TEENAGE WARNING: PUNK, POLITICS AND YOUTH CULTURE

Obviously, the music is the thing that brings all the people together in the first place and a lot of the music, I think, has fairly important political comments to make. And those comments may be naïve, but I think we've tended to believe over the years that because political expression was naïve there was somehow something wrong with it … I think the naivety in the music really has very little to do with the sincerity or the accuracy of the statements its making politically.[1]

John Peel (1977)

The mood was tense even before the violence erupted. As a benefit concert organised on behalf of six political activists arrested in the summer of 1978 for conspiring to 'cause explosions with persons unknown', the vagaries of the charge and the drawn-out prelude to the trial – which ran from September to December 1979 – served only to affirm the seditious and conspiratorial mind-set of Britain's anarchist milieu.[2] Among the 500-strong crowd of punks, skinheads, students and veteran politicos gathered inside London's Conway Hall, any semblance of a good night out had already been tempered by the politics underpinning the event. This was less a gig than a point of reckoning. The state had conformed to type, it seemed; 'the system' was closing in: 'Beware, the thought police are coming'.[3]

Three punk bands were scheduled to play: Crass, an anarchist collective encamped in a communal house located near Epping on the edge of London; Poison Girls, a staunchly feminist and libertarian band originally from Brighton; Rondos, a Dutch group of ultra-leftists with

revolutionary aspirations. Among the audience, meanwhile, a contingent of skinheads aligned to the far-right British Movement (BM) took up position, provoking skirmishes and feeding off the repressive atmosphere enveloping the hall. The police came and went, with the gig's organisers assuring them that the situation was under control, before a call was made to members of the anti-fascist 'squads' formed within the ranks of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) to mobilise a response. Come ten o'clock and it arrived: a tooled-up mob of battle-hardened anti-fascists forced their way into the venue to beat the Nazi skins into submission. Bottles smashed, fists flew, and the once bullish *sieg heils* that had punctuated the evening were stifled amidst the chaos. In the aftermath, with Crass unable to play their set, the police returned with ambulances in tow to tend the wounded and pick over the debris strewn across a blood-stained floor crackling beneath the crunch of broken glass.[4]

Now, the events of 8 September 1979 may not have constituted a *typical* Saturday night out in the late 1970s, but they were resonant of a time in which youth culture, popular music and politics intertwined in complex, exciting and often ugly ways. Taken altogether, the identifiable subcultural styles (punks and skinheads), the visibility of political 'extremes' (anarchists, revolutionary socialists, fascists), the backdrop of perceived crisis and impending authoritarianism, the violence and the meshing of politics and culture all combined to form a recognisable snapshot of Britain on the eve of the 1980s.[5] Indeed, the purpose of this book is to explore the extent to which the cultural spaces opened up and inhabited by British punk from 1976 informed and were informed by the wider socioeconomic and political environment of which they were part. In other words, it seeks to determine the politics of punk as a musical form and youth culture. If punk was an expression of youthful revolt, as it first appeared and was initially understood to be, then what was it revolting against, in what ways, why, and to what end?

More broadly, the book urges historians to take youth and youth culture seriously.[6] If we return to the Conway Hall in 1979 then we find not just a political benefit, a pop gig and a punch-up, but also a portal into the construction of personal identities; a forum for expression and dissent; an alternate site of information, communication and exchange. Integral to the current study, therefore, is the positioning of youth culture as a space for social and political development. That is, youth culture should not be understood simply as a model of

consumption, or a product of media invention, but as a formative and contested experience through which young people discover, comprehend, affirm and express their desires, opinions and disaffections. This, arguably, was made explicit with the emergence of punk, whose early protagonists raised the standard of 'Anarchy in the UK' and set themselves but one criterion: 'Does it threaten the status quo?'[7]

We Are Not in the Least Afraid of Ruins: British Punk, 1976–1984

British punk is synonymous with the Sex Pistols. Though it may be more accurate to see the band as providing a point of convergence for the various influences that informed what eventually became known as punk, there is no doubting that the Pistols served as the fulcrum of a musical and stylistic form that redefined popular culture both in Britain and beyond. If not quite signalling a mythical *year zero*, then the emergence of the Sex Pistols in 1975–76 offered a critical moment of departure that has since come to shape our understanding of the 1970s. The Pistols tore open the cultural fabric, trashing the past and confronting the present to better refine the future. 'As soon as I saw them [Sex Pistols] I knew that rhythm and blues was dead, that the future was here somehow', Joe Strummer (John Mellor) of The Clash claimed in late 1976. 'I just knew … It's the music of now'.[8]

The origins of the Sex Pistols were rooted in London's Shepherd's Bush circa 1973. Steve Jones, Paul Cook and their friend Wally Nightingale, three working-class truants obsessed with The Faces, Roxy Music and the harder-edged r'n'b bands of the mid-1960s, procured by a variety of nefarious means the equipment necessary to form a band.[9] Members came and went, before a connection to the clothes shop owned by Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood on the King's Road in Chelsea, known as SEX between 1974 and 1976, helped provide the personnel and impetus to move out of the rehearsal room and onto the stage. SEX, too, framed the band in an assortment of cultural and political signifiers that reasserted youth culture as a site of subversion: the clothes and ephemera that emerged from the shop juxtaposed overt sexuality and fetishism (bondage, rubber) with extreme politics (swastikas, anarchism), irreligion and rock 'n' roll.[10] By the time of the Sex Pistols' first gig, on 6 November 1975 at St Martin's School of Art in central London, the band was managed by McLaren

and comprised Jones (guitar), Cook (drums) and Glen Matlock (bass), with John Lydon, better known as Johnny Rotten, providing the voice.

The impact made by the Sex Pistols has been well documented.[11] Throughout 1976–77, the band helped forge a distinctive youth culture that challenged the preconceptions of the music industry and provoked a media-driven moral panic that fed into broader concerns as to the nation's well-being. Essentially, the Sex Pistols offered a negation of everything: 'No Feelings', 'No Fun', 'No Future'. In so doing, they initiated what Jon Savage described as an 'intense process of questioning' that infused popular culture with an oppositional sensibility that transcended its immediate cultural context.[12] Live appearances were confrontational, during which Rotten often abused audiences already polarised in their response to the Pistols' aggressively stripped-down rock 'n' roll. An air of violence and unpredictability enveloped the band, fuelled by music press stories of gigs descending into chaos and brawls breaking out among the crowd.[13] Early interviews, too, focused on tales of vandalism, petty crime and remand centres that gave the band's members and affiliates a dangerous air of delinquency.[14] Rotten, in particular, projected an attitude that cut through the pretensions and complacency of what he described as 1970s 'non-reality culture', demanding a music that engaged with and appeared relevant to life in a period of social conflict and recession.[15] Just twenty years old and dressed in ripped-up clothing with short spiky hair alien to the time, his first words to the music press were: 'I hate shit. I hate hippies and what they stand for. I hate long hair. I hate pub bands. I want to change it so there are rock bands like us … I'm against people who just complain about *Top of the Pops* and don't do anything. I want people to go out and start something, to see us and start something, or else I'm just wasting my time.'[16] 'Everyone is sick of the old way', he told Caroline Coon in November 1976, 'we're just one alternative. There should be several.'[17]

Rotten's rallying cry was soon met by those inspired as a result of seeing or reading about Sex Pistols. Simon Barker, having caught the band at Ravensbourne College in December 1975, alerted his friends and thereby paved the way for the so-called 'Bromley contingent' to form the Pistols' first core audience. Dressed in outfits inspired by the Weimar chic of *Cabaret* (1972) and *The Night Porter* (1974), not to mention the fetish wear pedalled by McLaren, Westwood and exhibited by their shop assistant Jordan (Pamela Rooke), the

Bromleys – who included Susan Ballion (Siouxsie Sioux) and Steven Bailey (Steve Severin) among their ranks – reconciled their loathing of suburbia through a style deliberately designed to shock.[18] In so doing, they helped extend the template for what became punk's defining look while simultaneously taking the aesthetics of SEX into the streets, bars and clubs.[19]

As this suggests, aspirant musicians and artists with similar influences to the Sex Pistols soon gravitated towards the band, providing the personnel for The Clash, The Damned, Siouxsie and the Banshees, The Slits, Chelsea and Generation X.[20] Not dissimilarly, pre-existing bands that favoured a rougher live sound (Cock Sparrer, The Jam, The Stranglers) were absorbed into what by the summer of 1976 was defined by the music press as 'punk rock'. Others, such as Adam Ant (Stuart Goddard), Vic Godard (Victor Napper), Pauline Murray, TV Smith (Tim Smith) and Poly Styrene (Marianne Elliott-Said), immediately resolved to form bands or commit to the Sex Pistols in the wake of seeing them perform. In Manchester, Howard Trafford (Howard Devoto) and Peter McNeish (Pete Shelley) helped pioneer punk's do-it-yourself (DIY) ethos by self-releasing and distributing their own record – Buzzcocks' *Spiral Scratch* EP. Even before this, they had organised two Sex Pistols gigs at Manchester's Lesser Free Trade Hall in June and July 1976 to provide a stimulus to punk's spread beyond the capital.[21] Back in London, Mark Perry – a young bank clerk from Deptford – initially eschewed playing in a group to write about punk in his *Sniffin' Glue* fanzine. Thereafter, a flurry of samizdat magazines emerged from bedsits and bedrooms across the UK to provide personalised commentaries on the gigs, bands and implications of punk's cultural challenge.[22]

Not surprisingly, such a burst of creativity brought music industry and media attention. By November 1976, the Sex Pistols had signed to EMI and appeared on a series of television programmes to preview their debut single, 'Anarchy in the UK'.[23] The record was incendiary. Over Steve Jones' multilayered barrage of guitars, Rotten prophesised in a language of chaos and disorder, raising taboos with antichrists and anarchists before exposing the staid mundanity of a Britain defined by shopping schemes, traffic lines and council tenancies. The final verse, during which Rotten fired off a series of terrorist acronyms (IRA, UDA, MPLA), was later described by Jon Savage as a 'scrambled newscast from a world beset by terrorist forces'.[24] For Perry – as for many

others – 'Anarchy in the UK' was 'the most important record that's <u>ever</u> been released', a polarising moment guaranteed either to incite or repulse.[25] Things intensified, however, following the Sex Pistols' appearance on Thames Television's *Today* programme on 1 December 1976. Bill Grundy, the presenter, had been expecting to showcase Queen's latest single, 'Somebody to Love', before a last-minute hitch necessitated EMI find a replacement.[26] Instead, Grundy's ill-prepared interview provoked Johnny Rotten and Steve Jones to swear live on air and thereby spark a protracted media panic that led to the band being dropped by its record label and prevented from playing the majority of dates on its subsequent tour.[27] Amidst front-page headlines and articles bemoaning the Pistols as 'boorish, ill-mannered, foul-mouthed, dirty, obnoxious and arrogant', punk was first subjected to municipal bans and earnest moral outrage as to its supposed degeneracy before then being codified and commodified by a record industry keen to appropriate, package and market the 'new wave' as saleable product.[28] Punk's *meaning*, Jon Savage argues, was refracted through a media glare, reduced to caricature in the mainstream press and probed for deeper significance in the music papers, broadsheets and periodicals.[29]

Despite such co-option, punk retained its potential to challenge and offend. The Greater London Council (GLC) made it difficult for punk bands to play in the capital throughout 1977 amidst rumours of a 'new wave dossier' that blacklisted certain groups. Local authorities, venue owners and student committees across the country likewise prevented punk gigs or ensured a police presence at those that did go ahead.[30] Most famously, perhaps, the furore that surrounded the Sex Pistols' second single – 'God Save the Queen' – all but eclipsed the controversies of the *Today* programme.[31] Released in late May to coincide with 1977's Silver Jubilee celebrations, the record was seditious and provocative, stripping away the façade of British tradition to reveal a repressively outmoded social structure trapped beneath. Predicting 'no future in England's dreaming', the 7-inch came wrapped in a sleeve that defaced the Queen. In response, the single was prevented from reaching the top of the chart only by the machinations of the music industry, with several retailers refusing to stock the record.[32] A boat trip along the Thames organised to promote the single was then curtailed by river police who arrested members of the band's entourage, while a cross-party group of MPs sought advice towards banning the single. On the ground, Rotten and Jamie Reid, who designed the artwork for 'God

Save the Queen', were attacked by royalists goaded by the tabloids' faux outrage.[33]

Two more singles followed: 'Pretty Vacant', a snarling hymn to irreverence, and 'Holidays in the Sun', a chaotic descent into Cold War paranoia via reflections on commodified leisure and a Jamie Reid design that détourned a Belgian Travel Service brochure to present cartoon families taking a 'cheap holiday in other people's misery'.[34] Inspired by a short trip to Germany, the record bristled with Rotten's anger and frustration, the suffocating dead end of the twentieth century embodied in the concrete block of Berlin's wall. October 1977 saw the release of *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols*, the title enough to provoke another round of headlines and a failed prosecution under the Indecent Advertisements Act (1889).[35] But even after the Sex Pistols imploded on their first American tour in January 1978, punk continued to provide a provocative cultural form that existed beyond the realms of the pop charts and high-street fashion.[36] Intermittently, it would re-emerge into the media consciousness, be it as one of the triggers for the wide-scale urban disturbances of 1981 or as a site of political opposition to the Falklands War in 1982.[37]

Punk's transition from subculture to pop culture ensured that its complexities and contradictions quickly unravelled. The Sex Pistols had fused rhetorical populism with cultural innovation; the proletarian credentials of the band and Rotten's emphasis on engagement were filtered through the art school pretensions of McLaren, Westwood, Reid and erstwhile associates such as Bernie Rhodes (who managed The Clash). Punk appealed on one level because it was visually and aurally exciting; it injected a sense of youthful energy and urgency into pop music. Those drawn to London's Roxy club in early 1977 revelled in punk's creative expression, seizing the opportunity to shock, pose and perform.[38] But it resonated too because it captured a mood. Punk gave vent to frustrations of both socioeconomic and existential origin at the precise moment when Britain itself was passing through a period of uncertainty and change. In other words, punk's language, style and iconography (cut-up Union Jacks, 'blackmail' lettering, ripped clothing) appeared to embody the rhetoric of decline and social dislocation that pervaded the media and political discourse of the time.[39] As a result, punk could be read both as a medium for cultural and musical experimentation that challenged conventional sociocultural structures and values, and as a means of providing a voice for the disaffected,

including those Mark Perry described as the 'kids … waiting out there in the discos, on the football terraces and living in boring council estates'.[40]

Such a tension, between punk-as-art and punk-as-social-commentary, would inform the culture's development into the 1980s.[41] First, and most obviously, punk began to subdivide into a mesh of mutating and overlapping subscenes. In the wake of The Clash, whose early set-list drew on Rhodes' advice to write songs relevant to their everyday lives, a number of bands committed to punk as a form of street-level protest. The music was raw and aggressive, the lyrics either depicting the frustrations and excitement of inner-city living or railing against those social, economic and political forces that restricted opportunity. From this, bands such as the Angelic Upstarts, The Ruts and Sham 69 emerged, presaging the Cockney Rejects' ruck 'n' roll to provide a template for the working-class social realism of Oi![42] Concurrently, punk's distillation of rock was soon honed to a hardened thrash perfected by early-1980s bands like Discharge and The Exploited. The social commentary remained, but now cast in the shadow of the Cold War or bound to the entrenched unemployment of Margaret Thatcher's monetarist policies.[43] Crass and Poison Girls, meanwhile, produced a series of records and publications that critiqued the various systems, ideologies and institutions that maintained power both in Britain and globally. Seeing anarchy not simply as a provocative slogan of self-determination but as the basis for an alternative society capable of sustaining itself beyond existing state and socioeconomic structures, the bands each lived collectively and lent support to a range of radical causes. Inspired by their example, numerous groups – not to mention fanzines, record labels, anarchy centres, squats and campaigns – committed to what has since been labelled 'anarcho-punk', with Conflict, Flux of Pink Indians, The Mob and Subhumans among those to the fore.[44]

The 'art' side of British punk likewise fractured into a number of distinctive subscenes. From the Warhol-via-Bowie influences that informed the Bromley contingent came a more elitist reading of punk's 'otherness', one that took the 'clothes for heroes' slogan raised by Seditionaries (the name adopted for McLaren and Westwood's shop from late 1976) as a means to social, cultural or sexual transgression. The tribes who gathered around Siouxsie and the Banshees and the early Adam and the Ants thereby fed into new romanticism and the proto-gothic 'posi-punks' who emerged into the early 1980s.[45] Others

picked up on punk's challenge to the music industry, seeking to confront the expectations and influence of the established sector by forming independent record labels and asserting control over the sound, look and promotion of pop music's production. This often contained an overtly political or subversive motive. Bands such as The Desperate Bicycles and Scritti Politti saw musical experimentation and independent organisation as a means of resisting cultural and economic hegemony. They, alongside groups such as Gang of Four and Ludus, used pop as a medium through which to critique and expose the mechanisms behind gender relations, consumerism and power. Simultaneously, Throbbing Gristle's sensory overload of noise and horror augured an industrial culture intended to reveal and break down the processes of social conditioning.[46]

Such approaches were frequently informed by critical theory, be it Marxist, feminist or via literary avant-gardists such as William Burroughs. For those with less overtly political agendas, however, punk more simply provided an opportunity to reinvent popular music, scrambling the codes of rock and pop to create new forms free from the tenets of rock 'n' roll or the whims of the record industry. In other words, punk served to open up a cultural space in which to fuse musical styles; to inject new sounds and lyrical content into popular music; to explore new ways of expressing emotions both light and, given punk's negative impulse, dark. As this suggests, what has since become known as post-punk placed an emphasis on originality and innovation: a 'new musick' or a 'new pop' that evaded preconceived ideas and genres to perpetuate punk's tendency to confront, demystify and reassemble.[47]

Second, punk's dissemination beyond London ensured that it evolved in divergent ways. This has been mapped extensively by Simon Reynolds, whose survey of post-punk explores how the Sex Pistols' cultural intervention was interpreted and reimagined through the urban, socioeconomic and cultural landscapes of places such as Manchester, Leeds, Liverpool, Sheffield, Bristol and Coventry. But it was also a product of punk's DIY message inspiring local scenes to develop around venues, shops, fanzines, squats, labels and bands.[48] Many of these came and went, in the process providing loose networks of contacts that proved able to sustain and inform punk as a fractured-but-distinctive subculture long after it had fallen off the conveyor belt of London's media taste-setters.

Third, punk's adoption of political signifiers and tendency to social commentary invited divergent interpretation and expression. Early on, McLaren, Westwood and the Sex Pistols' use of the swastika and reference to anarchy formed part of a more general assault on mainstream culture. These were confrontational symbols, often utilised to provoke a reaction and juxtaposed deliberately to avoid easy assimilation. In so doing, however, punk could not prevent political meanings being projected back onto the emergent culture. Just as members of the far right saw punk's swastikas and iron crosses as evidence of white youth becoming aware of their racial identity, so some on the left saw in punk a formative expression of socialist protest.[49] From the outset, therefore, punk became a politically contested cultural form. Accusations of fascism soon led bands such as The Clash to better define their stance, presenting themselves as 'anti-fascist, anti-violence, anti-racist and pro-creative'.[50] They and others aligned themselves with initiatives such as Rock Against Racism (RAR), played gigs in support of political causes and opened the way for bands with relatively distinct political agendas to adopt or utilise punk as a medium for progressive cultural politics. Simultaneously, sections of the far right sought to colonise punk gigs to recruit and mobilise members. Though very few punk bands associated with parties on the right, several had to grapple with the problems thrown up by an audience that included either British Movement or National Front (NF) supporters.

Finally, punk's meshing of subcultural styles combined with its rejection of hippiedom, progressive rock and saccharine pop to initiate – or provide a context for – youth cultural revivals to flourish. Thus, the skinhead, mod, rude boy and rockabilly revivals of the period were often infused with a punk aesthetic or attitude that gave rise to sometimes innovative (and sometimes derivative) cultural (re)inventions. Around all this, a debate ensued as to whether punk represented a return to rock 'n' roll basics or its decimation; whether it was part of a youth cultural continuum or evidence of its fragmentation. On the street, such concerns were played out in subcultural rivalries that added further division to the fallout from punk's detonation.[51]

Punk, then, is here defined in its British context and in relation to people and cultural practices inspired or informed by the Sex Pistols. Such a definition recognises that punk was quick to splinter into multiple subsects that often conflicted with each other, but suggests continuity existed in at least four ways: a stated opposition to a perceived status