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Punk: Socially reactive music

Punk rock stood defiantly on the archaic rock of the 1970s, declaring itself the anti-Christ with a nearly talentless but potent package of irony called The Sex Pistols.

Creepsidburned psychologists seduced burned-out Marlboro women to the stoned sounds of rusty rock 'n' roll or seedy club disco in the '70s.

Music, movies, politics and threats of nuclear fallout seemed to get worse every year. I think I was depressed the entire decade. Punk rock was a welcome change, whatever it was to promise and however

it got started.

The Sex Pistols were a marketing scheme of entrepreneur Malcolm McLaren, a man who sold everything from sex toys to anti-establishment T-shirts.

MacLaren was ready to market his own spectacle; four wasted British youth lead by an inspiringly sarcastic and rebellious Johnny Rotten (now Johnny Lydon of Public Image Limited.)

The Sex Pistols' careless ridicule of the queen of England and their flippant desire to "be anarchy" captured media attention worldwide.

The band disintegrated. Sid Vicious died of a drug overdose, and Malcolm McLaren put a Sex Pistols record out with dance versions of their songs. The Sex Pistols were the joke no one seemed to care to get.

Punk rock had become loosely defined: destructive, self-righteous, anti-conformity, anti-adult, anti-authority, "on the edge" and anarchistic. It was fast. It was anything that was capable of destroying, in its own world, the Queens of 1970s rock & roll.

Punk rock was the anti-hero that would finally kill our decrepit idols and heroes, if not with a cultural victory than with a sheer energy that refused to lose.

Its own heroes were those who died or committed suicide; to die was punk rock. It was the ultimate embracement of the music—deny everything.

Wiresang "I'm tired of being told what to do/I'm tired of being told what to think" while The Dead Kennedys sang about a "Holiday in Cambodia." Punk rock rarely declared itself socially responsible. It was socially reactive.

Punk rock's initial ethic of self-destruction was rooted in ways by threads of sub-cultures to the anti-art of the Dadaists in the early 1900s, the linguistic and narrative deconstruction of the Surrealists in the 1930s and the quasi anti-capitalism of the Situationists in the

1950s. Punk rock would attempt to kill rock 'n' roll from within the confines of rock 'n' roll's own three-chord song structure.

Freedom of speech seemed radical, even if it was just saying "Screw you President." There were elements of 1960s radicalism present, but that style was out; scream because you're angry or bored, for any reason at all; not just because of the First Amendment.

Dye your hair. Wear ripped clothes and leather. It seems silly now, but it is an indicator of how conservative stylistically our culture was—that something as simple as a unique haircut and a striped shirt would establish one against the mainstream. Today's culture of sampling and individuality-within-a-range makes only the currently or recently unsampled irregular; certainly not the target of the violence that punk rock dressing received.

Punk rock itself was dead before most of its fans had even begun to buy its records. For many new fans it was a short history to be worshipped. Never again would punk rock reach the state of global politics that The Sex Pistols had.

What was left was an orgasmic cloud of newly forming bands, sounds, record labels, record stores, music scenes and record-buying fans.

An independent music scene grew quickly. Yesterday's New Order, U2, REM and The Cure became today's mega-bread winners for major labels and alternative music stations, subduing anti-capitalism sentiments with money.

Ironically, punk rock's initial rebellious energy was born against, yet thrived within and was accepted by the music markets of advanced capitalism. Though it may have affected profoundly many lives, record labels and bands, musically it may be less significant than rap. It is an irony that may never be sampled again.

—Mark Nemeth is a Diversions contributor.



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