of the 1970s, this number declined; the percentage jumped again in 1977, then reached an all-time high 1983 to 1985, when the average was 7.9%. [Jerome Shapiro, Atomic Bomb Cinema: The Apocalyptic Imagination on Film (New York: Routledge, 2002), 359-78.]

Punks used graphic art as well as music to register their alarm and anger about the arms race. In 1980 Mark Vallen, a Los Angeles punk artist, created a silkscreen poster as a commentary on the ever-present fear of nuclear Armageddon, and its image ran as the front cover of the LA Weekly, L.A.'s leading independent entertainment newspaper of the day. In the image, an attractive woman, drawn in Brenda-Starr style, comic-strip realism, clasps her hand to her head as she sheds tears, visibly anguished, and exclaims, "Nuclear War?! There goes my career!" She reacts to the news of nuclear war in a petty and selfish way: instead of "Nuclear war?! There goes humanity!" she thinks of her professional future. According to Vallen, the print "was a critique against those self-possessed and upwardly mobile individuals who were too busy with their careers to notice they were in part responsible for the state of the world."⁷¹

While antinuclear punks were angry at yuppie ostriches, they were utterly incensed at the fact that they had been bequeathed such a volatile geopolitical situation. The Circle Jerks decried their inheritance in "Stars and Stripes" (1982): "What they did, past or present/ Got us in this situation/ Predicament, nowhere to run/ Everybody's building bombs/ ... Modern technology digs your grave/ Care of Moscow and D.C./ Votes you never gave." And the media repeated over and over again that the superpowers had enough nuclear weapons to demolish the Earth completely, a fact not lost on punk rockers. The New York hardcore band Agnostic Front, sing about the "Final War" (1983): "Better look out, you've gotta move quick/ They're coming to get you, Uncle Sam this is it/ This is the final war! ... And there will be no one left." A 1983 advertisement for Sin 34's *Do You Feel Safe?*, "a new 15-song LP on Spinhead records," graphically illustrates punks' fears. The ad depicts a crowded

⁷¹ Mark Vallen, "Nuclear War?! There goes my career!." <http://www.art-for-a-change.com/blog/2005/08/nuclear-war-there-goes-my-career.html>, posted 5 August 2005, accessed 5 June 2007.

freeway, cars in the four lanes traveling forward (toward the future) face several choices of exits, including a by-pass. But hanging over the entire image and dominating the freeway up ahead is an enormous mushroom cloud. The message to young punk rockers seems clear: no matter what path you take, what choice you make, the future contains nuclear war.⁷² For young people just beginning to chart a life course, this ever present danger could serve to darken their outlook and circumscribe their choices.

Increased awareness of the threat of nuclear war eventually led some punks to become more active politically. Washington, D.C.'s "Revolution Summer" illustrated this turn toward active engagement. While early D.C. hardcore had concerned itself primarily with personal politics and issues of immediate concern to teenagers, such as school, parents, and peers, by 1984 some D.C. punks had turned to larger issues like racism and nuclear weapons. 1985 proved to be the major turning point in D.C. punks' politicization. Punk rockers took part in No Business As Usual protests against nuclear weapons in April. And, inspired by groups in Nevada, Mark Andersen and others founded Positive Force DC in June, a group that worked for "fundamental social change and youth empowerment." Punks orchestrated "punk percussion protests" and music festivals, all evidence of a growing – if still small – trend within punk called "positive punks."⁷³ Positive punks, a designation that encompassed bands like Reno's 7 Second and LA organizers the Better Youth Organization,

⁷² Circle Jerks, "Stars and Stripes," Wild in the Streets, Faulty Products, 1982. The song also sarcastically lists the American culture that will be destroyed by nuclear war: "No more housewives, 'Days of Our Lives,' television, Disneyland, basketball or stars and stripes." A search on Lexis-Nexis Academic for the term "nuclear war" returned 167 items between 1976 and 1980 and 651 items between 1981 and 1985 in the New York Times; 82 items between 1976 and 1980 and 443 items between 1981 and 1985 in the Washington Post. The Los Angeles Times' archives are not available via LexisNexis. Agnostic Front, "Final War," United Blood, Last Warning, 1983; Advertisement for Sin 34, Flipside, no. 38, May 1983, 28.

⁷³ "Revolution Starts Now with You," <http://www.positiveforcedc.org/>, accessed 15 September 2007; Mark Andersen and Mark Jenkins, Dance of Days, 168-92.

tried to remind their peers that “every generation has the responsibility to change what they feel is wrong in the world.”⁷⁴

Conclusion

Being young in the 1970s meant facing a daunting intersection of issues. On a daily basis, young Americans of the era encountered a contradictory ideology that celebrated the power of youth but stringently channeled youthful expression into acceptable avenues. They lived in the shadow of the largest and most visible youth culture in American history – the baby boomers’ counterculture – and wrestled with its legacies, including “Eagles-dominated FM” radio and the human potential movement.⁷⁵ Nationally, the American public was gripped by disenchantment, even despair, as the insults of Vietnam and Watergate were followed by an energy crisis and stagflation. And as the seventies gave way to the eighties, Americans watched their president lead an aggressive arms race against an “evil empire.” Growing up during a time in which political leaders were presumed corrupt and the possibility of nuclear war was imminent could be a perplexing and emotionally challenging experience. Coming of age while these gloomy elements coexisted with feel-good New Age philosophies must have been bewildering beyond belief.

Punks responded to these baffling, contradictory, and overwhelming trends in sometimes mysterious and contradictory ways. Some critics have applied the name of Richard Hell’s best-known tune, “Blank Generation,” to punk rock, seeing it as a group of

⁷⁴ “Youth Brigade,” http://www.byorecords.com/index.php?page=one_band&aid=17, accessed 15 September 2007.

⁷⁵ Greg Shaw, “The Facts About Greg Shaw,” 1994, <http://www.bomp.com/Facts.html>, accessed July 1, 2004.

young people gripped by inertia or – even worse – studied inaction. Hell himself says the song implied that the listener could and should fill in the blank; he could attach whatever descriptor he chose to designate his generation. And most punks seemed to do just that; they chose not to be a blank generation. Members of the earliest cohort of punks, those first engaged in the subculture in the mid to late seventies, were generally deeply cynical and dismissive of the counterculture's efforts at change. These rebels did not opt for the sort of social action evident in the Students for a Democratic Society, the civil rights movement, or the anti-war movement of the sixties, but they also shunned the easy-going escapism they saw in many of the hippies' remnants or legacies in the seventies. For punk rockers, bands like the Allman Brothers and the belief that "I'm Okay – You're Okay" represented misguided and moribund attitudes inappropriate to the era. As the Deadbeats suggested, hippies who, "[n]o matter what you do or how out of line ... just smile and give you the peace sign," were sadly, even dangerously deluded throwbacks to a naïve era. These fools ignored humanity's increasingly evident dark side, elements – like Idi Amin, the Son of Sam, and the Manson Family – that punk painstakingly brought to the forefront of their culture.

At the same time that punks belittled the naïveté of the counterculture and the corny earnestness of New Age philosophies, punks themselves pursued a sense of community and belonging similar to that of their New Age counterparts in est and the Esalen Institute. Punks wanted a human connection, no matter how much they highlighted the faults and foibles of their fellow man. As highly individualistic young people who felt out of touch with mainstream society, they found great relief in locating and communing with likeminded misfits. Thus one of the great ironies of punk – and one of the things that made it such an

unstable subculture – was the fact that it celebrated individualism but did so in a community setting.

Some punks eventually found larger purposes for their community beyond the music and the alternative consumer community it fostered. Many of these activist rebels came from a second cohort of punks who found the music in the late seventies and early eighties.

Coming of age with the threat of nuclear war hanging over their heads was demoralizing for punks, who questioned whether they would have the opportunity for any sort of future. Thus, the increasingly heated rhetoric of the Cold War and the threat of nuclear war were the issues that most often forced punks out of their narrower mindsets into a broader social and political vista. From there punk rebels became engaged in a range of issues, including racism and sexism, although as we shall see in the next two chapters, these punks were in a minority.

CHAPTER 6

BEAUTY AND THE BEAT: WOMEN AND AMERICAN PUNK ROCK

It is 1985; I am 19 years old and a junior in college. I have two tickets to see Black Flag but decide not to go to the concert at the last minute. I was supposed to go to the concert with Joanne, one of my best college buddies and one of the few people I know at Emory University who is into punk and new wave in the slightest. On the night of the show, she and I head down to the Metroplex, the punk bar in Atlanta at this time (688 recently closed) to try to sell the tickets. The Metroplex is located in a somewhat seedy downtown warehouse district, and we park a block or so away. We walk toward the club, through a couple of parking lots. Along the way, I ask the punks if anyone wants to buy the two tickets for ten dollars. One punk – a skinhead – says, “No, but if you give me ten bucks, I’ll let you suck my dick.” He has been making out with a female punker; she leans against his chest, looks at me, and laughs at his lewd suggestion. I am very angry but also very intimidated. We keep walking.

Punk’s ethos advised followers to be “self-invented people,” ostensibly inviting each individual punk to act, dress, and express him/herself however s/he liked, as long as s/he broke from the mainstream. Not only was it “okay that you weren’t like everybody else. It was better that you weren’t like everybody else,” in the words of Sick F*cks vocalist Snooky Bellomo. Trudie “Plunger” Arguelles Barrett, said something similar about belonging to the early Hollywood punk scene: a “person only had to show that they wanted to belong and that they were willing to reject the past. This was not something that was spoken, you would cut

the hair, pack up the fur jacket, sew your bell-bottoms into straight-legs, join a band, get energized.”¹ This purposefully transgressive philosophy had important implications for gender roles. Punks, especially women, adopted outrageous stances that challenged traditional feminine roles in rock ‘n’ roll. At the same time, while the punk ideal preached unlimited potential for self-creation and expression, in practice gender “self-invention” encountered limits. To a certain extent, these restrictions were self-imposed, but sometimes emerged at the hands of male members of the subculture, as the opening vignette suggests. By the early eighties, hardcore, the ascendant subgenre of punk rock, spewed forth an aggressive masculinity that pushed women and certain forms of femininity literally and figuratively to the back of the room

“Kung Fu Girls”: Punk Women on Stage²

Rock historiography generally stresses the degree to which punk rock was a place where women could assert themselves.³ Undeniably, women did make great strides in punk rock, but conventional accounts fail to contextualize these gains and, more importantly, to acknowledge their limits. First, we must recognize that women in the subculture built upon not only important female predecessors in popular music but also social developments like second-wave feminism. They also used certain aesthetic and ideological elements of punk to

¹ Tish and Snooky Bellomo, telephone interview by author, transcript. 24 June 2002, 23; Trudie Arguelles Barrett, email interview by author, 2004.

² Blondie, “Kung Fu Girls,” *Blondie*, Private Stock, 1976.

³ See for instance, Gillian Gaar, *She’s A Rebel: The History of Women in Rock and Roll*, 2nd ed. (New York: Seal Press, 2002), 195-203, 227-35; Mina Carson, Tisa Lewis, and Susan M. Shaw, *Girls Rock!: Fifty Years of Women Making Music* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004), 6, 90-1; and Lucy O’Brien, *She Bop II: The Definitive History of Women in Rock, Pop, and Soul* (London and New York: Continuum, 2002), 132-53.

their advantage. Second, while female punks pursued new and expanded roles in rock, their advances were hampered by several factors, including their own mindsets and the splintering of the genre.

According to rock historians, through much of rock and roll's history, women's creative and professional choices most often were constrained by the men inexorably surrounding them. Because of these restrictions, women tended to be singers rather than instrumentalists, recorded other people's songs rather than their own material, and followed the advice of male managers and/or husbands in making contractual and other business decisions. Women were likely to assume stereotypically feminine guises on stage and perform within the pop, R & B, or country spectrums of rock that were purportedly most appropriate for such a womanly image. In this traditional portrait, female performers were puppets manipulated by men who may or may not have had the women's best interests in mind.⁴

This rendering of women in popular music is, of course, overly rigid, and there were important exceptions to the rule from rock and roll's earliest days. Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton growled out the original version of "Hound Dog" in 1952, and rockabilly performers like Wanda Jackson wielded rowdy guitars later in the decade. On the whole, however, the traditional tale of women in rock contains more than a grain of truth and fits within the description of "female spectacle" outlined by historian Susan Glenn. According to Glenn, female entertainers of the turn-of-the-twentieth-century vaudeville era challenged simple constructions of gender identity through sexually suggestive and unpredictable stage

⁴ Lisa L. Rhodes, *Electric Ladyland: Women and Rock Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 28; Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie, "Rock and Sexuality," in *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word*, eds. Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (1978; reprint, London: Routledge, 1990), 373-4; Gillian Gaar attempts to debunk the myth that women in girl groups had no control in *She's A Rebel*, 32-62.

shows, but during the mid-twentieth century, men tamed female performance – a form of public female eroticism – through techniques involving control, repetition, and impersonalism. A hallmark product of such taming, according to Glenn, was the chorus line, featuring identically dressed and virtually interchangeable women performing in perfect unison. Glenn’s theory has parallels in rock history. The assertive, individualistic performances of Thornton and Jackson in the 1950s gave way to the highly disciplined performances of sixties girl groups who dressed in matching outfits, sang songs that usually followed simple formulae, and whose stage personae emphasized the group rather than individual identity. Furthermore, the bulk of the most successful girl groups came under the often heavy-handed management of three male producers: Phil Spector, Berry Gordy, and George “Shadow” Morton.⁵

Antithetically, rock performance had been gendered male since its inception in the 1950s, according to most interpretations; it is a masculine rebel challenge to a feminized world characterized by control and restraint. Scholars point out that rock and roll emerged around the same time that the notion of “mom-ism” became popular, a term first put forth by Philip Wylie in Generation of Vipers in 1942. This intensely misogynistic view gained currency after World War II, suggesting the “destroying mother” was accountable for a host of post-war social ills, including the degeneration of American popular culture. Mothers and wives caused 1950s conformity because they were the ones who wanted the domestic idyll and all its commercial trappings. They thereby enslaved their husbands into a rat race of breadwinning. They also were the ultimate roots of juvenile delinquency because they

⁵ Susan A. Glenn, Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000). For histories of girl groups see, for example, Rhodes, Electric Ladyland, 32-62; Charlotte Greig, Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow? Girl Groups from the 50s On (London: Virago Press, 1989); and Alan Betrock, Girl Groups: The Story of a Sound (New York: Delilah Books, 1982).

smothered their sons with love. Against this backdrop rock 'n' roll music emerged, with the male rock-and-roll rebel at its ideological center. Indeed, everything about rock 'n' roll's ideals seemed to counter Glenn's definition of tamed women performers. If disciplined female spectacle tended to appear controlled, repetitive, and impersonal, rock and roll celebrated chaotic release, spontaneity, and individualism. Following this logic, rock was and is a "masculinist mode of cultural self-articulation," in the words of literary scholar Leerom Medovi.⁶ In such an articulation, women's roles were circumscribed.

The folk movement of the 1960s, the singer/songwriter explosion of the late sixties/early seventies, and women's (or womyn's) music of the 1970s brought some change in women's roles in popular music, especially in the degree to which a number of female performers took control of their artistic and occupational lives. In the singer/songwriter and – to a lesser degree – folk movements, women (and men) tended to write and perform their own material, thus increasing women's involvement as writers, instrumentalists, and individual performers. Womyn's music, paralleling radical feminism and lesbian separatism, was less a coherent musical genre than a philosophy, focusing on music as an opportunity to build community for women. Whenever possible and at all levels of music making, the genre employed only women: as writers, performers, engineers, producers, and roadies.⁷

Despite their great social and musical importance, the impact of folk, singer-songwriters, and womyn's music on punk was negligible. Womyn's music was largely

⁶ Philip Wylie, Generation of Vipers (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1942). Simon Reynolds and Joy Press include a particularly compelling discussion of the connections between mom'ism and rock 'n' roll in The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion, and Rock 'n' roll (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 2-7. Leerom Medovoi, "Mapping the Rebel Image: Postmodernism and the Masculinist Politics of Rock in the U.S.A.," Cultural Critique no. 20 (Winter 1991-1992): 156; see also, Reynolds and Press, The Sex Revolts, 2-101.

⁷ Rhodes, Electric Ladyland, 1-40, *passim*; Carson, Lewis, and Shaw, Girls Rock, 95-114; Gaar, She's A Rebel, 86-7, 138-42; and O'Brien, She Bop, 257.

irrelevant to punk rockers, as most punks were probably only marginally aware of the movement. The influence of the folk and singer/songwriter movements on punk was slightly greater but chiefly in a negative way. That is, to the extent that folk music or singer/songwriters influenced punk, it was predominately reactionary. For example, some women embraced punk because it allowed them to break free of the limitations imposed by genres like folk. In a 1980 interview, Joan Jett, guitarist for the proto-punk band the Runaways, recalled learning to play the guitar:

I remember the first albums I had were Black Sabbath, Grand Funk Live and Electric Warrior by T. Rex. I used to run around the room pretending I was playing guitar to them. I bugged my parents to buy me an electric guitar, and they finally did when I was 13 [ca 1971]. My father wanted me to play classical guitar or nice folk songs, but right away he knew that wouldn't work. I took guitar lessons for a month but my teacher wanted me to play songs like "On Top of Old Smokey." I quit and went home and played along to my records.

Jett failed to find "nice folk songs" like "On Top of Old Smokey" inspiring, but she did not truly allow herself to aspire to be a professional musician until she saw Suzi Quatro in 1975: "I was in the front row and I was so amazed. There was this girl up there in leather, playing rock 'n' roll and running around acting just like a guy, not like these Joni Mitchell types. I thought, 'If she can do it, I must be able to.'"⁸ Instead of imitating folkie Joni Mitchell, Jett helped form the Runaways, a band that would in turn inspire many punk women to take to the stage. Alice Bag, for instance, "bought the Runaways album" when she was in high school, "the idea of an all-girl group was very exciting to [her] and [she] really wanted to do that."⁹ Tina Weymouth, who would become bassist for the Talking Heads, did not consider playing electric guitar as a teenager in the 1960s. Instead she followed the example of

⁸ Jett quoted in Jon Young, "Joan Jett," Trouser Press November 1980, 11.

⁹ Alice Bag, interview by the Experience Music Project, transcript, 1999, 5. In the end, the Bags were not an "all-girl" band, despite efforts by Alice and Patricia Bag to recruit women.

acoustic guitarists like Joan Baez. When her boyfriend and drummer Chris Frantz and her roommate and guitarist David Byrne began looking for a bassist to form a band, Weymouth did not immediately see herself as a candidate. Only after Chris failed to find a bassist who shared their minimalist vision did Weymouth throw her hat in the ring.¹⁰

Although change for women through the early 1970s was less pronounced in hard rock than in other genres of popular music, important predecessors to punk emerged. In the 1960s, Janis Joplin's boozy blues and Grace Slick's biting lyrics showed a darker, edgier side of female performance, foreshadowing broader interpretative vistas for women rock singers. A few women of this era even made their marks as rock or pop instrumentalists: Maureen Tucker drummed the avant garde in the Velvet Underground; Suzi Quatro rocked a glam bass guitar in England; and Bonnie Raitt toured with Buddy Guy and Junior Wells as they opened for the Rolling Stones 1969 tour.¹¹

While their forebears helped show them the way, there is no denying that women in punk broke new ground, both qualitatively and quantitatively.¹² One has only to listen to Deborah Harry put a "bad girl" twist on traditional pop themes, witness Patti Smith spit on stage, or watch Alice Bag scream her rage to know that punk women changed rock forever. Deborah Harry cultivated a specific image as the singer of Blondie:

I never wanted to approach rock 'n' roll from a man's point of view.... I was always in a position of setting a precedent, which, from my point of view, gave me a definite advantage. Even if I went onstage and did a direct rip-off of Jagger or Bowie, it would never come off as a complete copy because Blondie is a girl. The initial idea was to be desirable, feminine, and vulnerable, but with a resilient, tenacious wit at the

¹⁰ David Bowman, This Must Be the Place: The Adventures of Talking Heads in the 20th Century (New York: Harper Entertainment, 2001), 1, 54-6.

¹¹ Gaar, She's a Rebel, 156.

¹² O'Brien, She Bop, 132-53; Gaar, She's a Rebel, 195-203, 227-35; and Reynolds and Press, The Sex Revolts, 236-48.

same time rather than a poor female sapped of her strength by heartthrob and unrequited love.¹³

Deborah Harry was typical of many women in punk who pushed the boundaries of what it meant to be feminine on stage and who worked hard to remain in control of their careers. But most histories of punk fail to explore how women drew on both broader social trends and specific elements of punk in order to blaze new rock 'n' roll paths.

While women in punk rarely allied themselves with feminism overtly, they nonetheless were deeply affected by the contemporary movement toward increased women's rights. American society witnessed real changes for women in the seventies as a mature second wave of feminism achieved some of its goals and individual women made headlines. For example, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 barred gender bias in federally assisted educational activities and programs, including sports teams, which enhanced the visibility of women's sports. Additionally, in the 1973 "Battle of the Sexes," Billie Jean King took down Bobby Riggs in three straight sets. A flurry of publications, including Gloria Steinem's Ms. magazine, spread the principles of the women's movement. All of these events indirectly affected the women in punk. Many of the women interviewed for this project said their mothers were positive examples of independent thought, whose actions embodied feminist ideals. For instance, Tish and Snooky Bellomo, singers for the Sick F*cks and owners of Manic Panic, depict their mother, who raised them as a single parent, as "a rebel, a liberal" and "a great inspiration to" them in starting their business, a punk-rock clothing and style store in New York City. In fact, "she even named [the] business Manic Panic because she had gone into the art therapy field." Similarly, Los Angeles punk

¹³ Debbie Harry, Chris Stein, and Victor Bockris, Making Tracks: The Rise of Blondie (London: Elm Tree Books, 1982; reprint Da Capo, 1998), 29.

photographer Jenny Lens describes her mother as “very radical.” “My mother was a registered nurse, so it was a professional environment, [I was] encouraged to study, to read. My mother always encouraged me to be creative and follow my heart, and I’m sure that that played a lot into punk.” Conversely, some female punks saw their mothers as negative examples, motivation for them to assert themselves and pursue a more independent, deliberate path of self-definition. For instance, Alice Bag’s explosive performances as the lead singer for the Bags served as a way for her to purge her anger at her father for beating her mother. From a young age, Alice “vowed never to be a victim, even if it meant [her] own death.”¹⁴

As much as second-wave feminism, punk rock’s do-it-yourself ethos helped many women find an assertive voice in the subculture. The DIY attitude celebrated any effort to create, no matter how premature or amateurish, and in doing so challenged the tradition of the gendered guitar hero in rock. This figure has a long history, dating to pre-rock-and-roll bluesmen like Robert Johnson, and became solidified in rock in the 1960s through figures like Eric Clapton and Keith Richards. By the 1970s, the guitar hero had assumed an even more exaggerated gender image through “cock rock,” a sub-genre of rock epitomized by the Rolling Stones and Led Zeppelin. In cock rock, the electric guitar (or microphone) became a “technophallus” in performances that “work[ed] to affirm a phallocentric, male-dominated sexual order,” according to American Studies scholar Steve Waksman.¹⁵ The male and female fans’ adulation affirmed the sort of hypermasculinity performed on stage during songs

¹⁴ Tish and Snooky Bellomo, interview by author, 2002, 11; Jenny Lens, interview by author, transcript, Santa Monica, Calif., 29 June 2004, 1; Alice Bag, “Violence Girl,” <http://www.alicebag.com/violencegirl.html>, accessed September 14, 2006.

¹⁵ Steve Waksman, *Instruments of Desire: The Electric Guitar and the Shaping of Musical Experience* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 253. See also, Frith and McRobbie, “Rock and Sexuality,” 374.

with sexually suggestive lyrics like “gonna give you every inch of my love” and misogynistic declarations like “the way she does just what she’s told/Down to me/ the change has come/ She’s under my thumb.”¹⁶ Cock-rock bands like the Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin, and the Who attained legendary status in the pantheon of rock, and as they conflated musical and sexual prowess, they deepened the public perception of rock-stardom as a male preserve.

Punk rock’s anti-virtuosity stance deflated the overblown status of the guitar hero and, in the process, debunked his masculine myth. While performers like Mick Jagger and Jimmy Page cultivated larger-than-life personae based on talent and sexuality, punk rockers sought to bring rock back to what they saw as its roots: simple short songs that could be performed in any teenager’s garage. By rejecting technical prowess, punks opened the doors to women by rejecting the gender implications that had adhered to skill during rock’s development. Punk’s admonitions to “do it yourself” and “do it now” made women feel less intimidated about getting on stage. Alice Bag remembered being motivated by the Germs’ notoriously unprofessional show at the Orpheum in Los Angeles in 1977: “The Orpheum show inspired me to form a punk band. Seeing The Germs really lit a fire under me. I thought to myself, ‘If they can do it, I can do it.’ The Orpheum show took place in April of 1977; by September of 1977, my band, The Bags, played its first show in a little underground bomb shelter called The Masque.” Many women interviewed for this project experienced the DIY ethos and punks’ egalitarianism in an ungendered way. Later in the same interview, Alice Bag reflected, “I never thought of myself as a ‘woman in the punk scene,’ I just thought of myself as part of a creative community.” Exene Cervenka offered a similar viewpoint in her description of the early L.A. punk scene: “It didn’t matter if you were forty or sixteen, if you

¹⁶ Led Zeppelin, “Whole Lotta Love,” *Led Zeppelin II*, 1969; Rolling Stones, “Under My Thumb,” *Aftermath*, RCA, 1966.

were a run away or a graphic artist, or a woman or a man or black or white. Nothing mattered except that if you knew you belonged there, then everyone else knew you belonged there.” L.A. ‘zinester Pleasant Gehman observed,

I never defined myself as a woman in punk rock. I felt like I was just me. ... It just felt like anyone could do anything. I didn’t really feel any prejudice, because there were always girls in bands. ... The women that were in that scene and doing stuff – whether it was on stage, or even just being an artist or just hanging around the scene – were so beautiful and so strong and so creative that it was like having role models that you would never have in a “real” life.¹⁷

A second element of punk that helped open doors for women, one closely related to the idea of DIY, was its attempts to break down barriers between performers and audience. By the mid-seventies rock had become big, big business. Rock stars performed literally and figuratively out of the reach of most fans who usually experienced their heroes through records, radio, television, or arenas. Punk rock sought to bring the performers back into touch with the audience through the intimacy of small venues. Even more, punk rockers actively broke down the “fourth wall” of performance when musicians entered the audience, and the audience came on stage.¹⁸ In this way, the audience, as active participants, became part of the spectacle. An unintended – perhaps – consequence of blending audience and performance was the disruption of women’s traditional positions at a rock concert – that of spectators. Scholars Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie, in exploring the gendered aspects of rock consumption, argue that male fans, especially male fans of “cock rock,” identify with performer. They want to be able to feel and express the boastful sexual prowess and control

¹⁷ Alice Bag, email interview by author, 6 August 2004; Exene Cervenka, interview by the Experience Music Project, transcript, Los Angeles, Calif., 29 April 1998, 2; Pleasant Gehman, interview by author, tape recording, Los Angeles, Calif., 28 June 2004.

¹⁸ Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 71, 91, 136. 172; Peter Brooker, “Key Words in Brecht’s Theory and Practice of Theatre,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht*, eds. Peter Thomson and Glendyr Sacks (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 211-5.

articulated by cock rock performers like Robert Plant. Female consumers, on the other hand, want to be the love objects of male performers, especially “teenybop” performers like Donny Osmond and David Soul. The key here is that identifying with a male performer encourages a male fan to see himself on stage, whereas envisioning oneself as a love object does not. Women in punk broke with this tradition. As Joan Jett stated, “I wanted to be a rock star, not to be chasing rock stars for autographs or waiting around hotel lobbies for them.”¹⁹

The position of woman as spectator was part of a larger process of meaning-making in rock. Even if, as noted above, rock and roll was a masculine challenge to the restraints of both literal women (mothers, wives) and a figurative female (an overly structured, repressive society), rock’s male posturing would have meant something completely different without a female audience to validate it. It is hard to imagine the Beatles having the same initial American impact without the presence of thousands of screaming teenage girls.²⁰ Robert Plant’s invitation to “squeeze my lemon” ‘til the juice runs down my leg” encouraged male fans to identify with him in large part because they believed female fans would line up to accept his invitation. Punk rock did not do away with hypermasculine male posturing, a fact that will be explored more fully in the chapter on punk and masculinity, but stereotypical cock-rock posturing did not dominate the genre. Women in punk asserted their right to use rock as their own expression of release, spontaneity, and individualism. Additionally, as we shall see in the next chapter, men sometimes explored new performative styles by expressing alternative visions of masculinity.

¹⁹ Frith and McRobbie, “Rock and Sexuality,” 374-5; Joan Jett quoted in Marc Spitz and Brendan Mullen, We Got the Neutron Bomb: The Untold Story of L.A. Punk (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001), 45.

²⁰ Barbara Ehrenreich, Elizabeth Hess, and Gloria Jacobs argue that the public spectacle of Beatlemania was a protest by teenage girls against the conformity and sexual repression of the era. [“Beatlemania: Girls Just Want to Have Fun,” in The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 84-106.

The single most important aesthetic and ideological element that allowed women to clear new paths for themselves within punk was the genre's emphasis on doing something new, nontraditional, or even shocking. Snooky Bellomo, who, along with her sister Tish, performed with an early version of Blondie and later with the Sick F*cks, described the New York punk scene succinctly, "I think the whole thing was great because you didn't have to be this prissy little disco queen, or you didn't have to be so submissive. In those days it seemed like women were so submissive." Punk's admonition to be innovative invited women to "be more than a witness," to take to the stage, pick up the pen, the camera, or whatever inspired them, and it fostered performative approaches and lifestyles that were aggressive, original, and individualistic. Female punk rockers were not the only women pushing the limits of performance and accepted behavior in rock in this period, but as a group they did so most consistently and most outrageously, and in doing so, they provided important examples to female rockers to come.²¹

One of the hallmarks of punk performance was the visceral, explosive, and sometimes violent action of the performers on stage. For some, their actions were deliberate and thoughtful; for others, their actions were spontaneous. Either way, the women who engaged in such performances broke with a strong tradition emphasizing feminine restraint. Many punk rockers, including the women, were angry adolescents or young adults who found in the music a perfect outlet for their emotions. Alice Bag stated that her stage performance "was the part of me that was able to express the anger and pain that had been stored away inside of me for years. ... Had it not been for punk rock, who knows how that anger would have manifested itself." She grew up surrounded by violence: her fatherly routinely beat her

²¹ Snooky Bellomo, interview by author, 2002, 23; Gaar, *She's a Rebel*, 195-203, 227-35; O'Brien, *She Bop*, 132-53.

mother; and her neighborhood and school were rife with male and female Latino gangs. She reflected,

I hated violence; detested it. But as much as I tried to avoid it, I was internalizing it all the time. When I finally found an outlet as lead singer of The Bags, all the violence that I'd stuffed down inside of me for years came screaming out. I would literally black out while onstage with The Bags; it was like "normal Alice" checked out and "violent Alice" checked in. All the anger I felt towards people who had treated me like an idiot as a young girl because I was the daughter of Mexican parents and spoke broken English, all the times I'd been picked on by peers because I was overweight and wore glasses, all the impotent rage that I had towards my father for beating my mother just exploded, and that's what people saw onstage.²²

In the context of a national punk community, whose prototypical member was white and middle-class, Bag was unusual in that she was Latina and came from a working-class family. In other ways, however, Bag was representative of her fellow punk rockers, especially the younger cohort: her family life was a source of stress and unhappiness, and she felt like an outsider, ostracized by her peers. Like so many others, Bag found a home in punk and release on stage.

Like aggression, spontaneity and originality were primary characteristics of punk performance. Unsurprisingly, a genre that celebrated originality and effort over professionalism often produced performances that were not highly polished, choreographed, and practiced. Patti Smith, for example, viewed performance as an opportunity for spiritual communion. She whirled and danced on stage in a freeform fashion, as she sang or chanted her poetry. Her spontaneous reaction to the music helped her achieve something akin to a spiritual transcendence. In a 1978 interview, Smith described the consuming loss of self and self-awareness she achieved on stage. Earlier that year, she had become so enrapt during a performance in Tampa, Florida that she fell off the stage and seriously injured her neck.

²² Alice Bag, email interview by author, 2004; Alice Bag, "Violence Girl."

Recalling that evening, she said, “I spend so much time challenging God when I perform ... trying to feel some kind of cerebral or sexual communication with God. ... There was a moment -- real or surreal it doesn't matter – when I had my fall that I felt I could have gone through the black tube [toward God and death], I felt myself disintegrating and I didn't wanna go.”²³

Although punk's commitment to originality generally proscribed matching outfits and synchronized choreography, New Yorkers Tish and Snooky Bellomo exploded and subverted those conventions in their band the Sick F*cks. Like girl groups and Motown acts of the 1960s, the Bellomos (after some experimentation) wore matching outfits as they performed as back-up singers for the band. At first, they would “always have a different outfit, a different look” at each show, including a “nurse outfit with white stockings and garters, and blood all over the nurse uniform” and “a Girl Scout with green stockings, green garters,” “[b]ut then the nun's drag was the most popular so that's the one that stuck.” Although they dressed alike and had choreographed dance moves, Tish and Snooky undermined these girl-group norms through the specifics of their costumes, dancing, and lyrics. Not only were their outfits far more blatantly sexual than girl-group standards, they also paired this sexuality with jarring or disturbing concepts, such as pedophilia (Girl Scouts), religion (nuns), and violent death (bloody nurse). Sick F*cks performances were always tongue-in-cheek, however. The Bellomos viewed both the band and their punk clothing store as having “a sense of humor” “as well as a real cutting edge.” It is certainly difficult to take a band too seriously with two women “wearing ripped up nuns' outfits, and really heavy makeup, and chains, and whips” who wielded enormous prop cleavers in unison while singing, “Chop, chop, chop up your

²³ Melody Maker, 1978

mother.”²⁴

A disproportionate number of female punk performers – as in other sub-genres of rock and pop – were singers, but more women played instruments in punk than in other or earlier genres, and this was one important way punk women asserted their individuality on stage. In 1982, the Go-Go’s *Beauty and the Beat* became the first number one rock album by an all-female band (as opposed to an all-female vocal group).²⁵ Go-Go’s guitarist Jane Wiedlin gave her reaction to Los Angeles’s embryonic punk scene at the Masque: “Right from the beginning I knew I wanted to be in a band, but I didn’t know how to go about doing it, ‘cause I really didn’t know how to play anything and didn’t really have any talent, but that wasn’t stopping anyone else.” Punk’s acceptance of amateurism meant women like Wiedlin, with no training, felt brave enough to get on stage and perform. Wiedlin described the Go-Go’s’ first gig, which was at the Masque July 1978:

It was a big party for the Dickies, who [were] the first [LA punk] band to get a record deal. And we did two and a half songs, and we couldn’t remember how to play the third song, so we stopped in the middle of it, and then we played one of the first songs. ... really just a charming disaster. I think people just thought we were sort of cute, and funny, and entertaining, and terrible all at the same time.”²⁶

While an unprecedented number of women took up instruments in punk, even more contributed to songwriting efforts in their bands. Whereas most women in pop and rock before the 1970s performed other people’s songs, punk rock placed a high premium on being innovative, which often meant performing original tunes. A few examples of female punk songwriters include Tina Weymouth, bassist for the Talking Heads, who shared writing

²⁴ Bellomo, interview by author, 2002, 20.

²⁵ Belinda Carlisle, vocals; Charlotte Caffey and Jane Wiedlin, guitar; Margot Olaverra, bass; Gina Schock, drums. Patricia Romanowski and Holly George-Warren, eds., “The Go-Go’s,” The New Rolling Stone Encyclopedia of Rock and Roll (New York: Rolling Stone Press, 1995), 381-3.

²⁶ Wiedlin, interview by the Experience Music Project, transcript, 1999, 8.

credits with the rest of the band for all but a few songs on their albums; the Go-Go's, who wrote all eleven songs on their number one *Beauty and the Beat* album; and singer Susan Mumford, who wrote most of the lyrics for Washington, D.C.'s Tiny Desk Unit.²⁷

Not only did more women write songs in punk, they explored lyrical themes that expressed their individuality, often in an introspective manner. Two women in particular exemplified this penchant, Patti Smith and Exene Cervenka, both of whom were poets before they became rock singers. Their poetic lyrics could be dense, full of metaphors and complex literary allusions, but Smith's baldly autobiographical song "Piss Factory," was fairly straightforward. It described her literal and figurative need to break free from a mundane cookie-cutter world, symbolized by the factory in which she worked as a teenager in her hometown of Pitman, New Jersey. After taking the job, Smith quickly learned that distinguishing herself from her coworkers was discouraged:

Floor boss slides up to me and he says
"Hey sister, you just movin' too fast,
You screwin' up the quota,
You doin' your piece work too fast,
Now you get off your mustang sally"

But Smith could not accept that she was like her colleagues, "these bitches" who were "Too goddamned grateful to get this job/ To know they're getting screwed up the ass." She admitted that she and her co-worker "Dot Hook ... may look the same/ Shoulder to shoulder sweatin' 110 degrees," but through her passionate desire to get out of the factory and its small town, she broke from the factory's "monotony" to assert her individuality.

²⁷ Punk rock had its share of covers as well, but cover tunes were usually performed in a very unusual, even bizarre way, such as "The Banana Splits Theme" by the Dickies and "(Can't Get No) Satisfaction" by Devo. Michael Barron, "Tiny Desk Unit: A History," <http://www.bobboilen.info/iweb/Tiny%20Desk%20Unit%20Music/Deep%20History.html>, accessed 17 February 2007.

And yeah we look the same
Both pumpin' steel, both sweatin'
But you know she got nothin' to hide
And I got something to hide here called desire²⁸

Her hidden desire is her source of individualism, her way of differentiating herself from the Dot Hooks of the factory.

Like Smith, Exene Cervenka penned deeply personal and emotional lyrics. Cervenka met her future band mate (and husband for a time) John Doe in a poetry workshop in Venice, California. She remembered, "I'd never sang, and John Doe liked my writing; he wanted to use my writing in this band he was starting with Billy Zoom. And I didn't want him to take my writing away from me and start singing my words. So he said if I wanted to sing it I could do that, then I could be in the band."²⁹ Cervenka's reflections suggest she felt too connected to her "words" to allow someone else to sing them, and her performance on stage was an expression of her individual emotions and thoughts. After her sister was killed in a car crash en route to an X performance in 1981, Cervenka's grief was readily apparent in several songs on *Under the Big Black Sun* (1982). In "Riding with Mary," Cervenka tells the tale of illicit lovers riding in a car because they have nowhere else to go. She ties the story to her own experience by closing with a deeply personal admonition: "On the dashboard rides a figurine/ A powerless sweet forgotten thing/ So the next time you see a statue of Mary/ Remember my sister was in a car." The most intensely personal song on the album is "Come Back to Me," in which Cervenka recounted seemingly random details from her sister's funeral.

²⁸ Patti Smith, "Piss Factory," EP, Mer, 1974. For brief summaries of Smith's life and career, see, Gaar, *She's a Rebel*, 195-98; and Maria Raha, *Cinderella's Big Score: Women of the Punk and Indie Underground* (Emeryville, Calif.: Seal Press, 2005), 16-21.

²⁹ Cervenka, interview by the EMP, 1998, 1.

Gifts and flowers lay upon the lid of pink silk above your face
Tears make a river of diamonds in the dark
Our daddy breaks down at the funeral home
Flies and relations make an annoying sound
We sit or wander 'round the room
Ribbons are folded on the rose bouquets
I hear a voice that sounds so much like yours
Please, please come back to me

These songs emerged from the personal experience of the singer, rather than the pen of a professional lyricist or a successful pop-music formula.³⁰

In addition to songwriting and instrumentalism, female punk performers expressed their individuality through their dress. Twentieth-century female performance traditions called for women to de-emphasize their distinctiveness on stage by dressing in contemporary fashions or – if there were more than one woman – matching outfits. Occasionally women in punk, like the Bellomos in the Sick F*cks, broke with this tradition by wearing outrageous costumes. The vast majority of the time, however, female punks took a pastiche approach, drawing inspiration from many areas of popular culture. According to journalist Kristine McKenna, “punks rejected the Academy and drew instead from ‘low’ sources: graffiti, underground comics, advertising, car culture, the tarot, blaxpotation, bondage and pornography, surf culture, fifties industrial films, Mad magazine, and the universe of American detritus that winds up in thrift stores. It all got tossed in the blender.” As this quote suggests, there was no single, agreed-upon guise in early punk. Jane Wiedlin of the Go-Go’s described the early Masque scene: “Everyone was kind of into the whole homemade thing, ‘cause ... you couldn’t buy real punk clothes like they could in London.” In the Stilletos (a precursor to Blondie), the Bellomo sisters and Deborah Harry “wore ...

³⁰ Rian Malan, “The Last Show at the Whisky: X Encounters the Beast,” *LA Weekly*, 24 April 1981, 59; X, “Riding with Mary” and “Come Back to Me,” *Under the Big Black Sun*, Elektra, 1982.

stuff from thrift shops, maybe altered, and cut up,” drawing on the girl-group strand of pop to create a “bad-girl group” image. Some women, like Cervenka, achieved a more bohemian look through their thrift-store finds.³¹ Poison Ivy of the Cramps and Dinah Cancer from 45 Grave drew on old horror movies and Catholic imagery to prefigure the goth look of the 1980s and 1990s. Others, like Patti Smith and Los Angeles punk-folkie Phranc, cultivated a deliberately androgynous look to express a new perspective on rock music.

“The Heart of the Scene”: Punk Women Off-Stage

Women in punk made even greater strides off stage than on it, wielding a great deal of power through their various formal and informal roles as writers, photographers, entrepreneurs, ‘zinesters, and scenesters. One of the reasons women held a great deal of power in punk – especially as writers and photographers – was that punk was brand new. No punk-rock canon had yet been established, a process usually dominated by men. Communication studies scholar Will Straw helps us understand the gender dynamics of punk journalism in his analysis of the gendered practices of record collecting and rock connoisseurship. According to Straw, “the nerdish homosociality of those who collect popular music artifacts is as fundamental to the masculinism of popular music as the general valorization of technical prowess and performative intensity more typically seen to be at its core.”³² Simply put, Straw’s argument is that more than anyone else, collectors, an overwhelmingly male group, and their knowledge networks are responsible for the

³¹ Kristine McKenna, “Remembrance of Things Fast,” in *Forming: The Early Days of L.A. Punk* (Santa Monica, Calif.: Smart Art Press, 1999), 31; Wiedlin, interview by the EMP, 1999, 7; Snooky Bellomo, interview by author, 2002, 4; Cervenka, interview for the EMP, 1998, 1.

³² Will Straw, “Sizing up Record Collections: Gender and Connoisseurship in Rock Music Culture,” in Sheila Whiteley, ed., *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 15.

establishment and revision of the rock canon. Thus gender politics play an important role in access to power and knowledge in the realm of rock. But in punk, because it was uncharted territory, women did not have to break through an established, male-dominated cadre of punk power brokers. Instead, they were there at ground zero to help create all aspects of punk and to decide what was worthy of notice. Because punk was a novel phenomenon, out to “break all rules,” women felt more at ease writing about and photographing the music and people they felt were important within the genre. Furthermore, women (and any journalist or photographer) had easy access to punk groups. Because no one in authority had yet established that punk was important (or, put another way, what in punk would be important), bands and individuals were happy to have anyone – male, female, employed, freelance – there to document the scene, publicize the nascent genre, and produce the music. Thus women like Pleasant Gehman in Los Angeles and Xyra in Washington, D.C. could create positions of power and prestige by putting out Lobotomy and Capitol Crisis respectively. And even once bands began to establish themselves, perhaps “women journalists in the scene, like Mary Harron [in New York], were able to get some of the best punk interviews because they seemed unthreatening and non confrontational,” according to photographer Roberta Bayley. “Sometimes the fact that you're a woman and not taken as seriously can work to your advantage because someone might be more likely to let their guard down.”³³

The lack of a punk canon as well as punk’s admonition to “be more than a witness” dovetailed with the momentum of the 1970s women’s movement to encourage women to write about punk. They were tremendously important in shaping the punk environments and helped change rock journalism in general. American Studies scholar Lisa Rhodes discusses

³³ Roberta Bayley, email interview by author, 27 February 2007.

the misogyny that permeated much rock journalism through the mid-seventies, especially in Rolling Stone magazine. For example, when describing women, Rolling Stone writers were rather “likely to employ superfluous and stereotypical details and use double entendres, especially those of a sexual nature.” Details about clothing, make-up, and hairstyles appeared at the expense of serious, critical analyses of women’s musical abilities or contributions to their genres.³⁴ In other words, even Rolling Stone, a publication with a reputation as a voice of the era’s progressive left, was systematically misogynistic.

Women writing about punk helped move rock journalism away from the misogynistic inclinations of the sixties and early 1970s. As we saw in chapter 2, instruments for writing about punk varied from DIY, photocopied ‘zines put out by any punk with some initiative to – after some time – established mouthpieces of rock criticism, including the Los Angeles Times, the Village Voice, and the Washington Post. One of the earliest rock writers to cover punk was Lisa Robinson. While she had a recognized career by the time punk took off in New York, she also had a reputation as someone who embraced the lighter side of rock writing. She wrote for Hit Parader and Creem magazine, the latter of which was known for taking Rolling Stone to task for its self-seriousness. She also co-founded Rock Scene, simultaneously a “very hip” magazine and a fanzine akin to “a twelve year old’s scrap book.”³⁵ By all accounts, Robinson had her finger on the pulse of everything, and she helped generate label interest in CBGB’s punk scene. A 1976 Hit Parader interview with Patti Smith illustrates the perspective Robinson offered in her journalism. Robinson allows Smith’s own words to tell most of the story, and the result is a deeply personal, introspective

³⁴ Rhodes, Electric Ladyland, 42.

³⁵ Bob Gruen, interview by Carlo McCormick (originally posted in The New York Trash, <http://nytrash.com/>), <http://www.bobgruen.com/interview.htm>, accessed 24 October 2007.

view of the performer's life. Patti Smith emerges as an artist, a writer, a woman, and – at bottom – an individual.³⁶

In addition to writing and publishing, women in punk had a big impact through photography. Just as it might have been easier for women to find outlets for their writing in a genre geared toward DIY, making a name as photojournalists in punk required no credentials and meant a market more receptive to the contributions of women. Recent interviews with Roberta Bayley (NYC), Stephanie Chernikowski (NYC), and Jenny Lens (L.A.) give insight into their initiation into both photography and punk. Bayley observed, "Punk was just the idea that you didn't need to be an expert in your field. I didn't go to art school. I just took pictures. It's worked out OK." Stephanie Chernikowski remarked on her entrance into photography, "I picked up a camera, and I just couldn't put it down again. ... I decided I'm going to go be a photographer in New York [despite] knowing nothing about the business, nothing about anything except I liked taking pictures. I barely could focus at that point. It was rough for a long time. It was very near to the bone." The event that motivated Jenny Lens to take an active role in punk was a 1976 Patti Smith concert in Los Angeles. While standing in line to get in to the performance, she was "dismayed [as] people got out of their car and walked right in," ahead of everyone else. Meanwhile the show was over "by the time [she] got in." Said Lens: "I made a promise to myself, while in line, that somehow I'd be able to do that. I wasn't pretty, young or thin, so being a groupie was out. I can't sing or play or write songs. I had no idea what I could do, but I was going to live this lifestyle, even though I had no idea what it was." Eventually Lens had an inspiration, "I grabbed my camera, went to the Hooper's Camera in Granada Hills, in the valley where I lived, the

³⁶ Lisa Robinson, "Patti Smith: The High Priestess of Rock and Roll," Hit Parader, January 1976, 18-21.

salesman put the film in, told me what setting to use, and [I] shot unbelievably beautiful shots of dear, sweet, tormented Dee Dee and a few of Joey, Johnny and Tommy.”³⁷

Lens’ description of Dee Dee as “sweet” and “tormented” suggests that women sometimes brought a different perspective than men to rock writing and photography. Although Bayley claimed, “I don’t think being a woman made much difference,” she also observed that some of the British writers, like Caroline Coon, “got some of the vulnerability of the otherwise brash punk rockers.” Women also sometimes shifted the focus away from the bands to the fans and the scene at large. While this was ostensibly an inherent viewpoint in punk, women journalists and photographers seemed to do this most consistently. Women often, for example, authored columns in fanzines devoted to particular local scenes. Michelle Bell (Gerber) wrote reports on the Huntington Beach scene for *Flipside* in which she listed not only upcoming records by bands but gossip about individual scenesters. Pleasant Gehman, who co-founded the fanzine *Lobotomy*, stated that “Slash interviews would have stuff about politics and art, but *Lobotomy*’s trademark was that the interviews would be about sex and drug experiences.”³⁸

While working as photographers and writers accorded punk a degree of influence in punk circles, perhaps their greatest power came from their less tangible roles as scene-makers. By scene-makers, I refer to the people who not only were active participants,

³⁷ Bayley, email interview by author, 2007; Stephanie Chernikowski, interview by author, transcript, New York, N.Y., 26 June 2002, 8; Jenny Lens, interview by Alice Bag, November 2004, <http://www.alicebag.com/jennylensinterview.html>, accessed 25 October 2007. Other important female punk photographers include Donna Santisi (LA), Anna Summa (LA), and Cynthia Connolly (DC). See Stephanie Chernikowski, *Dream Baby Dream: Images from the Blank Generation* (Los Angeles: 2.13.61 Publications, 1996); Donna Santisi, *Ask the Angels* (Orange, Calif.: Double R Books, 1978); Cynthia Connolly, Leslie Clague, and Sharon Cheslow, *Banned in DC: Photos and Anecdotes from the DC Punk Underground (79-85)* (Washington, D.C.: Sun Dog Propaganda, 1988).

³⁸ Bayley, email interview by author, 2007; Michelle Bell, “Another Michelle Report on H.B.,” *Flipside*, no. 19, July 1980, 4; Pleasant Gehman quoted in Spitz and Mullen, *Neutron Bomb*, 85.

knowing everything that was happening, but were important conduits of information and often were the reason things happened when and where they did. In an underground movement, a great deal depended on word-of-mouth communication, and scene-makers therefore wielded vast power. A case in point was the Plungers, one of the most famous punk groups that never was. According to Trudie Plunger, “The Plungers were just 3 girlfriends [Trudie Plunger, Mary Rat, and Hellin Killer] who planned to leave home and move to Hollywood to be near the action. ... We later met Trixie and she joined us. We had an idea to start a band but found no time to practice or do anything practical though; we were busy managing the social scene from our ap[artmen]t.” The Plungers “always seem[ed] to know where the show to go to was,” and they were “switchboard/guest list connection” to many. But their roles went beyond merely relaying information. According to Trudie, the Plunger Pit, their small apartment in Hollywood, was “the heart of the scene along with the Masque.” In between shows, people congregated at the Pit:

People would crash on our floor, in one of the two beds in the living room or in the chair in the kitchen, even in the tub. Blondie would come by to get their hair cut. The Deadboys and Mumps and out-of-town bands would come over when they were in town, the Germs and Zeros would come and move in for a few days. We had hilarious parties after the shows; the Dickies would cook for us.

X-8, a punk fan who would join the staff of fanzine Flipside, recalls the Plungers as being “the center of the world, they were just fabulous ... the cutest girls on the scene, and everybody wanted to be seen with them and to hang out with them because they knew everybody and they knew everything about new music and they dressed sexy and partied every night.”³⁹

In addition to being scene-makers, women in punk asserted their power and broke

³⁹ Trudie Barrett, email interview by author, 2004; X8 quoted in Spitz and Mullen, Neutron Bomb, 130.

new ground by claiming street culture for themselves. Both literally and figuratively, the “street” traditionally has been seen as male terrain.⁴⁰ In the 1970s, economic recession and urban demographic trends, including white flight, contributed to portrayals of urban streets as grimy, dangerous, and debasing. According to “The Figgie Report on Fear of Crime” in 1980, “[f]our of every 10 Americans are ‘highly fearful’ they will be victims of murder, rape, robbery or assault and feel unsafe in their everyday environments.”⁴¹ In this dominant mainstream take, women should be sheltered from the life of the street. And good girls certainly did not seek out street culture. In contrast, punk women embraced street life, actively inserting themselves into it. Jane Wiedlin of the Go-Go’s, who grew up in the relatively sheltered middle-class enclave of the San Fernando Valley, remembers being intimidated by going to the Masque, which “was in the basement of a porno theatre, the Pussy Cat Theatre, ... in a really, really rotten area of Hollywood that was crawling with hookers and drug addicts and the first of the homeless people.” She continues, “I went down there alone, and ... I was this little suburban chick, and it was really scary, but really exciting too, and I just was so happy.” Eventually, Wiedlin came to feel comfortable with the seedier parts of Hollywood and its occupants; after “living in Hollywood” at the Canterbury Apartments, “as a punk rocker ... you knew all the homeless people’s names.”⁴²

In addition to immersing themselves physically into literal street life, punk women asserted their figurative street rights as well. Traditionally in popular culture, the street has

⁴⁰ For scholarship on this history, see, for example, Ted Ownby, Subduing Satan: Religion, Recreation, & Manhood in the Rural South 1865-1920 (UNCP, 1990), ch. 2; Anne Campbell, The Girls in the Gang, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 4-32.

⁴¹ Selwyn Raab, “Crime Fear Seen Changing Habits around the U.S.,” New York Times, 17 September 1980, sec. B, pp. 6; George J. Lankevich, American Metropolis: A History of New York City (New York: NYU Press, 1998), 197-231.

⁴² Wiedlin, interview by the EMP, 5.

been the terrain of men. From the Bowery B-boys in nineteenth-century New York to gangster rap in the 1980s, male figures have dominated street lore. Contrast, for example, Ronny and the Daytonas boasting “Little buddy, gonna shut you down/ When I turn it on, wind it up, blow it out, G.T.O.” with the Beach Boys taunting

She’ll have fun, fun, fun ‘til Daddy takes the T-Bird away

Well you knew all along
That your dad was getting wise to you now
(You shouldn’t have lied now; you shouldn’t have lied)
And since he took your set of keys
You’ve been thinking that your fun is all through now
(You shouldn’t have lied now; you shouldn’t have lied)

But you can come along with me
‘Cause we gotta a lot of things to do now
(You shouldn’t have lied now; you shouldn’t have lied)
And we’ll have fun, fun, fun now that daddy took the T-bird away.

In these songs (and the hotrod culture of the 1960s), men asserted their prowess through the machines they owned, modified, and drove with pride. Conversely, the girl in these songs can only have “fun, fun, fun” by borrowing “her daddy’s car” or by catching a ride from the male protagonist. She is not able to assert her independence, as symbolized by the automobile, because she does not own one. In contrast, women in popular culture who lived street lives were depicted as sex objects (e.g., Nancy, the young murdered prostitute in Oliver Twist) or tomboys (e.g., Anybodys, the tomboy who so desperately wants to be a Jet in West Side Story).⁴³

Punk women would not allow themselves such passive or stereotyped roles in street culture. In Blondie songs, for instance, women are active participants in their destiny, and much of the action happens on the street. Indeed, the street defines certain characters; the

⁴³ Ronny and the Daytonas, “G.T.O.,” *G.T.O.*, Mala Records, 1964; Beach Boys, “Fun, Fun, Fun,” *Shut Down Volume 2*, Capitol Records, 1964; Campbell, Girls in the Gang, 10-11.

first thing we learn about “Sunday Girl” is that she is “from a lonely street.” In “X-Offender,” “Just Go Away,” and “Slow Motion,” relationships begin or end in the street. The central character in X-Offender first spies her love interest when he was “standing on the corner.” In “Just Go Away,” the singer quits her lover in public: “I left you in the street, you’re pre-fab/ I had to get away.” And in “Slow Motion,” the heroine entreats her lover to “stop on the street/Take me back.” Lisa Fancher, founder of Frontier Records, published a DIY ‘zine called Street Life in the mid-seventies. She “took the title from the Roxy Music song because I didn’t pick up anything useful in school. Anything I ever learned was picked up through the streets anyway.” X crafted intriguingly complex female characters, some of whom were street-wise, some of whom were street-worn. “Johnny Hit and Run Paulene” is a disturbingly graphic and moving anti-rape song: “L.A. bus doors open/ Kicking both doors open/ When it rested on 6th street/ That’s when he drug a girl inside/ He was spreading her legs and didn’t understand dying/ She was still awake.” “White Girl” tells of a male protagonist’s desire to comfort an emotionally independent but scarred young woman whom he met on the street where “she came along ... leav[ing] a trail of blue and black.”⁴⁴

“We were trying to be boys”: Punk Women Face Limits

As we have seen thus far, punk women did indeed push the gender envelope, and they should be remembered for it. But even in punk, women’s progress was limited, a fact that only recently has received significant attention.⁴⁵ First and foremost, gender stereotypes,

⁴⁴ Blondie, “X-Offender,” *Blondie*, Private Stock, 1976; “Sunday Girl” and “Just Go Away,” *Parallel Lines*, Chrysalis, 1978; and “Slow Motion,” *Eat to the Beat*, Chrysalis, 1979; X, “Johnny Hit and Run Paulene,” *Los Angeles*, Slash, 1980; X, “White Girl,” *Wild Gift*, Slash, 1981; Lisa Fancher, personal communication, 30 October 2007. Fancher published Street Life 1976-77.

⁴⁵ Maria Raha acknowledges that it “feels traitorous to criticize a community in which I have invested so much” when she points out the continuing marginalization of women in rock, even in her beloved punk and indie

especially proscriptive admonitions regarding public behavior, were too pervasive and too deeply ingrained to be overcome easily, even by such rebellious insurgents as punk women. Women appeared in punk bands in numbers never before seen in rock history, but still they never approached a number equal to their male counterparts. Growing up, the punk generation did not have many female rockers as role models. For every Alice Bag and Exene Cervenka who found her way on stage and professed to view herself and her place in punk in an ungendered way, there must have been a dozen women who could never have imagined performing in public. Most punk women probably were not consciously aware that gender conventions affected their decision whether or not to perform. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu would say that most punk women were not able to find their way on stage because they were unable to overcome or escape from their *habitus*, a set of internalized group norms that regulates individual action according to a logic formed and perpetuated by a particular set of the population. Women's *habitus* encouraged them to see themselves as spectators rather than musicians.⁴⁶

The second explanation for why women did not make even greater gains in early punk was that making strides as women was not the central goal for most women in the subculture, an explanation that speaks to the fundamental tension within punk that emerged out of desires for both community and individualism. Punk rock's basic philosophy of DIY individualism blunted the possibility of a community of punks based on gender. Conversely, the genre of 1970s womyn's music was a philosophy-driven movement whose central goals

underground. She provides nuanced and insightful analysis of these women from the 1970s to the present. [*Cinderella's Big Score*, ix.

⁴⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 101-2, 109; and Bourdieu, "The Genesis of the Concepts of *Habitus* and of *Field*," translated by Channa Newman, *Sociocriticism* 2 (Dec 1985): 11-24.

were to generate opportunities for women in the music industry and to create a community for those women. In other words, they put gender and feminism at the center of their professional and personal lives. Most women in punk, however, professed to see themselves as punk rockers first and women (or white or Latina or middle-class) second. Michele Flipside said when she began to write for Flipside “there was never even a thought as to what sex someone was or any type of static about being ‘a woman.’”⁴⁷ The reality was probably something a bit more complicated: punk women’s identity most likely was a complex and conflicting combination of a number of aesthetic, racial, sexual, class, and regional factors. But the fact that so many punk women wanted to be viewed as punks first and women second says a great deal about them and the subculture. Punk was anti-authority, anti-established record industry, anti-hippie, and anti-many other things, but it was not anti-men. And despite its antiestablishment creed, it was built on an individualistic, DIY ethos and, therefore, not well positioned to address broad social issues systematically, including inequities faced by women in the music world or society at large. Nor did punks seem to wish to interrogate or even acknowledge that a broader culture may influence how women feel they should participate in music – even punk. Punk’s take on rock fit more comfortably within a 1950s notion of rock in which the individual rebel railed against a conformist, insipid society than the counterculture view of rock as a vehicle for social change.

A third issue, the fragmentation of punk into many sub-genres, also had an impact on women in punk, although it is not entirely clear whether this splintering helped or hurt them overall. By the late 1970s or early 1980s, styles that once would have fallen under the large umbrella of punk, and might have been seen together on any given night at CBGB’s, the

⁴⁷ Michele Flipside, email interview by author, 15 July 2007.

Masque, or the Psychedelly, now earned more specific labels like power pop, art rock, No Wave, new wave, and hardcore. The proliferation of sub-genres was accompanied by the segmentation of punk audiences. This aesthetic explosion and the codification that accompanied it had important ramifications for women's roles in punk because the various sub-genres in punk became increasingly gendered over time. To oversimplify things, one end of the punk rock gender spectrum was occupied by a feminized sub-genre called new wave while the other end belonged to the hypermasculine sub-genre of hardcore.

If success was measured by numbers of records sold, then women made great gains as punk's divisions solidified and the record-buying public embraced new wave. Heartened by punk's success in England and desperate for economic palliatives as disco declined and the music industry entered a slump, established labels seized on music at the pop end of the punk genre, what came to be called "new wave." Bands like Blondie, the Talking Heads, the Dickies, and the Urban Verbs signed contracts with major record labels.⁴⁸ The list of new wave bands with female members that hit the charts is too large to be detailed here, but a representative sampling would include Joan Jett and the Blackhearts, Blondie, the Talking Heads, and, of course, the Go-Go's. Punk pedants, then and now, can argue whether the Go-Go's on vinyl were still punk, but no one can deny the importance of Go-Go's in the history of rock. Their achievements and those of other female new wavers were important not only in and of themselves but also because they set the stage for many female performers of the

⁴⁸ Elektra took on Blondie. The Talking Heads got on Sire. The Dickies signed to A & M. The Urban Verbs signed with Warner Brothers in 1978. For debates over the terms "punk" and "new wave" and insights into how "new wave" became increasingly associated with the lighter or "pop" side of punk, see, for example, Alan Betrock, "New Wave Hangs Ten," and Lisa Jane Persky, "Pimp Rock," *New York Rocker*, vol. 1, no. 8. July-Aug 1977, 43, 46; Roy Trakin, "Patti Smith Group," *New York Rocker*, vol. 1, no. 11. Feb-Mar 1978, 4-7, 12; "Vote for Your Favorite Punk," *Bomp!*, vol. 3, no. 7, Winter 1976/1977, 40-1; Greg Shaw, "Editorial" and "Powerpop," *Bomp!*, vol. 4, no. 2. March 1978, 4-5, 8-11, 57; Greg Shaw, "Editorial," *Bomp!*, vol. 4, no. 3, October/November 1978, 6; Robert Hilburn, "Punk Searches for an Audience," *Los Angeles Times*, 27 September 1977, sec. IV, p. 1.

1980s, including Annie Lennox, Madonna, Sheila E. (Escovedo) and Pat Benatar.

Although new wavers chalked up financial victories, if success was defined by who retained ownership of the term punk, women lost out. In the early eighties, some punk rockers chose to close ranks, identifying punk in increasingly narrow terms. When major papers and mainstream magazines began to recognize, label, and laud new wave, many punk purists rejected it as inauthentic, something less than punk. In 1978, Los Angeles Times rock critic Robert Hilburn described “new wave” or “power pop” as “a return to the innocence and fun of the early ‘50s and the peppy melodies and inviting harmonies of the mid-‘60s Beatles and Who.”⁴⁹ In stark contrast to the pep of new wave, hardcore punk musicians took to the stage, “expressing rage, disgust and/or depression with rapid-fire, extremely simple chords.”⁵⁰ To some punks, like Craig Stockfleth of Berkeley, California, it “remained the truest version of punk” in the early eighties because it was the most outrageous and most rebellious. Furthermore it built on the examples of early punk bands like the Ramones and the Damned, who had represented a return to basics, playing stripped down, sped-up, three-chord rock. Hardcore took their austere sound and made it even faster and angrier, making the earlier bands look like they were on Quaaludes. According to Steven Blush, author of American Hardcore, “Most bands couldn’t really play that well.... ... However they had IT – an infectious blend of ultra-fast music, thought-provoking lyrics, and fuck-you attitude.”⁵¹

Although some punk aficionados cite the Bags as progenitors of hardcore, as the sub-

⁴⁹ Robert Hilburn, “Costello, Lowe: The Power in Pop,” Los Angeles Times, 23 April 1978, sec. CAL, p. 72.

⁵⁰ Terry Atkinson, “Punk Concert at the Stardust Ballroom,” Los Angeles Times, 13 February 1981, sec. VI, p. 4.

⁵¹ Craig Stockfleth quoted in a review of Stockfleth’s photograph exhibit at College of Marin in Marin County, California, 6 November – 19 December 1983. [Leslie Traveller, “Bay Area Punk, A Cultural Document,” Puncture, Winter 1983-1984, no. 6, 21.] Steven Blush, American Hardcore: A Tribal History (Los Angeles: Feral House, 2001), 9.

genre matured it became a boys club – both qualitatively and quantitatively – in which all comers – male or female – had to participate on male terms.⁵² Hardcore music was, put very plainly, a performance of masculinity in hyperdrive, on-stage and off. The performers barked or shouted lyrics during highly athletic or energetic performances using confrontational gestures and postures. What came to be known as slamdancing, moshing, or the mosh pit meant that hardcore was an exhibition of masculinity in the audience as well. Hardcore as masculine performance will be explored more fully in the next chapter, but what is important here are the limits hardcore placed on female achievement in punk. In terms of numbers, hardcore was overwhelmingly male – on stage and in the audience. They were a few rare exceptions on stage, including Kira Roessler, who became Black Flag’s bassist in 1984, Toni Young of D.C.’s Red C, and the all-female bands Raszebrae (L.A.), Anti-Scrunti Faction (L.A.), and Chalk Circle (D.C.). But many women found hardcore’s unpolished, sonic assault as well as its physical challenges – to fans as well as performers – unappealing. And, for the most part, the boys of hardcore were fine with that. Keith Morris remembers the early days of Black Flag:

Slam dancing, stage diving, that was also something that started with us. Now all these other bands can try to take credit for it but screw ‘em. We had skateboard kids and surfers who were very aggressive athletic-type characters showing up to these shows, jumping off the stage. ... We of course would let it go ... until it started to get violent, and then of course we would then cut it off there. And they realized that it was just a bunch of guys having fun, you know, and the girls complained that they couldn’t get close to the stage, and it was like “sorry gals, you know, that’s the way it goes.”

Nathan Strejcek, singer for the Teen Idles, recalled, “When we [The Teen Idles] got back from California, the whole [Washington] scene changed. ... slamdancing got big. Whenever

⁵² Lauraine Leblanc discusses the increasingly masculine temper of punk in the 1980s in Pretty in Punk: Girls’ Gender Resistance in a Boys’ Subculture (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 108-110.

people did it, they were deemed cool, so everybody did it. All the girls who went to the shows sort of dropped out of the scene because it became so male-dominated. They kind of stayed on the outskirts.”⁵³

The women who chose to participate in hardcore did so based on rules outlined by men. D.C. hardcore fan Amy Pickering admits, “We were trying to be boys.”⁵⁴ I personally remember seeing my first hardcore show as a seventeen year old in 1983: the Dead Kennedys at the Cuban Club in Tampa, Florida. Arriving primed for action, I felt ready to hurl myself in with the slamdancers. When one of the opening bands took the stage, and the pit writhed into being, I stood back in awe and trepidation, thinking, “I wish there were a girls’ section.” Aimee Cooper, who has written a memoir about her time in the L.A. punk scene of the early 1980s, had fewer qualms, taking “pride in being one of [the few] girls” in the “pit.” Part of the excitement of being there was getting banged around and – sometimes – knocked down. One night, after ending up at the bottom of a pile, a man pulled Cooper to her feet: “The punk checked me out quickly, making sure I was okay – then he gave my head a rough, admiring rub, and shoved me back into the pit. It was the greatest compliment a guy could have given me.”⁵⁵ Cooper did not question the terms of the pit, rules crafted and negotiated by men; instead she prided herself on being one of the guys.

Performance ethnographer Della Pollock would call Cooper’s experience a “feminine epic” rather than a “feminized epic.” In the former, women do not redress male-driven

⁵³ Michael Azerrad, Our Band Could Be Your Life : Scenes From the American Indie Underground, 1981-1991 (Boston: Little Brown, 2001), 46; Blush, American Hardcore, 35; Mark Andersen and Mark Jenkins, Dance of Days: Two Decades of Punk in the Nation’s Capital (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2001), 93; Keith Morris, interview by the Experience Music Project, transcript, 1998, 9-10; Nathan Strejcek quoted in Connolly, Clague and Cheslow, Banned in DC, 25.

⁵⁴ Amy Pickering quoted in Andersen and Jenkins, Dance of Days, 93.

⁵⁵ Aimee Cooper, Coloring Outside the Lines: A Punk Rock Memoir (Elgin: Texas: Rowdy’s Press, 2003), 21.

heroics as much as they celebrate having survived them, while in the latter women transform the hero's role altogether. Creating a hardcore feminized epic would have involved converting a masculine space into a heterogeneous one by demanding a physically safe space for women in the audience (something that eventually happened through the efforts of positive punks and riot grrrls). Just as contemporary liberal feminists expected women to work within existing economic and social structures, women like Cooper accepted the rules of hardcore and its terms of masculine participation.⁵⁶ But the sheer physicality of slamdancing (which could resemble football blocks) and stage-diving (which could involve catching large men wearing steel-toed boots) put most women at a disadvantage.

Participating in hardcore as a woman meant accepting not only male mosh-pit rules, but also certain aspects regarding a dress code. In early punk, "There wasn't really a look to the ... scene particularly, which to me was what was nice about it," according to New York photographer Roberta Bayley; instead there was "charity shop chic," the "vintage look," and all sorts of efforts to break free of the dominant styles of the mid-1970s.⁵⁷ By the time hardcore emerged, "there were rules about [how to look]," as Cooper puts it. "[T]hey may have been unspoken rules, but they were there.... Punk rock meant short hair. ... In the real world, short, spiked hair or a shaved head were considered by some to be an invitation to a beating, or ... verbal abuse. To punks, it was the price they paid for being different, and they

⁵⁶ Della Pollock, *Telling Bodies, Performing Birth: Everyday Narratives of Childbirth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), ch. 1. Eventually, positive punk and riot grrrls would work to create these sort of safe spaces for women at hardcore shows by ensuring that action near the stage did not get too physical. For this history, see, for example, Azerrad, *Our Band*, 392-3; Andersen and Jenkins, *Dance of Days*, 334-8. William Chafe, *The Paradox of Change: American Women in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), ch. 11.

⁵⁷ Charlotte Robinson, "She Just Takes Pictures: Interview with Roberta Bayley, 30 September 2000, Pop Matters, <http://www.popmatters.com/music/features/000830-bayley.html>, accessed September 26, 2006; Roberta Bayley and Gary Valentine, quoted in Everett True, *Hey Ho Let's Go: The Story of the Ramones* (London: Omnibus Press, 2002), 50.

were willing to pay that price. Out *there*.” But “inside the clubs, it was their turf. You either became one of them, or you stayed the hell out.” Thus, hardcore followers tended to “[w]ear the same uniform,” according to Jack Rabid, which generally consisted of very short hair or a shaved head, straight-leg Levi’s, Doc Marten or engineer boots, a plain white, black, or punk band T-shirt, and perhaps a flannel shirt.⁵⁸ Even women in hardcore varied little from this formula; they might leave bangs or some fringe on the neck when they shaved their heads, and they might wear “kilts and combat boots” instead of jeans.⁵⁹ But otherwise, women often chose to follow the dress code developed by the men of hardcore.

Conclusion

Women in punk broke new ground both qualitatively and quantitatively and thereby opened doors for women in the 1980s. Female punks were able to assert themselves on-stage and off by blending ideas from second-wave feminism with elements of the punk ethos. They drew on punk’s anti-virtuosity stance, its challenge to separation between audience and performer, and its admonition to try new things as they assumed roles that diverged from women’s traditional stances in popular music. They could be aggressive and angry on stage. Female punks were spontaneous and original, emphasizing their individuality through dress, introspective lyrics, and their choices to play instruments. Off-stage they were even bolder, making names for themselves as writers, photographers, and scene-makers. They emphatically inserted themselves in street life on their own terms.

⁵⁸ Cooper, *Coloring Outside the Lines*, 9-10; Rabid, interview by author, transcript, New York, N.Y., 27 July 2002, 37. For other discussions of the “uniform” of hardcore, see Tony Reflex, interview by author, tape recording, Sierra Madre, Calif., 23 June 2004; Cervenka, interview by the EMP, 1998, 5.

⁵⁹ Nathan Strejcek quoted in Connolly, Clague, and Cheslow, *Banned in DC*, 25.

According to James Dickerson, the eighties were the “best decade in modern history of solo female artists.” In those years, 73 female solo artists made the top-20 charts for a thirty-one-percent share of the total chart placements. Dickerson acknowledges that a “gender tug-of-war was beginning to take hold in the 1970s” but fails to acknowledge punk’s role in opening doors for women in the 1980s. And quite a few of the women whom Dickerson views as exemplifying women’s success in the eighties – Pat Benatar, Deborah Harry, Joan Jett, Cyndi Lauper, the Bangles, and Madonna – either had direct ties to punk communities or benefited from an association with a new-wave image.⁶⁰ Their success attests to the gains women in punk made through the sub-genre(s) of new wave.

Despite the fact that punk women made great strides in punk, these gains were constrained by several factors. As punk grew, sub-genres became increasingly codified and policed by their members. The voices that most forcefully claimed the right to retain the name punk came from within hardcore, a particularly angry, belligerent style of punk played for and by mostly men. Hardcore’s increasingly homosocial environment literally pushed women to the margins as it created and condoned a physically challenging cultural landscape. Women found that if they were to participate in hardcore, they had to do so on the men’s terms – by surviving the brutal live performances and dressing in a hardcore uniform.

The most important reason female punks did not make greater gains in the 1970s and early 1980s was the fact that they viewed themselves primarily as individual punks rather than a group of women. In a subculture that placed such a high premium of individuality, it was difficult for women to see initially that the “personal was political,” that women’s experiences in punk as a whole might be qualitatively different simply because they were

⁶⁰ James Dickerson, *Women on Top: The Quiet Revolution that’s Rocking the American Music Industry* (New York: Billboard Books, 1998), 157-77.

women. Janelle Simmons observed of the D.C. hardcore scene of the early 1980s, “At the time I was blind to it, but looking back now, women didn’t really have a place.” By the mid-1980s, certain people and bands within a select few American punk scenes began to recognize the obstacles faced by women in punk. For example, bands like Embrace and Rites of Spring in D.C. discouraged slamdancing at their shows so that, among other reasons, women could be near the stage. But it was only with the Riot Grrrl movement of the early 1990s that a group of punk women banded together around a feminist cause.⁶¹ Some Riot Grrrls (who have since been seen as a branch of third-wave feminism) had had access to some of the institutionalized elements of a fully mature second-wave feminism, like women’s studies programs, that were not widely available to punk women in the 1970s and early 1980s. Riot Grrrls published ‘zines, wrote songs, and performed in such a way that called attention to issues like the sexual double standard, violence against women, and reproductive rights. Through their feminist message, the Riot Grrrls were able to assert a sense of simultaneously being individual women and a community of punks far better than female punks of the 1970s.

⁶¹ Janelle Simmons quoted in Andersen and Jenkins, *Dance of Days*, 93, 307-38; Amber E. Kinser, “Negotiating Spaces For/Through Third-Wave Feminism,” *NWSA Journal* 16, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 124-53; Jessica Rosenberg and Gitana Garofalo, “Riot Grrrl: Revolutions from Within,” *Signs: Journal of Women and Culture in Society*, vol. 23, no. 3 (1998): 809-841.

CHAPTER 7

SPUDBOYS: MASCULINITY AND PUNK

In the liner notes to Half Japanese's *Greatest Hits* (1995), David Fair offers instructions on "How to Play Guitar."

I taught myself to play guitar. It's incredibly easy when you understand the science of it. The skinny strings play high sounds and the fat strings play low sounds. If you put your finger on a string near the body part of the guitar it makes a higher sound and if you put your finger on the stringer farther out by the tuning end it makes a lower sound. If you want to play fast move your hand real fast and if you want to play slower move your hand slower. That's all there is to it. You can learn the names of notes and how to make chords that other people use, but that's pretty limiting.

David and his brother Jad, comprised the core of Half Japanese, a band based in Washington, D.C. from 1976 to 1984. They drew followers from D.C. punk circles, but their jangly, eclectic sound anticipated indie rock of the 1980s. Half Japanese first recorded themselves on a cassette tape recorder at their parents' house in Uniontown, Maryland, using microphones bought from Radio Shack. They transferred the recording from cassette to reel-to-reel at a friend's residence and sent it off to a record plant where it became the seven-inch EP "Calling All Girls" released on the Fairs' own 50,000,000,000,000,000 Watts record label.¹ David's tale of learning to play the guitar, his conscious decision to approach the instrument in an unschooled manner, and the DIY recording of their first single illustrate how punk rockers sought to demystify rock's methods and meanings. David's self-taught guitar technique was illustrative of punk's commitment to amateurism in general, an ethos that

¹ David Fair, "How to Play Guitar," liner notes to Half Japanese, *Greatest Hits*, Safe House, 1995; Jad Fair, telephone interview by author, tape recording, 29 August 2002.

ousted the hypermasculine guitar god from center stage and asserted the right of the average guy to play rock and roll. One did not need to be fantastically sexy, successful with girls, or masterfully skilled to be in a band. Indeed, one could be – just as Jad and David appeared to be – geeks making music in their bedrooms. As was the case with the issue of femininity, the story of masculinity in punk is a complicated tale, although a couple of generalizations may be made. First, punk men pushed gender boundaries less consistently than their female counterparts. Second, early punk generally saw more male gender experimentation than the increasingly codified sub-genres of later punk. In the space opened by the absence of hypermasculine rock stars, early punk had room for several alternatives to the dominant masculinity of the day, including an ostensibly asexual stance, a masculinity that was effete or intellectual, and another that must be characterized as anxious.

Spudboy: Asexuality in Punk Rock

An absence can be a very powerful thing, and the degree to which some – though by no means all – punk rockers offered asexual public personae represented a serious challenge to gender norms in rock. Rock and roll was sexually charged from its inception, and for punks to excise such an integral part of the music brazenly flew in the face of rock's history and its current kings. Two aspects of the subculture, in particular, illustrated its asexual threads. First, although the percentage of popular songs addressing romantic love declined as a whole from the late 1960s through the 1990s, punk rock was ahead of the curve. Dave Laing's classic 1985 study of British punk found that only twenty-one percent of punk songs tackled the topic of love, compared to fifty-four percent of Top-50 tunes. What did punks talk about instead of love and sex? Some of the more common lyrical themes included

boredom, violence, anger, futility, alienation, and fun. Simon Reynolds and Joy Press, in their erudite and compelling discussion of gender and rock, draw on psychoanalytic theory to explain punk's "professed indifference to sexuality." They suggest that "beneath the professions [of apathy] ... lurked a fear of engulfment." For Reynolds and Press this fear was gendered; it was the latest cultural expression of man's fear of drowning in the abyss of woman/love. Their favorite example of this trepidation is the Sex Pistols' song "Submission," which is about sexual bondage and a "woman [who] was literally unfathomable, a bottomless chasm which threatened [the singer's] identity."²

While punks' ostensibly asexual stances may have surfaced in part because of deep-seated psychological fears, they also emerged from the rebels' immediate historical context; punks' public asexuality was a direct challenge to the rock status quo. From rock and roll's inception in the 1950s, one of its fundamentals had been love songs, and for 1970s punks, this rock standard begged to be obliterated or banished, along with other customs like the guitar solo and the chorus-verse-chorus song structure.³ Their impulse to demolish rock's conventions dovetailed with the second impetus behind punks' public asexuality: the general disillusionment of the era. Reynolds and Press come close to my assessment of gender and punk when they describe punk as "a sort of asexual relative of metal: cock-rock, with the

² Laing examined the songs on the "first five" British punk records and the top fifty British songs of 1976. [Dave Laing, One Chord Wonders: Power and Meaning in Punk Rock (Milton Keynes, Eng.: Open University Press, 1985), 68-9.] Amy Mohan and Jean Malone found that only 7.6 percent of the alternative song lyrics they examined broached the topic of love, compared to 22.9 percent of mainstream lyrics. They examined songs on Billboard's "Modern Rock Tracks" chart January 6, 1990 to October 3, 1992. ["Popular Music as a 'Social Cement': A Content Analysis of Social Criticism and Alienation in Alternative-Music Song Titles," in Adolescents and Their Music: If It's Too Loud, You're Too Old, ed. Jonathan S. Epstein (New York and London: Garland, 1994), 291-3.] Simon Reynolds and Joy Press, The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion, and Rock 'n' Roll (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 87-8.

³ Perhaps the archetypal expression of this motif was "This Is Not a Love Song" by the British band Public Image Ltd. Johnny Lydon (formerly Johnny Rotten of the Sex Pistols) sarcastically asserted, over and over, "this is not a love song," to a surprisingly upbeat but monotonous pop melody.

cock replaced by a sort of generalized castration-paranoia (society's to blame)." I do not go so far as to say male punks felt collectively emasculated, but I do believe they thought bleating about romantic relationships was far too banal and passive in a world so hopelessly and irreparably defective. To demonstrate, in "My World," the Descendents of California catalog the pedestrian events of a typical day, including sex with a girlfriend, strumming a guitar, and jogging. Ultimately, however, the song is about hopelessness and alienation. The song opens with "Went to the no nukes rally/ the Don Quixotes made me feel silly" and closes with "Went to my desk to study/ there's no world, no love, nobody but me/ and that's the way it's gonna be/ so stop knocking, stop it."⁴

When punks did address romance, they usually did so with a heavy dose of cynicism or irony, as the Circle Jerks' album *Golden Shower of Hits* (1983) illustrates. The LP has twelve songs, eleven originals and a medley of tongue-in-cheek covers. Of the eleven originals, only one, "In Your Eyes," concerns romantic love; it is an acerbic tale of "lies and alibis" in a bitterly failed relationship. At first glance, the closing medley seems to be a positive take on romantic love and includes "golden oldies" like "Along Comes Mary" and "Love Will Keep Us Together." A quick listen, however, reveals quintessential punk sarcasm regarding relationships. Lead singer Keith Morris, in a voice that is more boozy than tender, tells a romantic tale through snippets of songs. He bellows, screeches, and burps his way through falling in love ("Along Comes Mary" and "Close to You"), then the "Afternoon Delight" that apparently resulted in her "Having My Baby." His hopes that "Love Will Keep Us Together" are dashed when the medley ends in "D-i-v-o-r-c-e."⁵ Taken

⁴ Reynolds and Press, *Sex Revolts*, 23; Descendents, "My World," *I Don't Want to Grow Up*, New Alliance/SST Records, 1985.

⁵ Circle Jerks, *Golden Shower of Hits*, Frontier Records, 1983.

together, the songs, both in the cumulative story they tell and the sardonic manner in which they are performed, provide a severe commentary on the possibilities of romantic love.

Not only were punk lyrics and music a far cry from rock's traditional approach to sex and love, punk as an embodied stage performance also could be much less overtly sexual than traditional rock performance. Much has been written about masculinity and rock 'n' roll, and there is, of course, no single or simple definition of masculinity in rock. For instance, Reynolds and Press write of a number of rock masculinities: the "man-machine omnipotence" of heavy metal and techno, the "camaraderie of brotherhood-in-arms" seen in the Clash and Public Enemy, and the "psychedelic mother's boy" represented by the Byrds and Brian Eno.⁶ Despite the widely differing versions of masculinity represented by Rob Halford, Chuck D., and Roger McGuinn, for example, what each of these performance styles shared was audience identification: fans wanted to be that person or be with that person. Some punks carried on this performance tradition, including bands like Social Distortion and individuals like Billy Zoom of X. But a number of punk entertainers worked to distance themselves from or even alienate the spectators, rather than follow a traditional path of performing a version of masculinity that invited audience desire or identification.

Three bands that characterized this confrontational punk style were Suicide and DNA of New York and the Screamers of Los Angeles. Arto Lindsay, leader of DNA, and his band self-consciously performed "in a [Bertolt] Brechtian sense – wanting you [the audience] to think about your situation. Wanting to remind you of your physical self." In playwright and theorist Brecht's "epic theatre," the "spectator was no longer in any way allowed to submit to an experience uncritically ... by means of simple empathy with the characters in a play. The

⁶ Reynolds and Press, Sex Revolts, 66-75, 77-9, 81-2, 107.

production ... put [the spectators] through a process of alienation: the alienation that is necessary to all understanding.” Rather than identify with the performers, Brecht required “the spectator to adopt an attitude of inquiry and criticism in his approach” to “the incidents portrayed.” According to Brecht, “The dramatic theatre’s spectator says: Yes, I have felt like that too – Just like me – It’s only natural The epic theatre’s spectator says: I’d never have thought it – That’s not the way ... It’s got to stop.”⁷

Suicide, DNA, and the Scremers achieved what Brecht called “the alienation effect” through shocking lyrics, provocative live performances, and music that was jarring and discomfiting.⁸ Suicide got their start in the early seventies, finding inspiration in the Velvet Underground’s example of “repetition, monotony, and dissonance” but adding self-flagellation and audience intimidation to their live performance. A 1972 review of the band described a show at the Mercer Arts Centre: “During one piece called ‘A Punk Music Mass,’ [singer Vega] struts, dances, is on and off stage, intimidates those in front, especially femmes, blocks the door to hinder those trying to escape, and beats his face with the hand mike.” The reviewer noted that this show had been “tamed down[,] since Suicide’s past shows included use of daggers and chains in the audience.” Like Suicide, the Scremers’ performances invited unease more than empathy. While lead singer Tomata du Plenty’s lithe and muscular body could be sexy, he shouted or barked the lyrics with very little melody while grimacing and leering at the audience. The music was dark and moody and the total effect is disquieting rather than sexy, uncomfortable rather than sensual. According to Peter Urban in review of a Scremers’ performance July 4, 1977, “Tomata sings the first song

⁷ Arto Lindsay, interview by author, tape recording, New York, N.Y., 26 June 2002; Bertolt Brecht, Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 71.

⁸ Brecht, Brecht on Theatre, 136.

without the aid of a mike, he uses a bullhorn instead – PERFECT.” The lyrics further tormented the listener:

Be quiet or be killed!" he said.
In front of you and in front of me.
He made the pilot get on his knees.
Made him crawl, made him whimper,
Made him cry out for his mother.

Wow! What a show!
122 Hours Of Fear.
Wow! What a show!
122 Hours Of Fear.
122 Hours Of Fear.

This song, “122 Hours of Fear,” whose title was taken from a headline in the Los Angeles Herald Examiner, seeks to replicate for the listener the fear and humiliation felt by kidnapping victims, not an experience invited by most spectators.⁹

Other punk bands came across as “asexual” by masking their sexuality performatively and musically, as demonstrated by Devo, transplants to Los Angeles from Akron, Ohio. These *über* nerds seemed as remote from the hypermasculinity of cock rockers Led Zeppelin or Van Halen as one could get. Surprisingly, a relatively large number (for punk) of their songs concerned love or romantic sex: twenty-four percent of the sixty-six songs on their first six studio albums. But the romance or sexuality of even these songs was cloaked behind erratic, decidedly un-sensuous rhythms and clipped or discordant vocals. A prime example of this jarring presentation was Devo’s cover of the Rolling Stones’ classic “(I Can’t Get No) Satisfaction.” The song expresses an inability to find pleasure through consumerism or love, and in the Stones’ version, the chorus builds the sexual tension through the interaction of the vocals and an increasingly insistent guitar beat. The lyrics “Cause I try and I try and I try

⁹ Peter Urban, “The Screamers,” *New Dezezes*, 1977, <http://www.synthpunk.org/screamers/>, accessed 4 November 2007; The Screamers, “122 Hours of Fear,” *The Screamers: Live in San Francisco, September 2nd 1978*, 40 min. MVD Video. 2004.

and I try/ I can't get no" are followed by a three-beat guitar riff – during which we can imagine Mick Jagger's hips thrusting – that emphasizes the frustration expressed in the lyrics, before the phrase closes with "satisfaction." In Devo's adaptation, the sexual innuendo is buried beneath a mechanical, cold ambiance. The minimalist arrangement and jerky rhythms do not exude a latent sexuality but rather suggest that the singer is trapped in a robotic existence filled with meaningless actions regulated by our modern world of fast-paced consumerism and relationships. Occasionally the bass seems about to break into a funky, truly sexy rhythm, but the vocalist is unwilling or unable to follow. He sings the words slightly off beat, as if following some impulse apart from the rest of the musicians.¹⁰ The rapid-fire staccato vocals, combined with the clinical, clunky music make this song an asexual opus.

In addition to their lyrics and musical style, Devo cultivated a deliberately asexual visual appearance. In music videos and live performances, the band members often moved in a mechanical manner, as if they were not men but merely extensions of their instrument-machines. Their baggy jumpsuits and construction hats marked them as asexual worker drones. One of their recurring characters, Booji Boy, appeared with a mask that makes him appear to be a demented boy rather than a full-grown, sexually active man. Not only did Devo de-sex themselves they dehumanized themselves. On the cover of their *Oh No! It's Devo* (1982) album, the members appear on the cover as "spuds," band slang for average Joes. Instead of bodies the band members' heads sit atop uniformly shaped potatoes. Devo

¹⁰ Devo's first six studio albums are Devo, *Q: Are We Not Men? A: We Are Devo*, Warner Brothers, 1978; *Duty Now for the Future*, Warner Brothers, 1979; *Freedom of Choice*, Warner Brothers, 1980; *New Traditionalists*, Warner Brothers, 1981; *Oh No! It's Devo*, Warner Brothers, 1982; *Shout*, Warner Brothers, 1984; Rolling Stones, "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction," *Out of Our Heads*, Decca, 1965; Devo, "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction," *Q: Are We Not Men? A: We Are Devo!* Warner Brothers, 1978.

built a mystique around their geeky sensibility, bizarre videos, and odd jargon, including spud, Booji Boy, and de-evolution. According to front man Mark Mothersbaugh, the band etymology of spud “came from looking at famous people and thinking if society was the vegetable kingdom, we’d be potatoes – dirty, asymmetric, from underground. Yet spuds are the staple of the American diet, on everybody’s plate. But nobody ever talked about them. So we decided we were potatoes where Brooke Shields was an asparagus.” As they said in “Smart Patrol,” “I think I’m only a spudboy looking for a real tomato.”¹¹

“He’s just trying to tell a vision”: Punk’s Intellectual Masculinity

When male punks put forth a more sexual persona, they often did not fit into the dominant images of seventies manliness, such as men “in tight pants with gold razors on gold chains around their hairy necks.”¹² Indeed a number of men who, on the face of it, might be described as effete or intellectual became very important in punk. Television, the band responsible for bringing punk to CBGB, became known for their dueling-guitar sound created by Richard Lloyd and Tom Verlaine on co-lead guitars.¹³ Television, unlike most punk bands, achieved critical acclaim for both their skill and their aesthetic and were seen as one of “the most highly thought-of new rock band[s] on the NY scene.”¹⁴ By the time they released their first album in 1977, they demonstrated talent and skill on guitar well above that

¹¹ Simon Reynolds, Rip It Up and Start Again: Post-Punk 1978-84 (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), 45; Devo, “Smart Patrol,” *Duty Now for the Future*, Warner Brothers, 1979.

¹² Anna Statman, Los Angeles punk, email to author, 30 July 2004.

¹³ Legend has it that in 1974 Richard Lloyd and Tom Verlaine, of the band Television, ran into Hilly Kristal outside his club, the bar that would become known as CBGB. They talked him into giving them a gig, managed to draw a good group of friends, and thereby convinced him to give Television the stage every Sunday for a month. [Clinton Heylin, From the Velvets to the Voidoids: The Birth of American Punk Rock, 2d ed. (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2005), 119]

¹⁴ George Gimarc, Punk Diary: 1970-1979 (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1994), 16.

of the average punk band. While their talent might have led some to call them virtuosos, their stage presence was far from that of the hypermasculine guitar god.

Tom Verlaine, born Thomas Miller, changed his name to pay homage to French symbolist poets, especially Paul-Marie Verlaine. This choice of pseudonym illustrated the distance between Television and the world of hard rock's orgasmic guitar solos. Whereas rock 'n' roll more commonly expressed an explicitly assertive, aggressive male sexuality, Verlaine and Television, like the Symbolist poets, believed in subtle expression over clear-cut declarations, in intellectual and emotion depth over demonstrative gesticulation. Verlaine's original ambition had been to be a famous poet. His preference for subtlety over aggressive expression became clear in friction between Verlaine and bandmate Richard Hell, another poetry aficionado and longtime friend to Verlaine.

The iteration of Television that first gained a reputation in New York included Richard Hell. Initially, as rock writer and guitarist Lenny Kaye noted, the band was "pretty rough and ragged," and Television was proud of this fact. On a 1974 flyer for a CBGB performance, they quoted a SOHO Weekly News review: "The great thing about this band is they have absolutely no musical or socially redeeming characteristics and they know it." This early version of Television achieved a great deal of their performative effect through their clothing and on-stage charisma, both of which Hell enjoyed manipulating. He saw a "separation of duties" in Television, whereby he would take "charge of all the stuff which ... wasn't musical," including "clothes and the look of our graphics and all that imagery kind of thing." His goal was to project an "anti-glamour, angry but poetic sensibility." Hell enjoyed using apparel and movement to make bold, defiant statements and "used to go really wild onstage." He saw performance as "a total catharsis, physically and mentally." Eventually,

however, Verlaine – much more than Hell – began to seek a more sophisticated sound and performative style. Following the Symbolist poets, Verlaine wanted to use words and music to evoke feelings and moods in a much more understated manner than was common in most rock ‘n’ roll. Hell realized he “was on the way out [of the band] when [Verlaine] told me to stop moving onstage. He said he didn’t want people to be distracted when he was singing. When that happened I knew it was over.”¹⁵ Hell left the band in March 1975.

Instead of singing about sex or romance, Verlaine’s post-Hell version Television spent more time on interiority and the imprecision of perception. In “Prove It,” on Television’s first LP *Marquee Moon* (1977), Verlaine wants to “Prove it ... just the facts... the confidential/ this case, this case, this case that I/ I've been workin' on so long.” The listener is never quite sure what “it” is that needs to be proven but senses it is something intangible, something epistemological, having to do with the world, reality, or individual existence, as the rest of the song suggests:

First you creep, then you leap
Up about a hundred feet, yet you're in so deep
You could write the Book.
Chirp chirp, the birds
They're giving you the words
The world is just a feeling you undertook.
Remember?

Now the rose, it slows
You in such colorless clothes
Fantastic! You lose your sense of human.
Project
Protect
It's warm and it's calm and it's perfect
It's too "too too"
To put a finger on
This case is closed.

¹⁵ Lenny Kaye and Richard Hell quoted in Heylin, *Velvets to the Voidoids*, 125, 122, 124; image of flyer in Heylin, *Velvets to the Voidoids*, following 225.

Verlaine's idea of performance was to let the music and the words create soundscapes and atmospheres for the audience. He, like his character "Little Johnny Jewel," was "just trying to tell a vision."¹⁶

Unlike a more typical mid-1970s rock performance, Television, in its post-Hell incarnation, did not use their guitars or microphones as "technophalluses." They did not perform in any of the hypermasculine styles seen in cock rock, nor did they sing about sex or even romance, for the most part. And yet, Verlaine and second guitarist Richard Lloyd were extolled as some of the sexiest men in New York punk. Photographer Stephanie Chernikowski remembered Verlaine's "gorgeous bony" face. Patti Smith gushed in a review for Rock Scene in 1974: "And the lead singer Tom Verlaine has the most beautiful neck in rock & roll. ... A languid boy with the confused grace of a child in paradise. A guy worth losing your virginity to. ... Richard Lloyd plays emotional and highly sexually aware guitar. He's the pouty boyish one."¹⁷ As this review implied, Television put forth something similar to the sort of "pyschedelic mother's boy" outlined by Press and Reynolds, but Verlaine's lyrical poetry indicated a more intellectual masculinity. Furthermore, Verlaine demonstrated a great deal of confidence in his music making. While not given to cock-rock swagger, Verlaine possessed a very clear musical vision as well as the strong will necessary to achieve it. After squeezing Hell out of the band, Verlaine and Lloyd found Fred Smith for the bass, a musician who was much more able to ground the band while also exhibiting the sort of "fluid" playing Verlaine sought. Furthermore, Verlaine knew what he wanted in the studio

¹⁶ Television, "Prove It" and "Little Johnny Jewel," *Marquee Moon*, Elektra, 1977. Television originally recorded "Little Johnny Jewel" as a privately released single released on their own label. ["Television," in The Virgin Encyclopedia of Popular Music, 3rd ed., ed. Colin Larkin (London: Virgin Books, 1999), 1212.]

¹⁷ Patti Smith, "Learning to Stand Naked," Rock Scene, October 1974.

and how to get it, co-producing all the tracks on *Marquee Moon*.

“I’m Tense and Nervous”: Anxious Masculinity

While Verlaine represented a confident, intellectual brand of masculinity, some men in the subculture radiated an anxious masculine persona, and David Byrne of the Talking Heads was anxiety embodied. On stage and off, Byrne seemed uncomfortable with himself and his role as a rock star, as a 1977 New Musical Express article reveals: “A hirsute, tense looking man who folds his arms, tucking his hands in as if he was in a straight jacket. When his hands escape, they play nervously with objects nearby.” This edgy energy also materialized on stage, as the reviewer also state: “When they perform the number live David is galvanized into a twitching marionette. He sure doesn't look as if he's having fun.” David’s voice further contributed to this nervous guise, going “a little high” sometimes, as if verging on panic. Another critic wrote of Byrne that year,

Everything about him is uncool: his socks and shoes, his body language, his self-conscious announcements of song titles, the way he wiggles his hips when he’s carried away onstage (imagine an out-of-it kid practicing Buddy Holly moves in front of a mirror). But it only makes you love him as you laugh at him – or at the concept he presents. ... sitting in the audience you’re never sure whether Byrne’s persona is real or if it’s brilliant satire.¹⁸

Whether David Byrne’s nerdy, nervous qualities were part of the act or a genuine aspect of his personality, he performed an anxious masculinity not commonly seen in rock. His lyrics suggested he was worried about many things, including place (as we saw in Chapter 4), but the most prevalent source of anxiety was human relationships, especially

¹⁸ Miles, “This is a Minimalist Headline,” New Musical Express, 23 April 1977. An earlier (1976) review of a Talking Heads performance remarked, “Somehow Byrne’s ultra-conventional trousers and sport shirt only serve to emphasize a stage manner that could be described as post-electric shock. ... Musically they take up where Lou Reed left off when he packed up his guitar to pursue a career in self-parody: skeletal and hypnotic, tormented yet restrained.” [Mary Harron and Michael Zilka, “Talking Heads,” PUNK, no. 2, 1976.] Michael Aron, “Talking Heads: Beyond Safety Pins,” Rolling Stone, 17 November, 1977.

those between men and women. In “The Girls Want to be with the Girls,” a song the band performed from their very earliest days as the Talking Heads, “the girls” and “the boys” talk past each other. They simply cannot communicate. And when there is no communication, there “is just no love.”

And the boys say, "What do you mean?"
And the boys say, "What do you mean?"
Well there is just no love,
When there's boys and girls.
And the girls want to be with the girls,
And the girls want to be with the girls.

Girls are getting into abstract analysis,
They want to make intuitive leaps.
They are making plans that have far reaching effects.
And the girls want to be with the girls.¹⁹

Similarly, in “Tentative Decisions,” off their first LP, *Talking Heads '77*, both “the boys” and “the girls” “are concerned” and “Want to talk about those problems.” Yet “it’s all/ hard logic/ to follow” and both sides “get lost,” confused, and loose focus. Thus even tentative decisions are difficult to reach.²⁰ While some Talking Heads songs were more optimistic about love and communication, the prevalence of the theme of discomfited human relationships combined with David Byrne’s restless awkwardness on stage meant that early Talking Heads performances and music personified an anxious masculinity more than any other gender expression.

Byrne’s angst, his observation that “the girls want to be with the girls,” and his difficulty reaching even provisional conclusions may have arisen from unease with shifting gender parameters in the era. With the emergence of the gay-rights movement and the

¹⁹ They first performed as the Talking Heads in 1974; their original name had been the Artistics. Talking Heads, “The Girls Want to be with the Girls,” *More Songs about Buildings and Food*, Sire, 1978.

²⁰ Talking Heads, “Tentative Decisions,” *Talking Heads '77*, Sire, 1977.

maturation of second-wave feminism in the 1970s, Americans' assumptions about masculinity were shaken to the core. Men found they had more alternatives in expressing their masculinity, options that individual men, depending on their perspective and desires for change, might find liberating, overwhelming, or infuriating. For some men, the gay liberation movement, as embodied by the first Los Angeles Gay-In in March 1968 and the 1969 Stonewall riot in New York, made being openly gay a slightly more realistic choice, especially for those living in areas like San Francisco, Manhattan's West Village, or West Hollywood. Straight men could follow the example of Alan Alda who believed that feminism and the ERA in particular could liberate men from constrictive and restrictive traditional gender roles. By letting go of some unattainable, John-Wayne masculine archetype, men could live fuller lives and offer more to their families by allowing themselves to tend to their spiritual and emotional needs. Harry Chapin's song "Cat's in the Cradle" (1974) is a testament to this belief with its story of one man's lament at trading an intimate relationship with his son for a successful career.²¹

While Alan Alda worked comfortably from within feminism, other men worked toward "male liberation" through a nascent men's movement. These men sought inner transformation through largely informal structures akin to women's consciousness-raising groups. They wanted interaction with other men who, for example, were in the process of reassessing the relative importance of family and career. Providing "support and intimacy" in homosocial environments, these men's groups were institutionalized in the National

²¹ Other proponents of a more introspective and less aggressive masculinity included Warren Ferrell's The Liberated Man (New York: Random House, 1974) and Marc Fasteau's The Male Machine (New York: McGraw Hill, 1974); Harry Chapin, "Cat's in the Cradle," *Verities and Balderdash*, Elektra, 1974.

Organization of Changing Men in 1982.²² Even for men like these who actively sought new ways of masculinity, finding the way to “take back our full humanity” was difficult.²³ For men outside these groups, the path forward could be even more confusing. Like David Byrne and the Talking Heads, they were not able to embrace a single straightforward expression of masculinity. Most middle-class young men of the era, according to journalist Gail Sheehy, were conflicted between “fear of not having enough money and fear of being locked in by the pursuit of money.” They wanted the sort of personal growth and fulfillment claimed as a right by the counterculture, but they also wanted the material security attained by their fathers in the post-World War II economy. As a result, many “adopt[ed] the postponement method,” delaying their entrance into the rat race and decisions about family.²⁴

“Fuck art, let’s rock and roll!”: Punk Rock as Cock Rock

Uncertainties about what it meant to be a man in post-1960s America help explain why Byrne’s anxious masculinity pushed three Talking Heads albums into the top 25 between 1979 and 1983. They also help explain why punk men pushed gender boundaries less aggressively than their female counterparts. Indeed many male punks adhered to older models of rock masculinity, including what journalists and scholars have termed cock rock. Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie, in an early article that defines cock rock more succinctly than any other source, describe the phenomenon as “music making in which performance is

²² Peter G. Filene, Him/Her/Self: Gender Identities in Modern America, 3rd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 234-5; Bruce Schulman, The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics (New York: Free Press, 2001), 182-5.

²³ Berkeley Men’s Center creed quoted in Filene, Him/Her/Self, 233.

²⁴ Gail Sheehy, “Introducing the Postponing Generation: The Truth about Today’s Young Men,” Esquire, October 1979, 25-30.

an explicit, crude, and often aggressive expression of male sexuality” stretching from Elvis Presley through Mick Jagger and onward. The “performers are aggressive, dominating, and boastful, and they constantly seek to remind the audience of their prowess, their control.”

“Cock rock shows are explicitly about male sexual performance.... In these performances mikes and guitars are phallic symbols; the music is loud, rhythmically insistent, built around techniques of arousal and climax.”²⁵ The macho posturing of sixties garage rock, including

the Seeds, the Wilde Knights, and the Chocolate Watch Band, fell within the cock-rock

strain, and many punks explicitly name these bands as a source of influence and inspiration.

The Wilde Knights’ song “Beaver Patrol” was perhaps the most blatantly masculinist song of sixties garage rock:

My favorite way of getting kicks
I go down town, I hustle chicks
Beaver Patrol! (Beaver Patrol!)
A Rolls Royce, a limousine
The girls all groove for my machines
Beaver Patrol! (Beaver Patrol!)
I cruise the drive-ins of this town
Not once has a girl shot me down.

According to Reynolds and Press, these garage bands “whose songs aggressively targeted women” taught punk “the art of defiance.” Punk “redirected the riffs and accusatory

²⁵ Patricia Romanowski and Holly George-Warren, eds., “Talking Heads,” The New Rolling Stone Encyclopedia of Rock and Roll (New York: Rolling Stone Press, 1995), 979-80; Frith and McRobbie, “Rock and Sexuality,” reprint from Screen Education 29 (1978), in On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), 374. More recent work has built on and expanded Frith and McRobbie’s idea, but the definition and basic understanding of cock rock has remained essentially the same. See, for example, Leerom Medovoi, “Mapping the Rebel Image: Postmodernism and the Masculinist Politics of Rock in the U.S.A.,” Cultural Critique no. 20 (Winter 1991-1992): 153-88; and Steve Waksman, Instruments of Desire: The Electric Guitar and the Shaping of Musical Experience (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 239-66.

machismo at society.... But inevitably, punk's roots in the masculinism of '60s rock were bound to resurface.”²⁶

Like Reynolds and Press, certain contemporaries of punk, including British music journalist Caroline Coon, saw links between the garage rock of the 1960s and some – but not all – of late-1970s punk. According to Coon, the New York Dolls and certain other New York bands were “much closer musically to the punk rock bands of the 60's” than were British punks or the New York “avant-garde and intellectual punks like Patti Smith and Television.” Coon thus recognized the two distinct aesthetic threads emerging in New York punk by 1976. On the one side were “art rockers” like Patti Smith, Television, and the Talking Heads, many of whom had attended art school or were writers before becoming rockers. These performers consciously brought with them influences from literature, painting, and performance art. On the other side were bands like the Dictators, the Dead Boys, and the Heartbreakers who played back-to-basics, hard-driving songs and formed the nucleus of what Clinton Heylin, author of From the Velvets to the Voidoids, describes as the “‘fuck art, let's rock!’ niche” at CBGB.²⁷ This hard rock thread in punk was the inheritor of the cock rock/garage rock gender legacy, and – as Coon and Heylin both propose – incorporated an anti-intellectual or anti-artistic element into their version of cock-rock.

Before the Dictators and Dead Boys began molding a punk version of cock rock, the

²⁶ The Wild Knights, “Beaver Patrol,” *The Essential Pebbles Collection, Volume 1*, Archive International, 1997; “Beaver Patrol” was originally released in 1965. The Wild Knights were from the Pacific Northwest and moved to Los Angeles. Richie Unterberger, “The Wilde Knights,” All Music Guide, <http://wc04.allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll>, accessed 10 November 2007. Reynolds and Press, *Sex Revolts*, 33. These garage bands were the first bands to earn the designation “punk,” a moniker coined by Greg Shaw of *Bomp!* magazine.

²⁷ Caroline Coon, “Rock Revolution,” 1988: *The New Wave Punk Rock Explosion* (London: Orbach and Chambers, 1978), 15; “Rock Revolution” is from an article Coon originally wrote in 1976 for the British music magazine *Melody Make*; Heylin, *Velvets to the Voidoids*, 229.

proto-punk (early- to mid-seventies) New York Dolls presaged the outrageous make-up and sensibility of 1980s hair metal bands. The five members of the Dolls – all male – dressed in pseudo-drag, with platform shoes, spandex pants, teased out long hair, make-up, and women’s accessories like scarves and belts. Their look confused some people, especially men. Lee Black Childers, photographer and manager of several seventies bands, is gay and “thought they were all gay. I was wrong, of course.” Straight photographer Bob Gruen, although at ease around rock megastars and Hells Angels, felt uncomfortable when he encountered the Dolls’ scene. He first saw the band at the Mercer Arts Center, the physical center of the tiny street-rock scene before CBGB. The Mercer was known for its mix of drag queens, glitter rockers, and “ridiculous theater,” a genre of “outrageous underground theater” akin to theater of the absurd, according to Childers.²⁸ At Mercer, Gruen was taken aback upon encountering this “strange assortment of people, not the kind [he] tended to hang out with.” “Some guy I knew walked past me with eyeliner and I freaked out. I left.” Underneath the lipstick and eyeliner, however, the New York Dolls were testosterone-fueled, blues-based, rock ‘n’ roll.

According to Dolls’ drummer Jerry Nolan, “In the beginning, a lot of the New York Dolls’ audience was gay, but of course, we were all straight. ... And let me tell you something: it turns out women knew immediately. It was the men who were confused.” Singer David Johansen told a similar story while describing a gig at Mr. D’s, a club on Long Island, far outside the Dolls’ usual downtown environs: “All the chicks started moving to the front and

²⁸ Childers quoted in Legs McNeil and Gillian McCain, Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk (Grove Press, 1996; reprint, New York: Penguin, 1997), 115, 88. Details of the Dolls’ interactions with Jackie Curtis, one of the principal figures in the ridiculous theater genre, are found in Nina Antonio, The New York Dolls: Too Much Too Soon (London: Omnibus Press, 1998). The Mercer Arts Center was located in the same building as the Grand Central Hotel at 673 Broadway, just a few blocks southeast of Washington Square Park. Built in 1869, a large portion of the hotel collapsed in August 1973, killing several people and destroying the Arts Center.

all the guys went to the back.”²⁹ While their gender-bending clothes and make-up confused or frightened some people, certain aspects of their appearance made it all too clear that they were cock rock. They poured themselves into leather and spandex so tight, Spinal Tap would have been jealous.

Unlike the Dolls, the Dead Boys put forth an unambiguous heterosexual stance, and lead singer Stiv Bators provided the quote that was the basis for Heylin’s designation of this group of bands. Bators explained the Cleveland rock scene where the Dead Boys got their start: “The Pere Ubu crowd hated us because we were just fuck art, let’s rock and roll! And that’s what really split us.” The Dead Boys originated as a retrograde glam-rock outfit called Frankenstein. Sensing the winds of revolution, they changed their name to the Dead Boys, slapped on some Swastikas, and moved to New York. These rockers-cum-punkers certainly fit the cock-rock mold of being “aggressive, dominating, and boastful” both lyrically and performatively. In fact, their words often went beyond boastful to misogynistic. For example, “Caught with the Meat in Your Mouth” disparages a fictionalized female character that Bators says was an amalgam of “about six different girls” in the New York scene:

Look for love on a one-way street
Bedding down with every new band you meet
Stripping and a dancing and buying some downs
Support the latest sensation in town

And while you’re performing on your leopard skin sheets
The roadies all keeping the beat
You fell asleep with the meat between your cavities
And a case of water on the knees

²⁹ Gruen quoted in McNeil and McCain, Please Kill Me, 132. Elsewhere Gruen states he was “impressed” at how the “Dolls were attracting really desirable, eligible women.” [Antonio, Too Much Too Soon, 76.] Nolan quoted in McNeil and McCain, Please Kill Me, 115; Johansen quoted in Antonio, Too Much Too Soon, 49.

Everyone knows you were caught with the meat in your mouth.³⁰

The Dead Boys ridiculed this woman for “bedding down with every new band” she met but seemed to have held themselves to a different standard. Indeed, the Dead Boys’ sexcapades were legendary, quantitatively and qualitatively. When asked in 1977, “How do you relate to S&M [sodomasochism],” Bators stated that the “whole band’s toyed with it a lot” and proceeded to describe the “girl [who] first introduced me and Jimmy to it. We took her up to my attic and hog-tied her and beat her with a riding crop, fist-fucked her in the ass and that, poured hot candle wax on her. I made her blow my cat.” Later in the interview Bators gave more details about rough sex, stating, “In New York City all the girls are really into getting beat up – all of em!” “But we never did it when girls didn’t want to.” This proclivity for sadism is seen in another Dead Boys song, “What Love Is.” Written by singer Bators and guitarist Cheetah Chrome, the song states unequivocally that love is not romantic. It is not even necessarily about sex, narrowly speaking; “what love is” is instead violent and controlling:

I don’t need none of your tender back seat love
And I don’t need none of your two-bit machine love

Write on your face with my pretty knife
I wanna toy with your precious life
I want you to know, I want you to know
I want you to know, I want you to know what love is.

Not only did the Dead Boys perform a dominating, aggressive, self-important version of masculinity through lyrics and private rough sex, they brought their sex lives on stage.

Bators purportedly received oral sex while performing at CBGB on more than one occasion,

³⁰ Stiv Bators quoted in Heylin, *Velvets to the Voidoids*, 216; Dead Boys, “Caught with the Meat in Your Mouth,” *Young, Loud, and Snotty*, Sire, 1977; the song was originally performed by Rocket from the Tombs. Dead Boys guitarist Cheetah Chrome (Gene O’Connor) and drummer Johnny Blitz (Madansky) had been in Rocket from the Tombs.

and he claimed to have “fucked a girl onstage at Max’s [Kansas City in New York] at Halloween” 1977.³¹

Another band, the Dictators, represent cock rock with a blue-collar, humorous twist. The original foursome, Adny Shernoff, Ross Funichello, Stu Boy King, Scott Kempner and their “secret weapon” Handsome Dick Manitoba (born Richard Blum) “grew up in the streets in the Bronx” as teenagers loving rock and roll, girls, cars, and alcohol.³² Their pre-punk landmark *Go Girl Crazy* (Epic, 1975) inspired John Holmstrom, Legs McNeil, and Ged Dunn to begin publishing PUNK, the first American fanzine of what would become known as punk music. *Go Girl Crazy* presented just what its name hinted it might: a teen-angst fueled homage to rock stardom (“The Next Big Thing”), girls (“Back to Africa”), teen life (“Weekend” and “Teengenerate”), booze (“Weekend” and “Two Tub Man”), and girls, teen life, booze, and cars (“(I Live for) Cars and Girls”). While they portrayed themselves as tongue-in-cheek rock fun, they “were stunned,” according to Shernoff, when their first two albums did not do well critically or financially. Even more, Shernoff “was offended that people didn’t take me as a serious songwriter.” “You were supposed to have a sense of humor about it, but it wasn’t supposed to be a joke. It came across as a joke,” and “the sound” was poor. Part of what made people see the Dictators as a gag was their ironic take on rock ‘n’ roll masculinity. The liner notes for *Go Girl Crazy* include individual pictures of the band members at home in their bedrooms surrounded by rock posters plastered to the wall. King and Kempner assume pseudo-beefcake poses, wearing only shorts and open

³¹ Dead Boys, “What Love Is,” *Young, Loud, and Snotty*, Sire, 1977. Gary Valentine, New York Rocker: My Life in the Blank Generation with Blondie, Iggy Pop, and Others, 1974-1981 (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2006); quotes are Stiv Bators in Search and Destroy, no. 4, 1977, reprinted in V. Vale, ed., Search and Destroy #1-6 (San Francisco: V/Search Publications, 1996?), 77.

³² Quote is Dick Manitoba in Roy Trakin, “Rock n Roll Made a Mensch Out of Me! The Dictators Reach Maturity,” New York Rocker, New York, August 1978, 6.

shirts. Kempner's shot is particularly humorous: he lies in his twin bed, thin, pale, and hairy, accompanied by a hibachi complete with shish-kebob!³³

The band went into gender parody overdrive through roadie-turned-front-man Handsome Dick Manitoba, "the handsomest man in rock and roll." The band loved "the essentials of junk culture," including wrestling, and Handsome Dick was Richard Blum's rock-and-roll wrestler persona, complete with white wrestling boots and flamboyant, red, customized jacket. Blum's voice and carriage were pure Bronx, the perfect swagger for cock rock. And he was just the man you would expect to sing

What I want to do, I do
Who I want to screw, I screw
Playin' in a heavy band
Guess I'm just a Two Tub Man.

But put him in a wrestler's outfit, complete with red satin and sequins, and the lyrics that come next subvert a boastful masculinity:

I drink Coca-Cola for breakfast
I've got Jackie Onassis in my pants
I'm never gonna watch channel 13
Edjumatation ain't for me
I'm so drunk I can barely see.³⁴

People in the burgeoning downtown punk scene either loved or hated the Dictators' brand of for-the-boys trash rock. For many in the art rock and/or ex-Mercer crowd, the Dictators shtick was too low-brow or juvenile. An incident between Handsome Dick and Wayne/Jayne County hurt the Dictators' position further. At a Wayne County performance at CBGB, according to Please Kill Me, Manitoba repeatedly heckled County, an ex-Mercer-

³³ McNeil and McCain, Please Kill Me, 268; Shernoff quoted in Trakin, "Mensch," 6; and Please Kill Me, 269; Dictators, *The Dictators Go Girl Crazy*, Epic, 1975.

³⁴ Dictators, "Two Tub Man," *The Dictators Go Girl Crazy*, Epic, 1975.

ite transvestite (eventually transsexual) with her own (even more raunchy) strain of bawdy rock. County claimed she did not recognize Manitoba as he shouted “Queer!” over and over. When Manitoba approached the stage, she felt threatened and lashed out with her microphone stand. They then tussled on the stage, and Manitoba suffered head lacerations, a broken collarbone, and spent two weeks in the hospital. Handsome Dick claimed his taunts were in good fun, an integral part of rock and roll, and that his move toward the stage was not belligerent. The details of the confrontation are less important for the discussion here than the outcome: members of the nascent punk scene took sides and most sided with County. According to Manitoba, the Dictators had always been “perceived as these Bronx bullies. Boorish rednecks” and “late comers,” “even though we had the first record out.”³⁵ For many in the downtown scene, the confrontation solidified the Dictators’ outsider position.

“White, Straight, and Male”: Homosexuality and Punk

The scandal that followed the fight between County and Manitoba deepened the fissures already present in a community home to gays as well as hard rockers. According to Bob Gruen, who admitted to being initially ill at ease around homosexuals, the County-Manitoba incident marked “a real turning point” in the scene. Before, “[e]veryone had taken it for granted that you could rank out a queer. Then all of a sudden it did matter, you realized this was a real person who was being insulted, that this was a friend of yours.” To some extent, Gruen was probably correct; the episode called people to the mat, resulting in more open tolerance of homosexuals, a seemingly logical culmination in a scene that from the

³⁵ Details of that evening and its fallout are found in McNeil and McCain, Please Kill Me, 272-77; Heylin, From the Velvets to the Voidoids, 185; Manitoba quoted in Please Kill Me, 268-9.

beginning was an eclectic mix of three-chord retro rock, ex-Mercer glitter gays, and intellectual art-rock, a musical community influenced by, among other things, the legacies of Warhol and the Beats.³⁶ Additionally, very few venues booked original, unsigned rock in this era. Besides CBGB and Max's, two gay clubs, Mother's (267 West 23rd Street) and Club 82 (82 East 4th Street) were among the only outlets for original bands at this time.³⁷ The willingness of punk musicians and fans to frequent these clubs demonstrated some combination of tolerance of sexuality and desperation for outlets. But when considering the outcome of the County-Manitoba confrontation, it is important to remember that Wayne County's manager, Peter Crowley, was the booking agent at Max's Kansas City, a position of considerable power in a fledgling scene. In 1975, Max's had just reopened under Tommy Dean, who had no intention of booking live music. Seeing the success of CBGB, however, Dean changed his mind, and Max's became a very important venue for downtown bands. For some time after the County-Manitoba episode, Crowley refused to book the Dictators or anyone who played with the Dictators. The number of people who truly sided against homophobia versus those who were being expedient is, therefore, impossible to determine.

More than anything else, the County-Manitoba incident confirmed the extent to which traditional rock and rollers, on the one hand, and the gay-friendly hipster crowd, on the other, made procrustean bedfellows. A few months after the episode, rock critic Lester Bangs penned a long, stream-of-consciousness rant about New York's "faggot mafia," despite not having been present for the event itself. He intended to publish his essay, "Who are the Real

³⁶ Gruen quoted in McNeil and McCain, Please Kill Me, 277. After a long self-imposed exile, Burroughs returned to New York City in 1974, taking up residence in "the bunker" where he visited with a number of punks. Likewise, a number of the Warhol crowd, including Mary Woronov, became part of the punk scene. Presumably associations with Burroughs or the Warhol crowd implies a level of tolerance for homosexuality. [McNeil and McCain, Please Kill Me, 424.]

³⁷ Heylin, Velvets to the Voidoids, 188.

Dictators?” in PUNK magazine but had second thoughts. In the never-published article, Bangs maintained, “I got no axe to grind against gay people” but instead protested “homosexuals who use their sexual predilections” to “lay down the law in New York about just exactly who's acceptable and who's ignorable.” He found it “hilarious how many straights, who are probably too sheepish to declare themselves a minority group, will inevitably and always go along with the Gay (no relation to any liberation – the key word here is ARROGANCE) Party Line” [emphasis in original]. In other words, Bangs bemoaned the fact (as he saw it) that too many people in New York equated being gay with being hip, too many folks waited “for somebody who ‘Matters’ to come along and tell them that's cool, hip, correct, RIGHT FOR THEM TO LIKE.” And in New York, those who mattered, the “real dictators,” were the “rock culture FAGGOT MAFIA.”³⁸ In the piece, Bangs argued – fairly credibly – that what he disliked about the CBGB/Max’s scene was hollow pretentiousness, not gays *per se*. That said, why did he not simply rail against posturing and the perceived snobbery of the trendy, in-crowd? Why not call it the “hip mafia” or the “art-rock mafia?” Bangs’ spewed reaction about the support for Wayne County cannot be whitewashed completely and probably demonstrated the sort of closeted homophobia more common than many in the New York punk scene would have acknowledged openly.

Bangs’ rant notwithstanding, the early New York punk scene was much more tolerant of homosexuality than punk in Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., and even the later New York scene, where the norms ranged from private homophobia to outright gay bashing. Like New York, the L.A. punk subculture had many gay participants in the early years. For example,

³⁸ Bangs wrote this piece shortly before he moved to New York from Detroit where he had been a writer and editor at Creem (“America’s Only Rock ‘n’ roll Magazine”). Lester Bangs, “Who are the Real Dictators?” <http://www.punkmagazine.com/morestuff/bangsdictators.html>, accessed January 25, 2007.

the Screamers, the Runaways, the Bags, and the Germs all had gay members. It is clear also that a number of gays played a part in the scene as fans or in other capacities.³⁹ Masque owner Brendan Mullen estimated that “the old Hollywood/Masque scene ... was probably as much as 30-35 percent gay, maybe even more.” According to a significant number of punks interviewed for this project, one’s sexuality had very little bearing on one’s standing in the L.A. punk community. Neither Robert Lopez, guitarist for the Zeros, nor Pleasant Gehman, writer and scenemaker, remember any homophobia there. To some extent, the lack of blatant homophobia may be chalked up to a combination of naïveté on the part of young heterosexuals and closeting on the part of homosexuals. In a 2005 interview, Nicole Olivieri Panter, who managed the Germs, remarked, “I saw a video of [the Screamers] a couple of years ago and I was struck by how flamingly gay they were, something that went right by me back then.” Mullen himself described the gays of the early L.A. punk scene as “the mostly closeted but considerably large don’t-ask-don’t-tell homo constituency.” Journalist, musician, and Hollywood scene insider Craig Lee wrote in 1983, “Though some early [L.A.] punks were gay, they kept it to themselves.” Band manager and fan M. L. “Jet” Compton’s choices supports Mullen’s assertion that many of Los Angeles gay punks kept their sexuality private; Compton himself “was in the closet until 1979 or so.” Certain punks attribute the tolerance of gays to simple indifference. Don Bolles reflected on his experience as drummer for the Germs: “that was the other thing with Darby being gay, ... it wasn't about that. Who cared? Nobody cared what you put your wiener in or what you let other people do to your whatever. None of it mattered.... ... That was just so unimportant.”⁴⁰

³⁹ For obvious reasons, I do not want to name names here.

⁴⁰ Mullen quoted in Marc Spitz and Brendan Mullen, We Got the Neutron Bomb: The Untold Story of L.A. Punk (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001), 162. Lopez, interview by author, tape recording, Chapel Hill,

As we saw in chapter 2, L.A. punk had a dark side, a noir sensibility that emerged partly because it was surrounded by Hollywood's adult-entertainment industry. L.A. – and Hollywood in particular – had been a magnet for teen runaways long before punk. Most runaways were from the greater metropolitan area; others were drawn to Los Angeles by the hopes of fame and fortune or California's sun-and-fun image. In reality, many of these teens ended up on the streets, and many of those turned tricks to stay alive. By the mid-1970s, moves at state and national levels deinstitutionalized runaway youths, increasingly classifying them as status offenders (guilty of acts such as running away or frequenting bars that were crimes only because of the offender's age). These decisions released hundreds of thousands of youths onto the streets. Furthermore the relaxation of obscenity laws in the 1960s led to an explosion of legal "adult-entertainment" venues such as topless bars and adult bookstores. Along with the legal venues, prostitution became entrenched in Hollywood, especially along Sunset Boulevard.⁴¹ Concurrently, of course, youth subcultures – first hippies and then punks – proliferated in this period, fed by the baby boom.

Lexicon Devil, an oral-history biography of Darby Crash, lead singer for the Germs and a towering figure in L.A. punk, sheds light onto Hollywood's seamy underbelly and a disturbing part of L.A. punk's history. According to its publisher, Lexicon Devil provides a

N.C., 29 October 2004; Gehman, interview by author, tape recording, Los Angeles, Calif., 28 June 2004. Lisa Fancher also implies being gay in the early scene was no cause for comment in email interview by author, 2004.] Nicole Panter, interview by Alice Bag, April 2005, <http://www.alicebag.com/nicolepanterinterview.html>, accessed 11 January 2007; Craig Lee, "Los Angeles," in Hardcore California: A History of Punk and New Wave, eds. Peter Belsito and Bob Davis (Berkeley: The Last Gasp of San Francisco, 1983), 17; Bolles, interview by the Experience Music Project, transcript, 1999, 18; ML "Jet" Compton, interview by author, tape recording, Sherman Oaks, Calif., 24 June 2004.

⁴¹ Susan Ruddick, Young and Homeless in Hollywood (New York: Routledge, 1996), 93-4.

window into the “1974 West L.A. juvie style in all its confusion, ignorance and arrogance.”⁴² Parts of the book are indeed difficult to read, especially the details about prostitution involving young boys. Two places frequented by male hustlers and their customers were The Gold Cup restaurant on Hollywood Boulevard at Los Palmas and Arthur J.’s at the corner of Santa Monica Boulevard and N. Highland Avenue. Both were within a few blocks of the Masque. Some of the male hustlers became punkers, and some of the punkers hung out at the two restaurants. Black Randy and the Metrosquad and Arthur J. and the Gold Cups were two bands that incorporated the restaurants’ reputations into their acts. Arthur J. and the Gold Cups was an L.A. punk “super-group” composed of Masque owner Brendan Mullen on drums, Geza X on guitar, Hal Negro on trumpet, and other members who came and went. The name, of course, was an inside joke for L.A. punkers in the know. “Punk provocateur/parodist” Black Randy took “the joke” even farther, because no subject was sacred in his world. His song “Trouble at the Cup” makes light of the unfortunate subject of teen prostitutes:

They say the boulevard is no place for me
Pinball and coffee is all right with me
I can’t live at home, I gotta be free
I hate my parents more than they hate me
Schools and factories make me sick
I’d rather just stand here and sell my dick
Trouble at the Cup, trouble at the Cup.⁴³

Black Randy (a.k.a. John “Jackie” Morris) claimed to be a hustler, although many debate this

⁴² Adam Parfrey, “Publisher’s Note,” in Brendan Mullen, Don Bolles, and Adam Parfrey, Lexicon Devil: The Fast Times and Short Life of Darby Crash and the Germs (Los Angeles: Feral House, 2002), iv.

⁴³ Other members of Arthur J. and the Gold Cups included Andy Seven on saxophone and Spazz Attack singing lead. [Spitz and Mullen, Neutron Bomb, 142-3; Michele Flipside, Email interview by author, 15 July 2007.] Black Randy and the Metrosquad, “Trouble at the Cup,” Dangerhouse, EP, 1977. Music critic Richard Cromelin called Black Randy a “punk provocateur/parodist.” [“Band Report,” Los Angeles Times, 29 April 1979, sec. CAL, p. 78.]

assertion. He nonetheless seemed to have a sincere affinity for the hustler world, as this quote suggests: “The Gold Cup was ... where all these sleazy male prostitutes hung out, who I admired and fraternized with. I was closer to them than most of the punk rockers....”⁴⁴

While some in the early Los Angeles punk world witnessed no overt homophobia, this viewpoint was by no means universal. Others in the subculture, like Trudie “Plunger” Arguelles, do not go so far as to describe out-and-out homophobia, but recall that “being gay was not completely accepted” in L.A. punk. On the one hand, Arguelles believed “[e]veryone was treated as equals, and sexual encounters were rampant. There was little shame in anything you could do, no one was judging, it seemed as though everyone was learning about themselves and there were as yet no rules.” On the other, “I only knew two males who openly admitted to being gay and maybe two or three who admitted to being bisexual.” Other participants cited brazen antagonism to gays. K. K. Barrett, drummer for the Screamers (and Trudie’s husband), noted, “It was a time of gay fear and there were a lot [of] gays in the scene like Tomata, Tommy, Darby, Maicol Sinatra, Kid Congo, Craig Lee, but it was all hidden, ‘cause there was a lot of homophobia.” Jet Compton agrees: “Although punk tried to be asexual, it seemed very homophobic to me.” He was gay-bashed outside the Whisky a Go-Go in December 1979. According to many of his friends, Darby Crash purportedly was gay but never fully came to terms with his sexuality before dying at age 22.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ John Doe of X stated, “He wasn’t good looking enough to be a hustler.” [Spitz and Mullen, *Neutron Bomb*, 104.] Black Randy quoted in Mullen, Bolles, and Parfrey, *Lexicon Devil*, 149.

⁴⁵ Trudie Arguelles Barrett, email interview by author, 2004. Elsewhere Arguelles states, “The only openly gay punks I knew were Maicol Sinatra and Craig Lee. Darby never said, ‘I’m gay.’ We kind of figured it out later, but he was very closeted.” [Quotes in Spitz and Mullen, *Neutron Bomb*, 165.] K. K. Barrett quoted in Spitz and Mullen, *Neutron Bomb*, 164; Compton, interview by author, 2004; Mullen, Bolles, and Parfrey, *Lexicon Devil*, 41, 147, 227-8, *passim*.

The band X immortalized one woman's wide-ranging prejudices, including homophobia, in their song, "Los Angeles":

She had to leave Los Angeles
...
She started to hate every nigger and Jew
Every Mexican that gave her a lotta shit
Every homosexual and the idle rich
She had to get out.⁴⁶

"She" was an L.A. punk who went by the name of Farrah Faucet-Minor. As the song and evidence in interviews attest, Faucet-Minor found Los Angeles's diversity more than she could bear, and she fled the scene for her home in Florida.⁴⁷ Faucet-Minor, as a character in the song, symbolized a larger issue of the late 1970s, namely the problems middle (white) America and suburban Los Angeles might have had with urban Los Angeles, but the living breathing Faucet-Minor represented the limits of punk's allegedly vigorous individualistic ethos. In reality, individual participants' abilities to be open and expressive, including in the arena of sexuality, were limited by prejudice.

Punk's relationship to disco sheds light on its oftentimes thinly veiled homophobia. If punk began in opposition to hippies and glam rock, it came of age with disco as its "other." Masque owner Brendan Mullen described the music to the LA Weekly in 1978: "It's an exciting alternative to the disco phenomenon, which has been responsible for the current subliminal homosexualization of America. Nothing could be more depressing than going into a vast, laser-lit hall with 500 semi-naked males rubbing genitalia with each other. The Masque and what it stands for is quite simply an alternative to all of that." Mullen's quote

⁴⁶ X, "Los Angeles," *Los Angeles*, Slash, 1980.

⁴⁷ Alice Bag, email interview by author, 6 August 2004; Jenny Lens, interview by Alice Bag, November 2004, <http://www.alicebag.com/jennylensinterview.html>, accessed 25 October 2007; Brendan Mullen, interview by the Experience Music Project, transcript, 2d segment, Los Angeles, Calif., 30 March 2000. See also Kitra Allen quoted in Spitz and Mullen, Neutron Bomb, 98.

revealed both the not-so-closeted homophobia within the L.A. punk scene and the degree to which some of its members viewed punk as a heterosexual masculine expression. Punk was “an alternative” not only to disco culture itself, according to Mullen, but also to the dangerous, effeminate direction America was taking in the period. Mark Fenster’s communication-studies research supports the idea that some in the subculture felt inhibited in their public expressions of sexuality. According to Fenster, until the late 1980s, queer punks felt a great deal of pressure to closet their sexuality in hardcore punk circles due to fear of physical or psychological violence.⁴⁸

If even the early scenes at the Masque and CBGB could be homophobic, a hardcore show could be an uncomfortable, even dangerous, place for gay men. In Washington, D.C., by 1982 a group of young punks who called themselves the Rat Patrol roamed the streets “on the offensive” against gay men in Dupont Circle. In New York, the hardcore band Ism fanned the flames of homophobia with their songs “White, Straight, and Male” and “Man-Boy Love Sickie” (both 1983). The former asserted, “When you’re white, straight, and male, you take a lot of crap,” while the latter attacked the North American Man-Boy Love Association (NAMBLA). NAMBLA, which grew out of the gay liberation movement of the 1970s but became increasingly ostracized by the center of the gay movement, had a relatively high profile in the early 1980s as it participated in anti-nuclear rallies and other public events. The New York hardcore band the Cro-Mags and their followers had a reputation for “vicious fag-bashing spree.” HR, frontman for the Bad Brains, belied the bands’ message of unity

⁴⁸ Cindy Jourdan, “Getting There,” *LA Weekly*, 15 December 1978, 19; Mark Andrew Fenster, “The Articulation of Difference and Identity in Alternative Popular Music Practice,” Ph.D. diss. University of Illinois, 1992, 134-4, 170-9, 187-90. The first queer punk fanzine convention occurred May 25, 1991 at the Randolph Street Gallery in Chicago. [Bill Hsu, “SPEW: The Queer Punk Convention,” *Postmodern Culture* 2, no. 1 (September 1991). [online journal]

with his openly homophobic remarks; as a Rastafarian, he believed homosexuality was an abomination.⁴⁹

The clothes worn by hardcore punks reflected and reinforced their conservative views on sexuality. The men's very short hair or shaved heads, their heavy engineer boots or Doc Martens, blue jeans, and T-shirts asserted a purportedly unambiguous masculinity shaped by a working-class vision. Male hardcore habitués rarely wore make up, and they avoided the gender-bending fashions of other branches of punk. For example, male and female synth-pop new wavers (more friendly to gay men) tended to wear skinny ties and jackets with the sleeves pushed up, cuffed jeans and loafers, or day-glo mod outfits that harkened back to the pop-art 60s. Both sexes might wear heavy make-up and have heavily styled hair. Not surprisingly, the sub-genres that were more likely to exhibit androgyny in male clothing styles were much more likely to be friendly toward gay men. But in hardcore, its "uniform" could be very reassuring to young men in an era witnessing great change in sex roles.

As with almost everything in punk, there were exceptions to the homophobic rule: a few hardcore bands had openly gay members, including MDC, the Dicks, and the Big Boys, all from Austin, Texas. Additionally, straight punks could be outspoken denouncers of homophobia. In November 1982, Captain Avenger wrote an editorial in the fanzine Big City, defending diversity and encouraging tolerance in the New York hardcore scene. He urged people to be open-minded and avoid violence: "A7 [one of the foremost hardcore clubs of the era] is getting more and more popular. ... Long hairs, short hairs, young, old and more

⁴⁹ Mark Andersen and Mark Jenkins, Dance of Days: Two Decades of Punk in the Nation's Capital (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2001), 108, 127-8; Ism, *A Diet for the Worms*, S.I.N., 1983. See also Blush, American Hardcore: A Tribal History (Los Angeles: Feral House, 2001), 37. The Gay Rights Platform of 1972 called for "repeal of all laws governing the age of consent." [Tom Warner, Never Going Back (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2002), 120; Elizabeth A. Armstrong, Forging Gay Identities (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2002), 100; Miriam Catherine Smith, Lesbian and Gay Rights in Canada. (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1999), 60-1.

girls than before. ... I think prejudice [sic] people suck. ... being wrong does not include being gay or straight, straight edge or drugs and alcohol, etc. Wrong is doing damage to someone or someone's property."⁵⁰

My research suggests that, as Trudie Arguelles asserted, "it was easier for the gay women" in L.A. punk than the gay men. Scholar Lillian Faderman agrees: "Though homosexual practices were usually covert among male punks, among punk girls they were open and even signified a declaration of female sexual freedom." In her book Gay L.A., she quotes a woman named Sheree Rose: "There was an amorphous sexual energy. Who you slept with didn't have anything to do with gender. The men knew that the women were sleeping together. It was no problem." Joan Jett, known to have girlfriends, was generally well received in the punk community and produced the Germs' album, *GI*. Seal, a woman who roadied for the Bags, the Go-Go's, the Alleycats the Plugz and others, likewise was openly gay.⁵¹

Two rationales explain why gay or bi-sexual women experienced a smoother path in punk than men. The first explanation is simplest: gay women traditionally have faced less severe or less violent consequences than their male counterparts. The second reason gay or bi-sexual women fared better in punk is more complicated and, for the purposes of my discussion, more interesting. Punk was an outsider's movement and an expression of disillusionment. As such, punk rockers often adopted – at least outwardly – a chip-on-the-shoulder stance and an angry sneer, an attitude sustained in their clothes, hairstyles, lyrics,

⁵⁰ Big City, New York, no. 2, November 1982, 2.

⁵¹ Trudie Arguelles Barrett, email interview by author, 2004; Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons, Gay L.A.: A History of Sexual Outlaws, Power Politics, and Lipstick Lesbians, (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 253; Seal, interview by Alice Bag, March 2005, <http://www.alicebag.com/sealinterview.html>, accessed 11 January 2007.

and pseudonyms. Acknowledging, of course, that gay men and women have always adopted a wide range of personal styles, punk's abrasive edge and defiant stance meshed more readily with the stereotype of "butch" lesbians than the typecast of "femme" gay men. The names punk women (straight or gay) chose for themselves tended to have a tough tone or were traditionally associated with men: Mary Rat, Hellin Killer, and Mad Dog Carla in Los Angeles; Lara "Lynch" LaVoison and Kendall "Lefty" Hall in Washington, D.C.⁵² Additionally, clothing and hairstyles could be butch or androgynous. For example, by 1977, both men and women tended to wear short hair in punk. Women sometimes wore aggressively racy or outrageous outfits that might include short skirts, fishnet stockings, or high heels, but just as often they wore "male" clothing like straight-leg pants, ties and jackets, and boots.

The uneven reception of gays in punk rock mirrored the gains and setbacks experienced by gays in broader society. For example, gays made great strides in California in the early- to mid-1970s. In 1975 Governor Jerry Brown signed the "Consenting Adults Bill," which made consensual homosexual acts legal and struck down a 1914 law against oral sex. In 1976 Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley announced an official Gay Pride Week, and gays acquiring an increasing number of friends on the City Council. Culturally, West Hollywood came to epitomize a new gay lifestyle that equated pleasure with gay liberation. At same time, however, sporadic violence and discrimination against gays continued. In 1975, the Los Angeles Police Department made a huge raid against a legal bathhouse on Melrose Avenue that was holding a mock slave auction for charity. And on a larger scale, the Moral Majority and conservative spokespeople like Anita Bryant made homosexuality a

⁵² Names found in Andersen and Jenkins, *Dance of Days*, 125, 128.

national concern.⁵³

“Trying to prove who had the most testosterone”: Homosociality in Hardcore

While not all hardcore punks exhibited the homophobia of the likes of the Rat Patrol, most hardcore followers enjoyed the homosocial nature of the sub-genre. Some observers might say that hardcore punk fell within the cock rock category discussed above. Certainly the performers could be “aggressive, dominating, and boastful.” On the other hand, hardcore shows were not “built around techniques of arousal and climax.” Instead, the songs tended to be very short, with barked or shouted rapid-fire vocals. Furthermore, with its very simple musical arrangements, the idea of the guitar hero did not generally figure into hardcore. Hardcore performers generally were not highly skilled musicians, nor did they necessarily “seek to remind the audience of their prowess, their control” in the way cock-rockers did. In fact, hardcore bands often relinquished control of the stage and the performance to fans. Audience members constantly pulled themselves onto the stage in order to stage dive or crowd surf. The performers sometimes “would enter the crowd and share [the] microphone with slammers, who knew the words,” as a New York Times review of a Black Flag performance related.⁵⁴

Although hardcore punk does not qualify as cock rock strictly defined, it was “bound” together by “a very male sense of Rock,” as John Kezdy, singer for the Chicago band, the Effigies, put it. Band members (with a few exceptions) were almost exclusively male.⁵⁵

⁵³ Faderman and Timmons, Gay L.A., 216-28, 245.

⁵⁴ Frith and McRobbie, “Rock and Sexuality,” 374; Jon Pareles, “Hardcore Rock: 2 Bands,” New York Times, 13 March 1983, Late City Final Edition, sec. 1, p. 62.

⁵⁵ John Kezdy quoted in Blush, American Hardcore, 31. Exceptions include Kira Roessler, bassist for Black Flag Toni Young of D.C.’s Red C, and the all-female bands Raszebrae (L.A.), Anti-Scrunti Faction (L.A.), and

Over time, the audiences became increasingly male (at least until the advent of positive punk). During performances, the area immediately in front of the stage – known as the “pit” – became a writhing mass of bodies slamming into each other, a ritualized performance of hyperbolic masculinity. At a crowded show, fans in the chaotic pit had to deal with intense jostling, shoving, and flying elbows, and they might have to help catch stage-divers. At less crowded shows, the pit could be even more dangerous: arms and legs could flail more wildly; without a dense web of bodies surrounding him, a fan was more likely to fall down when jostled or shoved; and at sparsely attended shows, stag-diving – with only a few people to catch – was more perilous for both the diver and the fan(s) onto whom he fell. Dense or otherwise, the pit was physically challenging for men or women. Artist Shawn Kerri (a woman) described the pit: “Things could get pretty violent. Jello Biafra of the Dead Kennedys knocked me out cold one night. This was at the Skeleton Club in San Diego. He did one of those flying leaps off the stage, and his boot caught me right in the temple, and I just went right down on my back. I remember thinking about trying to get up, and I said, ‘No way,’ and blacked out. I woke up next somewhere backstage.” In the documentary *Another State of Mind*, a female Chicago punk observed tersely, “I used to go in the pit; I got my leg broke.” Another young woman agreed: “It’s a good way for guys to get aggression out; it’s dangerous for girls.”⁵⁶ Another possible configuration at less crowded shows was the somewhat more formal mosh or skank circle. “Skanking” was the name for the aggressive form of dancing in which punks flung themselves about with knees high, elbows wide, and

Chalk Circle (D.C.). [Michael Azerrad, *Our Band Could Be Your Life : Scenes From the American Indie Underground, 1981-1991* (Boston: Little Brown, 2001), 46; Blush, *American Hardcore*, 35; Andersen and Jenkins, *Dance of Days*, 93.]

⁵⁶ Shawn Kerri, quoted in Paul Grushkin, *The Art of Rock: Posters from Presley to Punk* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1987); *Another State of Mind*. Videocassette, 78 min, Time Bomb Filmworks, 1983.

heads low, often purposely slamming into other fans. If someone got slammed out of the pit, an onlooker would obligingly shove him back in.

Many hardcore punks claimed the violence of the pit was intended to be a positive outlet for pent up adolescent anxiety. Shawn Stern of the Los Angeles hardcore band Youth Brigade alleged, “It is violent but it’s not negative; it’s just an energy release of pent-up frustration.” Photographer Glen Friedman recalled slam dancing growing out of the sheer speed of hardcore music:

The whole thing about slam dancing was the music was just that fast.... You can’t jump down and be on the ground and jump up again because it’s just too fast. So the only thing to do is just to completely run around like an idiot, and it was totally fun. ... You’d bump into people, and you’d bash people, you’d get bashed up yourself a little bit, but ... it wasn’t about killing each other.

Other punks saw the pit in a darker light. Ray Farrell of SST Records observed, “Hardcore made it more like a sporting event than music – with like the worst jocks you’ve ever seen. It excluded women. It became exclusionary only because it was violent – people couldn’t handle the physicality.”⁵⁷

Mosh-pit aggression can be seen as part of a broader trend of public performance of ritualistic violence in the 1970s, as historian Michael Nevin Willard notes. Americans flocked to see disaster flicks like *Earthquake* (1974); they watched Evil Knievel break bone after bone in daredevil stunts; they were captivated by organized crime as portrayed in the *Godfather* movies (1972, 1974) and reveled in African-American street life as seen in blaxploitation films like *Shaft* (1971). Even more, Charles Manson simultaneously fascinated and repelled Americans, including many punks, who saw him as representing “the bizarro

⁵⁷ Shawn Stern quoted in *Another State of Mind*, 1983; Glen Friedman, interview by the Experience Music Project, transcript, 1st segment, 1999, 21; Boyd Farrell quoted in Blush, *American Hardcore*, 22. SST Records, founded by Greg Ginn of Black Flag, put out primarily hardcore punk bands in the early 1980s.

part of American culture that makes people freak out.” The members of the hardcore band Black Flag were particularly drawn to Manson, calling their tours “creepy crawls,” based on the Manson family’s penchant for breaking into people’s homes while they were out and rearranging their furniture. Black Flag hoped their shows would be similarly disconcerting. Black Flag’s Chuck Dukowski admitted what most Americans would not: “We get an arcane and emotional value from Manson.”⁵⁸

The ritualistic and aggressive performance of masculinity in the mosh pit sometimes gave way to less controlled violence, both inside and outside music venues. Inside, fights could erupt if audience members did not (intentionally or otherwise) comply with the “rules” as understood and enforced by the local punk crew. Harley Flanagan of the New York hardcore band the Cro-Mags (a band with quite a reputation for violence) reminisced, “If you weren’t down with the people on the scene, went out on the floor and accidentally hit somebody who was down with everybody, you’d get your ass beat.” Some bands began to take stands against violence at shows by stopping their performances if audience members began to fight. Keith Morris of the Circle Jerks said the mosh pit at its best was like “having a big powwow, and having a great time, and letting off some steam, and jumping around, and being aggressive ... bustin’ loose, just lettin’ it go.” But if things got out of hand, the band “would stop and just say, ‘Look, this is not cool. This is not a good thing, you know. We’re here to make friends.’ It’s like you leave here, you go out that door and everybody wants to beat you down and take something from you. So [in here] be strong and have a good time.”

⁵⁸ Exene Cervenka called Manson “bizarre” American culture in her interview by Amy Phillips, September 2002, <http://www.furious.com/perfect/exene.html>, accessed 17 February 2007. See also, Lisa Fancher, email interview by author, June 2004. James Parker, *Turned On: A Biography of Henry Rollins* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 1998), 57-60, 145-6; “Black Flag Interview,” *Flipside*, vol. 22, December 1980, 16-8, 59. Dukowski quoted in Parker, *Turned On*, 59. See also, Fancher, email interview by author, 2004.

Conversely, some bands, including – most famously – Black Flag, would not stop playing in order to call out offenders. When asked in 1981 why the band did not take a stand against the violence, Greg Ginn replied, “we ... think it’s wrong to use the stage as a position of authority. ... We have no right to judge the audience in any way. That doesn’t mean they don’t know how we feel about it.” He goes on to say that the band was “totally against anybody being excluded from shows or abused in any way because they might look uncool or because they might dress in a certain way.”⁵⁹

Outside punk shows violent interactions took place between punks and a host of others, including additional punks, police, and non-punks (especially, according to punks, “jocks” and “rednecks”).⁶⁰ Sometimes hardcore punk rockers were merely defending themselves. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, before MTV had made punk rock a household term, having a punk signifier like “colored hair was a fucking commitment. Now it’s cute, but at that time there was nothing cute about it. ... everybody hated you.”⁶¹ This theme is ubiquitous in my research; interview after interview mentions the physical and verbal abuse punk rockers experienced daily, simply walking down the street. On the other hand, some punk rockers sought out the violence. Harley Flanagan of New York: “I’d walk around and get into fights because I was this fucked-up kid. I was into whacking people in the head with a cueball.” In a 1981 interview, Mike Muir of Suicidal Tendencies admitted he enjoyed

⁵⁹ Harley Flanagan quoted in Blush, American Hardcore, 23; Keith Morris, interview by the Experience Music Project, transcript, 1998, 6. Greg Ginn quoted in Robert Hilburn, “Black Flag’s Greg Ginn: Music for Inspiration,” Los Angeles Times, 16 June 1981, sec. VI p. 1, 4; see also, William Overend, “What Makes Punks Tick: Image of Violence Vies with 9-to-5 Concerns,” Los Angeles Times 30 August 1981, sec. VII, pp. 1, 14.

⁶⁰ Tony Cadena quoted in Blush, American Hardcore, 90.

⁶¹ Jack Grisham, singer for T.S.O.L., quoted in Blush, American Hardcore, 24. See also, Gehman, interview by author, 2004, who cites “long-hairs” and “low riders” as being especially problematic for punks; John Roecker, quoted by LA Alternative Press, vol. 3, no. 6, 25 June – 9 July 2004, <http://www.laalternativepress.com/v02n25/feature/feature.php>, accessed June 28, 2004; Steven Blush, American Hardcore, 22-5.

fighting. Overtime punk pseudo-gangs emerged, such as the Rat Patrol of D.C. and numerous southern California groups like the Family of Orange County, led by John Macias, the Suicidal Tendencies posse (The Suicidals out of Venice), FFF (Fight for Freedom from the Valley), the LADS (L.A. Death Squad in Hollywood), HSS (the Hollywood Street Survivors), the Saints (of Upland, California), and the HB's (of Huntington Beach).⁶² These gangs and some of the punk rock violence in general were fueled by localism, loyalty to a particular locale and the bands associated with it.

Localism, masculinity, and violence were deeply intertwined within punk. Ian MacKaye, lead singer of D.C.'s Minor Threat recalled that by 1981, D.C. punks "had gotten cocky and were trying to fight all the time." During a July 1981 S.O.A./Black Flag show in Philadelphia, the D.C. hardcore kids confronted a group of Philly punks. MacKaye "saw a fight break out and the kids from the [Kensington] neighborhood [took] off with a bunch of DC kids chasing them – a pretty typical scene at shows at this time." The "twelve to fifteen DC kids ... got about a half a block down" from the club "when all these other kids came out from two alleys with bats and sticks. ... So many people got hammered; it was terrifying." Gender and violence were tied together in punk through members' beliefs that in order to foster community or create a scene they needed to express solidarity through physical means, in the form of slamdancing or fighting.⁶³

⁶² Harley Flanagan quoted in Blush, *American Hardcore*, 25; Overend, "What Makes Punks Tick," 1, 14. For discussion of punk gangs, see *Ink Disease*, no. 6, 1984, 3; Andersen and Jenkins, *Dance of Days*, 127-8; Blush *American Hardcore*, 97-9; Steve Alba and Duane Peters, interview by the Experience Music Project, transcript, 1999, 17-18; and Ruddick, *Young and Homeless in Hollywood*, 114-20. The police in some Orange County municipalities misinterpreted punk rock as evidence of a new type of urban gangs. Police officers would detain punk rockers for no reason, photograph them, and make note of their tattoos. [<http://www.latimes.com/sbin/iawrapper?NS-search-set=/368bf/aaaa004WQ8bfe63&NS-doc-offset=19&NS-adv-search=0&>, accessed 30 September 2005.]

⁶³ For discussion of localism and violence, see, for example, Frank Agnew, interview by author, tape recording, Fullerton, Calif., 3 July 2004; Shawn Stern, interview by author, tape recording, Marina del Ray, Calif., 23 June

Unfortunately, violence begat more violence. New Yorker Jack Rabid reflected, “Every time the media would touch punk it all would be a gawk-a-thon. ‘Who are these crazy people doing violent things? Isn’t it terrible?’ And it became a self-fulfilling prophecy, quickly.” “It became even more violent because [violent] people were attracted to violence.” In Los Angeles, in writing an article for the Los Angeles Times titled “The SLAM,” Patrick Goldstein, according to ‘zinester Shreader, “freely exploited and made media-meat out of the suburban Punk scene, citing that punks ... were criminal, vicious, and *dangerous*. Naturally this drew a whole new wave of fungus ... who read ‘Punk rock’ as ‘drawing blood.’⁶⁴

In order to understand the hyperbolic masculinity performed onstage and off in hardcore punk it must be contextualized. To some extent, hardcore’s homosocial environment was the logical outgrowth of adolescent insecurities. As we have seen, punks in general tended to be social outsiders, and this also was usually the case for hardcore punks. But those in hardcore circles tended also to be younger than the original punk cohort, and as teens, male hardcore fans found the homosocial environment a comfortable break from the pressures of puberty. According to Steven Blush, author and member of the hardcore band

2004. Ian MacKaye quoted in Blush, American Hardcore, 139-40. Allan Keenan discusses aggression and violence and their relationship to both autonomy and solidarity among male punks in “Angry Young Men,” Washington Tribune, 8 October 1982, sec. 1, pp. 12-15. Ian MacKaye, interview by author, tape recording, Arlington, Va., 9 September 2002. See also, Henry Rollins, interview by the Experience Music Project, transcript, 24 February 1998, 6-7.

⁶⁴ Rabid, interview by author, transcript, New York, N.Y., 27 July 2002, 19. Dewar MacLeod also talks about how “the subculture ... grows because the media exposure brings in people who do not necessarily share the values of those already there, but who respond instead to the ideology presented in the dominant media report.” [“‘Social Distortion’: The Rise of Suburban Punk Rock in Los Angeles,” in America Under Construction: Boundaries and Identities in Popular Culture, eds. Kristi S. Long and Matthew Nadelhaft (New York and London: Garland, 1997), 130.] Ruddick discusses the increasing destructiveness and violence of what she calls the “third wave” of punks in the early 1980s, leading to the loss of the sort of marginal space runaway punks needed in order to be squatters. [Young and Homeless, 109-11.] Shreader, “Los Angeles,” in Hardcore California: A History of Punk and New Wave, eds. Peter Belsito and Bob Davis (Berkeley: The Last Gasp of San Francisco, 1983), 46. See also, The Big Takeover, no. 2, 1982, 2.

No Trend, “Hardcore boys saw girls as outsiders even distractions.” He goes so far as to call hardcore punks “raging asexuals,” who thought, “Look, I’m not getting laid anyway, so why should I listen to music that says I’m gonna?” One female Los Angeles punk rocker offered a more critical viewpoint: “The Hardcore scene was very adolescent, and teen boys are scared of women.”⁶⁵

Teenage hormonal urges colliding with teenage fears helped explain the homosocial nature of hardcore but did not account for the sub-genre’s hypermasculine displays in the forms of slamdancing, fighting, and the intense, visceral stage performances. Nathan Strejcek of the Teen Idles said of hardcore, “it was like all the bands were trying to prove who had the most testosterone. They’d be louder, and faster, and tougher” than the last group.⁶⁶ The hypermasculinity of hardcore was partially reactionary, a response to the way second-wave feminism, gay liberation, and the men’s movement challenged traditional gender roles in the 1970s and early ‘80s. It also was a response to changes in the family. Between 1965 and 1980, the period during which most hardcore punk rockers came of age, the divorce rate doubled, and in 1981 the divorce rate reached an all-time high of 5.3. A ubiquitous theme in hardcore was anger at parents and authority figures in general (not terribly surprising for an adolescent expression). As Orange County hardcore punks Bad Religion put it, “Hate my family, hate my school/ Speed limit and the golden rule.”⁶⁷ But some of hardcore punks’ anger was fueled by the fact that they felt they could not count on

⁶⁵ Blush, American Hardcore, 34; Meredith Osborne quoted in Blush, American Hardcore, 34.

⁶⁶ Nathan Strejcek, telephone interview by author, transcript, 9 August 2002, 8.

⁶⁷ Michael Schaller and George Rising, The Republican Ascendancy: American Politics, 1968-2001 (Wheeling, Ill.: Harlan Davidson, 2002), 72; Bad Religion, “American Dream,” *How Could Hell Be Any Worse?* Epitaph, 1982.

the two most important and immediate examples of gender modeling – their mother and father.

Conclusion

Punk rock was supposed to be a place where each individual could express him/herself however s/he chose, but the reality was less sanguine. Male punks, usually in the artier or softer realms of the genre, did carve out spaces for alternative expressions of gender identity. Because punk rock did not place a premium on virtuosity, the gendered figure of the guitar master did not find a home in the subculture. In his place, punks offered relatively asexual, intellectual, or anxious masculinities. But males in the subculture failed to challenge gender norms as strongly as punk women. Certain bands, like the Dead Boys and the New York Dolls, continued the cock-rock tradition of rock ‘n’ roll. Furthermore, some sub-genres, especially hardcore, created an extremely homosocial environment, making their worlds uncomfortable and even dangerous for women and gays. Indeed homophobia was evident even in the circles in which gays played significant artistic and entrepreneurial roles.

In the 1980s and 1990s, women and homosexuals began to assume more visible stances, even in hardcore punk. Queer punks began publishing zines, like J.D.s and Homocore, in the mid-1980s. Yet even then, homosexuality was far from universally accepted, as fierce debates in the left-leaning, San-Francisco-based Maximum Rock ‘n’ Roll attest.⁶⁸ Although MRR was highly critical of homophobic stances, they encouraged individual thought and therefore printed letters and articles about whether gays and gay pride had places in hardcore punk of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Women were more successful

⁶⁸ Fenster, “The Articulation of Difference and Identity,” 134-4, 170-9, 187-90.

in this later period. As we saw in the last chapter, female punks became an assertive voice in third-wave feminism through the Riot Grrrl movement, using the music not only to stake a claim in punk but also to voice concerns about broader issues like rape and domestic violence.

CONCLUSION

Punk rock was, most broadly, a commentary on popular music and mass culture in general. The members of the subculture disliked the music they found in the bins at the record store and on their radio dials so, as Slash writer Anna Statman remembered, “We ... made something else. Dirty and real.”¹ Punk rock began as simple efforts by individual, unconnected people to make music that fulfilled them, something they hoped might revitalize the music industry. Over time, these discrete and disparate people and labors grew into a subculture whose music, publications, art, and lifestyle became a powerful critique of not only the music business but also the family, institutional authority, suburbia, dominant gender mores, and mainstream consumerism. Aesthetically diverse, a punk sensibility valued individuality above all else and allowed participants to be alternately angry, cynical, ironic, or hedonistically joyful. Punks celebrated the dark side of life. Despite punk rockers’ best efforts, these attributes they wore on their sleeves – individualism, apathy, hedonism, and irony – could not mask their very strong desires for existential meaning, a yearning to belong to something worthwhile. If they had not sought belonging, punks could have expressed their apathy and witty irony in private solitude. But they didn’t. They came together as punk rockers happy to find like-minded misfits and “anything to believe in” – a paradoxical and inherently unstable community celebrating individualism.²

¹ Anna Statman, email to author, 30 July 2004.

² Shawn Stern quoted in *Another State of Mind*, videocassette, 78 min, Time Bomb Filmworks, Los Angeles, 1983.

By the mid-eighties punk rock gained increased notoriety, when mainstream television programs like “ChiPs” and “QUINCY” ran episodes with largely negative portrayals of the subculture. But the movement’s moment in the public eye faded fairly quickly. Most commentators agree hardcore punk had peaked by 1985, thus completing what I consider the first cycle of punk rock. The punk underground soldiered on, however, as did its struggles to define itself. Even today, participants passionately argue the aesthetic and ideological parameters of the genre, most notably in the pages of San Francisco area MaximumRocknroll, the punk ‘zine that surpassed Flipside in importance in the late eighties. During the eighties, punk also wrestled with growing numbers of racist skinheads who found the angry, aggressive platform of hardcore to be a ready vehicle for their message of hate. Though racist “skins” remain active today, they never achieved more than a marginal role in the broader punk subculture. Then in the early nineties, grunge rock hit the charts, a genre with clear roots in punk. Concurrently, annual traveling music festivals like Lollapalooza (1991-1997) and the Warped Tour (1994-present) enabled punk rock bands to sell out venues of seventeen thousand people or more.³ In recent years, the punk image has become commonplace, as demonstrated by the pop-punk styles of mainstream artists like Pink and Avril Lavigne.

Despite the cooptation of punk by pop stars, the reputation of original punk rock, both in the music world and in academe, has risen greatly over the last twenty years. During the 1990s, bands like Green Day, the Offspring, and Rancid brought punk into the mainstream, selling millions of albums. Green Day, for example, got its start in the mid-eighties at the Gilman Street punk collective in Berkeley, California before receiving a 1995 Grammy

³ Lollapalooza toured nationally from 1991 to 1997 and again in 2003. Since 2005 it has been put on as an annual festival in Chicago.

Award for Best Alternative Album for *Dookie*. In 2005 they received the Grammy for Best Rock Album for *American Idiot*, and to date, they have sold over 60 million albums. As groups like Green Day became superstars, the general public became increasingly aware of punk's history, and punk pioneers began receiving long overdue accolades. In 2002, the Ramones and the Talking Heads became the first punk bands inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Since then the Hall has tapped the Pretenders, Blondie, Patti Smith, as well as a handful of British punks.⁴ Additionally, the scholarship on punk has increased tremendously since I began work on this project seven years ago. Work by historians, though it lags far behind other disciplines, is growing slowly. Dewar MacLeod completed the first history dissertation on punk in 1998, which will be published in book form in 2008. In 2000, the American Historical Association listed no dissertations in progress on the subculture. Currently, it lists five, at least three of which are on punk rock outside the United States. Despite this progress, clearly much historical work on punk remains to be done.

One of the most important tasks for punk historians in the years ahead is to place the movement in a transatlantic or global context. The subculture, of course, became a transatlantic phenomenon within a couple of years of its inception and was an important episode in an ongoing conversation about popular music between the United States and Great Britain. By the early 1980s, it was becoming a global event, with vibrant scenes in Europe, Australia, and Latin America. In his book, *The Great Disruption*, political scientist Francis Fukuyama has argued that every major industrialized country went through a time of decomposition and demoralization between the mid-1960s and 1990s. This period saw the growing distrust of institutions, rise in crime and incivility, and significant shifts in the

⁴ Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum, "Inductee List," <http://www.rockhall.com/inductees/inductee-list/>, accessed 12 November 2007.

structure of the nuclear family. Perhaps punk rock should be understood most broadly within this global perspective.⁵

⁵ Francis Fukuyama, The Great Disruption: Human Nature and the Reconstitution of Social Order (New York: Free Press, 1999). Louis Menand supports this view in "The Seventies Show," New Yorker, 28 May 2001, 128-33. Scholars who discuss differences between American and British punk include Bruce Dancis, "Safety Pins and Class Struggle: Punk Rock and the Left," Socialist Review 8, no. 39 (1978): 58-83; and Richard D. Dixon et al "The Cultural Diffusion of Punk Rock in the United States," Popular Music and Society 6, no. 3 (1979): 210-18.

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