


# PUNK

Adrian Heathcote

(Appeared in Black and White magazine, No. 22, 1996)

 IN 1976 THE EMERGENCE of Punk sent the culture into a moral panic from which it has never fully recovered. It was twenty years ago this month that saw the Sex Pistols appear on the Bill Grundy 'Today' show and stun the British public with remarks like 'You Dirty bastard', and 'You dirty fucker'. And it was this event more than any other that catapulted Punk from being a musical revolution to an assault on each and every cherished institution. And eventually into a mainstay of the tabloid press.

Over the space of a year—from the Sex Pistols' first London show in February of '76—to the first 'proper' Punk single (The Damned's 'New Rose'), to the long delayed release, and rapid withdrawal, of the Sex Pistols' first single in November, Punk had put a stamp on its time as few movements have managed to do. By the end of the following year the Punk style had ossified into a uniform (as John Lydon, aka Rotten, had ruefully remarked 'Become a Punk, join the army') and the Sex Pistols were within a fortnight of breaking up for good. Many purists would later claim that they were finished as a band by January of 1977—when Glen Matlock was ousted—but it is also true that it was only after they had become a spent force musically that they were to perfect their Style.

And the Style was, of course, the thing. It was to be a style that laid the ground rules for street credibility for the next fifteen years; and it was the stylised slogans of 'Anarchy' and 'Destruction' that created a template for all future political dissatisfactions. This style was so much more than a restrictive dress code, though it was that as well: it was a potent bundle of inescapable attitudes. For one whose mind-set was created during this time

only the itchy hair-shirt of socio-political anxiety would seem *real*, would seem psychologically well-dressed.

It was this that became the great legacy of the Punk explosion. To be authentic was to be hunted into the shadows of one's bedsit. There was a gentle crackle of paranoia that could be heard underneath everything—the hiss in a telephone, an open line through to the apocalypse.

The previous 'hippie' mentality was swept away, along with the San Francisco light that had given birth to it. Punk thrived best in the gloom of London. Rubbishy skies, pissing rain, and the litter of urban fear blowing through the streets. Perhaps this was why Melbourne, more than any other Australian city, took Punk so to heart. Melbourne was the closest thing that Australia had to the suicide-skies of London. But Melbourne had something else as well: it was an intellectual city—and Punk was quintessentially an intellectual movement.

Of all of the journalistic misunderstandings of Punk this is one of the greatest: that Punk was a dumb and semi-literate movement. In reality it was neither. The misunderstanding arises because journalists easily believe their own news stories, and the story of the time was that the Sex Pistols were the creators of Punk—and the Sex Pistols were *dumb*. As a consequence (it is thought) the movement died when they separated—under the weight, presumably, of their collective stupidity.

Malcolm MacLaren and John Lydon have gone to great lengths to promote this conception of their respective starring roles—while simultaneously denying the cause by talking-up their IQ's. But even writers like Jon Savage—who should know better—have been unable to resist the idea that Punk was over by late 1978.

But Punk did not start with the Sex Pistols and it didn't end with them either. And its creative ambitions were not limited to theirs. One of the great anthems of the Punk movement was Richard Hell's 'Blank Generation' and it was written by March of 1975—before the Sex Pistols had even formed. And Patti Smith's album 'Horses' was released in 1975, itself some three years after the first Roxy Music album—and both could lay claim to being proto-punk.

In fact Richard Hell was even responsible for the standard Punk hair cut—the razor-slashed tuft that was the regulation hair style of the late 70's, until it was dyed black and grew out (and up) to become the look of the early Eighties. The latter became the style for The Cure, Echo and the Bunnymen, Nick Cave, Siouxsie Sioux, The Jesus and Mary Chain, The Church and scores of others. And Richard Hell had copied the look from a famous picture of the very young, Nineteenth Century French poet, Arthur Rimbaud.

He had even taken his name from Rimbaud's longest poem, *A Season in Hell*.

The literary connections, particularly with the French bohemians, run through Punk from the beginning to its end. Richard Hell's confrère in Television changed his name to Tom Verlaine because 'Verlaine' was the name of Rimbaud's best friend. The Cure not only took the theme from Camus' *The Outsider* as the basis for an early song, they even lifted one of Baudelaire's poems and used it (uncredited) as the lyric to a song.<sup>1</sup> In fact most of MacLaren's political slogans were taken directly from the French anarchists *Situationist Internationale*. Even the ransom-note style lettering of the Sex Pistols' album came from this group. And it is hard to think where Punk would have been without the plays of Samuel Beckett—even if they had, by that time, been processed through the television show *Steptoe and Son*.

But if Punk was never as dumb as it seemed, it is certainly true that there were conflicts within it that made it hard to decode—even for Punks themselves. How well did the Nazi iconography—the swastika arm-bands, the SS badges, the Hitler salutes—go with the Left-wing rhetoric taken from the *Situationist Internationale*? The confusion this caused was so great in 1977 that skinheads of the National Front thought that Punks were with them one hundred percent. It took a lot of fast talking by MacLaren and others to convince people that Punk was out to destroy everything—but in a *good* way! The consequent back peddling from all concerned ultimately led to everyone trying to outdo one another in political correctness. Mick Jones was a case in point: he had been in a band called London SS in 1976 but by '77 found himself fronting The Clash—the most ideologically correct band of its, or any other, time.<sup>2</sup> (It was The Clash's manager, Bernie Rhodes, who had fallen out with MacLaren over The Swastika Issue—Rhodes' mother was a Holocaust survivor.)

In truth the Swastika imagery was chosen for purely aesthetic reasons. Put simply it was felt to be sexy. This was an integral part of the culture of the times, and is now easily forgotten. Liliana Cavani's film *The Night Porter* was made in 1973 and was playing in Art House cinemas the world over for the next ten years—and Pasolini's *Salo* was made in 1975. The ineluctable sexiness of the SS was a Theorem of the culture of the time. The National Front—literal-minded clods that they were—mistook all of this for a political

---

<sup>1</sup>Homework exercise hint: it is on the *Kiss Me, Kiss Me, Kiss Me* album.

<sup>2</sup>Incidentally, London SS eventually turned into Tony James and Billy Idol's Generation X. Idol has since been immortalised as the plain original of *Buffy's* Spike (William, the first name of both). Tony James later renewed the SS connection by forming the band Sigue Sigue Sputnik.

point.<sup>3</sup>

In reality Punk was an almost purely aesthetic movement. Those who took the politics seriously—whether on the left or the right—showed a certain naiveté in reading the cultural messages. The band that understood all of this the best were The Birthday Party—they didn't succumb to the easy political pieties of The Clash or The Jam. They remained supremely contemptuous of *everything*.

Not only was British Punk not essentially political it was also—contrary to its own pronouncements—downright patriotic. If the music was fuelled by anything it was by a revulsion for American West Coast Rock—The Eagles, Jackson Browne, *etc*—and a desire to return to a more raucous version of British Mod. In fact Punk was Mod shorn of its Soul and R & B roots. Rattled out at breakneck speed it was picking up the thread of The Kinks' 'You Really Got Me' and The Who's 'My Generation'. And just as with Mod, Union Jack flags were worn on everything. Nor could the little twist of irony that was added, disguise the feeling of pride that London was once again the Style Capital of the Universe.

But Punk added something new and lasting to its cocktail of '60s influences. The idea that all culture is simply trash—to be used and disposed of—would have been completely unthinkable in the Sixties—except perhaps to a few duffle-coated odd-balls in the Art Colleges. Irony, particularly in the culture of Pop music, was in very short supply. Punk changed this for the next twenty years. All culture—even youth culture—was detritus. There was nothing to believe in—and there was nothing that was any good. There was

---

<sup>3</sup>The whole issue of Punk's relation to Fascist imagery needs an article to itself: it was McLaren—himself half-Jewish—who had first promoted the Swastika imagery through his shop *Sex*. By 1978, however, tolerance for this kind of posturing was beginning to get thin. Late in that year Julie Burchill—then only 19—wrote a scathing review of Siouxsie Sioux, chastising her for anti-Semitism. 'I keep seeing,' she wrote, 'Siouxsie up there in her swastika armband making nothing but a fashion accessory out of the death of millions of people.' When the *Red Wedge*—think Billy Bragg—effectively took over in 1981, Punk had split into an aesthetic movement on one side—think Goth—and a political movement on the other. The latter made Communism more loved in the West than by then it was in the East: it became very uncool then to mention the Soviet Gulags, or the Communist-world's persecution of writers. And that same self-loathing and airy arrogance that led middle-class children to embrace a philosophy in which they piously hoped that someone would come along and take away their every freedom became the *chic-schtick* of the next twenty years. Still is.

(As a side-note: it was Siouxsie Sioux who had been the object of Bill Grundy's lust before the television show in 1976, and that had caused the Sex Pistols to hurl abuse at him on camera. She was part of the Pistol's early entourage, and, though she was not wearing a swastika arm-band on that occasion, another in the entourage was, and it was plainly visible on camera.)

just the shuffling of Styles in ever more elaborate recombinations.

As an artistic credo this could have been a liberating idea—and for many it clearly was. But for the audience it caused—and continues to cause—an odd kind of paralysis. How can I like something that says that there’s nothing to like? In what ways am I *allowed* to like it? If I like it, don’t I betray it? The standard psychological response to this paradox is to resort to irony, or shudder, quotes. I “like” this even though nothing is really worth liking. Ultimately these shudder quotes have taken over the world. They book-end every sentiment. They age everything—sitting like crow’s feet at the edge of the world.

Irony has become a kind of marinade in which trash culture can be enjoyed without the need to believe that it is good. Melrose Place and Barbie Dolls and Brit Pop and Grunge fashion and so on and on... These are all the continuation of Punk culture. Punk didn’t die, it became *everything*. And irony is the ghost of Punk.

Or should I say: Irony is the “ghost” of Punk.