

Subjective Answers to Drew's Questions on Punk!

1. What do you think influenced the Punk movement; eg art, fashion, politics, society?

For me personally, and what I will discuss more in answering question 2, punk provided a relief to the musical tedium of the time. During the early and mid 1970's the music scene was pretty flat, but for a lot of people they only perhaps realised how flat it was when punk showed them! There was a lot of fairly dire glam-rock around which seemed to follow a standard formula. There were exceptions, of course. The Sweet, for example, tried to show some attitude and shocked some people with their combination of rock music and open homosexuality, but they were still constrained by the "formula". Others also tried to do their own thing within their confines, most notably David Bowie and Iggy Pop. When punk exploded it was as though someone had opened a window to a room in which you couldn't breathe previously.

Punk was able to poke people in the ribs and make them sit up and *think* about what they were listening to, and why they were listening to it. It was different, it was provocative, it was inspirational, and perhaps above all every piece of punk music seemed to tell young people to just pick up a guitar and do it themselves. One very early and influential band was The Desperate Bicycles who recorded and pressed their own single *Smokescreen/Handlebars*. This single had the same tracks on both sides, but the B-side finished with the spoken words "It was easy and it was cheap ... go and do it!". This summed up the wave at the time. No longer did you have to be musically accomplished to say something — just learn a few chords and get up there. The message from all sides became 'join a band!' In conveying this message, punk captured an energy and urgency that wasn't seen in music before. The all-girl band The Slits were an example of such raw energy. However, when they were invited to do a Peel session they found themselves in a proper studio and some of the technicians helped them to tune their guitars. John Peel says they never sounded as great after that!

This was also the start of the period where people set up their own labels. In the case of the Desperate Bicycles, their *Smokescreen/Handlebars* single cost a mere £153 to record, press and distribute through their own label Refill Records. John Peel said that this was "an amount any band could afford if the bass player sold their motorbike and the rest of the band robbed a few telephone boxes!" Other bands did the same, notably The Buzzcocks with the legendary *Spiral Scratch*.



This need for ordinary people to say something musically, and to be in sole control of how they did it, was born out of the depressed society of the time. The hidden belief amongst young people was that there was no future for them, as typified by The Sex Pistols' single *God Save the Queen* released on the day of the Queen's Silver Jubilee:

*"God save the Queen. She ain't no human being
There's no future, and England's dreaming"*

It gave young people an alternative to politics through which to have their say.

So, to finally answer the question, it would be fair to say that politics and society were the main catalysts to the start of punk. Very quickly after punk exploded it was to influence art and fashion, and this in turn led back to an influence on society (thus turning full circle).

2. How did Punk influence you, if at all?

As I said above, for me personally I appreciated that punk opened that window to the stuffy room. I was 12-13 years old when punk exploded. It gripped me, my friends, and pretty much everyone at school at the time — even our young 20-something music teacher! I went to Quarry Bank school (now mysteriously renamed Calderstones High School) in Liverpool where John Lennon attended in the 50's — his first band was called The Quarry Men. So being caught up in a musical wave there seemed very fitting, though of course this is only something I appreciate now.

It was music that seemed to say something relevant to all of us. Instead of hearing songs about love sang by people who had been in the music business for years and just wanted to sell records and please their record company, now we were listening to people singing about what really happens in *our* lives — about *our* hopes, *our* fears — such as being jilted, or being ignored by the girl in the next class, or having no money for chips. Ordinary stuff. This, combined with the energy, the rawness and the vibrancy of the music itself, was something that really poked you in the ribs and shouted “Oi!”. A friend of mine summed up the feeling, when we started buying, swapping, playing and talking about punk records, by saying “Finally I can listen to something that grabs me by the bollies and swings me round the room!”.

At 13 I managed to make a trip to Manchester on the train with some older friends to see The Buzzcocks supported by Penetration at the Electric Circus. To this day I have never experienced anything quite the same — you really felt part of what was going on on stage, and you also had this gut feeling that you were experiencing something massive and life-changing.

In terms of clothing and styling, I never got beyond Dr. Martens, drainpipe jeans and V-neck jumpers, but that was pretty normal in the early days of punk. Punk fashions, as we remember them today, came about when punk split off three ways: The Romantics (into stuff like Buzzcocks, The Undertones, etc.), The Goths (Siouxsie and the Banshees, etc.) and The Oi Boys (Angelic Upstarts, Sham 69, etc.).

Punk still influences me today. Not only do I still listen to punk occasionally (and by that I mean original late 70's punk, not what is called “punk” today) but a whole raft of music which doesn't follow a formula. It's left me with a need to see, or feel, something in the music other than a formula — attitude, honesty, texture. And I still get a thrill from a musical poke in the ribs!

3. Was Punk real or just a marketing scheme?

By all accounts, both! And one person's name is sufficient to sum up this issue — Malcolm MacLaren.

It's pretty clear now, and probably even then, that Malcolm MacLaren just wanted to cause a social storm when he created The Sex Pistols. He wanted to pound the establishment, both musical and authoritarian, and just take the good old piss. I firmly believe, however, that he never really appreciated the power of what he had created. John Lydon (then Pistols lead singer Johnny Rotten) said so himself many years later. When Lydon left to join Virgin Records and form PIL, The Sex Pistols were left with relatively new bass player Sid Vicious as their singer, and it was embarrassingly awful. Lydon left at just the right time. However, this did not stop MacLaren taking the band onwards (or I would suggest downwards) because it still gave him what he wanted, a mechanism to take the piss and earn himself some money while he was at it.

But by then it was too late. Other bands had followed the lead of The Desperate Bicycles and done their own thing, and The Sex Pistols had been a major influence on people. The Clash formed because Joe Strummer saw the Sex Pistols on telly and wanted to do the same, and he was in good company.

Many TV channels and radio stations initially steered clear of punk, worried that they may offend viewers or simply that it didn't match their scheduling aims. Two players lead the way in spreading the word, however: The legendary John Peel of BBC Radio One, and Tony Wilson of Granada TV in Manchester. After seeing The Sex Pistols play a low-key gig at the Lesser Free Trade Hall in Manchester in 1976, Tony Wilson, who produced a pop show for Granada at the time, decided to put them on telly. Their subsequent live, wild and chaotic rendition of *Anarchy in the UK* took viewers by storm, and over the following months his show completely changed track as they followed new bands from venue to venue as punk exploded all around them. John Peel, in parallel, was doing what he's always done, and still does today, and played tapes and records by new punk bands and dragged them into studios to record Peel sessions.

So, it was a scam, and it was real! The big question is, would punk have exploded without Malcolm MacLaren? Probably.

4. How do you think 1970's Punk has influenced the music of today?

As I said above, punk quickly split into three areas. The romantic route went the way of boys in jumpers and tight jeans singing about the girl they fancy who won't talk to them, or about falling in love with the wrong person, or even about how people with fast cars really piss them off! Examples of this are Buzzcocks and The Undertones, and in turn led into some of the romantic music of the 80's, notably (and arguably) stuff like The Smiths. The Gothic route started with Siouxsie and the Banshees and led into stuff like Sisters of Mercy and The Cure. Then there was the so-called "Oi Boy" movement (my least favourite) where bands sang about riots and violence and whose influence, fortunately, diffused considerably after a few years (although bands like Sham 69 did pop up again from time to time, usually at a National Front rally or something similar!). In fact, I'm oversimplifying the matter when I say there was a three-way split. There were other branches that managed to weave out from the main trunk of the tree. There was also a feed into electronic/dance music, perhaps the earliest notable example being Cabaret Voltaire.

All these have had their influence on music through the 80's and 90's, and into today. Much of the guitar-oriented and dance-oriented music of the early 90's were influenced by some aspects of punk. Guitar bands of that time, such as Nirvana, Smashing Pumpkins, Teenage Fanclub, etc. cited original 70's punk bands as being major influences, and the dance music of Prodigy, Chemical Brothers, Orbital, etc. likewise. These genres have in turn fed into today's music.

Without the punk explosion of the late 70's the music of today would be very different, as indeed would be the case had the music scene of the 60's not existed (e.g. The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, The Doors in their early days) and the influence of 50's Rock 'n' Roll before that, and the Blues and grass roots music of the American black south since the 1920's, etc.

Looking at the music scene now, I think we're about ready for another explosion!
