

England and Punk

WILL HUNTER

WRITER'S COMMENT: This is not my area of expertise. I enjoy punk, but I'm a little more versed in hard rock culture than I am in punk rock. I used to be, anyhow. Based on hours spent in the library studying, I'm probably a punk guy now technically, if not completely in spirit. Though, for the record, *Dookie* was the first CD I ever bought (Ha! a music pun and a naughty word in one sentence! Two points). Three circumstances led to my choosing to write about punk rock in England for my class in modern European history. First, I majored in engineering, which means I spent most of my time writing about things like the bending strength of concrete and the bearing pressure of dirt—thrilling topics, you'll no doubt agree—so this provided some welcome variety. Secondly, as a card-carrying member of the iPod generation and a proud lover of every music genre excepting pop and R&B, the opportunity to write about music was difficult to pass up. And thirdly, this was the only topic I could think of. Engineer, remember?

—Will Hunter

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: Will wrote this paper for my history course on Europe since 1945. In it, we emphasized two closely intertwined themes, both of which he examines beautifully here. One is the unfolding and creative tension between generations. The second is the way that well-intentioned politicians and technocrats tried to remake postwar society through grand planning schemes. Older Europeans were busy reinventing a stable world in the ashes of fascism, but all too often forgot to pay attention to their youngsters and the lonely (if modern) landscapes they were bequeathing them. The old displacement of World War II was replaced by a new displacement, as young people struggled to find their place in society

and history. Will chose to examine the role that music and musical rebellion played in remaking Europe in the 1970s. He makes the crucial point that British youth not only developed an entirely new kind of sound, lyrics, and culture, they also rejected the imperial, edifying, and unifying visions of Europe's elites. Punk musicians offered a brooding tour of Europe's unhealed wounds and anxieties, while mocking the very idea of social progress. As Will suggests, they were the philosophers of their age. When we look back on their visions today we can see the value of their words and their predictions. I am deeply impressed that Will—an engineer, trained in a field of rational certainties—took the time to write so passionately about these prophets of trouble and dissent. This is the kind of student of whom I can say, with pride: we have taught each other. In class, we listened to the Punk anthem, *God Save the Queen*. But after reading Will's paper, I want to listen to it again, and again.

—*Krystyna von Henneberg, History*

It's 1977, and it's dark outside the 100 Club. Inside, a group of scrawny kids make their way to the stage. They are dressed garishly, covered in black makeup and polished steel. Their fans, a rowdy and exclusively young group, are dressed similarly; one wears a shirt with two columns, one titled "Loves" and one titled "Hates." There are a lot of entries in the Hates column (Savage, 84–85). With a sharp "One-two-three-four!" the band launches into their first song. The singer screams, the fans scream back. Outside it's still dark and calm, but inside it's as though a hurricane has settled in. The band is the Sex Pistols. The fans are the cynical youth of post-World War II England. Bound to each other by their mutual frustration with society and their inability to change it, they have invented punk music. And they hope you hate it.

By the early 1960s, a large portion of the youth of Europe

suffered from serious discontent. Born in the wake of World War II, the teens of 1970 were adrift, represented by no one. The fierce drive in Europe to avoid another world war led to the elimination of all things revolutionary, extreme, and passionate. The tepid void that remained seemingly had no place for teenagers, whose views tend naturally toward the passionate and whose opinions are very rarely heard, let alone considered. Teens were given few outlets for their opinions, and very little respect should they find a way to make their views heard. This resulted in pent-up frustration in teens across Europe, a sense of disenfranchisement within an entire generation that looked unlikely to disappear for some time.

In England, in particular, the dearth of the usual channels for teen angst was coupled with a period of nationwide poverty. World War II had left England deeply in debt, lacking her former colonies and forced to seek help from other countries for the first time. For the sons and daughters of the working class in England, conditions were wretched. Thrust abruptly into ramshackle housing blocks erected by the state, many families lacked the money for basic necessities such as food and clean water. To compensate for meager wages, parents were often compelled to work long hours; their children, left to their own devices, were obliged to find their own transportation to school, assuming they were even attending. (Wegs & Ladrech, 76–78). For the teenager in London in 1970, then, life was difficult at best, and a natural sense of resentment pervaded their culture.

This bitterness manifested itself in myriad forms. The local form that dissent took was often a function of the economic status of the dissenters, as economic status largely determined the experiences of the individual. Cohn-Bendit and Cohn-Bendit illustrate this in their description of France where university students began to protest against capitalism and

against what they perceived as the subservience of the university system to the capitalist economic model. As members largely of the middle class, these students had access first of all to the university and all of the benefits associated with it, but also to the knowledge and experiences of the middle class. They could organize strikes, stage sit-ins, and follow the usual course of dissent, which they began to do in increasing numbers. Though the results varied, these young adults had at least the satisfaction of knowing that they had the opportunity to effect change (18–19).

Young working class adults in England, on the other hand, generally lacked the resources for the typical protests and measures of dissent; most were concerned with the much more pressing matters raised by their destitution, matters which often left the youth neither the time nor the energy required for social protest. Equally important, as Inglis points out, they lacked the desire to mobilize as a group. They saw few channels through which their lot could be improved, and that served only to further their malaise (40–41). Livid but listless, disenfranchised and disappointed, the blue collar youth of England were looking for an outlet for their resentment. Enter the music.

Popular music held several advantages over traditional forms of youthful protest. For one thing, it provided an adequate sense of rebellion with very little action required on the part of the listener. Whereas protesting in the streets or attending political action committees required a great deal of effort and planning, listening to rock and punk music could be done any time, anywhere, with the simple twist of a dial. The intensity of the dissent could be varied quickly and easily by merely swapping records and listening to different bands. Because it was entertainment, music was not limited to active protesters and the few truly rebellious listeners—nearly eve-

ryone listened to some form of music or another. What's more, the music provided a tangible sense of achievement. The screaming guitars, thrashing drums, and pounding bass all triggered a primal response in the listener, physically challenging the peace and quiet and thus attacking the timidity of postwar society.

Music had already begun to take shape as an outlet for social protest by the late '60s, and bands like The Who and The Beatles had already begun to infuse their music with more than just pop fluff. "I hope I die before I get old," wrote The Who's Pete Townshend in the 1965 hit "My Generation," while the Beatles' "While My Guitar Gently Weeps" lamented the state of modern society (A-Z Lyrics). As Helander points out, these bands remained largely pop-oriented and didn't stray too far off the beaten path, but as a forum for social commentary, music had been primed to step into the limelight (21-25).

It was in 1972 that the first truly rebellious musical group, the Sex Pistols, began to form out of fittingly inauspicious circumstances. The Sex Pistols were comprised of four young men from London: Johnny Rotten, Steve Jones, Paul Cook, and Glen Matlock. With the partial exception of Matlock, all four came from impoverished blue collar families, Jones and Cook in particular.

Steve Jones was born in 1955 in London. His father was a boxer; his mother, a hairdresser. His parents divorced while he was still young, and when his mother remarried Jones never saw eye to eye with his stepfather. He grew up a rebellious, angry teenager, and at the age of fifteen Jones left his mother and moved in with his buddy Paul Cook. Cook, like Jones, came from the working class. The son of a carpenter, Cook had grown up knowing hard times. Both Jones and Cook exited high school nearly illiterate, having been often truant at Jones's urging (Savage, 70-73).

In the winter of 1972–1973, the two teenagers decided to start a band with two other friends. Lacking the money for equipment, they stole instruments and PA gear from local stores, concerts, and wherever else they could find it. By 1975 they had dropped the two earlier members and replaced them with Glen Matlock and John Lydon, better known as Johnny Rotten. Of the four, Matlock alone came from a somewhat white collar family, while the rest hailed directly from the lowest of classes. The four decided on the name Sex Pistols, in partial homage to a local shop owned by their manager and general schemer Malcolm McLaren, and in 1977 they released their first album, *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols* (Savage, 414).

The Sex Pistols immediately captured the attention of the London underground music scene. Working class teens and young adults related to Rotten's angry, irreverent lyrics and to the raw energy of the group's live shows. Unlike the squeaky-clean Beatles and the comparatively docile Rolling Stones, the Sex Pistols were loud and angry. So, too, were their fans, droves of whom felt they'd finally found an outlet for their frustration with the world. When Rotten howled that "I wanna be Anarchy / Know what I mean?" the fans knew exactly what he meant (A–Z Lyrics). Whether they knew it or not, the Sex Pistols had tapped directly into the undercurrent of malcontent bubbling below the surface of London.

Their life as a band was short-lived, however. Shortly after the release of *Never Mind the Bollocks*, and in the wake of a less-than-stellar United States tour, the Sex Pistols disbanded. The punk movement, however, was just getting started. The Sex Pistols had struck a deep chord with the sons and daughters of the London working class, and their popularity increased long after they ceased to exist as a band. Teens in London now had something to truly call their own, a

medium by which they could make their plight known, and they held on with a death grip. In the immediate wake of the Sex Pistols, a slew of potential successors to the throne rose to fill the void. Foremost amongst these were The Clash, arguably the most successful of the postwar punk bands, as well as by far the most socially aware and politically active.

The Clash were directly influenced by the Sex Pistols and after forming as a band in 1976 went out on tour as a supporting act for the Sex Pistols. Though slightly less revered than the Sex Pistols, The Clash featured a similar makeup and similar disillusionment. Excepting Joe Strummer, who was born into a middle class family, the members of the Clash hailed from working class families from London. They met each other, as had the Sex Pistols before them, in the dirty streets of London. And, like the Sex Pistols, they were a rowdy bunch; they eventually gained renown as rebels, thanks to the myriad arrests of the band-members for stealing and vandalism (Erlewine).

They differed from the Sex Pistols, however, in that their songs directly reflected their very distinct ideologies. Joe Strummer and Mick Jones, the two primary songwriters in the group, commonly centered their lyrics on their political and social views. Where the Sex Pistols had been content to simply vent their anger at the world, The Clash tried to raise awareness and effect change in that world. The song "White Riot" effectively demonstrates this ideology, with Strummer howling "Black people gotta lot a problems / But they don't mind throwing a brick / White people go to school / Where they teach you how to be thick." He goes on to attack the concentration of power in the hands of the elite, and to chastise the lower classes for their timidity and acceptance of a system that he sees as criminal (A-Z Lyrics). Coming as it did on the very first album that The Clash released, "White Riot" was a sign of

things to come. Indeed, as The Clash matured, their songwriting remained fiery and defiant for years and years to come.

Both the Clash and the Sex Pistols before them captured the attention of their young, poor audiences because they spoke directly to the generation, in a language that the generation was prepared to understand. Whether it was Rotten raving against the Queen of England on “God Save the Queen” or Strummer bemoaning the fact that “London’s burning with boredom now,” punk rockers represented all of the feelings that young Londoners experienced (A–Z Lyrics). Where once the primary reason for the malaise of England’s working class youth had been a lack of community, now teenagers who had never met before had some common ground and a mutual source of support.

The obvious question that arises, of course, is this: did the punk and rock music have any effect on the state of European affairs? Did this ferocious new movement lead to any fundamental changes in the lives of those involved? The answer is twofold, and contradictory. In terms of effecting radical or even modest change in the structure of society, music can almost categorically be said to have failed. The social revolutions in European society came about generally because of protests and strikes and the more active forms of rebellion; music, in and of itself, had very little effect on those changes. This was not lost on the musicians of the time. Joe Strummer put it this way: “None of us is going to change anything. Everyone goes ‘Punk! Hurrah!’ But in three years time what do you think I’m going to be doing? What do you think the guys who buy our singles are going to be doing?? I’ll still be walking around muttering to myself. They are still going to be shoveling shit down some old chute and maybe with their wages they’ll buy The Clash’s fourth album. Rock doesn’t change anything”

(Marko).

So why, then, did the movement continue? Why, in three years time, *did* those guys buy The Clash's fourth album, and the fifth after it? Why did the rock continue when it so obviously made no difference? The answer is that punk rock was never designed to make a difference. Less a push for change than a simple protest, music was used generally as a forum by which frustrations could be vented and dissatisfaction made known. A cynic could argue that they were too apathetic to engage in truly effective forms of protest, and that the punk movement was little more than a generational tantrum. There is a certain amount of truth to this; inciting social changes was never part of the game plan for most punk bands, the Sex Pistols included. They simply were upset with the system and wanted to make that known. Other bands such as The Clash, though, set out to create social unrest and to foster questioning attitudes in their listeners. In this respect it seems that they did in fact succeed, as evidenced by the anti-state attitudes that are all but mandatory in most punk rock circles. Revolutionary social architects they were not, but as the voice of a generation, they managed to make their dissatisfaction very well known.

The effects of the punk rock boom in the '70s are of course still being felt today. Punk bands like Green Day, blink-182, and Social Distortion have made long and illustrious careers using the punk rock formula. It is interesting to note, however, that punk rock today bears little resemblance to the punk of yore, largely due to the size and nature of the audience. Whereas the Sex Pistols and the Clash played most of their gigs in small venues with at most a few hundred fans, bands like Green Day now headline stadium concerts with attendance in the thousands. Whereas the 1975 punk rock fan generally came from a blue collar background, the typical punk

fan of today hails largely from the suburban middle class. The disillusioned young adults of the postwar punk era have been replaced with the angst-ridden pre-teens of white collar suburban society.

To the youth of England in the 1970s, though, punk rock was about more than just music. It was about building a community where before had been nothing. In listening to the Sex Pistols and the Clash, in attending punk concerts and singing punk lyrics, teenagers gave voice to their own anger, their own fears, and their own discontent. With their music, young Londoners made their fury known, slicing through the apathy of the working class. And if the edge of that blade has dulled somewhat in the years since, we should be thankful. Because above all, punk rock was a sign that a generation had been forgotten.

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