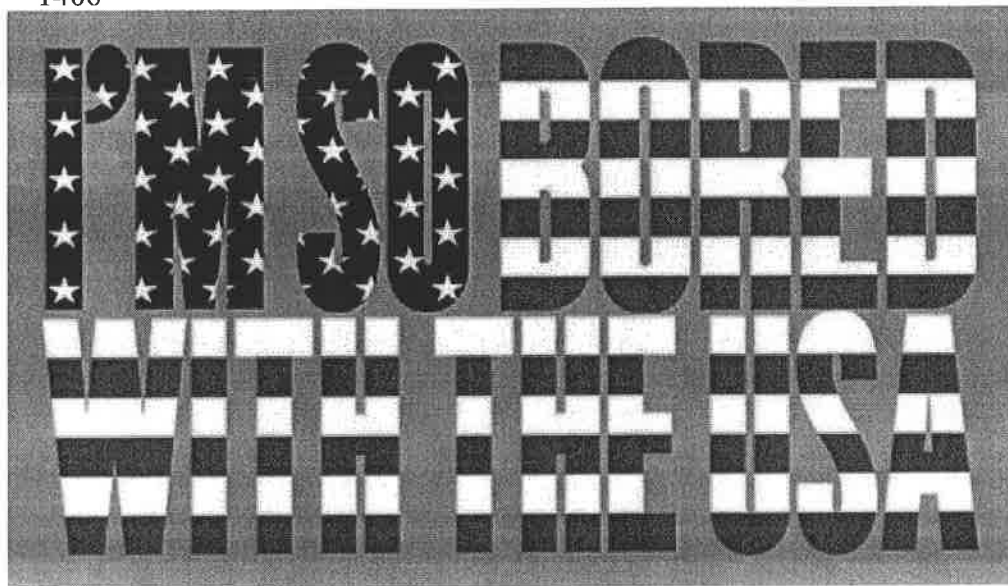


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Celebrating the politics of punk

Written by Mark Perryman in Music
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8th April is the 40th Anniversary of The Clash's debut album. Mark Perryman reminds us what the 1977 punk and politics mix was all about.

The birth of punk for most is dated on or round 1976, with the November release that year of the Sex Pistols' *Anarchy in the UK*. Music and movement were catapulted into the 'filth and fury' headlines via the band's expletive-strewn Bill Grundy TV interview.

More Situationist than Anarchist, Rotten and the rest were of course key to the detonation of a youthful mood of revolt alongside the not entirely dissimilar The Damned, Manchester's Buzzcocks and the more trad rock Stranglers. Giving the boy bands a run for their money, The Slits pushed perhaps hardest at punk's musical boundaries, their *Typical Girls* track quite unlike what the others were recording.

But it was The Clash who more than anyone symbolised the punk and politics mix, showcased on their debut album *The Clash*, released 40 years ago on 8th April 1977. From being bored with the USA and angrily demanding a riot of their own, via hate and war to non-existent career opportunities, fourteen tracks, played at furious speed to produce two-minute classics. The one exception was their inspired cover version of Junior Marvin and Lee 'Scratch' Perry's *Police and Thieves*, played slow, the lyrics almost spoken rather than sung, backed by a pitch-perfect reggae beat.

The album cover shows the youthful threesome of Strummer, Jones and Simonon in their artfully stencilled shirts and jackets that was to become their signature stagewear, completed by the obligatory skinny jeans, white socks, and black DMs. The print quality is purposely poor to add a degree of authenticity that this band more than most hardly needed. But it was the back cover that is the more telling. A scene from the 1976 Notting Hill Carnival Riots with the Met's boys in blue, these were the days before RoboCop style body armour, riot shields, helmets with visors, in hot pursuit of black youth retreating and regrouping under the Westway flyover.

 MP police 2

It was that experience in '76 that inspired The Clash's anthemic *White Riot* and the lines 'WHITE RIOT! I WANNA RIOT. WHITE RIOT! A RIOT OF MY OWN.' At the time the National Front's streetfighting racist army was laying waste wherever they marched, their leaders John Tyndall and Martin Webster were household names, and the NF was getting enough votes to suggest an electoral

breakthrough might be a possibility. The potential for 'White Riot' to be misinterpreted then, and now too, is obvious. But the band's intent couldn't be clearer. Living and recording in and around the Westway, they embraced the changes this West London community had undergone since the 1950s. Caribbean music, food and fashions were as much a part of The Clash as rock and roll, Sunday roast and safety pins. They sought to share the spirit of Black defiance, not oppose it.

*All the power is in the hands
Of people rich enough to buy it,
While we walk the streets
Too chicken to even try it.
And everybody does what they're told to
And everybody eats supermarket soul food!*

A year after the album's release, The Clash headlined the first Rock against Racism carnival in London's Victoria Park. The dayglo politics of this musical culture of resistance fitted perfectly with the agitprop look and lyrics of the band, as it did with Polly Styrene of X-Ray Spex's punk feminism, Tom Robinson's liberatory Sing If You're Glad to be Gay, and Birmingham's Steel Pulse with tales of a Handsworth Revolution. This wasn't just a line up that commercial promoters in '78 would die for, it was a platform to challenge prejudice both without and within that we could dance to. In her book 1988 The New Wave Punk Rock Explosion, Caroline Coon predicted of The Clash that "their acute awareness, and ability to articulate the essence of the era which inspires their music, will make their contribution to the history of rock of lasting significance. Happy times are here again."

The Clash inspired, and continue to inspire, a wave of bands who play music we can dance to and march to in equal measure. Belfast's Stiff Little Fingers, Southall's Ruts, and the Au Pairs stand out from back then. Poets too, who often styled themselves as ranters, like Seething Wells, and of course Attila the Stockbroker. Then came the unforgettable and much-missed Redskins and the hardy perennial favourite, Billy Bragg. Today? A new wave (sic) of bands whose influences, musically and politically, can be traced back to '77 era Clash would certainly include The Wakes, The Hurriers, Thee Faction, Joe Solo, Louise Distras, Captain Ska, Séan McGowan and more. Off the musical beaten track yet holding out for a better tomorrow with tunes to match!

Like all successful musicians The Clash did become celebrities, their appeal went mainstream, and the venues became bigger and bigger. But through force of circumstance the band bailed out before they reached U2's overblown proportions, or overstayed their musical welcome to play into their dotage Rolling Stones style. 1977 is a year to remember but not to fossilise - that would be the antithesis of everything they represented. As the final track from the album put it :

I don't want to hear about what the rich are doing, I don't want to go to where, where the rich are going.

Garageland. That's where they came from and never entirely left either. Its why more than anything else '77 Clash in 2017 matter still.

 MP Clash ad for Tweet

'77Clash Night is presented by Philosophy Football in association with the RMT and supported by the FBU, Brigadista Ale and R2 Magazine. Saturday 8th April, the 40th anniversary of the release of The Clash Debut Album side one played live 'as was', side two 'played now' by artists of today remixing and rewriting the originals. At Rich Mix, Shoreditch, East London. Tickets just £9.99 from [here](#).

'77 Clash T-shirt range available now from [Philosophy Football](#). This is an extended version of an article first published in the Morning Star.

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around 1975 to 1978, but both the musical genre and the sensibility with which it was associated continue to exert a strong influence today on alternative rock musicians. *New wave* music, which developed alongside punk rock, approached the critique of corporate rock in more self-consciously artistic and experimental terms. (The term "new wave" was soon picked up by record companies themselves, who began using it in the late 1970s to refer to pop-influenced performers such as Blondie). Although the initial energy of the punk and new wave scene was largely expended by the start of the 1980s, young musicians inspired by the raw energy and minimalism of this movement went on to create distinctive regional music scenes in Los Angeles; Minneapolis; Seattle; Athens, Georgia; and elsewhere.

Punk was as much a cultural style—an attitude defined by a rebellion against authority and a deliberate rejection of middle-class values—as it was a musical genre. The contrarian impulse of punk culture is evoked (and parodied) in the song "I'm against it," recorded by the Ramones in 1978.

I don't like sex and drugs
I don't like waterbugs
I don't care about poverty
All I care about is me

I don't like playing Ping-Pong
I don't like the Viet Cong
I don't like Burger King
I don't like anything

Well I'm against it, I'm against it

In its automatic gainsaying of everything from sex and drugs to the Viet Cong and Burger King, this song evokes the motorcycle gang leader played by Marlon Brando in the archetypal teen rebellion film *The Wild One* (1954). When asked by a young woman, "What are you rebelling against?" the Brando character responds, "What'daya got?"

Punk was in fact both the apotheosis and the ultimate exploitation of rock 'n' roll as a symbol of rebellion, a tradition that began in the 1950s with white teenagers gleefully co-opting the energy and overt sexuality of black rhythm & blues to annoy their parents, and continued through the 1960s with songs like the Who's 1966 youth anthem "My Generation" ("Why don't you all just f-f-fade away?"). To many of its fans, punk rock represented a turn toward the authentic, risk-taking spirit of early rock 'n' roll and away from the pomposity and self-conscious artistry of album-oriented rock. On the other hand, like all alternative styles of popular music, punk rock was riven through with contradictions.

To begin with, if punk was explicitly against the standards of traditional commercial fashion, it was also a fashion system in its own right with a very particular look: torn blue jeans, ripped stockings, outfits patched with ragged bits of contrasting materials, and perhaps a safety pin through the cheek. If some punk musicians framed their challenge to established authority in terms of progressive social values, others flirted with fascist imagery, attaching Nazi swastikas to their clothing and associating with the racist "skinhead" movement. Many in the punk movement—including musicians, fans, and those rock critics who championed the

music—saw punk as a progressive response to the conservatism of the record industry. Yet the nihilism of much punk rock—the music's basic "I don't give a f——" stance—posed a crucial question that still resonates in today's alternative rock music: is it possible to make music that is "authentic" or "real" while at the same time loudly proclaiming that you don't care about anything?

In musical terms, punk rock turned progressive rock—with its artistic aspirations and corporate backing—on its head. As the drummer for the Ramones, widely regarded as the first punk rock band, put it:

We took the rock sound into a psychotic world and narrowed it down into a straight line of energy. In an era of progressive rock, with its complexities and counterpoints, we had a perspective of non-musicality and intelligence that took over from musicianship. (Lainig 1985, p. 23)

Punk was a stripped-down and often purposefully "nonmusical" version of rock music, in some sense a return to the wildness of early rock 'n' roll stars like Jerry Lee Lewis and Little Richard, but with lyrics that stressed the ironic or dark dimensions of human existence—drug addiction, despair, suicide, lust, and violence. As David Byrne, the leader of the new wave band Talking Heads, put it (on the PBS television series *Rock & Roll*):

Punk . . . was more a kind of do-it-yourself, anyone-can-do-it attitude. If you only played two notes on the guitar, you could figure out a way to make a song out of that, and that's what it was all about.

Punk rock and its more commercial cousin, new wave, took shape in New York City during the mid-1970s. One of the predecessors of punk rock was an American musical institution called the *garage band*, typically a neighborhood operation, made up of young men who played mainly for themselves, their friends, and the occasional high school dance. A few of these local groups went on to enjoy some commercial success, including the Los Angeles–based Standells (whose "Dirty Water" was a Number Eleven pop hit in 1966); ? and the Mysterians, from the industrial town of Flint, Michigan (who took "96 Tears" to the top of the charts in the same year); and Portland, Oregon's Kingmen, best known for their cover version of the 1950s R&B song "Louie, Louie" (Number Two pop in 1963). The rough-and-ready, do-it-yourself attitude of the garage bands—something akin to a rock 'n' roll–based folk music movement—paved the way for punk rock.

Three groups, none of them very successful in commercial terms, are frequently cited as ancestors of 1970s punk music, and of later genres such as new wave, hardcore, industrial, and alternative rock: the Velvet Underground, the Stooges, and the New York Dolls. The Velvet Underground, a New York group, was promoted by the pop art superstar Andy Warhol, who painted the famous cartoonlike image of a banana on the cover of their first LP. Their music was rough-edged and chaotic, extremely loud, and deliberately anticommercial, and the lyrics of their songs focused on topics such as sexual deviancy, drug addiction, violence, and social alienation. The leaders of the Velvet Underground were singer and guitarist Lou Reed—who had worked previously as a pop songwriter in a Brill Building–style "music factory"—and John Cale, a viola player active in the avant-garde art music scene in New York, who introduced experimental musical elements into the mix, including electronic noise and recorded industrial sounds.

If the Velvet Underground represented the self-consciously experimentalist roots of 1970s new-wave music, the Stooges, formed in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in 1967, were the working-class, motorcycle-riding, leather-jacketed ancestors of punk rock. The lead singer of the Stooges, Iggy Stooge (a.k.a. Iggy Pop, James Osterburg), was famous for his outrageous stage performances, which included flinging himself into the crowd, cutting himself with beer bottles, and rubbing himself with raw meat. Guitarist Ron Asheton has described the Stooges' approach:

Usually we got up there and jammed one riff and built into an energy freak-out, until finally we'd broken a guitar, or one of my hands would be twice as big as the other and my guitar would be covered in blood. (Palmer 1995, p. 263)

The Stooges' eponymous first album (1969), produced by the Velvet Underground's John Cale, created a devoted if small national audience for the Stooges' demented "garage band" sound. A good example of the sensibility that underlay much of the Stooges' work—the depression of unemployed Michigan youth caught in the middle of a severe economic recession—is the song "1969," which evokes a world light-years distant from the utopianism of the hippie movement and the Woodstock festival, held that same summer: J

