




THE AESTHETIC OF OUR ANGER

Anarcho-Punk, Politics and Music

EDITED BY MIKE DINES & MATTHEW WORLEY



PUNK IS ONE OF THE MOST FIERCELY DEBATED POST-WAR SUBCULTURES. DESPITE THE ATTENTION SURROUNDING THE MOVEMENT'S ORIGINS, ANALYSES OF PUNK HAVE BEEN DRAWN PREDOMINANTLY FROM A NOW WELL-TRODDEN HISTORICAL NARRATIVE. THIS SIMPLIFICATION OF PUNK'S HISTORIES ERASES ITS BREADTH AND VIBRANCY, LEAVING OUT BANDS FROM CRASS TO THE SUBHUMANS WHO TOOK THE CALL FOR ANARCHY IN THE UK SERIOUSLY.

DISILLUSIONED BY THE COMMERCIALIZATION OF PUNK, THE ANARCHO-PUNK SCENE FOUGHT AGAINST DEPENDENCE ON LARGE RECORD LABELS. ANARCHO-PUNK RE-IGNITED THE PUNK ETHOS, INCLUDING A RETURN TO AN 'ANYONE-CAN-DO-IT' CULTURE OF MUSIC PRODUCTION AND PERFORMANCE. ANARCHO-PUNK ENCOURAGED FOCUSED POLITICAL DEBATE AND SELF-ORGANISED SUBVERSIVE ACTIVITIES, FROM A HEIGHTENED AWARENESS TO ISSUES OF PERSONAL FREEDOM AND ANIMAL RIGHTS TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF LOCAL COOPERATIVES WHERE MUSICIANS, ARTISTS AND LIKE-MINDED PEOPLE COULD MEET.

THE ANARCHO-PUNK MOVEMENT HELPED TO REIGNITE A SERIOUS ANARCHIST MOVEMENT IN THE UK AND INSPIRED ACTIONS CHALLENGING THE THATCHER-REAGAN AXIS. THE AESTHETIC OF OUR ANGER EXPLORES THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ANARCHO-PUNK SCENE FROM THE LATE 1970S, RAISING QUESTIONS OVER THE ORIGINS OF THE SCENE, ITS FORM, STRUCTURE AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE EXAMINING HOW ANARCHO-PUNK MOVED AWAY FROM USING 'ANARCHY' AS MERE CONNOTATION AND SHOCK VALUE TOWARDS AN APPROACH THAT SERVED TO MAKE PUNK A THREAT AGAIN

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**MINOR
COMPOSITIONS**



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For Sheila Whiteley (1941–2015)

GEORGE MCKAY

4WORD

AN.OK4U2@32+1984

THAT FIRST TIME in Norwich, Crass and Poison Girls were astonishing, not just to me, but to all the punks who knew about the gig and had turned up, the more so because the bands were so casual about it, wandering around the half-empty hall before and after playing, wanting us, waiting for us, to talk to them. They were out front drinking tea – I'd never ever seen bands doing that at the end of a gig before. Music was material to them, and they showed that; the performance was an object, clearly delineated, which they involved themselves in and then exited. Music happened for a while and then it didn't happen. The bands extended the performance entirely and indefinitely, to include the pre- and post-show, the setting up of the PA, the draping of flags and banners and subsequent transformation of the hall, Crass in their problematically paramilitary black garb and red armbands, the

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sexy sexless women. Either way I was totally intimidated, and deeply attracted. Here were people doing exactly what I thought punk should do, be a force.

This was me, an eighteen-year-old punk in 1979, having his anxieties that maybe punk wasn't going to change the world (for the better) after all put on hold for a couple of more years. I'm uncertain how powerfully the sensation lasted. (Occasionally, yes, I can still express that sentence today as: I'm uncertain how powerfully the sensation *has* lasted.) It was the laying out and laying bare of ideals, culture and event presented in a total package that I fell for in that old barn that night. Nine or ten months later, the same bands played a small hall in Suffolk, a benefit gig for local peace groups. There were clashes in the sleepy market town between outsider punks and local bikers, and the bikers circulated around the hall brandishing chains waiting for lone punks to attack.

Plenty of people in the crowd – me included – aren't interested in this at all; we want to see the bands, experience the whole Crass & Poison Girls trip, that sensurround gig of music, TVs, banners, flags, uniforms, wrapped in an unpretentious delivery of the mundane. Disapproving comments are shared as we try to reassure one another, there are sneers at this new mods-and-rockers-style moment, this isn't punk, we're here for a pacifist benefit. The transformed church hall is made a site of extreme rhetoric and cultural production for two hours. But outside ...

The open space of an anarcho-punk gig, where subcultural contestation and negotiation could sometimes take place, where self-determination and self-policing could take a while to work through, operated very poorly for me *that* night. Six bikers trapped me alone near the train station in the dark after the gig and taught me an unforgettable lesson about the limits of tolerance and freedom among British youth in the countryside. Welcome to anarcho-punk. Rival tribal rebel revels, indeed.

The late 1970s and early 1980s were an extraordinary period in British social history. There were sustained manifestations of violence

from the Northern Ireland troubles, to the Yorkshire Ripper to the Falklands War; there was mass protest from Greenham Common to the Miners' Strike; there were periodic riots sweeping across much of the country, a socially divisive government, mass unemployment and racism. As a teenager moving into early manhood, trying to find my way in the world, it felt like I was in a country falling, or being pulled, apart. All of this was happening under the grand penetrating paranoia of the MAD ('mutually assured destruction') discourse of the nuclear sublime of the late Cold War. When you looked out across Britain then, it was tired, frightening, a bit of a dump. With, okay, some great music. It was something like this version of the British landscape that formed the dark palette of choice for an apocalyptic and dystopian sense of the world that anarcho-punk fiercely, or crudely, or both, depicted and critiqued.

For Matthew Worley the anarcho-punk scene 'served as a nexus for a range of political movements that included anarchism, feminism, anti-militarism, animal rights activism and the early 1980s Stop the City campaigns that fed into the anti-capitalism and anti-globalisation movements' of today.¹ One can look back as well as forward, and see some kinds of origins of anarcho-punk in the communes movement, in the avant-garde happenings of the 1960s counterculture, and in the 1970s free festival movement; this constructs an even more enduring tradition of cultural radicalism, while also resisting a Year Zero reading of punk. The retrospective aspects *within* anarcho-punk are important in themselves, too: cross-generational dialogue, for example, happened within bands, and enriched them with creative tension. So elder activists or counterculturalists like Penny Rimbaud of Crass or Vi Subversa of the Poison Girls would share stage and studio with young punks, and would also extend the cultural reference of the scene by drawing on their past experiences in happenings or avant-garde cabaret.

It was indeed a remarkably rich and vibrant multimedia and cross-cultural social scene, with music at its heart: music recording, production and distribution, live performance, recorded sound, film and video experimentation, clothing/style, visual art and design, graffiti and street art, typography (the Crass font), alternative organisation

1 Matthew Worley, "Shot By Both Sides: Punk, Politics, and the End of 'Consensus,'" *Contemporary British History* 26:3 (2012): 333-354.

networks, domestic arrangements, fundraising for campaigns, détournements – all of these featured in an ambitious and encompassing extension of DIY practice. We can also factor in other notable contributions, ranging from developments in the autonomous social centre, some of it linked with squatting culture, to a zealous commitment among some to animal rights and aspects of food production and consumption such as vegetarianism and later permaculture, to a considered exploration of gender politics in song from Poison Girls’ “Underbitch” and “Real Woman” to Crass’s “Big Man Big M.A.N.” and *Penis Envy*, to a partial internationalisation of the project’s scope. The latter is traced by Stacy Thompson: anarcho-punk ‘spread from England to Holland and the United States and adopted economic and aesthetic forms of negation of, and resistance to, commodification similar to and inspired by Crass.’² Although it is not easy to evaluate and substantiate, it seems clear that anarcho-punk quickly became a remarkably popular underground music scene, achieved with very little coverage in the mainstream music press, no advertising, no television appearances, and little radio coverage or interest. (The leading band, Crass, never played on BBC television’s leading weekly pop programme *Top of the Pops*, and recorded only one session for the John Peel BBC Radio 1 nightly show.) It is estimated that Crass alone sold two million records during the band’s productive existence;³ ‘[t]heoretically,’ wrote one English music magazine retrospectively of their ‘phenomenal record sales,’ ‘their walls should be covered in gold discs.’⁴

Of course, not everyone was convinced. For some anarchists, the subcultural turn of the movement was a mistake because punk turned off far more people than it turned on. It seemed to fetishise the chaotic and confrontational; its aggression could be frightening and intimidating. For others, culture *per se* was always secondary to class awareness and economics, and there was great distrust of ex-public school hippy dropouts from anarcho-punk (as some indeed were) preaching a move beyond class, away from collective organisation, and apart from the bulk of the revolutionary left. Musicians who were themselves politically radical – from folk or jazz scenes, for instance – heard

2 Stacy Thompson, *Punk Productions: Unfinished Business* (Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 2004), 92.

3 Penny Rimbaud, *Shibboleth: My Revolting Life* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 1998), 277.

4 Thompson, *Punk Productions*, 99.

only the crude shouted slogans, naïve lyrics and images, and poor musicianship that expressed to them a lack of imagination. Too cultural for some of the existing left, not cultural enough for others, then.

The sometimes complex aesthetic of anarcho-punk claimed to be predicated on anger, as Crass sloganised on the cover of 1983's *Yes Sir, I Will*, as the band Omega Tribe put it with their 1982 EP release on Crass Records, *Angry Songs*, (as incidentally, punk itself would revisit with something like John Lydon's new autobiography *Anger is an Energy* in 2014), and as this book's very title maintains. But there were other models of anger around anarchism – only a few years earlier in London, after all, the Angry Brigade of clandestine 'urban guerrillas' and stark communiqués had employed political violence in the form of a bombing campaign aimed at engendering armed insurrection. What would be different about this new anarchist anger? It was musical and it had a specific sound – transmitted in part through the sound of the singing voice and its delivery of words ('the anger was in the vocals – raw, unprecedented, primal'⁵), and in the lyrics themselves, not least through the use of swearing. However, the sound needed capturing through the recording process, and much of the success here was down to the innovative approach of Southern Studio's owner and producer John Loder. In Samantha Bennett's view, Loder's achievements would go on to read 'like a "who's who" of 1980s and 1990s underground and alternative music, with a focus on punk, hardcore, post-hardcore, noisecore, grunge and industrial subgenres: Crass, Ministry, Fugazi, Babes in Toyland, Big Black, The Cravats, Rudimentary Peni, Shellac, and Jesus and Mary Chain.'⁶

We should consider further quite how influence and legacy operate. For example, punk, Crass, anarcho-punk and the pacifist end of the anarchist movement were the engines of my own politicisation as a teenager. They gave me frames and questions with which to think about the world, and they gave (or confirmed in) me an attitudinality

5 George Berger, *The Story of Crass* (London: Omnibus, 1998), 116.

6 Samantha Bennett, "Recording the Musical Underworld: John Loder's Southern sonic style" (paper presented at the International Association for the Study of Popular Music (UK & Ireland) biennial conference, University College, Cork, 2014). See also Oliver Sheppard, "The Postpunk Legacy of Crass Records," *Souciant* online magazine, July 9, 2012. Accessed January 21 2015, <http://souciant.com/2012/07/the-postpunk-legacy-of-crass-records>.

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I have never quite lost. I first presented an academic piece about Crass in 1992 – I actually remember being surprised even then, just a few years after the band’s end, that no-one else seemed to be paying them any attention. My earliest book as an academic, two decades ago, developed that work into the first in-depth writing about Crass and the position of anarcho-punk in the radical tradition of countercultural practice in Britain.⁷ (In fact, that book, *Senseless Acts of Beauty*, had originally been conceived of by me as a book about anarcho-punk.) All my work since then, from jazz to protest to festival to gardening to disability – and lately, to my own surprise, as I get older, returning to punk – has had something or everything of the anarchist and activist in it. I even dedicated one of my books to Penny Rimbaud (he didn’t really need it, having dedicated his own autobiography to...himself). Such work is itself a sort of legacy of anarcho-punk, as someone like me, or Crass historian George Berger, or some of the contributors here, have journeyed from the audience to the written page. The thoughtful, provocative, committed essays collected here will further contribute to and interrogate the anarcho-punk movement, its sounds and cultures, its energy and contradictions, its claims, achievements and any lasting importance. They are part of a growing body of writing in the form of band memoirs and collections (such as Rimbaud’s *Shibboleth: My Revolting Life* (1998), Ignorant’s *The Rest is Propaganda* (2010), Vaucher’s *Crass Art and Other Prepostmodernist Monsters 1961-1997* (2012) and Steve Lake’s *Zounds Demystified* (2013)), music journalism and popular history, as well as the first academic drafts of new understanding in the form of PhD theses. I am, I will say, surprised that it has taken over three decades for an in-depth set of critical studies of that important cultural and social movement to appear, but also delighted that one finally has. More, please, for the future.

So, in a spirit of anarcho-perversity, I finish this foreword and open up this collection with the wise words of a Victorian Jesuit, the poet-priest Gerard Manley Hopkins: ‘piecemeal peace is poor peace; what pure peace allows... the death of it?’ I can hear someone like Penny Rimbaud reciting those words, you know, at a poetry reading in a jazz club, say, in a lamentable accusation to our warring political and faith leaders: ‘piecemeal peace’/’poor peace’. The unattainable

7 George McKay, *Senseless Acts of Beauty: Cultures of Resistance Since the Sixties* (London: Verso, 1996), chapter 3.

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ideal, unrealistic even in articulation, of ‘pure peace’, is something to take still from anarcho-punk, too, I think – even if and precisely because it may be imbued with ‘classic “impossiblist” anarchist sentiment.’⁸ Is there any other music practice or cultural formation that has such an insistent and relentless core message around pacifism? Within the orthodoxy of militarism which we seem compelled to inhabit in contemporary society, the impossible demand for ‘pure peace’ needs hearing more than ever. For in the midst of all their shouting, and swearing, and noise, and anger, let us continue to hear and think on this, from our *visionary* anarcho-punks, amidst our daily diet of rumours and alarums of state bombing and religious terror: FIGHT WAR NOT WARS. FIGHT WAR NOT WARS. FIGHT WAR NOT WARS. Now, there is something in that.

8 Rich Cross, “‘There is no Authority But Yourself’: The Individual and the Collective in British Anarcho-Punk,” *Music and Politics* 4:2 (Summer 2010).