New York Punk Rock: Genre as Mourning and Reconciliation (1967-1980)

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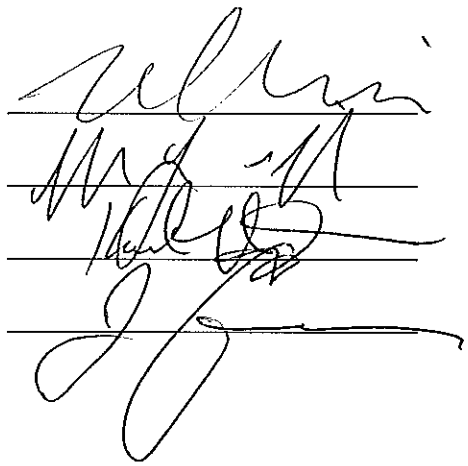

ABSTRACT

My dissertation takes a speculative cue from the reception of 1970s New York punk, which is typically treated as both rule – the symbolic site of origin – and exception – a protean moment before the crystallization of punk proper. For this reason, artists such as Velvet Underground, Patti Smith, the Ramones, and Blondie are today afforded the simultaneous status of originators, interlopers, innovators, and successors. This has led both to the genre's canonicity in the music world and its general neglect within scholarship.

I argue that punk ought to be understood less as a set of stylistic precepts (ones that could be originated and then developed), than as a set of philosophical claims about the character of rock music in the 1970s. Punk artists such as Patti Smith, Jayne County, and the Ramones developed an aesthetic theory through sound. This was an act of accounting, which foregrounded the role of historical memory and recast a mode of reflexive imagination as musical practice. At times mournful, at times optimistic about the possibility of reconciliation, punk was a restorative aesthetics, an attempt to forge a new path on memories of rock's past.

My first chapter looks at the relationship between early punk and rock music, its ostensible music parent. Through close readings of writing by important punk critics including Greil Marcus, Lester Bangs, and Ellen Willis – as well as analyses of songs by the Velvet Underground and Suicide – I argue that a historical materialist approach offers a new in-road to old debates about punk's progressive/regressive musical character.

My second chapter explores the way this conversation shifted from an abstract, philosophical debate to a concrete musical project. I call attention to a seldom-acknowledged early punk subculture centered on LGBTQ punk artists in the first years of the 1970s. Using work in queer theory by Tavia Nyong'o, Elizabeth Freeman, and Rosemary Hennessy, I emphasize the role of LGBTQ artists like Lou Reed, Magic Tramps, and Jayne County in shaping the early contours of the genre.

My third chapter turns toward mid-seventies punk. Though a chief reference point for later portrayals of the genre (the classical moment of punk, as it were), the mid-1970s punk scene surrounding CBGB was intensely factionalized at the time. I use this dissensus as a vantage point to rethink punk's status as a *subculture*. Drawing on the work of the Birmingham School as well as the writings of Benjamin and Marx, I argue that a historical materialist theory of subculture allows for a greater role of contradiction in social movements.

My final chapter examines the fate of this alternative at the end of the 1970s. I chart the simultaneous explosion of punk as a transatlantic media obsession, and a wellspring for new subgenres. This chapter traces the way late seventies punk enacted, once again and for the last and first time, a set of claims about punk's afterlife as postpunk. I argue that punk saw its simultaneous arrival as a meta-genre, and its fracture into dozens of antagonistic subgenres. In splitting into two, 1970s punk evinced the two paths its offshoots have followed since: to pull down its own future, and to start building again.

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"In the mid-1980s, punk rock is in danger of being taken for granted. Like Elvis or the Beatles, the term is used in a way which assumes we know exactly what it is and what it meant."
-Dave Laing, *One Chord Wonders* (1985)[1]

"Punk is officially overdetermined and overhistoricized. Any buck that can be squeezed from it has been, and then a couple more bucks have been squeezed by handwringing over all the buck-squeezing… Let's move on."
Willie Osterweil, "Punk Isn't" (2012)[2]

I. The Problem of Punk

Punk is an enigma.

It is iconic, almost taken for granted as a part of American culture. Really, punk has become a trope. Almost coterminous with its explosion into mass media in the late 1970s, stock characters adorned in leather jackets and spiked hair began appearing in films from *The Warriors* to *Terminator* and *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* (yes, the one with the whales). The genre has only entrenched itself in recent years. Today, Ramones shirts droop from suburban shopping mall t-shirt racks while shows like HBO's recent series *Vinyl* rehearse the band's history like sacred myth. Punk is so recognizable, that a restaurant CBGB Lab opened last year in Newark Airport in order to give tourists one final taste of the City before they depart. The implication is that one need only toss a few black-

[1] Laing and Smith, *One Chord Wonders*, 1.
[2] Osterweil, "Punk Isn't."

and-white photos and a scrawl of graffiti on the wall to transport the viewer back to a golden age of New York rock and roll.

Punk's musical reputation keeps up with the visual. It equally is a *sonic* trope, instantly recognizable with a brief listen. Punk practically needs no definition. The term readily conjures up the sounds three-chord rock, buzzsaw guitar riffs, screeching amplifiers, and shouted vocals. This is confirmed when neat definitions are offered. The opening of the genre's *Wikipedia* entry reads:

> Punk bands typically use short or fast-paced songs, with hard-edged melodies and singing styles, stripped-down instrumentation, and often political, anti-establishment lyrics. Punk embraces a DIY [Do It Yourself] ethic; many bands self-produced recordings and distributed them through informal channels.[3]

This definition merely elaborates on the famous saying that punk is "short, fast, and loud." With an ethos to match a sound that is simple and aggressive, punk practically spills out hermeneutic content. Its edge suits Matt Damon's *Eurotrip* character, whose snotty delivery of "Scotty Doesn't Know" adds a mocking, cruel edge to Scott's discovery that everyone has known about his girlfriend's infidelities but him. The amateurism punctuates the struggles of the comic-book-turned-movie-hero Scott Pilgrim. Scott invites his love interest Ramona to see his band, their embarrassing ineptitude – as he admits, "we're terrible" – standing in for his more general inability to court her. And, the incisive political commentary provides a musical articulation of the central struggle of *The Green Room*. The 2016 film pits the fictional punk band, The Ain't Rights, against a group of neo-

[3] "Punk Rock."

Nazi skinheads (their leader terrifyingly portrayed by Patrick Stewart). The assumption there is that punk music functions as an instant index oppositional, left wing politics.[4]

Punk's prominence in popular culture might even indicate that the genre no longer requires any comment at all, that it has become self-evident. This, at least, was the position expressed by Willie Osterweil in his 2012 review of the coffee table book *Punk: An Aesthetic*. Osterweil lamented the entrance of yet another overpriced punk anthology in the marketplace, doomed to repeat truisms about the genre. He concluded that at this point, the redundancies of such publications were unsurprising, given that all writers could do today was desperately attempt to cash in on punk:

> Punk is officially overdetermined and overhistoricized. Any buck that can be squeezed from it has been, and then a couple more bucks have been squeezed by handwringing over all the buck-squeezing. Among the object and artwork donors for *Punk: An Aesthetic* are Cornell and Yale Universities. Everything is recuperable. Fuck it. Let's move on.[5]

And herein lies punk's enigmatic character. Simply put, despite all of the genre's professed overdetermination and self-evidence, nobody really agrees what it is.

II. Literature Review

Osterweil was at least right about one thing. Punk has inspired a lot of handwringing. This is confirmed not just by the glut of popular histories and

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[4] For more on the film and punk politics, see Ervin, "Inside the Green Room."
[5] Osterweil, "Punk Isn't."

coffee table books, though glut there is.[6] Punk has earned endless attention from all manner of institution. After forty years of *best of* lists, Rock and Roll Hall of Fame induction ceremonies, and even one award from the French Minister of Culture (when Patti Smith was named *Commandeur* in the *Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* in 2007), it would be reasonable to claim that punk is part of the popular canon. In 1982, Brian Eno famously remarked:

> I was talking to Lou Reed the other day, and he said that the first Velvet Underground record sold only 30,000 copies in its first five years. Yet, that was an enormously important record for so many people. I think everyone who bought one of those 30,000 copies started a band![7]

While Eno's comment is an exaggeration (and is typically misquoted anyway), it captures perfectly the mystique that punk has continued to wield since the early eighties. Celebrations of the genre have only intensified with the approach of punk's symbolic 40th anniversary (or its passing, depending on whether April 1976's *Ramones* or October 1977's *Never mind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols* is a given commentator's preferred birth place for punk). Retrospectives and countdowns have appeared in the pages of major music publications from *Rolling Stone* to *Pitchfork Media*, confirming the enduring legacy of the genre.[8] If *Velvet Underground and Nico* didn't launch quite as many ships as Eno might suggest, it has at least kept hundreds of publications, galleries, and museums afloat.

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[6] The most important popular histories of punk are Blush, *New York Rock*; Hermes, *Love Goes to Buildings on Fire*; Heylin, *From the Velvets to the Voidoids*; McNeil and McCain, *Please Kill Me*; Valentine, *New York Rocker*. I engage with dozens of other popular sources throughout.
[7] McKenna, "Lots of Aura, No Air Play," 6.
[8] E.g. Dolan et al., "40 Greatest Punk Albums of All Time"; Harvey, "The 25 Best Music Videos of the 1970s"; Leitko, "Review of Various Artists - Ork Records: New York, New York."

Even in the ivory tower, typically insulated from the real world, punk has become entrenched. Theo Cateforis observed in *Are We Not New Wave?* that there is a "virtual cottage industry" of academic writing on punk.[9] But I might argue that punk is less a cottage industry, than a leitmotiv in the history of popular music studies. Many of the field's earliest debates hinged on interpretations of the genre. Especially in England, under the sway of artists like the Sex Pistols in the late 1970s, it became a privileged battleground for scholars. Birmingham School manifestos elevated punk as a form of revolutionary subculture, while early luminaries like Dave Laing and Simon Frith recruited it as an exemplar for nascent theories of popular culture.[10] The genre reemerged in the late eighties as the white knight of musical postmodernism, earning attention from important scholars including Lawrence Grossberg, Greil Marcus, Neil Nehring, and others. (Even Fredric Jameson, generally silent about sound, cites the genre as the paradigmatic musical example of the "cultural logic of late capitalism.")[11] Punk also remains a go-to in the contemporary paradigm of cultural musicology, prominently figuring into new subfields such as sound studies, as well as discussions of race, gender, and sexuality.[12]

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[9] Cateforis, *Are We Not New Wave? Modern Pop at the Turn of the 1980s*, 10.
[10] Hebdige, *Subculture*; Frith, "Formalism, Realism, and Leisure: The Case of Punk"; Laing and Smith, *One Chord Wonders*.
[11] Marcus, *Lipstick Traces*; Nehring, *Flowers in the Dustbin: Culture, Anarchy, and Postwar England*; Grossberg, "Is There Rock after Punk?"; Moore, "Postmodernism and Punk Subculture: Cultures of Authenticity and Deconstruction"; Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 1; See also Hebdige's revisiting of his earlier, more famous position on punk in Hebdige, *Hiding in the Light*, 181–244.
[12] Some examples of recent work addressing punk's relationship to race, ethnicity, or other forms of heritage include Beeber, *The Heebie-Jeebies at CBGB's: A Secret History of Jewish Punk*; Duncombe and Tremblay, *White Riot: Punk Rock and the Politics of Race*; Rapport, "Hearing Punk as Blues." see Chapter 2 for a survey of literature on LGBTQ punk.

The end result of this history is a large and dynamic discipline dedicated in particular to the study of British punk.[13] Despite this scholarly enthusiasm for the United Kingdom, the United States receives less critical attention. Where mentioned, American artists like Patti Smith and the Ramones are typically treated as precursors to groups like the Sex Pistols. Used in this fashion, they have tended to function like a springboard, launching discussions of later genres.

As early as 1985 (in the first full length academic work on British punk), Dave Laing wrote, "In the mid-1980s, punk rock is in danger of being taken for granted. Like Elvis or the Beatles, the term is used in a way which assumes we know exactly what it is and what it meant."[14] In a similar spirit, I would suggest that today, US artists like Lou Reed and Blondie are taken for granted. To date, there is no single author monograph on 1970s New York punk.

However, there have been substantial texts written about the topic. There is a wealth of writing on 1970s punk in the popular press. Bypassing the many recent essays and reviews cited above (as well as dozens of period sources I discuss in the chapters that follow), a number of studies of punk music place New York in a central role. Largely spurred by the twentieth anniversary of now-canonic rock albums like Patti Smith's *Horses* (1975) or the Ramones' *Ramones*

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[13] That discipline is still growing. For an example of a good recent text on British punk, see Crossley, *Networks of Sound, Style, and Subversion: The Punk and Post-Punk Worlds of Manchester, London, Liverpool, and Sheffield, 1975-80*; see also my review, Ervin, "Review of Networks of Sound, Style, and Subversion: The Punk and Post-Punk Worlds of Manchester, London, Liverpool, and Sheffield, 1975-80, by Nick Crossley."

[14] Laing and Smith, *One Chord Wonders*, 1.

(1976), a number of substantial chapters, overview texts, memoirs, insider accounts, and oral histories began appearing in the mid-1990s.[15]

Of these works, two are most noteworthy. The first is Clinton Heylin's *From the Velvets to the Voidoids: A Pre-Punk History for a Post-Punk World* (first published in 1993 and given a second edition in 2005). The book is an archival and interview-based history of punk music in the US from the 1960s to 1980. Organized chronologically, *From the Velvets* offers nearly thirty short chapters on many of the most famous American punk groups. Though it is primarily about New York artists, Heylin pays special attention to 1970s punk music in Cleveland. A city that is often overshadowed by New York, Cleveland was an important home for early punk bands (including some, such as the Dead Boys and Pere Ubu, who were central to New York's punk scene itself). One of the book's chief virtues is that it features extensive appendices, including a substantial bibliography and discography. Among the most comprehensive entries on the topic, they mark excellent starting places for research on US punk.

The second, Legs McNeil and Gillian McCain's *Please Kill Me: The Uncensored History of Punk*, is a lengthy oral history of punk in New York (1996; reprinted in 2016). First-hand witnesses provide the narrative, their testimony culled from both period sources and interviews. In addition to the comprehensive and primary character of the book, it is important for offering a long history. *Please Kill Me* covers not only the early years of punk artists such as Patti Smith,

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[15] E.g. Blush, *New York Rock*; Fletcher, *All Hopped Up and Ready to Go*; Gibbs, *Destroy: The Definitive History of Punk*; Hermes, *Love Goes to Buildings on Fire*; Heylin, *From the Velvets to the Voidoids*; McNeil and McCain, *Please Kill Me*; Valentine, *New York Rocker*.

but also the 1980s. This was an era when many New York punk artists remained active, though it is less famous than that first decade.

Despite their strengths, both sources have limitations. Heylin's book is too broad to adequately cover New York's entire punk scene. It focuses mostly on the most famous artists, meaning that many significant but lesser known groups like Tuff Darts and the Miamis are ignored. Meanwhile, the focus of the book is too narrow for it to serve as an introduction to the US more generally. Important early scenes in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and other cities are largely neglected, while even Cleveland's scene sometimes appears most noteworthy for producing artists who performed in New York. The major weakness of *Please Kill Me* is that it is an extension of *Punk* magazine, an important but controversial magazine from the 1970s; co-author Legs McNeil was a member of their editorial collective in that era. Their prevailing tone was irreverent, and the editors were famous for picking fights and causing feuds. For this reason, their story is skewed toward punk's most iconoclastic figures, meaning that the story appears one-sided. Many artists who don't fit that bill are ignored, while even those who are covered tend to receive attention for uncharacteristic inflammatory work. (See my second chapter for more on the *Punk* controversy.)

The academy has been slower to take interest in 1970s punk. There are a number of good chapters and essays focusing on early US punk written by academics. Many strong books and articles use punk as a vessel for illustrating

theoretical concepts such as minimalism, amateurism, or actor-network theory.[16] Others provide insightful commentaries on punk en route to discussions of later genres like new wave and industrial music.[17]

The first full-length scholarly work to address US punk at length is Tricia Henry's 1989 *Break All Rules* (UMI Research Press). The outgrowth of a thesis written in the Performance Studies program at NYU, Henry's book offers a survey of a number of key punk artists from the 1970s. This includes chapters on Lou Reed and the Velvet Underground, the New York Dolls, the CBGB scene, the Sex Pistols, and the broader fanzine culture central to punk. The book is noteworthy for offering an early attempt at analyzing punk music. Henry includes a number of published transcriptions as appendices, and in so doing brings a concreteness to her descriptions that is often lacking in the broader literature.

While generally strong, the book's short length and emphasis on British punk means it can be reductive. Henry's prevailing narrative suggests that US punk was a limited attempt at a style that only "crystalized" in the Sex Pistols, a common truism that encourages the strong emphasis on British punk. (See my chapter 4 for a further discussion of the Sex Pistols and the relationship of London to US punk.) Henry also curiously confines her analysis to published sheet music. The effect of this decision is a limitation both in the scope of her repertoire – since very little punk music has been published in this format – and

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[16] Examples of good recent texts that partially address punk include Court, "Musical Amateurism, 1968-1984: Knowing Incompetence"; Lindau, "Art Is Dead. Long Live Rock! Avant-Gardism and Rock Music, 1967-99"; Piekut, "Actor-Networks in Music History: Clarifications and Critiques," 13; Shank, *The Political Force of Musical Beauty*.

[17] Cateforis, *Are We Not New Wave?*; Reed, *Assimilate*. See Chapter 4 for a survey of literature on postpunk genres and no wave in particular.

her engagement with aspects of music beyond pitch (that is, exactly the material concealed by an American songbook-style transcription of a song).

Since Henry's book was published, two substantial scholarly works on punk have been published. While neither is exclusively concentrated on New York, both provide excellent accounts of the period. Bernard Gendron's *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club: Popular Music and the Avant-Garde* (Chicago, 2002) is a larger history of artists who work across the high art-popular culture divide. The book offers four chapters on the New York punk scene and its legacy (focused, respectively, on early American punk, the CBGB scene, no wave, and the legacy of punk after 1980). Each chapter is rich with archival detail, as well as a philosophical acumen often lacking in writing on punk in the US. Gendron's aim is to articulate an underlying aesthetic theory guiding New York punk, and so he thinks deeply about the stylistic character of the genre as well as its engagement with broader art movements.

The second study, Steve Waksman's *This Ain't the Summer of Love: Conflict and Crossover in Heavy Metal and Punk* (UC Press, 2009) tells the story of punk's intertwined history with heavy metal. Often treated as distinct (and, at times, fundamentally at odds with each other), Waksman argues that we should attend to the many ways that the two genres explore shared social and aesthetic concerns. His introduction and chapters about Iggy Pop and The Dictators offer excellent introductions to two groups deserving of more attention from both critics and scholars.

Given that both Waksman and Gendron are interested in a broad scope of aesthetic and historical concerns, their books highlight certain aspects of punk. While it would be unfair to charge otherwise strong studies with the failure to cover all of punk music (an agenda that neither promises to fulfill), it is fair to say that there is more to be said about the periods they address. Waksman, for example, reasonably focuses on those aspects of punk that engage with ideas of amateurism, aggression, and theatricality (common tropes in both punk and metal). But this does mean that artists who tended to be more cerebral, experimental, or pop-oriented – e.g. Patti Smith, Suicide, and Just Water – are less central to the story. In a similar vein, Gendron's focus is on those punk groups who were interested in highbrow art, a bad fit Jayne County or Milk 'n' Cookies. Further, his thesis occasionally forces him to overemphasize the artsy dimensions of groups like the Ramones. While art influences were crucial factors in punk, I would argue against Gendron that groups such as the Ramones and the Dictators stood at odds with more esthete peers like Patti Smith in emphasizing punk's roots in mass cultural production.

II. Genre & Historical Materialism

That certain strands of punk outweigh others in punk scholarship reflects the enigmatic character of the genre, both as a musical project and as an historical concern. 1970s punk is pulled in different directions depending on who was playing and listening, and when. This dissertation aims to understand what

about punk gives rise to this tangled history. Ultimately then, it is to consider genre in the context of New York punk during the 1970s.

Before I speak further about that genre in particular, I need to establish a few theoretical presuppositions guiding my thinking about genre as such. At the core of my work is the idea of *historical materialism*. Simply put by the philosopher Raya Dunayevskaya, historical materialism hinges on "the unity of theory and practice."[18] The central question guiding this line of inquiry concerns the troubled relationship between 1.) the domain of material life, including not just production/reproduction of human life but more broadly, the patterns and activities humans engage in socially, and 2.) the domain of thought, the intellectual activities through which human beings exchange with each other and make sense of their world.

Historical materialism names not only the set of concepts and ways of thinking about this, but also a tradition concerned with this problematic. This links a range of philosophical and political projects, most centrally in three key moments: 1.) German philosophy of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-centuries, especially the idealism of Kant and Hegel 2.) Marxian thought proper and its many instantiations in political theory (Leninism, Maoism, etc.), and 3.) the many traditions that engage with Marx during the twentieth-and twenty-first-

[18] Dunayevskaya, *The Power of Negativity: Selected Writings on the Dialectic in Hegel and Marx*, 227.

centuries: the Frankfurt School, Black Radical thought, Marxist-feminism, and so on.[19]

Genre plays a special role in this conversation, because it indexes both a set of material practices and a set of ideas. In the loosest sense, genre refers to the material and conceptual elements linking texts of various kinds, what I'll refer to hereafter as "norms."[20] As the genre theorist John Frow writes, genre refers to "a set of conventional and highly organized constraints on the production and interpretation of meaning."[21] In other words, genre refers to the categories that creators and audiences use to negotiate artistic practices. Such practices not only include key categories for musical works, novels, and films (areas where the term most often appears), but also non-artistic practices (official discourse like emails and announcements, even everyday speech acts, and many other examples). Categories saturate our lives; as Jason Toynbee suggests, few things escape the "inevitability of genre."[22]

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[19] Disagreement abounds as to what this tradition could be called (critical theory, Western Marxism, etc.). Cf. Feenberg, *The Philosophy of Praxis: Marx, Lukács, And The Frankfurt School* and Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism*; Further disagreement abounds as to whether it constitutes a tradition at all. Commentators have varyingly questioned or reaffirmed Marx's fidelity to Hegel (e.g. Althusser, *For Marx*), Adorno's fidelity to Hegel and Marx (e.g. Rose, *The Melancholy Science*), and so on. While a full dissertation would be needed just to cover this literature, suffice to say: I like "historical materialism" as the most neutral term available. It avoids the disparaging implications of terms like "Western Marxism," which often is used to suggest that political movements or social programs originating outside of the Eastern Bloc are outside of legitimate political struggle. And I think of it as a tradition, expressing a set of centrally linked concerns, as a generalization in the spirit of Bernstein, "Negative Dialectic as Fate."

[20] A selection of exemplary studies of genre in music studies includes Brackett, *Categorizing Sound*; Fabbri, "A Theory of Musical Genres: Two Applications"; Fabbri and Chambers, "What Kind of Music?"; Frith, *Performing Rites*; Negus, *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures*; Toynbee, *Making Popular Music: Musicians, Creativity, and Institutions*; Weisbard, *Top 40 Democracy* (though I should note that in the case of that last text, Weisbard takes issue with the privileging of genre over the radio format).

[21] Frow, *Genre*, 10.

[22] Toynbee, *Making Popular Music: Musicians, Creativity, and Institutions*, 107.

This is not necessarily because rules abound in some mythically ordered universe, but because we depend on relationships between texts in order to find them meaningful. Indeed, constraints should not only suggest restrictions (a partial reason for my preference of the term norms, about which I'll say more below). Really, as David Brackett writes, genre enables meaning:

> It is a condition of the legibility of a text that a listener can place it in the context of a genre, that is, in the context of how sounds, lyrics, images, performer personae, musical rhetoric, and a generic label (among other things) can be related. In order for this to occur, texts must cite or refer to generic conventions that predate them.[23]

Genre is not a set of rules one must follow, or even a set of optional codes that one can choose to ignore. Rather, genre is a space for understanding continuity and transgression, endorsement and rejection, the love of tradition and the desecration of what is sacred.

Given this, genre theory becomes of particular interest from the standpoint of historical materialism. We simply cannot bypass the tense relationship between musical concepts and practices in discussing genre. Genre theory partially concerns rules and categories, the most abstract of abstractions. But its purchase, if it has any, lies is in its attentiveness to those most immediate senses we have when we listen to something and think, "this sounds like…" Genre is the term that bridges the gap between music's status as something interpreted and something heard, between its status as thing and concept.

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[23] Brackett, *Categorizing Sound*, 13.

Despite this, materialism has played a rather limited role in musical thought in recent years. Rather, I would argue that to the contrary, an idealist tradition has dominated thought about genre. The distinction between materialism and idealism is best understood in the context of Marx's critique of German philosophy. Throughout his career, Marx challenged the abstraction that guided thinkers to privilege grand ideas over lived experience. He called for a new form of thought rooted in the conditions of daily life. This was a point developed extensively in his 1846 manuscripts the *German Ideology*, co-authored with Frederick Engels. The text took the form of a lengthy critique of Hegel and his more liberal disciples (the so-called "Young Hegelians"), who Marx saw as the dominant figures in philosophy in his time. Marx observed that such writers simply aimed to make metaphysical concerns more concrete. For example, Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* argued that many of the theological concerns of Christianity could actually be understood to be human worries masquerading as the Divine.[24] Marx concluded that such gestures ended up dressing up the same old idealist concerns for ideas as a form of progressive critique:

> Since according to their fantasy, the relations of people, all their doings, their fetters and their limitations are products of their consciousness, the Young Hegelians put to them the moral postulate of exchanging their present consciousness for human, critical or egoistic consciousness, and thus of removing their limitations. This demand to change

[24] Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*.

> consciousness amounts to a demand to interpret the existing world in a different way.[25]

Marx castigated the Young Hegelians for confining social activity to concepts. For him, their work amounted to a plea for thinking better without one for doing better. Effectively, this confined philosophy to the scholastic function of contemplating abstract ideas (This is why Ernst Bloch quips, "in Hegel philosophy becomes a headmaster").[26]

Marx proposed an alternative, one rooted in "the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions of their life, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity."[27] In other words, he called for a thought grounded in human life, in how humans sustain themselves. Marx reached the conclusion that philosophy would simply be irrelevant if it couldn't account for these sorts of things. Further, it should not just offer an *account* at all, but should provide a path to help people improve their lives. This position was most famously summarized in the conclusion to the so-called "Theses on Feuerbach," where Marx wrote, "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it."[28]

I would argue that a form of idealism dictates the tone of much writing on genre. In her study "Genre Study and Television," Jane Feuer formalizes the notion that genre itself is an ideological category:

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[25] Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, 5:30; I have modified the translation slightly to remove unnecessary gendering of language and awkwardness of phrasing.
[26] Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, 185.
[27] Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, 5:31.
[28] Ibid., 5:8.

> Genre is a construct of an analyst. The methodology that the analyst brings to bear upon the texts determines the way in which that analyst will construct the genre. Genres are made, not born. The coherence is provided in the process of construction, and a genre is ultimately an abstract conception rather than something that exists empirically in the world.[29]

Feuer's decision to reject genre as naturally born is a necessary pushback against a bygone generation of literary formalists like Northrop Frye (who perhaps more than any early writer is a specter haunting contemporary genre theory).[30] But Feuer chooses to battle formalism in the spirit of Feuerbach, arguing that many of genre's most fundamental categories are actually human in origin rather than naturally occurring.[31] Disenchanting the now fundamentally unthinkable proposition that genres are spontaneous and prior to human intervention, she insists instead that they are instead dreamt up in the head.

Feuer also orients genre theory toward suspicion, one that matches a broader suspicious tendency in the academy today.[32] She suggests that we should be distrustful of genre, since the actions of the analyst impose order on something that does not actually exist in the world. This contempt more generally pervades a commonplace understanding that discussing norms is hubristic, rigid, even a form of dominance enacted in the realm of ideas. This sentiment is manifest most of all in the general hostility toward *taxonomy*, the attempt to

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[29] Feuer, "Genre Study and Television," 144.
[30] E.g. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*; for an early critique of Frye, see Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*; for examples of the way music theorists have recently engaged with Frye (albeit in a more pragmatist manner, rejecting much of the transcendentalism that structures Frye's own thought), see Almén, "Narrative Archetypes" and Klein, "Ironic Narrative, Ironic Reading."
[31] Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*.
[32] On suspicion in the academy, see Felski, *The Limits of Critique* and Cheng, *Just Vibrations*.

delineate genre rules on a categorical level. Stern denunciations of Aristotelian poetics or evocations of Foucaudian orders "imposed on things" abound in genre theory.[33]

This tendency is best exemplified by Derrida's 1978 lecture on the topic, "The Law of Genre" (first published in 1980). There, he argues that a *law* – what he also calls *the voice* – functions akin to a juridical demand, insisting: "GENRES ARE NOT to be mixed."[34] Derrida was not attacking categories *as such*. In fact, he took them quite seriously. His claim here, "there is no genreless text" (212), parallels his famous proclamation from *Of Grammatology*: "there is nothing outside of the text."[35]

Even so, good postructrualist that he is, Derrida privileges a vision of art that evades genre's normative force. Throughout the essay, he contrasts the juridical commitments of genre with moments at its "liminal edge" (210). These are ones that illustrate that genre necessarily fails. As he insists, "participation [in genre] never amounts to belonging." Instead, he argues that a text "belongs without belonging, and the 'without' (or the suffix '-less') which relates belonging to non-belonging appears only in the timeless time of the blink of an eye" (212). In writing this, Derrida is also being a good romantic. It is no accident that his original text uses the German phrase *Augenblick*, a term that abounds in literary romanticism. Derrida aligns with the literature of privileged moments and singularities. He extolls Blanchot's *La Folie du jour*, a text he affectionately

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[33] Feuer, "Genre Study and Television," 139; Dowd, ""Introduction: Genre Matters in Theory and Criticism," 11.
[34] Derrida, "The Law of Genre," 202–203.
[35] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 158.

describes as "not even quite a book" (213). Thus, despite his deconstructive contrast between law and freedom, Derrida sides with the latter. Freedom here too means idealism, choosing to liberate our minds from the law of genre.[36]

Of course, in questioning idealist genre theory, my point isn't that we can bypass the way thoughts influence how people make or perceive genres. Any theory of genre must confront the way norms contribute to our experience of music. Here is where a second excursus on historical materialism becomes necessary. What sets that line of thought apart from what is sometimes called "vulgar" or "naïve" Marxism is its refusal to stop with the critique of idealism. A tempting conclusion from Marx's critique is that we ought to abandon concepts, either disregarding ideas altogether or turning toward various strains of thought that imagine they can bypass the problem of thought. Historical materialism, as I understand it, rejects the assumption that the world can be reduced to a mechanistic result of labor. From Hegel to Marx and beyond, the historical materialist tradition puts a premium on thought. This is true in many practical forms (think of figures like Franz Fanon and Rosa Luxemburg, who were both political activists and prolific writers). But it also powered the rise of forms of thought like critical theory, most famously associated with the Frankfurt School. I take it that an impulse to taking seriously the troubled relationship of theory and practice guides Adorno in his famous opening to *Negative Dialectics*:

> Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because
> the moment to realize it was missed. The summary

[36] For a similar line of commentary, see Frow, *Genre*, 25–28. Frow himself is not exempt from this criticism. While he defends the force of genre, he privileges a theory that is no less idealist in its tendency to elevate the linguistic turn over the typological impulses of "Aristotelian categories"; see 51-71 for his account of this shift.

> judgment that it had merely interpreted the world, that resignation in the face of reality had crippled it in itself, becomes a defeatism of reason after the attempt to change the world miscarried.[37]

And, it guides Bloch in his challenge toward the vulgar anti-religious sentiment that often abounds among even among Marx's disciples; as Bloch writes: "Only someone who speaks not just for the earth but also for the wrongly surrendered heaven will truly be able to demystify the fabrications of bourgeois-feudal state ideology."[38]

Historical materialism demands that we attend to both heaven and earth, thought and matter. This does require reconceiving of how the two domains are linked, and how they stand at odds. This view of conceptual norms as a kind of practical activity is nicely developed by the pragmatist philosopher Robert Brandom. He argues that thinking about norms is a social gesture, not a typological one. Brandom writes that judgments are "things knowers and agents are in a distinctive way *responsible* for. Judging and acting involve *commitments*. They are *endorsements*, exercises of *authority*."[39] Ultimately, descriptions are claims about what we value and who we want to be.

If concepts are practical, then this means that we are never imprisoned within this choice between taxonomy and chaos. Rather, norms guide us as we act. In the context of genre, they are claims about how to use musical material. One person's "x sounds like this" really means, "you ought to hear x this way." In saying this, I want to emphasize what Frow calls the "rhetorical function" of

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[37] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 3.
[38] Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, 245.
[39] Brandom, *Reason in Philosophy*, 32.

genres. As he writes, texts are structured so as to "achieve certain pragmatic effects: to catch the attention of a distracted reader with sufficient force to persuade them to buy a copy of the newspaper; to reinforce a set of populist moral judgments."[40] Frow's two examples are somewhat narrow, but one can extrapolate. Frow suggests that genres are not just limited to formal devices or thematic devices, but also include a persuasive element. Genres carry with them an *ought*.

To bowdlerize a famous claim by Slavoj Žižek, then, genre "doesn't give you what you desire, it tells you how to desire."[41] Take the slasher movie. Of course, such films are bound up with any number of formal properties: terrifying masked killers in cat-and-mouse chases, summer camp sex parties, soundtracks featuring Alice Cooper songs, and so on. But such tropes also make demands of us. They attempt to frighten us and thrill us, all within a complex moral economy of transgression and punishment. Think of *Friday the 13th* series, as Jason Voorhees stalks negligent counselors. Or, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, where Freddy Krueger hunts children to enact revenge on their parents. (This is also what is so perfectly parodied in *The Cabin in the Woods*, where the deaths of teenagers at the hands of monsters turn out to be literally sacrificial.) These films also invite you to side with the heroes, the final girls and scared children and Marine Corps soldiers, calling for their victory over the villains.

Of course, one can reject such a demand. You might find horror movies unpleasant, funny, offensive, simply ignore them or turn one off. Interpreting

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[40] Frow, *Genre*, 9.
[41] His topic is actually cinema, not genre *per se*; this quotation comes from the documentary Fiennes, *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema: Parts 1, 2, 3*.

genres is almost always troubled process, because accounts of how a genre works are seldom innocent or immune to partisanship. This has often been treated as a problem for genre theory (since, after all, to speak of genre is to risk entering the realm of Derrida's cold, empty law). But I would suggest that dissensus is a necessary and central aspect of thinking about genre. This starts to point toward that infamous historical materialist term hovering behind my discussion so far: *dialectics*. It is a difficult one to define, partially because many of its greatest champions like Hegel and Marx refused to give neat definitions for it and their disciples can't seem to agree about what it means. Hegel cryptically refers to it as the "course that generates itself," Marx said this meant that it was "standing on its head," and Adorno admitted "there is no definition that fits it."[42] Reconstructing the history and meaning of the term would be a project unto itself, so I will bypass any general discussion here.

Sketchily put, I understand dialectics to be a way of thinking that recognizes the place of contradiction and disagreement in thought and practice. Dialectics rejects the commonplace assumption in many strains of philosophy and social theory, that we can neatly distill concepts to their most unproblematic form. To give one simple example: in *Capital*, Marx famously schematizes capitalist societies into different classes. His point in doing so is not to give us a nice clean dichotomy, but to challenge pervasive assumptions that society works like a homogenous unit. Instead, he suggests that different people in a capitalist society have different concerns, ones that often stand in strict distinction to each

[42] Hegel and Findlay, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 40 (see the equally cryptic account of it in the introduction to *The Science of Logic*, 23–43); Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, 1:103; Adorno, *Hegel*, 9.

other. One of his favorite examples should be straightforward to anyone who works for a living: employers want their employees to work as long as possible for as little money as possible, while employees want to make more money for less exploitative work.[43]

This starts to chip away at a central aspect of dialectics. It is not only a theory of distinct positions that are irreconcilable (or get added together, the "thesis-antithesis-synthesis" reduction that is often allowed to overshadow nuances in the concept). Dialectics also inquires after the place of negativity within concepts. Things are seldom what they simply *are*, but often are defined by what they are not. This is nicely expressed in Žižek's often-quoted summary of dialectics, the "coffee without cream" joke:

> In Lubitsch's *Ninotchka*: the hero visits a cafeteria and orders coffee without cream; the waiter replies: 'Sorry, but we've run out of cream. Can I bring you coffee without milk?' In both cases, the customer gets straight coffee, but this One-coffee is each time accompanied by a different negation, first coffee-with-no-cream, then coffee-with-no-milk.[44]

Despite the quirky formulation, Žižek is expressing something relatively straightforward: things are not only meaningful for their positive content. This is all-but self-evident to many paying attention to contemporary politics. To give one such example: Angela Davis has written at length about the ways social order is based in negativity. In "Rape, Racism, and the Capitalist Setting," Davis observes that the United States comfortably tolerates many practices that stand

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[43] See Chapter 10, "The Working Day," in Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, 1:340–416.
[44] Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 765–766.

at odds with its oft-professed values of freedom and security (as her title suggests, the central examples in her essay are the horrifically pervasive acts of rape and anti-black bigotry/violence in the US). Davis claims that the mistake would be to think that practices which have persisted so long and so centrally in the US are aberrations. Rather, such practices are inextricable parts of that social formation.[45] Rape is part of US life, right alongside freedom and democracy. Or, as former SNCC chairman Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin put it, "violence is a part of America's culture. It is as American as cherry pie."[46]

Despite my shift to such severe topics, I don't mean to suggest that dialectics is only concerned with violence, disagreement, and renunciation. Dialectics is also a way of thinking about the grounds for identity provided by disagreement. This is what sets Hegel alongside Marx as a contributor to historical materialism, whatever their professed differences. Hegel's philosophy is neither magical nor an abstract meditation on ideas. It is an investigation of what it means to be a social being embedded in a community (this is largely what Hegel's term *Geist* inquires after, not gods or ghosts). In this sense, I would argue even more emphatically than Frow that genres are indistinguishable from their pragmatic function. Genres teach us what the world is, and make pleas about what it ought to be. In this sense, Derrida is right about one thing. As he writes, a genre description is a "promise, an oath." But it is not uttered as "a vow of obedience, as a docile response to the injunction emanating from the law of

[45] Davis, "Rape, Racism, and the Capitalist Setting."
[46] Al-Amin, "Press Conference."

genre."[47] Musical actions are not empty oaths carved into Wotan's spear. Rather, they are promises, rendered in sensuous form, about what right life might be. This makes the cultivation of norms akin not only to regimes of power, but potentially a version of what William calls *care*.[48] Or, as Jason Toynbee writes, "genres "express the collective interest or point of view of a community."[49]

If this is true, it does mean that the stakes of genre commitments can be high. Transgressions of norms can varyingly function as the betterment of the world or the denial of what was promised. Concepts have the ability to impart what the philosopher JM Bernstein calls "moral injury," moments that "discount or injure the value I am (my sense of inner worth or dignity) and the knowledge that others are like me and share the understanding of our shared predicament of vulnerability."[50] This is why genre can be bound up so intensely with regimes of power. Unjust definition of genre norms by individuals, institutions, or markets are denials of the right to recognition.

Conversely, it is also why art potentially poses a challenge to power. To say that art ought to go a certain way is also to claim that things ought to be otherwise. In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno – the reputed fatalist – argues that even in its mere sounding, music potentially calls for something better. He writes ardently about the force of genre:

> "Even for an artist like Mozart, who seems so unpolemical and who according to general agreement moves solely within the pure sphere of spirit,... the polemical element is

[47] Derrida, "The Law of Genre," 204.
[48] Cheng, *Just Vibrations*.
[49] Toynbee, *Making Popular Music: Musicians, Creativity, and Institutions*, 110.
[50] Bernstein, *Torture and Dignity*, 3.

> central in the power by which the music sets itself at a distance that mutely condemns the impoverishment and falsity of that from which it distinguishes itself. In Mozart form acquires the power of that distancing as determinate negation; the reconciliation that it realizes is painfully sweet because reality to date has refused it… What crackles in artworks is the sound of the friction of the antagonistic elements that the artwork seeks to unify."[51]

Adorno is here arguing that the demand for justice saturates even the music that comfortably travels within genre norms. Regardless of Adorno's characteristically polarizing estimation of a beloved composer – I know, how dare he call Mozart unpolemical! – he is making a claim about normativity and music. In participating in genre, Adorno claims, we make a demand for a better world.

We also make a claim to live up to past demands, forgotten promises and broken oaths. One of the central thoughts that guides historical materialism is the *historical*. This should be straightforward enough, not just because the word history appears in the term historical materialism, but to anyone who has read Marx's lengthy historical accounts or Benjamin's famous last essay, "On the Concept of History."[52] Simply put: music is historical. It almost always implicitly takes a stance on its past. Genres tell us what of that which came before is relevant, and what should be forgotten. This is often easy to see in those genres that depend on relationships to lengthy traditions (think of many genres in classical music or in folk music traditions, which depend on understandings of musical practices that have hundreds of years of history). Others depend on the

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[51] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 177.
[52] E.g. the history of capitalist accumulation (chapters 26-33) that concludes Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, 1:873–940.

subversion of or erasure of tradition, defining their practices through what they are no longer.

The argument of historical materialism is not just that we should *attend to* history, but that human thought and activity is itself historical. Historical materialism follows from the fundamental Hegelian insight that history inflects our very self-understanding. As Bernstein remarks, Hegel reveals that,

> we are right here and now a community of the living and the dead. That the dead are always with us, and that we have to find adequate means of acknowledging in our collective and communal practices of acknowledging our relationship to the dead."[53]

In this spirit, we should keep in mind that genre should not really be thought of as a set of *a priori* codes that precede musical activity (a potential risk of misreading the Brackett quotation above). Rather, artists work over inherited codes, endorsing or rejecting what came before. From the traces of blues and gospel that pepper soul music, to the retro pastiche of recent musicians like Ariel Pink and Kali Uchis, history punctuates all manner of music. Artists make claims about the relationship of the past to the present. Less an endorsement of genres *as such*, these traces evoke, in sensuous form, the character of community as something determined by what came before. Ultimately, genre is an attempt to make good on the promises and failures of the past.

Of course, this potentially inflects history with a tragic character. Indeed, many accounts of history tend toward the past at the expense of the present. As

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[53] Bernstein, "Introduction."

Hegel famously wrote, "the owl of Minerva takes flight only at dusk."[54] Hegel was not actually suggesting that we should only task ourselves with reflecting on the past or elevate historians and philosophers to the level of gods. The quotation comes from a passage in the *Philosophy of Right* where, quite to the contrary, Hegel warns that philosophical reflection often comes too late to solve all social problems.

Even so, Gillian Rose warns that history is all-too-typically conducted in a melancholic register. As she argues, reflecting on history can constitute a form of "aberated mourning," where to remember is to dwell in a "baroque melancholia immersed in the world of soulless and unredeemed bodies."[55] Music making is often an act of mourning. The heightened retroness of artists such as John Maus and Amy Winehouse signals memories of the unredeemed past, one which, unassimilated, lingers in the present.

Despite this, remembering should not always be construed as a lament. The term "reconciliation" peppers Hegel's writing and historical materialist thought since. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel uses the term to characterize a situation in which individuals might stop seeing each other as potential objects of domination, instead uniting under shared concepts of rightness.[56] The past – both in its promises and its failings – offers a vision of a world in which such circumstances are not the exception but the rule. Turning

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[54] The now standard translation of the quotation is "the owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk." I have modified it simply to stay closer to its more common usage, which sounds less awkward and captures the meaning of the phrase better. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 23.
[55] Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*, 69.
[56] E.g. Hegel and Findlay, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 126.

toward history means making a demand to live up to broken promises. As Benjamin writes in "On the Concept of History," "the past carries with it a secret index by which it is referred to redemption."[57] Genres themselves testify in musical form. Artists in punk, jazz, metal, rap, and dozens of other genres position themselves as inheritors of long-running musical traditions. D'Angelo, Kendrick Lamar, Beyonce, and others reference the past to make claims about the nature of a black community that crosses the boundaries separating the contemporary world and the bygone. Mourning also gives rise to the hope of reconciliation, a form of remembrance entangled with a plea for the future.

III. Punk as Mourning & Reconciliation

Initially, it might appear odd to pair up punk, typically thought of as a postmodern genre *par excellence*, with Hegel and Marx, the great boogiemen of recent academic theory. Anyway, there are few things less trendy than being a Hegelian in 2017, regardless of the history. My point is partially to show that punk is better understood through recourse to historical materialism. But more importantly, I want to argue that the genre itself makes claims about history and material life.

Punk is the ultimate "coffee without cream" genre. Punk is rock without rock, queer without queerness, not quite alive and not quite dead. This is often glossed in accounts of punk, which often frame punk as a negationist project in

[57] Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 390.

the spirit of art forms like dada and situationism.[58] It has been most commonplace to align punk with a pure and empty form of negativity akin to the famous Sex Pistols chant "No Future."[59]

Historical materialism provides grounds for articulating the positive aspects within this negative project. This is what I find enticing about 1970s New York punk. Even in the years before there was a punk canon (let alone HBO shows and airport eateries dedicated to it), punk was overdetermined and saturated with dissensus. Preceding a concrete musical practice called punk was a debate about what constituted the spirit of the genre. Answers were often given in the negative. The Velvet Underground was powered by a desire to be *not rock* (or, so I claim in chapter 1); the queerness of New York Dolls and Jayne County by the desire to make music that was *not* straight (chapter 2); Patti Smith's experimentalism was powered by the urge to make music that was *neither* pop nor poetry (chapter 3); and Blondie and No Wave artists were guided the desire to be somehow *after* punk itself (Chapter 4).

Such gestures were not always empty acts of refusal. Historical materialism further helps to frame these desires in terms of their conceptual and musical pragmatics. Punk negativity functioned as an *ought*. The fervor of punk's early devotees can easily be construed as chauvinism, Patti Smith's snotty attitude or Lester Bangs' castigation of James Taylor taken as evidence of punk rock arrogance. It's not that punks weren't chauvinistic. (They often were, especially Lester Bangs; he leaves behind a problematic legacy of powerful music

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[58] E.g. Henry, *Break All Rules*.
[59] This is the central argument of Marcus, *Lipstick Traces*.

criticism and troubling snuff pieces.)[60] But the mistake is to suggest that it could have been otherwise. Lester Bangs's demands that punk music differ from James Taylor were attempts to guide music elsewhere. And, Patti Smith's music articulated in sonic form not just a vision of where music might go, but where the world might. Punk offered not polite suggestions, but demands.

Moreover, these were not just calls shouted into the void, but claims about history. Much of punk's ambivalence emerged in light of what came before. In the 1970s, punk largely took the form of a testimonial aesthetics, one defined by the pains of loss and the possibilities of future happiness. Punk was what was dragged along in musical identity, scars cut deep into sound. It is often noted that later punk genres (e.g. hardcore) are defined in relationship to or against prior forms of punk. But as early as 1978, the anarcho-punk band Crass rejected their forbearers on "Punk is Dead," proffering up their austere sound as a negation of the relatively poppy and polished sound of earlier punk artists. By 1982, the Oi! band Cock Sparrer was attempting to restore punk to its former glory. On "Where Are they Now?," the group lamented that "six years on" – yes, six whole years after the first wave of punk – the genre had "turned sour."

A recent issue of *Social Text* focuses on "Punk and its Afterlives."[61] The implication of the title is that we can trace the long legacy of punk beyond its earliest moments, certainly true as the genre has scattered across the globe in its forty years of history. But it might be better to think of punk as a genre itself

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[60] I discuss Marcus at length in Chapter 1; Bangs's writing on punk appears extensively in Chapters 1 and 2. The second of those chapters engages with his often-complicated writing on LGBTQ punk.
[61] See the essays collected in *Social Text* 31:116 (Fall 2013).

rooted in the afterlife. Punk is genre *as* afterlife, genre as remembering and forgetting and building on what came before. Punk is always already post-punk and proto-punk, always too late and always arriving too soon. It is an attempt to restore a past that was and wasn't, in the name of a future that might never be. Lester Bangs's laments for rock's golden age or Suicide's tattered neo-rock songs took the form of Rose's "baroque melancholia." And Patti Smith's "Gloria" was saturated with messianic zeal, an attempt in sound to make good on the forgotten promises of the past.

This dissertation aims to articulate what I see as the most formative visions of punk as acts of mourning and reconciliation during its heyday. I provide four case studies. Each chapter explores both a historical moment in punk's early history and the debates that surrounded it. My argument is loosely chronological; it spans from the late 1960s and 1970s, when punk first appeared as a term in the critical lexicon, to its explosion as a widely known term at the end of the decade. Essentially then, the historical contour of the argument follows punk from its first years as a small, vanguardist subgenre located in New York City to its emergence as a widely known metagenre. I am not particularly interested in chronicling all of its moments, nor in regarding punk's history as one of sudden rise and tragic fall (a narrative schema that guides many popular histories of the genre). Rather, I aim to understand the way punk formed a central battleground for musicians concerned with the possibility and fate of alternative music-making in the US.

In the spirit of historical materialism, I attempt to elide the theoretical with the practical. I achieve this partially by drawing extensively on punk's extensive archive. This means that I closely attend to the perspectives of critics and participants from that era. As I have already hinted above, punk was intimately linked to its critics. Indeed, it might make more sense to say that punk was inextricably linked to music criticism. Not only did critics constitute some of the most robust voices in the discussion of punk, there is a blurry division of labor separating critics and artists in the New York punk scene. Critics lived alongside punk artists and attended their earliest shows, and they brought a zealotry to their writing that sometimes even outstripped artists themselves. It is through critics and in dialog with them that artists spoke, long before a general public was willing to listen. Often times, it is even difficult separate the two, as Lester Bangs, Patti Smith, Lenny Kaye, Jayne County, Lance Loud, and many others both wrote criticism and worked as musicians during the 1970s.

In support of my dissertation, I conducted extensive research into punk's archive. I surveyed extensive collections related to punk held at NYU, New York Public Library, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Museum and Archives, and University of Virginia. I used this material to reconstruct a critical map of punk, revealing the patterns and conflicts that characterized writing on rock music during the 1970s. I additionally draw extensively from the recorded history of punk. By studying bootlegs, reprints, and other period recordings, I came to understand that punk's sound is broader than is often acknowledged in hagiographies of titans like Patti Smith and the Ramones. Just as the critical map reveals a more complicated discourse around punk than stock narratives about

naïve amateurism or pronouncements of revolution, punk's sonic map undermines neat distinctions between proto- and post-, past and the future, ones that often shape discussions of the genre.

This blurriness of sound and idea is not just interesting because it provides a particularly live archive, though it does. Really, the interplay between theoretical and practical is built into punk from its earliest moments. Punk was itself a philosophical project, an attempt to write a philosophy of musical history in sound. Critical theorizations not only lent focus and sowed seeds of discontent, but under their pens (and for spite of them), punk emerged as a forum for evaluating music's potential and limits. In order to support this claim, I match my archival survey with extensive analysis. I attempt to show throughout the way theory dialogued with practice, the way music dialogues with, embellishes upon, and rejects the cultural, political, and intellectual claims made by artists and critics.

Ultimately, despite the many grand conceptual ambitions that have often been grafted onto punk (for better and worse), punk recast such conversations in sound. Music was the privileged battleground for examining the afterlives of the 1960s, of the history of punk, and of American culture more generally.

1. AFTER ROCK: PUNK AS MELANCHOLY & HORROR

"Well, a lot of changes have gone down since Hip first hit the heartland. There's a new culture shaping up, and while it's certainly an improvement on the repressive society now nervously aging, there is a strong element of sickness in our new, amorphous institutions. The cure bears viruses of its own. The Stooges also carry a strong element of sickness in their music, a crazed quaking uncertainty, an errant foolishness that effectively mirrors the absurdity and desperation of the times."
-Lester Bangs, "Of Pop Pies and Fun" (1970)[1]

"*This is no work of mourning*: it remains baroque melancholia immersed in the world of soulless and unredeemed bodies… [T]here can be *no work*, no exploring of the legacy of ambivalence, working through the contradictory emotions aroused by bereavement. Instead, the remains of the dead one will be incorporated into the soul of the one who cannot mourn and will manifest themselves in some all too physical symptom, the allegory of incomplete mourning."
-Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*[2]

I. Introduction

In March 1981, just a month before he died at 33 following an accidental drug overdose, the critic Lester Bangs published a letter in the *East Village Eye*. Offering to clarify the history of a term that by the early eighties was inspiring debate about its early years, Bangs chastised the paper for idle speculation: "Dear East Village Eye: So far in your pages I have at different times learned that both

[1] Bangs, "Of Pop Pies and Fun: A Program for Mass Liberation in the Form of a Stooges Review Or, Who's the Fool?," 34.
[2] Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*, 69–70.

Richard Hell and John Holstrom invented punk, presumably also at different times. So I figured I might as well put my two cents' worth in."

If anyone could clarify who invented punk, it was Lester Bangs. After a decade spent writing prolifically about punk artists for nearly every major rock publication, Bangs was possibly the most important critical contributor to the topic. Indeed, Bangs wrote about the genre in all of its instantiations during the seventies, beginning long before it was a trendy buzzword circulating throughout pop culture (and nearly a decade before the 1979 first issue of the *East Village Eye*). He was not only one of punk's busiest critics, but one of its first. Even so, his brazen claim might have come as a surprise:

> "I invented punk. Everybody knows that."

Despite the display of chauvinism, Bangs qualified his comment:

> But I stole it from Greg Shaw, who also invented power pop. And he stole it from Dave Marsh, who actually saw Question Mark and the Mysterians live once. But he stole it from John Sinclair. Who stole it from Rob Tyner. Who stole it from Iggy. Who stole it from Lou Reed. Who stole it from Gene Vincent. Who stole it from James Dean. Who stole it from Marlon Brando. Who stole it from Robert Mitchum. The look on his face when he got busted for grass. And he stole it from Humphry Bogart. Who stole it from James Cagney. Who stole it from Pretty Boy Floyd. Who stole it from Harry Crosby. Who stole it from Teddy Roosevelt. Who stole it from Billy the Kid. Who stole it from Mike Fink. Who stole it from Stonewall Jackson. Who stole it from Napoleon. Who stole it from Voltaire…

This saga continued at length, reviewing rival origin claims and violent struggles between vagabonds and soldiers for possession of the genre; by the end, Lady

Godiva's horse more or less appeared to be the most plausible candidate for inventor of the genre of punk. From there, Bangs turned toward chronicling an alternative history in which that originary moment of theft never occurred, preventing the *East Village Eye*, Richard Hell, John Holstrom, and Bangs himself from ever participating in punk. (In his alternative history, he ended up working as a writer for the Jehovah's Witness magazine *Awake!*).[3]

Attributing the birth of punk to a series of scraps between horses and beggars, Bangs was obviously mocking the search for origins of a phenomenon that in many ways was defined less by who first used the term, than by a promise to speak for the outlaws and villains and derelicts and castaways of the world. Nothing could be more ridiculous than to speculate about who uniquely invented punk, as if it were dreamt up in an individual's head.

Even so, Bangs's cutting irony was not wholly irreverent. His list was peppered with allusions and tributes, to those who fought tirelessly on behalf of a genre that struggled for concreteness, for a genealogy and a name. Greg Shaw, the editor who dedicated his life to the fanzine *Bomp!* and the preservation of 1960s rock culture, and who, defeated, ceased publishing when punk failed to reassert rock and roll as the dominant paradigm of music. Dave Marsh, the writer who really was one of the first to use the term punk, who uttered it in awe after seeing s reunion show of 1960s garage rock legends Question Mark and the Mysterians.[4] Pioneering punk figures like Iggy Pop, Lou Reed, John Sinclair. And, the dozens who challenged established orders long before the term punk

[3] Reprinted in Bangs, *Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung*, 337–38.
[4] Marsh, "Looney Tunes."

was uttered to characterize music: Gene Vincent, James Dean, Marlon Brando, and, why not? Lady Godiva's horse.

In many ways, Bangs's letter encapsulated the contradictions of punk during the 1970s. Punk artists set out to make a music that was wholly new and modern, and yet were fascinated with precursors, historical legacies, and the search for roots. The genre was inextricably linked to its rock critical establishment, and yet the internecine disputes and rivalries within that institution that meant punk never wholly followed from any particular critical proclamations. It was a world of caustic irreverence, paired with an obsessive search for origins.

It was this latter quest above all that typified the early years of punk. This chapter does not take up the question of origins *per se*, a gesture that could never be more than a speculative search deserving Bangs-esque mockery. Rather, I focus on the complicated relationship between punk and rock music, the genre's alleged musical parent. If one thing could be taken for granted about punk at the start of the 1970s, it was that it was a subgenre of rock. Punk borrowed liberally from the rock of the 1950s and 1960s, captivated and polarized fans of rock music, and was embraced by a rock critical establishment built in the preceding decade on the strength of rock music's popular support.

And yet, punk music was characterized by a fevered iconoclasm that made it anything but a loving endorsement of inherited tradition. Punk artists sought radical innovation while critics like Lester Bangs wrote virulent polemics against punk's rivals. In many ways, then, punk was defined *against rock*. This left that

new music in a curious place: both within rock and without, reaffirming and subverting that very thing to which it might owe its very definition. Punk was, in this sense, an act of theft akin to that performed by Lady Godiva's horse and generations since: an act of plundering the past to remake the future.

In this chapter, I argue that from its early moments, punk was defined dialectically in relationship to rock: both through and against it. The term punk first appeared in rock criticism at the start of the 1970s. In fact, it was a tool in the critical vocabulary long before it became the iconic designator that conjures up images of buzzsaw guitar riffs and leather jackets, spiked hair, and sneers. Writers including Lester Bangs, Dave Marsh, Greg Shaw, and dozens of others treated the term as a rallying cry for a new form of rock music.

In order to theorize punk's fraught relationship to rock, I begin my chapter by examining the role of rock criticism in early conversations about punk. In their attempts to delineate punk's aesthetic purchase, critics like Bangs were taking as a given not only punk's relationship to earlier music, but also a broad music publishing industry that sustained and justified their efforts. I term this the *rock critical project*. The rock critical project was nothing short of a literary revolution, giving rise to an explosion of rock-related intellectualizing in the late sixties and early seventies. The rock critical project created a forum for evaluating rock music, and critics rushed to produce comprehensive and systematic theories of rock's musical and social character. In so doing, they also produced rock's first canon. Calling rock a musical *lingua franca* for a modern, mass-cultural era, they

developed a theory of rock that saw it not just as a popular form of music, but *the* classical style of the United States.

I continue by suggesting that discourse about punk was a critical response to the rock critical project. While the early pioneers of punk betrayed strong continuities with rock, they strayed from it in fundamental ways. Punk offered a vision of rock *after rock*, a failure to wholly identify with the lingering promises made by a music that imagined itself to be the sound of America's postwar *res publica*. I offer analyses of the Velvet Underground and Suicide, two early pioneers of punk who I argue constituted twin visions of this moment. The Velvet Underground offered a melancholy lament at rock's passing, while Suicide sounded the horror of inability to identify with that world's passing.

In order to conceptualize this work, I draw on a range of critics including Ellen Willis and Lester Bangs and contributors to the historical materialist tradition of philosophy from Hegel and Adorno to Jay Bernstein and Gillian Rose. Ultimately, I argue that punk's early struggles with origins – of thefts and sicknesses and deaths –constituted a set of early attempts to reside in a community of the living and the dead.

II. Inventing Punk

In the early years of the 1970s, the term punk was not just seldom used but confusing. Before the widespread popularity of the CBGB scene or the Sex Pistols, the term had no clearly defined meaning. This was especially true for the musical dimensions implied by the concept. In fact, in the first two years of the decade,

punk often indexed musical descriptors that might appear curious today given *just* how iconic the sound of groups like the Ramones or Sex Pistols have become.

This is because the public had little access to punk as a musical term before the late seventies. There are a number of genealogical accounts of the term punk that have been given. Often, these highlight slang usage of the term to describe prison sex, a bad attitude, or a more general kind of slander (eg. "that guy's a punk!").[5] But few links between those prior usages of the term and musical practices are actually apparent during the seventies. In fact, the word often simultaneously maintained independent musical and slang meanings well into the late seventies. It was commonplace, for example, to see the term appear in the pages of the *New York Times*, both in John Rockwell's editorials about New York's rock scene and in sports reporting, with no acknowledgement of the overlapping usage. Before the flurry of chatter surrounding the Sex Pistols' famous entrance into New York's musical life, perhaps the most publicized usage of the term occurred after Texas Rangers' baseman Lenny Randle slugged the team's manager for calling him an ungrateful "$80,000 punk."[6]

The hubbub surrounding the Sex Pistols in 1978-1979 quickly brought the term to the front pages of the *Times* and to a broader life as a musical designator (see chapter 4). But this was not the first time punk was making headlines. By the time of the Sex Pistols' U.S. debut, the word had been receiving aggressive cultivation by critics and fans in the underground music press for almost a

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[5] On punk's geneology, see Nyong'o, "Do You Want Queer Theory (or Do You Want the Truth)?," 107 and Cullen, "A School for Singing: The Poetics, Politics, and Aesthetics of the CBGB Scene," 6.
[6] "Lucchesi Tells in Court of 'Punk' Remark Context."

decade. Indeed, the meaning and value of the term was hotly debated in print, often times receiving differing and polemical definitions.

As early 1970, Ed Sanders of the Fugs used the term as a musical descriptor, suggesting that his current group was inflected with a "punk rock – redneck sentimentality."[7] The following year, Dave Marsh used the term to characterize the group Question Mark and the Mysterians, calling their reunion show a landmark for its punk rock "bizarreness."[8] By 1972-1973, the term had a bit more consensus around it. It was frequently used to describe a strain of garage rock from the 1960s, particularly the unsuccessful groups, the amateurs and one-hit wonders who were increasingly neglected in the age of high profile acts like the Rolling Stones and Elton John. Perhaps the most important milestone in framing 1960s punk was the compilation *Nuggets*, put together for Elektra Entertainment by Lenny Kaye (future guitarist for Patti Smith Group). Featuring dozens of songs by largely forgotten artists like The Vagrants, The Shadows of Knight, and Count Five, Kaye's compilation provided a musical revisionary history of the 1960s; it was, he suggested in his liner notes, "a changeling era which dashed by so fast that nobody knew much of what to make of it while it was around, only noticeable in retrospect by the vast series of innovations it would eventually spawn." Reviewing *Nuggets* in 1973, the critic and editor Greg Shaw called punk the "arrogant underbelly" of the sixties, and praised Kaye for restoring forgotten treasures to their well-deserved glory:

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[7] Baker, "Ex-Fugs Leader's Solo Album Study in Self-Honesty."
[8] Marsh, "Looney Tunes."

> The real vitality of American rock in the years 1964-8 was tied up, to a far greater extent than has ever been recognized, with these ephemeral local bands who rarely saw their names on an album of any sort. Even today some of the best rock comes out on obscure singles, but in those years there was a difference, a whole culture of teen dances, local scenes and record companies by the thousand… Punk rock didn't produce many big hits, because it was too primitively undisciplined… [But it] provided the inspiration for literally hundreds of imitators.[9]

Shaw's basic thought was that the 1960s were shaped less by titans like the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, than a widespread social practice spread across the US. Shaw latched onto *Nuggets*, an album which told an alternative story of the people involved. Far from a collection of pristine songs made carefully by superstars, punk was a democratic music that was directly in the hands of performers and audiences. For this reason, it's obscurity and amateurish character was not a failing, but a testament to relevance to ordinary people.

This strain of punk was heavily promoted by *Creem* magazine, which was also the chief platform for early punk theory. In addition to a number of famous articles by writers like Dave Marsh, Lester Bangs, and Greg Shaw that used the term (see below), the magazine also frequently referenced the concept in ads and images. In a July 1972 ad, *Creem* touted the fact that its articles were written from a from a "rock and roll perspective" that friends call "punkitude."[10] By June of 1973, the magazine printed the results of their "1972 *Creem* Rock 'n' Roll Poll," which included awards for "Punk of the Year." This would suggest that readers would have known the term and had some sense of how to apply it, but the results were… confusing to say the least. Alice Cooper won number one, followed

[9] Shaw, "Punk Rock: The Arrogant Underbelly of Sixties Pop."
[10] Creem, "Creem Delivers: Mardi Gras and 'Punkitude!'"

by Mark Bolan, Terry Night, and David Bowie. Lester Bangs lost out to Donnie Osmond, who took fifth. Meanwhile, Lou Reed, often called the godfather of punk, only narrowly edged out president Richard Nixon for eighth place. While it's obvious the readers weren't exactly taking the poll seriously as an opportunity to demarcate the punk style, their answers for other questions were generally less equivocal: Classic albums like *Exile on Main Street*, *Transformer*, and *Superfly* emerged as big winners, and among the readers of *Creem*, Richard Nixon was probably a shoe-in for "Crumb Bum of the Year."[11]

The ambiguity of these results are characteristic of the lack of consensus surrounding punk in the pre-CBGB era. Garage rock of the 1960s was no more helpful of a starting place than Richard Nixon for locating punk, given that the term was a retrospective construction. As Shaw himself admitted, nobody seemed to recognize the existence of this music in its heyday. Worse, it seemed to locate punk in exactly the wrong era: punk was the sound of the 1960s, a curious fact given that punk was clearly emerging as the hot buzzword for rock in the 1970s. Meanwhile, critical accounts of that era produced even more confusion. A quick survey of early writings on punk would produce a list including not only expected artists like Velvet Underground, MC5, and the Stooges, but also the Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen, and Jan and Dean.[12]

On the surface, this might produce the simple observation, true enough of all genres perhaps, that boundaries are difficult to draw and styles are nebulous. But why all of this fervent debate about punk in particular? Why were so many

[11] Editors, "1972 Creem Rock 'N' Roll Poll."
[12] Rockwell, "Fine Blues by Taj Mahal, A Singer and a Scholar"; Rockwell, "Pop Music: Dylan Myth"; Dove, "Garden Resounds to Johnny Winter and Chicago"; Smucker, "When Punk Rock Met the Vietcong."

invested in this term and yet unable to agree on a basic definitional level about what punk actually was?

III. The Rock Critical Project

To fully understand the currency of the term punk as a critical ideal, a broader frame for rock criticism is needed. Debates about the meaning of punk constituted only one small contribution into a larger expansion of critical discourse about rock music. The 1960s and 1970s witnessed a boom of writings about rock, one that enlisted nearly every media format to encapsulate a range of agendas unified by a shared interest in discussing popular music.

Rock magazines were, of course, the most obvious place where such curration took place. The late sixties witnessed the explosion of periodicals dedicated to rock and other popular music interests. Not only well-known sources such as *Rolling Stone* (1967) and *Creem* (1969), but also a number of others including *Crawdaddy* (1966), *Bomp!* (1970), and *Rock Scene* (1973) emerged to produce a broad critical literature on rock. This also spread beyond music magazines, with newspapers like the *Village Voice* and dozens of others getting involved. Indeed, rock writing proliferated wherever college newspapers and local weeklies allowed someone to write about the topic. While recognition by top papers was significant, rock criticism was defined largely its semi-professional character in this era. Many editors, such as Greg Shaw of *Bomp!* and Alan Betrock of *JAMZ* (who would later become editor *New York Rocker*), defined their sources explicitly as “fanzines,” amateur rather than professional

productions.[13] It is striking to look at early issues of many such magazines. Take *Crawdaddy*, one of the most important rock magazines of the 1960s and '70s.

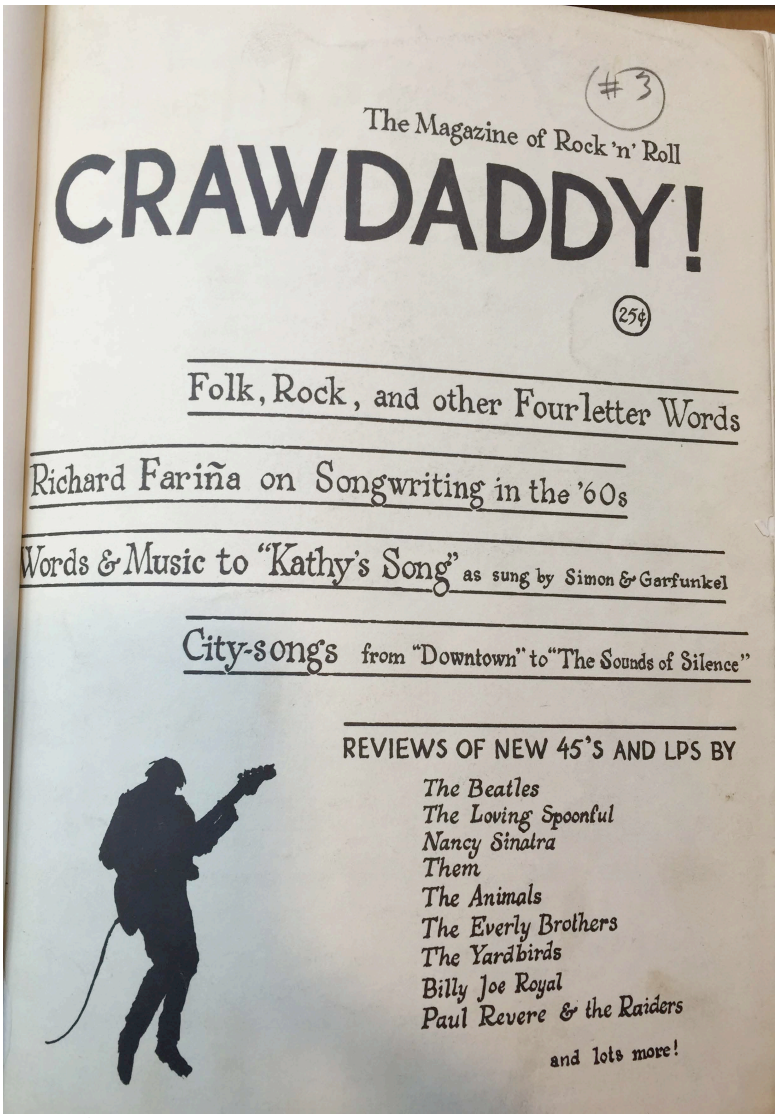

Figure 1 *Crawdaddy* Issue #3 (March 28, 1966)

[13] On rock fanzines, see Shaw, "The Real Rock 'N' Roll Underground" and Wilson, "Collector of Rock Scene Faces Crisis." There was also a tradition of writing in the so-called "alternative weeklies"; on these, see Powers, *Writing the Record: The Village Voice and the Birth of Rock Criticism*.

A glance at the third issue of the magazine reveals the amateur quality of the production. The magazine actually began while its editor, Paul Williams, was a student at Swarthmore College. While by the 1970s, the magazine had the look and content of comparable "prozines," issues for most of the '60s were essentially low budget productions written, printed, and produced by Williams himself with the occasional help of college classmates.

Periodicals were the most visible sources of rock writing. But they were only one media format within a larger literary agenda. Perhaps as dynamic was the vogue for bookwriting by rock critics, fans, and performers. Dozens of books were written about rock, encompassing a range of methods and concerns. The most well-known of these early texts are Charlie Gillett's *The Sound of the City* (1970) and Nick Cohn's *Awopbopaloobop Alopbamboom* (1969). But there were dozens, including Carl Belz's *The Story of Rock* (1969), *Rolling Stone* editor Jerry Hopkins's *The Rock Story* (1970), and Richard Meltzer's *The Aesthetics of Rock* (1970) and *Gulcher* (1972). There were even musical novels, including Garvin and Addeo's fictional account of Leadbelly's life, *The Midnight Special*, and tear-down pieces, such as Reverend David Noebel's screeds that suggested the Beatles were responsible for moral decay in the United States: *The Beatles: A Study in Sex, Drugs, and Revolution* and *Communism, Hypnotism, and the Beatles*. While Mark Mazullo is right to argue that Greil Marcus's 1975 *Mystery Train* has been widely influential in cultural studies and academic music writing, it wasn't the

first of its kind by any stretch. Really, it was the tail end of a literary movement that defined rock publishing in the 1960s and '70s.[14]

While most of those books were written as narrative histories or analytic accounts, other works took a more encyclopedic approach to popular music. Dozens of encyclopedias, anthologies, artist studies, and collections were released, including Lillian Roxon's *The Rock Encyclopedia* (1969) and Richard Goldstein's *The Poetry of Rock* (1969), a tradition that later included the famous anthology, *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock and Roll* (1976). Book editors and rock journalists alike actively pursued encyclopedic projects. Greg Shaw used his magazine *Bomp!* as a platform to release extensive articles intended to survey or anthologize various regional scenes; these often included discographies, band overviews, and other facts meant to provide depth lacking in previous writing. Even journals and academic organizations joined in the attempt to seriously study rock, including the *Journal of Popular Culture* (formed in 1967), *Journal of Popular Music and Society* (1971), The Popular Culture Association (1969), and the Department of Popular Culture at Bowling Green State University (1973).

This proliferation of scholarly interest in rock music might be termed the *rock critical project*. Central to this expansive publishing venture was the assumption that rock needed and deserved its own critical discourse, one that could treat rock with the seriousness and reverence deserved of great music. This

[14] Mazullo, "Fans and Critics."

at times even reached as far as the assumption that rock criticism needed to become, if not quite scientific, at least *disciplinary*. That is to say, critics insisted on the need for a critical method by which they could study rock with a keen ear to its particularities.

Sometimes, this was borrowed from other fields: Lillian Roxon's *Rock Encyclopedia* appealed to a modern intellectual tradition dating back at least to Diderot, Charlie Gillett's *The Sound of the City* (1970) sought to develop a serious sociological account of rock and roll, and the critic Richard Meltzer enlisted his undergraduate training in philosophy (as well as copious references to nearly every philosopher from Plato to P.F. Strawson) to produce his massive *The Aesthetics of Rock*.[15] This borrowing went as far as to bump up against the boundaries of the academy. R. Serge Denisoff, for example, used his position at the helm of the *Journal of Popular Music and Society* to plea for academics to take rock music seriously.[16]

Even when it was not conducted within the university, writers leaned on the assumption that rock writing needed a seriousness of character and quality. Carl Belz most ardently advanced this argument. In the 1972, second edition of *The Story of Rock*, Belz complained that, despite the new vogue for rock writing, little of it was substantial enough to match its subject matter. As he lamented,

> there is plenty of writing available on the subject of rock. Periodicals such as *Crawdaddy* treat it exclusively, and others, including *Time* and *Life*, offer regular features on one or another of its practitioners. Nevertheless, rock

[15] Meltzer, *The Aesthetics Of Rock*; Meltzer's book originally appeared as a *Crawdaddy* article; see Meltzer, "The Aesthetics of Rock."
[16] Dennisoff, "An Introduction."

> remains a sprawling and unclear phenomenon upon which little critical structure has been imposed. Confusion about the identity of the music is partially responsible for this situation. Many essays on the subject discuss the music in enthusiastic terms, but fail to describe clearly the inherent… nature of rock.[17]

Complete with an annotated bibliography ("Bibliographic Essay") reviewing prior writings on rock, Belz insisted on the need for a musically inflected aesthetic theory, a rock *musicology* as it were. In this spirit, Belz chastised the more essayistic style of writers like Cohn and Meltzer, accusing them of failing to write with a studiousness worthy of serious music. And though he praised Gillett for his depth of research, he accused the book of being overly sociological in defining art as a "a function of social conditions" and neglecting to value rock pieces as "objects worthy of study *in and of themselves*."[18] In so doing, Belz struck perhaps the first blow in still-running debates about whether sociology or musicology should be master of popular music studies. In the end, then, what we witness in the rock critical project is more than a simple cottage industry related pop music, but the inauguration of popular music studies.

As fascinating of a story as the rock critical project is in its own right, what I am most interested in here is the cultivation of rock music that was occurring through these sources. While contributors to the rock critical project differed in their methodologies and their sense of rock's impart, they were joined in a shared task: the refinement and theorization of rock's *classical style*. I am here bowdlerizing the notion of classical style from musicologist Charles Rosen's 1971

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[17] Belz, *The Story of Rock*, ix.
[18] Ibid., 236–237.

The Classical Style, a central text in a broader project by musicologists interested in demarcating the "musical language" that links composers of the Common Practice Era such as Mozart, Hadyn, and Beethoven. While the music and contexts of rock and classical music are of course noticeably different, there is an uncanny proximity between classical style theories of art music and rock criticism of the '60s and '70s. Rock critics applied a parallel version of Rosen's assumption that the participants in the classical style held a "common understanding of the musical language" that subsumed their particular choices, solutions, and personal idiosyncrasies.[19]

In the context of rock, this meant the insistence that a common stylistic practice unified a range of artists and songs from roughly Chuck Berry and "Rock around the Clock" to the Rolling Stones and *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band?*, that this style shaped the dynamics of rock music, and that had its own developments internal to it. Ultimately, the claim was that the classical style constituted a true musical common practice for United States culture. There were dozens of formulations of this project, with differing methods and contradictory claims about what rock and roll was. Some exalted Little Richard over Chuck Berry or Elvis, some saw the Beatles as the continuation or expansion of early rock while others saw it as rock's perversion, some saw rock's value in its link to youth culture while others praised it for avoiding the intellectualizing pitfalls that led to bookish contemplation. Many produced differing names and definitions for rock: Gillett distinguished *rock* from *rock and roll* (and diagnosed five primary forms of the latter), Nick Cohn said both constituted a single *superpop*, Robert

[19] Rosen, *The Classical Style: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven*, 23.

Duncan termed it *The Noise*, and Belz insisted that all of it was just an extension of folk music.[20] Whatever they called it, all agreed that there was a classical style, that it started somewhere in the fifties and ended somewhere in the sixties, and that it preceded whatever was coming next. Paradigmatically, then, theories of the classical style sought to develop a singular notion of rock and roll as a self-contained system.

This investigation largely began from the *musical* character of classic rock. Many writers sought to locate the features that grounded rock's style. They asked: was it a certain rhythm, the primacy of the guitar, Little Richard's voice, or something else defined the classical style? Was it the sum total of hit songs, the lessons the Beatles learned from Chuck Berry, something weirder and unspeakable? What musically separated Chuck Berry and the Beatles from James Taylor and Alice Cooper? These sorts of questions also had a range of answers, from James D. Graham's "Rhythms in Rock Music," (published in the inaugural issue of the *Journal of Popular Music and Society*) which attempted to ground rock in its rhythmic character, to Nick Cohn's attempt to locate rock in the fusion of black and white musical genres.[21]

But if an account of musical material was at stake in these discussions, the question ultimately proved to be about something deeper than *mere* stylistic features. Really, critics were asking through their investigation: what was the social character of the classical style? This social theory was voiced most explicitly by Greil Marcus in his large 1971 essay for *Creem*, "Rock-a Hula Clarified." When

[20] Gillett, *The Sound Of The City*; Cohn, *Rock From the Beginning*; Duncan, *The Noise*; Belz, *The Story of Rock*.
[21] Graham, "Rhythms in Rock Music"; Cohn, *Rock From the Beginning*.

Marcus's essay later reappeared in modified form as the prologue for *Mystery Train*, the essay was trimmed and its protagonist, Little Richard, was downplayed in history to make space for broader arguments about Elvis and Robert Johnson. But in its earlier form, Marcus used Little Richard to launch an elegiac meditation on rock *in toto*. For Marcus, rock was not just the style of any particular artist or defined by form or beat, but rather a kind of hidden truth about what held together America as a spiritual community:

> The secret was the rock, a frantic parade of novelty and sound, put together by strange men and boys who dumped little musical events on us for over a decade, until the disorganized series of events formed itself into something Dave Marsh calls our aesthetic myth… [T]his myth of ours came to be understood as a kind of culturally secret parallel history for a community that recognized itself as such only through the rock. We began to see that the sound of the bye-gone Fifties had been a means to a sense of freedom and a testing ground for values, that Top 40 had given us an idea of the choices that we made and that we made and that were being made for us.[22]

For Marcus, rock and roll thus comprised a style not just as a set of musical descriptors, then, but a full-blown, unified worldview.

Marcus put a curious spin on rock polling. He gave the example of the Rolling Stones' "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction," which won the title of best rock song in many magazine polls. Marcus claimed that this verdict didn't just reflect the favorite song of magazine readers. He insisted that in writing in, fans were really casting a vote for the kind of community they wanted to live in, seeking to define the shared values and meanings that comprised rock and roll's musical

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[22] Marcus, "Rock-A Hula Clarified," 38.

world. Thus, Marcus reasoned, they weren't just commenting about what they thought was a good song, but a musical standard fit to bear the burdens of democracy. Ultimately, then, they were asking: "What song was good enough, strong enough, to carry that weight?"[23]

Enter, stage left… rockism.

IV. Velvet Underground & Melancholy

Read today, that's an odd thought. If some accounts approached hagiography, Marcus was speaking about rock and roll in almost mythical terms. Indeed, his meditations on rock and roll as a unified spiritual community almost keeps stride with German philosophy's most grandiose musings on the ancient Greeks, as if *Mystery Train* might as well be Heidegger's "On the Origin of the Work of Art" repurposed for the music of… Las Vegas Elvis?!

In this sense, theorists like Marcus were literally *classicizing*, attempting to think of rock and roll as the (fallen) harmonious expression of a bygone democratic worldview. Marcus was echoing a tradition in modern German aesthetic theory, one that saw art as the democratic expression of social values in sensuous form. This tradition linked a range of theorists, from early writers like Lessing, Winckelmann, and Hegel, to twentieth century writers like Heidegger; they and many others showered praise on ancient Greek art in particular, and endorsed a theory that art garnered force through its social content (this was

[23] Ibid., 39.

even true of Adorno who, despite his hostility to classicism, at least contemptuously cast a parallel between the younger Beethoven and Hegel in their utopian desire to transform the "imprisonment of the bourgeois spirit within itself into a driving force").[24] The most ardent classicist was probably Johann Winckelmann, whose pioneering *History of the Art of Antiquity* (1764) – one of the first contributions to the tradition of art history – cast a tragic hue on modern art. His conclusion to the book lamented the passing of Greek art, arguing that to be modern was to miss what came before:

> Although contemplating the collapse of art has driven me nearly to despair, still, like someone who, in writing the history of his native land, must touch upon the destruction that he himself has witnessed, I could not keep myself from gazing after the fate of works of art as far as my eye could see. Just as a beloved stands on the seashore and follows with tearful eyes her departing sweetheart, with no hope of seeing him again, and believes she can glimpse even in the distant sail the image of her lover – so we, like the lover, have as it were only a shadowy outline of the subject of our desires remaining. But this arouses so much the greater longing for what is lost, and we examine the copies we have with greater attention than we would if we were in full possession of the originals. In this, we often are like individuals who wish to converse with spirits and believe they can see something where nothing exists… Had the ancients been poorer, they would have written better about art: compared to them, we are like badly portioned heirs; but we turn over every stone.[25]

Winckelmann's elegiac remembrance of Greek art's former glory matches the tone of Marcus, who too regarded rock and roll recordings as a set of artifacts left behind, the final traces of a once-glorious culture. So too does he anticipate Marcus's turn toward criticism in the wake of art. Winckelmann writes that the

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[24] Adorno, *Beethoven*, 16.
[25] Winckelmann, *History of the Art of Antiquity*, 351.

Greeks had no need for criticism and debate, since their art harmoniously expressed the values of their society.

Framed in that light, it should be clear that, more than strange, there is something suspicious at play in the rock critical project. The second dimension that should become obvious is the conservatism that underlies edenic musings on the glories of the 1950s, or alarmist claims that the Beatles destroyed rock and roll's innocence. Much of the rock critical project's idealizing of rock can be read as a form of the "boomer triumphalism" that Kevin Dettmar argues animated messianic writings on the death of rock during the seventies.[26] Few thoughts are more self-congratulatory than the claim that rock was perfected by 1963, that its moment had passed and could not be repeated in 1972, that it even needed its own scientific methods to curate its memory. Though rockism only gained a name in the Web 2.0 era, it began in earnest at the end of the 1960s.[27]

Moreover, as has been argued by a range of theorists, from recent critics of rockism to historians including Keir Keightly and Jack Hamilton, such myths largely functioned to conceal the uneven character of rock and roll fandom. This work has shown that rock's mythological edifice was built on selective acts of ignoring and plundering from minority cultures, groups that have only been granted partial inclusion in rock during the 1960s (and since).[28]

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[26] Dettmar, *Is Rock Dead?*, 26.
[27] On rockism, see Sanneh, "The Rap Against Rockism" and Loss, "No Apologies."
[28] Keightley, "Reconsidering Rock"; Hamilton, *Just Around Midnight*.

If, as I initially suggested, rock critics advanced theories of punk, this would suggest that the genre holds a share of guilt in rock's conservative mythologizing. Indeed, many of punk's early champions were also the same people curating rock's classical style; Greg Shaw and Greil Marcus were early commentators to use the term *punk*, and punk artists like Lenny Kaye and Patti Smith wrote pieces reflecting their interest in earlier rock styles.[29]

This warrants rethinking conventional wisdoms about punk. In the late seventies and eighties, theorists largely thought about punk through the lens of theories like postmodernism, which stressed punk's fragmentary and avant-garde character. Early luminaries in rock studies like Marcus, Dick Hebdige, Simon Frith, and others exalted punk for its use of pastiche, its eclecticism, and its irreverence.[30] In such accounts, punk stood as a musical (and often social) deconstruction of what came before. Punk exposed the truth of society, tearing down its constitutive myths and leaving smoldering rubble in their place.

The "punk as postmodernism" framework has been especially productive for discussions of British punk artists like the Sex Pistols, the Slits, and Gang of Four, all of whom seem to exemplify punk's deconstructive character through the disruption of social and artistic convention. While it might also speak to a limited extent about artists like Blondie and Talking Heads (see chapter 4 for an alternative account), postmodernism is a limited angle for theorizing American punk. Especially in the earliest years of punk's circulation as a category, whether

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[29] Kaye, "The Best of Acappella"; Smith, "Todd's Electric Exploitation: Rock and Roll for the Skull."
[30] Frith, *Sound Effects*; Frith, "Formalism, Realism, and Leisure: The Case of Punk"; Grossberg, "Is There Rock after Punk?"; Hebdige, *Subculture*; Marcus, *Lipstick Traces*.

in Marcus's classicist musings on Little Richard or the relative traditionalism of the Stooges (at least when compared to groups like the Sex Pistols and Gang of Four), much of American punk's story simply lacks the sheer nihilism that the thesis attributed to punk.

For these reasons and others, many critics are today participating in a reversal of this old adage about punk's revolutionary character. In many such accounts, punk artists participated in much more conventional projects of community-building, nostalgia, and even the search for authenticity.[31] Simon Reynolds has put this most explicitly, re-reading New York punk *in toto* as a form of *retroness* dedicated to the preservation of rock and roll ideals.[32]

In a 1980 essay, "Formalism, Realism, and Leisure," Simon Frith provides a suggestive frame to grasp these twin visions for punk. One, the *realist* account, corresponds to the restorative reading of punk. Realist readings of punk treat it almost like folk music, generally seeking correspondence between social realities and musical language. These theories largely seek to ground punk in the classical style. They generally accept punk's retro status through the assumption that it continues to work within classical rhetoric, even seeking to purify its language in order to restore a harmonious relationship to musical form. Meanwhile, the *formalist* account generally maps onto the postmodern theory of punk. For Frith, formalist theories frame punk as a musical intervention into the problem of

[31] See Crossley, *Networks of Sound, Style, and Subversion*, which interprets punk as a fairly emblematic social network; Shank, *The Political Force of Musical Beauty,* which understands Patti Smith to be largely interested in rock authenticity.
[32] Reynolds, "No Future."

musical meaning, turning toward avant-gardism as an admission of the failures of the musical vernacular of the 1950s and '60s.[33]

In the end, Frith was a partisan of the formalist reading of punk. He championed avant-gardists like Gang of Four above realist punk, something that surely felt urgent given the Left's often-unrestrained enthusiasm for simplistic political punk at the turn of the eighties.[34] Frith's frame is less helpful today for helping us to choose a side than it is for its diagnosis of a constitutive tension within punk. I would argue that punk has from its earliest moments been torn between realist and formalist ambitions, tendencies that have at times been prominent in different forms of punk but have never truly eradicated the alternative.

Early punk criticism itself oscillated within the space between realism and formalism. If by the early seventies, theories of the classical style brought realism to the fore, anti-realism was also pervasive among critics. Generally, the term punk often did not neatly map onto mere realist nostalgia. Rather, many of punk's early theorists were split about rock's fate, with many voicing suspicion of rock conservatism. Greil Marcus himself was no friend of empty tradition. He of course later reversed his line with *Lipstick Traces*, but even texts during the seventies championed the experimental aspects of punk and castigated rock

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[33] Frith, "Formalism, Realism, and Leisure," 166–171.
[34] For more on this, see Frith's attack on politicizing British punk, presented in Frith, "Beyond the Dole Queue: The Politics of Punk."

nostalgia (as in his 1971 tear-down piece on the Rolling Stones' "Brown Sugar," which he called reactionary for its racist depiction of black female sexuality).[35]

Others were even more aggressive in the fight against rock classicism. In a well-known 1972 *New Yorker* piece, "Into the Seventies for Real," critic Ellen Willis chided restorative visions of rock and roll and called the assumption that the 1950s were a perfect time misguided. Ultimately, she argued, such elated visions of the fifties lead to regressiveness akin to the election of Nixon, remarking that, "the anti-sixties backlash is an anachronism even before it begins."[36] A similar hostility toward retro nostalgia was widespread in critics who questioned the merits of the rock critical project. Dick Fountain insisted that questions about the Velvet Underground's style were best left to "rock musicologist historian academic wankers to pick over."[37] Tom Smucker went even further, deriding the obsession with oldies, reissues, and anthologies that emerged from the rock critical project. He concluded that nostalgia had become "boring," writing, "when I thought I might get a job as a rock critic I tried boning up with a long-winded history of rock 'n' roll and quit halfway through. It was like being an English lit major in college and having to read 'The Faerie Queen' again. Or sitting through some famous old movie you didn't really enjoy."[38]

Ultimately, neither the realist nor the avant-garde framework quite gets the story right. Traditionalism is an odd charge to leverage at later punk artists like Talking Heads or the Contortions, who are far from rock conservatives. Even

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[35] E.g. Marcus, "Patti Smith Exposes Herself"; Marcus, "Sticky Fingers."
[36] Willis, "Into the Seventies, for Real," 170.
[37] Quoted in Heylin, *All Yesterdays' Parties*, 182.
[38] Smucker, "When Punk Rock Met the Vietcong," 45.

early groups from punk are a poor fit for such a charge. Take the Velvet Underground, who were both hailed as punk pioneers and played concurrently to many of the 1960s artists. A song like “I’m Waiting for the Man,” singing odes to heroin and despair, shies away from the Elysian vision of social life offered by Marcus.

Interestingly, the Velvet Underground inspired a great deal of debate in their day exactly centered on their relative relationship to rock and roll. One of the central concerns of many early VU critics was delineating what made the group musically exceptional when compared to Anglo-American rock artists, and their art pedigree offered a tantalizing ground for those who wanted to argue that they broke with the classical style. Many commentators remarked on the group’s appearance. Their penchant for black outfits and dark sunglasses set them aside from the colorful psychedelia that characterized many of their peers:

Figure 2 Nico, Andy Warhol, and the Velvet Underground (Gerard Malanga, 1966)

Commentators also likened the group's music to something standing at odds with the ideals of the 1960s. Reviewing the group's first album, Timothy Jacobs expressed a fairly commonplace attitude that the group's incomprehensibility freed them from rock. He wrote:

> "the Velvet Underground produces a type of music that is distinctly different from American popular music… [It] is a full-fledged attack on the ears and on the brain. Using devices such as controlled feedback and a shrieking electric viola, the Velvet Underground attacks, grates, screams, and pounds on the eardrums until the mind is virtually reduced to oatmeal."[39]

Jacobs was clear: the Velvet Underground were not just experimental, but "distinctly different from American popular music." They stand at odds with the classical style, standing miles away from the solidarity that unified Marcus's edenic musical culture.

Curiously though, commentators often pushed back against the incomprehensibility narrative. Indeed, it was common to frame the Velvets as traditionalists, however curious their strain of traditionalism appeared to be. Many, including Lester Bangs, Lenny Kaye, Tom Mancuso, and Nigel Trevena, remarked on the group's strong grounding in the classical style.[40] Robert Somma put the argument perhaps most emphatically, insisting that the Velvets were simply a continuation of the lessons of rock's early greats. He insisted that the Velvets were no different from Jerry Lewis and Buddy Holly, and simply continued their legacy:

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[39] Heylin, *All Yesterdays' Parties*, 51–52, as well as the entries by Jahn and Williams; see also Glueck, "Syndromes Pop Ad Delmonico's: Andy Warhol and His Gang Meet the Psychiatrist."
[40] See the entries by Bangs, Kaye, and Mancuso in Heylin, *All Yesterdays' Parties*; see also Trevena, *Lou Reed and the Velvets*.

> They play rock and their figures are not obviously complex… [they have an insight] about the essential nature of rock; they recognize its basic rudimental simplicity of appeal and production, its reliance upon apparently rough-cut rhythmic diamonds for the purposes of decorating a sentiment, a belief, a discovery. The understood long ago how briefly rock would stand if it were based upon patterns too far-ranging and convoluted for a bass guitar and a drum to support. Early rock may not have approached the situational profundity of the present – but no one has gone very far beyond it in arrangement and instrumentative *conception*… The Velvets are made whole by such a conception – one which doesn't ignore complexity, but chooses to avoid it [sic].[41]

Perceived as both on the vanguard of rock experimentalism and one of rock's chief conservators, the group is in a curious place within rock criticism.

If Somma was perhaps understating the avant-gardism of the Velvet Underground, he at least perceived something curious about the group: for all of their avant-credentials and experimentation, the Velvet Underground's music is saturated with rock and roll history. Indeed, more than just a group that might be arguably categorized as rock, the Velvets' were practically rock historiographers. Throughout their career, the group drew on an impressive range of sources, from classic rock and roll to pop ballads and girl groups to country music. The group's 1970 album *Loaded* as a whole might be heard as a kind of homage to the classical style. But many songs on *Velvet Underground and Nico* and White *Light/White Heat*, both notable for lengthy experimental works, are basically traditional rock numbers.

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[41] Heylin, *All Yesterdays' Parties*, 90–91.

Equally interesting is the flexibility the Velvets' displayed with genres. Not just writing songs in an eclectic range of rock styles, they even substituted genres for one another in the process of reworking them. The recording history of "Heroin" is curious given the iconicity of that song's sound. On the group's *Ludlow Street Demos* (recorded at Cale's apartment on the Lower East Side's Ludlow St. in 1965), the song is recorded as a kind of dreamy folk tune, complete with Lou Reed's vocals sung in imitation of Bob Dylan. By the time of *Velvet Underground and Nico* (1967), the song was reworked into the well-known drone number that exemplifies for many audiences the sound of the group in the 1960s. But that was no final version of the song; Reed reworked it for his 1974 live release, *Rock and Roll Animal*, adding Dick Wagner and Steve Hunter's dueling twin guitars and screaming keyboard to create a glam epic worthy of Mott the Hoople or even mid-seventies arena rock.

The group did bring a degree of irony and interchangeability to their engagements with genre. This act of substitution was not unnoticed by commentators. Interviewing Reed for *Open City* in 1969, Ramblin' Jim Martin commented on the seeming variability of their songs. Reed evaded the question, simply saying that they changed songs simply to make them more enjoyable to perform.[42] But this interchangeability marked for many commentators a lack of sincerity on the part of the group, a thread that was persistent throughout their career. Reviewing the Exploding Plastic Inevitable in 1966, Paul Jay Robbins argued upon seeing the group, "the inevitable conclusion is that all is plastic… sterile, mechanistic, anti-human and transparent… their sound is… jaded and

[42] Ibid., 111.

abstracted."[43] Sandy Perlman even reached the conclusion that the group meant to bring this ironic detachment, arguing, "we gotta assume they're absolutely distant from what they perform with such dedication: I mean we can question their sincerity. And this question is always there. Always nagging at everything they do. Their cynicism's really so efficient."[44]

Whether or not anyone in the group intended to make cynical music, it is not difficult to hear irreverence in the group's deployment and redeployment of canonic rock genres. In her essay contribution for Greil Marcus's 1979 anthology, *Stranded*, Ellen Willis commented at length on the group's seeming tension between sincerity and irony. On the one hand, Willis noted, the Velvets at least had a strong classical streak. She noted their saturation with rock history, writing that they group was, "more or less consciously using the basic formal canons of rock and roll as material… and refining, elaborating, playing off that material."[45] On the other hand, Willis concluded that, if there was anything the Velvets shied away from, it was the classicism that characterized adorational writing on rock and roll. Far from disciples of rock's universality, she remarked, the Velvet Underground were paradigmatically punk in that "they can't really take themselves seriously as rock-and-rollers."[46] Willis concluded that the group's odd proximity to and resistance to the classical ideal made them ironists. She insisted that the group stood at exactly the tension between musical classicism and its

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[43] Ibid., 16–17.
[44] Ibid., 63.
[45] Willis, "Velvet Underground," 73.
[46] Ibid., 77.

own ideals pushed to an extreme, "the sound of the edge fraying." Ultimately, she wrote, they "posed a radical split between body and spirit."[47]

Willis was getting close to entering rather lofty metaphysical terrain with this latter categorization. Indeed, her *Stranded* piece concludes with an elegant plea for the Velvet's as a kind of spiritual resistance to nihilism, suggesting that rock pointed toward a form of spiritual elevation in the reunification of soul and body.

Though I'd like to bypass quite such grand concerns, I would argue that there is something musically perceptive about this categorization. In his *Aesthetics*, Hegel argued that, if there was one thing classicism refused, it was a split between "body" and "spirit."[48] By this, Hegel meant that classicism depended on a unity of its expressive action and social values. According to Hegel, classicism aspired toward an accordance between, 1. *form* – the aesthetic materials that comprised artworks, such as song structures, styles of representation in sculpture, brush techniques, and so on, and 2. *content* – the social values expressed (eg. youthful hedonism, divine reverence). Hegel's classicists created artworks who saw their formal and social values as in accordance, saw their artworks directly in service of rendering such values. This should seem straightforward, recalling that the message of Winckelmann and Marcus; both sought to argue that their respective canons not only looked and sounded good, but did so in a fashion that made them expressive of the good in their moment.

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[47] Ibid., 75 and 78.
[48] Hegel, *Hegel's Aesthetics*, 434.

Hegel contrasted this with ironic modes of representation, ones that depended on the rift between content and form. For Hegel, irony embodied a doubled sense of doubt of the fitness of social virtues and art, paired with a longing for them. As he wrote, irony was a doubled sense of cynicism and longing for reconciliation:

> Irony is, on the one hand, the vanity of everything, factual, moral, and of intrinsic worth, the nullity of everything objective and absolutely valid… on the other hand, [it is a failure to] find satisfaction in this self-enjoyment and instead become inadequate to itself, so that it now feels a craving for the solid and the substantial, for specific and essential interests… the subject does want to penetrate into truth and longs for objectivity, but… cannot renounce his isolation and withdraw into himself or tear himself free from this unsatisfied abstract inwardness.[49]

In other words, Hegel's irony depended on a rift between form and value, betraying a longing for accordance that otherwise felt implausible. For the ironist, the classical style is both true and false. It is a model of truth that, though bearing no truth itself, stands in for the general sorrow of a lack of truth that would otherwise be longed for.

This *longing for* is critical. Hegel's notion of irony was characterized by its deep melancholy, a sorrowful rather than smug or pleased sense of the end of classicism's authority. The historical materialist tradition has long been interested in the notion of melancholy. In *Minima Moralia*, Adorno characterized his own philosophical project as stemming from the perspective of "the melancholy science" ("Die traurige Wissenschaft"). He later returned to the

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[49] Ibid., 66.

notion, noting that the avant-garde's aesthetic autonomy was its source of power and irrelevance; this, he argued, was the "the melancholy of art."[50] Benjamin also dedicated significant attention to the idea of melancholy, treating it as a central trope in his early study of German "Trauerspiel" (literally, "mourning play.").[51] The philosopher Gillian Rose, in her final book *Mourning Becomes Law*, remarked that melancholy above all was defined by its *aberated* status, an interrupted and sustained lack of closure born from the breakdown of classical authority. As she wrote, this condition inspired:

> Baroque melancholia immersed in the world of soulless and unredeemed bodies… There can be *no work*, no exploring of the legacy of ambivalence, working through the contradictory emotions aroused by bereavement. Instead, the remains of the dead one will be incorporated into the soul of the one who cannot mourn and will manifest themselves in some all too physical symptom, the allegory of incomplete mourning.[52]

In other words, melancholy constituted a sense of prolonged dwelling within absent authority, of being unable to wholly mourn and move on from what came before. Melancholia was a sense of being after the past, but not liberated from the past.

This provides a helpful framework in which to understand the Velvet's ironic continuation of classical rock. They were melancholics within the rock tradition, working within rock even as they cast doubt on Marcus's triumphalist narratives. This was played out in the formal register. That is to say, on the one hand, the Velvets play with musical configurations. They used genre(s) for effect.

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[50] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 53; Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 15.
[51] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*.
[52] Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*, 70.

And they did so by using genre as genre, or genre-*qua*-genre: genre that signals its status as genre, immediately intelligible as a set of musical conventions. And yet, on the other hand, these genre usages are largely at odds with the implicit meanings, values, and social norms that correspond to those genres. Even as these genres appear in recognizable forms (doo wop, rock and roll, country, etc.) they seldom convey values that link up neatly to those genres. Take "Heroin": what does it mean to have a folk song detailing the experience of heroin usage? Or, "White Light/White Heat," a driving rocker exalting the feeling of being on speed? Or again, "That's the Story of My Life," a breezy country number pointing out that the difference between wrong and right no longer matters because "both of those words are dead"?

This melancholic irony heavily saturates The Velvets' "I'm Waiting for the Man." This tune also has its own curious version history. On the *Ludlow Street Demos*, it like "Heroin" is recorded as a Dylan-esque downhome copy. When the group performed live (as on the *Live 1969* disc), they often transformed it into a laid back, blues-rock number. I hear the album version of "I'm Waiting for the Man" as a pretty typical pop song of the mid-sixties. It's hard for me to not to hear echoes of girl groups, saturated as it is with the driving rhythmic grooves that punctuate the accompaniment of a song like the Ronettes' "Be My Baby" or the Crystals' "Da Doo Ron Ron."

As Susan Douglas has argued, girl group music "burrowed into the everyday psychodramas of [young women's] adolescence," encapsulating the tensions between sentimentality and sensuality, love and lust, the public and

personal expectations wrestled with by teenagers in the 1960s. She claims that girl group music depended on a deep sense of identification, of the feeling that, in her words, "the songs were ours."[53] Mentioning girl groups is not intended to suggest either kinship or contest between the VU and the Ronettes. I have no idea if Reed was thinking about any of these or other related issues in writing a song like "I'm Waiting for the Man." Indeed, the song is an obvious outlier in this context. A song about a trip to East Harlem to meet a heroin dealer, the song deals with a topic far too taboo for even (the already rather sexually suggestive music of) girl groups. This difference was an interpretive line predictably of interest to rock critics eager to elevate nascent punk rock over alternatives in the musical world. It was also one that trivialized teenage women's experiences, if not engaged in outright sexism. After all, it was Mike Jahn, the *New York Times* rock critic and an early champion of the Velvet Underground, who Douglas observed called girl groups the "low point in the history of rock 'n' roll…"[54]

More interesting than Jahn's (now absurd) turf war about sentiment and seriousness is conceptualizing the ways that "I'm Waiting" stands both outside and inside of rock music of its day. In a perverse sort of way, "I'm Waiting for the Man" is actually a model contribution to the musical world of the girl groups. The song details anticipation and longing, a search for fulfillment, a tension between anxiety and hopefulness. On a schematic level, then, the song hardly stands apart from alternatives of its day. This lyrical message is musically reinforced. "I'm Waiting" defines its affect through its proximity to the musical conventions of a

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[53] Douglas, *Where The Girls Are: Growing Up Female with Mass Media*, 85–88.
[54] Quoted in Ward, Stokes, and Tucker, *Rock of Ages: The Rolling Stone History of Rock and Roll*, 275.

group like the Ronettes or the Shirelles. The song deploys a churning rhythmic groove, hammered out by steady eighth note rhythm guitar and a tambourine that echoes the percussive layers Phil Spector peppered over "Be My Baby." The rhythmic propulsion of the song is reinforced by a basic I-IV-V progression, inflected with a chromatic neighbor III chord. Mostly built around a churning alteration between D major and G major triads, the song intersperses an ascending harmonic pattern that cycles D major - F# major - G major - A major; the entrance of that F# chord in particular creates a striking, propulsive sense of harmonic drive.

Simply put, then, the Velvets are evoking the affective force of rock music in their day. The rub, of course, is that the persons and the outcomes are all wrong. The desire evoked is the alleviation of heroin withdrawal; the journey is not one toward the promise of love or adult autonomy but a trip across the jagged, racially segregated geography of New York City; and the uncertainty isn't about true love deferred or the possibility of sexual experimentation, but whether or not Reed's protagonist will find his dealer, waiting palm out, ready to engage in a simple heroin transaction.

A running question lingering about the Velvet Underground's drug-themed songs like "Heroin" or "White Light/White Heat" concerns the extent to which such songs endorse or critique their subject matter.[55] I would argue that the song displays a form of circularity that seems to undermine its general, progressive motion. On a formal level, "I'm Waiting" is essentially modular; the

[55] E.g. Shank, *The Political Force of Musical Beauty*, 138–143.

group vamps the I-IV progression, interrupting each cycle with a single iteration of the I-III-IV-V progression as Reed reaches the third line of each stanza of text (e.g. "up to Lexington, 1 2 5"). Each module concludes with the iteration of the line "I'm waiting for my man." This structure gives a highly repetitive character to the song. While the song builds in intensity in the midst of each stanza (around that III chord), it returns to its starting place by the end. Ultimately, the song is rather flatline, and it is hard to hear it as any sort of triumph. If that final, jubilant chorus of "Be My Baby" hints that resolution is in store, "I'm Waiting for My Man" winds around back to where it began. It suggests that the narrator will begin the journey to 125th and Lexington again soon… that we will continue an aberated act of mourning the classical style's loss of power.

V. Punk as Rock Avant-Garde

Ultimately, if punk stands aside from the classical style but was saturated with it, we might think of punk as an avant-garde tradition from within the musical world of rock. This in itself isn't a bold claim. A standard line of commentary (inherited from the postmodern theorists and often advanced by they themselves), is that punk works like an art movement rather a rock tradition. Critics from Greil Marcus to Bernard Gendron have long argued for punk's similarity to art. Largely, this argument has taken the form of analogy, arguments that punk is analogous to or works in a similar fashion to famous movements from art history. Greil Marcus, for example, argued that – despite a

general lack of historical or social continuities – the Sex Pistols evinced a spiritual similarity to earlier avant-gardes like dada and situationism.

The argument for punk's art exceptionalism was advanced even more emphatically by the art critic Robert Garnett in a 1999 essay on the Sex Pistols published in the collection *Punk Rock: So What?*. There, Garnett argued that punk artists like the Pistols stood aside from both rock and art:

> What is it about *Never Mind the Bollocks* that makes it stand out from anything else in the history of popular music?... Perhaps there is no single means of explaining the phenomenon that was punk at its best, but what does seem clear is that the Pistols were singing from somewhere else, someplace that hadn't existed before and that only existed for a brief moment in time. It was a zone that was neither high nor low; it was a space between art and pop... [W]hat made punk singular [was] that within that space bands like the Pistols created something that couldn't be made within art or pop, or anywhere else for that matter.[56]

Garnett's point was that the Pistols departed from popular music in a fashion akin to the avant-garde's own departures with institutional art (he echoes many in evoking avant-garde techniques such as situationist *détournement*). In so doing, Garnett concluded, punk become as much like French avant-gardes as it was like any rock music that came before.

Some analogies have been helpful for calling attention to punk's complicated relationship to the classical style and its own internal dynamism; Bernard Gendron's account of punk's avant-gardism, for example, argues forcefully for punk's presence in an "art-pop dialectic" (and thus, for thinking of punk's dalliances with art as varied, polemical in tone, and subject to constant

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[56] Garnett, "Too Low to Be Low: Art Pop and the Sex Pistols," 17.

reappraisal or even abandonment).[57] Even so, many analogists of punk and art have tended lean on art movements in a fashion that simply replicates attempts to read punk in terms of prior rock history.

An obvious limitation of this approach is that it quickly slips into the terrain of legitimation. Garnett's story, for example, becomes one about punk's excellence, its exceptionality within popular music because it bathes in art's glowing light. This is easy to dismiss. Especially today, when art itself hardly holds much capital, there is little gained by proving that punk belongs in the art history textbooks growing dusty on university bookshelves. Moreover, the "punk as art" narrative often plays into a tendency, inherited from aesthetic theory more generally, to think of the avant-garde ahistorically. Construed as an act of refusal, avant-gardism is taken to be an act of dismissal of the past, of radically overcoming that which came before. This standpoint saturates the theory of Peter Bürger, whose popular *Theory of the Avant-Garde* argues that in negating autonomy as an institution, the avant-garde is freed from its inheritances from to the art world.[58]

Instead, it is more helpful to think of punk as an avant-garde *from within* rock. Punk was a consciousness of punk's ruptures with the past, even as it took cues from the past. The philosopher Jay Bernstein has forcefully advanced a theory of avant-gardism that takes seriously its relationship to inherited materials. In his 2006 book *Against Voluptuous Bodies*, Bernstein formalizes a

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[57] Gendron, *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club*.
[58] Burger, *Theory Of the Avant-Garde*.

post-Adornian account of avant-gardism in the context of what he calls "pictorial modernism" (essentially, visual arts such as painting and photography).

Bernstein argues that, *contra* common misreadings of Adorno (and of avant-gardism more generally), the term autonomy does not characterize asocial visions of artistic transcendence. Rather, Bernstein claims that the term characterizes a certain fraught relationship between artworks and the (highly social) aesthetic norms that bind the art world together. Adorno's modernism is a self-referential art, one that takes as its vocation the exploration of its own history and limitations. Moreover, this is not a simple act of mining history for the discovery of new resources, the common heroic understanding of modernism as stylistic progress. Rather, avant-garde artworks are those that display a doubled sense of identification with and doubt about the normative force of artistic practices. Autonomy signals not triumphant escape from society, but art beleaguered under its social conditions. Pressed against the wall, autonomous art fails. To be avant-garde, then, is to show that it might soon be *too late* for art.[59]

Bernstein's focus is on visual art from various art traditions (his repertoire stems from the Dutch masters to the photographer Cindy Sherman). A parallel theory of avant-gardism was formalized in all-but-name by Lester Bangs across his corpus. Bangs rejected the conservatism of rock historians even as he argued for continuities between punk and rock. In his 1971 *Bomp!* essay "James Taylor Marked for Death," Bangs provides a long account of classic rock that goes well beyond the narrow interest in amateurism or retroness that is often projected

[59] Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies: Late Modernism and the Meaning of Painting*, 2–10.

onto him.[60] Bangs wrote at length to suggest that what he was most interested in with the classical style was not its simplicity, but its applicability to youth experience. For him, the classical style detailed,

> successive chapters in a suite in progress which was actually nothing more than a gigantic party whose collective ambition was simple: to keep the party going and jive and rave and kick em out cross the decades and only stop for the final Bomb or some technological maelstrom of sonic bliss sucking the cities away at last. Because the Party was the one thing we had in our lives to grab onto, the only thing we could truly believe in and depend on, a loony tune fountain of youth and vitality that was keeping us alive as much as any medicine we'd ever take or all the fresh air in Big Sur, it sustained us without engulfing us and gave us a nexus of metaphor through which we could refract less infinitely extensible concerns and learn a little bit more about ourselves an what was going on without even, incredibly enough, getting pretentious about it. We didn't really exactly know what it meant in the larger more 'profound' scheme of things (although we really did know in our bones and just hadn't gotten around to turning it into a form of scholasticism and self-psychoanalysis yet), but we damn sure knew what we needed.[61]

If Bangs was getting close to Marcus's Little Richard essay in linking rock to the social character of youth culture, he departed quickly. The former writer regarded rock as a lost ideal for the turn of the seventies. Bangs rejected the totalizing optimism that many critics projected onto the classical style. He claimed that, because of its newfound significance, it increasingly tended toward self-congratulation rather than enjoyment as the 1970s emerged. Indeed, he claimed,

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[60] E.g. Dettmar, *Is Rock Dead?*, 85–87. Dettmar curiously generates a reading of Lester Bangs as a rock alarmist based on Philip Seymour Hoffman's character from *Almost Famous*. His account of Lester Bangs' penchant for adolescence is more forceful, but what follows should constitute my disagreement with his reading.

[61] Bangs, "James Taylor Marked for Death: What We Need Is a Lot Less Jesus and a Whole Lot More Troggs!," 68.

the classical style had become a readymade template for artists (and critics) to elevate themselves above the heard:

> The prime effect of all this vast intense rush toward a million eddies and vectors of Involvement was that American kids began in larger numbers all the times to take themselves with the utmost seriousness, both as individuals and a vaguely mystically defined mass class… So everybody put in overtime soul-searching. Everything was scrutinized, dissected, acidized, turned sideways and inside out to gut every last drop of mystery, either that or treated with a kind of wax-paper filtered reverence, as if mystery and obscurity was the whole thing and no one had a right to disturb what was whole and holy in its primal unrationalized objectness.

Ultimately, Bangs lamented, rock was not in trouble because of Beatles-esque complexity, but because "we got caught up in the whirlwind of Our Consciousness of Ourselves as Our Generation."[62]

Bangs's various essays present differing visions of what he saw as the alternative to rock's self-conscious vanguardism. The one that sets him apart from his peers in the rock critical project is the 1970 *Creem* essay, "Of Pop Pies and Fun." Framed as a review of the Stooges' 1970 album *Funhouse*, Bangs provides what is really a massive philosophical treatise on rock's classical style, the politics of the 1960s, and the future of music.

Bangs highlighted Iggy Pop and the Stooges because he believed them to be unique among rock artists of their day. For Bangs, the group seemed to stare directly into the face of rock's crisis. Whereas many seemed satisfied with the present and others seemed desperate to turn back the clocks to a golden age of rock, Iggy Pop was something else. Of course, Bangs acknowledged that the

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[62] Ibid.

Stooges were grounded in many of the features of the classical style. The group seemed simple, teenage, amateur, and so hinted at the exactly the kind of naiveté that critics saw to be formative in the early rock years.

But Bangs didn't stop there. He observed that for many, the Stooges seem *too* simple, *too* amateurish, *too* teenage. Indeed, he worried, there was almost something embarrassing about the group's distance from the professionalism of current artists, "who never make fools of themselves the way that Stooge punk does."[63] Given this, Bangs argued that we should resist the notion that the Stooges marked some triumphant continuation of rock's bygone glory days. Bangs conceded: "you're goddamn right Iggy Stooge is a damn fool."[64] He spun everything that might link the Stooges to the golden age of rock into a mark of their inadequacy for a new age of rock professionalism: what appeared teenage was essentially "adolescent drivel," what seemed amateur was "crazed uncertainty," their simplicity "errant foolishness."[65]

Far from heroically restoring the classical style, the Stooges seemed to *fail*. And for Bangs, that was exactly the point. He insisted that if the Stooges seemed both out of touch with the times and a cartoonish return to the past, this was exactly what made them interesting. For Bangs, the Stooges offered a diagnosis of the woes of rock, presenting anxieties about rock in musical form; they were, he remarked, "willing to make fools of themselves, absolutely jump off the deep end

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[63] Bangs, "Of Pop Pies and Fun," 34.
[64] Ibid., 35.
[65] Ibid., 34.

and make the audience embarrassed for them if necessary, so long as they have not one shred of dignity or mythic corona left."[66]

Given Bangs's assumption that the Stooges seemed to abandon art rock pretention, it is interesting that he dedicates a significant amount of his actual review of the album to the song "LA Blues" (the final track on side B of *Fun House*).[67] One of the Stooges's least traditional songs, it seems to be exactly the sort of departure from rock classicism that Bangs railed against. Beginning with a long, banshee wail from Iggy, the song follows with nearly five minutes of sheer cacophony before collapsing into a lengthy stretch of feedback. If it seems like the Stooges' most experimental song, it is probably also their most ridiculous. For Bangs, it seemed to be one giant put-on. Rather than disparaging the song, Bangs argued that this was precisely the song's virtue. As he remarked, "there is a strong element of sickness in our new, amorphous institutions… The Stooges also carry a strong element of sickness in their music, a crazed quaking uncertainty, an errant foolishness that effectively mirrors the absurdity and desperation of our times."[68] In this sense, "LA Blues" was an emblematic song, not because it stood for a return to retro nor a musical advance (and certainly not because it was minimalist or amateur), but because it was a music that stood, broken, on the rift between past and present.

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[66] Ibid., 35.
[67] Bangs, "Of Pop Pies and Fun: A Program for Mass Liberation in the Form of a Stooges Review Or, Who's the Fool? - Part Two," 39.
[68] Bangs, "Of Pop Pies and Fun," 34.

VI. Suicide & The Horror of Nonidentity

If this rift was latent in the melancholy of the Velvet Underground and the clumsiness of the Stooges, it reached horrific proportions in Suicide. Throughout their career, the band Suicide was frequently compared to Iggy Pop for the intensity and spectacle that characterized their concerts; Vega reportedly often antagonized his audience during performances, brandishing a motorcycle drive chain like a weapon while crowds jeered, booed, or walked out.

Suicide's music kept stride in its intensity. The group brandished aggressive timbre and cacophony like a weapon. It is for this reason that many standard narratives of punk frame the group as a post-punk/new wave group.[69] Where post-punk is taken to be the less orthodox, more hybridized and experimental aspects of punk from the late seventies and early eighties (e.g. Gang of Four, No Wave, ZE records' "mutant disco," etc.), Suicide certainly appears to be a shoe-in. If there are stylistic grounds for framing them as post-punk, there is also chronological ground for thinking of Suicide as typical for the late seventies and thus an exemplar of the forms that followed or superseded punk. The majority of their work received commercial releases in the late seventies and early eighties, including their 1977 Red Star records debut full-length, *Suicide*, and its 1980 ZE records sequel of the same name (often subtitled *Alan Vega and Martin Rev* or called the "second album" to differentiate).

But if we dispense with partitioning punk in terms of its relative simplicity or complexity, Suicide might just as reasonably be thought of as an early punk

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[69] Colgrave and Sullivan, *Punk: The Definitive Record of a Revolution*, 331.

group. There are historic grounds for this. Alan Vega and Martin Rev first began to play together as a group in 1970, discovering shared interests while frequenting the Project of Living Artists, a collective art's space funded by the New York State Council. Adopting the name Suicide from the character Satan Suicide in the comic *Ghostrider*, the pair cobbled together a cheap keyboard and amp before undertaking a series of musical experiments. After first performing at the Project of Living Arts in 1971, the group had a series of gigs at iconic venues including the Village Vanguard and Ungano's, the club and Italian restaurant known for hosting a number of the Stooges' New York visits in 1970. After the Mercer Arts Center became a regular venue for early punk bands like New York Dolls, Magic Tramps, and Jayne County's group Queen Elizabeth in 1972 (see chapter 2), Suicide gave a number of performances there. They are also reportedly one of the first groups to use the term *punk* as a self-descriptor, borrowing the term from Bangs's "Of Pop Pies and Fun" for a number of flyers they used to promote their "punk masses" in '71 and '72.[70]

Suicide was musically productive in this period. They recorded a number of songs in 1974 and 1975 that were only publicly released after the first two records. The first collection, released on tape by Roir Records in 1981 and reissued on CD in 2000, features three early home demos dating from 1974/1975, "Space Blue," "Long Talk," and "Speed Queen," as well as a track, "Dreams," recorded at Sun Dragon Studio in 1975. The second, released as a bonus disc to the second album by Mute Records in 2000, features fourteen tracks, recorded

[70] Nobakht, *Suicide: No Compromise*, 38. Nobakht's text is the best single text on Suicide's history and style; in this context, see in particular his reporting on Suicide and the Mercer arts scene, 39-50.

on two-track reel-to-reel in Alan Vega's Greene Street basement apartment in 1975. The group also released a single of "Rocket USA" b/w "Keep Your Dreams" (both of which were re-recorded for the first record); the A-side was featured on the 1976 compilation, *Max's Kansas City*.

Given their extensive activity before the mid-seventies, Suicide was central in early efforts to define punk as a musical and social ideal. In suggesting this, my goal here isn't to reverse common assumptions and claim that Suicide was exclusively a *proto*-punk group. No doubt, they belong in conversations about dance punk and music of the late seventies. But I do want to suggest that they contribute to a rethinking of early punk and its anxious relationship to rock. If the Velvets split commentators about their avant-gardism, Suicide's early listeners were undivided in their conviction that the group was not just incomprehensible, but destructive. Reports of the group's early gigs largely chronicle a series of upsets and rejections by audiences and venue owners. The owner of the Gaslight Au Go Go supposedly pulled the plug on the group after three minutes of performing, and one of the owners of Ungano's, who happily hosted rock bad-boy Iggy, fired the group after reportedly observing that having them "is like having ninety-nine Iggies."[71] The group's 1978 tours of the UK and Europe were particularly infamous for inspiring tension and even violence. The group's performance with the Clash at Glasgow's Apollo Theatre prompted an audience member to throw an axe at Alan Vega's Head. Suicide's Brussels gig that summer alongside Elvis Costello prompted a full-scale riot only minutes into the group's set (it was released as a 12" bootleg by *New Musical Express* under the

[71] Ibid., 35–36.

name *21½ Minutes In Berlin/23 Minutes In Brussels*, named for another disastrous gig on that same tour). Indeed, throughout their career, it was common for Alan Vega to leave the stage bloodied:

Figure 3 Suicide's Alan Vega, pictured with Paul Simonon & Joe Strummer of the Clash (unknown photographer, 1978)

Critics largely regarded their sound as the musical equivalent of their anarchistic performances. Reviewing one of the group's 1972 shows at the Mercer for the *Village Voice*, Richard Nusser remarked:

> What can you say about a duo that… offers brain-curdling stomps, shrieks, and throbbing noises from an electric piano/organ, and highly amplified sobs, moans, and whimpering 'I-love-youse' from a lead singer who whips himself, is dressed in black leather, hung with chains, sequins, studs, and jewelry, with greasy black ringlets framing a face oozing silver pancake glitter and fear, and which refers to its material as 'punk-junk music'? What *can* you say?[72]

[72] Nusser, "Riffs."

This line of commentary has been influential on more recent critics, who have largely endorsed the narrative that Suicide was defined by their inaccessibility. Reviewing "Frankie Teardrop" for his famous *Songbook*, Nick Hornby implied that the group pursued difficulty for difficulty's sake, writing:

> "Frankie Teardrop" is ten-and-a-half minutes of genuinely terrifying industrial noise, a sort of aural equivalent of *Eraserhead*. Like David Lynch's film, it conveys a chilling, bleak, monochrome dystopia, full of blood-curling shrieks and clangs, although I seem to remember that the movie offered the odd moment of respite, an occasional touch of bizarre and malformed hope, whereas "Frankie Teardrop" offers none at all.[73]

Punk historiography has also taken its cues from this sort of commentary. Clinton Heylin's *From the Velvets to the Voidoids* suggests that Suicide approached music, not from a rock context, but from an "art perspective" that led them "not to celebrate but to deconstruct rock and roll… the embryonic Suicide preferred to forsake songs *per se*, presenting one not-so-seamless performance piece."[74]

As extreme as the group was, they never fully depart from rock's classical style. Lester Bangs was being characteristically provocative when, in his 1981 liner notes for *Half Alive*, he suggested that some of the tracks on the tape were "pure pop" and claimed that the track "Love You" might as well have been "Sugar Sugar" by the Archies (the virtual band from *The Archie Show* who snagged a surprise 1969 hit from the song). But in a roundabout sort of way, Bangs was onto something. Many of Suicide's songs explicitly reference classic rock artists, including "Elvis in Las Vegas," "All Night Long," and "Sister Ray Says" (the latter

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[73] Hornby, *Songbook*, 63.
[74] Heylin, *From the Velvets to the Voidoids*, 65–66.

a strange cover of the Velvets' "Sister Ray" which mostly features Vega screaming the lines "Sister Ray says" and "suckin' on my ding dong" over and over again).

Musically, the group commonly deployed characteristic rock features. The typical structure common to almost every single Suicide recording combines a brief keyboard riff with simplistic drum machine patterns and minimalist vocals. In many such recordings, elements of the classical style provide musical material. Confining a survey to just *The First Rehearsals*: "Two Fine" and "See You Around," a paired set which would later be reworked as "Ghost Rider" by the group's first album, features a fairly basic minor blues riff… "C'Mon Babe" is a pretty cliché bubblegum love song centered around the phrase, "C'mon babe I love you" (Bangs was right: it might as well be "Sugar Sugar")… "Speed Queen" has a synth bass line that recalls the rhythmic alternations of the iconic bass lick from Spencer Davis Group's "Gimme Some Lovin'"… and "Sneakin' Around" simply rips the guitar riff right out of "Sunshine of Your Love" (the rhythms are changed, but the pitch classes are identical).

Simply put, the classical style saturates Suicide's music. But of course, it would ridiculous to call Suicide classic rock. Indeed, their songs sound like rock music that has deployed all of the elements (the licks, the grooves, etc.) without any of the principles that should hold it together. In that sense, then, Suicide pushes the split between rock form and authority to an extreme. Their songs sound like badly faded copies of copies of copies, as if rock is an image that has become so blurry, it lingers only as the faintest trace. Their vision offers a disturbed portrait of the rift between punk and its history.

In his account of avant-gardism, Jay Bernstein reads Cindy Sherman's photograph *Untitled 153* (1985) as exemplary of an extreme form of avant-gardism defined by its horrific character. On one level, Bernstein observes that Sherman's photo is about its content. Depicting what appears to be a dead woman lying in dirt and moss, the picture is horrible for its depiction of a "body that ought not to be seen."

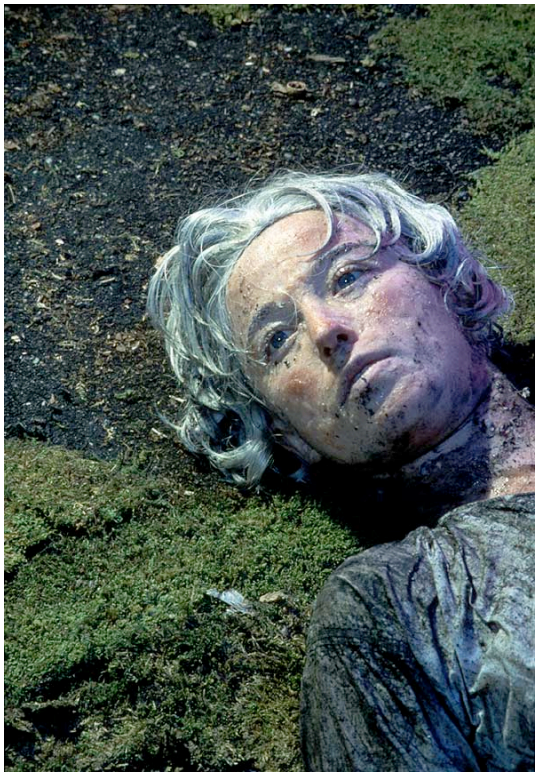

Figure 4 Cindy Sherman, *Untitled 153* (1985)

In looking at it, we cannot but focus in on some act of violence that appears to have been perpetrated. Bernstein remarks that it is almost as if the photo asks us a rhetorical question: who killed this woman?[75]

[75] Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies*, 298–299.

He suggests: "we know the answer: the camera did it." This leads to his argument that, on a second level, there is something intensely formal characterizing *Untitled 153*. The piece appears carefully posed and framed, concealing what (if anything) has even happened to the woman. In aestheticizing this woman's body in such a fashion, Sherman makes her subject almost beautiful. But this cannot be right, as if the work were a mere testament to the craft of photography. In this sense, *Untitled 153* disturbs not merely because of content, but also through the act of artmaking itself. Ultimately, we feel horror as we witness a corpse lying under the camera's cold, beautifying gaze.[76]

One of the best examples of punk's form of horrific nonidentity comes from Suicide in the song "Dreams." The song was recorded as part of the group's 1975 Sun Dragon Studio demo, featured on the compilation *Half Alive*. The song was re-released in a more polished form on the group's 1977 album as "Keep Your Dreams" and again for the group's 1980 second album as "Dream Baby Dream." In its original version, the song is not unintelligible as a form of rock music. The keyboard outlines a standard, two measure I-IV-V progression that would be at home on any sixties garage rock record, and while the drum machine riff's steady eighth notes are admittedly somewhat minimalist, they at least reproduce a pretty standard rock cymbal pattern. Lyrically, the song is not particularly out there, being comprised mostly of variants of the phrase, "keep your dreams burning forever." If it is vague and simplistic, it at least indexes a central thematic that has resonances with many notable rock songs (ex. The Everly Brothers' "All I

[76] Ibid.

Have to Do is Dream" or Elvis's "Follow that Dream" or "I Can Dream," the later of which also makes heavy use of the imagery of burning).

In a rough sort of way, then, "Dreams" functions as a contribution to rock. And yet, it feels like everything is off. In later versions of the song, a straight backbeat rock groove and a more obvious poetic structure make the song more grounded. But the earlier version, by contrast, is essentially a series of musical gestures poorly patched together. The song's chord progression is played unevenly, with the switch from IV to V happening inconsistently somewhere on or around beat 4 in the second measure of each riff. The song is rhythmically flat, and the drum pattern feels like we *only* have a cymbal played without the rest of the kit. Meanwhile, if the song's lyrics vaguely reference a topic of sorts ("dreams," I guess), the what and the how and the why of those lyrics aren't really present.

Vega's lyrical delivery further clouds the matter. He essentially treats the phrase as a series of particles that can be reworked at random, and so the songs' lyrics ultimately sound like pieces of the key phrase mashed together in random iterations. The song unfolds:

> Yeah keep your dreams baby
> Yeah keep your dreams burning… forever
> Yeah hold on tight
> Yeah hold on tight… to life
> Yeah keep your dreams burning… baby
> Yeah keep them dreams burning… forever
> Yeah keep them dreams burning baby… forever
> Yeah baby… we all love you

The delivery of the first line, "yeah keep your dreams baby," is late and casual; it sounds almost like it is an answer to a line of text we do not hear. The final line is similar, sounding as if the "yeah baby" might be a flourish at the tail end of a phrase rather than the beginning of one. If the song lacks any sort of clear narrative structure, this lack of definition reaches down into each line of text. The lyrics seem mostly like embellishments, flourishes, "yeahs" and "ohs" and "babys" that are addenda, cliché fillers from a missing song. This discordance is emphasized by Vega's phrasing. While his lines roughly correspond to iterations of the two-measure chord progression, the entrance of each is usually late. Largely occurring toward the end of the second bar of each lick, they sound essentially random.

Ultimately, Suicide's music marks a moment of near-total collapse, the pushing of the classical style to the edge. In their music, rock hangs in tatters, draped across the barren frameworks of their songs like scraps of cloth. And yet, even then, Suicide does not escape the classical style. Suicide bears the history of rock like scars, and battered though it might be, rock's tradition lingers. They gaze back at this lingering tradition, horrified at its growing remoteness.

Both Velvet Underground and Suicide, then, display the distance between punk and rock. In so doing, they demonstrate a tension that is not just constitutive of much punk through the 1970s, but one that persists to this day. Time after time, as Simon Reynolds writes, punk artists "rip it up and start again."[77] But in so doing, they continue punk's dialectic of dissolution and

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[77] Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*.

restoration… finding themselves somewhere between the past, present, and future.

2. Are You a Boy or Are You a Girl?

New York Queer Punk in the 1970s

> Max's Kansas City has closed. So where have all the Max's regulars and visiting stars of stage, screen and Rock gone?... Well, you may find Lou Reed at the Gilded Grape... Mick Jagger was led there one drunken nite after being promised that the Go Go boy contest was an absolute gas!... Another popular bar located downtown in Green[w]ich Village is the 220 Club. This place is after hours and doesn't even open it's doors until four in la morn!... Where else! There's Le Jardin. This is an uptown disco that caters to a very mixed blend of stars, drag queens and every other gay blade or closet case to be found just about anywhere... Lady Astors' has become a hangout for a lot of the old Max's Crowd... Even some of the Rock and Roll kids from Brooklyn and Queens have invaded the place!!!
> -Jayne County (1975)[1]

> "We punks are very American... When all that stuff came out about punks being homosexual and anarchist and all that shit, it pissed us off – these press bastards are destroying our good intentions."
> -Legs McNeil (1978)[2]

I. Introduction

In the middle of a March 1976 concert at CBGB – the famed New York City venue often dubbed the "birthplace of punk" – the rock singer Jayne County hoisted a microphone stand over her head, swung it awkwardly about, and forcefully swung it down. As it traveled, it smashed into the shoulder of the

[1] County, "Where the Rock Stars Are."
[2] Quoted in Smith, "Boy Scouts of Rock," 30.

Dictators lead singer, Richard "Handsome Dick" Manitoba. His collarbone shattered instantly.

Manitoba staggered into a table, a deep gash forming on his head. Drenched in blood, he leapt up and charged County. A short scuffle ensued, but the two were quickly dragged apart. Blood smeared across her wig and tattered dress, County resumed the show. Soon after, Manitoba left the club on a stretcher. A few days later, County was arrested and charged with assault.

What exactly happened during the fight is difficult to ascertain, and there are conflicting accounts.[3] County was a central figure in New York's punk scene during the 1970s. Born in Georgia, County lived in Atlanta before moving to New York in the late sixties. She was present at the Stonewall riots, a performer in New York's theater scene alongside luminaries such as Andy Warhol and Tony Ingrassia, a DJ at the famed rock club Max's Kansas City, and a regular performer with rock bands New York, London, and continental Europe. County initially began performing under the name Wayne County as a drag queen. In the sixties and seventies, this term was used (often in contested fashion) as a synonym with terms like "transvestite" and "transsexual," designating both male-identifying people who dressed as women as well as people who today would likely identify as transgender.[4] County reports identifying as a woman from early childhood,

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[3] County reports on the fight in County and Smith, *Man Enough To Be A Woman*, 107–110; the comments of a number of other witnesses (including Handsome Dick himself) are quoted in McNeil and McCain, *Please Kill Me*, 268–278; for other writing on the issue, see Heylin, *From the Velvets to the Voidoids*, 183–186; Valentine, *New York Rocker*, 127–129; Waksman, *This Ain't the Summer of Love*, 122–124.

[4] County explains in her memoir that she was often flexible with her own self-identity for historical reasons: "In the 60s, people weren't really making divisions as much as we do now; we didn't talk about gay, lesbian, transsexual, bisexual, transvestite or anything; it was all just one big grab-bag of being different." See County and Smith, *Man Enough To Be A Woman*, 30.

and publically adopted the name Jayne in 1979 (Out of respect for Jayne's gender identity, I refer to her by the name "Jayne" and with she/her pronouns throughout).[5]

By 1976, County was performing regularly on the New York music scene with her second band, Wayne County and the Backstreet Boys. She reports in her 1995 autobiography that Manitoba, known around the music scene as a provocateur, stood close to the stage yelling, "Queer! Queer! Aaaaah, ya fuckin' drag queen!"[6] County worried that Manitoba, a trained wrestler, was moving to attack her when he stood up and began walking toward the stage. Others reported that Manitoba was simply walking toward the bathroom, a gesture that could be difficult to read given the club's cramped space. But as someone who had experienced intense transphobia while living in Atlanta during the 1960s, County feared for her safety and felt impelled to act.

Understanding this event's significance is also tricky. The case against County was eventually dropped after Manitoba failed to show in court. Some reports suggest his absence was intentional. Even so, the fight had deep resonances for punk. That spring, momentum had been building around New York's nascent music scene. Patti Smith Group's first album, *Horses*, had just been released to widespread acclaim in the previous fall. The following February, a largely unknown group, the Ramones, had just finished recording the self-titled debut that *Rolling Stone* would later call "Year Zero for punk rock."[7] Punk was

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[5] This excludes quotations and titles (e.g. Wayne County and the Backstreet Boys), which I leave in their original format for bibliographical clarity.
[6] County and Smith, *Man Enough To Be A Woman*, 108.
[7] Dolan et al., "40 Greatest Punk Albums of All Time."

gathering centripetal force, poised to become one of the hyped up movements in seventies rock music.

But this exchange of violence split the young scene in two. Gary Valentine, bassist for Blondie, suggests that the fight exaggerated a creeping division between the bands that played CBGB and those who frequented its chief rival, Max's Kansas City.[8] The Dictators were banned from Max's, which had served as County's home venue since the early seventies. Meanwhile, a May 30, 1976 benefit for County's legal fund further cemented the with-us-or-against-us division in punk. Organized at the Manhattan Centre on 34th and 8th, the show's roster constituted a veritable who's who of rising punk stars; it reportedly included members of Patti Smith Group, Blondie, Tuff Darts, Mink de Ville, the Heartbreakers, New York Dolls, Suicide, and the Ramones, as well as a cast of queer icons including Divine, and the Andy Warhol superstars Jackie Curtis and Holly Woodlawn. As the photographer and scene insider Bob Gruen recalled, "I felt that it was a kind of turning point, that all these guys had to 'fess up and say that Wayne's our friend. And we stand up for him and it's not ok to come into a club and call a guy queer. It's not ok."[9]

Even so, many sided with Manitoba. In particular, the editors of the insider fanzine *Punk* rallied against County. By 1978, the *Village Voice* printed "The Punk Manifesto," a text functioning as a tacit rejection of Gruen's sentiment. Legs McNeil, "resident punk" for the magazine ranted to *Voice* columnist Howard Smith that "when all that stuff came about punks being

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[8] Valentine, *New York Rocker*, 128.
[9] Quoted in McNeil and McCain, *Please Kill Me*, 275.

homosexuals and anarchist and all that shit, it pissed us off – these press bastards are destroying our good intentions." The manifesto further questioned the place of LGBTQ in the genre altogether, boldly insisting that the music "wasn't asexual faggot hippie blood-sucking ignorant scum as the media would have you believe."[10]

In propelling bands and scenesters to factionalize against each other, the County-Manitoba fight made it clear that all was not right in the house of punk. But it was also prophetic. In a spectacular sort of way, it played out a tension that was formative, not just in New York during the 1970s, but forty years of punk history since. Simply put, punk has perennially been defined by a fraught relationship to queerness. On the one hand, punk appears substantially queer. Its history is full of famous LGBTQ people, from County to Darby Crash and Laura Jane Grace. Dozens of punk and punk-influenced subgenres including queercore, riot grrrl, and crust punk have made queer politics the centerpiece of their musical activity. These links are so intense, that it often appears as if queerness and punk are inextricable.[11]

On the other hand, punk also resists queerness. Many standard narratives of punk downplay or ignore the contributions of queer people, and all of the sources cited above speak as much to coalition building and LGBTQ activism as

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[10] Smith, "Boy Scouts of Rock," 30.
[11] Daniel, "'Why Be Something That You're Not?' Punk Performance and the Epistemology of Queer Minstrelsy." On queerness and punk, see; Ensminger, "Redefining the Body Electric: Queering Punk and Hardcore"; Fuchs, "If I Had a Dick: Queers, Punks, and Alternative Acts"; Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*; Kearney, "The Missing Links: Riot Grrrl - Feminism - Lesbian Culture"; Leblanc, *Pretty in Punk: Gender Resistance in a Boy's Subculture*; Marcus, *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*; Needham, "Jon Savage: Writer of Famous Punk Book Has Sex Therapy Every Week"; Waksman, *This Ain't the Summer of Love*, 70–103.

extensive moments of homophobia, heteronormativity, and gender policing within punk. These competing truths have prompted Tavia Nyong'o to argue that punk exists in a *frozen dialectic* with queerness.[12] In observing this, Nyong'o was riffing on Dick Hebdige's famous 1979 claim that "at the heart of the punk subculture, forever arrested, lies this frozen dialectic between black and white cultures."[13] Evoking Hebdige's thought in the context of LGBTQ culture, Nyong'o calls attention to a dual identity for punk that inscribes it simultaneously as queer and not queer.

This chapter extends Nyong'o's suggestive claim on two fronts. First, I argue that punk's frozen dialectic with LGBTQ people was formative for 1970s punk in a way that has largely been ignored. Nyong'o himself bypasses punk's early queer history, electing to subversively put a queer spin on Patti Smith, an artist who publically espoused conservative family values rhetoric. No such strategy is needed. In the 1970s, dozens of musicians and fans were LGBTQ-identified or –perceived, including Lou Reed, Jayne County, Mumps, Magic Tramps, and the New York Dolls. Moreover, critics wrote frequently about their queerness, and – though they filtered it through a euphemistic lens – based many early conception of punk on this queer scene. I argued in my previous chapter that punk began the decade as a despatialized, amorphous set of ideals about rock history. But it ended with intense geographical and aesthetic specificity. Queerness facilitated this shift.

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[12] Nyong'o, "Do You Want Queer Theory (or Do You Want the Truth)?," 107.
[13] Hebdige, *Subculture*, 69–70.

But queerness also constituted a sticking point for many punk fans, critics, and artists. Throughout what follows, I draw out the historical character of punk's frozen dialectic of queerness by recourse to Elizabeth Freeman's notion of *temporal drag*. Punk was an act of donning and disavowing queer history, of recovery and forgetting.[14] In this spirit, I suggest that punk was animated by queer history, both in its nostalgia for the past and demands for a better present. Punk posited a range of possible histories in musical form, crossing boundaries between nostalgia, contempt, and hope that the past and present might be reconciled in the name of a brighter, queerer future.

II. New York as Queer World

In order to make this argument possible, we first need to make a historical detour. In reaching out to queerness, New York punk artists were turning toward an edifice built on nearly a century of urban LGBTQ life. It was this that provided a substantial social and conceptual apparatus for early punk. From at least the late nineteenth century, New York City sustained a broad queer social infrastructure with its own extensive network of venues, events, even entire neighborhoods host to queer lives. While this community lacked legal recognition and faced intense stigma, it constituted a self-contained dynamic world, one driven by its own set queer-focused social practices and values.[15] It was also

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[14] Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, 62.
[15] There is a large literature on New York's queer history. See Chauncey, *Gay New York*; Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*; D'Emilio, "Placing Gay in the Sixties"; For texts that discuss the history of New York in the broader context of U.S. LGBTQ history, see D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*; D'Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*; Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History*

widely integrated into a citywide social and sexual counterculture, one that made New York look very different from the city it is today.

For example, Times Square was essentially a Red Light District at the beginning of the 1970s. Long before it became the spectacular host of Disney Stores and Forever 21s, it was home to porn theaters, peep shows, and bars that catered to LGBTQ clientele:

Figure 5 One of the many porn theaters that populated Times Square until the 1990s (unknown photographer, 1975)

Such shops persisted until the 1990s, when Mayor Rudy Giuliani initiated an aggressive law enforcement-based crackdown on all forms of vice – the "broken windows" approach.[16]

Even so, Giuliani's actions came at the tail end of a transitional moment which began at the end of the 1960s. Many have overstated the significance of

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of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America; Kaiser, *The Gay Metropolis*; Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*; Stryker, *Transgender History*.

[16] For more on Times Square and the LGBTQ world, see Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*.

this period for transforming the place of queer people in the U.S., falsely understanding it as "birth" moment for gay rights. Even so, the period from the end of World War II through beginning of the punk era witnessed broad social, political, and cultural transitions, ones that restructured the role of queer people in American life. Not only famous events like the Stonewall riots but dozens of other gestures of action, coalition-building, and legislation carved out political and social recognition for queer people.[17] New York in particular witnessed a number of important changes in response to political action. Previously a battleground marred by intense persecution of LGBTQ by law enforcement, organized crime, and the public at large, the city in this period entered a cautious (and uneven) acceptance of many forms of LGBTQ life that has slowly expanded toward the present.[18]

There is much to say about the character of this transformation, both its virtues and its limitations. Most relevant for my purposes is the way this period witnessed an increasing public awareness of LGBTQ people, one that crossed previously rigid lines between straight public and queer private. The core of this

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[17] Many political organizations formed through the 1970s, including famous gay organizations such as the Los Angeles-based Mattachine Society or New York's Gay Liberation Front and Gay Activists Alliance. But there were dozens of other important groups, especially those centered on transgender and gender-non-conforming people. For example, San Francisco's Vanguard and New York's Labyrinth Foundation, Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries, and the Queens' Liberation Front. The 1969 riots at the Stonewall Inn are one of the most famous events of this era, symbolizing to some the beginning of the modern LGBTQ rights movement. But there were many such events dating back to the 1950s: Los Angeles' Cooper's Donuts sit-in of 1959, Philadelphia's Dewey's Lunch Counter sit-in of 1965, and San Francisco's Compton's Cafeteria Riot in 1966. Importantly, these events and other were largely prompted by the unrest of the most marginalized groups in the LGBTQ community: drag queens, sex workers, transgender people, and gender-non-conforming individuals. On political actions by transgender people from Cooper's to Stonewall, see Stryker, *Transgender History*, 60–85; See also the documentary on Compton's Cafeteria, Silverman and Stryker, *Screaming Queens: The Riots at Compton's Cafeteria*; for more on Stonewall and transgender activism in the New York area, see Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, 235–237.

[18] On NYC during this period, see in particular Kaiser, *The Gay Metropolis*, 145–190.

shift constitutes what Rosemary Hennessy calls *queer visibility*, the entrance of LGBTQ people into mainstream public consciousness. This marks both the intentional strategy of combatting bigotry through publicizing LGBTQ lives and the unintentional effects of increasing entwinement between queer lives and the postwar, media-based, consumer society of the United States.[19]

It should be acknowledged right away that queer visibility is a source of controversy, the contours of which are shaped by the tendencies of this discourse to favor a certain vision of queer life: one centered on a small sector of upper-middle class, white gay cis-men, and increasingly severed from the political Left that once dominated LGBTQ politics.

However we might valance this period, what is undeniable is that the period from the 1950s to the present has seen a gradual expansion of visibility for LGBTQ people in public life. There have been a number of venues for this discourse, from electoral politics to local activism to culture. Most relevant for musical practice has been the massive explosion of LGBTQ media. This is obvious in a contemporary era where shows like *Modern Family*, *Glee*, *Orange is the New Black*, and others have inspired heated conversation about LGBTQ portrayals in TV and film. But LGBTQ mediatization actually began decades ago.

The mid-century witnessed LGBTQ portrayals not only in visual media, but also literature, theater, newspapers, and magazines, all of which began to engage with a sector of the U.S. population it was becoming increasingly difficult to ignore. There was a veritable media revolution of LGBTQ representation in the

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[19] Hennessy, *Profit and Pleasure*, 111; Walters, *All the Rage: The Story of Gay Visibility in America*.

period from the 1950s through the 1970s: journalistic reporting brought the stories of queer people to the pages of *Life*, the *New York Times*, and even *Playboy*. Millions of Americans tuned into television spectacles including the highly publicized 1967 documentary *by CBS Reports*, "The Homosexuals," and the 1971 proto-reality hit, *An American Family*. And films like *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), *Myra Breckenridge* (1970), and *Boys in the Band* (1970) brought the dramatic difficulties of LGBTQ lives into movie theaters across the U.S.[20]

The forms of political spectacle enacted by the emergence of a public, LGBTQ-focused media in this period are of enduring interest. Most relevant to punk is the way this period led not just to the proliferation of queer art forms, but also to a broad self-consciousness about queerness as an aesthetic phenomenon. That is to say, people came to understand not only that queer art forms existed, but also that they were defined by their queer character. More than just normal media featuring queer people, this media was taken to itself be queer.

The most common aesthetic catchall for this queer media self-consciousness was *camp*. Usage of the term camp proliferated in the 1960s and 1970s, in a number of works by a broad range of critics, scholars, and artists; Susan Sontag, George Melly, Esther Newton, C. Connelly, Andy Warhol, and others all latched on to it as a descriptor of art and culture more generally.[21] Camp quickly became a buzzword; as one reader wrote in a 1967 Letters section

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[20] On periodicals, see D'Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 319; on print, TV, and film, see Kaiser, *The Gay Metropolis*, 149–164, 185–192, 208; on Lance Loud and *American Family*, see Ruoff, *American Family*, 95–115; on *Midnight Cowboy*, see Brown, "John Schlesinger's Bildungsfilm" and Corkin, "Sex and the City in Decline."

[21] On those sources and others as documents of the 1960s vogue for camp, see Leibetseder, *Queer Tracks*, 59–62; see also Cleto, *Camp*, 302–303. This latter source includes an exhaustive bibliography of writing on camp from the mid-1960s to the '70s.

of the *New Statesman*, camp had become cultural criticism's "indispensable and compendious monosyllable."[22]

While camp does not exclusively reduce to an expression of LGBTQ identity, it was inextricable with queerness through the 1960s and '70s (something still largely true in the present).[23] This was both internal to queer expression through art and culture, and to public straight perceptions of queer art. In those decades, queerness became cool. As Susan Stryker remarks, at the beginning of the 1970s, America became fascinated with the drag queens and homosexuals who were appearing in movies and TV. In her account, even a *transgender aesthetic* "was becoming hip and cool for mass audiences."[24] Fabian Cleto calls this mainstream-inflected form of straight-queer identification *pop camp*. Pop camp marked the intersection between queer and heterosexual within mass culture. This was a moment where camp appeared simultaneously in the heady texts of intellectuals like Sontag as well as the pages of *Time* magazine, a description of the latest Warhol piece by an art critic or a furniture sale ad in the *New York Times*.[25]

In her paradigm-defining text, "Notes on Camp" (1964), Susan Sontag famously described camp as a form of "modern dandyism," a way of being a

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[22] Quoted in Cleto, *Camp*, 302.
[23] Sontag provides an early and robust articulation of this link. In her paradigm-defining essay "Notes on Camp" (1964), Sontag argued that (white) gay men in particular functioned as a kind of "vanguard" for the proliferation of camp taste; in her account, camp is a form of gay aestheticism: of seeing the world through characteristically gay tensions between effeminacy and hypermasculinity ("he-man-ness"), and finding that it reflects back a literary world of dandies, Oscar Wilde, and Jean Genet. See Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 279; 288–291.
[24] Stryker, *Transgender History*, 91–92; Will Hermes confirms the appeal of this transgender aesthetic. As he writes, in the downtown scene, drag queens "were celebrities… Boys with long hair were no longer shocking, at least in New York. But add lipstick, panty hose, and high heels… people noticed." See Hermes, *Love Goes to Buildings on Fire*, 15–16; see also Warhol and Hackett, *POPism*, 281–282.
[25] Cleto, *Camp*, 302–303.

"dandy in an age of mass culture." This observation makes explicit only one of many of the contradictions inscribed in camp: camp was a mass cultural phenomenon with aristocratic ambitions.[26] What is more relevant about camp, though, is what Sontag's *modern* dandyism says about camp's relationship to history. Sontag claims that camp largely stems from our temporal estrangement from a certain register of commodity:

> [S]o many of the objects prized by Camp taste are old-fashioned, out-of-date, *démodé*. It's not a love of the old as such. It's simply that the process of aging or deterioration provides the necessary detachment – or arouses a necessary sympathy. When the theme is important, and contemporary, the failure of a work of art may make us indignant. Time can change that. Time liberates the work of art from moral relevance, delivering it over to the Camp sensibility… Thus, things are campy, not when they become old – but when we become less involved in them, and can enjoy, instead of be frustrated by, the failure of the attempt.[27]

Sontag's account centrally locates camp in its *belated* character. Her dandy is a dandy after the fact. He – and he was a he, as Sontag's heroes for the essay were largely gay men – has arrived too late, living in the twentieth century while feeling at home in the nineteenth.

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[26] Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 288; The best source on camp's contradictions from the standpoint of class is Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture*. This text reprints his important 1988 essay, "Uses of Camp," where Ross argued that camp is a contradiction in terms. It is the taste of a minority elite, and yet it depends on its appeal to the majority for its very legitimacy. In this sense, camp is progressive in its negation of bourgeois social forms, and yet reactionary in the sense that it turns toward the aristocracy as a model for this critique (146-147). Ross extended his suspicion to the intellectuals who proliferated the discourse of camp; for him, the great camp theorists of the 1960s were not just describing an artistic phenomena, but were themselves participating in this dialectic by propping up high brow intellectual criticism within this classless discourse. For Sontag and others, camp was a form of "new egalitarianism meant a passport, from the top down (but not necessarily the bottom up) to all corners of a cultural garden of earthy delights" (141).

[27] Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 285 [emphasis original].

Andrew Ross argues that camp depends on this historical distance. For Ross, camp is a kind of rescue attempt that picks over "history's waste." In this sense, then camp prays upon historical material. As Ross writes, camp is "the *re-creation of surplus-value from forgotten forms of labor*."[28] This adds a second historical tinge to camp. Camp fed off of the rift between earlier and later gay culture. With the emergence of a new, public and mediated LGBTQ present, even recent queer history became recoded as historical source material available for mining. Those practices, institutions, and concepts increasingly being rendered obsolete by the reorganizing of gay life in the public sphere became available as so many sources for revisiting, parody, and reclamation.

This renders camp a form of what Elizabeth Freeman calls *temporal drag*. For Freeman, the evocation of drag characterizes both drag in its more common parlance as a style of queer gender *performativity* (say, that famously championed by Judith Butler in her *Gender Trouble*) as well as a less commonly investigated form of *historical* drag: an investigation of the relationship between anachronism and the future, the deadweight of history as an excess of temporality, of "retrogression, delay, and the pull of the past on the present."[29] Camp stood with one foot in the present and one in the past, demonstrating "simultaneously minor failures of historical authenticity and the sudden *punctum* of the present."[30] Camp ultimately embodied an aestheticized vision of queerness, one standing between a visible present, and an increasingly opaque past.

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[28] Ross, *No Respect*, 151 [emphasis original].
[29] Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, 62.
[30] Ibid., 72.

III. New York Queer Punk

Emerging at the start of the 1970s, the nascent punk scene of New York City depended on the character of this discourse inherited from the queer world. Linked both to New York's substantial historical LGBTQ community *and* to a newly paradigmatic post-queer aesthetic field, queerness provided a substantial and clear edifice on which any number of later social formations could depend. And yet, given its increasing blurriness as a social and aesthetic ideal in this period, queerness also was ambiguous enough to accommodate a diverse range of messages. Take, for example, the fact that both punk and disco, two genres generally thought to be antithetical, had substantial links to LGBTQ culture in this decade.[31]

Camp did have a specific resonance for punk in this era. As the previous chapter suggested, punk's early conceptual development took the form of a theoretical proposition advanced by critics. This meant that it largely preceded musical practice, in particular the explosion of punk musical activity of the late 1970s. Punk as a category lacked the concreteness that eventually would accompany the later media frenzy that would accompany artists like Blondie and the Sex Pistols (see chapter 4). In its early years, punk was only a name for a critical attitude about music. Not just stylistically unclear, it was also spatially and temporally amorphous. Punk's imagined origins placed it somewhere between Liverpool in 1960, the Lower East Side in 1967, and Detroit in 1969,

[31] On New York's broad musical life during the seventies, see Hermes, *Love Goes to Buildings on Fire*.

hovering somewhere between the real locations of rock history and an idealized vision of 1960s Anglo-American rock.

New York's music scene was a mirror to this ghostly visage. The city had an abundance of specificity; as Dave Marsh joked in a 1973 *Creem* article on the City, "sleazadelic" character practically bubbled up in abundance from the "subterranean scuzz-holes of Gotham."[32] And yet, what the city had in social reputation, it lacked in musical identity. Critical consensus was that the city was a rock desert at the start of the seventies. If for many, the 1960s marked the long decline of rock's classical style, this was nowhere more clear in New York. This worry was of course exaggerated, but there were real material difficulties facing New York rock. By 1971, many of the city's most important venues including the Scene, the Electric Circus, and Filmore East, had closed.[33] The two major hometown heroes of underground rock had also gone the way of history: blue-eyed soul stars, the Young Rascals, disbanded in the early seventies after struggling to match the successes of their sixties work, and Lou Reed left the Velvet Underground in 1970. This latter move in particular quashed rock critics' ambitions that the group would pave the way to a New York-based rock and roll future.[34] The City had entered the long, dark night of the 1970s.

Of course, the end of the decade shattered this stereotype. Disco, hip-hop, and dozens of other musical happenings set the city in the limelight once again.[35] New York became a rock powerhouse, the *de facto* capitol of American punk,

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[32] Marsh, "New York Rock"; This is a reprint of a piece previously published in *Melody Maker*, Marsh, "Rock on the Wayne."
[33] Fletcher, *All Hopped Up and Ready to Go*, 301.
[34] See Marsh, "Rock on the Wayne"; McCormack, "New York City's Ultra-Living Dolls"; Rock, "Lou Reed Sees the Future Darkly."
[35] See again Hermes, *Love Goes to Buildings on Fire*.

rivaled only by London in its importance for this new music. While this status was only cemented in the late seventies, the process of recoding New York began much earlier. The period between 1970 and 1976 led to the substantial remapping of punk as an urban phenomenon and New York the exemplar of its urban ethos. Queer punk was at the heart of this shift; punk became punk because of the network of musicians, fans, critics and critical writings, recordings, venues, and other institutions that participated in New York's queer rock scene.

Altering prior definitions of punk style, rock critics aggressively advanced a theory of punk as a queer, New York-based phenomenon. A number of overview pieces written the New York scene in the seventies drew links between early definitions of punk as a form of post-rock and non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality. Some of the groundwork for this conversation was established through the reputation Max's Kansas City, the iconic Union Square venue famous as a hangout for the Velvet Underground and Andy Warhol's crowd during the sixties. Initially associated with Warhol's famous queer superstars, the transgender icons Candy Darling and Holly Woodlawn and the drag queen Jackie Curtis, the link between Max's and punk was cemented when it emerged as one of the core venues of the mid-seventies punk scene (see chapter 3).

But New York's queer punk network was much thicker. In a 1973 *Creem* article (quoted above), Dave Marsh remarked with awe that a "new wave of musicians" was guiding New York's scene toward a great rebirth. While Marsh referenced Max's Kansas City, the iconic Union Square venue famous for hosting the Velvet Underground and the Warhol scene during the late '60s, he expressed surprise: New York had hidden within it a music scene featuring dozens of new

artists playing in unknown venues that even spilled out into the outer boroughs. While he did not address gender or sexuality directly, the article was filled with euphemistic terms that hinted at the queerness of performers and fans; adorned in lipstick or glitter and "dressed up" (that is, wearing drag), Marsh observed that New York's "new generation of sleazadelic ratpacks" engaged in "decadence" worthy of the John Waters film *Pink Flamingos*. Marsh also dedicated his highest praise to those groups who most aggressively transgressed gender and sexual boundaries, including the New York Dolls and Jayne County's group Queen Elizabeth. Of Jayne County, he remarked, her "performances are incomparable, the last truly underground phenomenon."[36]

Marsh's euphemistic style of addressing sexuality was characteristic of much writing about the NYC scene in the early seventies. Lou Reed was functionally a magnet for coy writing about his sexuality – a topic he generally refused to talk about with critics. But in many ways, Lou Reed, the "godfather of punk," was also a godfather of queer punk. After leaving the Velvet Underground, Reed released a string of important solo albums in the first half of the decade; these included *Transformer* (1972), *Berlin* (1973), and the live album, *Rock and Roll Animal* (1974). Along with a series of early seventies Velvet Underground reissues (see chapter 3), these albums helped to establish Reed and the VU as the premier figures of New York rock music.

The solo records in particular were pivotal in linking Reed to queerness. While Reed's songs from this period were not miles away from those on Velvet Underground's sixties work (and often times, were simply songs Reed wrote

[36] Marsh, "New York Rock."

while still in the group), the extent to which they focus on gender and sexuality grabbed the attention of critics. *Transformer*, abounding with references to the Warhol set and well-known gay cruise spots like Times Square, struck many as turning over a new, queer leaf. Reed's marketing also cultivated this image, calling attention to his emphatically queer appearance. Take this promo photo, released by Lou Reed's label RCA records around 1973, in the midst of his *Transformer* and *Berlin* projects:

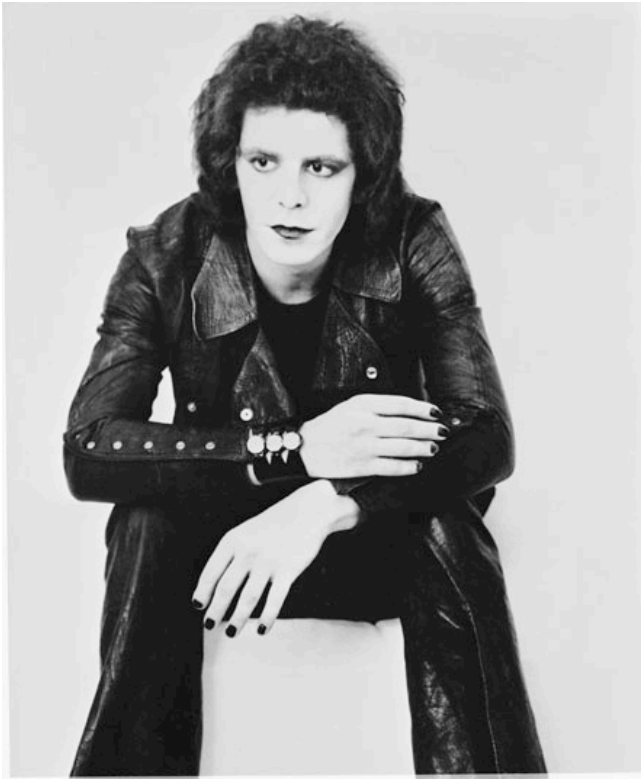

Figure 6 RCA promo photo of Lou Reed (unknown photographer, 1973)

It exemplifies the queer visual aesthetic Reed consistently cultivated during the mid-seventies. He is seen here wearing makeup, black nail polish, and leather – all queer signifiers. This look even made it onto official releases, including the famous (somewhat blurry) cover of Reed's 1974 live album, *Rock 'n' Roll Animal*:

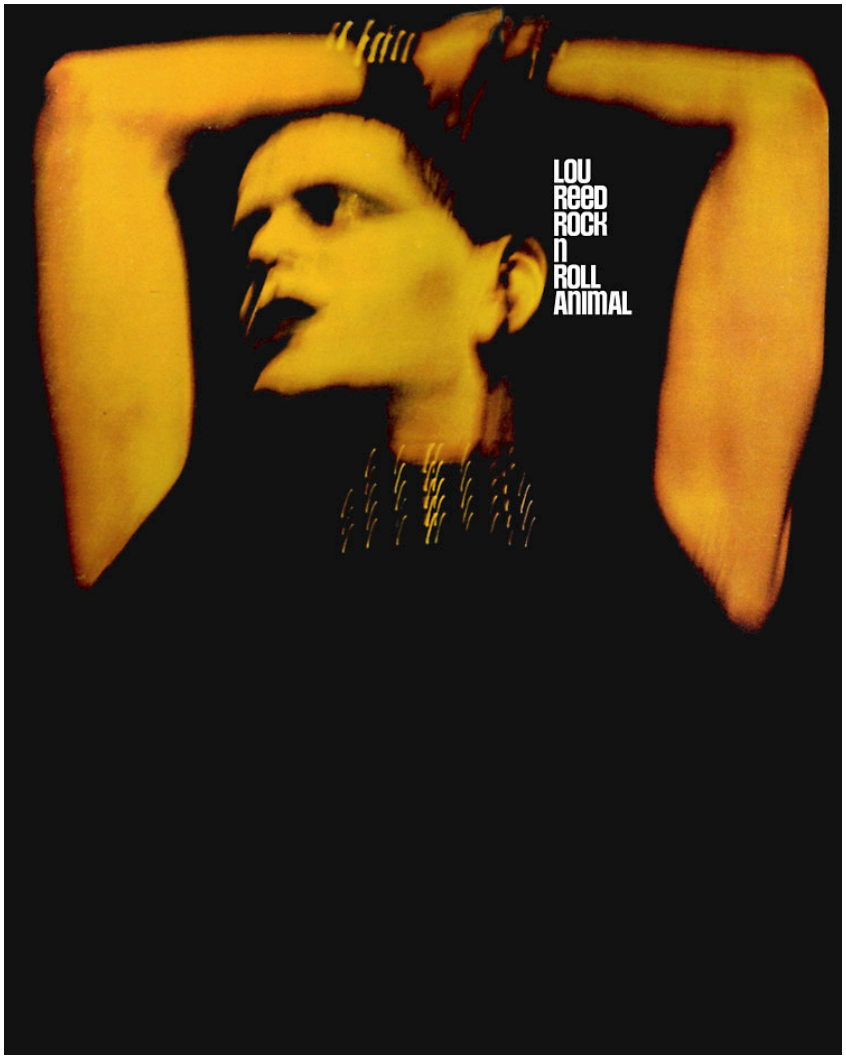

Figure 7 Cover image for *Rock 'n' Roll Animal* (DeWayne Dalrymple, RCA Records, 1974)

Many noticed Reed's new aesthetic, however careful they were about explicitly engaging with taboo topics. In his overview on NYC, Marsh hinted at Reed's queerness, calling him a "kinky, skinny cutie."[37] Richard Nusser also alluded to this in his article on Reed's solo work, arguing that the singer was willing to embrace forbidden "depravity" in order to depict "reality, however dark it may

[37] Ibid.

be."[38] Lester Bangs was one of Reed's few critics to explicitly address Reed's sexuality, and in a July 1973 *Creem* interview, pressed Reed to talk about his own life and his sense of the LGBTQ scene in New York.[39] By 1975, when Bangs returned to interview Reed, he ran a second *Creem* piece with a lead line suggesting that Reed had turned a "whole generation of young Americans into faggot junkies."[40] While Bangs was being characteristically provocative (and also characteristically crossing a line), his comment was not really slander. Indeed, Bangs was standing apart from many critics who chose to ignore or hide the queerness of Reed's music. Ultimately, Bangs was acknowledging something true: Reed was a figurehead for a blossoming punk scene in which queerness was prominent.

Another one of the musicians Marsh highlighted, Jayne County, was also an aspiring critic. A DJ at Max's, a scenester with the Warhol crowd, and one of the first punk artists to play CBGB (1973), County is in many ways a crucial figure both as a musician and as an insider-commentator on the punk scene. Her song "Max's Kansas City" was one of the first songs to explicitly acknowledge the New York punk scene (see chapter 3). County also explicitly addressed links between punk and queerness in her two columns that appeared in rock magazines: *Rock Scene* ran a "Dear Abbey" style column, "Dear Wayne," which fielded questions about gender, sexuality, and rock music, while *Hit Parader* featured her New

[38] Nusser, "Dark and Light Rays."
[39] Bangs, "Deaf Mute in a Telephone Booth: A Perfect Day With Lou Reed."
[40] Bangs, "Let Us Now Praise Famous Death Dwarves: Or, How I Slugged It Out With Lou Reed and Stayed Awake."

York gossip column, "Where the Rock Stars Are."[41] Her columns were so outlandish, that she was eventually fired from both gigs.[42]

But they were also excellent documents of New York's early punk scene. In a September 1975 *Hit Parader* column focusing on venues, County suggested that it was gay bars and other queer spaces that provided many of the key early performance spaces for punk groups. She remarked that the rock scene crossed fluidly between rock clubs and the many gay bars that peppered Manhattan; most of these were the mafia-owned clubs that catered toward persons who we would now recognize as transgender clientele (of which the Stonewall Inn is only the most famous example). Writing in her characteristic stream-of-conscious, slang-ridden style, County regaled her readers with tales of hopping across the New York scene with any number of rock luminaries:

> Where are [the scenesters] hanging out now that [Max's] has closed its doors? Well, you may find Lou Reed at the Gilded Grape… La waiters all dress in Sailor suits showing mucho box. Mick Jagger was led there one drunken nite after being promised that the Go Go boy contest was an absolute gas!… Another popular bar located downtown in Greenich Village is the 220 Club. This place is after hours and doesn't even open it's doors until four in la morn!… Once again this place caters to the drag set. Real transsexuals and transvestites of every variety… Where else! There's Le Jardin. This is an uptown disco that caters to a very mixed blend of stars, drag queens and every other gay blade or closet case to be found just about anywhere… Lady Astors' has become a hangout for a lot of the old Max's Crowd… Even some of the Rock and Roll kids from

[41] Lance Loud, lead singer of the Mumps, also did similar writing for *Rock Scene* magazine. A gay musician, Loud explicitly addressed sexuality in the New York rock scene; see Loud, "Lance Loud's Rock-Autopsy!!!" and Loud, "Tid Bits From the Diamond Doggiebag."
[42] County and Smith, *Man Enough To Be A Woman*, 105–107.

> Brooklyn and Queens have invaded the place!!! (Ha, Ha, Ha, Ha, Ha!!!)[43]

While her writing aimed to capture the outrageous character of the New York scene, County also made it clear that the lines cordoning off New York's rock scene from its queer scene was tenuous at best.

Others suggested that traffic flowed the other direction: the queer scene bled into the rock scene. This was most pronounced in the scene that emerged at the Mercer Art Center, a Village venue initially opened as an off-Broadway theater. The Mercer was perhaps *the* premier site for punk in the years before Max's reopening and the establishment of CBGB as a venue. The Mercer began to book unsigned rock groups in order to generate the extra revenue that alternative theater was missing. It would go on to host a number of the most important early punk bands, including the New York Dolls, Suicide, and the Modern Lovers. As Blondie bassist Gary Valentine writes, the Mercer was "the Mecca of the New York rock scene" in its heyday. It was also the main venue to regularly book a number of the artists Dave Marsh was highlighting in his article: the Magic Tramps, the 42nd Street Harlots, the Miamis, Teenage Lust, Ruby and the Rednecks, and Jayne County. These groups were eclectic, but were often conjoined in their deliberate eccentricity and their willingness to address themes of non-traditional gender expression and sexuality in their music. They were also important for the surrounding fan base they attracted, which became infamous within New York as young, queer, and adventurous. As the photographer Bob Gruen recalled, "it was the weirdest group of people I'd ever seen in my life: 13- to

[43] County, "Where the Rock Stars Are."

14-year old girls in mini-skirts and make-up and plastic clothes and guys that were just so effeminate and prancy."[44]

It is also clear that the punk's early queerness was not cordoned off from the goings-on of the later seventies. One of the major groups to play CBGB during the late seventies was the Mumps. Two gay men led the group: keyboard player/songwriter Kristian Hoffman and singer Lance Loud, who was most famous for his earlier appearance on *An American Family* (see the previous section). As CBGB regulars, they played alongside Television, Blondie, and Patti Smith Group – the latter poached the group's original drummer, Jay Dee Daugherty. Loud also wrote a column for *Rock Scene*, where he delved into the queer gossip of the New York scene. His column also explicitly engaged with queer issues, making it clear that punk was not cordoned off from the LGBTQ scene; among other things, he focused on punk's links to Club 82 and the drag scene, also acknowledging the importance of Jayne County for punk's early years.[45]

Ultimately, this literature led to the recoding of punk as a New York based, queer phenomenon. In 1974 cover article New York Dolls published by *Rock Scene*, magazine editor Richard Robinson argued that New York was actually *two* cities: "one you see during the day and one that slinks around at night." This latter "city of night" was a place for people who "can't tolerate the sunshine, the people scurrying off their commuter trains and being jovial in their offices," a world that was "more bizarre, more unreal, more the product of a fanciful brain

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[44] Quoted in Heylin, *From the Velvets to the Voidoids*, 79.
[45] See, for example, Loud, "Lance Loud's Rock-Autopsy!!!" and Loud, "Tid Bits From the Diamond Doggiebag."

than anything else." For Robinson, rock and roll was the sound of the city of night, and the New York Dolls the first full realization of this spirit.[46] Robert Christgau expressed the aesthetic character of New York's divided world more strongly in a 1973 *Creem* article, where he argued that the Dolls constituted a kind of outer boroughs music, at odds with that from uptown Manhattan. Whereas that latter world produced "wealthy and arty" artists like Janis Ian and Carly Simon, the Dolls struck Christgau as the latest form of outer boroughs/downtown rock, a musical expression of Queens Brooklyn, and bathhouses on St. Mark's Place. As in Robinson's estimation, the Dolls advanced this aesthetic – for Christgau, the Dolls were the sound of New York's "teenage-wasteland, a subway ride away, just like Warhol trash."[47]

If this discourse made it clear that early punk was intimately linked to New York's queer world, this link was not unproblematic. As much as punk depended on queer people for its early energy, many were uncomfortable with punk's queerness. Indeed, many sought to contain punk's troublesome links to non-traditional gender and sexuality.

There was a veritable cottage industry of writing along these lines about the New York Dolls. The Dolls were the most famous of the Mercer bands, one of the first 1970s New York groups to find record label support, and an important reference point to the later CBGB scene (see chapter 3). As photographer and scenester Leee Childers remembers, "The Dolls created a huge scene and it

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[46] Robinson, "The Dolls: Hot New York."
[47] Christgau, "The New York Dolls: LUV 'Em or Leave 'Em."

became extremely fashionable to go see them. You didn't just go to see the Dolls – you had to be seen seeing the Dolls." Patti Smith Group guitarist Lenny Kaye generalized the impart of the group to the city as a whole, remarking that the Dolls "were the first native Lower Manhattan rock and roll band to really make it… So by their very existence, the Dolls gave a certain focus to the… New York rock scene."[48]

The Dolls were also centrally linked to the outrageousness of queer punk. They were largely presumed to be queer by critics and fans, who commented at length on the group's appearance:

Figure 8 The New York Dolls pose during the photoshoot for their self-titled debut (Toshi Matsuo, 1973)

[48] Quoted in Heylin, *From the Velvets to the Voidoids*, 77; The attire of the Mercer fans was a frequent topic addressed by critics. For example, Ed McCormick recalled, with a mixture of shock and amusement, the individuals who frequented the Mercer scene: "a muscular, shirtless young man wearing… two red plastic clothespins clamped onto his nipples!… [A] girl with a live goldfish in the eight-inch transparent plastic heel of one of her Minnie Mouse platform shoes…" McCormack, "New York Confidential."

The group was prone to performing in androgynous clothing, as they did in the photoshoot for their 1973 debut, *New York Dolls*. Despite common claims that the group wore drag, members of the band often stressed that their clothing largely came from men's clothing racks (note that beneath the makeup and big hair, most members are wearing jeans except for Johnny Thunders, who is on the far right in his iconic skin-tight leather pants).

The Dolls actually performed in drag only once, at a famous February 15, 1974 concert in New York's Academy of Music; Thunders himself refused to wear drag. Even so, the rock critic Roy Trakin recalled that the general perception of the Dolls was that "they were soulless drugged transvestites who couldn't even play their instruments."[49] Though this hinted at a prominent strand of disdain for the group, many highlighted exactly this sort of queerness as their virtue. Reviewing a Mercer concert for *Variety* in 1972, reviewer Kirby predicted that though the group appeared to blur lines between straight and gay, "this unit's future should bring them more exposure. They can't miss gaining attention."[50] Writing for *Rolling Stone* that same year, Ed McCormack speculated that their queerness would be the *source* of their success, claiming that their "funky transsexual style" had made them the "newest darlings of the subterranean satyricon that populates Max's Kansas City and more recently the Mercer Arts Center."[51]

Even so, many aggressively sought to downplay this perception, insisting that underneath the drag, the Dolls played simple, old-fashioned rock and roll.

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[49] See Trakin's liner notes for the CD reissue of the group's 1972 demos, New York Dolls, *Lipstick Killers* (Audio).
[50] Kirby, "The Dolls," 61.
[51] McCormack, "New York City's Ultra-Living Dolls," 14.

Critic Steve Simels wrote in his regular column for *Stereo Review*, "[u]nderneath the urban chauvinism and the drag posturing, there turns out to be a quirky sort of intelligence at work: Johansen's songs, a midly silly amalgam of early-Sixties girl-group r-&-b and British story rock circa '66, are actually rather touching."[52] Framed in this light, the Dolls' flamboyant performance style and songs that played with gender transgression like "I'm a Boy, I'm a Girl" and "Personality Crisis" could be interpreted more directly as a continuation of rock and roll's general wildness rather than in relationship to queerness.

This framing has been paradigmatic for later commentators on punk, many of whom have taken as a given these "de-queered" narratives. A commonplace maneuver has been to presume that groups like New York Dolls are "proto-punk" or "glam," something that implicitly downplays the centrality of queerness for later punk. While there are interesting historical and aesthetic links between NYC early punk artists like New York Dolls and David Bowie or Marc Bolan, strictly dividing glam from punk proper has often had the effect of minimizing the contributions of LGBTQ artists like Jayne County or the Mumps. In *Break All Rules*, one of the first academic texts to dedicate substantial attention to New York punk groups, Tricia Henry downplays the significance even of famous figures like New York Dolls and Lou Reed. She argues that punk *in toto* is fundamentally defined by its political nihilism, a stylistic premise best

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[52] Simels, "The Simels Report: The New York Dolls," 56; Attempts to protect the Dolls from their perceived queerness were widespread. Richard Robinson insisted that, on the question of the Dolls being queer, "NONSENSE. They are NOT drag rock and they certainly aren't freaks. They're just good old grimy New York street kids with a sense of humor" (Robinson, "The Dolls"); People also frequently defended the Dolls against charges of queerness by deflecting their suspected sexuality onto other musicians. As one letter writer to *Creem* wrote, "Bowie, Reed, Iggy, and the rest are not queers. Bolan's the queer!" (Byrne, "Answers to Everything").

encapsulated by the "no future" chant from the outro of the Sex Pistols' 1977 single "God Save the Queen." Because early seventies US artists tend to adopt a less explicit toward outrage or class politics, Henry brands them proto-punk. This confines the queer punk era to the role of a prescient but insufficient anticipation of punk's future.[53]

Henry was merely expressing a commonplace implicit assumption that punk is defined by its (largely straight) heroes, clad in ripped shirts and leather jackets. Indeed, such narratives about punk are so pervasive, that even work that *does* focus on queerness in the 1970s New York scene takes a straight landscape as a starting place. Tavia Nyong'o's work on 1970s punk offers a persuasive frame for hearing queerness within Patti Smith's music, belying the singer's publically professed and conservative family values. Even so, it is curious that Nyong'o overlooks the many prominent LGBTQ musicians in the New York scene. In confining punk's queer dialectic within one of the great Rock and Roll Hall of Fame heroes from the era, he takes for granted the absence of many queer pioneers from the standard narratives of punk.

IV. Punk as Queer Aesthetic

This, then, is the full weight of his claim that punk and queerness exist in a *frozen dialectic* a dialectic from which even later commentators are not exempt. Punk in its early years is marked by forgetting, rediscovery, and disavowal of its queerness. Punk could pick over the historical source material offered up by

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[53] Henry, *Break All Rules*, 13, 40.

queer history, regarding it as one of so many resources for its restorative artistic project. Or it could in turn deny even those most intimate connections that linked punk to the past. Indeed, this even meant that punk could forget and rediscover its own queerness, building up its myths, renouncing affiliations, or purporting to deliver on forgotten promises. Such has been the fate of punk, with many participants in later punk subgenres forced to fight for the mere right to be female, feminine, or transgender… all while playing music practically invented by women, drag queens, and transgender people.

This foregrounds the double-character of the *temporal drag* inscribed within punk. On the one hand, punk treated queerness as a wellspring that could be tapped or just as easily switched off. But it also experienced this source in historic terms. Even basic concepts could be grabbed from increasingly obsolete terminology. England's Rough Trade records took its name from *rough trade*, early twentieth century slang for a masculine or married man who had sex with other men, and something that was increasingly anachronistic by the 1970s.[54] As I suggested in the previous chapter, even the term *punk* was malapropriated queer slang. This appropriation too has a nostalgic tinge; evoking its definition locates punk's queerness *ex post facto*, positing speculative histories, origin points, and essences for punk.[55]

This adds a second dimension to the historical character of punk aesthetics discussed in chapter 1. Not simply a call for the perseverance of rock on the grounds of mere stylistic predilection, punk's dialectical relationship to history

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[54] Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 20–21.
[55] For more on queer punk terminology, see Nyong'o, "Do You Want Queer Theory (or Do You Want the Truth)?," 107.

also took the form of an investigation of the paradigms inherited from the queer world. In this sense, punk stood as musical borderland between the queer past and present, towing a line between nostalgia and hope in an uncertain moment of LGBTQ history.

Often, nostalgia won out. Lou Reed was perhaps exemplary in his participation in queer punk's anxious dialectic. Reed oscillated frequently between endorsement of queer punk and anxiety about being associated with it. In 1973 (two years *before* Bangs proclaimed him the figurehead of queer punk), Reed complained that he had already grown tired of a scene based on "makeup" and "platform shoes," and even joked that he might even come out with an anti-gay sequel to *Transformer*.[56] This contradicted Reed's position from the previous year, when he remarked that the "transvestite bands" were among the most promising groups in rock. But even then, he defined his own relationship to this queer world ambiguously, claiming that "[w]hat I've always thought is that I'm doing rock and roll in drag."[57]

This comment is suggestive for what to make of punk's odd relationship to sexuality. I take Reed to be expressing something salient about his act, about punk both as rock and roll *dressed up as* something queer and a *queering* of an inherited realm of rock and roll. In this sense, we might understand him (and perhaps others) as enacting an early form of what Drew Daniel argues is a strain of *queer minstrelsy* woven into the fabric of later punk subgenres.[58] Importantly, my evocation of minstrelsy here should not be taken to mean mere exploitation,

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[56] Bangs, "Deaf Mute in a Telephone Booth: A Perfect Day With Lou Reed."
[57] Rock, "Lou Reed Sees the Future Darkly."
[58] Daniel, "'Why Be Something That You're Not?'"

however troubled we should be by those moments in punk that seem to lean that way. I find it more interesting to consider queer minstrelsy in the spirit of Eric Lott's investigation into blackface minstrelsy as a site "underwritten by envy as well as repulsion, sympathetic identification as well as fear."[59] Hidden within punk's anxious relationship to queerness, then, was a form of affection as well anxious disavowal. Indeed, punk performed temporal drag as a lingering identification with and fear of queer history. Punk constituted a form of nostalgia for the promises queerness at the point of rupture, a lament for the possibilities offered by those queer social forms that were threatening to disappear.

This provides a suggestive framework in which to hear Reed's most famous song, "Walk on the Wild Side." The song is lyrically interesting for referencing a number of real-world queers, all of whom worked closely with Andy Warhol as his "superstars": Holly (Woodlawn), Candy (Darling), little Joe (Dallesandro), the "sugar plum fairy" (Joe Campbell) and Jackie (Curtis). The stories Reed tells are mostly biographical details about these people, recalling both details from their lives and their real-world reputations and involvement in the queer social scene at venues like Max's Kansas City.

Throughout, Reed is not shy about describing a range of taboo identities, evoking gender fluidity, queer sex, prostitution, and drug usage. But there is something particular about these descriptions. They are voyeuristic. We are invited to watch and learn about the lives of queer people. We hear stories of adventure, lust, and risk. But importantly, we hear them at a distance. The

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[59] Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, 9. This comparison should not be taken to indicate necessary historical or political similarities between blackface and punk, which obviously have differing contexts and political stakes. That said, the link between punk and minstrelsy has been raised before; see Rapport, "Hearing Punk as Blues."

narrator only speaks in the third person. It is as if he is watching and savoring the lives of his characters without participating in them.[60]

The musical accompaniment to "Walk on the Wild Side" matches this estranged standpoint. Like Reed's work with the Velvet Underground discussed in the previous chapter, *Transformer* continued Reed's exploration of genre's (declining) normative force. Really, the record is remarkable for the diversity of stylistic resources it culls up in the course of eleven tracks. A number of tunes written for standard rock ensemble are placed alongside less obvious rock songs: we hear an orchestrated ballad ("Perfect Day"), a cabaret piano number ("New York Telephone Conversation"), and even a faux-Dixieland/Tin Pan Alley version of the minstrel standard, "Goodnight, Ladies" (probably best-known today for its inclusion in the well-known 1957 musical, *The Music Man*). These genres push Reed's earlier meditation on rock's historical genres into a broader space that drags historical queer music worlds like Broadway into the deliberate, anachronistic picture Reed presents of 1970s New York.

"Walk on the Wild Side" is exemplary of Reed's hazy, queer temporality. The song places itself within the doo-wop/vocal harmony tradition. It deploys a number of signature elements of these styles: a percussive shuffle rhythm hammered out by acoustic guitar, a walking bass line, a sax solo, and doo-wop

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[60] This calls to mind Genet's *Our Lady of the Flowers*, in which Genet positions himself (in autobiographical terms) as a narrator erotically remembering a cast of homosexual people while serving a prison sentence. There is a more immediate frame of reference for the song: Paul Morrissey's so-called "Andy Warhol Trilogy." *Flesh* (1968), *Heat* (1970), and *Trash* (1972) were the film vessels for many of Warhol's superstars in that era. Each is a kind of character study of queers in the late sixties and early seventies. The films focus on LGBTQ identities, and the problems of loneliness, poverty, prostitution, and drug addiction that plague them. Four of the people addressed in "Walk on the Wild Side" appeared in the films (Joe Campbell didn't, but he did appear in Warhol's 1965 *My Hustler*). In this sense, Reed's song exists within a broader voyeuristic tradition of watching queers.

style vocals sung by Reed and a choir. It also plays on the affective power of earlier pop tradition. Just as "I'm Waiting for the Man" evokes the goal-driven force of sixties pop, "Walk on the Wild Side" gradually accrues layers that propel the song forward: plucked bass and gently strummed guitar are followed by the entrance of drums, then Reed's vocals the backing doo-wop choir, and by the time of the third and fourth verses, a legato, string countermelody.

On closer examination, though, "Walk on the Wild Side" is no model reconstruction of doo-wop. The vaguely accented guitar and plodding bass part only loosely evoke the robust swing grounding that persists through doo-wop and later rock traditions, while the choir resorts to cliché – pretty much just the syllable "doo" on repeat. Despite the gradual layering effect of the song, its overall development feels curiously deflationary. The song loses rather than gains force, such that by the arrival of the sax solo, it appears excessive and meandering against a plodding backdrop. These transgressions are minor compared to Reed's singing. In a musical world ruled by voice, Reed's is testimony to a deep rift. Evoking a world of star singers and vocal bravado, of forceful vocal *presence*, Reed is absent. Not just his usual coy irony, here, Reed seems on the verge of giving up. He speaks in a deflated monotone that distances him from the subject matter. Ultimately, the song begins by evoking a tradition saturated with virtuosity, energy, and eroticism, and concludes with the abdication of its power.

Frankly, "Walk on the Wild Side" is dull. For a song that alludes to musical desire and lyrically promises the listener the delights of the "wild side," it doesn't sell either well. Not only is there nothing sexy about Reed's vision of the wild side, it has been drained of its allure. It is here that I want to propose hearing the

song as a form of *temporal drag*. Both in lyrics and form, "Walk on the Wild Side" reaches back to bygone moments, but in its treatment of them, renders them *bygone*. That is to say, "Walk on the Wild Side" holds its sources at a distance, demonstrating their remoteness from the present. This performs a double act of drag. On the one hand, it constrains the sexual subject matter of the song by rendering it *mere* drag. It is play for the narrator, something to watch enthusiastically but abstain from. This has an element of safety to it. It is Holly and Joe who compromise their masculinity, not the narrator (or, by extension, the listener). On the other hand, "Walk on the Wild Side" demonstrates the temporal drag of the lives and affect it evokes. Those excitements are not ours to enjoy, as the world of johns and queens threatens to fade into the past once and for all.

This gives a fatalistic tinge to the unassimilatibility of queer history; punk emerges as a story about the failure of queer immediacy, something troubling given punk's broad queer contingency in both the 1970s and recent history. As forceful as "Walk on the Wild Side" is in evoking a strain of punk nostalgia, it would be a mistake to construe punk's broader history in these terms. Just as early punk's relationship with rock was fraught, queer punk was defined by an array of rival aesthetic paths. If punk partially depends on staging failure, this does not mean that punk should be taken to be preoccupied with failure *as such*.

Many queer theorists have sought to reclaim the power of failure, its ability to testify to rifts and resist naïve pleas for synthesis, reconciliation, and triumph. Freeman's appeal to temporal drag is one such attempt, calling for us to resist the thought that history follows a progressive and emancipatory path, a

presumption that often structures queer political and artistic praxis. Judith Halberstam has even more ambitiously called for embracing a "queer art of failure." For Halberstam, a prominent and important strain of queer art defines itself through "a relentless form of negativity in place of the forward-looking, reproductive, and heteronormative politics of hope that animates all too many political projects."[61]

I read much of queer punk as staging an alternative version of temporal drag, one also rooted in failure but lacking Reed's melancholic tinge. Many queer punks rallied around retro rock without falling into fatalistic assumptions about the end of the 1960s, even pushing back against punk's conservative streak.

In a 1975 *Rock Scene* column, Lance Loud offered to do a "Rock-Autopsy" on a rock scene that he felt was already tarnished by nostalgia (this, well before New York punk began to attract acclaim in the period between 1976-1978; see chapter 3). Loud mocked Reed's current work, suggesting that it lagged too far into the past:

> When Lou released "Berlin," the biggest problem was that, despite the groovy conceptual angle it hit the market with, it was still just a pseudo-sixties drug/psycho drama which only [sixties TV doctor] Ben Casy could have been called upon to cure… Unfortunately by that time, helpless in reruns and so was this 1968 anti-speed saga… in 1973… ahhh sweet inspiration, look deep into the brick wall of nothingness and ye shall see the soul of Lou Reed trying to become ectoplasmic Saran Wrap to hermetically seal in all the flavor and wantonness of the 60's for us supermarketeers.[62]

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[61] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 106.
[62] Loud, "Lance Loud's Rock-Autopsy!!!"

Loud's group enacted a musical version of this anti-nostalgic sentiment. While the Mumps also explicitly addressed New York's gay scene through their songs, their song "Rock and Roll This, Rock and Roll That" ridiculed 1970s nostalgia for rock's classical style (see chapter 1).

Perhaps nobody embodied queer punk's attempt to drag rock and roll into the present better than Jayne County. Like Reed and the Mumps, County gravitated toward punk because of her dissatisfaction with the queer world, saying that she left Atlanta to escape the dominance of a certain strain of pop camp:

> I was considered strange, even by the other drag queens, because I was into rock and roll. We had this party one time, and the drag queens came out and did Supremes songs. I said, 'I don't want to go to one more fucking party where one more fucking queen comes out and does a fucking Supremes imitation… Every party you'd go to, some queen would come out and go, 'Ooooh, baaaby love, my baby love…' So I came out and did Janis Joplin.[63]

In her musical work, County frequently drew on the rock and roll she loved. Often, this had a tinge of retroness. County frequently covered earlier rock songs, such as the Electric Prunes' 1966 "I Had too Much to Dream (Last Night)" or the Barbarians' 1965 "Are You a Boy or Are You a Girl?" County's manager, Jimi LaLumia, reports that Jayne even considered recording an album of 1960s rock covers.[64] Most of the original songs by County's groups also looked back to the sixties, borrowing heavily from the verse-chorus, three-chord template of garage rock. Indeed, there is something almost conservative about her relationship to

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[63] Quoted in McNeil and McCain, *Please Kill Me*, 271.
[64] LaLumia, "Wayne County at the Trucks!"

her sources: “Got the Time if You’ve Got The Place” practically sounds as if County simply added new lyrics to the Troggs’ “Louie, Louie.”

Of course, it is difficult call someone conservative when she sings the line, “you gotta get laid to stay healthy, and I’m the healthiest girl in town.” County largely juxtaposed retro material with explicitly queer lyrics. Her songs addressed gender anxieties and sexual promiscuity, often exploiting the rift between her performance and the material she drew upon. “You Gotta Get Laid to Stay Healthy” contrasts a plea for wanton sexuality to a slow rock and roll blues ballad. “Wonder Woman,” which recounts County’s prowess in bed, is a straight-ahead, driving I-IV-V garage rock tune. Even where covering traditional material, County destabilized her sources. County’s cover of “I Had too Much to Dream (Last Night)” renders obscene what otherwise was euphemistic in the original. Performing in a short black leather skirt, high heeled white boots, and gyrating sexually, County makes explicit what “dreaming” implies in a song about a late night tryst.

I take this play with the queer subtext of retro material to be central to County’s work. County’s performance, both visual and musical, depended on the clash between straight and queer, masculine and feminine. Moreover, this clash was particularly intense in rock and roll, that straightest of straight genres in the early 1970s. To see a woman – widely known to be transgender – confidently performing rock and roll music was not only an affront to rock’s masculinity, but also a challenge to assumptions that rock was fundamentally masculine.

Exemplary in this regard is County’s cover of the song “Are You a Boy or Are You a Girl?” County recorded the song as part of her infamous live

concert/theater spectacle, *Wayne County at the Trucks*, an elaborate stage production directed by Tony Ingrassia and featuring extensive props, costume changes, and choreography. Jimi Lalumia reports that for the show,

> Every song had it's own scenery, props, costumes, etc. like a Broadway play. Breaking the rules of rock and roll, the band was off to the side of the stage, while Wayne stood front and center. The attitude and subject matter was… blatant and obscene to a degree never seen before in pop music, at a time when it was considered totally off the radar. The show opens with Wayne's backup singers, in homage to the "King Kong" film of the 30s, summoning Wayne, chanting 'man made woman in the man made world", in front of a wall of Wayne's painted visage… Wearing a 'dress" of inflated condoms, with 'shoes' that featured a cock at the tip and heels in the shape of a pair of balls, Wayne County was quite a sight to behold, "The Exorcist' with a rock band, as one noted critic observed.[65]

Though a video was made of the concert by MainMan Artistes, the company who managed County in the early seventies (alongside David Bowie), it has never been released. [66]

Even so, photos from the period capture the heightened sexual quality County brought to her performances. In the early-mid-seventies, County generally dressed in revealing clothing, brought a highly sexualized tone to her singing, and highlighted the ambiguity of her gender and body:

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[65] Ibid.
[66] However, an audio recording of eight of the songs from the show does exist. See County, *Wayne County at the Trucks* (Audio).

Figure 9 Jayne County performing live (Jill Furmanovsky, date unknown)

In this picture – taken by the legendary rock photographer Jill Furmanovsky – County calls attention to her crotch by brandishing her microphone between her legs. This is a threatening sight for anyone uncomfortable with what might be under her skirt.

An interesting example of County's musical acts of gender ambiguity is found in her cover of "Are You a Boy or Are You a Girl?," actually a tame song by comparison to her original material. The song was actually made famous by the Barbarians, a Cape Cod-based rock group active in the sixties and most famous for their drummer Moulty, who used a prosthetic hook in order to play the drums. The group had the most success with humorous and novelty songs, including "Moulty," a cheeky ballad narrating Moulty's life with a hook. The group remained influential through the early seventies as a paradigmatic example

of the garage rock of the 1960s; “Moulty” itself appears on Lenny Kaye’s *Nuggets* compilation (see Chapter 1).

“Are you a Boy” was a similar song in spirit. A 1965 hit for the group, the song was a kind of jocular take-up of 1960s male fashion in the wake of the British Invasion. In the song, a narrator claims that because he is looking at someone with “long blond hair” and skin-tight pants,” he is confused about their gender: “You're either a girl or you come from Liverpool.” Half-take up, half-endorsement, the song acknowledged and satirized anxieties about the look sweeping across the U.S. in the wake of the British Invasion.

In many ways, the Barbarians were model source material for “1960s nostalgia” visions of punk. Making simple rock songs with humorous topics, the group exemplifies the ‘60s escapism that became seductive to critics and artists worried about the excess and darkness of the ‘70s. But as a song, “Are You a Boy,” resists some of that nostalgic fantasy. Indeed, the song depends on the irony between the uncertainty of the lyrics and the unabashed confidence of the musical language. In the original form, the song worries about the British Invasion while being a transparent adoption of British Invasion by a U.S. band. A basic verse-chorus rock and roll tune built on a modified twelve-bar blues, the song layers jangly guitar vocal harmony to create what might as well be a Monkees tune. In that sense, it displays a curious array of affection and contempt for the British Invasion, one manifest primarily in terms of a discussion of gender.

County’s version redeploys this ironic gap in order to comment on the seventies. Even as County refers back to the 1960s, her version of the song pushes

it away from nostalgia. She strips a bit of the song's original hallmark sound: gone are the cheery backup vocals, replaced by a hardened, bass-driven sound that pushes away all resonances of innocent meetings in Clarksville. County also rewords the song to refer to "*bleached* blond hair" and claims that the subject's skin-tight pants "put the boys in a trance." In so doing, she sets the song in New York of the 1970s, perhaps now addressing one of the "subterranean satyricons" of the Mercer Scene. The song also gains new significance in the context of County's work. County frequently sang about instances of gender transgression and ambiguity. "Man Enough to be A Woman," from 1978's *Storming the Gates of Heaven*, stages the impossibility of reconciling the contradictory pulls of gender and proudly embraces County's fluidity as she shouts, "I like what I am, I don't give a damn."[67]

County's cover of "Are You a Boy" stages a similar thought. Sung forcefully by County, she positions the song's irony in reverse. Half-take up, half-manifesto, the song points toward gender trouble but owns it. Where the British Invasion signaled a pleasurable threat to the Barbarians, County recasts ambiguity as a site of promise for those who long for a world where gender is troublesome. Further, she forces this conversation squarely into 1970s rock. Guitar-driven blues here signals not the sound of the naïve, pre-Stonewall world that Reed rejects and the Dolls' critics covet… but something proper to her world.

Her version demonstrates the irreconcilable nature of gender's contradictions, one which deeply implicates rock. This has powerful implications

[67] I draw here on a live version of the song, recorded during a 1978 concert in Stuttgart, Germany, and included on the CD release of *Wayne County at the Trucks*. See ibid.

in light of County's own struggles with her gender identity. It also stages a generational and historical tension. Just as the Barbarians captured worries about the implications for the 1960s because of the British Invasion, County expresses a gender anxiety in the 1970s. In the post-Stonewall moment, in light of shifts in the queer world, the emergence of the Mercer Scene, and of queer punk generally, County tells us that there is no easy answer to the question posed in the song title; any attempt to answer it is bound for failure.

Despite this, it would be a mistake to put a tragic spin on County's work. Nor would it make sense to regard her claims about gender to be mere celebration from 1960s rigidity to a better 1970s. Neither lament nor celebration, County's work stages a tension between the 1970s and the past. I read it as a form of what Freeman calls "temporal transitivity," a progressive vision saturated by the drag of the past into the present. Freeman characterizes as "the power of anachronism to unsituate viewers from the present tense they think they know."[68]

If gender has gotten more complicated than it was for the Barbarians, County suggests that we have not fully escaped the 1960s. We still exist in that world, her song says; we feel the pull of the 1960s, we reach out for its music. And yet, we also struggle to drag the 1960s into the 1970s, to re-pose the Barbarians' original question in light of a new world. If we fail to fully escape the past or arrive in the present, County seems to say, that is also because the potential of the past, the present, and the future lingers.

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[68] Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, 61.

County deploys rock to show us the temporal drag at the heart of queerness more generally. Her music tells us that the lines between past and present, LGBTQ and straight, queer and rock, are not always clear. It suggests that we remain in the past even as we seek to escape it. And yet, it also warns us about the rift that separates past from present, the lingering and irreconcilable present of queerness, punk, and society at large. Ultimately, County tells us that punk's frozen dialectic continues.

3. NEW YORK PUNK AS SUBCULTURE

Jesus died for somebody's sins but not mine
Meltin' in a pot of thieves
Wild card up my sleeve
Thick heart of stone
My sins my own
They belong to me, me
People say 'beware!'
But I don't care
The words are just
Rules and regulations to me, me
-Patti Smith, "Gloria" (1975)

The gaze of the alienated man… is the gaze of the flâneur, whose way of life still conceals behind a mitigating nimbus the coming desolation of the big-city dweller. The flâneur still stands on the threshold-of the metropolis as of the middle class. Neither has him in its power yet. In neither is he at home… In the flâneur, the intelligentsia sets foot in the marketplace-ostensibly to look around, but in truth to find a buyer. In this intermediate stage, in which it still has patrons but is already beginning to familiarize itself with the market, it appears as the boheme… Baudelaire's poetry draws its strength from the rebellious pathos of this group. He sides with the asocial.
-Benjamin, *Arcades Project* (1927-1940)[1]

I. Introduction

Living in New York in 1976, it would be possible to be lured by a *New York Times* editorial to see a concert at a relatively unknown dive bar. That spot was CBGB OMFUG, a former biker spot located at 315 Bowery; the full name was "Country, Bluegrass, Blues and Other Music for Uplifting Gormandizers." You would be likely to catch one of the early shows of the Ramones, who performed at the club over seventy times during the years 1974-1976. Four men, dressed like

[1] Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 10.

the Hamburg-era Beatles a decade and a half too late, would probably be furiously playing on the club's cramped stage. A brutal cacophony would pour out of the speakers. According to the *Times* rock critic John Rockwell, early shows by the group provided a "breathless, nearly nonstop succession of short songs," drenched in a "lack of clarity and squealing feedback" that coalesced into a "rising crescendo of sound."

One of the earliest surviving recordings of the group, preserving their July 31, 1975 show played at the tail end of CBGB's "Festival of Unsigned Bands," confirms Rockwell's take. During their set, lead singer Joey Ramone shouts out blank chants over a blistering succession of eighth notes pounded out on bass and guitar. Songs are only separated for a few seconds, typically allowing for Joey to announce the title of the song before bassist Dee Dee Ramone screams out his iconic "1-2-3-4" count – something he did before nearly every song played by the group during almost two decades of non-stop touring. The net effect of the set is a relentless wash of noise. Finally, you might connect *punk*, that buzzword bandied about by friends and newspapers, to sound. *This* is the new music emerging from "the punk-art-rock murk of the New York underground."[2]

Perhaps the next night you might return, this time after learning that Patti Smith Group was headlining. Seeing another representative of the nascent punk scene, it would be easy to get confused. Smith was prone to improvise monologues or read elaborate poems during her concerts, prompting Rockwell to label her a "rock and roll shaman."[3] Catching a performance of the group's

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[2] Rockwell, "Two Rock Groups at Bottom Line."
[3] Rockwell, "Patti Smith: Shaman in a Land of a Thousand Dances."

signature songs “Land” and “Gloria” would provide a very different portrait of punk. Ebbing and flowing together for ten minutes almost like a Grateful Dead jam, the song suite is miles away from the Ramones’ sound. Far from the reduction of rock to minimalist noise, Smith appears to lift rock upward, transforming it into something far more ambitious and mysterious in the process.

Repeated visits over the coming years would only make things worse. The Marbles might play their signature strain of power pop after Mink DeVille played a set of songs hearkening back to 1960s pop and soul. Or, Blondie might perform the faux-surf rock song “In the Sun” before the lead singer of the Dictators burst into the club, wearing wrestling spandex underneath a sequined jacket. By 1979, watching the band Just Water perform a rock cover of “Singing in the Rain” or the Cramps sing songs about humans transformed into werewolves and giant flies, punk might appear to be a curious term indeed.

This chapter takes up this question of genre in the context of New York’s most iconic period. The mid-seventies witnessed the rapid emergence of a small, local scene in New York around 1974 and its subsequent transformation into one of the most hyped up music scenes of the decade. This is the moment many think of as punk proper, the first wave of US punk and the place where it all began. For the sake of clarity (and to avoid ideologically weighted labels like “first wave” or “proto-punk”), I’ll simply refer to music from this period as “mid-seventies punk.” This era saw substantial changes in punk, both stylistic and social. Punk finally codified as a clearly demarcated subculture alongside a wave of beloved bands. This period saw the formation of the Ramones, Patti Smith Group,

Television, Blondie, and Talking Heads, all of whom were embedded in a network of punk-centered venues, industry personnel, and fans.

It was mid-seventies punk that transformed punk from a fleeting ideal to a genre that forty years later still tops best album listings and earns Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductions. Given its iconicity, this moment has been taken for punk's most coherent and formative time. But – even bracketing the rivalry between New York and London, let alone New York and dozens of the other US cities that made competing claims to punk's earliest scenes – New York's most famous moment was born only of great angst. Further, it stood on the ashes of two earlier scenes. In this sense, even "first wave" punk derived much of its energy from its sense of historical distance from its predecessors. In many ways, then, the New York scene was an origin point only because it was the first scene in punk to be understood as a late and final wave of punk.

This chapter sets out to understand why punk in its most classical moment is also punk at its most contradictory. I begin my chapter by situating the critical discourse that powered the popularization of New York's young rock scene in the mid-seventies. I look at how a group of now-legendary rock critics – including Robert Christgau, John Rockwell, Lisa Robinson, and Alan Betrock – provided an impetus for the nascent punk scene through their aggressive theoretical writings on the rock scene. Under their pens, punk transformed from a reactionary and fringe discourse into one of the biggest buzzwords of the 1970s.

From there, I theorize why critics so ardently debated a seemingly insignificant local music scene. I use the polemical nature of this discourse to think about punk as *subculture*. Subcultural theory has been the prevailing

discourse for punk theory since at least the late 1970s, but it has so far had little of substance to say about New York. Concentrating on British punk as the unified musical expression of the white working class, the theory has stumbled when confronted by a comparatively middle class and stylistically scattershot scene in the US. Drawing on the writings of early Birmingham School theorists including Stuart Hall as well as Marx and Benjamin, I argue that a tweaked version of subcultural theory still has purchase when brought to bear on bourgeois subculture. Vanguardist and revolutionary from within the aesthetic universe of middle class musical life, punk depended on both its cohesion and its exceptionalism. Bourgeois in its resentment of the bourgeoisie, punk transformed from a fringe theory into an intensely volatile social and musical project by the mid-seventies.

The payoff of this thought, I argue, is that it provides a space to understand the diversity of New York punk as a musical project. Punk in the mid-1970s offered a forum for thinking about how to make rock music in an era when its self-evidence was compromised. Less a set of style requirements (eg. amateurism, power chords, etc.) than a series of theses about what it meant to make rock after the supposed end of rock, punk artists were unified in their shared investigation of their musical heritage. Varyingly casting the musical materials of 1950s and 1960s rock as shared inheritances alongside a mixture of poetry, wrestling, modernist art, and slasher movies, punk was held together by the shared assumption that rock was defined by inheritance.

In support of this account, I provide a reading of just one such vision. I take Patti Smith Group's music to be exemplary of punk's ambitious subcultural

musical project. The standard line on Smith's career is that she is a synthesizer of poetry and rock. I reject this, arguing that her avant-gardism stems from within the musical universe of rock music. I look at the group's cover of the Van Morrison original "Gloria," a song that I argue encapsulates the band's vision of punk as a vessel for restoring rock to its never-quite-realized former glory. Using rock and roll material toward artistic ends, I claim that Patti Smith Group articulated a theory of rock as imbued with its own avant-garde potential, the high art of the postwar bourgeoisie.

II. Reinventing Punk

Despite functioning as the continuation of two earlier waves of New York artists, mid-seventies punk gained force through crisis. Punk's redefinition in this era was catalyzed by a widespread sense that the music scene of New York had transformed since the early decade. Despite the intensely short timeframe this would suggest – essentially, the radical redefinition of New York musical culture in about three years – there were genuine shifts motivating this sentiment. Many groups who most famously defined the New York scene emerged only after the Velvet Underground and the queer punk scene had faded. Many artists central to the mid-seventies scene including the members of Talking Heads and Dead Boys did not even live in New York during the heyday of the Velvet Underground or the Mercer Scene. Others who were around during that earlier era only achieved professional careers later. Patti Smith Group released their first studio album in November 1975, the Ramones in April 1976, and Television not until February

1977. Other changes were simply infrastructural. The redefinition of punk was facilitated by the emergence of new venues with fewer connections to the New York music world of the late 1960s and early '70s. CBGB and Max's Kansas City, which reopened as a CBGB rival in 1975, provided an alternative home base for a new group of artists.

But the line separating queer punk and the mid-seventies scene was not always clear. Many of the latter scene's most famous denizens participated in that earlier moment and simply had moved on to new projects or forms of scene involvement. Joey Ramone, Blondie's Clem Burke and Gary Valentine, and others participated in the glam/queer punk world; only the fame of their later groups has served to obscure their earlier involvement with New York's arts world.[4] Jayne County continued performing through the end of the 1970s, and Suicide – Mercer Arts Center regulars and one of the first bands labeled with the designation punk – even outlasted Patti Smith Group. Further, many of the venues that sustained queer punk continued to be in use. LGBTQ spaces like Club 82 and Mothers were central venues for the groups that defined the new era of punk (see chapter 2 for more on those venues).

What is perhaps most curious about these anxieties is the fact that a number of artists including Lou Reed, David Johansen, and even Patti Smith were talked about as distinct from the new artists. They were regarded as grandparent figures separated by a large generational chasm from the New York

[4] For more about Valentine's involvement with glam/queer punk, see his memoir, *New York Rocker*.

scene, despite the fact that they performed concurrently with Blondie and the Ramones for a significant chunk of this supposed new moment.

This chapter will only gloss the history of the New York scene, which has been well rehearsed in a number of accounts.[5] One detail occasionally gets downplayed in those stories but is crucial for the argument that follows: New York's punk scene was far larger and more diverse than is often suggested by narratives that solely focus on the most famous artists. My point isn't really to suggest that Patti Smith or the Ramones shouldn't be of interest. Patti Smith is the central artist of this chapter, after all. But they need to be understood as only two participants in what was a diffuse set of competing visions for punk. Further, they only became separated from this context after their later success. Period critics did largely agree that they were the best acts within New York punk. But critics had a much different sense of punk's borders even after punk became a household term in the late '70s.

Critical reports punk from before 1980 – and even, really before the vogue of punk history writing in the last twenty years – situate the icons within a musical project far more diverse than our present understanding might suggest. One 1978 article, published in *New York Rocker*, suggested that punk could have its own "Top 40" based on the number of great bands playing in the city. While the actual list only contained 35 acts (the editors admitted they couldn't think of 40 bands that were actually *great*), the article suggested that lesser-known groups like the Cramps, the Mumps, the Miamis, the Criminals, and the Erasers

[5] The standard histories of punk in this period are Heylin, *From the Velvets to the Voidoids*, McNeil and McCain, *Please Kill Me*, and Hermes, *Love Goes to Buildings on Fire*; See also chapters on 1970s punk in Fletcher, *All Hopped Up and Ready to Go*, Gendron, *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club*, and Waksman, *This Ain't the Summer of Love*.

were poised to generate success. The piece aggressively praised the Paley Brothers, the Sire Records power punk group most famous for their inclusion on the soundtrack to the 1979 Ramones vehicle *Rock and Roll High School*. It speculated about coming success for the group: "The Paley Brothers are just wrapping up their debut album, produced by Earle Mankey. Great catchy songs and effervescent Spector-Beach Boys debts are this group' strong points, and hit records are just a shot away."[6] Other critics went even further in suggesting that such groups were the best or most characteristic New York punkers. While history proved him wrong, the great critic Robert Duncan was not unique in his 1977 prediction that Television and the Ramones would flounder in mediocrity. Duncan was admittedly no fan of punk. His writing castigated punk as aggressively as he did heavy metal, a genre that his 1984 classic study of rock music *The Noise* famously characterized as "music made *by* slackjawed, alpaca-haired, bulbous-inseamed imbeciles in jackboots and leather and chrome."[7] But he did have faith in a few New York scenesters. He boldly insisted, "Mink Deville is *it*, the band who will survive the unfortunate circumstances of the punk scene… Their record, [is] one of the three or four best of the decade."[8] Oops.

What is also worth stressing up front is the fact that punk quickly exploded as a designator during the mid-1970s. The term began the decade as the watchword for an ill-fated intellectual project ruled by critics like Lester Bangs, but it finished it as the kind of genre that warranted bitter debates and grand predictions about who would succeed. This was especially concentrated on the

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[6] Unattributed, "The Top 40," 44.
[7] Duncan, *The Noise*, 36–37; On Duncan's relationship to metal, see Walser, *Running With the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music*, 20.
[8] Duncan, "New York Lights Up With Soggy Matches," 40.

years 1974-1977. In that period, punk traveled from a vanguard moment to a word that most people following Anglo-American popular music would be familiar with.

Despite this change, music criticism remained central to punk discourse. Indeed, its role only expanded compared to the early part of the 1970s. The mid-seventies punk expansion occurred in tandem with a paradigm shift within punk writing. Earlier periodicals like *Creem* and *Bomp!* remained actively involved in curating punk. But well-established music periodicals got into the game as punk became a larger presence in the Anglo-American musical landscape. *Rolling Stone* began to cover punk consistently in the second half of the decade. Under the helm of punk champions Lisa Robinson and Danny Fields, *Hit Parader* and *16* snuck punk news into their pages alongside pictures of teen idols like the Bay City Rollers and Donny Osmond. The British rock press also took notice, with magazines like *New Musical Express* and *Melody Maker* covering New York in tandem with their homegrown scene.

Even the *New York Times* entered the fray by the end of the decade, a function of both the mainstreaming of rock criticism and the media frenzy surrounding British punk groups like the Sex Pistols. The *Times* sensationalized coverage of that group, regularly reporting on the violence that accompanied the group. Take their obituary for Sid Vicious:

24 L THE NEW YORK TIMES,

Sid Vicious, Punk-Rock Musician, Dies, Apparently of Drug Overdose

By JOHN KIFNER

Sid Vicious, the punk-rock musician, died yesterday, apparently of an overdose of heroin, about 13 hours after he was freed on bail in the stabbing murder of a friend, Nancy Spungen.

The police said he died after taking drugs at a party celebrating his release, held at the Greenwich Village apartment of Michelle Robinson, a 22-year-old actress. At first, detectives were inclined to view the death as a suicide — he had cut his wrists with broken light bulbs in a previous attempt — but later they said they believed it was caused by an accidental overdose.

The city's Chief Medical Examiner, Dr. Michael M. Baden, said his preliminary examination indicated "an inadvertent death due to the taking of illicit drugs." An autopsy is to be performed, he said.

Born John Simon Ritchie, the [illegible]

he attempted to slash his wrists while she slept.

The bail was revoked last on Dec. 8 after he allegedly assaulted Todd Smith, the brother of the rock singer Patti Smith, with a broken beer bottle at Hurrah's, a second—floor bar at 62d Street and Broadway.

On Rikers Island, he underwent withdrawal in the prison's drug-detoxification unit.

Bail Is Reinstated

At a bail hearing on Jan.16, Judge James Leff of State Supreme Court reinstated the $50,000 bail, adding $10,000 bail for charges growing from the disagreement with Mr. Smith, after the defendant's attorney, James Merberg, contended that his client had been completely detoxified during his stay at Rikers Island. On Thursday, Judge Leff agreed to release him on the initial bail

United Press International

Figure 10 "Sid Vicious, Punk-Rock Musician, Dies, Apparently of Drug Overdose" (John Kipner, *The New York Times*, February 3, 1979, p. 24)

Like much *Times* coverage of punk, the article focuses on the sordid details of the bassist's criminal career. It makes little mention of his professional career, simply describing him as "the punk-rock musician." Meanwhile, it chronicles at length the details of Vicious's fatal drug overdose, a prior suicide attempt, his fight with Patti Smith's brother Todd; it even goes into detail on his bail hearing. In this fashion, it was common for punk to simultaneously show up in the arts pages and the police reports section; punk might appear, say, in a rave review of the latest Ramones show and a posting chronicling Vicious's latest arrest.

In a 1976 *Village Voice* editorial entitled "Yes There is a Rock Critical Establishment," Robert Christgau explained the significance of this new moment in music journalism. He alleged that New York had executed a takeover over rock

writing. He wrote, "as recently as mid-1972… the idea of a rock-criticism establishment operating from Manhattan would have seemed impossible." Now, he claimed, the city had emerged as a new capital for critics. As proof, the article details an elaborate social network of affiliated writers living in the city as proof of "New York's hegemony." In particular, he noted that this network spanned from the underground press on up to the "straight press." The most significant of these included John Rockwell's 1972 appointment as a rock critic for the *New York Times*, Dave Marsh's move from Michigan to work for *Newsday* and *Rolling Stone*, and his own editorship for the *Village Voice*. In pointing to the *Times* and the *Voice*, Christgau showed that even those presses far away from the late sixties rock underground were taking seriously what rock critics had to say.[9]

But it wasn't just mainstreaming that powered punk criticism. There was something even deeper *and* more aggressively local about rock writing than even Christgau acknowledged. If the genre's popularity was owed to the emergence of a rock-oriented mainstream media, its fervor continued to derive from the alternative press. By the mid-1970s, this meant something different than in the previous decade. No longer idealizing the underground scene of the Motor City or the sounds emanating from garages in Tacoma, punk's critics became enamored with the music coming from their home base: New York. This was true for people like Lisa Robinson and Danny Fields, who were essentially sneaking regional music news into mainstream coverage. But it was even more intensely felt within the city. The *New York Times* was really just keeping stride with smaller hometown papers, ones that were picking up on punk because it was another

[9] Christgau, "Yes, There Is a Rock-Crit Establishment," 85.

thing happening in the neighborhood. Christgau enlisted the *Village Voice* section "Voice Choices" as a platform for the nascent punk scene. Contributing writers regularly mentioned the CBGB roster alongside the New York art's establishment. There, critic James Wolcott was one of the first writers to broadcast punk, suggesting in one 1975 article that the best of New York's "rock underground" included a series of unknown artists including "Blondy," the Ramones, Talking Heads, and Television.[10]

At times, the interest in punk was almost provincial in character. The local bent of punk criticism was even more pronounced in the *SoHo Weekly News*. Started in 1973 in order to provide a media outlet that catered more directly to SoHo residents, the paper elided coverage of community issues with the arts scene. They were neighborhood-oriented both in style and content; the first cover of the paper boasted "Soho Wins Landmark Fight," announcing that locals, eager to curtail development in their neighborhood, had scored a big win in getting the area designated a historic landmark. This tone made them the perfect source to regard what began as an all-but-nonexistent music scene with deadly seriousness. Internecine rivalries within the downtown arts world were part-and-parcel with their project. *Soho Weekly* became one of the first sources to regularly cover the local punk scene. And they pulled no punches. It was the *SoHo Weekly* that published Josh Feigenbaum's April 1974 review of one of Television's first CBGB shows, the source of one of the most famous comments on the group: "the great

[10] Wolcott, "Top 40 Unrecorded New York Rock Bands."

thing about this band is they have absolutely no musical or socially redeeming characteristics and they know it."[11]

But *SoHo Weekly* was after more than teardown pieces. They also regularly published the writing of Alan Betrock, who was one of New York punk's most ardent champions during the mid-1970s (in addition to his writing, he produced a 1975 demo for Blondie). After running the fanzines *JAMZ* and *Rock Marketplace*, Betrock began to write for *Soho Weekly*. He contributed a feature under the title "Know Your New York Bands," and also published a number of other essays on the New York scene. Focusing on breakout artists like Television, the Ramones, and the Dictators, these pieces purported to discover the New York scene once again.[12]

Betrock's second publication venture, *New York Rocker*, proved to be even more important for punk writing. It embodied the other major venue for local punk writing: the scene-based fanzine. Along with *Punk* – and in tandem with other fanzines like *Search and Destroy* in the Bay Area and *Sniffin' Glue* in London – *NYR* pioneered a new form of punk criticism geared toward ultra-factionalized and hyper-local scene curration. While *Punk* magazine embodied the standoffish, bad conscience of New York rock, *NYR* was the most systematic punk fanzine in its scope. During the mid-seventies and early eighties, the magazine published an exhaustive catalog of articles, interviews, and editorials on major punk groups from Patti Smith to No Wave and beyond. *NYR* stood out from its peers in the comprehensiveness of its peers. Unlike many sources that

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[11] Feigenbaum, "R&R&B&CW."
[12] Betrock, "Know Your New York Bands: The Dictators," "Know Your New York Bands: Television," and "Know Your New York Bands: The Ramones."

ran an *ad hoc* piece on this or that punk artist, the magazine closely follow major artists through every aspect of their career. The Ramones, for example, attracted not only reviews and interviews but also tabloid-esque coverage of a visit to LA well-before they had a solid reputation outside of New York.[13] *NYR* also went beyond worship of the major players; their coverage of scene participants was more exhaustive than any other publication. They ran features highlighting not only the now-canonic groups like the Ramones or Patti Smith but also Jayne County, Tuff Darts, Mink Deville, Milk 'n' Cookies, the Marbles, the Miamis, and the Mumps.

While the comprehensiveness and local focus of these periodicals was significant, what is most important about their work was *how* they covered punk. While punk critics continued to make use of the time-honored formats of rock writing – the record review, the interview, and the band feature – these were enlisted for a specific purpose. Punk critics wrote as if uncovering a lost scene, piecing together a network hidden from plain sight. A review of Patti Smith Group's second album or an interview with the Ramones served a larger purpose than mere exposition. And a feature on an undiscovered band was not just scholastic in character. Rather, such work filled in a point on a map, revealing a constellation hidden in plain sight. The suggestion by historian Clinton Heylin that the "*New York Rocker* was… more about propaganda than perspective" is a tad harsh, but it has some truth to it.[14] Not just *New York Rocker* but many

[13] Badger, "Ramones."
[14] Heylin, *From the Velvets to the Voidoids*, 243.

publications covering punk during this era wrote with a sort of evangelical zeal for the genre. More than propaganda, punk critics aspired toward revelation.

Betrock's writing was characteristic of this assumption that the New York scene represented a fulfillment of earlier punk's failed prophecy. In a January 1975 *SoHo Weekly News* column simply titled "Television at CBGB," Betrock ambitiously predicted:

> When groups like the Dolls, Harlots, and Teenage Lust failed to create much success after huge advance publicity, most people assumed the NYC scene to be dead. But Television, along with such varied units as Patti Smith, Milk n Cookies and the Dictators, prove that New York is alive and well, and predictions of widespread adulation do not seem premature.[15]

This was a bold claim. At the time, none of those groups had even released an album. Really, they were just playing poorly attended gigs at a repurposed biker bar in an abandoned and decrepit neighborhood in downtown New York. Suggesting that this group of artists was the fulfillment of broken promises was less an analysis than an attempt at prophecy.

Given such grand statements being made on behalf of punk, it quickly became urgent to figure out how to make good on those promises. Critics turned toward theorizing the social and musical character, attempting once again to explain what made punk a coherent set of ideas. Dozens of features were published purporting to explain what held the New York scene together. While many of these reached different conclusions about what best typified punk, they were conjoined in their desire to isolate those elements that made punk cohere.

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[15] Betrock, "Television at CBGB."

Lisa Robinson, in a 1976 *Creem* feature "The New Velvet Underground," explained that punk as a whole was a form of visual darkness rendered into music. She wrote that the NY bands "are evolving a totally new look, as well as a sound. There's a decidedly chiaroscuro… feel to these bands; a spare, stark, no-nonsense visual… [T]here's an avant garde nostalgia at work here as well as a desire to strip away all excess popstar trappings."[16] There is something to her description:

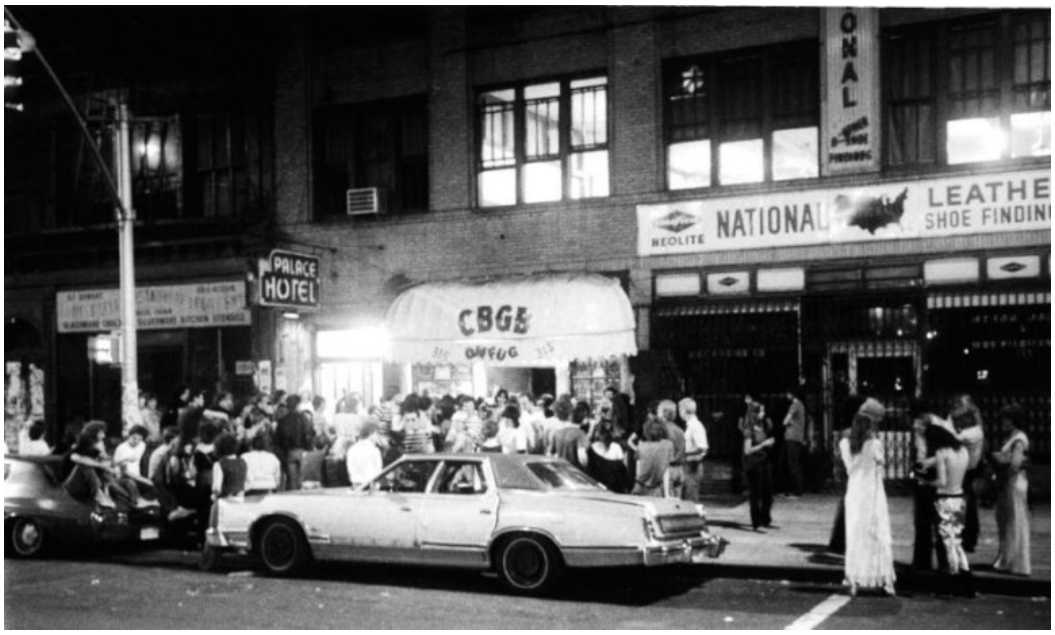

Figure 11 Unknown concert at CBGB (David Godlis, 1977)

This 1977 photograph by the famed rock photographer David Godlis captures an aspect of Robinson's description in a visual register. Punk was largely seen – and heard – under the cover of darkness, and nearly all of its early media, from photographs to films, was shot in low budget black and white. Punk shows were gatherings of crowds clad in all black, and Robinson's account aimed to formalize

[16] Robinson, "The New Velvet Underground," 81.

the cohesiveness of punk as a stylistic lexicon. John Rockwell posited punk's unity even more emphatically, insisting that,

> by any logical criterion, the current New York rock scene is a movement. The movement is defined first of all on a social level; the bands know one another, steal members from one another and hang out in the same clubs. Second, they share a common lineage, from the Velvet Underground through the Dolls to Patti Smith. And third, the very act of being perceived as a group from without establishes them as such.[17]

The point of this sort of writing was as much to explain punk as it was to *justify* it. An order was hidden in what might otherwise look like a series of haphazard concerts and recordings. Rockwell was really insisting that despite the seeming diffuse nature of punk, it had a logic and an order that was coherent and necessary.

In addition to a collective aesthetic vision, critics argued that punk had a unified history. Just as earlier punk bands were subjected to intense historical analysis, the mid-seventies punks were carefully analyzed through a retrospective lens. Often, this took the form of biographical elaboration, as critics sought to understand how the punk groups developed their various personal and musical styles. Perhaps even a majority of features on Patti Smith searched for clues to her current work in her earlier years. Critics poured over her biography (her youth in New Jersey, her time spent working in a baby buggy factory, her journey to Paris, etc.), seeking to find some sort of critical lens to understand the sounds of her group.[18]

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[17] Rockwell, "Report From New York's Rock 'Underground,'" 11.
[18] E.g. Glover, "Sweet Howling Fire," Marsh, "Her Horses Got Wings, They Can Fly," and Robinson, "The High Poetess of Rock 'N' Roll."

More generally though, writing on punk took the form of social and musical genealogy. By the late seventies, critics had developed elaborate theories of the New York scene's stylistic and spiritual roots. Most of these dated the current New York bands back to the mid-1960s. Critics linked mid-seventies punk up to earlier theories of punk as retro rock, essentially updating garage rock's family tree to extend from groups like the Troggs and the Shadows of Night up to the Ramones and Television (see chapter 1 for more on early punk theories). Many of these accounts justified the continuing usage of the label *punk* by arguing that artists of the mid-seventies harkened back to the rock and roll underground of the 1960s. This work came with a sense of urgency, not just because critics sensed that mid-seventies punk owed something to the previous two decades, but that it was shaped by its relationship to that era. Robert Palmer – the other major punk theorist working for the *Times* – noticed that seventies punk artists such as Alex Chilton and the Cramps were explicitly referencing the rockabilly sound pioneered by Sun Records artists such as Billy Lee Riley, Carl Perkins, and Elvis. He thought of this as a kind of imitative retroness, running the article with the title "Punks Have Only Rediscovered Rockabilly."[19]

Others suggested that this wasn't mere copying. As early as 1976, Allan Jones offered a theory of mid-seventies punk as a new historical formation built upon the old. Jones claimed that the Ramones were actually the *fourth* generation of punk, following three previous waves: queer punk, the Velvet Underground, and 1960s garage rock.[20] James Wolcott offered the most

[19] Palmer, "The Punks Have Only Rediscovered Rockabilly."
[20] Jones, "But Does Nihilism Constitute Revolt?"

substantial claim about punk's historical character in his 1975 *Village Voice* essay, "A Conservative Impulse in the New Rock Underground." He argued that punk as a whole was not full of references to older artists, but was *defined* by its relationship to its roots:

> No longer is the impulse [of rock music] revolutionary – i.e. the transformation of oneself and society – but conservative: to carry on the rock tradition. To borrow from Eliot, a rocker now needs an historical sense; he performs 'not merely with his own generation in his bones,' but with the knowledge that all of pop culture forms a 'simultaneous order.' The landscape is no longer virginal – markers and tracks have been left by, among others, Elvis, Buddy Holly, Chuck Berry, and the Beatles – and it exists not to be transformed but cultivated.[21]

In theorizing mid-seventies punk as something shaped by its own self-understanding of its roots, Wolcott was extending punk's earlier retro rock dialectic to a new generation. Still burdened by the weight of rock's classical style, Wolcott argued that punks were destined to continue their anxious meditation on the past (see chapter 1 for more on punk and retro).

As important as that continuing relationship was, mid-seventies punk was marked by an increased sense of distance from the 1970s. Curiously, many punk essays went beyond simple contextualization, instead taking a tone of rescue for the new punks' forgotten precursors. These essays functionally re-rediscovered the '60s garage rock groups who critics like Greg Shaw had championed just a few years before. Brock Altane's 1976 feature on the Ramones for *New York Rocker* provided an elaborate history of the British invasion and garage rock, arguing

[21] Wolcott, "A Conservative Impulse in the New Rock Underground," 6–7.

that this history was needed to make sense of new rock music.[22] Mick Houghton's 1975 feature on the term punk for the British magazine *Let It Rock* went even further into the past. He skipped over contemporary groups entirely, instead, offering an elaborate discussion of the 1960s, describing Lenny Kaye's *Nuggets* compilation and bands like Question Mark and the Mysterians.[23]

Other features sought to identify the groups who best predicted the current wave of punk. Critics turned toward groups like the Troggs and the Modern Lovers, both of whom predated the New York scene but continued to perform through the later seventies.[24] The Velvet Underground quickly established a central role in this commentary. For a second time during the decade, Lou Reed was called up as the elder statesman for punk. It was common for features on mid-seventies punk to turn into elaborate memorials for the Velvet Underground or to contextualize Reed's newer work within the scene. James Wolcott's important early Village Voice essay on punk, "The Rise of Punk Rock," was actually a lengthy feature on Lou Reed's influence that ran on the magazine's back page with the title "Lou Reed Rising."[25]

Reed's name became inextricable with the New York scene. It was in this period that writers began regularly referring to him as the "godfather of punk."[26] But if he continued to be linked to New York's punk music as he did for the early seventies, critics reconceived of Reed's significance. They started to ignore his earlier, queerer projects, highlighting instead those aspects of Reed and the

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[22] Altane, "The Ramones."
[23] Houghton, "White Punks on Coke."
[24] Rockwell, "Troggs Pound Out 1960's Rock" and Wolcott, "A Conservative Impulse in the New Rock Underground."
[25] Wolcott, "The Rise of Punk Rock."
[26] E.g. Emerson, "John Cale, Rock Star, At CBGB."

Velvet Underground that best matched the emerging artists playing at CBGB. Reed's mid-seventies helped this narrative. Albums such as *Coney Island Baby* (1975), *Rock and Roll Heart* (1976), and *Street Hassle* (1978) leaned away from his earlier Broadway-esque work toward classic rock and roll. *Coney Island Baby*, for example, featured a standard rock backing band on every single tune, a marked contrast from the orchestral numbers and piano ballads that populate *Berlin* and *Transformer*. Wolcott linked up this grittier rock and roll side of Lou Reed's work to the new punk. He argued in argued in his feature on Reed that "the Velvets and their progeny are all children of Dr. Caligari – pale-skinned adventurers of shadowy city streets." He justified this claim by arguing that Patti Smith, the Talking Heads, and Television followed after Reed, also making music that "captures the fevers, heats, and dreamily violent rhythms of city life, expressing urban disconnectedness and transcending it."[27] In a *Times* feature that compared Reed to Patti Smith and Tom Verlaine, John Rockwell went even further in linking Reed to punk. He suggested Reed's place was central in the New York scene:

> Mr. Reed might seem an unlikely father figure; his image of perverse wickedness is not exactly paternal. Still, ever since nearly a decade ago with the Velvet Underground, the seminal underground rock band for which he composed and sang, Mr. Reed has lurked in the shadowy background of the scene."

Rockwell went on to praise those aspects of Reed's career that most closely linked him to the new crop of artists popping up in the city. He extolled Reed's poetic sensibility as an influence on the rock "avant-garde" of Patti Smith and Talking

[27] Wolcott, "The Rise of Punk Rock," 88.

Heads, and linked him to the crude minimalism of contemporary punk in the "defiantly tuneless singing and the grimness of the themes" on *Street Hassle*.[28]

Lester Bangs more or less abandoned broad reflections on Reed's relationship to punk during the later part of the decade (see chapter 2 for more on the relationship between Bangs and Reed). But he wrote two articles showering heavy praise on 1975's *Metal Machine Music*, a Reed double album comprised entirely of feedback; one piece dubbed it the "greatest album ever made."[29] Reed himself downplayed his relationship to the new scene. When Danny Fields asked him who he thought would succeed his group, he reportedly screamed back, "I AM THE NEW VELVET UNDERGROUND!"[30]

III. Punk as Subculture

These intense debates about legacy and succession are rather curious. A small crop of vanguardist music critics, writing for a close-knit circle of presses, tasking themselves with the definition of an unknown and inaccessible music scene… Why write so ardently about the aesthetic and historical character of a genre that even most readers of the *New York Times* – let alone anyone outside of the city – would probably never encounter?

In seeking to define the unitary aesthetic and historical character of punk, critics and artists were attempting to define what justified its claims of musical

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[28] Rockwell, "Three Faces of New York Rock," 22.
[29] Bangs, "The Greatest Album Ever Made: Just In Case You Ever Wondered"; see also Bangs, "How to Succeed in Torture Without Really Trying Or, Louie Come Home, All Is Forgiven."
[30] Quoted in Robinson, "The New Velvet Underground," 94; Reed seems to have held some hostility toward the newer artists. When asked his thoughts on the New York underground by Lenny Kaye, Reed reportedly scoffed, "there isn't any underground anymore." Quoted in Kaye, "How Many Times Does a Snake Crawl Out of His Skin?," 34.

exceptionalism. They were investigating what made it hold together as a distinctive social and musical project. In other words, critics were cultivating a theory of punk as a *subculture*.

For almost the entire history of punk, subcultural studies has been the primary guiding force of punk scholarship. It functions as a persistent thread linking the 1970s to the present. Practically coterminous with punk, subcultural studies emerged as a research program in the mid-seventies powered by scholars affiliated with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CSSS), the so-called Birmingham School. It inspired many disciples including Dick Hebdige, whose 1979 *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* was the first full-length academic study of punk; it still probably is the most widely read scholarly text on the topic.[31] Subcultural studies has also been controversial. It has faced repeated attacks on every front from the moment it emerged. But even opponents of the field have had to cede the terrain of debate to it, refuting rather than bypassing it. Indeed, the controversy that has surrounded it since its earliest years is really a testament to its power, forcing important early punk scholars like Simon Frith and Dave Laing to challenge it head-on in their work.[32]

One commonplace tenant of the theory is that subcultures hold a unitary affective and social program. These distinguish them from culture at large, granting them both an externally oppositional and internally coherent character. Central to this is a claim about the nature of culture and class, to which I'll return below. But in terms of its internal organizational logic, the argument goes:

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[31] Hebdige, *Subculture*.
[32] E.g. Frith, "Formalism, Realism, and Leisure: The Case of Punk" and Laing, "Interpreting Punk Rock."

subculture rejects dominant culture and develops its own, alternative set of rules. These are formative for a range of social practices, from politics and appearance to artistic style. In spite of how varied they might appear on the surface, they largely follow from a coherent logic. The most robust version of this argument comes from Hebdige in *Subculture*, where he suggested that subcultural style took the form of *homology*. Drawing on a term deployed by sociologists and anthropologists including Paul Willis and Claude Levi-Strauss, Hebdige wrote that punk, despite its seemingly chaotic character, "was only possible because the style was so thoroughly ordered. The chaos cohered as a meaningful whole." Hebdige claimed that punk was defined by its homologous nature, that is, by the consistency shared across ostensibly diverse forms of expression. Clothes, music, and attitude, then, all worked together to express a shared social program.[33]

For Hebdige, this was the negativity that characterized punk, the cut-ups and antagonism and dissonance that found expression in punk's aggressive musical and visual style. Others have modified this account or questioned it entirely. Despite the fact that Hebdige has faced attack on any number of fronts, homology has been a difficult premise to shed. Many of his later critics share his assumptions even as they disavow elements of his theory. Take, for example, Philip Lewin and J. Patrick Williams's more sociological and ethnographic account, "The Ideology and Practice of Authenticity in Punk Subculture." They reject what they see as the more idealized moments of Hebdige's commitments to class-based subcultural theory. But they replace that with a new central principle, one rooted in anthropological values rather than political theory. Abandoning

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[33] Hebdige, *Subculture*, 113.

style, they argue that punk contains instead an unequivocal commitment to "self-actualization," an authenticity-oriented sense of self-creation and –reliance.[34]

I would also allege that even the studies replacing social theory with more properly musical concerns have simply transported Hebdige's concern for homology into the aesthetic realm. Tricia Henry, one of the first scholars to dedicate attention to US punk, argues that the genre is primarily about musical outrage and shock. She suggests that this stylistic premise is best encapsulated by the "no future" chant from the outro of the Sex Pistols' 1977 single "God Save the Queen." Because she centers punk music on the Sex Pistols nihilistic worldview, Henry regards the New York scene as an anticipatory but incomplete realization of punk style. Less interested in anarchistic destruction, the Velvet Underground and the New York Dolls aren't a great example of punk for her. Failing to match the central aesthetic principle of no future, New York's scene is confined to the role of proto-punk throughout her narrative.[35]

The problem of it all is that, though homology goes hand-in-hand with punk, the genre has seldom followed along with the theory. Really, punk in most of its forms has failed to behave the way scholars would hope. British punk has been a bit better suited for subcultural studies. Especially if we think of more orthodox and standoffish subgenres of punk like Oi! or crust, subculture studies has some explanatory force. But US punk has been poorly served by the argument.[36] Less consistent visually and musically, with a jagged history that

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[34] Lewin and Williams, "The Ideology and Practice of Authenticity for Punk Subculture," 77.
[35] Henry, *Break All Rules*, 13.
[36] Worley, "Oi! Oi! Oi!: Class, Locality, and British Punk."

makes even chronology difficult, a theory based on clear-cut social designations and homological style doesn't hold much water when applied to New York.

Take the visual aesthetic of punk, which formed the basis for nearly all of Hebdige's analysis of punk. British punks tended to dress in a more visually outrageous – and coherent – fashion. Take this photo, shot by the photographer Janette Beckman in 1978:

Figure 12 British punks at World's End (Janette Beckman, 1978)

Beckman's photographs – which often appeared in *Melody Maker* and *The Face* – brought British punk well beyond the confines of Chelsea during the seventies and eighties. This picture in particular captures the iconic look of punk and skinhead subcultures. By the end of the seventies, artists and diehard fans in Britain frequently donned the boots and spiked hair that so enchanted Hebdige. Given their pervasiveness, he was justified to an extent in characterizing punk's visual language in terms of its homology. Contrast this to a photograph grouping together a mix of New York punk stars in the mid-1970s:

Figure 13 Joan Jett (the Runaways), Debbie Harry (Blondie), David Johansen (New York Dolls), and Joey Ramone (Roberta Bayley, date unknown)

This photo, taken by the famed photographer Roberta Bayley at a wedding sometime during the seventies, captures a cross-section of figureheads of US punk. Joan Jett is seen on the left (Before forming her most famous group, the Blackhearts, she performed with Los Angeles' Runaways; she also recorded her debut solo album featuring Paul Cook and Steve Jones of the Sex Pistols with Clem Burke and Frank Infante of Blondie). Debbie Harry of Blondie, David Johansen of the New York Dolls, and Joey Ramone stand in for New York in the photo. Joey Ramone dresses in the iconic fashion of his group, wearing torn skin-tight jeans and a leather jacket. By this time, Johansen had largely abandoned the androgynous style characteristic of the New York Dolls, electing here for a casual look that is far more neutral than his friends. Meanwhile, Debbie Harry, ever the fashion icon, dons a dress that sets her aside from the deliberately shabby look of many US (and British) punks.

The problem of locating punk's visual and sonic boundaries was not lost on early critics and artists, who fought ardently about how or even whether punk could be thought to comprise a coherent musical project. While many critics agreed that mid-seventies punk had promise, they often seemed to sense they were onto something before they knew exactly what it was. Beyond a general consensus that there was a thing called punk and that it was a very good thing, critics couldn't seem to agree what it actually was.

Indeed, the difficulties plaguing definitions were fundamental. So fundamental that, for a second time, critics disagreed about the very name for the genre. Though punk was the most consistently applied term through the middle seventies, dissenting names for the group abounded until the mainstream media picked up the term around 1977-1978 (see more on terms like new wave and postpunk in Chapter 4). Many early expository texts pitched alternative names, some of which were quite unwieldy. A July 1975 spread in the *SoHo Weekly News* announced the "new musical scene rising from the Bowery underground." It also referred to the groups as "hard-ass rock" and "the new New York rock and roll bands."[37] Lisa Robinson suggested that the groups performing at CBGB constituted a "newly emerging 'New York band scene."[38] By 1977, John Rockwell had produced a number of suggestions ranging from the simple to the… complex. These included "the New York Rock Scene," "the punk-art-rock murk of the New

[37] Unattributed, "Hard-Ass Rock Versus the Bowery Bum Blues."
[38] Robinson, "The New Velvet Underground," 80.

York underground," and "the currently fashionable New York underground punk-rock scene."[39]

The term *new wave* was also floated to describe bands during this era (see chapter 4 for more on the relationship between new wave and punk). Bernard Gendron outlines the way this term largely superseded *punk* by 1978, a function of the mainstream success of groups like Blondie.[40] But new wave played a limited role in writing on punk during the explosive first few years of the New York scene, and remained controversial even in the late seventies. In a December 1977 editorial, Robert Palmer scoffed at the term. He claimed that the term was mystifying, arguing that it stuck around only because "radio programmers and record retailers settled on New Wave as a generic name for punk rock" [sic].[41] Admittedly, Palmer was polemicizing for a certain version of punk rooted in retro rock, and so downplayed a term that carried connotations of artsiness and pastiche. But even those unsympathetic to such a musical project weren't any more comfortable with the term. Robert Duncan aggressively castigated new wave in an anti-punk November 1977 *Creem* article: "Let's get this straight. I refuse to call this crap New Wave… Punk rock is what it started as, and punk rock is what it'll finish as – soon, I hope."[42]

More troubling than this sort of trolling – or the question of nomenclature – was the lack of consensus about *music*. If the worry were merely about labels, it

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[39] Rockwell, "Report From New York's Rock 'Underground'"; Rockwell, "Two Rock Groups at Bottom Line"; Rockwell, "Dictators Offer Bill of Punk-Rock."
[40] Gendron, *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club*, 227; for more on new wave and its relationship to punk, see Cateforis, *Are We Not New Wave?*
[41] Palmer, "Rock: Motors of the 60's."
[42] Duncan, "New York Lights Up With Soggy Matches," 37; This was a line Duncan continued to draw while writing *The Noise*. In a chapter entitled "Kindernacht," Duncan argued that artsy groups getting described by the label new wave were simply the "other pole" of the punk "joke" that was more "frightening" than funny; see Duncan, *The Noise*, 240–241.

wouldn't warrant much discussion. But the object proved to be equally unstable. Period articles on punk often rely more on "I know it when I see it" claims than concrete analysis. Or at best, they deploy vague descriptors like "art rock," "minimalism," and "retro rock" – terms that could apply to most of what was happening in rock music in the mid-seventies.

More often than not, they define punk negatively. Most descriptive writing on punk in this period quickly turns into writing on what was not punk. Duncan concluded that the Talking Heads could not be called punk, writing that, "while the music may be punkishly repetitive and austere for the most part, the fact that they have added a subtle horn section is positively *anti*-punk."[43] The absence of horns as the defining characteristic of punk? Meanwhile, John Rockwell condemned the use of horns, but he was inclined to agree with Duncan's estimation of the group. He wrote, "Talking Heads is no punk band, despite its charter membership in the CBGB's pantheon." But his justification for his claim was a curious reversal of Duncan's analysis, suggesting that they weren't true punks precisely because of their sparse sound: "This is as pure and original a mi[nimal]ist art-rock trio as we have."[44]

While such accounts often functioned like musical gatekeeping, a polemical tone also characterized positive writing. An anonymous article ran by *Trouser Press* in 1977 insisted that,

> The Dictators were the only real punk band… It was not the Ramones but the Dictators who solidly conceptualized the rough exterior and atomic-tempered punk rocker. Every band since – and we include the Ramones – has unjustly

[43] Ibid., 38.
[44] Rockwell, "The Pop Life: Bonnie Koloc, Chicago Fixture, Is Going National."

> been tossed into the oblivion of blanket labeling and robbed of their own identity… Where does this leave the Ramones?… It frees them from the grasp of punkdom forever.[45]

Suggesting that punk was a prison rather than a positive means of asserting a group's musical identity, this anonymous writer was characteristic of a widespread sentiment toward punk in this era.

It was also one many bands themselves endorsed. Most groups affiliated with punk in the mid-seventies display a degree of awkwardness when confronted about their place in the genre, usually oscillating between denying links to the genre and claiming to be its greatest exponent. Rockwell was characterizing a general trend among punk bands in 1977 when he suggested, "musicians tend to resist analysis and categorization, and now that so much had been written about 'the New York scene,' a counter-movement has arisen that denies the very existence of such a thing."[46] Even before the fame, this movement was starting to emerge. For a 1974 article in the *Soho Weekly*, Tom Verlaine told Alan Betrock that his group was uncomfortable with being connected to the rest of the New York scene. He called his rivals "campy and non-sincere," saying "that's not the way rock s[h]ould be."[47]

By 1977, with the need for distinction only increased, the Ramones expressed an even more characteristic degree of unease with the New York scene. In an interview with Roy Trakin for *New York Rocker*, the members of the Ramones refused to self-describe as punk. Johnny Ramone said of people who

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[45] Unattributed, "N.Y. Notes," 29.
[46] Rockwell, "Report From New York's Rock 'Underground,'" 11.
[47] Betrock, "Know Your New York Bands: Television."

labeled them with the term, "Whaddya gonna do? We don't care… It doesn't matter one way or the other." Even so, all of the members of the group repeatedly insisted that they were the greatest example of what was they weren't representative of. They suggested that the other bands in the scene were jealous of them and imitating them, Johnny went on a lengthy diatribe about the proper way of being punk, and Tommy insisted that they were the main reason the New York scene was succeeding: "We were the first CBGB-punk-type group to get signed and that was important because I think we opened up the doors… I think it was important because the scene happened."[48]

The point of reviewing these sorts of claims is simply to challenge the commonplace assumption that New York punk was organized around homology. My goal is not, however, to argue that the genre was incoherent or deceptive. In my introduction, I suggested that pervasive suspicion offers up a blackmail logic wherein musical norms must be perfectly pure or regarded as ideological falsities. This chapter attempts to make good on my promise to theorize punk as a set of dialectical practices rather than a set of neatly defined style rules or a mere invention.

I'll turn toward the aesthetic ramifications of that thought in a moment. But I first need to provide an alternative account of subculture, one that understands the centrality of dissensus in social formation. Homology has often functioned as a trap, forcing commentators to rely on reductive, first principle-style arguments about punk. This is a problem that pervades in sociological

[48] Trakin, "The Ramones: Rockets or Rubberbands."

accounts more generally, where writers often search for singular and totalizing rules for culture or society. This was a thought not lost on the earliest theorists of subculture, who remain more directly linked to Marxist and so to a historical materialist and dialectical social theory than their successors. In his classic 1980 article "Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms," Stuart Hall polemicized against thinking about culture in static terms. Instead, he praised the thinking within cultural studies that leaned toward understanding culture as "praxis." He praised that thought about culture focused on,

> social *practices*… '[C]ulture' is those patterns of organization, those characteristic forms of human energy which can be discovered as revealing themselves – in 'unexpected identities and correspondences' as well as in 'discontinuities of an unexpected kind' – within or underlying *all* social practices.[49]

Here, Hall was simply extending a fairly orthodox Marxist viewpoint to a theory of culture. Marx himself wrote in his famous "Theses on Feuerbach" that philosophy suffered insofar as focused on reality, "conceived only in the form of *contemplation*, but not as *human sensuous activity, practice*, not subjectively." Instead, he claimed, "social life is essentially *practical*. All mysteries which mislead theory into mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice."[50]

This thought underlies Marx's entire career, which was neither an attempt to uncover a fixed character for capitalism nor an attempt to reduce human life to production. Even in *Capital*, his most ostensibly materialist text (insofar as it focuses primarily on production and exchange rather than philosophy or other

[49] Hall, "Cultural Studies," 59–60.
[50] Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," 143–145.

such topics), Marx worried about the contradictory and interlocking dynamics of human sociality. This took myriad forms. On the one hand, Marx was interested in the distinction between classes, such as in the antinomy formed between working people and capitalists conjoined in the production process. But he also wrote at length, on the other hand, about the internal division of subjects in capitalism. He wrote that working people find themselves faced with the contradiction between production to sustain themselves (necessary labour) and those forms of work that solely benefit their employer (surplus labour).[51]

The presence of contradiction was at the heart of the early thinking of the Birmingham School. The widely read introduction to the 1976 CCCS program-defining collection *Resistance Through Rituals*, "Subcultures, Cultures, and Class," intimates at the considerably more eclectic subcultures of the US. Co-authored by John Clarke, Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson, and Brian Roberts, the piece largely aims to work out a theory of subculture in a working class, British context. But the lengthy essay concludes with a suggestive episode about how to think about cultural politics in the US. The authors observe that the 1960s and '70s witnessed a parallel explosion of subcultures in the US (sometimes, as in the case of hippies, grouped under the rubric of countercultures). More diffuse than British working-class subcultures, the US subculture relied on more generally middle class conceptions of individuality that propels it toward a more amorphous social formation.[52] This is contradictory in character. Clarke et al wrote that this strain of subculture was inflected with a "negative dimension."

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[51] See the chapter on "The Working Day," especially pp. 340-344 in Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*.
[52] Clarke et al., "Subcultures, Cultures, and Class," 45.

Born of the dominant, bourgeois ethos, it took as its cue the structures of the dominant culture even as it called for their dissolution. It is a form of bourgeois opposition to the bourgeoisie, and so even as it celebrated and endorsed the possibilities of middle class life, it called "for a systematic inversion, a symbolic up-turning, of the whole bourgeois ethic."[53]

As their priority was theorizing social life in the UK, the CCCS largely left such suggestive thoughts at the level of mere suggestion. Further, their conception of the aesthetic implications of bourgeois subculture fails to keep stride with more forceful Birmingham school accounts of British skinheads, punks, and other subcultures. Though they vaguely evoke hippies and the music of the 1960s, they largely remain on the surface in their account.

I read Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* as offering a suggestive way to expand this account and develop a theory of punk's aesthetic program. The *Arcades Project* is many things, not only a massive text in its own right, but also the background for his widely read "On the Concept of History" and material that has been gathered into a full-length volume of essays about Charles Baudelaire. I also read it as of the greatest accounts of the bourgeoisie as an organizing locus of culture. Ostensibly a study of the nineteenth century Parisian Arcades – the wrought iron passageways that grouped the shops of Paris into precursors of modern day shopping malls – Benjamin's work is really a massive meditation on the cultural totality realized by capital at the height of the industrial revolution. *The Arcades Project* defines the constellation of the bourgeois social world, detailing the way the arcades function as passageways linking everything from

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[53] Ibid., 49.

the interiors of the bourgeoisie's homes to dozens of cultural and artistic practices pervading French life.

Benjamin's interest in the aesthetic centers on Charles Baudelaire. While his writing along these lines is sprawling and ambitious, what is more relevant for my work is the way Benjamin uses Baudelaire to theorize the oppositional character of bourgeois art. In the "Exposés" – the programmatic essays that introduce the *Arcades Project* – Benjamin argues that Baudelaire's writing functions as a powerful allegory for bourgeois social life. More specifically, Benjamin claims that Baudelaire writes as if channeling the "gaze of the flâneur." Benjamin argues that the *flâneur* represents a characteristic figure of bourgeois intelligentsia, one who stands "on the threshold of the metropolis as of the middle class… In neither is he at home."[54] Benjamin's figures stand with one foot in the middle class cityscape, and one without. They imagine themselves to have best understood their own epoch, gazing on the public and "seeing straight to the innermost recesses of [the passerby's] soul." And yet the force behind this understanding is a deep distance from this world: "the gaze which the allegorical genius turns on the city betrays… profound alienation."[55] The flâneur is a bohemian, one who draws her "rebellious pathos" from its world and yet "sides with the asocial."[56]

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[54] Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 10.
[55] Ibid., 21.
[56] Ibid., 10.

IV. Punk as Subcultural Aesthetic

Benjamin argues that an aesthetic program follows from this social view. Benjamin claims that the flâneur's artistic vision culminates in an intensified aestheticism, one which finds its apex in *l'art pour l'art* and the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. It is easy to get lost in the details of Baudelaire's complex artistic vision, Wagnerian aesthetics, and so on. I am not interested in reading Benjamin as a commentator on Baudelaire or Wagner, who's artistic projects I hope to show below are largely irrelevant to the question of punk.[57] Rather, Benjamin strikes me as of interest as a theorist of bourgeois subculture, from which a set of conclusions about aesthetics might be drawn.

What is most important for understanding Benjamin's take is his own conception of the aesthetics of the flâneur. In "The Artwork in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility," Benjamin that the notion of *l'art pour l'art* marked the intensification of art as ritual. For Benjamin, this signaled the revelation of something, often hidden in seemingly secular Western views about art: the persistent cult function of what he famously terms *aura*. What is most important in the context of Baudelaire and the flâneur is that Benjamin saw this mode of art production as an intensified and totalizing "theology of art."[58]

In the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin further clarified that this ambitious view of art parallels the social contradictions of the bourgeois epoch. He claims that relentless and expansive aestheticism of the flâneur parallels the character of

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[57] Neil Nehring follows an alternative strategy, thinking deeply about connections between Baudelaire's elitist aesthetic vision and Patti Smith; see Nehring, "Patti Smith and Modernism: The Problem with Dandies," 238.

[58] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility (Second Version)," 105–106.

capitalist society. Just as *l'art pour l'art* demands the intense newness of avant-garde innovation, capitalism demands ever-new commodities available for sale. Just as the market demands development, so too does the flâneur. Further, art transformed into theology parallels the commodity form, which Marx famously argued "is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties."[59] *L'art pour l'art* promises an artifact seemingly self-generated from its own demands, the ultimate transformation of labor into properties of an artifact.

In this sense, Benjamin argues that the Baudelarian vision is paradigmatically bourgeois, radicalizing the bourgeoisie's paradigmatic creation – the commodity – into a model for artistic practice. The program is deeply anti-commercial and yet infatuated with newness that parallels the relentless expansion of capital. In so doing, Benjamin's Baudelaire is both isolationist and yet deeply of his moment, missing that "art's last line of resistance… coincide[s] with the commodity's advanced line of attack."[60]

Abstracting from Benjamin's claims about the specificity of nineteenth Parisian life or Baudelaire's writing, I would suggest that he provides a helpful way of conceptualizing the aesthetic program of the bourgeois subculture. Born of a doubled sense of resentment and affection for the bourgeois epoch, the flâneur is the bourgeoisie's greatest critic and its greatest champion. It cordons itself off from the social totality it finds loathsome, but it does so by refining the logic of that totality. Or, to translate in the direction of punk: it turns toward

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[59] Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, 163.
[60] Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 22.

subculture. In so doing, it doubles down on those elements most characteristic of middle class life. This form of subculture emerges as the greatest trumpeting of the bourgeoisie's social and aesthetic program.

This is a helpful framework for making sense of the contradictory character of punk. Punk was a vanguardist project that takes its cue from bourgeois culture. It dove into the cultural forms of mass culture: film, television, music, print culture, and beyond. There were many ways this played out in New York. Take for example the Ramones' austere rehashing of classic rock and roll or the Cramps' transformation of horror movies into musical vignettes. Both reaffirm their source material even as they render it remote. The Cramps show that they are the true devotees of the horror movie.

I would argue that the vision for punk that most closely resembles Benjamin's direct account is expressed in what has often been conceived of as the artistic strain of punk. Running counter to forms of punk that made more direct reference to popular culture (comic books, 1950s rock and roll, etc.), a number of artists in the mid-seventies punk scene were characterized by experimentalism and art referentiality. Television, Talking Heads, Suicide, No Wave, all struck commentators as proof that punk represented an artistic turn for rock. Pushing the boundaries of rock previously conceived, these groups and others distinguished themselves from each other and rock of the moment through their artistic superiority.

Of all such artists, Patti Smith was a magnet for this sort of commentary. She herself cultivated her reputation as an artist, frequently mentioning poets and artists in interviews and her own writing. This in part explains why she has

been the darling of literary criticism, attracting more remark as a poet than as a rock musician.[61] This was pervasive in not only Smith's career as a writer and singer, but also in the visual style she cultivated in collaboration with photographers like Robert Mapplethorpe and Judy Linn:

Figure 14 Patti Smith with camera (Judy Linn, 1969)

Take this photograph, shot by Smith's friend and collaborator Judy Linn in 1969. Linn befriended Smith while a student at Pratt Institute, taking dozens of photos of Smith during their friendship. Many photographs of Smith cultivated an image of her as a dreamy auteur. This one features Smith holding Linn's Super 8 Bolex camera, a favorite tool of many experimental filmmakers in the 1970s.[62]

Despite her dalliances with film, 1970s rock writers latched onto Smith's literary credentials. They wrote at length on the way she appeared to blur lines

[61] E.g. Daley, "Patti Smith's 'Gloria'"; Kane, "'Nor Did I Socialize With Their People'"; Nehring, "Patti Smith and Modernism"; Noland, "Rimbaud and Patti Smith."
[62] For more on Linn's photographs of Smith, see Bussell, "A Muse Named Patti Smith."

between rock and art. This was largely a function of her introduction to those critics, something first facilitated by her poetic rather than musical career. Well-before Patti Smith Group became critical darlings at the center of the punk revolution, Smith was well known as a New York poet. Her work was unique for finding publication both in traditional poetry collections (eg. 1972's *Seventh Heaven*) and the pages of *Creem* magazine. Dave Marsh was one of her first supporters, publishing her work in the magazine in 1971.

Critics continued to be impressed as Patti Smith Group began to crystalize. Smith's first efforts towards a poetry-rock fusion occurred in 1971 when the guitarist and critic Lenny Kaye accompanied her at her readings. The pair first performed together on February 10, 1971 at an event celebrating the birthday of the writer Bertolt Brecht. Performances in this era tended to be relatively free form. Kaye usually played simple improvised melodic material or chord vamps that he called "fields."[63] Gradually, Kaye and Smith expanded the ensemble, adding instruments as well as musical dynamism. The addition of keyboardist Richard Sohl, a period that ultimately culminated in Smith's 1974 debut single, "Piss Factory" b/w "Hey Joe." Smith's original, which tells a story about the drudgery of factory work in small-town New Jersey, is comparably more structured than her earlier work. The song is built around the alternation of verse and chorus progressions held down by Sohl, who stands in on piano for an absent rhythm section. On the verses, Sohl hammers out a simple eight beat E minor-D major vamp. After a turn-around, featuring a quick one-to-one alternation

[63] Heylin, *From the Velvets to the Voidoids*, 113.

between these two chords, the chorus begins. It is a contrasting ascending pattern, C major – D major – E minor – D major – E minor.

Even while writing songs in this vein – or covering garage rock classics like "Hey Joe" – the rock world tended to think of Patti Smith as a poet. But they thought of her as *their* poet. Lester Bangs wrote in an introduction to a collection published in *Creem* in 1974, "it is the grittiest poetic instinct of the 70s which supremely imbues all of her work. We don't often print what's stamped officially as 'poetry' in CREEM, but then Patti's poetry is rock 'n' roll splattered in a vibrating mosaic on the printed page."[64]

This type of criticism only intensified with the release of Patti Smith Group's 1975 Arista Records debut, *Horses*. By this point, working with the addition of drummer Jay Dee Daugherty, the record more firmly centered Patti Smith within rock music. Some critics acknowledged the distinctive rock roots of Patti Smith's mid-seventies work, as when Patrick Goldstein wrote at length on Patti Smith's obsession with the "punk revolution of the mid-60s."[65] But even these comments were often intellectualized. Though suggesting that Patti Smith was relatively conservative and made music saturated with references, Craig Gholson attributed scholarly depth to her musical work: "Patti Smith has her PhD. In '60's anti-establishment culture, a major in British Bad-Boys, a minor is West Coast Black Leather Poets… Patti Smith has studied well."[66]

More frequently, critics continued to discuss Smith as an artist. They latched onto *Horses*, citing it as proof of the potential in New York's blossoming

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[64] Bangs, "Sulky Angel: The Poetry of Patti Smith"; See also Glover, "Review of Seventh Heaven, by Patti Smith" and McCarthy, "Patti: Poet as Macho Woman."
[65] Goldstein, "Patti Smith," 67.
[66] Gholson, "Patti Smith."

rock subculture. Many were enticed by the fact that the Velvet Underground's John Cale produced the record, establishing a link between Patti Smith Group and the previous generation of punk auteurs. Others simply contrasted her to the rock of her moment. Reviewing the album, John Rockwell wrote at length on Smith's uniqueness in rock:

> Patti Smith is the hottest rock poet to emerge from the fecund wastes of New Jersey since Bruce Springsteen. But Smith is not like Springsteen or anybody at all. Springsteen is a rocker; Smith is a chanting rock and roll poet. Springsteen's followers thought he was a poet too, at first, because of the apparent primacy of his speedy strings of street-life images. But Springsteen quickly set matters right by building up his band and revealing his words to have been what words have been for most music all along – conceptual frames on which composers hang their art. For Smith, the words generate everything else.[67]

Rockwell was voicing the standard perspective on the album by remarking on the artistic dimensions that separated it from rock of the era. So even as critics now began to discuss her more centrally as a rock artist, she was framed as one who transcended the limitations of rock.

The question of punk and art is always tricky. In Patti Smith's case, the story gets quite complicated. For starters, Smith herself displayed a healthy dose of irony when discussing her artistic ambitions. Despite her inclination toward literary and rock hagiography, she laughed off this inclination as pretentious, saying, "[i]f I didn't think of so much of myself, I'd think I was a name dropper. You can read my book, *Seventh Heaven*, and who do you get out of it? Edie Sedgwick, Marianne Faithful, Joan of Arc, Frank Sinatra."[68] Even as she mocked

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[67] Rockwell, "Patti Smith: Shaman in a Land of a Thousand Dances," 85.
[68] Quoted in McNeil and McCain, *Please Kill Me*, 100.

her own relationship to tradition, she also demonstrated her own inability to stand comfortably in the art world. During a concert at New York's Bottom Line on December 27, 1975, after an audience member yelled out for the group to play something by Beethoven, Smith mocked the evocation of a high art composer in a rock context: "Beethoven? Wait a minute… I do… we do know something about Beethoven. Oh, but I forget. Beethoven, yeah! B-E-E-T."

More than a question of self-presentation, I think it is important to tend to the musical efforts of Patti Smith Group in order to make sense of her work. The band produced neither the same old rock with allusions to Rimbaud nor poetry set to drum beats. I would suggest that the tendency of overreading artistic influences on Patti Smith music has led to misunderstanding. This is as true of Smith's early critics as it is of more recent writers. Thurston Moore, for example, suggests that the sensibility of Patti Smith and punk more broadly stems from her influences: "Patti Smith was, and is, pure experience… She completely immersed herself in the genius of Bob Dylan and Arthur Rimbaud… She went to hear Television at CBGB and joined forces with Tom Verlaine and Richard Hell. They amplified the influence of Burroughs, Genet, Hendrix, Dylan, Stooges, Dolls and reggae."[69] The standard counter has been to downplay the force of Smith's professed influences. Barry Shank and Neil Nehring have both alleged that references to literary figures are superficial lyrical allusions that leave music unaltered. Nehring in particular has pushed this line ardently, castigating

[69] Moore, "Patti Smith," 51.

academics for linking the artist to literary modernists like Baudelaire and Rimbaud.[70]

While I wholeheartedly agree with Nehring's objection to the tradition of thinking of Smith as a literary modernist, I would suggest that the problem isn't really whether or not Smith succeeds in living up to her influences. In both sides of the argument, the central question is presented as one about the force of analogy. Moore effectively endorses analogies between Smith and Rimbaud, while Nehring doubts the efficacy of an analogy based in artistic modernism. Analogies can be helpful of course, and they are more or less inevitable when writing about music. But when given the central role in conversations about Smith, they have tended to sideline discussion of her music for debates about source material. For all of its explanatory force, Nehring's article largely becomes a debate about the respective merits of modernism and postmodernism. This relegates the discussion of her musical style to the brief conclusion of the piece.

As an alternative, I propose thinking of Patti Smith's avant-gardism in relationship to internal parameters. Above, I developed a theory of punk as a subculture, using Benjamin to formalize a model of bourgeois avant-garde aesthetics. In my understanding, Patti Smith offered an avant-garde artistic project not through Rimbaud or any other source that might be used as an analogy. Rather, her aesthetic program emerged vis-à-vis rock music. I read Patti Smith's work as an advance of rock's internal musical dialectic discussed in Chapter 1. Just as Smith's precursors in an earlier moment of punk set about

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[70] Shank, *The Political Force of Musical Beauty*, 156; Nehring, "Patti Smith and Modernism: The Problem with Dandies," 245.

evaluating the musical efficacy of rock and roll for a new era, Patti Smith Group advanced the introspective turn. In this sense, they drew on rock material for artistic ends. But PSG had a distinctive character from that earlier project. Isolated from rock's crisis within the confines of New York subculture, Patti Smith was able to take for granted her musical lineage. Hailed as the successor to Velvet Underground and the New York Dolls, the centerpiece of a blossoming New York-based musical revival, her work was elevation without tragedy. It is rock regarded as *l'rock pour l'rock*, rock turned autonomous and avant-garde.

This vision saturates *Horses*. Importantly, despite the high blown writing on the group's work, *Horses* is a curiously conservative album. It is saturated by lyrical allusions to nearly all of rock history, and features musical references to rock-related genres from classic rock and roll to reggae. Simon Reynolds writes that, despite the commonplace sentiment that the record anticipated the more revolutionary moments of the late seventies, it "more closely resembles the preceding decade… Teeming with invocations and channelings, *Horses* is one long exercise in rock and roll mythography."[71]

This plays out nowhere more clearly than in Patti Smith's cover of the Van Morrison original "Gloria." The song was originally released with the group Them as the B-side to their version of the blues standard "Baby Please Don't Go" (the latter was widely recorded, and is best known today for versions by John Lee Hooker and Ted Nugent's first group/backing band, the Amboy Dukes). Later included on their classic debut album *Angry Young Them*, the song is a paradigmatic example of the sort of 1960s garage rock privileged by '70s critics

[71] Reynolds, "No Future," 252.

(see Chapter 1). By that decade, the song had become a rock standard; it was covered by the Bobby Fuller Four, the Shadows of Knight, and the Doors, and received a 1973 re-release on the Decca imprint Deram. Musically, it was the paradigmatic garage rock song. Constructed around a simple falling I-bVII-IV progression (E major – D major — A major), it simply vamps those harmonies from the start of the song to the finish. On the choruses, the drums add a few extra snare fills and the guitars pound out the chords a bit more emphatically, but otherwise, the song is unmodified; in this sense, it is a song practically designed to invite clichés about three chord garage rock.

Lyrically, “Gloria” describes the narrator's intense desire and anticipation of a late-night tryst with his lover. On the first verse, Van Morrison's narrator eagerly (with thinly veiled sexual innuendo) details his excitement about the encounter that waits:

> Like to tell you about my baby
> you know, she comes around
> She about five feet four
> A-from her head to the ground
> You know she comes around here
> At just about midnight
> She make ya feel so good, Lord
> She make ya feel all right

The text is downright vulgar in its transparency, the crude underside of the veiled sexuality pervading 1960s Top 40 music. Van Morrison's vocal delivery only heightens this crudeness, both in terms of its lo-fi garage credentials and its debauched intentions. His voice crunches with gravel, something that saturates the song with animalistic eroticism.

Patti Smith Group's cover drastically reforms the tune. There are a few basic continuities. The chorus is a similarly shouted “Gloria! G-L-O-R-I-A!” over the same basic chord progression. But most of the lyrical content is reworked, and a number of subtle changes alter the overall musical program of the tune. Smith's lyrics are a combination of original texts, both newly written lyrics and older poetry, pastiched together with fragments from Van Morrison's tune.

The core of Smith's lyrics for the song is one of her earliest poems, “Oath.” A kind of negative credo, “Oath” renounces original sin and takes on the promise of salvation onto the narrator:

> Jesus died for somebody's sins
> but not mine
> melting in a pot of thieves
> wild card up my sleeve
> thick heart of stone
> my sins my own
> ...
> So Christ
> I'm giving you the good-bye
> firing you tonight
> I can make my own light shine
> and darkness too is equally fine
> you got strung up for my brother
> but with me I draw the line
> you died for somebody's sins
> but not mine [72]

At their earliest gigs, Smith read “Oath” without accompaniment. But a later bootleg (conjecturally reported to be from 1973) features Kaye backing up the song with intense, sustained feedback and a meandering whole tone-based melodic line. This accompaniment gives a free form character to what is actually

[72] Smith's tendencies to revise and improvise during live performance make the text of “Oath” unstable. This is quoted from the version printed in P. Smith, *Early Works 1970-1979*.

a relatively rhyme-based text. At this moment, Patti Smith probably was closest to her artistic heroes.

But by the time the song was reworked into "Gloria," it was given a full backing band and expanded into an epic rock number. In this new version, the song is drastically different in character. Part of this comes from the elision of texts. The song sits in a blurry space between secular and sacred planes. Juxtaposing lyrics about youthful sexuality with a religious (anti-)credo, the song plays on the double-meaning of the word "Gloria" as well as the doubled spiritual and sexual nature of Christian religion. This, I believe, explains the song's subtitle, "In Excelsis Deo." Gradually traveling from Smith's credo to the powerful chant of the final chorus, the song captures the fulfillment promised by Gloria in both forms.

Musical development is also crucial to this narrative. Lenny Kaye has explained that "Gloria" started out as a simple jam the group would perform live, playing a series of his fields over which Smith would "chant, poeticize, and tell stories."[73] On the recorded version, the song builds up from a slow crawl to a powerful finale. Harmonic motion guides this. At the opening of the song, the original chord progression is stripped down to one of Kaye's characteristic fields. This time, a simple I-bVII alternation is played on piano. A falling E-D-C# melodic line is all that we hear of the original progression, the final pitch standing in for the missing A major chord. Over this accompaniment, Smith reads the first stanza of "Oath." Contrasting with the more speechlike delivery on the 1973 version, Smith's delivery is here more musical. Smith bends the phrasing toward

[73] Quoted in Heylin, 133.

rock, lining up the words *jesus*, *died, somebody's, sins*, and *mine* with beats 2 and 4 (accented by the piano).

From there, a series of verses build the song up from this basic vamp to the chorus. The first verse, featuring original text by Smith, adds in a simple drum part that outlines the four large beats. Two guitar tracks are also present, one outlining the I-bVII vamp and another adding in melodic fills. On the second and third verses (which now draw more closely from Van Morrison's lyrics), the drums fill in eighth notes and the guitar plays more emphatically. Finally, the group builds to a bridge, built around a harmonic turnaround (I-bVII-IV-bVII-I-bIII) as Smith slowly spells out the song's signature phrase: G-L-O-R-I-A.

Here, we arrive at the chorus. It is the closest part of the cover to the original, but here played with unprecedented intensity resulting from the chorus's delay. Ultimately, the song reworks a simple garage rock tune into an expansive and powerful musical journey. I hear this differently from Barry Shank, who interprets the song as a "nonphallic" alternative to standard rock, a tune built on free rhythms and "floating sonorities."[74] Quite to the contrary, I would argue that the song is almost Brucknerian in its reliance on tonality to build a sense of dynamic musical space. Just like a symphony, the song manipulates harmony to create a sense of delay, development, and ultimate fulfillment (here, we get guitars instead of Wagner tuba, but so it goes).

This renders the song interesting on two fronts. On the one hand, the withholding of harmonic resolution performed in Smith's cover allows for a far more expansive version than the original. The song is freer, amenable to

[74] For Shank's full analysis of the song, see *The Political Force of Musical Beauty*, 170-174.

experimentation with the potential inherent in relatively simple material. Indeed, it was common in live performances for the group to elide the song with "Land," another *Horses* tune reworked from a rock standard: "Land of a 1000 Dances," most famous for the 1966 Wilson Pickett version. Also built around a falling I-bVII-IV progression, the songs would segue into each other almost in the spirit of a jam band. This gave them the appearance of a quasi-suite. More than just a stretching of harmonic motion, I would argue that this expansive structural manipulation opens up the original source to new potential. As I suggested above, the song gains new meaning from its structure. Not simply anticipation of a sexual encounter, Smith builds the song into a sprawling meditation on the ecstatic potential of rock music.

On the other hand, the new version works in tandem with the original in an intriguing way. The song doesn't work – to quickly challenge a paper tiger argument – by *adding to* the original. It does not borrow from Bruckner (or Rimbaud or anyone else). Structurally, while the Smith version is more dynamic, it is still just a verse-chorus pop song. In this spirit, the poetry bends toward the song structure (rather than the reverse). The most drastic alteration to the original text is simply the inclusion of an opening section of poetry. Read metrically in a way appropriate to rock, it overlays a section that could comfortably be analyzed in any pop song as an introduction. In that sense, the song is no more radical than "Gimme Shelter" or even the Barbarian's "Moulty."

Further, though the newer version is expansive when compared to the older, it works by tapping into the potential implied by the harmonic and textural possibilities of a relatively straightforward rock song. It is through common rock

devices of contrasting sections, textural layering, and increasing timbral density that the song builds into its frenzied finale. In other words, rock material provides the vehicle for the song's expansion. Not only is the source material itself significant – a classic garage rock tune from the golden age so idolized by many punk artists – but so too is the vessel for Smith's dynamic tonal odyssey: three chord rock.

It is in this sense that we might hear "Gloria" as *l'rock pour l'rock*. Smith deploys rock and roll, a musical language born of mass culture, for the purposes of developing a new, alternative vision for music. Subcultural in spirit, it is an alternative from *within* the musical mainstream. The song separates itself from the universe of garage rock and teenage lust. But it does so by recourse to the mechanisms of that universe. This spearheads punk's alternative musical identity, one that teeters somewhere between its own subcultural space and the musical world at large.

4. AFTER PUNK: POSTPUNK AT THE END OF THE 1970S

"A spirit of disenchantment is certainly in the air… What started as a year of unbridled optimism is ending in confusion and doubt for a lot of people. Even as recently as the last issue of *BOMP*, I was speaking of a permanent, expanding New Wave scene as an accomplished fact… What actually happened, I guess, was that the momentum pushing everyone along just sort of collapsed as more and more people realized they weren't getting anywhere. It got harder and harder to believe that this scene would explode when people finally got exposed to it, after the mass audience had every opportunity for exposure and still remained apathetic."
-Greg Shaw, "Editorial" (*BOMP*, January 1979)[1]

Dusty frames that still arrive, die in 1955
Fade away and radiate!
-Blondie, "Fade Away" (*Parallel Lines*, 1978)

I. Introduction

At the end of the 1970s, punk artists and fans found themselves in curious circumstances. A decade prior, punk was as an obscure critical category indexing a fledgling revisionary musical project. For all practical purposes, the genre didn't exist beyond the pages of *Creem* magazine or the minds of a small network of hipsters (see chapter 1). Even by the middle of the decade, the term largely functioned to describe small subcultures in a handful of major cities in the US and UK. Though punk was gaining traction, the word held little currency outside of New York and London.

[1] Shaw, "Editorial: The Beat."

By 1980, this situation had been reversed. Punk was a widely used category, linking musical scenes across the US, Europe, and even the global south.[2] Many early pioneers were starting to find recognition, including some they might not have wanted. And new bands were forming, many inspired by what had transformed from an impossible ideal to widely dispersed, concrete music scenes featuring dozens of artists.

Even though this signaled a greater interest in the genre by fans as well as an expanding network of artists increasingly understood to be participating in a shared global phenomenon, it also meant that punk had lost its insider status. Punk was now a word used – and misused – by more people outside of the genre than within. And, for those who might be reading a sensationalist *New York Times* report on the antics of the Sex Pistols or casually stumbling across Blondie's 1979 number one hit "Heart of Glass" on the radio, punk largely meant something quite different than it did for the early seventies purists.

If one of those purists opened the June 20, 1977 issue of *Newsweek*, they might be surprised to read about a British phenomenon of teens with dyed green hair who reportedly were

> part of a small pop culture cult whose members call themselves punks. Successors to the Teddys of the 1950s, the mods of the 1960s, and the rockers and skinheads of the

[2] There is little coverage of anything but Anglo-American punk in the scholarly or popular literature. Notable exceptions include the discussion of South Africa's National Wake in Petridis, "National Wake: The South African Punk Band Who Defied Apartheid"; Peru's Los Saicos in Brooks, "Meet Los Saicos, The Peruvian Band Credited With Inventing Punk Rock"; Watts and Collyns, "Where Did Punk Begin? A Cinema in Peru"; there is, to my knowledge, no English language source discussing Restos de Nada, perhaps the first Brazilian punk band. They are mentioned in Wheeler, "Rock, Refrain and Remove."

> early 1970s, punks sport safety pins and bizarre plumage and celebrate anarchy as their creed."[3]

And by 1979, they would be even more confused to find in a *New Republic* article a flippant eulogy for their scene: "punk died on Friday, February 2, 1979."[4]

For an American punk fan, this might come as an outrage. The date suggested that punk died along with Sid Vicious, the Sex Pistols bassist who overdosed on heroin at age 21 while under suspicion for having murdered his girlfriend, Nancy Spungen. It was an indication that the fate of the genre hung on the British group and not Patti Smith or the Ramones. Appearing in a relatively conservative press – at least compared to alternatives like *Marxism Today* and *East Village Eye* that had also taken an interest in the genre – it would have been especially easy to write off.

But such proclamations were widespread, coming from supporters and detractors alike. For many concerned with punk's fate, the end of the decade signaled the end of punk as a isolated subculture, and the birth of something new in its wake. The signature term for the moment of punk's ascent into the mainstream – and its alleged death – was *postpunk*. This chapter articulates a theory of that concept, which, following punk itself, is possibly the most widely used term in discussions of rock from this period. It has also largely been misunderstood. Typically construed as a set of aesthetic departures from punk's earlier raw form, commentators largely use it to tell a developmental history about the expansion of a genre. Inverting the "punk is dying" narrative that was

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[3] Schwartz, "Rock Bottom."
[4] Miller, "Jim Miller on Pop Music: Some Future," 26.

standard through the 1970s, postpunk is typically presented as an act of building on what was previously limited in punk.[5]

To the contrary, postpunk signaled neither a stylistic or social abandonment of earlier punk. It did however modify the genre. I offer two theories of postpunk as a corrective to the common account. The first addresses an often overlooked aspect of punk's legacy: the punk *subgenre*. While hundreds of artists have departed from punk in the last four decades, they have often done so under the genre's aegis. It is taken for granted that punk has inspired many subcultures, a claim that underlies discussions of queer punk or crust punk or pop punk. But many have tended to treat such subgenres developmentally, as expansions on some originary punk moment. The typical assumption is that punk subgenres supersede their predecessors by discovering new social and aesthetic resources previously unknown to the early punks.[6]

There is a need for a greater sense of precision in discussing subgenre. One of the major legacies of 1970s punk is the rise of the term as an umbrella notion linking a set of subcultures, at times wildly distinguished from each other. In this chapter, I focus on no wave punk, an early – and perhaps, first – punk subgenre.

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[5] Disscussions of differences between postpunk and punk abound in writing on late seventies and early eighties music. See, for example, Cateforis, *Are We Not New Wave? Modern Pop at the Turn of the 1980s*. His study of new wave suggests that the genre reconfigured punk: "new wave groups… shared punk's energy but tempted its vitriol with more accessible and novel songwriting sprinkled with liberal doses of humor, irreverance, and irony" (3). Alex Reed's great book on industrial music also confirms the rift between punk and later genres: "it can seem a little tough to reconcile [Cabaret Voltaire's] high-minded, almost scientific approach to soud experimentation with their punkish public antics… [They] managed to bypass the tired cultural pathways of music's recent past - something that not even punk could do in its amped-up reboot of the 1950s teddy boy scene" (63). In Reed, *Assimilate*.

[6] E.g. Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*. Reynolds's book in a reading of postpunk fit for any great old textbook on modernist avant-gardes. It tells the story of a number of early postpunk subgenres as a set of "vanguards" who went beyond punk's "unfinished revolution" by discovering new musical resources through technology and formal innovation. See in particular his prologue, 1-11.

No wave continued to build on aesthetic concerns derived from punk by refining and reshaping them. Strikingly, the no wavers directed their ire away from rock music and toward punk itself, treating the mid-seventies scene as its own set of obstacles to be overcome. Attempting to negate their precursors, musicians like James Chance's group the Contortions treated that genre as its own musical world. They deepened punk's subcultural commitments, further sequestering punk from a popular music world which no longer offered the possibility of reconciliation. I draw on Hegel's concept of the *unhappy consciousness* to suggest that Chance initiated one of the first visions of punk as a permanent vanguardist subculture, a punk bounded off from the mainstream forever.

From there, I turn toward a second and more common understanding of postpunk: the genre's stylistic expansion and popular success at the end of the 1970s. Drawing on musical material that had generally been ignored (e.g. disco and power pop) and achieving chart hits, many artists began to find a recognition radically at odds with the vision of no wave or even more moderate precursors in the CBGB scene. Critics have largely adopted a line that regarded this moment as a concession to the mainstream, the abdication of punk's status on the periphery, a true *post*-punk for a post-punk world. The late seventies signaled exactly the opposite. Postpunk offered a moment of stylistic expansion *within* punk, a new understanding of punk as a genre amenable – or dependent on – its musical diversity. In this sense, punk emerged less as a broken genre (or, like no wave, one fatally hidden away), than as a new *metagenre* capable of refinement and internal differentiation.

Seventies punk thus initiated a new moment of punk as a mobile, reconfigurable set of practices suited to new historical and geographic situations beyond the privileged local moment of the CBGB scene. I take the group Blondie as a representative example of this early moment. They turned toward a broader conception of the rock classical style of their peers, even regarding 1970s forms like disco and hip hop as part of an evolving popular music world. This sentiment was a thread in punk from its earliest years and one that came to dictate the genre's future. Blondie offered the great early vision of punk as a metagenre, an expanding constellation of genres and musical practices capable of musical and social diversity suited to a new moment.

These two conceptions of postpunk model the genre's dual fate since the 1970s. On the one hand, punks have waged war on the alternatives, challenging even neighboring subgenres in pursuit of musical and social purity. Since the early eighties, punk has fractured into thousands of little subgenres, modified each time for what often are radically differing political and aesthetic concerns. In this sense, punk's modern lot has largely tended toward the periphery, the local, and the isolated.

On the other hand, punks have also continued to expand the genre's stylistic and social map. Punk today also names the rejection of parochialism in the name of greater diversity in musical practices. It is now a genre that promises the reconfiguration in light of changing circumstances, demanding particularization in light of the diversity of human needs. It has stood for many as model of progressive cultural practice, bearing within it a demand for a better world. In that sense, our world is postpunk only insofar as today, punk is a

promise to remember the past and build on it, expanding as the genre enters its fifth decade of existence.

II. Punk Blows Up, Punk is Dead

Whatever is to be said, the late seventies did initiate a new moment for punk. In true punk form, it was again one of doubled alarmism and heroic predictions. Once more, the genre was hoisted as rock's salvation and litmus of its impending doom.

In 1979, Greg Shaw, who first voiced some of the grandest promises made on behalf of the genre at the beginning of the decade, was having a crisis of confidence. In an editorial for the January 1979 issue of *Bomp!*, Shaw acknowledged that perhaps punk's millennial character always led it toward the dustbins of history. He opened his piece gravely, noting that when it came to punk, "a spirit of disenchantment is certainly in the air, and for a lot of valid reasons." Though he suggested that the genre had entered a "recession," he went on to imply that it was really just dead in the water:

> What started as a year of unbridled optimism is ending in confusion and doubt for a lot of people. Even as recently as the last issue of *Bomp!*, I [w]as speaking of a permanent, expanding New Wave scene as an accomplished fact. The change must seem abrupt to readers who have not kept their gaze riveted on the front battle lines the last few months, but it did happen rather suddenly (though the signs were there to see, if we wanted to see them – which of course we didn't!). What actually happened, I guess, was that the momentum pushing everyone along just sort of

> collapsed as more and more people realized they weren't getting anywhere.[7]

Shaw suggested that over the course of a year, punk had essentially fallen apart. Given his earlier eschatological commentary on the genre, such handwringing shouldn't appear surprising (see chapter 1). But this time, he had more than speculation to back him up.

Artists had been seeing some success on the financial and public relations front, and by 1978, punk finally seemed poised for success. This battle was hard fought. One of the major problems facing punk in its earliest moments was a lack of distribution networks outside of New York City. Initially, most punk bands were unsigned, with a primary orientation toward live performance. When they did release music, it was often on small or independent labels. Some artists even self-released albums. Just Water, for example, formed Branded Records to release 1977's *The Riff* and a string of singles including their 1978 version of "Singin' in the Rain." Even some of the proper labels that released punk records were essentially glorified DIY projects. Ork Records, founded in 1975 by Television manager Terry Ork as a vehicle for artists in the CBGB scene, released a handful of singles by punk up-and-comers; this included Television's first single, "Little Johnny Jewel," Richard Hell's "Blank Generation," and a number of promising singles by now lesser known artists including the Marbles, the Feelies, and Alex Chilton. This was also true to a lesser extent of Private Stock, who released Blondie's self-titled debut record in 1976. Though formed by industry insider Larry Uttal in 1974, the label folded in 1978 after releasing a slew of

[7] Shaw, "Editorial: The Beat."

oddities and one-hit wonders, including Walter Murphy and the Big Apple Band's "A Fifth of Beethoven" and Cyndy Grecco's "Making Our Dreams Come True" (best known as the *Laverne and Shirley* theme song).

The turn from small labels to the majors led the CBGB scene to its moment of starlight. Early releases – including Patti Smith's 1975 Arista debut *Horses*, the Dictator's 1975 Epic *Go Girl Crazy*, and the Ramones' 1976 *Ramones* with Sire – were followed by a string of signings and albums by major labels. 1977 saw the release of Television's *Marquee Moon* with Elektra, as well as the Talking Heads' *77* and the Dead Boy's *Young, Loud, and Snotty*, both by Sire. The following year witnessed the further expansion of punk, with less successful artists like the Tuff Darts seeing releases from Sire. Blondie even jumped to Chrysalis. The label would put out all of the group's albums from *Plastic Letters* up to their 1982 breakup, and guided them to superstardom in the process.

Even with major label support, punk had to fight to build public attention. The 1970s witnessed a sustained battle between punk artists, concert promoters, and radio producers. Especially before signing recording contracts, promoters were reluctant to book unsigned artists. Many of the biggest dates for the mid-seventies punk scene – including a summer 1975 festival at CBGB and an April 1976 festival at Max's – were DIY ventures. Though such events got covered by local press vanguardists, they received little attention outside of the city.[8]

Punk's obscurity began to wane as the decade came to a close. Radio began to take notice of punk. In 1977, the genre received a feature, getting played on

[8] On the CBGB festival, see Wolcott, "Top 40 Unrecorded New York Rock Bands"; for the Max's festival, see Gholson, "Max's Easter Rock Festival."

every other Wednesday in the 1:30-3:00 slot on the *Good City Rock Show* hosted by Bob Alexzander on WBAI. By 1978, it had spread beyond the city, capturing attention from the alternative FM stations like Philadelphia's WMMR and San Francisco's KSAN.[9] TV also took notice, and Patti Smith did a string of 1978-1979 appearances on shows like WABC's Stanley Siegel Show, Tom Snyder's late night talk show *Tomorrow*, and the ABC kid's show *Kids Are People Too*. Many of the New York artists began to book larger venues, at home and abroad. With greater attention, punk bands were able to play local venues like the Palladium; Patti Smith even played concerts in the Hayden Planetarium, Central Park's Wollman Rink, and Long Island's Nassau Coliseum (former home of the Islanders and the Nets).[10] Hilly Kristal himself opened a second, larger venue, the short-lived CBGB Theatre in the former Anderson Theater on Second Ave. New York punk artists even began to tour across the country and even Europe. Patti Smith and the Ramones both visited the UK in 1976 (the Sex Pistols attended the latter group's London performance). The Talking Heads and the Ramones did a joint UK/Europe tour in summer 1977, and Richard Hell visited England same year. By the end of the decade, New York punk bands were regularly playing destination cities in France, Germany, and the UK.[11]

The emergence fans in Europe signaled that punk was slowly becoming a global phenomenon. The connection with the UK also had a second degree of

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[9] On punk's introduction to radio, see Pett, "New Wave Air Waves"; Smith, "Punk: Airing the Problems"; for a slightly later source, see also McKenna, "Lots of Aura, No Air Play." This is the source of the famed quote from Brian Eno about the Velvet Underground inspiring 30,000 bands. See my introduction for a discussion of that quotation.

[10] The most comprehensive database of Patti Smith concert details is *The Patti Smith Setlists*.

[11] Sources indexing other punk concerts are less comprehensive. Two reasonably good sources include "Blondie Concert Setlists & Tour Dates"; "List of Ramones Concerts" both Blondie and the Ramones toured frequently outside the US.

significance. Nothing matched – or threatened – New York's monopoly on punk more than British artists like the Clash, the Damned, and X-Ray Spex. The media hype surrounding punk latched onto one act in particular: the Sex Pistols. They became the international face of punk, the stand-in for its excesses and failures, and a model for its promises. As Robert Christgau wrote in a 1978 feature on British punk for the *Village Voice*:

> Notorious antistars, dole-que kids awash in record-biz money, nihilists who have made something of themselves, the Pistols are everything punks are supposed to be, and more – they live out the contradictions most punk musicians have barely begun to dream about… If we are to believe that punk's future is up to the Pistols – and that is definitely the conventional wisdom – then their fall could well precipitate everyone else's.[12]

Though Christgau's jab at conventional wisdom was intended to express a cautious disdain for Pistols hype, his suggestion that the group embodied punk's "contradictions" – and his title, "We Have to Deal With It," an affectionate quotation from the Clash's "Hate and War" – was a tacit confirmation that one couldn't ignore the British example.

This moment initiated a still-current fight over punk primacy between the US and the UK. The debate over who invented punk is not particularly interesting by itself. Clinton Heylin is right to suggest that there were two separate musical projects in the US and the UK, ones that themselves had complicated histories and regional distinctions (e.g. London vs. Manchester, New York vs. Cleveland).[13] I do think it is important to qualify, as Heylin does not, that all of these scenes became interdependent following the media hype around punk in the late 1970s.

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[12] Christgau, "We Have to Deal With It, It's the Currency," 27.
[13] Heylin, *From the Velvets to the Voidoids*, xii–xiii.

Whether the Ramones influenced the Sex Pistols or not, by the time the *New Republic* got its hands on punk, it became difficult to tease out differences within a phenomenon that increasingly becoming entangled in spite of regional and national differences.

Indeed, the pull that the Sex Pistols exerted during their brief career tells an important story about the metabolism between British and US punk scenes. What is actually quite curious is that the Sex Pistols were not only short-lived, but had a reputation that far outstripped their actual career. The group only really existed for about two years: John Lydon (aka Johnny Rotten) joined the group in August 1975 and they broke up in January of 1978. Moreover, they were hardly heard outside of the UK while they were together. Until the October 1977 release of their album *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols* and a US tour that lasted less than a month, the group was known only by reputation. Their first two singles did not even see US releases, while "Pretty Vacant" and "Holidays in the Sun" were released concurrently with the album. Such circumstances prompted John Rockwell to claim in his November 1977 *New York Times* review of the album, the Sex Pistols are "the most written-about but unknown band in the world."[14]

Even so, Rockwell reported that many of New York's import shops had carried the two singles ("Anarchy in the UK" and "God Save the Queen"), and that many of the hippest critics had traveled to England to hear the group.[15] Such acts of connoisseurship began to closely shape the fate of British and US punk artists.

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[14] Rockwell, "The Pop Life," 75.
[15] Ibid., 75.

There were also more immediate geographical exchanges between the US and the UK. The Sex Pistols themselves spent a great deal of time in New York City. It was in New York's Hotel Chelsea that Sid Vicious's girlfriend Nancy Spungen was murdered under mysterious circumstances, in Rikers Island that he was jailed after hitting Patti Smith's brother over the head with a bottle while out on bail, and in a West Village apartment that he died on February 2, 1979. Jayne County herself moved to England, expected greater tolerance from a country where acts like the Sex Pistols had attracted at least some positive attention.

Whatever the extent of the back and forth between British and US punk, the Sex Pistols quickly overshadowed their contemporaries Stateside. It wasn't actually the New York bands that prompted the media frenzy that popularized – and sensationalized – punk. As Bernard Gendron argues, in 1977, when the popular press began taking an interest in punk, it "completely assimilated New York punk into the British model."[16] Lurid reports on Vicious' criminal exploits or violent outbursts at London punk gigs appeared in the pages of the *New York Times*. And magazines like *Newsweek*, the *New Republic*, and *Playgirl* introduced them to a mainstream audience alongside their US counterparts, giving the group a role that matched or even overshadowed homegrown groups.[17] Ultimately, whatever their significance, the Pistols provided the international buzz around punk.

They also made it a scholarly topic. A handful of books were released to discuss punk, most of which focused on the Sex Pistols or at least treated them as

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[16] Gendron, *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club*, 266.
[17] Schwartz, "Rock Bottom"; Miller, "Jim Miller on Pop Music: Some Future"; McCormack, "Punk Rock."

a privileged example. Dick Hebdige's *Subculture* became the most famous of these texts, casting punk as one of the privileged actors in the emerging drama staged by British cultural studies.[18] But it wasn't the first book, or the last. Other writers who stood in between academic and critic turned toward British punk; many, including Simon Frith and Dave Laing, afforded the Sex Pistols a central role as they polemicized against Birmingham School style projects.[19]

The Sex Pistols themselves inspired a small cottage industry. Even before their demise, a handful of books were released focusing centrally or exclusively on their phenomenon. The curiously named *1988: The New Wave Punk Rock Explosion* (released 1978), gathered previously published columns by Caroline Coon, the writer who did for British punk what Lester Bangs and John Rockwell did for punk in the US; despite featuring articles on the Clash, the Stranglers, and the Slits, it was heavily skewed toward the Sex Pistols. Published the same year, Julie Burchill and Tony Parsons' *The Boy Looked at Johnny* placed an even greater emphasis on the group; their story treated them as the pivotal moment between punk's origins ("Germs") and its death ("Ashes"). Fred and Judy Vermorel's *The Sex Pistols: The Inside Story* went even deeper in its obsession with the group. Writing in 1978 (before the group broke up), they affected a scholarly tone in their work, providing two hundred pages of historical chronology and analysis culled from an archive including interviews, letters, and

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[18] Hebdige, *Subculture*.
[19] Frith, "Formalism, Realism, and Leisure: The Case of Punk"; Frith, "Beyond the Dole Queue: The Politics of Punk"; Frith, *Sound Effects*; Laing, "Interpreting Punk Rock"; Laing and Smith, *One Chord Wonders*.

material from the "secret private diary" of Malcolm McLaren's secretary, Sophie Richmond.[20]

By the mid-1980s, books on US punk artists had offset the heavy emphasis on England, cementing the transatlantic character of this discourse. This literature included Lester Bangs's 1980 *Blondie*, the 1982 photo diary *Making Tracks: The Rise of Blondie*, and Jerome Davis's 1986 *Talking Heads*.[21] In many ways, Greil Marcus's *Lipstick Traces* also belongs in this long tradition, functioning as not only the culmination of early infatuations with the Sex Pistols, but also of the rock critical project which launched the very phenomenon of punk-oriented writing (see chapter 1).[22]

Though the late seventies witnessed the early high point of punk respectability, they also galvanized a new moment of alarmism about the aging of punk. The genre's successes and scandals alike signaled to many the failure of a project that once promised to restore dignity to rock.

Many of punk's earliest and most ardent champions themselves powered this crisis of faith. *New York Rocker*, the voice box of the mid-seventies New York punk scene, largely took on a tragic tone before eventually all-but abandoning it to cover no wave and dance punk in the 1980s. Andy Schwartz, who replaced Alan Betrock as magazine editor in the April-May 1978 issue, offered cautious optimism his inaugural editorial. He warned that, "two years ago, when ROCKER was first published… [s]ome of America's best rock 'n' roll bands were playing CBGB's every week. The scene was fresh and exciting, and the very existence of

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[20] Coon, *1988*; Burchill, *The Boy Looked at Johnny*; Vermorel and Vermorel, *Sex Pistols*.
[21] Bangs, *Blondie*; Harry, Stein, and Bockris, *Making Tracks*; Davis, *Talking Heads*.
[22] Marcus, *Lipstick Traces*.

each band seemed to encourage the rest." He worried that in the two years since the formation of *NYR* and the explosion of the CBGB scene, punk's promise had become less clear. Acknowledging that the number of punk bands had expanded, he warned:

> Some are ready to make records and be otherwise 'discovered' by a larger audience. Some show definite original talent, but find it hard to keep going and growing on two or three gigs per month. Others are merely copying what has come before, and a few are purveyors of pure 'ersatz jive,' as Lester once put it."[23]

When Alan Betrock returned to offer a column for the magazine's September 1978 issue, he sounded even more apocalyptic. In a piece titled "There's No Action," Betrock lamented that punk, far from exploding into the mainstream, had signaled one last fatal attempt at the resuscitation of rock and roll: "all indications are that the brief surge of life we have recently experienced is merely the death throes, the last dying grasps, of the dinosaur that American rock 'n' roll has become." Far from offering a heroic return, Betrock concluded his editorial by characterizing punk as a form of underground resistance against a musical mainstream defended by indifferent radio producers and teen magazines: "We must fight for our freedom. We must unchain our minds and not become part of that which so earnestly seeks our destruction. We must stand together and fight for life, for otherwise life will soon just not be worth fighting for."[24]

Despite the overblown language of their essays, Schwartz and Betrock were responding to real problems within punk. A decade of propagandizing by the rock intelligentsia never quite convinced the commercial press to take interest

[23] Schwartz, "To Our Readers."
[24] Betrock, "There's No Action."

in the scene. Coverage in presses like *Newsweek* was fleeting, usually not going beyond one-off gawker features on punk. Attempts to bring punk outside of the underground press and into the hearts of teen America also largely failed. While editor of *16*, Ramones manager and punk champion Danny Fields ran a guerrilla campaign to smuggle punk artists in to the magazine alongside heartthrobs like Mark Hamill and the Bay City Rollers.[25] Such projects failed to win teen idol status for grizzly acts like the Ramones or Television. Radio also quickly lost interest in the genre. In his 1978 report on punk broadcasting, Howard Smith reported that most of the program directors for FM rock radio were ditching it; consulting a number of directors for major stations, Smith reported that poor local ticket and album sales, weak ratings, and a general sense of listener disinterest or outright hostility led them to give up on the scene.[26] When the Ramones included the song "We Want the Airwaves" on the 1981 album *Pleasant Dreams*, there was more than a hint of desperation hidden behind their bravado promise to conquer the radio.

For artists, basic survival proved to be a struggle. Despite the enduring positive reputation of many US punk artists, many of them had careers only a tad longer than their iconic, short-lived British counterpart. Television broke up in July 1978 just two months after their second album *Adventure*. By 1979, the Dictators, Dead Boys, and Patti Smith Group had folded (the latter after Smith retired from music making altogether). Even the Ramones struggled, despite being one of the most popular punk acts from the period and continuing to tour

[25] E.g. "The Lo-Down." This article mentions Jayne County, the Ramones, Lou Reed, and a number of other punk acts. While no author is listed, this occurred during Field's tenure as managing editor.
[26] Smith, "Punk: Airing the Problems."

until 1996. Financial reports from Sire records during the seventies confirm that the group proved to be a poor investment. Internal memos suggest a string of unpaid advances, legal fees, and net losses of the labels investments; this peaked in December 1977, with the label reporting that it had lost over a hundred thousand dollars on the group. A memo from a year later reported that the deficit had shrunk, but the group remained in the red.[27]

This reality guided Greg Shaw as he sat down to pen his *Bomp!* editorial for the January 1979 issue. In fact, he had written a detailed report on the dollars and cents of punk for *New York Rocker* that previous September, so his worries were no idle speculation.[28] But they were what finally did in his hope that punk might form a musical vanguard based on the promises of the 1960s. If Shaw's suggestion that punk's momentum had "collapsed" didn't give away his total hopelessness, his suggestion that punk fans give up on contemporary music certainly did. He concluded that, because punk had no hope of growing into a successful musical practice, its future lay behind it. Now, he wrote, critics and fans had to abdicate their roles as shepherds for a living musical practice, becoming "protectors of an endangered life form. Rock & roll still has the power to break through the crap and ignite our culture again, but its attempt to do so through New Wave failed. Maybe somewhere down the line, in some other form, it will succeed."[29]

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[27] "Ramones - Contracts, 1976-1979."
[28] Shaw actually had concrete numbers. See his more extensive and less speculative report, Shaw, "New Wave Goodbye?" there, he demonstrates that punk had largely proved to be a financial failure for artists.
[29] Shaw, "Editorial: The Beat."

Shaw arrived at the conclusion that this successor would not really be new music at all, but a form of curatorship over the past relics of rock and roll:

> The most realistic proposal I've seen is the establishment of a rock & roll archive that would make our history and the fruits of our culture accessible to anybody... The primary goal would be the collection, on tape and microfilm, of a definitive history of music, film, video, and printed history of pop music, starting with today and working backwards into the early years of the century.[30]

Ultimately, Shaw's conclusion was that the salvation of rock came at the expense of its future. Turning wholly historical, rock was now like Hegel's Owl of Minerva, taking flight at dusk.[31] Reaching its twilight, rock as a practice could only live on as a retrospective, curatorial process. A dead memory, not a living thought.

III. Punk & Postpunk

The name for punk's Minervic moment was *postpunk*. Critics latched onto the genre's transitory moment. They began to offer a flurry of predictions about punk's fate and what might potentially emerge from the ashes of its failed project.

The term postpunk has most commonly been associated with 1980s artists such as Joy Division or Throbbing Gristle, who seem to break with the musical templates set forth by artists like Patti Smith and Television. But it often was pasted onto pioneering New York artists like Blondie, Talking Heads, No Wave, and Suicide, intending to characterize divisions internal to New York's music scene.

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[30] Ibid., 4–5.
[31] Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 23.

Talking Heads, for example, were commonly regarded as somehow transcending or rejecting the model set by their more retro precursors. Their differences from other New York artists actually formed an early line of commentary. In his 1975 "A Conservative Impulse in the New Rock Underground" essay (see chapter 3), James Wolcott suggested that the group might be the first to go beyond those punk artists who dwelled on rock's classical style. He argued that they were among the few who were "ameliorating the post-'60s hangover by giving us a sense of detachment." He also quoted Heads' bassist Tina Weymouth, who quipped, "Rock isn't a noble cause."[32] Tom Carson went even further in a September-October 1977 *New York Rocker* feature, saying that the group transcended punk altogether:

> Talking Heads, of course, isn't punk. In fact, you can't categorize them into any group at all. They are among the few true originals in rock today. They combine a startlingly-conceptual and abstract intelligence with the simple emotions and visceral charge of driving rock n' roll. And yet they avoid the sterility and narrowness of 'art rock' because they know that emotion and communication are what's most important.

Arguing that the group mixed rock viscerally with "conceptual abstraction," Carson set forth a theory of postpunk that contrasted first wave punk's naïve immediacy to its quirky, intellectual successors.[33]

Indeed, this sort of accounting has defined subsequent theories of postpunk. In *From the Velvets to the Voidoids*, Clinton Heylin argues that groups like the Talking Heads initiated a postpunk tradition that broke with the "Velvets'

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[32] Wolcott, "A Conservative Impulse in the New Rock Underground."
[33] Carson, "Talking Heads."

strand of American rock & roll."[34] Simon Reynolds reached a similar conclusion, suggesting that postpunk as a whole emerged, in distinction from punk, "not as a return to raw rock 'n' roll but as a chance to make a break with tradition."[35] Even Dick Hebdige later abandoned the first wave. In a seldom-cited 1988 essay on the Talking Heads, he wrote that they in particular marked a "postmodern" rejection of punk modernism. Hebdige argued that the group defined themselves against rock's classicizing, historically obsessed strain of modernism. Instead, they offered a "light and laughing touch. The deconstructions and alienation effects are jokes rather than history lessons."[36]

There is some force to claims that later artists broke substantially with early punk artists. However much they might stem from the same family tree, it's hard to interpret 1980s bands like Throbbing Gristle or A-ha through a framework generated purely in terms of Patti Smith or the Ramones. But critical alarmism about the death of punk and affirmation of its successors are twin faces of the assumption that the genre was drastically overhauled at the end of the 1970s. There are reasons to be cautious about overstating postpunk as a rupture with the past.

For one thing, critical tropes about decline or departure were nothing new. In fact, as I sought to show in my first three chapters, punk began circulating as a term to describe worries about the decline of underground rock, worries that led many toward theories of musical irony, irreverence, even catastrophe. Worries about the death of punk were practically coterminous with the New York punk

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[34] Heylin, *From the Velvets to the Voidoids*, 211.
[35] Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, 2.
[36] Hebdige, *Hiding in the Light*, 240.

scene. As early as March 1975 (well before most of CBGB artists had even begun recording), the Mumps' Lance Loud offered in a *Rock Scene* column to conduct a "Rock Autopsy" on artists like Lou Reed who had become necrotic in the wake of success (see chapter 2 for more on Loud and Reed).[37] When the September 19, 1976 issue of *Melody Maker* came out, a few artists had finally released albums and garnered critical praise. But this signaled to reader Jonathan Collins exactly the end of punk's "freshness," saying, "to be 'punk' is now almost acceptable to the normal world, and bang goes any trace of rebellion!"[38] By October 1977, the same month the Sex Pistols released their debut album (one many still call the first proper punk record), *Trouser Press* ran as their cover story, a long eulogy for punk. Complete with a cover image of a tombstone bearing the sensational title "New Wave RIP," the magazine pronounced that punk's "unique and wondrous era has ended."[39]

Of course, it is worth reiterating a point made in my first chapter: these sorts of worries came from a paradigmatic narrative that Kevin Dettmar has called "boomer triumphalism."[40] Affirmative accounts of postpunk simply invert alarmism, telling instead a story of stylistic expansion and plurality. Here, rock's earlier years are construed as an era of conservatism rather than a golden age, and departures from that moment are taken as signals of stylistic progress rather than decadence. But the schema is otherwise unchanged.

Postpunk's champions often took an interest in the genre because it signaled to them the emergence of a highbrow pop music, one suited toward

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[37] Loud, "Lance Loud's Rock-Autopsy!!!"
[38] Collins, "Can Punk Progress?"
[39] Robbins, "New Wave RIP: Nails in the Coffin."
[40] Dettmar, *Is Rock Dead?*, 26.

emerging ivory tower theories of postmodernism and academia's privileging of intellectualized avant-gardes. Such assumptions guide Hebdige in his laudatory remarks on Talking Heads' experimentalism and Simon Reynolds in his careful chronicling of the various ways postpunk subgenres went beyond their precursors. They were also explicit in Simon Frith's "Formalism, Realism, Leisure" (discussed in Chapter 1). There, Frith proclaimed that a "formalist" avant-garde led by groups like Gang of Four and Public Image Ltd superseded earlier formulations of the genre. He castigated forms of punk that remained linked to earlier, rock and roll-rooted styles, calling them naïve in their appeal to populism. Ultimately, Frith ends up in the camp of many who align punk's promises with vanguardism (such an agenda is also politically explicit, given that the essay is a contribution to his broader pet project of denouncing the British left).[41]

Despite the elitism lingering in such accounts, such lines of commentary also obscure stylistic continuities between first wave punk and postpunk. Irony, nostalgia, artistic pretentions, and artifice saturate the history of the genre. Suicide, for example, marks an example of an early punk band – by many accounts, the first to self-describe as punk – whose early work must be ignored to be understood a successor to CBGB artists (see chapter 1 for a discussion of the group). The Talking Heads themselves also inspired many theories of punk's classical moment. Freddy Bosco's December 11, 1975 article for the *SoHo Weekly News* insisted that the group formed the center of the "current revival of early

[41] Frith, "Formalism, Realism, and Leisure," 169–170.

Sixties trans-Atlantic rock."[42] John Rockwell agreed, arguing that they embodied the spirit of "minimalist punk." He further claimed that their debut *77* formed the third entry in a holy trinity with Patti Smith Group's *Horses* and Television's *Marquee Moon*.[43]

That said, irony, overcoming, and failure all mean something different in a moment when punk became a household name. There were real departures, real feuds, and real reasons to think about punk's changes at the end of the 1970s. The point isn't to dismiss postpunk, but to think about its stakes given punk's historical transformation.

Punk's spurt of publicity brought new fans, critics, and artists into the fray. This lent dynamism to a genre that previously tended toward small, insider networks with homogenous social concerns. The late seventies witnessed the first moment when it was more than speculative to argue that punk formed different generations or waves. Before this period, such claims were largely formal and aesthetic; arguing for continuities, say, between the New York Dolls and the Velvet Underground, had a critical and interpretive dimension for two groups who didn't even generally call themselves punk artists. Now critics and fans had a concrete social phenomenon to index. There were artists who identified as punk or who were identified for years as part of New York's rock underground by a well established critical and fan network (whether or not the artists themselves liked it).

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[42] Bosco, "Hold the Pickles, Hold the Garnish."
[43] Rockwell, "The Artistic Success of Talking Heads."

Younger and newer crowds could respond to that in kind. Some acts began to move from outside of New York in order to participate in the punk scene, as in the case of the Dead Boys' relocation from Cleveland to the city or the Cramps' extended visit from Los Angeles (they lived there from 1975 to 1980, forming a regular presence in CBGB and other New York clubs). Punk even began to trickle out to the suburbs. This was the case of the Misfits, who formed in 1977 in Lodi, New Jersey, right next to Hackensack and a short drive away from Meadowlands; despite later developing a sound rooted in hardcore and metal, 1978's *Static Age* sits quite comfortably on a record shelf next to many of the releases from the more iconic New York bands.

Punk's expanding historical and social map encouraged more flexible conceptions of the genre. Earlier, critics tolerated little dissent, often characterizing punk as a singular ethos (see chapter 3 for a review of such debates). Now, given the expanding scope of punk, it seemed not just reasonable but necessary to draw divisions between its different offshoots. There were strands of the genre who modeled their aesthetic on horror movie kitsch (e.g. the Cramps and the Misfits), which set them aside from retro, pop-oriented groups (e.g. Just Water, the Miamis, Milk 'n' Cookies). This brought nuance to a scene that previously left little room for subtlety. Terms like "no wave" and "new wave," both in wide circulation by 1978, further added historical and categorical distinctions within punk (see sections three and four below).

It even became possible to tolerate geographical distinctions within punk. Whereas the stakes of New York punk once seemed linked to the distinctive character of the Big Apple, now it became clear that punk formed a national

network of bands participating in overlapping aesthetic projects. While many still insisted that regional distinctions separated the Ramones from bands like Boston's Modern Lovers, San Francisco's the Nuns, Los Angeles' the Germs, or Cleveland's Pere Ubu, it became clear that a few New York insiders could no longer claim a monopoly on the genre.

IV. No New York

Given punk's expanded circumstances in the late seventies, many thought that monopoly was not just passé, but illegitimate. This was the central tone of no wave, an offshoot of punk that originated in New York and attracted a great deal of critical attention between 1978 and 1980. A number of groups, including the Contortions, Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, DNA, Mars, Theoretical Girls, and the Gynecologists, enticed critics, many who had just a year before called Patti Smith and the Ramones the next big thing. The release of *No New York*, a compilation curated and produced by Brian Eno (Antilles, 1978), cemented for many the assumption that punk might live on beyond its original, mid-seventies moment, however distinctive a form that life might take.

Many critics and historians have framed no wave as an important moment in the early history of postpunk.[44] In many ways though, no wave might also be thought of as the first proper punk *subgenre*. The notion of subgenre is widely used in discussion of genre, but tends to be undertheorized in context.[45] For

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[44] E.g. Heylin, *From the Velvets to the Voidoids*; Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*.
[45] E.g. Brackett, *Categorizing Sound*, 8, 161, 192, 199; Holt, *Genre in Popular Music*, 9, 89; Neale, "Question of Genre," 173; Negus, *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures*, 133; Toynbee, *Making*

example, John Frow's *Genre* – one of the most exhaustive texts on the topic – says little more than that subgenre offers "the further specification of genre by a particular thematic content."[46] Frow's account reflects a tendency to lean on thematic material in definitions of subgenre, a logical conclusion if taking cues from film (e.g. the Western, which distinguishes itself from other subgenres at the level of costume and setting. After all, it is bank robberies, cowboy hats, and stunning Sedona vistas that set it aside from the urban metropoles of film noir or the futuristic settings of sci-fi).

Such an account is partially helpful for talking about music. Horror punk, for example, models itself on cinema and explicitly borrows its content from movies. But it is less clear what thematic content might mean in a discussion of the relationship between Patti Smith, the Ramones, and the Contortions. Michael Swanwick offers one of the more thorough accounts of subgenre, arguing that the concept denotes "conversations" within a genre. Unlike genres, which depend on broad fields of varying possibilities, subgenres highlight specific "component conversations" within that space.[47] Such conversations highlight certain particular aspects of a broader genre, emphasizing or clarifying what is otherwise folded into the broader fray. Swanwick gives the example of apocalyptic science fiction. This subgenre highlights those disasters and extinction events that appear in traditional sci fi as precursors to the central conflict rather than the drama itself. Compare, for example, *Planet of the Apes* to *World War Z*. The former famously leaves implicit the circumstances that led to the film's events, while the

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Popular Music: Musicians, Creativity, and Institutions, 157; for exceptions, see Brooke, *Strange Divisions and Alien Territories*; Friesen and Epstein, "Rock 'N' Roll Ain't Noise Pollution."

[46] Frow, *Genre*, 67.

[47] Brooke, *Strange Divisions and Alien Territories*, ix.

latter offers a detailed chronicle of the discovery of a zombie pandemic. Following Swanwick's account, we might understand apocalyptic science fiction like *World War Z* to be highlighting and embellishing upon the problem of disaster as inherited from films like *Planet of the Apes* (interestingly, the prequel series for *Planet* probably falls within the apocalypse genre).

In this spirit, we might understand no wave to be highlighting certain components of punk. No wave downplayed certain aspects of punk: the love of rock and roll, the affected poppy, 1960s sensibilities of their precursors. They instead highlighted punk's austerity, confrontational performance style, amateurism, and noise. In so doing, no wave signaled to many the possibility that punk might continue to live on beyond its death, however austere its new form might be. Roy Trakin, a writer for *New York Rocker* and one of no wave's biggest champions, wrote, such artists "are trying to reduce rock to its lowest common denominators, its primary building blocks… [T]hese groups represent the next important bands to emerge from the New York scene."[48] No wave was like the disaster film of punk. It took catastrophe, always latent in earlier punk, and transformed that into a central preoccupation.

Perhaps the central line of commentary about no wave – from 1978 to the present – addresses its proximity to high art. As I have stressed in my previous chapters, artsiness does not *ipso facto* distinguish any punk artist from another. But no wave moved away from punk's pop roots in a fashion unprecedented even by artists like Patti Smith Group. No wave's experimentalism delighted many writers, who saw in the subgenre an intellectualism denied to them by punk

[48] Trakin, "Avant Kindergarten (Sturm Und Drone)," 37.

proper. This was the presiding tone of commentary published in the *East Village Eye*. After forming in 1979, the magazine dedicated a great deal of energy to downtown avant-gardes including no wave. Writing for the June 15 issue, David Solomonoff attacked the earlier punks, "whose cognitive abilities seem to have been dulled by an overly self-conscious attempt to live out the punk mystique combined with generous amounts of heroin and glue."[49]

Intellectualism was a fair object of praise in no wave, which blended into other art forms in a way unprecedented by earlier punks. Many of no wave musicians collaborated with filmmakers, such that it is difficult to separate no wave music from no wave film. Directors like Beth and Scott B, Vivienne Dick, and Amos Poe cast musicians including Lydia Lunch of Teenage Jesus, Pat Place and Adele Bertei of the Contortions, and even Debbie Harry in their films.[50] Many no wavers also blurred the line between pop and art in their musical work. Rhys Chatham of the Gynecologists and Glenn Branca of Theoretical Girls in particular have become better known for their later quasi-symphonic rock compositions than their relatively short-lived 1970s bands.

Even so, we shouldn't overstate the rift between no wave and punk, or its relationship to an abstract notion of high art. Just like precursors including Velvet Underground and Patti Smith, no wave marked a moment of avant-gardism from within rock music. As James Chance of the Contortions quipped when asked about his feelings about art,

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[49] Solomonoff, "Experimental Information."
[50] For period sources on no wave cinema, see Hoberman, "No Wavelength: The Para-Punk Underground"; Taubin, "The Other Cinema"; the most comprehensive recent source is the documentary Danhier, *Blank City*; recent books on no wave music also address film. See Moore, Coley, and Lunch, *No Wave*; Masters and Walter, *No Wave*.

> Art? I hate Art. It makes me sick. My whole idea is anti-Art. And as for Soho, it should be blown off the fucking map, along with all its arty assholes… I don't see myself primarily as anything, especially not as a musician, and especially not as a fucking *artist*. I'm really sick of people asking me about Art… The *people*. *And* their ideas. I think they're all worthless.[51]

Chance was expressing a spirit of confrontation that was reflected in the musical standoffishness of the Contortions and distinguished them from much of prior and contemporary rock music. But it was a form of defiance that also set them aside from art in that moment.

More important than such statements is the way no wave was comfortably folded into the development and reception of New York and US punk more generally. In many ways, no wave followed quite naturally from earlier strains of punk. James Chance's criticism of art was also an attempt to separate himself from neighboring moments in rock music. In his big feature on the subgenre, "A Reasonable Guide to Horrible Noise," Lester Bangs placed no wave in a family tree populated by the Stooges' "LA Blues," Lou Reed's *Metal Machine Music*, and the 1977 debut single of LA's the Germs.[52] More than an aesthetic judgment, this was a social observation. Lydia Lunch herself admitted that she got interested in punk as a fan, running away to NYC in 1976 after reading punk coverage by Lester Bangs and *Rock Scene* and even exchanging letters with Jayne County.[53] No wave artists were regulars at first wave punk clubs like CBGB and Max's, often playing alongside first wave groups.

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[51] Platt, "No Chance," 26.
[52] Bangs, "A Reasonable Guide to Horrible Noise."
[53] Moore, Coley, and Lunch, *No Wave*, 4, 12.

No wave was integrated into in New York's scene, which tended to be on the edgy side of US punk. But elsewhere in the US, no wavers were still well received. For example, when Minneapolis organized its first punk-oriented festival, the Contortions were included alongside a slew of cutting edge New York groups including former DNA member Robin Crutchfield. (New York groups Model Citizens and the Lounge Lizards were also invited, but couldn't make it.) Even so, the festival featured a range of styles from within the punk pantheon. This also included more traditionally minded New Yorkers like Chris Stamey and the Fleshtones, San Francisco's Tuxedomoon, Cleveland's Devo, and a performance by reunited hometown heroes the Suicide Commandos. As Tom Carson wrote in his *Village Voice* feature on the festival, he wrote, "I'd figured, at least, to find a clear line being drawn between the power poppers on one hand and the No Wavers. But most of the bands didn't seem to fall anywhere inside that spectrum." He also reported that, despite Chance's posturing as an outsider, the group was well received.[54]

While no wave certainly exemplified certain aspects of punk music, they were hardly a radical departure from others in the genre. The reality is that Eno's compilation had the effect of creating an artificial rupture, as well as a sense of cohesion and distinction that many No wavers themselves would not endorse. Featuring only four groups from the scene (the Contortions, Teenage Jesus, DNA, Mars), the album was selective even within an already insular movement. Indeed, many no wavers were furious about being left out, while some included complained about how Eno's uniform production overrode important musical

[54] Carson, "You Burn Some, You Rust Some," 42.

distinctions. Chance later went on to insist that "No Wave was a label that writers came up with when *No New York* came out. No one talked about No Wave before that."[55]

Despite this, the term does have a heuristic function of calling attention to shifts within the punk landscape. Social and organizational distinctions strained the links between earlier and later punk in the late seventies. By the time the Contortions made their 1977 live debut and certainly by the release of *No New York*, many of the first wave artists had left the confines of the Bowery for Parisian arenas. Their control over the punk scene waning, many other upstart groups had begun to take over. Moreover, these interlopers started to reconfigure punk's geography. As Bernard Gendron notes, the no wavers were also integrated into art-oriented "alternative spaces," straying from the rock club infrastructure that sustained their precursors.[56] No wavers migrated into the art scene at the Kitchen, which had relocated to Soho after the Mercer Arts Center's collapse, and played regularly at Tribeca venues like Franklin Furnace and the Artist Space. It was at that latter venue – during a May 2-6 1978 festival – that Brian Eno first discovered the artists he later chose to include on *No New York*. No wavers tended to travel within a small network of local record labels, which meant that they failed to attract attention from the majors. Such was true of Lust/Unlust records, started by former Ork Records employee Charles Ball to release albums by groups including Teenage Jesus, Dark Day, and DNA. ZE Records was also a small operation; the now-legendary label carried records by the Contortions,

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[55] Quoted in Masters and Walter, *No Wave*, 16.
[56] Gendron, *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club*, 278–279.

Lizzy Mercier Descloux, and Suicide before pioneering the "mutant disco" punk-dance hybrid sound of the early eighties.

No wave was stylistically distinct from its precursors. First wave punk artists largely labored under the weight of rock's classical style, offering a range of responses to a new age but nevertheless remaining tethered to the past. It was almost natural for Lenny Kaye to say of Patti Smith Group, "sometimes I think of us as the last of the sixties bands.[57] By the time of no wave, such a worry was laughably remote. Sentimentality was miles away from the prevailing tone of no wave, which barely seemed to have sympathy for the present.

Yet no wave did extend many aspects of punk. Austerity, fatalism, and caustic irony were all time-honored elements of the genre. In many ways, no wave really doubled down on much of punk. No wave artists offered a punk that was more punk than punk itself, a kind of orthodox interest in certain elements that were otherwise peripheral in the genre. What is significant about this orthodoxy is the way it signals a qualitative shift within the universe of punk. No wave recalibrated punk, turning away from its earlier obsession with rock music. The earlier punks were awash in nostalgic dreaming of the 1960s, theorizing what it meant to make a music that followed from Elvis and Chuck Berry and the Mysterians. For them, the model was set forth by the garage rockers and pop stars of the 1960s; recordings of the Standells and the Beatles and Count Five carried with them all the possibilities and missed opportunities of the past.

No wavers were now taking their cues from punk itself. Just as first wavers labored under the weight of their 1960s precursors, no wave artists experienced

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[57] Quoted in Reynolds, "No Future," 252.

an anxiety of influence. But they largely ignored classic rock, instead placing punk in the parental role. For someone like Lydia Lunch, born in 1959 in New York State, Tacoma and Liverpool circa 1963 offered little gravitational pull. Now it was Patti Smith's records that stood in for the promises of punk, broken and kept. No wave thus inherited and reconfigured punk's dialectical relationship to its history. If in the beginning of the seventies, the Velvet Underground and Suicide took the form of rock *too late*, no wave was punk too late. Prior punk struggled, doubted its continuities with the cultural milieu of rock, almost attempting to reanimate a rock music at risk of meaninglessness. No wave was the final, fatal assumption that continuity might be altogether impossible. Chance's protestations against art, the reduction of rock to Trakin's "lowest common denominators," this represented an attempt to turn away from rock.

This sentiment marked no wave as a form of the aesthetic that Hegel called the *unhappy consciousness*. As Hegel wrote,

> the Unhappy Consciousness is the knowledge of… total loss. It has lost both the worth it attached to its immediate personality and the worth attached to its personality as mediated, as thought. Trust in the eternal laws of the gods has vanished, and the Oracles, which pronounced on particular questions, are dumb. The statues are now only stones from which the living soul has flown, just as the hymns are words from which belief has gone… The works of the Muse now lack the power [to]… give us the actual life in which they existed, not the tree that bore them, not the earth and the elements which constituted their substance, not the climate which gave them their peculiar character, nor the cycle of the changing seasons that governed the process of their growth. So Fate… gives not the spring and summer of the ethical life in which they blossomed and

> ripened, but only the veiled recollection of that actual world.[58]

Hegel's formulation is somewhat impenetrable (as is typical in his writing); it is also filtered through his interest in classical Greek drama, culling imagery from Grecian gods and oracles and muses. Even so, the point is relatively straightforward. He characterizes a kind of artistic practice that stands at odds with its broader social milieu; an art, marked by its doubled recognition of the earth and the impossibility of capturing it. Hegel's unhappy consciousness sees in the stone the (now forfeit) potential to capture the full flowering of spiritual and ethical life, but also its drained, empty form. Simply put, Hegel's account is an attempt to describe dark irony in art, one that has no ambition of social or spiritual elevation.

In this fashion, no wave set about being the unhappy consciousness – the bad conscience, as it were – of punk. It saw the last glimmer of the democratic impulses of 1960s music that punk longed after, but cast doubt on that music's ability to animate its moment. No wave was imbued with an almost deflationary quality, at times even a total irreverence born of its rejection of rock music. At times, it looks like the central goal of no wave was to be contrarian. The Theoretical Girls' 1978 live recording of "Theoretical Girls" (released on the 2002 anthology of the same name) is brutal in its portrayal of rock unfulfilled. Curiously presented as their "title song," the track is simply a riff on the time honored "1-2-3-4" count-off familiar to all amateur rock bands. The song features what is basically an endlessly repeated A power chord played by Glenn Branca,

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[58] Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 455 (§753).

with slight occasional alterations. The closest thing we get to form in the work is a moment of Bb inflection that resolves back down to an A, and at the end, a patchy ascending scale that leads from C# up to A. Over this, singer and guitarist Jeffrey Lohn repeatedly counts off, as if starting a song. He alters the rhythm and meter of the count, a few times extending the numbers to include a five, a six, and repeatedly over that Bb, seven (this seems to hint that eight is on the horizon, though it never comes). The whole effect of this display is a dramatic sense of building tension, anticipation of a resolution that is repeatedly promised but never delivered. And what sort of resolution is promised? Seven goes to eight? The payoff is unclear. In this sense, the song literally sounds out rock music's failure to launch.

Such performative acts saturate no wave with what Robin James calls a "disorienting effect," or as Caroline Polk O'Meara writes, renders it "epistemologically noisy."[59] Indeed, this disorienting effect saturates even no wave's "crossover" projects, which might seem to fit in with the general trend of postpunk toward eclecticism and a stylistic diversity lacking in earlier punk. A number of projects by no wave artists poach from other genres, including Lydia Lunch's faux-disco solo album *Queen of Siam* (1981), the Lounge Lizards' fake lounge jazz, and the dance punk promoted by ZE Records. These records excited period critics hoping to finally make punk mainstream.

Enthusiasm for no wave crossover also structures recent commentary on the genre. James Chance's 1979 disco album, *Off White* (recorded simultaneously

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[59] O'Meara, "New York Noise," 209; James, "Contort Yourself: Music, Whiteness, and the Politics of Disorientation," 212.

to the Contortions' *Buy* but released under the name James White and the Blacks) has inspired a great deal of affection for its playful album-length experimentation with one of rock's chief rivals, disco. Bernard Gendron sees it as an outreach to disco and African American music styles more generally.[60] Robin James goes beyond the formal dimensions of the album, arguing that Chance's crossover work marks an intervention into the whiteness of rock music. She writes that Chance's manipulations of disco and punk style exacerbate the rift between white and black, one that has tended to be crossed by "love and theft" style efforts of rock musicians to absorb (a selective and unthreatening blend of) black culture for whiteness. As James writes, "Chance's lyrics distort the logic of white hegemony (which is predicated on its own invisibility) and force white listeners to acknowledge, even feel bad about, their complicity in it."[61]

But I would argue that, to the contrary, Chance's distorted project reinforces the incompatibility of punk with alternatives. No wave stresses the rift separating rock from dance at a moment when fusion was in vogue and new wavers were playing with disco (or disco artists like Donna Summer was adding rock to dance tracks like "Bad Girls"). Take "Contort Yourself," a track that had versions on both *Buy* and *Off White*. The disco version from the latter grafts punk onto disco, introducing distortion, cacophony, and angsty lyrics into the tune. Even so, it is in many ways a relatively straightforward dance tune. On a formal level, the song is a straightforward verse-chorus tune. It also offers a groove-based bass line, four-on-the-floor style disco drumbeat, and rampant guitar

[60] Gendron, *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club*, 285–287.
[61] James, "Contort Yourself," 218.

syncopation. The topic also fits in with a certain libidinal atmosphere proper to disco – contort yourself, get loose, be free, and so on. There's even a clap track.

The awkwardness of the song is in the details. Sections pass clumsily into each other, as in the curious bass pickup to the chorus, which starts on the wrong beat, essentially dropping two out-of-sync measures of 4/4 on top of each other. Disco, as Robert Fink argues, typically relies on a form of "recombinant teleology," a concern for flow and tension-release on the small scale (such a procedure is also one that Elizabeth Lindau explains has precedent, given that early punk artists like Velvet Underground deployed their own strains of musical minimalism).[62] Here though, the song just can't groove, even if all of the surface boxes are ticked. The most jarring detail is that, a few seconds into the recording, a second song is briefly smashed onto the recording. More markedly in the standard style of the Contortions (e.g. more punk), the inclusion of this excerpt reinforces a division between punk and not-punk.

This dichotomy also structures the original version from *Buy*, which contrasts a relatively clean disco groove to atonal, meandering sax and treble-driven misplaced guitar. No wave's musical antagonism is even easier to see in the Contortions' cover of "Jailhouse Rock." Recorded live at a 1978 CBGB concert, the Contortions' version dramatizes their rejection of another one of punk's neighbors: rock and roll. The recording openings with James Chance insulting his audience, saying, "Now a little something for all those of you who

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[62] Fink, *Repeating Ourselves: American Minimal Music as Cultural Practice*, 46; Lindau, "Art Is Dead. Long Live Rock! Avant-Gardism and Rock Music, 1967-99," 24–25.

live in the past. And that's about 99 percent of you idiots out there. 99.4 percent's pure idiots."

Beyond calling the crowd members idiots, the Contortions' performance was a standoffish move. Standoffs were, of course, commonplace for the group. Chance was known for antagonizing his audience, at times physically engaging the crowd. He even got into a fistfight with the critic Robert Christgau at one of the group's concerts. But this performance dragged Chance's confrontationalism into a more subtle aesthetic register. Playing "Jailhouse Rock" in this fashion was a musical slap in the face of one of the great titans of rock, one who had just died the previous year. To most rock fans – let alone the hip New York rock intelligentsia who had been paging through the *Mystery Train*, Greil Marcus's prescient eulogy for the king, released in 1975 – this was blasphemy. Worse, it was given in CBGB, a high temple for just that sort of "living in the past" Chance was mocking. Just two years before, Patti Smith Group was playing covers of "Louie Louie" and "Gloria" on that same stage. She herself sang "Jailhouse Rock" dozens of times between 1977 and 1979, with about half of those concerts occurring in CBGB. Recordings of those performances reveal that Smith shied away from the type of revisionism offered on "Gloria" and "Land," instead electing for a straightforward, reverential read of the tune.

Just as with "Contort Yourself," Chance's version of the song is relatively straightforward from a formal standpoint. Really, it follows the standard template of the song. Elvis's original alternates a series of verses with a straightforward blues chorus. The verses are built around a simple set of accented chord upbeats, built on the progression VII-I (D-Eb). The choruses contrast this

with a lively walking boogie-woogie blues progression (IV-I-V-IV-I). The only other event is an understated guitar solo played over a single pass through the chorus. Chance's version preserves this basic template. In fact, the only formal departure occurs when the verse progression rather than the chorus is used for the "solo," the cool rockabilly guitar also finding itself replaced by cacophonous guitar slides.

It's at that sort of level where Chance undermines key elements of the original. The verses recognize the basic template, again mirroring the upbeat pickup. The bass plays that basic chromatic motion ($\hat{7}-\hat{1}$), here pounding out a steady string of eighth notes in place of the demure sustain (this version is also transposed to A, to the extent that it is in a key at all). However, the guitars – tuned to nonstandard configurations in characteristic no wave style – completely disregard the harmony. They offer instead dissonant rhythmic hits. The chord stabs are inconsistent in pitch material; some descend rather than ascend, others move by large leaps, and many never quite land on the "tonic" at all.

The chorus receives a similar, irreverent treatment. The bass ditches the walking boogie, instead pounding out a descending four note chromatic line that outlines a I-IV-I progression. The harmonic rhythm is inconsistent between choruses, the harmony appearing to shift at random. The guitar parts change even more wildly from chorus to chorus, sometimes mirroring the bass, sometime playing random chromatic slides or other nonsensical parts. The solo section (as it were) collides all of that together, giving over to the total cacophony. The song concludes with a final pair of chorus-verse alternations. There, Chance's

vocal delivery becomes even more frantic as he screams “Jailhouse rock” over and over before the song collapses into a wash of feedback.

The effect of the song is almost as if the group is haphazardly gesturing in the direction of the original but not quite caring if they hit the mark. Just as Hegel’s stones were drained of significance and unable to rise up to a meaningful vision of social life, the Contortions strip “Jailhouse Rock” of all traces of exuberant vitality that characterize the original. The distinguishing features of the original become mere markers, check boxes clumsily filled in as they blast past. In this regard, it is striking how rhythmically flat the performance is. The verse hits are accents of a basic rhythmic pattern, not intimations of the breezy, syncopated rock meter implied by the original. The tune is drained of groove. It gains something of that undifferentiated Ramones blitzkrieg quality, that clumsy formalism of amateurs grasping at a basic template; that’s the tone of Dean Carter’s 1967 cover of the tune, which has a heavy-handed kitsch quality typical of the garage rock coveted by first wave punk artists. But here, awash in a brutal, repetitive dissonance, it emerges as the empty law of a form that no longer animates rock’s classical style.

Suicide too released an odd paean to Elvis in this era, “Going to Las Vegas.” Also recorded live at CBGB in 1978, their tune offers a vague postmortem on Elvis’s Vegas years set to a throbbing eighth note synth ostinato:

> I got my car
> Going down the road
> Going to Las Vegas
> …
> I see the town
> Got neon lights
> they got a big Elvis

he's playing there dead

Their version of the song matches the frightening tone of their earlier work, where rock and roll floats frighteningly in a void (see Chapter 1). Even if remote, Elvis's ghost haunts a spectral Las Vegas that remains present in a post-Elvis world.

The Contortions, meanwhile, are active in the process of witnessing rock's death. They destroy rock, turning on a lingering past in which they no longer want to dwell. Their performance offers one last attempt to severe the frayed bonds tethering punk to rock music. The ultimate refusal might just be to move on, to forget Elvis. But here, they aim to "Rollover Elvis," to overthrow him performatively through their song. This gesture shows the impossibility of dissociating punk from rock, as well as the impossibility of reconciling the two. Theirs is the the unhappy consciousness, one born out of a recognition that punk might never feel at home once again in rock.

Some late seventies critics did project their hopes for punk onto no wave, predicting that success was in the cards for artists like the Contortions. Today, this idea seems laughable. Adding a bit of disco to a subgenre built around pure hostility to even its closest musical neighbors (e.g. first wave punk, rock and roll) did little to sweeten no wave's bitter taste. No wave went even beyond what Bernard Gendron theorizes as punk's permanent underground, a "rock avant-garde permanently sequestered on the sidelines and permanently in revolt against the mainstream."[63] No wave was the great confirmation of punk's destiny

[63] Gendron, *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club*, 260.

to reside on the margins. No wave was subcultural, with no hope of a future. As Clinton Heylin observes, it was doomed from the start: "if many of the pre-no wave New York bands had been short-lived by chance, it seemed that the no wavers were determined to build in their own obsolescence."[64] In fact, nearly all the No Wave bands broke up within a year of *No New York*'s release. In so doing, they modeled a literal trajectory for an aesthetic theory latent in punk subculture: to abdicate the role of vanguard altogether, to collapse into a permanent division between the broader world and punk. Ill fated, sequestered, unhappy.

V. X Offender

If no wave seemed designed for obsolescence, Blondie was its polar opposite. By the end of the 1970s, they had become punk's greatest success story. Their debut release on Private Stock failed to chart, and the label itself folded when founder Larry Uttal moved to England in 1978. By all rights, Blondie looked as if they might follow the rest of the punk groups in dissolving. But the group jumped to Chrysalis Records, a British indie label that also spawned 2 Tone Records (most famously associated with the 1970s ska revival and the Specials in particular). Between 1978 and 1982, they released five platinum selling albums and a string of hit songs, including US number one singles "Heart of Glass," "Call Me," "The Tide is High," and "Rapture." In so doing, they traveled in just four years from a fringe subcultural act to a household name, the face of new wave at the beginning of the 1980s.

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[64] Heylin, *From the Velvets to the Voidoids*, 319.

Many critics have attributed the group's success to their comparatively eclectic sound. Borrowing liberally from the less abrasive side of pop music – a tradition that spanned roughly from the 1960s girl groups to 1970s disco divas – Blondie stood aside from their peers who idealized the failed garage acts of the previous decade. "Heart of Glass" and "Rapture" strikingly remained in touch with two of the most important developments in popular music during the 1970s, disco and hip hop respectively. Moreover, the group abandoned the pathos that seemed to saturate that form of dwelling in the past (or no wave's brutal negation of the present). Debbie Harry's playful public persona shied away from the standoffish auteur visionary model put forth by nearly all of punk's grand figureheads from Lou Reed and Patti Smith to Tom Verlaine and James Chance.

For this reason, Blondie was largely understood as a crossover act, quintessentially postpunk insofar as they abandoned punk's orthodox inclinations for a more fluid musical language. Robert Palmer cited the group as the best example of a new pervasive "esthetic of the fake" that was taking over rock by way of new wave:

> The most popular success of the esthetic is Blondie's best-selling "Autoamerican" album, which begins with fake movie music composed by the band's guitarist, Chris Stein, and finds Miss Harry singing fake jazz, fake cabaret and fake disk jockey spiels, as well as the melodic pop that has made Blondie one of today's most popular bands.[65]

Despite the potentially negative ramifications of the term fake, Palmer was really attempting to highlight the diverse material that informed Blondie. The group pulled freely from jazz, cabaret, and pop, setting him at odds with the realness

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[65] Palmer, "Esthetic of the Fake Stirs Rock World."

that other punks often coveted. Lester Bangs more-or-less agreed, including a lengthy essay on Blondie's reliance on stylistic pastiche in his 1980 book on the group. He followed Hebdige in the early adoption of that great buzzword of the eighties and nineties: "the Blondies are hip to Post-Modernism, and Post-Modernism is hip to them."[66]

Predictably, some critics weren't pleased by the group's renunciation of punk's modernism, even as they essentially conceded the group's crossover appeal. Writing for the New York Times in 1979, Ann Bardach and Susan Lydon warned that, though the group had become the most successful example of a "new wave band crossing over to capture both the disco and MOR ('middle-of-the-road') audiences," a backlash was coming: "Many fans who were loyal to them in their lean years are deserting because they resent Blondie's 'commercial sellout.'"[67] Roy Trakin also noticed this, warning in *New York Rocker* that, many "new wavesters" had "blindly attacked the band for 'selling out' and 'going disco.'"[68] Greg Shaw was one such new waver, saying in his alarmist *Bomp!* editorial that fans should boycott "overhyped garbage." But even the record collector in him had to admit that the group had appeal, conceding: "who among us would refuse to own the Blondie picture disc or anything else on principle alone? Not enough to make a difference."[69]

Blondie definitely represented a change in the tide of punk. And it was one that rejected the model of microcosmic purity evinced by their precursors and taken to its apogee in no wave. We should again be cautious against hastily

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[66] Bangs, *Blondie*, 64–65.
[67] Bardach and Lydon, "A Cool Blonde and a Hot Band," 18, 36.
[68] Trakin, "Update Blondie," 14.
[69] Shaw, "Editorial: The Beat."

construing this change as a matter of rupture. In fact, despite the protestations, many critics saw the group as building upon rather than betraying punk. Blondie's glib eclecticism signaled to many that the group had added a new dimension to punk's long-running play with remoteness and insecurity. Even as he praised the group for its postmodernism, Bangs himself conceded that the group's blank, "pervasive coldness" situated them comfortably within a lineage of austere punkers from Lou Reed to Patti Smith.[70] Moreover, as he acknowledged in a *Village Voice* essay on the group, their ironic tone situated them perfectly within a longer tradition of punk:

> Punk rock was kind of a joke in the first place, as a listen to Count Five or the Seeds makes clear, and given the campily ironic distance most CBGB groups bring to it, it becomes a joke once removed, which is like seeing the punchline coming from a mile away… What makes Blondie's first set more than just a fanzine-mentality collection of 10-year-old styles by 25-year-old diehards is that it consistently conveys the same energetic *conviction* in its dumbness as the original punk rockers, yet like, say, the New York Dolls, the group are implicitly intelligent enough not to ram their understanding of earlier rock 'n' roll down your throat. Like the Ramones, they have both drive and a sense of humor. Unlike the Ramones, they don't condescend to their material… [Y]ou've got what rock 'n' roll has always really stood for: the sort of unselfconscious fun that transcends both scenes and generic restrictions."[71]

Bangs was clarifying the place of humor, irony, and eclecticism of source material (a large portion of his essay is just dedicated to pointing out the group's references to the '60s and early '70s). John Piccarella argued that even Blondie's later, disco-tinged work wasn't a departure from the spirit of punk, which shared with disco's interest in making "flesh into an image." As he wrote of the group's

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[70] Bangs, *Blondie*, 72.
[71] Bangs, "Blondie Is More Fun."

breakthrough record, "*Parallel Lines* is an achievement, not a sellout or departure from rawer, punkier moves. All three Blondie albums are eclectic and display lots of stylizations. "Heart of Glass" may be pure disco, but so was "Man Overboard" on the first album."[72]

Indeed, the question of fusion becomes especially clear when one takes a close look at the group's earlier music. The common tendency to frame the group's Chrysalis era as a new crossover moment is misguided. If Blondie broke rock's rules, this began in its earliest years. The first incarnation of Blondie was actually a faux-girl group called the Stilettos, featuring a trio of female lead singers comprised of Debbie Harry, Elda Gentile, and Rosie Ross. Essentially, the Stilettos were an out growth of the queer punk era: Chris and Debbie were introduced by Eric Emerson and ran like a theater project by Tony Ingrassia, the director of Andy Warhol's *Pork* and Jayne County's *Wayne County at the Trucks* show (see chapter 2). The group reportedly performed in a wild cabaret-esque format, covering pop hits like Labelle's "Lady Marmalade," the Four Seasons' "Big Man in Town," and the *Goldfinger* theme song.

Even when Stein and Harry broke off from the Stilettos and became CBGB scenesters, they continued to reach back into pop's past. Bootlegs from 1975-1976 reveal that the group covered a range of voice-driven pop tunes, everything from Martha and the Vandellas' "Heat Wave" to the jazz standard "I Cover the Waterfront," probably most famously associated with Billie Holiday. Importantly, such material was folded into a tradition of rock music that more closely resembled the idealized rock of the classical style theorists, including the Doors'

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[72] Piccarella, "Blondie Enters Rock and Roll Heaven."

"Moonlight Drive" and the Velvet Underground's "Femme Fatale." Live sets from their ascendant period (1978-1980) reveal the group frequently mixing in 1960s material with new. Punk go-tos like "Louie Louie" converged with a broader selection of 1960s rock such as the Four Tops' "Seven Rooms of Gloom" (1967) and James Brown's "(I Got You) I Feel Good" (1965). Indeed, the group's breakthrough European/UK market hit was a cover of "Denise," a 1963 doo wop hit for Randy and the Rainbows (Blondie's cover changes the gender of the titular figure and names him "Denis," pronounced in French). The group also introduced new material from the decade, covering Supertramp, Donna Summer's "I Feel Love," and David Bowie's "Heroes" (both from 1977).

This eclecticism should not itself be surprising. As I have argued throughout my dissertation, punk artists were obsessed with the legacy of the classical style, which often meant reaching out toward a wide spectrum of rock subgenres from the sixties. They were also sweeping in their engagement with cultural forms such as film and comics; the Ramones and the Cramps in particular plundered frequently from the broader world of pop culture. Even so, Blondie displayed an unprecedented number of simultaneous generic references. Integrating the B-movie themes of the Cramps with the garage rock of Patti Smith and a range of generally ignored genres like soul, disco, and musical theater, Blondie went beyond their peers in formulating a broad vision of rock's past.

What is also remarkable is the fact that the group tailor-made much of their sound to their source material. The Ramones played everything in a more-or-less interchangeable way, seldom adjusting the performance style or even

tempo from one song to the next. Meanwhile, Blondie's catalog reflects a flexibility matching their source material. They did play more traditional rock material like "Rip Her to Shreds" or "Detroit 442" in a guitar-driven style characteristic of other punk artists. But other genres retain a greater autonomy in their sound. Dance-influenced tunes like "Heart of Glass" stray away from the rock sound, while their cover of Donna Summer's "I Feel Love" is drenched in synth to match the computerized tone of Hi-NRG disco. The group even unleashes a country twang while Harry affects a southern drawl for their cover of the June Carter/Johnny Cash song "Ring on Fire" (recorded for the soundtrack of the 1980 film *Roadie*). This diversity reaches its peak on the group's 1980 release *Autoamerican*. There, reggae appears alongside disco tunes, cabaret numbers, rap songs, all following after an orchestral overture.

Today, punk's status as a broad global network of genres is more visible. Punk's tendency toward expansion first became obvious in the 1980s, with the explosion of dozens of simultaneous and tangentially related punk genres like hardcore, crust, and dance punk. For this reason, punk names less a "genre" than what might more accurately be called a *metagenre*. Metagenre, or what is often called a "supergenre," is a concept from literary studies addressing those genres that appear to transcend and unite a broad range of genres.[73] Genres like the epic or rock music go beyond the small set of stylistic rules that characterize genres or

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[73] Arnott, "Epic and Genre"; Beebee, *The Ideology of Genre*; Moretti, *Modern Epic*; Nagy, "Epic as Genre"; My preference for the term metagenre is partially to avoid the implication that such genres are Power Rangers-esque composites of smaller, independent categories. It should be noted that some sources (e.g. Giltrow, "Meta-Genre") use the term metagenre to mean a set of meta-language surrounding genres. I find this language misleading, since no genres exist independently from norms or metalanguage about genre, and where such things are formalized, probably better thought of as forms of fandom, criticism, or scholarship.

subgenres, integrating dozens of variant forms. As the genre theorist Luke Arnott writes, metagenres are a

> multiform, accommodating a variety of forms… Here is a genre that becomes a container, as it were, of a vast variety of other genres, realized in varying forms of performance and in varying degrees of formality in performance…. [It is] replete with stories suitable for a broad spectrum of different performances,… a medium of discourse that sees itself as all-embracing.[74]

Arnott clarifies that such works are defined by their substantial diversity of contexts, topics, and even their multimedial character. He argues that the epic, for example, is a generic template not only for drama, but also has proved flexible enough to respond to newer media like film, television, and video games.

In this spirit, punk today names a broad set of (often conflicting) stylistic concerns that have infiltrated cinema, design, and literature. Today, there are sounds, looks, and even philosophies that can be called "punk."[75] The genre makes cameos in movies like *Star Trek IV* and offers a style to the CBGB-themed restaurant in Newark airport. Meanwhile, hundreds of punk offshoots are scattered in cities across the globe. They approach a level of diversity unprecedented by punk's early play with genric referentiality.

By the late 1970s, critics were already noticing that punk had expanded beyond music to a range of cultural practices. Pioneers of the Stuckist art movement formed the Medway Poets in 1979, bringing the confrontationalism of

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[74] Arnott, "Epic and Genre," 28–29.
[75] On punk's legacy in design, sound, and culture more broadly, see Bestley, Ogg, and Loren, *The Art of Punk*; Savage et al., *Punk*; Howard, "Listening to Punk's Spirit in Its Pre-, Proto- and Post-Formations."

British punk into poetry.[76] Not only underground projects like no wave cinema but *The Warriors* and a movie musical staring the Ramones, *Rock and Roll High School* (both 1979), introduced the genre to film. Punk was also quickly absorbed into high fashion. In 1977, the *New York Times* warned that the style was disrupting the world of high fashion, leading icons from Calvin Klein to Bianca Jagger to abandon the "Saint Laurent uniforms" for a crude, personal style. The *SoHo Weekly News* also noted the change, citing pervasive punkish "sadomasochistic" attire at that year's Paris fashion week.[77] *Creem* even commented on high fashion, observed that British designer Zandra Rhodes had started marketing $600 dollar punk dresses under the banner of "conceptual chic" (as the magazine described it, "ripped dresses adorned with beaded safety pins, bathtub plug chains and stud-like sequins").[78]

Blondie was one of the first groups to mirror punk's expansive cultural map. They refused subgeneric purity, offering a form of the genre that signaled its increasing social and stylistic diversity. In so doing, they went beyond the subculturally-minded vision of their forerunners, offering a first intimation of punk as a metagenre. While this vision was on display on their records from the late seventies and early eighties, even their first releases showcase a vision of punk more ambitious than their peers. It is telling that the group's first recording, a demo produced in 1975 by Alan Betrock, includes alongside three originals the Shangri-La's 1965 "In the Streets" and an earlier version of their disco crossover

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[76] The only source I know on the Medway Poets is the entry on them in Milner, *The Stuckists Punk Victorian*.
[77] Donovan, "What They're Wearing at Night"; Cunningham, "The 4000 Guests Were Obliged to Wear Black."
[78] "Punk Couture."

hit, “Heart of Glass.” The group’s 1976 full length *Blondie* continued to dive into an eclectic segment of US culture. References to comic books, B-movies, and musicals (e.g. *West Side Story*) abound throughout the album. In a July 1975 CBGB concert, Harry even screams wildly on “Attack of the Giant Ants,” playing a character in a ‘50s horror film. As she remarked of the album, “It's prime-time television on record.”[79]

But it was also prime-time music. The originals on the record are wild pastiches of many genres; “In the Sun” draws on surf rock, “In the Flesh” from the girl groups, “Man Overboard” from disco. “X Offender” might as well have been a Ronettes tune.

The girl groups in particular form a common reference point for Blondie. There were some precedents for this in punk. The New York Dolls directly referenced the Shangri-La’s 1965 “Give Him a Great Big Kiss” in their “Looking for A Kiss,” opening their own tune with the poached line “when I say I’m in love, you best believe I’m in love, L-U-V.” Further, as I argued in chapter 1, as early as 1967, the Velvet Underground was presenting its own warped variant of the girl group sound with a tune like “I’m Waiting for the Man.” Blondie tunes like “In the Flesh” and “X Offender” were in many ways rather orthodox tunes given this backdrop.

Of course, “X Offender” represented a radical departure from the tone and topic of a song like “Be My Baby” or “Give Him a Great Big Kiss.” Originally titled “Sex Offender,” the name was changed at the request of Private Stock, who worried about the marketability of a song with the word “sex” in the title. The

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[79] Quoted in Heylin, *From the Velvets to the Voidoids*, 259.

song tells the story of a sex worker falling for the police officer who arrested her. Despite the decidedly adult tone, the lyrics are in many ways proper to a common template of 1960s girl group songs. Like many Shangri-Las or Crystals tunes, the lyrics chronicle the narrator's love for a man, one that is hindered by circumstances, but will persevere in spite of the situation. The song opens with a short introduction, a profession of affection for the idealized love:

> 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

On its own, that passage might seem innocent enough, until a series of peppered innuendos and double-entendres reveal that the target of the narrator's affection is a police officer, and that their relationship is partially legal in nature:

> You read me my rights and then you said "Let's go"
> ...
> We sat in the night with my hands cuffed at my side
> ...
> I think all the time how I'm going to perpetrate love with you
> And when I get out, there's no doubt I'll be sex offensive to you

In many ways, the song falls within the tradition of punk twists on the girl group classics, offering a new version of the harsh realism presented by Velvet Underground and New York Dolls. Like those songs, Blondie again drags the painful and tragic side of the 1960s into the realm of idealized pop.

What is striking about Blondie's version, though, is the comparative lack of pathos. While the tone of the narrator is glib, perhaps a tad casual given the gravity of the situation, the song suggests no condemnation. Despite the title, the

song seems to suggest that the romantic affection or implied sexual relations are consensual and requited. (This is a departure from reported earlier versions, which more directly referenced sex offenders.) The narrator, like the protagonists in girl group songs prior, recognizes the difficulty of her situation even as she preserves a sense of hope for the outcome. Interestingly, the song stands in many ways as a foil to "Rip Her to Shreds," which Judith Peraino rightly points out plays on a trope of female in-fighting; there, the narrator spits out a series of criticisms of another woman, culminating in a song where "every stanza of merciless defamation is articulated by a group of voices who shout a chorus of agreement, enticing the listener to join the fray."[80] Here, the narrator doesn't quite offer a broader vision of female solidarity. But she at least strikes a defiant rather than antagonistic tone, all-the-while targeting her ire toward social circumstances rather than individuals.

This tone of defiance-under-fire inflects the musical world presented by the song. I would argue that the song more comfortably inhabits the grey space between pathos-ridden rock and immersive pop. The Velvet Underground and New York Dolls seemed to expose the tarnished world lurking beneath the idealized love and the teen dance numbers (recall that the Velvets and the Dolls were both idealizing drugs, not love, in their girl group riffs). These references place them within a long tradition of angsty punk that suffered over the rift between the aesthetic promises of rock and the social world. Suicide offered tragic remembrance, Lou Reed queer nostalgia, Patti Smith aimed to sequester punk, and the Contortions sought to destroy punk's pop roots altogether.

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[80] Peraino, "Rip Her to Shreds: Women's Music According to a Butch-Femme Aesthetic," 19.

But if Blondie seems aware of distinctions within the musical universe – above all between past and present – "X Offender" presents no sense that the stylistic and historical continuum marks some sort of crisis. Beyond the vocals, a number of musical features situate this thought. The song really functions as a blend of musical genres. Beyond the lyrics, the song indexes the 1960s girl groups frequently. The introduction offers a simple kick drum accompaniment poached from the Ronettes' "Be My Baby," while the chorus introduces an iconic backing vocal descant stolen right from the playbook of the Crystals or the Shangri-Las. While the girl group references are somewhat predicable given the group's penchant for the style, the song draws on a number of tropes from other '60s pop genres. On the verses, the first guitar evokes surf rock, playing a trebly, reverb-drenched set of sustained chords outlining the underlying harmonic progression, a predictable I-IV-V. Meanwhile, the second guitar lays down a classic rock-a-billy accompaniment, sliding into a palm-muted riff that might have been taken from Eddie Cochran's "C'mon Everybody" (a song that the Criminals and the Sex Pistols both covered). Behind that all, an organ lays down a screaming outline of the chord progression that situates the song centrally in the world of 1960s post-British Invasion garage rock (Lester Bangs called it the "roller rink organ" of the Sir Douglas Quintet, but one could find a similar sound on pretty much any *Nuggets* track).[81]

Interestingly, the group happily segued from blender nostalgia, tweaking many of their songs when performing live or re-recording. The group tended to play a modified version of "X Offender" when performing live, displaying

[81] Bangs, "Blondie Is More Fun," 65.

flexibility within the musical world they inhabited. (Based on available bootlegs, this style was remarkably consistent from the song's earliest performances to well after the group became a success.) We could easily mistake the group's 1979 New Years Eve concert at the Apollo Theater in Glasgow – a bootleg that received a commercial release in 2010 as *Live at the BBC* – for one by the Ramones. The group skips over the faux-girl group introduction, launching straight into a speeding, rubato-free rendition of the tune that might as well be "Blitzkrieg Bop." Harry also abandons the teen idol persona, sneering out the vocals in a manner that set her alongside Patti Smith or Richard Hell. Here, Harry recruits punk's snottiness not for "blank generation" nihilism, but for the song's original defiance.

Heard in this light, Blondie offered a vision of punk that remained an assemblage of past styles. But they eschewed eclecticism driven by a shattered, pathetic vision, and instead broadened the stylistic universe of the classical style to one where girl groups happily coexisted with surf rockers. Given this, there is a limit to the discourse about Blondie's crossover, whether a negative read based on their acquiescence or a positive one that recognized their clever concessions to the marketplace. Rather, they were offering a vision of punk that renounced its aspirations to permanent vanguardism. Far from offering a vision of punk as a private, sequestered subgenre, punk emerges as something more like a metagenre, one that could reach out and accommodate stylistic and social differentiation.

Such a move did require renouncing a certain conception of punk, as an isolated subculture of the CBGB years that became permanent under no wave.

Their vision of rock's classical style was decidedly more eclectic than their peers, shying away from boy's club garage bands or male-driven auteurs. Blondie were far from punk purists; they stood at odds with no wave. But they came from a genre that never wholly committed to total purity as a vision. Moreover, even its classicizing streak betrayed a desire for social recognition. Punk wanted a shared community that rock once promised.

In this spirit, Blondie viewed punk as a frame that could tolerate stylistic subdivisions. For Blondie, surf and soul could coexist without tragedy, and might even happily coexist. There could be punk in a surf rock vein, punk soul, even punk disco. There could be many punks, spreading outward into the future.

EPILOGUE

Punk's doubled trajectory – represented by the opposed poles of Blondie's expansive ambition to render punk a metagenre and James Chance's retreat into subcultural vanguardism – anticipates the spiraling route that the genre has followed in the more than forty years since it first began to circulate as a revisionary musical category of critics and urban hipsters.

If nothing else, punk revolutionized itself as a musical and social ideal in the course of a decade. It began as a term of connoisseurship for the rock intelligentsia to delineate the successes and failings of the previous decades. In just five years, it mutated into the name of a dynamic New York-based subculture, one that indexed a battle over the character of 1970s alternative rock music and the project of carving out a space for a countercultural social model. Along the way, it offered a set of theories about the avant-garde potential of rock music, a reaffirmation of mass culture as its own sufficient domain, and a new, post-Stonewall form of queer musicking.

By the end of the decade, punk metamorphosed into a metagenre, a set of rapidly expanding and diverse subgenres, linked at times only by a term that has grown even more expansive and vague than even its early versions. Passing through distinctive shades in hardcore and industrial, metalcore and grunge, punk has long outgrown its foundational meditations on rock's dialectical character during the 1960s. Like umbrella terms such as rock or pop music, punk arrived at a doubled promise, its own dialectical character. On the one hand,

punk aimed to tear down the edifices of hitherto existing popular music, to pursue new and distinctive subcultures born of wholly particular and localized demands. These have become radically distinct in the realm of style and value, spanning the aesthetic spectrum from apolitical avant-gardes to liberal poptimists, and the spectrum of the political from the far left to the far right. If punk was an enigma in its earliest moments, it is only more enigmatic today.

On the other hand, punk has spiraled into something far bigger than its own often provincializing promises. The 1970s brought to an end the wish that the genre could live forever in the past, safe in the partitioned off spaces of New York City. In that sense, punk as a dream of a permanent, private revolution for a select few – socialism in one neighborhood, as it were – perished as Blondie careened into the charts and the Sex Pistols burst onto the front pages of the *New York Times*. Punk now became something that belonged to everyone, or at least, to anyone who cared to listen.

This gives the full weight of that famous cliché, "punk is dead, long live punk." Of course, as I have argued throughout this project, punk was always the living dead. Punk was a form of bearing witness to pop music's many deaths, of mourning and learning to live with the ghosts of rock and roll past. The end of the 1970s witnessed a particular death form for punk, one long prophesied by rock alarmists: the fall of punk as a wholly local, autonomous subculture. What began to bubble up from the isolated locales of New York City and London and Cleveland and San Francisco at the beginning of the decade became irrevocably linked under the single banner of punk. And while critics and fans continue to

argue over who did it first or who did it best, punk emerged as phenomenon that one could revise or personalize or enlist, but never exclusively own again.

In two senses, the end of the decade also witnessed a rebirth of punk, a rise of the concept of punk that we inherit today. This was true in two senses. The end of the 1970s saw the rise of punk as a catchall for an array of musical subcultures, sometimes indexing little more than a subculturizing tendency within music. Punk became a way of drawing divisions, preserving space in a world that profoundly restricts the possibility of happiness for many. No wave was merely an early and emphatic presentation of punk's promise to provide a whole and autonomous world for its denizens. This has taken any number of forms, from hardcore and queercore to crust and beyond. Punk continues to be a musical and social vanguard, a space where the dangerous, forbidden, and embattled might live. It is a refuge for the subordinated, a refuge for those seeking rest. Punk has provided a place for those left out of the sprawling music industry and its genres, for whom the top 40 does not sing and who covet a more direct form of access to and control over the sound of their social world. It has been the sound of defiant communities of queers, women, and people of color, those who have at many steps along the way been denied little more than a tokenizing place in the many genres of the mainstream. And it has been a space for left wing opposition, banished into hiding in the Reagan and Bush years, and perhaps once again finding itself called upon in the coming Trump Years.

Meanwhile, the end of the decade saw the death of a certain hope that punk could ever remain self-satisfied with isolation. Blondie and dozens of other artists since have offered a musical vision of a better world, one that has aimed

tear down musical and social walls wherever they arise. The end of the seventies witnessed the end of punk's early period of self-cultivation, a form of what the Adorno of *Minima Moralia* called "mere being-for-itself of subjectivity."[1] Punk grew beyond its early scholastic, private self-cultivation, one that came at the expense of the outside world. As Adorno wrote of the promise of philosophy:

> Anyone who died old and in the consciousness of seemingly blameless success, would secretly be the model schoolboy who reels off all life's stages without gaps or omissions, an invisible satchel on his back. Every thought which is not idle, however, bears branded on it the impossibility of its full legitimation, as we know in dreams that there are mathematics lessons, missed for the sake of a blissful morning in bed, which can never be made up. Thought waits to be woken one day by the memory of what has been missed, and to be transformed into teaching.[2]

In this spirit, punk was a rejection of provinciality, a form of existence that self-contented with mere *getting by*. It was spurned on by "the memory of what had been missed," an offer to make good on the promises of the past that carried with it a plea that the future not look quite as grim as what came before.

This is a form of memory that increasingly understands the past not to be a settled, dead thing, but a living form that shapes our daily practice. Punk has thus constantly reassessed its rivals and its allies, finding new ways of engaging across the (increasingly less gilded) border separating rock music from the world. Punk now names even the rejection of its earlier princely ambitions, the all-too-often-misguided desire for autonomy at the cost of engagement. Punk no longer strictly calls for musical purity, instead calling for solidarity. This has been accompanied by an urgent demand to de-provincialize conceptions of punk that

[1] Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 16.
[2] Ibid., 81.

put up walls between the very marginalized people for whom punk has so often promised – and struggled – to speak. In the marketplace of competing progressive visions of music, punk has continued to expand stylistically, conceptually, and politically. This has made it wildly amenable to the diversity of social practice in not just the US and the UK, but in a rapidly expanding network of global subcultures. Miles away from earlier visions of a music compartmentalized to single neighborhoods in a single borough in New York, punk is now a worldwide phenomenon. And it is one that again and again reinvents itself to follow the rapidly shifting – and sometimes dissolving – borders of each new era.

Punk carries within it a promise for rebirth, to realize democracy in sonic practice. That this promise has often been broken is not cause enough to accept a return to the provincial. Gillian Rose conceded the cruel melancholia of a world that all-too-often denies our ability to properly live with the dead, herself writing a book that would only see publication following her untimely death at the hands of cancer. She acknowledged that it was only on from defeat and misrecognition that a better future might be possible. She wrote:

> Let us continue to chase spirits back into their bodies, back into the history of their development, in order to comprehend their law and their anarchy and to complete the work of mourning. Reincarnated, put back into their bodies, as it were, 'spectres' in Marx, 'ghosts' in Heidegger, join up with class conflict in the former and with heterogeneous-originary iterable violence in the latter which deconstruction owns as its primordial and hence undeconstructable justice… [We need now an] *inaugurated* mourning: the recognition of our failures of full mutual recognition, of the law which has induced our proud and

> deadly dualisms, of the triune law – implicit but actual –
> which is always at stake.[3]

In this spirit, punk aims to inaugurate a new mourning, a new means of coming to peace in a community of the living and dead. It continues being reborn; again and again renewing, rewriting, and recomposing the sound of the world. That this is also a sound that the world hasn't always listened still is not enough. Punk continues.

[3] Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*, 71, 76.

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