

THE OXFORD
HANDBOOK OF
Punk Rock

edited by
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Abstract / Cover Blurp

No Future. Punk Is Dead. That is what they sang and said. Yet as we approach fifty years of punk rock, it still endures, and even thrives. From “White Riot” to Pussy Riot, Never Mind the Bollocks to Nevermind, DIY (Do It Yourself) to never gonna die, punk rock has marked or stained—it marks or stains—our musical and cultural history and practice. Here key established writers as well as emerging scholars from around the world offer critical views on punk practice and legacy, in a timely re-evaluation of its significance as music, culture, politics, nostalgia, and heritage. The handbook looks at pre- and proto-punk forms, the “high years” of circa 1976–1984, the international spread of the music and style, punk media from films to fanzines, as well as a thread that runs through its entire history—the inspiring politics of DIY. Crossing and blurring disciplinary boundaries, it presents methodological innovations to offer new ways of understanding punk’s significance. The Oxford Handbook of Punk Rock also identifies and explores some of punk’s core contradictions: its antiwar messages alongside its (often gendered) violence, its antiracism alongside its dominant whiteness, its energy and attitudinality as a youth culture for an aging demographic, and its intermittent but persistent flirtations with populism and nationalism.

Keywords

punk, punk rock, music and protest, subculture, film, DIY, fanzines, women in punk, punk and race, punk studies, theorizing punk

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[Editors'] Foreword

George McKay and Gina Arnold

Steve Severin, bassist with Siouxsie and the Banshees, observed in 1994 that “the farther [punk] recedes into the distance, the more important it seems” (quoted in Lydon 1994, 188). Now approaching fifty years after punk rock, rather than the twenty of Severin’s observation, it still demands critical attention. From “White Riot” to Riot Grrrl to Pussy Riot, *Never Mind the Bollocks* to *Nevermind*, DIY to never gonna die(t), the Slits to *We Are Lady Parts*, punk rock to punk studies, it has marked or stained—it marks or stains—our musical and cultural history and practice. So should that then be not “fifty years *after*” but “fifty years *of* punk rock”? It seems that, in spite of the Sex Pistols’ bold declaration, “No future” (which also kind of meant “No past”), the musics and scenes of punk have had a future after all. In aspic throb punk confounds, even if its constancy may be its primary enduring gift of surprise. Like other incendiary and innovative rock and roll moments, punk had no pretensions to longevity, yet it (has) endured. Unlike other rock and roll bursts, punk wrapped itself in an attitude of rejection of the past and future alike, the former gestural and ahistorical, the latter gestural and potentially self-defeating. The gesture is the link, not empty but resonant and energizing, even if one might think it incorrect twice over. While for aging fans and subcultural adherents across many genres and scenes “music is about not only where they have been but also where they are going” (Bennett 2013, 32), it is a result of the culture of early punk’s eschatological halo that such questions of futurity and longevity as are being discussed here are especially pertinent.

Since it now has its own past—a lengthy (for popular music) history—and a future—evidenced by its ongoing capacity to attract new adherents—punk needs and warrants its

studies more than ever. This should not, though, be a hauntology: if punk had an originary impulse of rejection, whether generational or musical, what has become abundantly clear is that that impulse was not a one-off moment. It has spoken and appealed to subsequent generations as well (so: not one-off) and seemed somehow to keep speaking to early elements (not simply a moment). Intriguingly, as it accrued a past, this has not seemed to weigh it down. Its reflexivity and humor might have contributed here: If you are in a punk club pogoing to a song like “I Am a Cliché,” perhaps when you become a cliché it’s not quite so bad? (Singer Poly Styrene’s solo spoken intro to the 1 min. 54 sec. song seeks to confirm its observation: “I *am* a cliché”—even though, of course, we may know that she of all punks was not: X-Ray Spex 1978.)

Many people—or some (it may depend a little on your editor)—place punk’s origins in the United States, locating them in Michigan and dating punk as early as 1967, with the formation of Iggy Pop’s band the Stooges. After that (the story goes), the sound, the style, and even individual band members wafted east to New York City, where punk rooted itself in the Bowery at the club CBGB, with bands including but not limited to the New York Dolls, Television, Blondie, and the Ramones, and from there it jumped the Atlantic where it underwent a form of meiosis—with each cell division, or band, creating a new set of genetic material. We can probably think of punk’s high period as circa 1976–1984, and then with developments and revivals, and the kinds of multiple musical and cultural spin-offs expected of a *bricolage* form and practice, that contribute to longer-term influence and legacy.

Internationally, it has a longevity and visibility, which may be as much on account of its DIY (Do It Yourself) narrative, and its anti-authoritarian attitudinality, as on its actual music and sounds. Although many successful punk bands have signed to major labels and played the commercial live music venue circuits, DIY became and remains a central tenet of punk, and that requires unpacking. DIY is generally punk’s “most prevalent core value” (Moran 2010,

62), while for Kevin Dunn the source of punk's "opportunity for personal empowerment" rests in its connection of "an anti-status quo disposition with a DIY ethos" (Dunn 2016, 58); its progenitors in 1950s skiffle and subsequent influence on 1980s rave culture are acknowledged (McKay 1998). But let us also note, potentially more critically, that, in the term's meanings, DIY can be individualistic or noncollective (Yourself), entrepreneurial (Do It), and either vaguer or wider than punk (It). And let us note altogether more critically that recent scholarship has begun "to challenge the standard critical narrative of punk as originary DIY culture," as well as to argue that DIY more broadly might benefit from a dose of "depunking" (McKay 2024).

As for its longevity, there is strength in the suggestion that "if punk can never quite give up the ghost, perhaps that's because we are still trawling through the political and economic wreckage that prompted its emergence in the first place" (Brown et al. 2013, 1). Also, punk was never simply a new rock and roll burst, could never be restricted to mere music: its broader cultural innovation, impact, and influence—from fashion to graphic design, enterprise to its (cloaked) entrepreneurship, its sometimes radical politics to its perhaps less tangible features such as ways of walking and talking, or attitudinality—contribute to and help explain its enduring significance. A few years ago, when one of the editors of this volume was working on the subject of disability and music, in an essay he set and answered a question to himself, for his readers: "Does punk matter (any more, decades later)? Curiously, I think, it has begun to speak more to me in my fifties than at any other time since my contumacious teens in the late 1970s." He thought about punk rock's "new meaningfulness" to him with surprise, but also with something like gratitude. "[A]s I aged," he wrote, "I looked for a culture that would help me understand, embrace, maybe even emblazon my own body thing, as my condition . . . deteriorated, and I found one in, of all places, the memory of that mad music and mismovement of my own youth" (McKay 2016,

239–240). In a time of personal crisis, corporeality spinning out of control, he reached for something “in, of all places,” punk rock. That “of all places” stands out: it is the signifier of surprise, yes, but also the acknowledgment of weight. It turns out that punk *did* still matter, as perhaps any other old punk who still carried the flame could have told him all along.

Both editors were there, in fact: as teenage punks in the crowd, one saw the Pistols on their penultimate UK gig on December 24, 1977, the other three weeks later on the US tour, January 14, 1978, the very final band gig (until reunion tours decades later; that particular editor made it her business to see their first gig back, in Finland, as well). So what? Does *that* matter, or signify? Of course, it speaks to as well as confirms a continuing sense within punk of authenticity, which may be both critically useful and restricting: useful as it can offer a way in to the minutiae, or the grand energy, of a distant scene or moment; restricting as it might overframe punk within subjective experience and the unreliable fractures of memory. In either instance, as a sort of opening statement, it begins by situating punk understanding historically, and, while some of what can be called punk studies has aimed to uncover its lost or forgotten scenes, bands, or events from “back in the day,” we have sought out careful, reflexive, or revisionist histories, and also, equally importantly, explorations of the trajectories, continuities, developments, and tensions in the decades of punk that followed.

But those memories and emotions of teenage gigs, which were sonic and performative twists of feelings of alienation and belonging, should not be discarded upon articulation: it may well be those that have made a book like this happen, for better or worse, enabled or forced us in our editorial labor. Thus, while our small statement of “auto-ethnographic insider status” coupled with “firsthand knowledge of events” is a kind of “membership badge,” in Alistair Gordon’s terms (2014, 192–194)—with the exclusory potential that entails—it is also an explanation of motivation and a fragment of material history. Here (Figure 1) is another (re/membership) badge, or button, which is a very, very minor part of punk’s materiality. It

was made around 1979 or 1980, by an editor's younger sister for her late-teenaged older brother. Although apparently lacking conscious design consideration, it is in fact a pure punk product: DIY, handwritten in best caps., off-center, amateur, ephemeral, faded Day-Glo green background. It says punk, and it is. Its observational statement is really a private sibling communication, not intended for public gaze—after all, anyone outside would know his subcultural identity from his clothing or walking or hair, and why would anyone want or expect to read his name? Yet the sister looked at her brother, the girl looked at George, and found somehow that he was not just *a* punk but *was punk*. The full stop may infer the unarguable nature of the statement, but also or instead speak to its finality. But that present tense, unchangeable *and* encompassing, is mesmerizing. Of course, as Andy Medhurst observed twenty or so years (like Severin) after punk, “‘I was there’ is . . . a difficult badge to dislodge” (1999, 219). Yet Medhurst kind of wore it himself, proudly and reflexively, in his still resonant chapter about punk and “punctum”—intense memory and autobiography as critical positionality—if you *were* there, and it is now nearly half a century later, that is worth a pause, a reflexive comment, an essay, a memoir, an *Oxford Handbook* even. The farther it recedes, the more important it is. Also, though, if you *are* there—because you never really went away, possibly, or because you are in or of one of punk's more recent or current manifestations—some of the essays here show how those positions matter too.

Figure 1 ROUND HERE PLEASE

Figure 1. DIY punk badge/pin/button, c. 1979, UK. George McKay personal archive (ephemera).

“Boredom,” the song by Buzzcocks recorded (so the single picture sleeve tells us) as played “live” in the studio in Manchester in 1976, and released on one of the very first independent punk labels, New Hormones, is generally widely lauded for its cultural significance and witty innovation. For instance, as Robin Murray nicely captures it in a 2016 *Clash* magazine interview with Buzzcocks’ Steve Diggle, “its two-note guitar solo [was] a

two-fingered salute” to the inflated, indulgent rock scene of the time (Murray 2016). Diggle himself remembers the impact “Boredom” had: “Just that one word summed up the music thing, and society at the time. Within three minutes it changed people’s lives—or minds. . . . It brought them to life. It changed everything” (quoted in Murray 2016). Of course, the sleeve also tells us that the solo is an overdub—so, not quite a “live” studio recording. The repeated E-B solo ends on an A both times—so, not two notes, but three. The final A of the same solo played for the second time is the song’s last note, and it is, surprisingly perhaps, sonically treated with a touch of echo. Boredom repeats: bah-dum, bah-dum. (Rhythmically, this famous punk guitar anti-solo is not really boring either: its three-beat pattern interrupts the straight four of the song, a cross-rhythmic motif that injects tension and then resolution.) It is an interesting performance of boredom that also begins to constitute the punk discourse of boredom.

Of course, boredom may beget creativity, may be one of its essential preconditions, or at least “a motivating force/catalyst for action” (Mann and Cadman 2014, 166). But there is more to punk boredom, for it is also a social critique (“that one word summed up . . . society at the time”), as much as a group marker (the repeated “boring boredom” in “I Am a Cliché”: X-Ray Spex 1978; see also Worley 2017, 111–114). And perhaps, if we think we need awkwardly to acknowledge that, sometimes, well, punk itself might be boring, the response is not to adapt (Theodore) Sturgeon’s Law about science fiction, that it “is indeed ninety-percent crud, but . . . *ninety-per cent of everything is crud* . . . —cars, books, cheeses, hairstyles, people and pins” (Sturgeon 1957, 49; emphasis in original). Intriguingly, writing in a 1950s science fiction zine, Sturgeon is rather punkily tilting at the “smarmy” disdain toward science fiction in the establishment literary circles of the *Saturday Review* and the *New Yorker*. We would not say 90 percent of punk is boring, but we would seek to align with the critical positionality Sturgeon adopts against the cultural mainstream, especially when

found in the smaller publication of a zine. We would use Sturgeon to suggest that, as all those “flowers in the dustbin” (Sex Pistols 1977) suggest, *punk may even be a 100 percent crud product*, in moments of its self-articulation and its loud questioning of cultural value alike. If punk is boring, it is because, as “Boredom” (Buzzcocks 1977) taught us early on, it is *about* boredom. Being about boredom is one of the things that makes punk interesting. We think this book is full of other interesting things, too—indeed, we confidently state that the chapters to follow are *not boring*, for their concern is with how a culture made half-a-century-plus (perhaps quite a lot plus) of flawed material, experience, and politics out of boredom.

In terms of the intellectual organization of the book, punk has been a movement that rewires artistic, aesthetic, ideological, and political boundaries, influencing its practitioners and its critics alike. This book thematically structures punk’s strands of influence not primarily along geographical or chronological lines but by interrogating its significance in music, style, performance, identity formation, cultural impact, politics, and theory, as well as arguing for its lasting influence, its creative and innovative possibilities, and its currency. It charts and assesses the significance of punk rock across its musical, cultural, and political spheres, and offers a timely re-evaluation of its significance. We can think of a *long punk rock*, which includes looking at the “high” punk years, of course, but also at some key pre-punk sounds and activities, and with a focus on what *Social Text* has called punk’s “afterlives” or even “afterburns” (Brown et al. 2013, 1, 7). Thus, we admit we are only slightly surprised to be thinking about punk’s proto-presence and enduring legacy being staged across at least four but quite feasibly as many as six or seven decades. That’s quite a career, in either or both nounal and verbal terms. The approach is interdisciplinary, drawing on the now quite extensive scholarship about punk and related scenes and movements from media and cultural studies, music, history, sociology, and art. Music and sounds,

attitudinality and identity, culture and media/film, fashion and design, DIY and “indie” modes of (self-)organization, protest, youth and aging, documentary and memoir, cultural theory—these are fields in which punk’s enduring impact can be traced. For punk has been enormously generative. (Today there are punk festivals and punk museums, meaning that it may be a living and heritage culture at the same time.)

Our essays seek to capture and interrogate the burst of energy and ideas from long-standing and early career punk researchers alike. The essays herein speak to a range of positions in a range of voices; there is not a house style to the critical textuality of this collection, but there is an insistence from all on its sharpness. Punk in academia has, it seems to us, sometimes permitted, maybe even encouraged, a kind of overwriting: punk scholarship is one of those pop fields replete with enthusiasts and celebrants, and—can we say this?—this has been sometimes to the detriment of its critical gaze. This may be partly because writers drawn to it are often highly sympathetic to it, themselves once or now punks. It may partly be a reflection of its cultural terrain and gesturality: art-theory- and fashion-informed, stylistically avant-garde, eschatological and scatological, juvenile and wise. It may, if we are being kinder, partly be in response to punk’s knowing performativity. Thus, punk and its studies have *sometimes* been surprisingly orthodox as a cultural and critical field. Above all else, we and our contributors have tried not to follow or uncritically repeat that orthodoxy. It is vital to note that contributors identify and explore core punk contradictions. These include, for example, its antiwar messages alongside not only its aggressive sounds but also its (often gendered) violence, its claimed antiracism alongside its dominant whiteness, its energy and attitudinality as a youth culture for an aging demographic, or its intermittent but persistent flirtations with populism and nationalism. We do claim a semantic and social richness for the culture, which may be celebrated but must be relentlessly critiqued. Lest we be thought of as trying to diminish the energy and attitudinality that might set not only punk but also, at its

best, punk scholarship apart, let us be clear that we view these as among its most remarkable characteristics, and possibly its most valuable ones. Within them we can locate its praxis, its politics, its generosity even, all of which may be encapsulated in—well, here’s a letter, here’s a second, here’s a third, now form a band, daub a slogan, change the world—after all, what’s the point in being here, on this page, otherwise?—DIY.

Following an introductory chapter that offers a critical review of the development of punk scholarship over the decades, the book is structured in six sections that loosely group together sets of essays thematically. We do not want to overstress the structural integrity of these sections here, for it is in the spirit of interdisciplinary dialogue—punk’s untidy seams and productive bricolage—to expect chapters to speak or leak across, or even demolish, any borders we might set. The sections are most useful primarily as a way of handling our wealth of material. Part One contains chapters that invite readers to reconsider punk rock, both in terms of alternative critical and theoretical approaches, and in thinking about some of its significant pre-lives. (So: a *hint* of chronological rationale here.) Parts Two and Three look at the importance of punk in constructing versions of identity, including how those negotiate aging, as well as its liberatory *and* *oppressive* practices. With a set of geographical case studies, Part Four critically charts ways in which punk spaces have spread, provincially *and* internationally, the case studies being culturally and historically situated. Part Five looks at questions of punk’s wider cultural and media resonance. Finally, the chapters that form Part Six offer critical explorations of the sometimes uncomfortable shifting politics of punk across the decades, and how the music has played these out.

We will not overstate it, but we will state it: there has been some pushback against a project like this. There is a view, from some in punk studies and others in the wider punk scene itself, that the academic press—branded product of an elite university will always seek to recuperate something like punk and drain its irruptive energy or potential. For them, the

very notion of an *Oxford Handbook of Punk Rock* sticks and stalls in the first two words: Oxford—home of scions and prime ministers, fast-tracked from private schools; Handbook—authoritative guide and manual on how-to-do punk and DIY. A less DIY production process would be difficult to envisage (except for academic publishing’s standard lack of professional remuneration for the labor of *all* its authors): to take one instance, copyediting outsourced by transatlantic organization to agency workers in India seems to speak more of hegemonic globalization than DIY. But such tracing of *complicity* is not at all new in punk, and was indeed part of its founding discourse and its founding drama. We can think of it as a rich culture of multiple complicities: a complex folding together of accomplices intent on doing something objectionable. If there is a charge against the book, we accept and refuse it: if we are to be among punk’s late-to-the-party enthusiastic undertakers, we bring with us what we consider to be a prickly set of sharp writing and thinking that seeks always to do the culture’s richness, ideas, contradictions, and problems justice. (Nor is complicity distant from academia, for there is a critical complicity familiar to all who work in the neoliberal university.) Like Burns’s nursèd wrath, perhaps, our attitude and purpose as editors has been *kept warm* by the residual heat of those teenage Pistols gigs, and, even—pushing it—*that’s why we were at them*.

Viv Albertine of the Slits has explained that in her groundbreaking 2014 memoir *Clothes, Clothes, Clothes. Music, Music, Music. Boys, Boys, Boys*, she carefully put the word “punk” in quotation marks whenever she used it, because she always felt that the term was one that had not been adopted by herself or anyone in her scene. This makes sense. The earliest US practitioners of what would later be labeled punk—the MC5, the Ramones, the New York Dolls, Iggy Pop, and others—would not have recognized themselves as being part of a cohesive, singular, descriptive label; nor, in truth, did the British incarnation. The Clash, the Sex Pistols, the Damned, Buzzcocks, Siouxsie and the Banshees, the Raincoats all sound

wildly different from one another, and arguably even unlike what many people today consider “punk.” (Here we can glimpse its mutability over decades, as well as both its inventiveness and lack thereof.) From this perspective, then, rather than being a sound, punk was (is) an attitude or perspective; perhaps more accurately one can observe that it developed into a worldview. It has international recognition and impact, after all, across a range of cultural fields. As Pussy Riot’s Masha Alyokhina said in 2016, in response to a question about whether the word *punk* described her art: “You are talking about genres. Like Human Rights or Music or Theater is genres, but punk is a way of life for me” (quoted in Peraino, this volume, chapter 29).

Punk as a way of life. We hope that this volume is able to capture and critically interrogate aspects of that. But, in the relentless spirit of inquiry that punk warrants, is such a claim, and especially its inference that this is why punk matters, an adequate argument? It explains why punk matters to the person for whom it is a way of life (it matters because it matters to me), and there is evidence of that position in our collection—which can extend to offering an academic rationale for the research: punk studies matters because punk matters to me. But punk is also a cultural method; a repertoire of sounds, gestures, styles; a problematic of discourse; passing juvenilia; a prop or compensation; a (re)fillable adjective (punk golf, punk management, punk archaeology, etc.); a limited palette; a surprise even in its predictability; a plurality of contradictions; troubling and violent; a yes-slash-no-slash-fuck-you to life and art; both music and anti-music—any of these may be less than (the claim of) a way of life, but no less vital or energizing for that. Hey ho, let’s go.

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