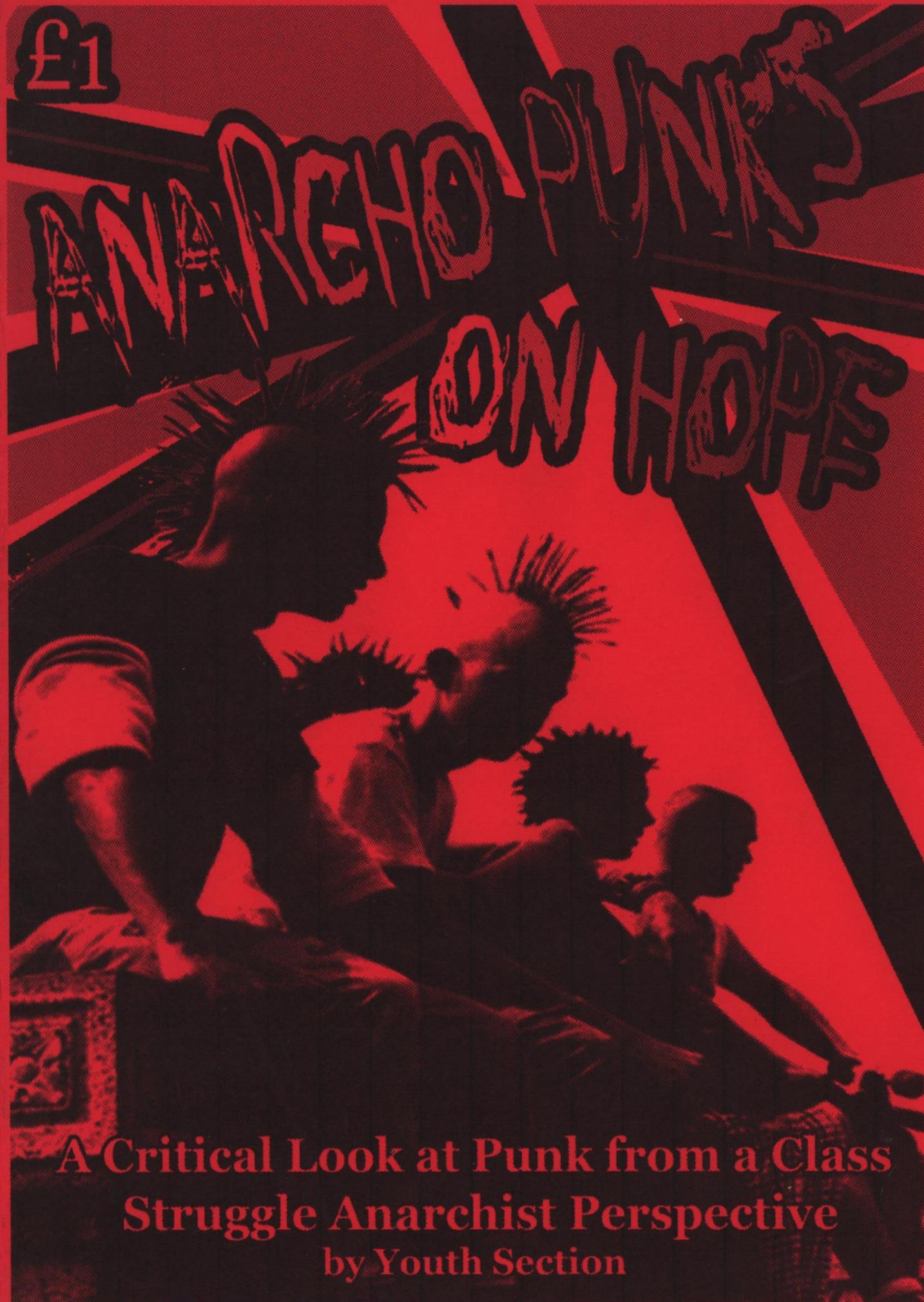


£1



A Critical Look at Punk from a Class
Struggle Anarchist Perspective
by Youth Section



A Now or Never! publication

On 26 November 1976, the Sex Pistols first released their notorious single "Anarchy in the UK", a song frequently cited as one of the most essential punk singles. A few seconds into the song and the seemingly insane front man, Johnny Rotten, is screeching the words "I am an anarchist", although he famously mispronounces the word so that it rhymes with "Anti-Christ." From this moment on, the punk movement has been associated with the political ideology of anarchism.

The exact origins of punk are highly debatable and to this day those in the punk subculture spend hours arguing over it. Some will tell you that the punk sound began with 1960s underground garage bands that nobody has ever heard of. Most people seem to think that the genre was started by the Sex Pistols, but others will tell you that they were merely copying the style that had already been developed by the Ramones. Other people will tell you that the Ramones were nothing new and that punk really began in Detroit, invented by bands like the Stooges and MC5. Many anarcho-punks will tell you that true punk was actually started by Crass and all the bands that came before them were punk in name only.

Whatever the story is, it is generally agreed that a vague, embryonic form of punk rock was conceived in America, before migrating to England, where it took on a new form and finally became a recognised and accepted form of music.

The Sex Pistols caused a lot of controversy and were demonised by the conservative media. It seemed, to many people at the time, that the Sex Pistols were defying the values of mainstream society with their calls for "Anarchy in the UK" and the iron-

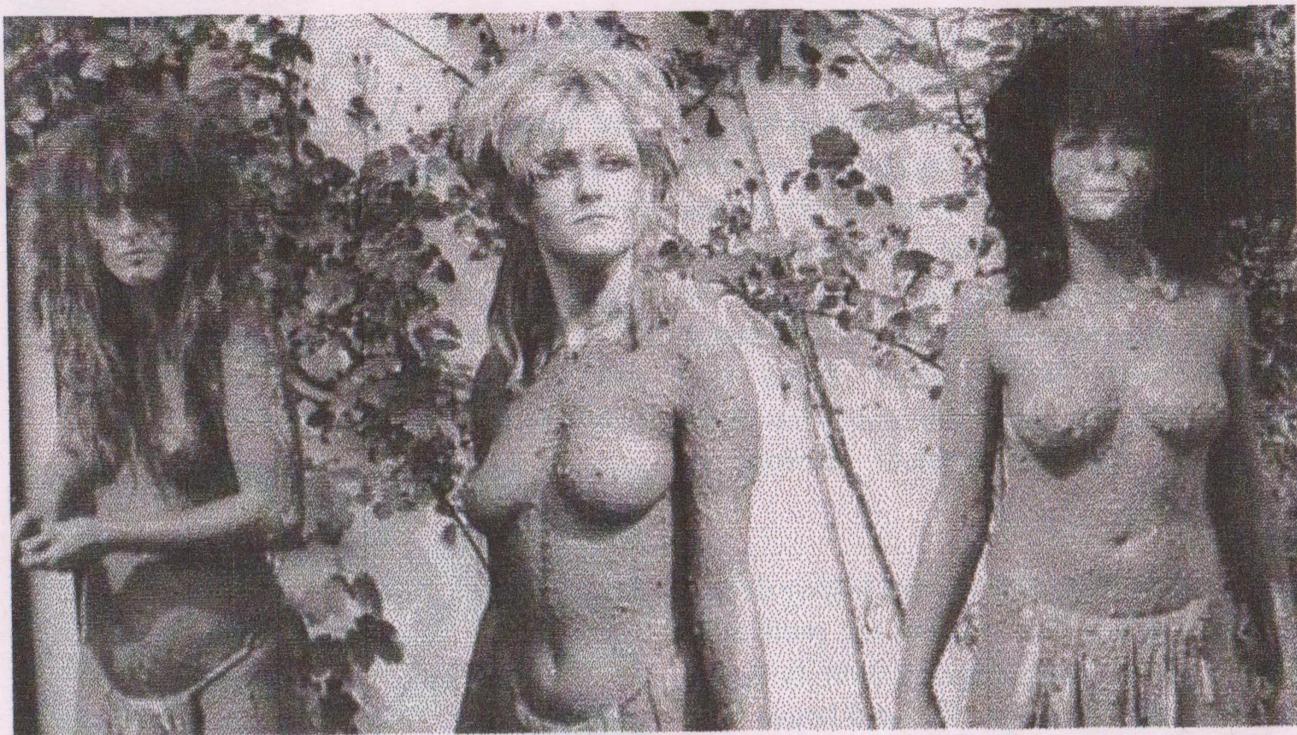
ic cry of "God save the Queen". The reputation of the Sex Pistols did not improve and they came face to face with the full wrath of the tabloid newspapers after saying some dirty words on live television.

The Daily Mirror famously ran the headline "The Filth and the Fury", which was later used as the title of a film, documenting the bands short, but influential life.



Sex Pistols

In 1977 the Sex Pistols released their only real album; Never Mind the Bollocks - Here's the Sex Pistols. According to a widely known urban legend, every time the Sex Pistols sold a record, a new band would spring up. This is obviously an extreme exaggeration, but there is no denying that a lot of bands did form after hearing the Sex Pistols. The reason for this is fairly simple. The Sex Pistols showed the masses that it was possible to be in a band and play something that sounded good without very much musical talent. The Sex Pistols songs were amazingly easy to play (even I can play Anarchy in the UK on the guitar and I'm terrible). No longer was music for the elite few who had spent their entire lives starring at scales, clefs and other musical notation. To many young people, punk was the new folk music; music by, for and of the people. Anyone could play in a punk band. The



Slits

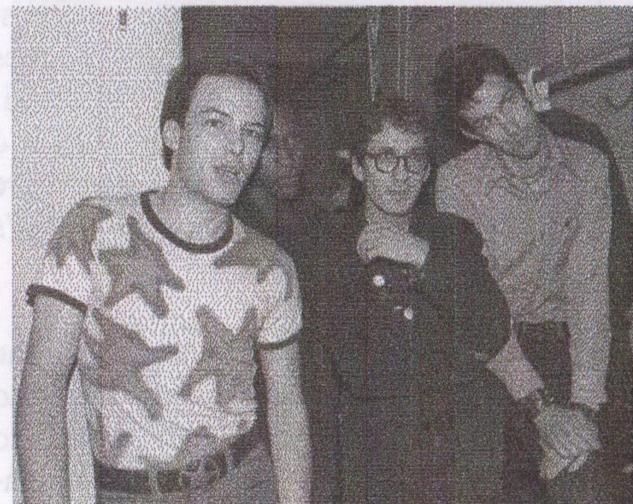
punk fanzine, Sniffin' Glue, famously printed a picture of three guitar chords along with the words "Here's a chord, here's another, here's another, now start a band!", encouraging people with no musical talent to create something.

Following the lead of the Sex Pistols and the Ramones, punk bands sprang up all over the place, often by people who could barely play their instruments. The Clash, the Buzzcocks, Wire, the Slits, the Vibrators, UK Subs and Sham 69 were just some of the memorable bands that helped define the 77 punk sound. The music owed a lot to classic 1950s rock and roll, except simpler, faster and much more obnoxious. Of course, punk has never really had a definitive sound. Some bands branched out musically, taking the genre in different directions. Bands like the Slits took punk in a lighter, poppier direction, while some acts, such as Wire and the Adverts, attempted to blend punk with art rock. The Clash dabbled in reggae, paving the way for what would one day become known as ska punk.

Any punk who isn't some lame emo, pop-punk poser will tell you that punk wasn't just about the music. To some, the youth subculture that developed around the music scene was as important as the music itself (if not more). At first punks dressed defiantly, sticking safety pins through their face and wearing home made clothes. Ironically, what started as an act of rebellion and individuality, quickly became the punk uniform and it became a common sight to see a gang of youths with their faces covered in safety pins and other bits of metal, wearing torn leather jackets, and who can forget the essential mohawk that is now so synonymous with the punk subculture?

From what I can tell by examining contemporary sources, when they weren't watching their favourite bands play, punks in the 70s spent most of the time drinking, taking drugs and spitting on each other to show their affection for one another. I'm sure this behaviour all sounds very alien to the sophisticated, upper class types who make up the majority of *Now or Never!*'s reader-

ship, but there are some theories to explain the oral expulsion of bodily fluid. John Lydon explains the spitting thusly: "I think the audiences gobbing on stage came from me. Because of my sinuses, I do gob a lot on stage, but never out toward the crowd... But the press will jump on that, and the next week you get an audience thinking that's its part of the fashion and everybody has to be in on it. There's not much you can do to stop it after that."



Dead Kennedys

The spitting was largely phased out after Joe Strummer contracted glandular fever after accidentally swallowing some of it.

In the same way that British punk had been strongly influenced by American punk, the American scene was given a huge boost by British punk and was transformed from a handful of bands playing in hidden enclaves to a huge underground counterculture that spanned the entire country. The bands that defined the American scene included Black Flag, Minor Threat, Bad Brains, Agnostic Front and of course the Dead Kennedys. But this new breed of American punk was not simply a mere copy of its British counterpart. Nothing could be further from the truth. American bands took punk and made it harder, faster and louder. This developed

a heavier sub-genre, within the genre of punk which became known as hardcore punk, or sometimes just hardcore.

American hardcore bands found much less commercial success than their English counterparts, partly because of the differences between mainstream radio in the two countries, but also because American hardcore was so fast and abrasive that the chances of it catching on with the masses were very low. The Dead Kennedys did have a top 40 hit in the UK with their song "Too Drunk to Fuck", but remained in virtual obscurity to mainstream society within their own country.

Whereas some British bands had blurred the line between punk and other styles of music, American bands completely tore down any barriers between punk and other genres. The California based Minutemen blended punk with just about any genre they could get their grubby little hands on. The Texas based "pinko commie faggot band" the Dicks, mixed hardcore with blues, while their friends, the Big Boys, injected funk and pop (among other things) into the punk sound. San Francisco based Flipper took the hardcore sound and slowed it down, giving their music a unique atonal quality that no band since has even tried to imitate. Youth Brigade even experimented with rap, mixing it with rock almost a decade before Rage Against The Machine.

Meanwhile, the hardcore sound seemed to have rubbed off on the British punk scene and British bands also played punk music harder and faster than the bands that had come before them. As in America, British punk in the 80s attained nowhere near the commercial success that 70s bands such as the Sex Pistols and The Clash had done.

Punk remained underground in more or less every country that had a punk scene (which by the 80s must have been almost all of them).

Punk is still going strong today and has about as many different sub-genres as it has bands. Since its humble beginnings, the genre has gone in so many different directions it becomes impossible not to lose count of them all.



The Clash

The link between punk and anarchism is an obvious one. When the singer of the most famous punk band screams that he is an anarchist into the microphone, it becomes hard not to link the two. But how strong is the bond between the political theory of anarchism and the musical genre of punk?

Sex Pistols front man, John Lydon, may have proclaimed to be an anarchist, but this "anarchism" of his is questionable. According to some sources, Lydon was a fully fledged anarchist, if a somewhat confused one. Other sources claim that Lydon simply wanted a word that rhymed with anti-christ and he thought that "anarchist" fitted the bill (someone should perhaps tell him that it doesn't). It is most likely that Lydon was just using the word for shock

value. When it came down to it, the Sex Pistols were more concerned about shocking people than anything else.

Contemporaries of the Sex Pistols, The Clash, had much more sound politics. The Clash espoused left wing and anti-authoritarian views in their music. They denounced capitalism, police oppression and racism, among other things. They sang songs about the alienation that is inherent in the modern capitalist system in an almost situationist type way. However, The Clash's politics were never specifically anarchist. In fact, if you listen to it you'll discover that they had very vague politics. They knew they were against the existing social order, but that's about it.

While the initial wave of punk rock in the late 70s included many bands that had somewhat political lyrics, they tended to only be expressing vague non-denominational left-wing sentiments. There were a few exceptions, such as Wire, a band who were consciously influenced by the Situationists.

There was a small minority of bands who even placed themselves on the extreme right, the most notable being Skrewdriver, who founded the sub genre "Rock Against Communism". However, it must be pointed out that most people within the punk sub-culture have strongly disassociated themselves with Skrewdriver and their followers and most of Skrewdriver's fan base came from fascists, not punks.

The line between punk and politics became substantially blurred after the emergence of one new band. After hearing bands like the Sex Pistols and The Clash and becoming outraged that they didn't practice what they



Crass

preached, some anarchist hippies decided to form their own punk band. This band was Crass, who became infamous after creating a new sub genre of punk music. Oddly, this sub genre was not actually based on the sound of the music, but was instead based on the message that bands were trying to convey. Any punk band that espoused views that were explicitly anarchist became known as an anarcho-punk band.

Crass set the standard for not just the anarcho-punk scene, but the punk scene in general when they condemned earlier bands (most notably The Clash) who signed to major labels, claiming that "It's not for revolution it's just for cash". Since then, the rejection of major labels and the opposition to selling out has been a central pillar of punk ideology to the extent that many in the punk scene claim that bands that sign to major labels and pursue mainstream success are not punk, regardless of sound.

Like the Sex Pistols before them, Crass had a profound impact and are practically

responsible for the creation of an entire scene. Almost as soon as they had gained a reputation other anarcho-punk bands sprung up. This new sub genre contained extremely musically diverse bands, ranging from Subhumans who were verging on hardcore, to Chumbawamba who were pretty much playing pop music that would not have sounded too out of place on Top of the Pops, if it hadn't been for the overtly class struggle anarchist lyrics.

But the politics of most anarcho-punk bands, although definitely anarchist, were still somewhat questionable.

Perhaps the best example to demonstrate this are the founders of the genre, Crass. Whilst they undeniably had created a music scene based around anarchism, their politics were not completely on the ball.

For most of their musical career they were committed pacifists and opposed violent revolution. They even went as far as to suggest that those who used violence to further

the cause of anti-fascism were more or less the same as the fascists they were opposing. In their music, Crass also accused normal working class people of being brain-dead tools just because they wanted to get the most they could out of life and not live in a dirty hippy commune with a bunch of smelly, whiny hippies trying to pass themselves off as punks. And women reading this might want to know that if you happen to like your legs better when shaved you are treacherous scum collaborating with patriarchy! Crass' harsh and uncompromising tone alienated many people who did not agree with them.



Conflict

As time went on, punk became even more political. Even the bands that weren't made up of anarchists usually expressed some kind of left wing views. The British punk scene became dominated by bands like Conflict and Subhumans, who were following Crass' lead and using music to spread anarchist philosophy. In America, as in Britain, the scene started off less political, with bands like Black Flag who despite their name would rarely write a political song. However, the political aspect of punk grew and eventually became the norm, beginning with bands such as the infamous Dead Kennedys, who used humour and sarcasm to express their extreme left-wing views. The political side expanded and

soon political bands like Reagan Youth, The Dicks, Youth Brigade and MDC (Originally short for Millions of Dead Cops, but they kept changing their name throughout their career) sprang up everywhere.

Again, the politics were varied and would rarely be completely sound. Politically, bands like Reagan Youth and MDC followed Crass, declaring themselves "peace punk". The singer of the Dicks openly admitted that he was a communist (remember that at this time the Soviet Union still existed, so communism was still used as a synonym for Bolshevism). Youth Brigade definitely held left-wing ideals, but their song lyrics seemed to reject more radical ideologies. Dead Kennedys' front man, Jello Biafra, outed himself as a philosophical anarchist, but remains a liberal reformist in practice, evidenced by his endorsement of the US Green Party.

A whole host of other political bands also remained at the forefront of the American hardcore scene, however, as with British anarcho-punk, they were mainly preaching to the converted. Like the British bands, they were also strongly against "selling out", which meant that their message had no chance of reaching a wider audience.

In the late 80s and early 90s, punk evolved even further. Hardcore became even more hardcore and was combined with metal to create the extremely heavy genres of Crust and Grind. The LA band, Bad Religion gave their music a much more melodic, poppy sound and a new form of pop-punk was created, different from earlier pop-punk bands as it was far more influenced by hardcore. Following the example of The Clash, ska-punk became it's own, fully fledged sub-genre.



Green Day

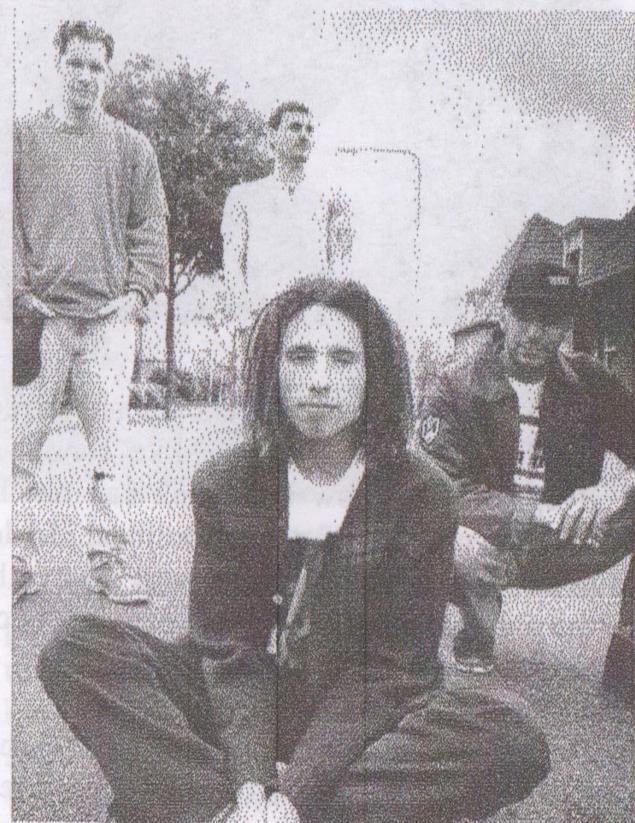
A few pop-punk bands even enjoyed some mainstream success in the 90s and were almost instantly disowned by many in the punk scene for being sell-outs, the most notable examples being Green Day, the Offspring and Rancid. The new genre of music mistakenly being labelled "Grunge" was really just a watered down version of the real Grunge music that had started in Seattle in the late 80's, which in turn was really just hardcore-punk slowed down. In fact, by the 90s almost all rock music was influenced by punk in some way, if not directly, then certainly indirectly. Since the early 90s, it has become very rare to find a rock band that does not owe at least something to punk music, even if the bands themselves don't even know it.

As punk expanded as a genre, the politics also became more of a mixed bag. While

there is still a large anarcho-punk current within the genre, websites like conservativepunk.com show that punk can not be tied down to any particular political ideology, even though anarchism will always be the political theory that most people associate with it.

Despite the widespread influence of punk, the political impact has been more or less nonexistent. Perhaps one of the biggest obstacles for any political punk band is the phobia of mainstream success. Since Crass came along, any punk band that signs to a major label are instantly labelled a sell-out. It is understandable that many anarchist punks would see things this way; after all being on a major label would mean that for every record sold some of the money would be going to a major corporation and would therefore be supporting capitalism.

However, it is impossible to live without supporting capitalism in some way. Whether you are buying products made by multinationals, or working all day so some boss can get rich, you are still supporting capitalism. Therefore, being on a major label isn't really any worse than going to the shops. Even Crass' moral and political purism could not save them from taking part in the evils of capitalism. No one would be able to hear Crass' records without decent distribution, meaning that their albums can be bought in almost any major chain of record stores.



Rage Against The Machine

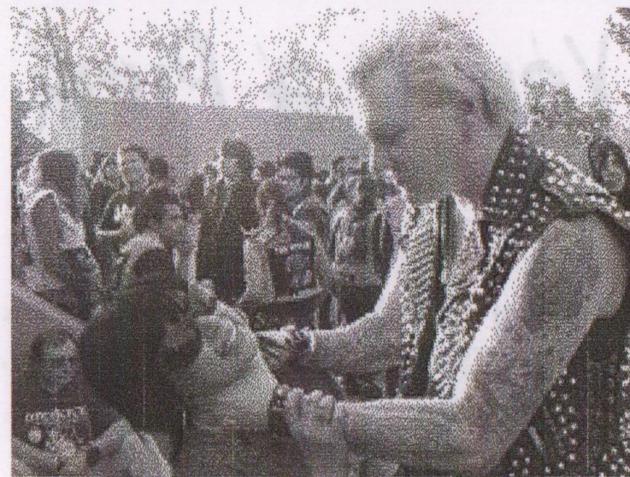
By refusing to take part in the mainstream music industry, anarcho-punks can do little more than preach to the converted. If you have a message to spread, why not use the most visible platform? I'm not going to deny that many people are introduced to radical politics through the medium of punk rock, but at the same time, it stands to rea-

son that this number would be much higher if the political punk bands increased the number of those listening to them. In addition to wider exposure, mainstream success would have also allowed anarcho bands to raise money for the various causes they supported. Popular rap-metal band, Rage Against The Machine may have "sold out" their revolutionary principles by signing to a major label and attained super-stardom, but at the same time, they were sending some of the big bucks they were making to the Zapatistas and other causes they supported. While Rage Against The Machine may not have exactly lived up to the high moral standards of the punk scene, at least they were trying to use their success to make the world a better place. They were actually bringing awareness to the struggle of the Zapatistas, while contemporary punk bands, such as Aus Rotten just kept screaming "boycott!!" into the microphone and hoped someone would listen.

But aside from that, punk has a very limited potential for revolutionary change anyway. Even if you did hear anarcho-punk songs regularly on mainstream radio, the world would not be on its way to social change.

The Clash's Joe Strummer, himself admitted that: "We were trying to grope in a socialist way towards some future where the world might be less of a miserable place than it is." and then added "We were groping in the dark, If Karl Marx couldn't [change the world], then what was the chance that four guitarists from London were going to change it?"

Here Strummer recognises the limitation that music has within politics. Despite the anarchist rhetoric in the lyrics of many punk bands, punk has had virtually no effect on



Punk - of limited revolutionary potential?

national or global politics. This is quite simply because, despite what some hippies might tell you, music cannot change the world. While many individuals who promote class struggle anarchism were introduced to the philosophy via punk rock, the punk subculture as a whole plays little to no part in the class struggle, save for the occasional benefit gig to raise money for a left-wing cause. And how can we really expect punk to play a political role? Punk is a subculture built around a form of music, not a political or social movement, despite what many in the punk scene mistakenly believe. You don't see emo-kids consciously working to further neo-liberalism. Goths play no part in the promotion of the political program of the Green Party. Why should punk

be any different?

Music will not bring about revolution, organising as a class will. Real social change is brought about through collective community and workplace struggle. It is the activities of ordinary men and women working together to improve their lives that has revolutionary potential, not some hippy dropouts writing songs about how much

Further Reading

they hate the Clash.

<http://www.punk77.co.uk/>

<http://homepages.nyu.edu/~cch223/main-page.html>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Punk_rock

American Hardcore: A Tribal History by Steven Blush

Cranked Up Really High by Stewart Home

England's Dreaming by Jon Savage

The Philosophy Of Punk by Craig O'Hara

Now or Never!

This pamphlet originally appeared as an article in *Now or Never!* #10. For a free copy of the current issue, text your details to 07947 362451, email them to enquiries@nowornever.org.uk or post them to *Now or Never!* PO Box 487, Norwich, NR5 8WE.

www.nowornever.org.uk



So You Think You're a Punk

Answer our exciting quiz to see how much of a punk you really are

1) Your favourite drink is

- a) martini, shaken not stirred
- b) Old Codger's Peculiar real ale in a pewter tankard at Fairport Convention Cropredy Bash
- c) 8.6

2) Anarchy is

- a) mob rule by the dregs of society
- b) true order, organisation without compulsion, the highest utopian ideal
- c) free cider

3) Bostik No Nails Gripfill is

- a) You wouldn't know, you're too busy writing critiques to dirty your hands with manual labour
- b) A useful adhesive for any DIY enthusiast
- c) The best fucking buzz there is man

4) During the great Crass vs. Conflict debate you were

- a) On the side of Crass, okay their music was shit, but they introduced anarchism to a whole generation, and besides Paco ate meat pies
- b) Jumping the tube, sniffing glue, into Gary Bushell's Oi bands and using fanzines to wipe your arse
- c) At a Subhumans gig

5) Chumbawamba are

- a) A great fun band, with some cracking tunes
- b) To be respected for what they achieved, they followed their own path
- c) Sell out scum

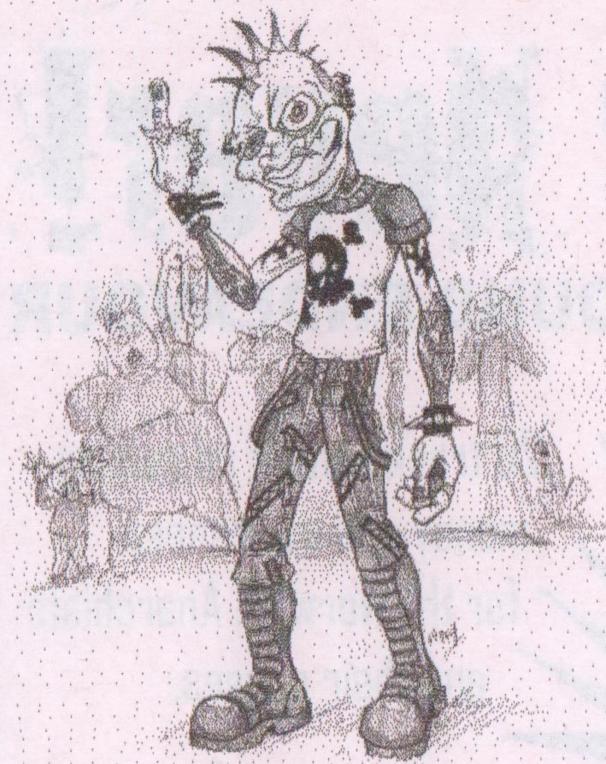


6) Last night you

- a) Settled down with your loved one for a quiet night in with one of those romantic comedies starring Hugh Grant
- b) Sat at home on your own reading a book about Puritanism in 1840s Chester
- c) You don't know what you did but you woke up in front of Kebab Express covered in vomit at six in the morning so it was probably quite a good night

7) The toilet breaks in your squat. Do you

- a) Fix it; this is a co-op not a squat!
- b) Move next door
- c) Shit in the bath



8) You are in the park when you see a body lying face down in the dirt. Do you

- a) Run to the nearest phone to inform the police immediately. That person may be in trouble and the authorities should deal with it
- b) Pretend you've seen nothing and walk on by, you're no good Samaritan
- c) Shout out "Hey pal, twose up on ya brew!"

9) You wake up in the middle of a riot. Do you

- a) Demand to see the chief officer in charge and have yourself air lifted to safety
- b) Mask up and commence throwing half-bricks at the advancing police lines, pausing only to commit large amounts of criminal damage
- c) Immediately consume an industrial quantity of white cider before attempting to attack a lamppost in an incoherent manner making sure to get your violently coloured hair and

offensively pierced face on the front cover of the Daily Mail

10) When in front of your local magistrate do you

- a) Give him the sign of the thrice turned pyramid and have the case mysteriously dismissed
- b) Squeeze into your interview suit your parents got for you when you left school and just act dumb
- c) Turn up in your Police Bastard t-shirt and call the magistrate a Nazi, giving seig heil salutes to the bench as you are dragged off to spend the next six months on remand

Correct answers: C

1-3 Young Conservative

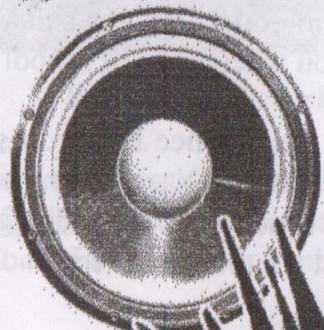
4-6 You don't want any trouble, you just want to keep your head down and do an honest days work, maybe go for a drink with your mates on a Friday night, treat the missus right, have a coupla kids, spend all your money on a car you can't afford, watch TV, believe the adverts, go shopping on Saturdays, pay off the mortgage, Sunday dinner at her Mum's.....poor little fucker.....slave right from the start.....

7-10 Congratulations, the Tennents Super brew award goes to you. You truly are one of the dregs of society. You live on other people's floors as a way of life and have a monosyllabic name you occasionally forget. You have Crass tattooed on your arm and sick permanently encrusted in your beard. You drive motorbikes over other people's tents at festivals, have a different dog every week because you can't look after it.....hang on this is brew crew territory we're getting into.....

the

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