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Rebellious Jukebox: Post-Punk's Disruption of Rock's Musical and Social Hierarchies

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by

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Abstract

This project explores British post-punk music of the late 1970s. It examines the subtle and explicit ways post-punk musicians adopted ideas from concurrent black American genres, and how those ideas disrupted rock's traditional musical and social hierarchies. This project examines the work of four key British post-punk groups: Public Image Limited, Gang of Four, the Fall, and the Slits. Post-punk is linked to its immediate antecedent, punk, but an important difference is that post-punk bands were eager to embrace techniques and songwriting approaches from black genres, like disco, funk, and reggae. By incorporating composition, arrangement, and instrumentation practices from those genres, post-punk bands were able to write music that emphasized the rhythm sections, bassists and drummers, equally with vocalists and guitarists. These musical arrangements resonated with the egalitarian lyrical rhetoric of the punk aesthetic and allowed cultural space for new subjectivities within the previously codified realm of rock music.

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Chapter One

Introduction

As a historic period, post-punk had a relatively brief flourishing, approximately 1978-1981, but much of the music from that era continues to inspire listeners today in 2020. A T-shirt depicting the iconic sleeve art of British post-punk band Joy Division's 1979 debut album, *Unknown Pleasures*, is still a *de rigueur* fashion accessory for college radio station managers. And bands inspired directly by the sounds and songwriting approaches of post-punk have thrived throughout the more than 40 years since post-punk began. For example, the March 2020 edition of the British music magazine *Mojo* features a picture of Joy Division on the cover. The accompanying headline is "40 Years On: The Eternal Life of Joy Division." The magazine comes with a compilation CD titled *Atmospheres: Mojo Presents Post-Punk 2020*. The disc contains recently released music by bands like Idles, Preoccupations, and Protomartyr, current groups heavily indebted to the legacy of post-punk.

Post-punk remains intriguing to adventurous listeners and young musicians in search of inspiration partially because it remains difficult to define. It is forever linked, in name and spirit, to its immediate antecedent, punk. And although punk's vibrant energy and appealing musical simplicity has ensured that it too has continued to thrive, its moment of historical dominance was exceedingly brief: by some measures, it could be boiled down to a single year, 1977. Punk was a flame that burned hot and went out quickly. For the purposes of discussing post-punk and situating it within the larger

historical continuity of rock music, punk represents a high-water mark of modernism and a simultaneous turn toward postmodernism. Punk is roughly the rock equivalent of John Cage's silent composition 4'33" or artist Robert Ryman's all-white paintings—a simultaneous distillation of, and subversion against, the progressive abstraction of modernism. In rock music, modernism is typified by progressive rock, or prog rock, a rock subgenre with aspirations toward classical sophistication.

Post-punk, as the prefix might imply, is thoroughly postmodern. The music, both of the original era and during subsequent revivals, is written with an awareness of history, a willingness to draw from seemingly disparate sources, and intentional efforts to subvert expectations.

Post-punk explores, and often attempts to reconcile, a series of dichotomies, some of which were problematic in previous iterations of rock music: punk versus prog—which is to say, untrained expressiveness versus technical ambition; soloist versus ensemble performance; earnestness versus irony; rock versus disco; guitars versus keyboards; aggression versus elation; harmony versus dissonance; beauty versus horror; and a series of artificial dichotomies constructed around various identities: male versus female; straight versus gay; British versus American; and black versus white.

By exploring the intersections of these dichotomies, post-punk opened up a lot of possibilities for genre hybridity, and in some ways anticipated the amorphism of subsequent genre-absorbing musical styles, like hip-hop and post-millennial mashups and dance remixes. But unlike those subsequent styles, post-punk emphasized what were arguably the two best qualities of punk: energetic, ensemble-oriented live performances and an emphasis on original songwriting.

This project is not an overarching historical overview of post-punk. Simon Reynolds' *Rip It Up and Start Again: Postpunk 1978-1984* is an excellent history that would be nearly impossible to supplant. Instead, this project is a musicological exploration of some specific key works of post-punk with the aim to better understand some of the parameters of the genre—specifically, the influence of black American music on post-punk, its relationship to progressive rock, and the political and semiotic significance of some of post-punk's musical arrangements. Because the focus of this project is narrower than Reynolds' book, there are many key post-punk groups that aren't discussed in-depth, particularly American bands, like Devo, Talking Heads, and Mission of Burma, but also some of the most influential British post-punk groups, like Wire, Throbbing Gristle, and the Cure. Readers who wish to know more about those groups, and the original post-punk era overall, are directed toward Reynolds' book.

In addition, Greil Marcus' *Ranters & Crowd Pleasers: Punk in Pop Music, 1977-92*, a collection of contemporaneous essays originally published in a variety of sources, provides an insightful critical perspective from the post-punk era. Tim Lawrence's *Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor, 1980-1983* provides an overview of the eclectic scene in New York at the time. Sean Albiez's "Know History!: John Lydon, Cultural Capital and the Prog/Punk dialectic" was invaluable for the discussion of Public Image Limited, as was Brian Cogan's "Typical Girls?: Fuck Off, You Wanker! Re-Evaluating the Slits and Gender Relations in Early British Punk and Post-Punk," Lauraine Leblanc's *Pretty in Punk: Girl's Resistance in a Boy's Subculture*, and Joy Press's "Shouting Out Loud: Women in U.K. Punk" for discussion of the Slits, and the collection *Mark E. Smith and The Fall: Art, Music and Politics*, edited by Michael Goddard and Benjamin

Halligan, for discussion of the Fall. But just as this project is not a historical overview, nor is it limited to discussion of a single artist or group. Instead, it intends to make connections among the scholarship on specific artists, and to use those connections, along with musicological analyses, to construct a specific argument about post-punk as a genre—that post-punk was an innovative synthesis of black and white musical styles of the late 1970s.

Like punk before it, post-punk was initially centered in two cities: London and New York. However, in the case of post-punk, the city of Manchester, in northern England, was nearly as important. The four case studies presented here all focus on British groups, and each band epitomizes several of the dichotomies mentioned above. Because of its shared personnel with the Sex Pistols, arguably the definitive British punk band, the post-punk group Public Image Limited, the subject of the first case study, is arguably the definitive British post-punk band. Public Image Limited, commonly referred to as PiL, is useful for differentiating post-punk from punk. One of the key differences is that post-punk bands were eager to adapt techniques and songwriting approaches from other genres, particularly contemporary black American styles, like disco, funk, and reggae. They also rejected the use of blues, the black American genre they associated with passé music from the previous generation of white rock musicians. For punk rock audiences, perhaps the most audacious thing about PiL's music is the group's prominent basslines. By emphasizing the low end, the music of PiL embraced signifiers of genres usually associated with contemporary black audiences, which immediately bestowed the music with a sonic signification of Otherness in the U.K and in the U.S. This was appealing to the band members, who sought to differentiate themselves from the mass

culture. Around that time, PiL vocalist and songwriter Johnny Lydon, formerly Johnny Rotten of the Sex Pistols said that the only contemporary music he cared for was disco. This was audible in the syncopated rhythms of PiL and had the secondary effect of provoking punks who were dismissive of disco and other black styles. The music of PiL combines the confrontational aesthetics of punk with music that draws inspiration and techniques from multiple genres.

An analysis of the music of Gang of Four reveals a political intention to post-punk's sonic approach. By incorporating composition, arrangement, and instrumentation practices from funk, disco, and reggae, Gang of Four were able to write music that emphasized the rhythm section—the bassist and drummer—equally with the vocalist and guitarist. This egalitarian balancing of the three instrumentalists and a vocalist is a musical reflection of the band's neo-Marxist lyrics, which espoused working class equality and astute cultural criticism.

Sociologist and media theorist Dick Hebdige's 1979 book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, itself something of a post-punk document, provides useful tools for discussing the context of punk and post-punk, and the influence of West Indian and African-American cultures on the subcultures as seen by a contemporaneous scholar. Gang of Four, a band comprised of intellectual university students, is an ideal exemplar for academic discussion of post-punk generally, and for application of Hebdige's theories specifically. Gang of Four's musical strategies were meant to be disruptive, both musically and culturally. Mimi Haddon's more recent article "Dub is the New Black: Modes of Identification and Tendencies of Appropriation in Late 1970s Post-Punk" provides some important tools for discussing the problem of appropriation in post-punk.

Gang of Four also provides an opportunity to discuss the role of the guitar in post-punk. For 30 years prior to the advent of post-punk, and for most of the subsequent decades, the electric guitar was the instrument most closely associated with rock music. And although guitar virtuosity remained a signifier of heroic authority in heavy metal and mainstream rock of the 1980s, in British post-punk, the instrument was often used in intentionally simplistic, even deliberately amateurish ways. These aesthetic choices placed the electric guitar in a prominent but often secondary, even satirical, role. The important, but decentralized role of the guitar in Gang of Four created a model for a democratically constructed rock band, where the guitar player wasn't more important than the other instrumentalists. These musical arrangements resonated with the egalitarian lyrical rhetoric of the punk aesthetic.

The music of the Fall undermines longstanding assumptions about the dichotomy of punk versus progressive rock. The conventional wisdom among many rock fans and critics is that the initial late-1970s boom of punk rock was a reaction against progressive rock, a subgenre that emphasized virtuosity and aspirations toward classical music sophistication. But the Fall, a British rock group that formed in 1976, is an example of band that began during the peak of the punk era, and with unimpeachable punk rock *bona fides*, that incorporated techniques and musical approaches usually associated with prog rock. Those techniques include prominent use of keyboards and other electronic instruments, extended song forms with room for improvisation, lyrics that draw on literary sources, and a willingness to collaborate with ballet dancers. Debunking the myth that punk was solely a reaction against the pretensions of progressive rock, and the

inherent implication that punk was anti-intellectual, is key to understanding the aims and ambitions of post-punk.

The title *Rebellious Jukebox* is taken from a song on the Fall's 1979 album *Live at the Witch Trials*. The song itself tells a rather obtuse tale about an actual, physical jukebox machine that becomes self-aware and rebellious: "No sounds at first came out/This machine had dropped out/But it made music to itself/Made music for itself." But, taken another way, the title also refers to listening as an act of rebellion. The song's lyrics also support this secondary interpretation: "I'm searching for the now/I'm looking for the real thing, yeah." Listening to music can be an investigation, a quest of discovery. It can also be an act of rebellion. If punk represents rebellion through near instantaneous creation, post-punk can represent rebellion through careful, thoughtful engagement. Post-punk musicians rebelled by listening to, and absorbing, music outside the codified traditions of rock.

Post-punk's reggae, funk, and disco-inspired musical strategies, which elevated the importance of the rhythm section, disrupted the longstanding musical hierarchy of rock, which placed emphasis on the guitar over any other instruments. And by disrupting the musical hierarchy of rock, post-punk also disrupted rock's social hierarchy. For most of its existence, beginning in the late 1940s and early '50s, and on through the 1970s and beyond, rock had been dominated by men. In the 1940s, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, a gospel singer who accompanied herself on the electric guitar, was an important innovator for what would become rock 'n' roll, but her work was not always as celebrated as the work of her male peers, like Chuck Berry and Little Richard. In the '50s, '60s and early '70s, nearly all the big stars of rock were men. There were a few prominent female vocalists,

like Janis Joplin, and a few songwriters, like Carole King, but very few female instrumentalists achieved much commercial or critical success. Although post-punk was likewise dominated by men, there were several notable exceptions. Arguably the most significant exception was the British group the Slits, whose music draws inspiration from punk and reggae in roughly equal measure. The Slits represent simultaneous disruptions of rock's musical hierarchy and its social hierarchy. The band's songwriting offers cultural critiques from a feminist perspective, something made accessible to women by punk's disdain for convention and even more accessible by the open-ended musical possibilities of post-punk. And by bringing a love of reggae to a punk audience, the Slits demonstrated that, within post-punk, women could be tastemakers as well as performers.

Taken together, an analysis of these groups demonstrates that, in the late 1970s and early '80s, these post-punk bands were approaching music with vitality and an open-ended willingness to draw from sources outside the previously codified traditions of rock. This allowed them to create music where technical virtuosity could coexist with amateurish enthusiasm, where distorted guitars could coexist with disco beats, and where there was space, musically and culturally, for a diversity of perspectives.

Musical innovation is often the result of combining seemingly disparate genres to synthesize new creations. In British and American music of the 20th and 21st centuries, these musical innovations have often been the result of transgressing the racial boundaries of otherwise segregated societies. At the beginning of the 20th century, African American musicians began playing jazz, a genre that combined syncopated African polyrhythms with European instruments and harmonic theory. After World War II, another new style emerged: rock 'n' roll, which again combined black styles, in this

case, blues and R&B, with white styles, Country & Western and European folk song forms. By the end of the 20th century, hip-hop was one of the most popular genres on the planet. By some measures, because of its ability to repurpose found materials, hip-hop is the ultimate postmodern artform. Through its extensive use of sampling—using short snippets of pre-existing recordings, often in conjunction with new material—hip-hop is able to incorporate elements from nearly every other genre, black or white. But booming about halfway between the midcentury advent of rock 'n' roll and the late-century triumph of hip-hop, post-punk was an equally innovative, but often overlooked, synthesis of black and white styles. Post-punk combines the energetic, ensemble approach and counterculture aesthetic of punk with the rhythmic dexterity and creative studio practices of funk, disco, and reggae. In addition, post-punk reincorporates some of artistic aspirations of progressive rock, which had been theoretically rejected by punk musicians.

For two decades before the advent of post-punk, rock music, and most of commercial music, had been dominated by white British men. And although post-punk was itself also dominated mostly by white British men, its open-ended musical practices allowed for new approaches and new perspectives. Post-punk opened up the cultural space for the popular and eclectic "New Wave" genre of the 1980s, which featured an eclectic array of groups that merged rock and dance music styles. In effect, there are two definitions of post-punk: a broad definition that includes nearly every rock and pop subgenre that contains the faintest trace of punk influence, and a narrower definition of post-punk focused on groups that emerged directly from the punk scene of the late 1970s. This project focuses on specific works by bands indisputably covered by the narrower definition. However, it's worth noting that some of the ideas and approaches adopted by

the groups discussed here had broad and lasting influence on many mainstream rock and pop acts. In addition, the more narrowly defined genre of post-punk explored here has had several revivals since the late ’70s and early ’80s. The most notable post-punk revival boom was during the early 2000s, and featured bands like Interpol, the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, Bloc Party, TV on the Radio, and the Rapture. Many of those groups were racially and sexually diverse. For example, Bloc Party’s singer and rhythm guitarist Kele Okereke is a British man of Nigerian descent who identifies as gay.

The genre hybridity of post-punk seems even more prescient in 2020 when traditional genre boundaries are more fluid than ever. Today, it’s not unusual to see previously disparate genres like punk, disco, funk and classic rock songs all appear on the same playlists. In part, that’s a legacy of post-punk. By drawing inspiration from concurrent black American genres, post-punk musicians were able to disrupt rock’s musical and social hierarchies.

Chapter Two

"Death Disco": Public Image Ltd.

Post-punk is defined primarily by its relationship to its cultural and musical antecedent, punk rock. An understanding of post-punk first requires an understanding of punk. The term "punk" itself can be confusing, because it has had, historically and colloquially, at least three different definitions. These definitions tend to overlap, but sometimes contradict. First, there's punk, the historical movement, a brief moment of popular, commercial success in the late 1970s for a musical style defined by fast rhythms, loud volumes, and antagonistic attitudes. Commercially, this movement was spearheaded by the London band the Sex Pistols, who topped the commercial British music charts with the song "God Save the Queen" on April 6, 1977. Officially, the BBC charts list the song as having peaked at No. 2, but the *NME* charts place it at number one and rumors have persisted for years that the charts were doctored to prevent an anti-royalty song from reaching number 1. The band played its first show on Nov. 6, 1975, and its last show, not counting cash-grab reunion gigs, on Jan. 14, 1978. The brief lifespan of the Sex Pistols provides loose, convenient historical markers for the punk movement.

The second definition of punk is the musical style itself: fast and loud, with an emphasis on ensemble energy rather than the virtuosity of individual performers. Punk rock as a genre has continued unabated since the Sex Pistols era, with a constant subcultural presence and occasional forays of commercial success, like a mid-1990s revival which included bands like Green Day and the Offspring. The genre is defined by a relatively strict set of codified, informal rules—for example, no extended individual

solos and no keyboards. And, as in many genres, like jazz before it and hip-hop after it, debate abounds in scholarly and fan circles about what qualifies as authentic "punk rock." Punk is distinguished from other guitar-oriented, rock-oriented genres by its loud volume, its quick tempos, its simplistic, anti-virtuosic musicianship, and, usually, the use of traditional pop song structures. Many independent record labels continue to release music by straightforward punk rock genre adherents. One example is the label Fat Wreck Chords, which was founded in 1990 by Michael "Fat Mike" Burkett of the band NOFX. Bands on this label, including NOFX, Lagwagon and Good Riddance, have continuously released new music, at the rate of an album or two per year, for the 25 years since the label was founded, and most of that music strictly adheres to the genre definition of punk rock.[1]

The third definition of punk is an aesthetic approach, which values the inspired amateur over the paid professional, and untrained exuberance over virtuoso perfectionism. It also values the homemade over the mass-produced, and the grassroots movement over the organized institution. The aesthetic of punk is often overtly political, and the lyrical rhetoric of bands like the Sex Pistols typically emphasizes a distrust of institutional authorities, such as police forces and the British monarchy, and any other institutions that privilege any one person over any other. This aesthetic approach usually overlaps with the anti-virtuosic music made by the genre adherents, but the aesthetic definition of punk can be extended to a band like Suicide, which, in the mid '70s, eschewed guitars in favor of synthesizers and employed unusual, open-ended song structures. The music retained a confrontational attitude and a handmade quality that

1 www.fatwreck.com

could be considered "punk," even though it didn't fit into the narrow genre confines of "punk rock."

This third definition of punk can be further extended to cover other arts and even businesses. The aesthetic of punk is characterized by the motto "DIY"—Do It Yourself—an ethos that espouses making things, like clothes or bicycles, rather than buying them. The punk aesthetic is generally critical of larger consumer culture and mass media.

The DIY aesthetic is the aspect of punk that is most often still present in post-punk music. Post-punk music was, as the name implies, generally written and recorded after the brief historical period of punk, and it generally doesn't fit within the narrow confines of the genre punk rock. Most post-punk is often a hybridization of punk with other genres, including reggae, funk, and disco, and this sort of postmodern mixing of signifiers is antithetical to the perceived authenticity of punk rock. In this sense, post-punk is very much a postmodern response to punk rock. More specifically, Public Image Ltd., commonly referred to as PiL, can be heard as a response by PiL founder John Lydon, formerly known as Sex Pistols singer Johnny Rotten, to the codified restraints of the genre.

In many ways, the Sex Pistols were the definitive UK punk band.[2] The group was commercially successful and gained increased notoriety after appearing on various British television shows, and newspaper and magazine covers. This fame was partially the result of the group's savvy management, but also partly because of the appeal of Lydon, the group's witty, quotable singer. But the fiery lyrical rhetoric of songs like "God Save the Queen"—"God save the queen/She ain't no human being/And there's no

2 The Ramones held a similar position in the United States.

future/In England's dreaming"—were not necessarily equaled by the actual music of the Sex Pistols, which was still firmly rooted in the Chuck Berry guitar riffs that had by then dominated rock music for nearly 20 years.

"The innovation of the Sex Pistols music was in the cultural, aural and oral performance in the grooves of their records and the stages they occupied; that is, in the emotional assertion of an individualist identity and the anger of their performance, and not in the chords, rhythms, or riffs they played," wrote Sean Albiez in a 2003 essay, "Know history!: John Lydon, Cultural Capital and the Prog/Punk dialectic."[3] In some ways, Johnny Rotten's career immediately after the dissolution of the Sex Pistols can be seen as an effort to extend the cultural innovations of the Sex Pistols—the defiance of social norms, the distrust of institutions—to the music itself.

Following the disbanding of the Sex Pistols, Rotten reverted to his birth name, John Lydon, and started PiL. Lydon carried over from punk an adherence to anti-virtuosic aesthetics but branched out stylistically and musically into new territory. Rather than taking inspiration from Chuck Berry or other 1950s rock 'n' roll artists or any blues-based music, the members of PiL took inspiration from more recent black American musical genres: disco, funk, and dub reggae. Those genres were all focused less on the showy guitar techniques of blues and '60s rock than on danceable bass-and-drum polyrhythms. This was evident in the musical arrangements and the recording mixes, which often gave a sonic boost to the low end.

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3 Sean Albiez, "Know History!: John Lydon, Cultural Capital and the Prog/Punk dialectic." *Popular Music*, 22:3, 2003, 364.

"As a punk rocker, you were safer in those days at the black dances than you were going down to the local white-boy pub," said PiL bassist Jah Wobble. "For me, hearing the bass that loud was a huge thing. The physical nature of it just left me gobsmacked."[4] An emphasis on the low end, and a bass part that functioned independently of the guitar line, was unfamiliar and exciting for open-minded punk musicians like Lydon and Wobble. The heavy low end was also a signifier of genres usually associated with black audiences, which immediately bestowed the music with an outsider status in the UK as well as the US. A sonic signification of otherness was appealing to Lydon and Wobble, who sought to differentiate themselves from the mass culture. Dub reggae in Britain in the late '70s and early '80s signified a similar kind of black outsider authenticity as blues had a generation earlier in the '50s and early '60s.[5]

"Jah Wobble never viewed himself as a musician before joining PiL, but had an encyclopedic knowledge of dub," wrote Albiez.[6] "This lack of aspiration to, or reverence for, rock musicianship, shared with Lydon, resulted in openness to sonic and musical experimentation removed from the circumscribed field of rock and roll. He was drawn particularly to innovation through overt hybridization—by deploying dub bass in a bleak post-punk soundscape." This deliberate identification as musical outsiders was also an example of Wobble and Lydon's efforts to identify themselves as outsiders generally, to

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4 Simon Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again: Postpunk 1978-1984*. New York: Penguin Books, 2005, 19.

5 By the end of the 1980s, the musical signifier of black authenticity would become hip-hop.

6 Albiez, "Know History!," 369.

deny themselves the privileged status of virtuoso musicians, and to sever ties from a strict, limited connection to the traditions of blues-based, guitar-oriented rock.

However, the group did not sever ties from rock traditions entirely. Guitarist Keith Levene was an avowed fan of progressive rock groups like Yes.[7] But this fandom was not necessarily apparent in his musical techniques or approaches, especially within the context of PiL. Furthermore, the open-ended, postmodern aesthetic of PiL allowed potential room for progressive rock guitar virtuosity, but not to point of excluding other genres or other instruments.

PiL's second album, 1979's *Metal Box*, was released as three 45rpm 12-inch records rather than at the rock industry recording standard of 33rpm. The 45rpm format was common in dance genres, partly because it gave better definition to lower frequencies.[8] The album's songs are led by Wobble's rolling, reggae-inspired basslines, front-and-center in the mix with a round, deep tone, and the disco-inspired, syncopated hi-hat patterns of a rotating cast of drummers. Levene's jagged, trebly guitar sounds are mostly employed as syncopated rhythmic accents. The overall effect of the music is similar to danceable dub reggae, but with a harshness of tone that makes the music seem abrasive, evoking the aesthetic of punk. Lydon's voice sometimes seems to haunt the music, drifting in and out of focus, often repeating phrases with different intonations, and expressing dour emotions, like alienation and paranoia, rather than the smiling uplift commonly associated with disco and funk.

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7 Albiez, "Know History!," 368.

8 Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, 216.

Around that time, Lydon said that the only contemporary music he cared for was disco.[9] This was evident in the aesthetic direction of PiL, and had, for the famously provocative Lydon, the secondary effect of provocatively baiting the orthodox punks who were dismissive of disco. The lead single of *Metal Box* was initially called "Death Disco," although it was later retitled "Swan Lake" on the album. Over a snare-and-bass drum pattern accompanied by disco-inspired hi-hat syncopation, Wobble plays a slippery, stop-and-start, climb-the-neck, stop-and-start-again bassline. Levene plays a harsh rendition of the "swan theme" from Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's 1876 ballet *Swan Lake*. Lydon repeatedly wails death-obsessed lyrics like "silence in your eyes" and "watch her slowly die." It's like a grim, morbid parody of the disco remixes to movie scores, opera themes, and classical motifs that were then popular. A significant example of this kind of disco homage is Walter Murphy's 1976 instrumental "A Fifth of Beethoven," a disco adaptation of the first movement of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. The song was included in the film *Saturday Night Fever*, and on its mega-selling soundtrack, the commercial pinnacle of '70s disco. "Death Disco" was released in both 7" and 12" single formats. It's a remarkable testimony to Lydon's clout and commercial appeal at the time that "Death Disco," an abrasive, morbid disco-ballet post-punk hybrid, was a Top 20 hit in the U.K. Despite the song's exciting energy and stunning aesthetic combination, it's difficult to imagine the song being a mass hit in any other time or place or without the name recognition of the group's singer.

For punk rock audiences, perhaps the most audacious thing about the song was its prominent bassline. At the time, Greil Marcus, an otherwise appreciative critic, described

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9 Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again,* 24.

Wobble's bass performance as "pompous."[10] Rock critics were simply so unaccustomed to hearing bass-led music that hearing that kind of prominent bass seemed like an act of arrogance, a supporting actor stepping unbidden into the spotlight. And, to be fair, Marcus admired the audacity: "It is, as Lydon claims, 'anti-rock 'n' roll'—territory staked out in opposition to what we now accept as rock 'n' roll—but it is also a version," he wrote. "Like disco, or especially the bass-led, out-of-reach rhythms of dub, PiL's sound is at once the rejection of a form and an attempt to follow certain implications hidden in that form to their necessary conclusions."[11] The form was punk rock and one of the hidden implications was the rejection of that form's unified front. Punk rock emphasizes a cohesive ensemble rather than individual musicians; this is an idea that PiL subverted.

One aim of PiL's aesthetic choices was creating the opposite of the "wall of sound," a phrase originally associated with pop producer Phil Spector, and his work with influential girl groups of the 1960s, like the Crystals and the Ronettes, but also associated with punk bands like the Ramones, who emulated and later worked with Spector. He produced dense sonic backdrops for vocalists, wherein individual instruments were heavily doubled and rarely discernible. Punk rock, as practiced by the Ramones and others, was an attempt to recreate a "wall of sound" with cheaper means and with fewer people. This was accomplished primarily through means of volume—loud amps—during live performances, and by making deliberately muddy mixes during the recording process.

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10 Greil Marcus, *Ranters & Crowd Pleasers: Punk in Pop Music, 1977-92*. New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1993, 98.

11 Marcus, *Ranters & Crowd Pleasers,* 99.

In a direct subversion of the long-standing rock hierarchy favoring vocalists and guitar players, in PiL's music, each instrument existed in a recognizable, distinguishable sonic space, where it was possible to clearly hear each part. The musicians also weren't focused on purely individualistic solo expression, in the way of some jazz or progressive rock. Rather, the individual parts were part of a larger whole, a whole where each part was visible. Marcus described it as like "a rhythm in the process of constituting itself. You begin to hear the music being made. Like a piece of modern architecture that puts the inner workings of a building—heating pipes, electrical systems, support structures—in plain sight, you hear PiL's music inside out."[12] This description of meta music, that is, music with all the constituent parts working in tandem, also describes much of the dance music of the era, polyrhythmic disco and funk, much of it inspired by James Brown, who would often shout "bridge!" to signal changes to his musicians or other audible performance instructions left intact on recordings.

"Death Disco"/"Swan Lake" is a song with the seams intentionally left visible.[13] After a brief introduction, Wobble begins playing a simple, two-measure Eb bass ostinato figure that he repeats throughout the song. He occasionally adds a slide or a brief melodic ascent, but never strays or varies from this harmonic center. The song is essentially a one-chord vamp. The closest thing to a pop chorus is guitarist Levene's repeated bastardized statement of Tchaikovsky's "swan theme." It appears at irregular temporal intervals, usually preceded by a brief walking bass figure that immediately returns to the Eb ostinato that anchors the song.

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12 Marcus, *Ranters & Crowd Pleasers,* 99.

13 The fact that the song was released with two different titles might support this interpretation.

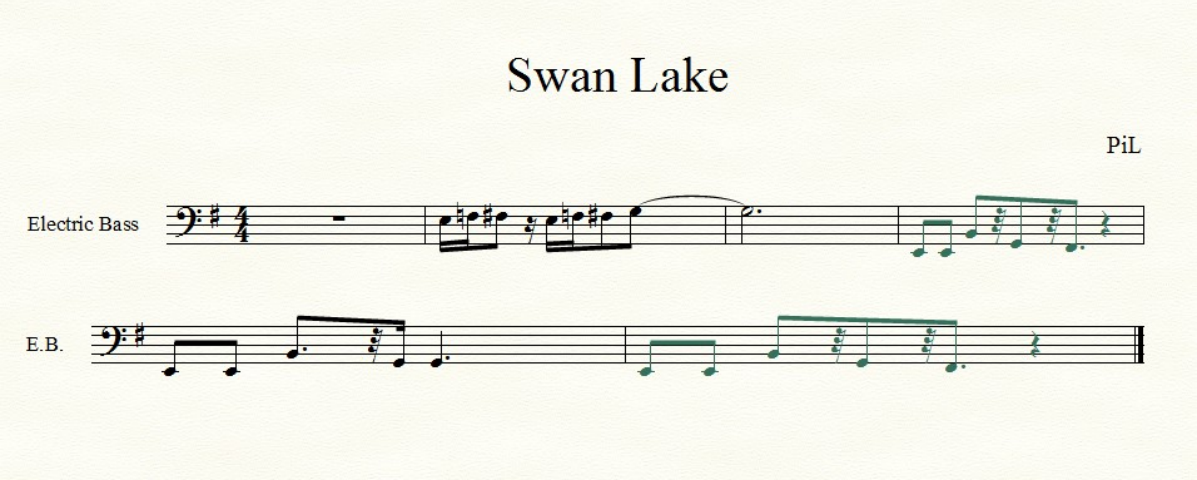

Figure 1: “Swan Lake” by Public Image Limited

Lydon’s vocal line is an incantation. Phrases like “see it in your eyes” are repeated, but not in a pattern that corresponds with the guitar part, either melodically or rhythmically. Sometimes the vocal line and guitar work in conjunction, other times in alternation. The key of Eb is potentially significant because it implies that the guitar and bass, whose lowest notes are traditionally tuned to E, are tuned down a half-step, giving the bass some extra slack and “wobble.” Of course, it’s also possible that the half-step difference is not an effect of how the musicians tuned their instruments, but rather the result of an audio distortion during the recording, mixing, or mastering process.

What’s the significance of quoting from a famous Russian ballet? On the one hand, the motif is simply a signifier of “classical music.” It’s a recognizable and identifiable theme from a well-known work by a famous composer. It could just easily be the opening motif from Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony or Wagner’s “Ride of the Valkyries,” or a dozen such themes. But the choice of the “swan theme” is itself

significant. Within the context of the ballet, it's meant to represent, in a leitmotif fashion, a princess who has been transformed into a swan by an evil curse. In this sense, the theme represents alienation from one's own body and a societal disconnect. In the ballet, this sense of alienation is presented as beautiful—the swan is, after all, a lovely bird—but also sad and lonely. Levene plays the theme in a seemingly loose, tossed-off, almost haphazard manner. In fact, in a 2001 interview with the online music magazine *Perfect Sound Forever*, Levene himself acknowledged that he initially began playing the "swan theme" by accident: "I've got no problem with music being really simple. ... It was all literally in one note. I realized that this tune that I was bastardizing by mistake was 'Swan Lake.' So I started playing it on purpose, but I was doing it from memory. You can hear that I'm not playing it exactly right. It just worked."[14] When he's not playing the "swan theme," Levene's guitar part alternates between shrill, amelodic noise and muted guitar-harmonic strums. The theme reappears at irregular rhythmic intervals, Levene's phrasing is inconsistent, and sometimes the theme itself is fragmented. This fragmentation and sense of indifference enhances the feeling of alienation already associated with the theme. And Levene's brittle guitar tone obscures some of the beauty of the melody, making it sound more aggressive than mournful.

Punk can be defined by deliberate amateurism, and progressive rock can be defined by aspirations toward the classical tradition. In "Swan Lake," there is a deliberately amateurish quotation of music from the classical tradition, subverting the paradigms of both punk and progressive rock. Albiez described PiL as a dialectical reconciliation of punk and progressive rock:

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14 www.furious.com/perfect/keithlevene2.html

> We can begin to challenge assumptions about the historical and dialectical relationship of progressive rock and punk. In Lydon, and his colleagues in PiL, we find evidence of musical continuity as much as change in their embrace of music and creative strategies seemingly antithetical to punk. Lydon's idiosyncratic creative resources and cultural capital emerged in part from his early active and eclectic consumption of music, including progressive rock. … Though class conflict is often central to Lydon's narratives, the perceived prog/punk 'class war' that remains in many punk histories can be challenged. Cultural capital is not fixed and cannot be mapped onto an individual's position in a static model of social class. The class specificity of cultural capital and its relationship to the social distinctions of 1970s rock music—with 'prog' a cerebral middle class pursuit and punk a visceral working-class revolt—can be contested and reconfigured through Lydon.[15]

"Swan Lake" might be the clearest musical example of this reconciliation of the perceived schism between punk and progressive rock. There is deliberate irony to the classical musical quotations in "Swan Lake"; it's an example of cheeky postmodern pastiche. But the motif also functions effectively as a simple rock guitar riff, like the short repetitive guitar phrases used by Black Sabbath guitarist Tony Iommi and legions of other heavy metal guitarists. The song is definitively post-punk—not just because of the presence of Lydon, punk rock's most recognizable icon, even after casting off his iconic accouterments—but also because it brings the amateurish, confrontational aesthetic of punk to music that draws inspiration and techniques from multiple genres, and mimics and mocks the high-brow aspirations of progressive rock.

Albiez described the polarization of punk and prog as something promulgated by the music press of the late 1970s, specifically the *Melody Maker* writer Caroline Coon. "The Coon analysis of the burgeoning punk scene as a knowing, working-class kick in the face of middle-class, university-educated progressives (a narrative Lydon employs, but implicitly contradicts) seems a defining trope which froze debate on the musical

15 Albiez, "Know History!," 358.

explosion of punk. ... Coon's iconoclastic narrative predetermined the future discourses of punk history, and is frequently reproduced in popular television histories of rock and punk."[16] The simplistic, high-energy, loud sound of punk often seems inherently angry, an impression often reinforced by the lyrics: "Let fury have the hour, anger can be power/Do you know that you can use it?" sang Joe Strummer of The Clash, another iconic British punk band, in "Clampdown," a 1979 song. Lydon himself later chanted "anger is an energy" on "Rise," from 1986. That angry sound seems to need a target, and progressive rock, with its air of pomposity and pretension, was a particularly convenient and inviting straw man for journalists looking for an easy narrative.

In addition to its subversive juxtaposition of prog and punk, "Swan Lake" also draws directly from a style of music sometimes viewed and described, especially during the 1970s and early '80s, as diametrically opposed to rock: disco. Drummer David Humphrey, who played on the recording of "Swan Lake" plays an alternating-kick-and-snare 4/4 beat accompanied by the syncopated, offbeat hi-hat pattern innovated by Philadelphia soul drummer Earl Young.[17] In other words, Humphrey plays a disco beat. The beat continues throughout the song, only interrupted by occasional brief drum fills at the ends of some measures.

Lydon, the vocalist and lyricist of PiL, was unquestionably the most famous member of the band because of the previous commercial success and infamy of the Sex Pistols. However, throughout *Metal Box* his vocals are buried in the mix between the shrill, trebly guitar and the large, dubby bass, and the vocals seem to compete with the

16 Albiez. "Know History!," 359.

17 Young was associated with The Trammps and Harold Melvin & The Blue Notes.

constant high-hat pattern. The lyrics are repetitive, and often almost unintelligible. His vocals are awash with echo and reverb and seem to haunt the music from some distance. "Words can never say the way," he sings early in the song, "[you] told me with your eyes." At the end of the song, he chants "words can not express" repeatedly—one of the most famous lyricists of his time lamenting the limitations of words and negating the purpose of lyrics. It's possible that the song was unusually personal and emotional for the usually wry, witty, antagonistic and sarcastic Lydon. This impression is reinforced by a 1979 performance of "Death Disco" on the British TV show *Top of the Pops.*[18] Wobble grins at the camera, one of his teeth apparently blackened out with a marker, but Lydon turns his back to the cameras and the audience, and appears uncharacteristically shy.

Multiple sources, including interviews with Lydon and other band members, describe the song as being a requiem ode to Lydon's mother, who was terminally ill at the time of the song's composition. This interpretation is readily supported by the song's original title, "Death Disco," and by lyrics like, "Watch her slowly die/Saw it in her eyes/Choking on a bed/Flowers rotting dead/Seen it in her eyes." The song's complete lack of harmonic motion reinforces its function as a funeral dirge. The elegiac style of the lyrics is reinforced by Lydon's disembodied vocal sound and the alienated quality of the fragmented "swan theme." And the swan theme also reinforces the mournful theme of the song since Odette, the princess-turned-swan, dies at the end of the ballet's narrative.

"Death Disco"/"Swan Lake" is a song that unites a syncopated disco drumbeat, a fat dub reggae bass line, a guitar part that alternates between noise and fragmented quotations from a 19th century Russian ballet, and a "punk" singer who intones a

18 www.youtube.com/watch?v=QjiDCMQYY1M

mournful incantation for his dying mother. Each part of the song is distinct, unusual, and drawn from a vastly different musical source.[19]

This song is not what genre purists would usually consider punk rock. But by closely combining disparate musical signifiers into a ramshackle sonic collage that's still cohesive enough to depict a specific meaning, in this case, morbid alienation, the song is aesthetically punk. The collage is the visual art from most often associated with punk. The punk aesthetic, which values deliberate amateurism, cultural criticism, and anti-authoritarianism, is the definition of punk that survives into post-punk. Post-punk follows the historical period of punk, and isn't restrained by the constraints of the genre, but it is still aesthetically punk.

19 The ready and willing appropriation from a variety of genres anticipates the sampling in hip-hop in the following decades.

Chapter Three

"Damaged Goods": Gang of Four

On September 18, 1980, on the medium-sized stage of the Rainbow Theater in London, the four young Englishmen of Gang of Four, with neatly trimmed hair and formal clothes that might seem more expected at an office than on a rock stage, begin the next song.[20] Jon King, nominally the group's singer, clangs together two pieces of metal at a slow, regular rate of about 40 beats per minute. Guitarist Andy Gill lets a few long, disembodied-sounding notes ring out of his instrument. Gill, bassist Dave Allen, and drummer Hugo Burnham all seemed tightly coiled, like snakes about to lash out with violence. Their facial expressions are somewhere between grim and blank, defiant, and sneering. Eventually, the three musicians leap into action, but the explosion is not uncontrolled chaos, but a taut, funk-inspired groove, each instrument stopping and starting with unexpected syncopation. Allen and King sing the lyrics of the song, "He'd Send in the Army," dispassionately, with none of the fury one might expect of punk rock. And Gill's guitar part seems like the rhythmic guitar accompaniment popular in funk and R&B of the time, but then the accents start hitting in all the wrong places, the tones are too harsh, and then, unexpectedly, he stops playing altogether.

Popular music is a conversation. The punk bands of the late 1970s entered the conversation loudly, ready to interrupt, to insult, to bait, to mock. The members of Gang of Four were willing to embrace those strategies, but they also realized that sometimes silence is the most effective conversational tool. Popular music is a discourse of financial

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20 As seen in the film *Urgh! A Music War*, directed by Derek Burbidge (1981; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2009), DVD.

power, acclaim, artistic accomplishment, and representations of personal and group identities. Music itself is a system of signification with no fixed literal meanings. The notes, harmonies, and rhythms that constitute music have no absolute, unchanging values, although the purposes of musical composition and the methods of performance, recording, listening, and interpreting music are historically specific. In the same way that a safety pin has both a legitimate purpose and a coded subversive function when worn superfluously by a punk, so can a recognizable, familiar musical sound, such as an electric guitar, be subversive when used in a way that challenges expectations.

British media theorist Dick Hebdige's 1979 book, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, is an examination of the social and societal roles of subcultures. As a recurring, unifying example, Hebdige explores the punk subculture, which he characterizes as a sympathetic response by white working-class Brits to black West Indian immigrant cultures, particularly Rastafarians and their associated music, reggae. He details the formulation of an overall punk subculture and its aesthetics in fashion, speech, and visual art. Although he acknowledges that the punk subculture was then largely centered around music, there's very little musical discussion in his book. The first part of this chapter details Hebdige's analysis of subcultures overall and of punk in particular. The second part situates the Leeds band Gang of Four within the context of the historical and aesthetic transition from punk to post-punk, with a specific focus on the disruptive practices of the band's music.

"The meaning of subculture is always in dispute, and style is the area in which opposing definitions clash with most dramatic force," wrote Hebdige.[21] By "style," he refers primarily to styles of clothing, but his definition also includes music. Style is a signifying process in which objects are granted meanings, some of them primary and explicit, some of them secondary and coded. "This process begins with a crime against the natural order, though … the deviation may seem slight indeed. It signals a Refusal."[22] For Hebdige, like other cultural theorists, what might be considered "the natural order," is not necessarily "natural," if such a thing even exists, but is constructed through cultural discourses. He cites Roland Barthes' examinations of mythologies, "the normally hidden set of rules, codes and conventions through which meanings particular to specific social groups (i.e. those in power) are universal and 'given' for the whole of society."[23]

Barthes applied the linguistic concept of semiology, the study of signs and symbols, to "texts" other than language, such as photographs and films. A semiologic approach is useful when examining any human activity, like music, in which meanings are systematically constructed. Barthes wrote:

> Any semiology postulates a relation between two terms, a signifier and a signified. … We are dealing, in any semiological system, not with two, but with three different terms. For what we grasp is not at all one term after the other but the correlation which unites them: there are, therefore, the signifier, the signified, and the sign, which is the associative total of the first two terms.[24]

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21 Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style.* London: Methum & Co., Ltd., 1979, 3.

22 Hebdige, *Subculture*, 3.

23 Hebdige, *Subculture*, 9.

24 Roland Barthes, "Myth Today," *A Barthes Reader*. New York: Hill & Wang, 1983, 97.

A "Refusal," as Hebdige writes, with the capital letter, is a protest and a subversive disruption of the supposed "natural order." Social and cultural signs tend to reinforce as natural the perspectives and corresponding interests of those in power. Hebdige refers to Stuart Hall's notion of "maps and meaning" that are "traced and retraced along the lines laid down by the dominant discourses about reality, the dominant ideologies. They thus tend to represent, in however obscure and contradictory a fashion, the interests of the dominant groups in society."[25] Subcultural signification, in turn, involves the intentional misuse of the dominant society's signs.

Much of Hebdige's discussion is focused on material objects: the leather jackets, torn T-shirts, and safety pins that were recognizable signifiers of punk identity in the latter half of the 1970s. Music doesn't have the tangibility or materiality of clothing and accessories, but it can also be a signifying language, and therefore just as able to signify Refusal. Hebdige wrote that the "challenge to hegemony which subcultures represent is not issued directly by them. Rather it is expressed obliquely, in style."[26] His examination of expressions of style focuses primarily on fashion objects, but there are also musical strategies that can be used to express subversion and disruption.

Hebdige describes British punk bands of the mid and late 1970s, like the Clash and the Sex Pistols, as inspired by black music, particularly reggae—an uneasy mingling of seemingly disparate musical styles: "Punk's epiphanies were hybrid affairs, representing the awkward and unsteady confluence of the two radically dissimilar

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25 Hebdige, *Subculture*, 15.

26 Hebdige, *Subculture*, 17.

languages of reggae and rock."[27] The musical link between black reggae and white punk is not necessarily audibly apparent, however. Hebdige retraces the British and American history of white affection, imitation, and appropriation of black musical styles, like swing, bebop, R&B, and reggae. Since the late 1970s, when his book was published, that list could be expanded to include funk, disco and hip-hop. Hebdige interpreted this succession of subcultures as "deep-structural adaptations which symbolically accommodate or expunge the black presence from the host community."[28] In some ways, punk represents a break in this pattern, while at the same time it is a reaffirmation of it. "Although apparently separate and autonomous, punk and the black British subcultures with which reggae is associated were connected at a deep structural level."[29] Unlike previous white appropriations of black music, Hebdige notes that punk's connection to reggae was not one of simple imitation.

> Far from simulating reggae's form and timbre, punk music, like every other aspect of punk style, tended to develop in direct antithesis to its apparent sources. Reggae and punk were audibly opposed. Where punk depended on the treble, reggae relied on the bass. Where punk launched frontal assaults on the established meanings systems, reggae communicated through ellipses and allusion. … To use a term from semiotics, we could say that punk includes reggae as a 'present absence'—a black hole around which punk composes itself.[30]

Hebdige cites Phil Cohen's definition of the latent function of a subculture is to "express and resolve, albeit magically, the contradictions which remain hidden or unresolved in the

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27 Hebdige, *Subculture*, 27.

28 Hebdige, *Subculture*, 45.

29 Hebdige, *Subculture*, 29.

30 Hebdige, *Subculture*, 67.

parent culture."[31] A central problem of the parent culture inherited by the British punks of the 1970s was racism. Hebdige interpreted punks as attempting to alleviate the problem of racism through their celebrated difference with Rastafarians. Punk was meant to complement reggae. Reggae was slow, bass-heavy and atmospheric, so punk was fast, trebly and confrontational. In terms of a Hegelian dialectic, reggae was the thesis, punk was the antithesis, and post-punk was the new synthesis, an attempt to reconcile the established differences into something new and cohesive. The band Gang of Four is a useful example of this new post-punk synthesis, in part because the band was overtly political and made explicit use of Hebdige's concept of Refusal.

Gang of Four formed in Leeds, England, in 1977. The group employed an occasionally hostile approach in conjunction with otherwise precise and technically accomplished "punk funk," an intentional hybrid of '70s funk, reggae, and punk. Bassist Dave Allen and drummer Hugo Burnham would play grooves inspired by reggae and mid '70s funk, like James Brown and Curtis Mayfield, as guitarist Andy Gill would play jagged lines that seemed to cut against the rhythm of the other instrumentalists.

In 1979, as post-punk was still just beginning, Hebdige wrote that "Perhaps, given the differences between them, there can be no easy synthesis of the two languages of rock and reggae."[32] The music of Gang of Four, and other post-punk groups, seems to contradict that analysis, except that it's indeed not an "easy synthesis," and the difficulty itself, the alienating discomfort of the combination, is part of what makes the music so compelling.

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31 Hebdige, *Subculture*, 77.

32 Hebdige, *Subculture*, 69.

Gill's guitar tone was more assaultive than even the tones used by many other post-punk bands. While the guitar in Public Image Limited was shrill and staccato, and the guitar in American post-punk band Talking Heads was thin and chiming, in Gang of Four, it was harsh and cutting. Gill played with a tone that was abrasive yet still trebly, allowing for a clearly differentiated separation between the bass and the guitar.

The band members chose a politically charged band name, befitting the group's sociopolitical interests. The name referred to a disparaging term for the four leaders of China's Cultural Revolution. The band members weren't card-carrying communists, but they were left-leaning, politically engaged students at Leeds University. Gang of Four's lyrical subjects include topics like personal identity, gender representations, class disparities, and critiques of consumer culture. The name was also a reference to the equality of representation. It was not a band name like Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers, Elvis Costello and the Attractions, or the Jimi Hendrix Experience, where one person, usually the singer or the guitar player, had his name out front. Instead, each member of the ensemble was placed on equal footing, one of four. "It's democratic music, where we don't have a 'star' thing," said Jon King, the group's lead singer.[33] "The band's dynamics had a political purpose: they kept one's attention from settling on a single performer," wrote music critic Greil Marcus.[34] The cumulative effect intentionally reconstitutes the function of a rock band, which wouldn't be possible without the deliberate use of the expected traditional instruments of rock. Without hearing a note, a group of four young white Englishmen—one holding a microphone, one holding an electric guitar, one

33 Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, 58.

34 Marcus, *Ranters & Crowd Pleasers*, 115.

holding an electric bass, and the fourth sitting at a drum kit—signifies "rock band." That signification creates a set of expectations, which could be confirmed or intentionally frustrated by the musicians.

In some ways, punk is partially defined by its absences. According to the "Coon analysis" discussed in the previous chapter, punk is rock 'n' roll expunged of the instrumental flash of progressive rock and its aspirations toward classical music sophistication and lengthy compositions with extended solos. But, according to Hebdige's analysis, punk is also defined by the absence of the musical signifiers of blackness. Hebidge's theory implies that punk was the white complement to reggae's blackness. On a superficial level, punks value and respect their cultural exchange with Rastafarians, organizing "Rock against Racism" events and praising reggae musicians whenever possible in interviews. "But at another, deeper level, the association seems to have been repressed, displaced on the part of the punks into the construction of a music which was emphatically white and even more emphatically British."[35] That identity was expressed largely through difference to reggae. Reggae is slow, mellow, and emphasizes the low end and the upbeat; therefore, punk is fast, energetic, and emphasizes the high end and the downbeat. Reggae musicians smoke marijuana; therefore, punks took amphetamines. Like any subculture centered around an artform, once punk music became commercially produced on a large scale, its subcultural signifiers, like clothing and records, "become codified, made comprehensible, rendered at once public property and profitable merchandise."[36] As an example, Hebdige notes that "punk" clothing could be purchased

35 Hebdige, *Subculture*, 66.

36 Hebdige, *Subculture*, 96.

mail-order as early as the summer of 1977. More recently, the national retail chain Hot Topic continues to sell "alternative" clothing, much of it punk-inspired, to young people in shopping malls throughout the U.S. Commercial punk music and fashions allow for its audiences to experience the sensation of rebellion while still contributing financially, through record and concert ticket purchases to corporate, capitalist hegemony. Hebdige defines two methods in which subcultures are reincorporated and subsumed back into the larger parent culture: "the conversion of subcultural signs (dress, music, etc.) into mass-produced objects (i.e. the commodity form)" and "the labeling and redefinition of deviant behavior by dominant groups—the police, the media, the judiciary (i.e. the ideological form)"[37] In the case of punk, both methods of cultural reincorporation seemed to occur almost simultaneously and immediately. To quote the Clash's Joe Strummer on that band's 1978 single, "(White Man) in Hammersmith Palais," the record labels and concert promoters were "turning rebellion into money." Hebdige attempted to unpack the problematic relationship of punk's anti-commercial lyrics recorded on albums meant to be sold commercially:

> "The relationship between the spectacular subculture and the various industries which service and exploit it is notoriously ambiguous. After all, such a subculture is concerned first and foremost with consumption. … It communicates through commodities even if the meanings attached to those commodities are purposefully distorted or overthrown. It is therefore difficult … to maintain any absolute distinction between commercial exploitation on the one hand and creativity/originality on the other, even though these categories are emphatically opposed to the value systems of most subcultures."[38]

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37 Hebdige, *Subculture*, 94.

38 Hebdige, *Subculture*, 94-95.

This problematic, contradictory relationship has remained central to punk in the more than 40 years that it has existed as a subculture in various permutations, most of those long after the publication of Hebdige's book. As cited above, Hebdige wrote that "Given the differences between them, there can be no easy synthesis of the two languages of rock and reggae,"[39] and in some ways, the attempt to achieve that synthesis is what defines post-punk as a genre, and the difficulty of the synthesis is exactly why some post-punk music is still, decades later, so uneasy and unusual, and therefore aesthetically compelling to some adventurous music fans who might enjoy the disparity. Post-punk is music made by bands inspired by the provocative energy and anti-virtuosic spirit of punk but not constrained by the stylistic simplicity of basic punk rock. Hebdige's book was published in 1979, the same year of the release of key post-punk albums, like Public Image Ltd.'s *Metal Box* and Gang of Four's *Entertainment!* Those albums attempt to synthesize punk with reggae, along with other black styles, like funk and disco. Post-punk music is an attempt to reconcile those differences, to incorporate black rhythms with white noises, while highlighting the connections among the different genres by emphasizing the instrumental voices commonly used among all of them: guitar, bass, and drums.

More recently, scholars like Mimi Haddon have explored some of the problems of cultural appropriation inherent in a musical genre primarily performed, at least during its original incarnation, by white musicians, but inspired by the works of black musicians. Borrowing from the work of Georgina Born, Haddon cites four modes of identification that can be used to represent social and cultural identities through composition or performance.

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39 Hebdige, *Subculture*, 69.

> The four principal modes of musical identificatory practice are: (a) the imaginary mode, a kind of 'psychic tourism,' the type of musical identification that is associated with exoticism, primitivism, and Orientalism; (b) the emergent mode, a musical identification or 'alliance' between two distinct social groups that 'prefigures' the emergence of a '[real] form of sociocultural identity'; (c) the homological mode, musical identifications that reinforce existing socio-cultural identities, e.g. the idea that black music is for and performed by black musicians; and (d) the macrohistorical mode, which describes how musics and their identificatory associations are reinterpreted at different moments in history.[40]

In Haddon's analysis, she posits that the relationship "between post-punk and dub-reggae did not conform to just one of these identificatory modes, but slipped between and occupied both the 'imaginary,' which we might consider colonial, and the 'emergent,' which could be considered post-colonial."[41] In other words, post-punk's embrace of reggae was both a case of exoticism and of cultural allegiance. Part of how Haddon is able to explain that post-punk's allegiance to reggae was more "emergent" than previous attempts by white musicians to incorporate the techniques of black musicians is that it was more nuanced. Rather than borrowing wholesale the most obvious aspects of the genre, like the offbeat, upstroke "skank" guitar, post-punk bands like Joy Division and Gang of Four employed some of the subtler techniques of reggae, like the studio effects of echo and delay, and the use of melodica, a simple, breath-powered keyboard instrument. Haddon Characterizes the use of this instrument as an allusion to dub reggae, specifically to Jamaican producer Augustus Pablo, who used it regularly.

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40 Mimi Haddon, "Dub is the New Black: Modes of Identification and Tendencies of Appropriation in Late 1970s Post-Punk," *Popular Music*, 36:2, 2017, 286.

41 Haddon, "Dub is the New Black," 286.

> However, even though the melodica was strongly associated with Jamaican popular music, its sound is arguably not as obvious a Jamaican signifier as a 'skank' rhythm employed by the Clash, the Police, and the Rolling Stones. In the case of Joy Division, the melodica blends seamlessly into the kinds of synthesiser sounds with which they were experimenting. … In light of the broader discussions of post-punk appropriation, then, I would argue that the semantic slipperiness of the melodica, as a synthesiser masquerade, makes for a more subtle kind of musical appropriation than those exemplified by the Clash, the Police, the Rolling Stones and [Eric] Clapton. … In choosing to blend a dub timbre into their songs rather than dub rhythm, have Joy Division circumvented crude appropriation or crude primitivist stereotyping? Furthermore, given the extent to which rock and modernist cultural discourses prioritize 'newness,' 'transformation,' esotericism and secret codes, Joy Division's timbral experiment with the melodica could also be said to afford more cultural capital than the Police's rhythmic borrowings or the covers performed by the likes of Clapton and the Rolling Stones.[42]

In Haddon's analysis, Joy Division's subtle incorporation of a reggae instrument was a more nuanced homage, and therefore less exploitative, than other attempts to pay tribute to artists of the genre. Likewise, her analysis of Gang of Four's use of the melodica reinforced the group's progressive social politics and punk aesthetic.

> The particular way in which Gang of Four incorporated the melodica into their songs can be heard as being part of punk's anti-virtuosic ethos. In "Ether," the opening song on their album *Entertainment!* (1979), the band introduces the melodica during the instrumental break where it participates in an antiphonal dialogue with the electric guitar, playing in minimal single-note and single-chord bursts. Towards the end of the instrumental break, the two instruments (guitar and melodica) alternate playing dissonant chords on the downbeat, eventually collapsing together, no longer playing antiphonally, as their rhythmic diminutions propel the song forward towards its main riff. In effect, the melodica-guitar duet in this song is an anti-solo; both instruments play minimal, non-melodic parts. In other words, Gang of Four used this "primary school" instrument in such a way that accorded with punk's overall ethos of anti-virtuosity.[43]

Although it retains much of the aesthetic sensibility of punk, subcultural identification decreases in importance in post-punk, and post-punk increases the emphasis on latent

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42 Haddon, "Dub is the New Black," 292.

43 Haddon, "Dub is the New Black," 293.

intellectual distance inherent in punk's irony and disdain. Post-punk music doesn't signify an entire subculture the way punk does, but rather the musicians use the established disruptive strategies of punk for a variety of purposes. "Subcultures represent 'noise' (as opposed to sound): interference in the orderly sequence which leads from real events and phenomena to their representations in the media," wrote Hebdige.[44] Post-punk bands, like Gang of Four, use noise that's not just metaphorical, as Hebdige describes it, but also literal. The abrasive sounds regularly employed by Gang of Four are actually sonically disruptive, and sometimes cognitively disruptive—musical signifiers of Otherness or alienation. These are meanings created by sounds that have extra-textual import regardless of associated lyrics or album artwork. The actual notes, chords, instrumental textures, and, most crucially in the music of Gang of Four, the silences between the notes, contribute to a musical subversion of dominant cultural paradigms.

The presence of electric guitar is a critical musical signifier. The use of electric guitar in forms of rock music since the 1950s is not just an aesthetic choice but also a signification of at least three interrelated ideas. First, it is a signification of authenticity to rock audiences. This authenticity is linked most prominently to African American blues, but also connects to English folk, San Francisco psychedelia, and dozens of other rock precursors and subgenres that feature the electric guitar as the most prominent instrument. The electricity of the guitar is also a signifier: it represents modernity, technological sophistication, and the potential for volumes only possible through amplification.

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44 Hebdige, *Subculture*, 90.

And the electric guitar is a signifier of sexual virility to rock audiences. Within the often exclusively masculine context of rock music, the guitar is, frequently to the point of common cliché, a phallic symbol. Expressions of virtuosity on the instrument are frequently characterized as expressions of sexual prowess, so much so that the phrase "cock rock" is often used to describe certain kinds of hyper-macho heavy rock bands. This is perhaps the most important signification of the electric guitar because it is both performative and qualitative: the better the guitar solo, the more convincing the sexual expression. In *Running with the Devil*, Robert Walser describes the masculinity of heavy metal and hard rock as "inevitably a discourse shaped by patriarchy."[45] He describes the visual presentation, in live performances, music videos and still images of heavy metal rock musicians thus: "visually, metal musicians typically appear as swaggering males, leaping and strutting about the stage, clad in spandex, scarves, leather, and other visually noisy clothing, punctuating their performances with phallic thrusts of guitars and microphone stands. The performers may use hypermasculinity or androgyny as visual enactments of spectacular transgression."[46] This physical behavior is an enactment of masculinity and assertion of male sexual power. The music, likewise, is an assertion of masculine dominance.

How then do we unpack the semiotics of deliberately anti-virtuosic guitar performances? How do we interpret musical rock performances that seem to intentionally frustrate the implicitly, or sometimes explicitly, sexual expression of rock 'n' roll, a genre

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45 Robert Walser, *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender and Madness in Heavy Metal Music*. Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1993, 109.

46 Walser, *Running with the Devil*, 109.

whose very name, like jazz before it, refers to sex? Hebdige's concept of subcultural signification provides a window. Post-punk musicians intentionally misused the sounds of the guitar, commonplace in the music of the parent culture, to subversively signify dissent and alienation.

Although anti-virtuosity is a principle and uniting force in many kinds of punk rock and post-punk, anti-virtuosity in rock perhaps reached its apogee in No Wave, a late '70s New York-based strain of punk rock that placed the musical spotlight on untrained performers, many of them of women, and many of them with backgrounds in visual art rather than music. These bands often had intentionally alienating (or alien) names, like Mars, Theoretical Girls, and Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, and often made a point of using traditional rock instruments: vocals, electric guitar, electric bass, and drums. No Wave bands eschewed the electronic instruments, like the keytar or the synthesizer, then popular among disco-inspired New Wave rock bands. ("No Wave" was a twist on the New Wave title.) "Curiously, it was as though the No Wavers felt that the electronic route to making a post-rock noise was too easy," wrote post-punk historian Simon Reynolds.[47] "It was more challenging, and perhaps more threatening, too, to use rock's own tools against itself. Which is why No Wave music irresistibly invites metaphors of dismemberment, desecration, and 'defiling rock's corpse.'" It was a compelling reversal of the dominant paradigm, and the use of traditional rock instruments allowed the musicians to create expectations before subverting them through deliberate discordance, upended musical structures and, occasionally, outright hostility. Arto Lindsay of DNA might have been the most representative of the typical No Wave guitarist: he played a

47 Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, 19.

detuned 12-string electric guitar, but never played traditional chords or melodies. Rather, he attacked the instrument with a percussive assault, often against the beat of the group's rhythm section.

While most No Wave bands established anti-virtuosity as an overall aesthetic, Gang of Four employed this occasionally hostile approach in conjunction with otherwise precise and technically accomplished punk funk. But even within the context of Gang of Four's egalitarian punk-funk, guitarist Gill was able to make unusual instrumental statements, even ones that some listeners might interpret as heroic, partly by intentionally thwarting the expectations of the rock audience. His approach to the electric guitar was to fire muted strums, and spiky pinched harmonic overtones off-beat to the rhythms established by the bass and drums, an effect Reynolds describes as "making the listener flinch from the shards shooting out of the speakers." However, even more startling are the moments when, having created listener expectations for jagged, staccato shards of sound, Gill would instead play nothing. "Instead of guitar solos, we had anti-solos, where you stopped playing, just left a hole," Gill said.[48] Marcus, writing at the time, got swept up in a narrative that cast Gill as a hero:

> Guitarist Andy Gill … made me afraid to take my eyes off the stage. Dressed blandly in jeans and a shirt buttoned to the neck, with piercing eyes and a stoic face, he is a performer of unlikely but absolute charisma: his smallest movements are charged with absurd force. He holds himself as if he's seen it all and expects worse. He communicates above all a profound sense of readiness. He's a figure out of countless British sci-fi flicks: caught between powers that are at once impossible to understand and unmistakably evil, he's the everyman who claws his way to the final credits.[49]

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48 Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, 58.

49 Marcus, *Ranters & Crowd Pleasers*, 50.

So, even if Gill was a "guitar hero," he was an unlikely one—like a cinematic hero of necessity. His bland clothes contrasted sharply with the savvy fashions of rock musicians from the late '60s and early '70s, or the leather, spikes, pins and patches often associated with punk fashions. And the "profound sense of readiness" implies that he was reactive rather than proactive. Gill seemed to be defending himself, and maybe his family or his city or his planet, from an invading force.

The 1981 concert movie *Urgh! A Music War* featured a song or two from dozens of post-punk and new wave bands and solo performers, including the Police, Devo, and Klaus Nomi. Gang of Four performs one song, "He'd Send in the Army."[50] The performance confirms Gill's statement, referred to earlier, that "Instead of guitar solos, we had anti-solos, where you stopped playing, just left a hole": He plays with violent motion, hitting his guitar strings with abrupt, percussive, jerky strikes, creating abrasive sounds. After the first verse, Gill's guitar playing seems to take center stage—the camera focuses on him—and all the instrumentalists build to a moment when traditional rock audiences would be trained to expect a guitar solo. Instead, Gill plays nothing. He pantomimes the motion, a moment of performative frustration, moving his hand with the same violent rhythm that he uses to create his serrated, staccato sounds, but he keeps his hand barely above the strings, creating a jarring moment of silence when one would expect abrasive sound. The effect is tense and captivating.

If guitar virtuosity was considered a signifier of sexual virility by traditional rock audiences, were these kinds of intentionally anti-virtuosic moments signifiers that Gang

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50 Video available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=qY4gyk9puts&feature=kp

of Four was anti-sex? On the one hand, vocalist King described Gang of Four's abrasive but polyrhythmic sound as "perverted disco,"[51] implying a kinship with often explicitly sexual dance music, and, if anything, a heightening of that music's sexuality. On the other hand, the group's lyrics were often critical of cultural obsessions about sex, as well as media representations of sex. And critiques of power imbalances are a recurring lyrical motif throughout Gang of Four's oeuvre, with sexual power imbalances given central critical consideration. The band's debut single, released in December of 1978, was a song called "Damaged Goods." The title is a reference to a woman whose reputation has been sullied by sexual experience, and the phrase also reduces her to the status of a capitalist commodity. The chorus contains the lyrics, "Sometimes I'm thinking that I love you, but I know it's only lust," and the song ends with the repeated refrain, "I'm kissing you goodbye (goodbye, goodbye, goodbye, goodbye, goodbye)."

The first-person protagonists of Gang of Four songs do not represent some personae of the vocalists, the way the first-person pronoun represents the personal identity of an assumed self of some singer-songwriters in rock, like Bob Dylan or John Lennon. When King sings "I," he is not referring to himself, but instead distances himself by embodying some other character, most often a satirical exaggeration of a sexist, capitalist, or fascist. The literal views expressed are often undermined by the unstable music. The fractured music reflects a fractured, unstable, undermined personality.

As much as the members of Gang of Four were musicians, they were also actors, enacting a performance of signification wherein the music was sometimes deliberately at odds with the lyrics. This creates moments of irony, sarcasm, and intellectual distance in

51 Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, 63.

the music, and opens up new, unforeseen hermeneutic possibilities. Often, only a singular subjectivity is represented in most traditional rock and pop songs, even if three or four people are harmonizing on the word "I" in a song, it's is usually understood as representing only one person's identity, what Edward T. Cone calls the "complete musical persona."[52] For Cone, writing about 19th century lied, the cumulative personae of the composer, librettist, vocal performer and any instrumentalists coheres into one overall persona, even if there is some intriguing fragmentation, as in Franz Schubert's "Der Erlkönig," where one vocalist portrays multiple characters. If multiple identities are represented in many other songs, they are usually clearly differentiated by other vocalists, as in a romantic duet, for example. In the music of Gang of Four, subjectivities are usually fragmented, through sarcastic vocal inflection, non-linear lyrical passages, and overlapping vocal parts with different, sometimes even contradictory lyrics.

The fragmentation of identity also includes the instrumental voices, which are only rarely presented in a cohesive, unified manner. In the second chorus of "Damaged Goods," after King sings "Sometimes I'm thinking that I love you," the guitar stops altogether, leaving King's voice accompanied only by drums and bass for the rejoinder, "But I know it's only lust." Each instrument (or character)—guitar, drums, bass and vocals—stops unexpectedly at some point in "Damaged Goods" and many other Gang of Four songs. This lack of rhythmic stability sometimes gives the music a frenetic, syncopated energy that's almost like the predominant dance music styles of the late '70s and '80s, funk and disco, except that, in Gang of Four's music, those dance rhythms are often interrupted by either sudden changes in rhythmic pattern, dissonant blasts of guitar

52 Edward T. Cone, *The Composer's Voice,* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974, 21.

feedback, or, perhaps most notably, those sudden silences that are a hallmark of Gang of Four. The bass and drums might signify musical cohesion, but this is undermined and contradicted by the discordance of the guitar.

Although sarcasm is common in punk, the practice of vocalists representing multiple subjectivities was more common, in the late ’70s, in progressive rock, punk’s ostensible antagonist. Canadian progressive rock trio Rush’s 1976 song “2112” is a 20-minute suite that loosely tells a science fiction story set in a dystopian future. Rush vocalist Geddy Lee portrays multiple characters, including both representatives of the repressive regime and the song’s idealistic protagonist. The willingness to incorporate musical practices often associated with progressive rock, like multiple subjectivities, is part of what differentiates post-punk from punk. “2112” is also a rock song that glorifies the electric guitar, which, in the narrative of the song is a miraculous object that helps the protagonist shake off the shackles of a repressive state. The guitar is both mythic, as in a magical object in a fantastical tale, and mythical, in the sense used by Barthes to describe objects or speech imbued with ideological significance.

“Love like Anthrax,” one of the two songs on the B-side of Gang of Four’s debut single, expands upon the critique implicit in “Damaged Goods.” For Gang of Four, “love” seems to be an ideological construct, a concept of false consciousness used by songwriters, marketers, and other capitalists to mask sexual desire and motivate customers to buy records. The single version of “Love like Anthrax” sounds preliminary compared to the more fully realized recording on the band’s 1979 full-length album, *Entertainment!.* On that version, the song title has been shortened to simply “Anthrax,” and the band explicates its critique of the popular music presentation of “love” by using

two conflicting vocal lines. The song begins with waves of guitar feedback, centered on A. The drums and bass then begin, maintaining a simple groove that lacks the frantic propulsion that characterizes other Gang of Four songs and most of punk. The bass repeats a simple ostinato.

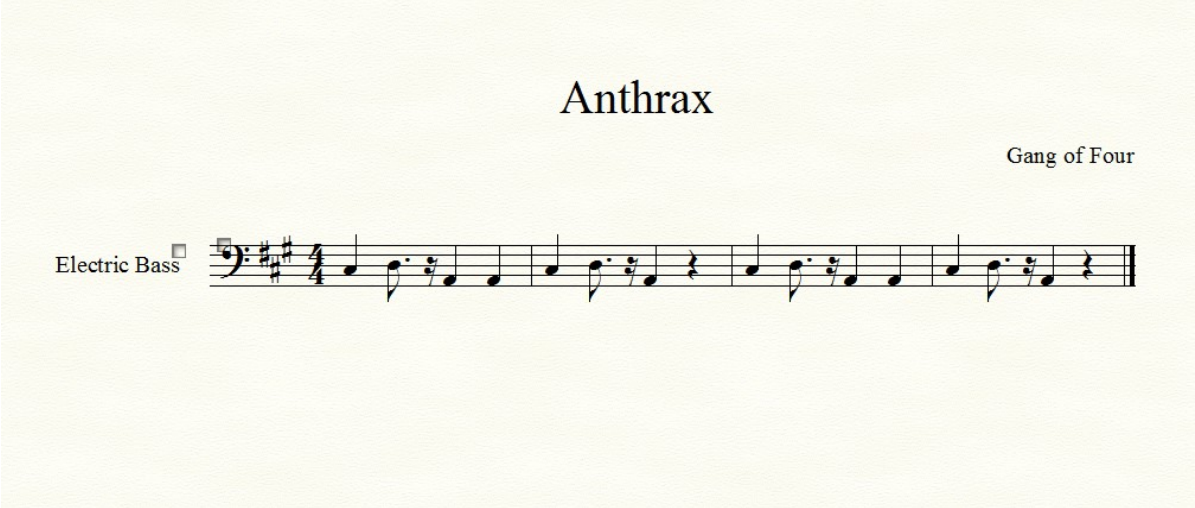

Figure 2: “Anthrax” by Gang of Four

It’s after the 2-minute mark before King begins to sing a simple melody, descending from D to A, subdominant to tonic, repeatedly, and with simple teleological musical motion. The lyric he sings is not, like most popular songs, a celebration of love, but instead expresses unmistakable anxiety about the subject:

> “Woke up this morning, desperation a.m./What I’ve been saying, won’t say them again/My head’s not empty, it’s full with my brain/The thoughts I’m thinking/Like piss down a drain/And I feel like a beetle on its back/And there’s no way for me to get up/Love will get you like a case of anthrax/And that’s something I don’t want to catch.”

Simultaneously, like an undercurrent, Gill speaks with a declarative monotone: “Love crops up quite a lot as something to sing about, because most groups make most of their

songs about falling in love, or how happy they are to be in love. You occasionally wonder why these groups do sing about it all the time"—here Gill pauses in his monologue to join King for a brief unison on the phrase "piss down the drain" before continuing:

> It's because these groups think there's something very special about it. Either that or else it's because everybody else sings about it and always has. You know to burst into song you have to be inspired, and nothing inspires quite like love. These groups and singers think that they appeal to everyone by singing about love because apparently everyone has or can love. Or so they would have you believe anyway. But these groups seem to go along with that, the belief that love is deep in everyone's personality. I don't think we're saying there's anything wrong with love, we just don't think that what goes on between two people should be shrouded with mystery.

Gill chimes in with other occasional moments of unison with King and then, after completing the monologue, there's another brief wave of feedback, again concentrated on A, before Gill and King sing together: "Love'll get you like a case of anthrax/And that's something I don't want to catch" twice more and the song ends with the simple tom-and-snare pattern that continues uninterrupted and unadorned throughout the song. The song's simplicity highlights the lyrics, and the band's decision to avoid a more typical pop song structure echoes the lyrical critique of the content of most pop and rock songs. "Anthrax" might not be anti-love song, but it is an anti-"love song" song.

This explicit cultural critique of "love" can be extended to be an implicit critique of the absurdity of conflating sexual expression with instrumental prowess. This is a critique expressed not through the lyrics of any particular Gang of Four song, but instead is expressed musically in moments like the jarring silence of "He'd Send in the Army." Unlike in progressive rock, where heroic status was often granted to the players with the most technical virtuosity, in post-punk it was possible to be a guitar hero by choosing to play silence.

Chapter Four

"Repetition, Repetition, Repetition": The Fall

As discussed in the previous chapters, the conventional wisdom among many rock fans and critics is that the initial late 1970s boom of punk rock was a reaction against progressive rock, a subgenre that emphasized virtuosity and aspirations toward classical music sophistication and respectability. But the Fall, a British rock group that formed in 1976, is an example of an early punk rock band that successfully incorporated progressive rock musical practices. The music of the Fall demonstrates that the schism between punk and "prog" is not as clear cut as it is often presented. Debunking the myth that punk was solely a reaction against the pomp of prog rock, and the inherent implication that punk was anti-intellectual, is key to understanding the aims and ambitions of post-punk

The term "prog rock" is associated with bands like Pink Floyd, King Crimson, and Yes, which, beginning in the late 1960s and early '70s, incorporated into rock musical practices from Western art music, jazz, Indian music, and other genres and traditions, as well as employing the latest musical and recording technology. The term "punk rock," initially associated with late '70s groups like the Sex Pistols, the Clash and the Buzzcocks, is often presented as a neoclassicist, anti-virtuosic reaction against prog. Punk from that era is often presented as a return to late '50s/early '60s styles of rock 'n' roll, albeit with louder volumes, faster tempos and more overtly political lyrics.

In its glossary definition of prog rock, the music database website Allmusic.com references the common narrative that punk was a reaction against prog: "[Prog']s heyday

soon came to an end with the advent of punk, which explicitly repudiated prog's excesses and aimed to return rock & roll to its immediate, visceral roots."

That narrative, punk being the adrenaline shot to the heart of rock 'n' roll after it had overdosed on prog, is ubiquitous among literature about either genre. In a review of the 2012 documentary *Big Star: Nothing Can Hurt Me*, about the '70s power pop band Big Star, music critic Steven Hyden skewers this narrative by presenting a fictional, clichéd punk rock film script:

> Watch enough documentaries about punk and indie-favored artists and this sequence will be instantly familiar. The script goes something like this: "In the early '70s, rock music became tired and bloated. [Cue concert footage of Emerson, Lake & Palmer.] The music lost its edge. [Insert a particularly long-winded snippet from Yes' *Tales from Topographic Oceans*.] Musicians no longer seemed dangerous or cool. [Close-up shot of Geddy Lee's nose.] What rock needed was a shot of energy! [Jump cut to the Sex Pistols playing 'Anarchy in the U.K.']53

There is some truth to this narrative. The schism between punk and prog represents a dichotomy between two competing definitions of rock 'n' roll authenticity. In his 2001 essay "Reconsidering Rock," Keir Keightley writes that "rock fans, critics and musicians are constantly evaluating the authenticity of music."54 This question of authenticity is at the root of the discussions of the relative merits of different pieces of music among fans and critics, and sometimes in musical statements—songs and albums—themselves, which are often intentional representations of different kinds of authenticity. Keightley delineates two competing definitions of rock authenticity: Romantic authenticity, which values tradition, community, sincerity, and an emphasis on folk, blues, and country forms

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53 Steven Hyden, "The Ballad of Big Star," www.grantland.com, 2013. Accessed Dec. 15, 2013.

54 Keir Keightley, "Reconsidering Rock" in *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock*, ed. by Simon Frith, Will Straw, and John Street. Cambridge, UK: University of Cambridge Press, 2001, 109-142.

and styles, and modernist authenticity, which values experimentation, change, openness to avant garde sounds and new technology.[55]

The split between punk and prog is a similar, related debate between two competing definitions of authenticity, although it's not an exact replica of the romantic-modernist schism. The difference between the two divisions is not simply one of nomenclature.

Progressive rock, with its emphasis on virtuosity, technology, and abstraction, is indeed a modernist venture. But punk is, in some ways, actually an ironic form of romanticism. The instrumentation and musicality tend to reside within the established domain of traditional rock 'n' roll, limited to electric guitars, drums, bass, and vocals, but the lyrical content tends to be more satirical and antagonistic, certainly not the pastoral sincerity that Keightley describes as the domain of a romantic rock group.

Punk emphasizes an energetic ensemble performance over individual virtuosity. Lyrically, punk is often political, realist and satirical, whereas prog is often earnest and tends to draw from literature, mythology, religion, and science fiction.

Part of the reason that punk lends itself so readily to the narrative of being a reaction against prog is that the lyrics of punk songs are often reactionary, characterized by oppositional tendencies directed against the British monarchy, other government agencies or institutions. (Punk, like prog, is primarily a British genre, although there are key groups in both genres from the United States, continental Europe, Australia and elsewhere.) The Sex Pistols' scathing and ironically titled "God Save the Queen," which famously climbed to number 2 on the British music pop singles chart in 1977, the

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55 Keightley, "Reconsidering Rock," 137.

commercial peak of punk rock, is probably the best-known example of this institutional opposition.

But the original model of punk rock, characterized by its oppositional stances—what it wasn't, rather than what it was—quickly proved unsustainable. By 1980, punk had quickly mutated into a variety of sub-genres, all of which can be, to some degree, grouped under the umbrella of post-punk. Among the post-punk subgenres that continued to come to prominence during the 1980s were New Wave, which was influenced equally by dance music and included prominent use of keyboards, Goth rock, which was most concerned with moody, downbeat atmosphere, and hardcore, which intensified punk's already fast tempos and aggressive instrumental attack.

There were still bands that fell squarely under the heading of punk rock, but the music had lost its wasabi-like power to shock and cleanse the palate. "Punk's initial blitzkrieg impact was absorbed into the mainstream, and the form itself rapidly became reduced to a series of clichés and dogmas," wrote Andy Wood in "'Rebellious Jukebox': The Fall and the War against Conformity." "Punk seemed to be rapidly co-opted, commercialized and remarketed as a series of new orthodoxies."[56]

By the mid '80s, punk had become a codified genre with an instantly recognizable sound: quick tempos, no extended instrumental solos, and simple, sing-song melodies with vaguely political lyrics. In spite of—or, perhaps, because of—this stagnation, in recent years, the schism between punk and prog has become less pronounced, as younger generations of rock bands have drawn from both sides of the fence. New millennium

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56 Andy Wood, "Rebellious Jukebox: The Fall and the War against Conformity" *Mark E. Smith and The Fall: Art, Music and Politics*. Michael Goddard and Benjamin Halligan, editors. Farnham: Ashgate, 2010. p. 40

groups like At the Drive-In, And You Will Know Us by the Trail of Dead, and Queens of the Stone Age all feature prominent features of both genres. For contemporary bands and audiences circa 2020, the schism between punk and prog is less important than it was in the 1970s when both genres were still in their infancy, and it was considered an impossibility to be a fan of both the Sex Pistols and Pink Floyd.

However, it's worth noting that, contrary to the traditional narrative, even in that initial punk era time period, the mid to late 1970s, there were bands that successfully incorporated musical and cultural aspects of both punk and prog. Perhaps the most notable of these groups is the Fall.

The Fall formed in Prestwich, Greater Manchester, England, in 1976, in the wake of the pair of Sex Pistols concerts that summer at the Manchester Lesser Free Trade Hall. These are concerts that, in some circles, have achieved legendary status. There are more claims of attendance by famous musicians of Manchester's then neophyte punk scene—future members of the Buzzcocks, Joy Division, and The Smiths, among others—than there were actual attendees. The concert has been recreated for mainstream films (*24 Hour Party People* in 2002 and *Control* in 2007), and a 2006 book, *I Swear I Was There: The Gig That Changed the World*, attempted to sort out who was actually in attendance for both shows, including the sparsely attended first concert.[57]

Mark E. Smith (March 3, 1957-January 24, 2018), the singer, frontman, and sole constant member of the Fall, was at both shows. "I loved the Pistols, really," he told biographer Mick Middles. "I loved Johnny Rotten's vocals. I certainly connected with that—the way he used his non voice. That was absolutely fantastic even though, in many

57 David Nolan, *I Swear I Was There: The Gig that Changed the World*. London: IMP, 2006.

respects, the Pistols were a pretty bad heavy metal band."[58] Smith's dismissive attitude about the group's musical ability is pertinent to a discussion of post-punk because it illustrates that the music of many punk bands didn't always much the ferocity or innovation of the overall punk aesthetic. Repairing this discrepancy is one of the chief aims of post-punk, including a group like the Fall, which defies easy categorization as either punk or post-punk, or anything else for that matter.

Smith launched the first lineup of the Fall shortly after the Sex Pistols' Lesser Free Trade Hall shows, partly motivated by the fact that he thought he could do it better than they did. Throughout the Fall's more than four decades as a band, one of the few constants has been that the membership has been in flux. Musicians join, leave, and return, creating changing, volatile chemistry around the constant nucleus of Smith. This was as true during the early years of the band as it was during tumultuous later periods.

The lineup on the group's first full-length album, *Live at the Witch Trials,* which, despite the title, is a studio record, included Smith, Martin Bramah on guitar, Marc Riley on bass, Karl Burns on drums, and Yvonne Pawlett on keyboards. The album was released in the spring of 1979 and had been preceded by a couple of singles the previous year.

This early Fall music is recognizably punk in many regards. The tone of the music and lyrics is confrontational, and some of the musicianship, especially Smith's thickly accented, nearly spoken word vocals, is anti-virtuosic. The early timeline of the band—forming in 1977, playing concerts and releasing singles throughout 1978, and then

58 Mick Middles and Mark E. Smith, *The Fall*. London: Omnibus Press, 2003, 70.

releasing a full-length in 1979—was roughly concurrent with many punk bands of the time, including the Buzzcocks, with whom the Fall often shared bills.

The Fall's canonical status as a first wave, or early second wave, punk band is confirmed by the routine inclusion of early Fall tracks on compilation albums of early punk rock, like "Bingo Masters Breakout" on Rhino Records' 2003 compilation *No Thanks! The '70s Punk Rebellion*. The group's first record releases, including the 1978 single "Bingo Masters Breakout" and *Live at the Witch Trials*, were on a punk label, Step Forward Records, founded by Mark Perry, the editor of U.K. punk fanzine Sniffin' Glue. The Fall's labelmates on Step Forward included Sham 69, authors of the punk anthem "If the Kids Are United."[59]

Despite this historical punk rock credibility, the Fall's music contained aspects that were generally frowned upon by the zealots quickly becoming the orthodox faction within punk. *Live at the Witch Trials* prominently features Pawlett playing an electric piano, an instrument found in almost no other punk rock, but regularly featured in prog rock.

Early punk rock songs generally stuck to a strict three-minute verse-chorus, verse-chorus, bridge-chorus structure. Even in 1978, the Fall was releasing songs like "Repetition," an extended five-minute open-ended vamp, over which Smith delivered a manifesto of sorts: "We've repetition in the music/And we're never going to lose it …This is the three R's/The three R's/Repetition, Repetition, Repetition" The song ends with a surprise tempo change, and a quotation from New York punk singer Richard Hell's

59 Mark Deming, "I Wanna Punk Rock: Step Forward Singles Box Set," www.allmusic.com, 2007. Accessed Dec. 15, 2013.

song “Blank Generation,” just before the fade-out. Smith and company would ignore the traditional pop song formula more often than they would embrace it.

Smith’s lyrics often contained allusions to literature, science fiction and horror fiction. H.P. Lovecraft and Philip K. Dick were favorites in the early era. In the final years of the band, William Blake made regular appearances. Smith adopted the band name from the title of a novel by the Nobel Prize-winning French author Albert Camus.[60] Literary references—of both the high culture (like Camus) and low culture (like Lovecraft) varieties—were common in the prog rock of bands like the Moody Blues, and basically unheard of within the realm of punk rock, which tended to value realism and working class values.

Smith, whose lyrics and interviews are often critical of academics, journalists, and historians, is a rarity: a well-read anti-intellectual. According to Mark Fisher, author of “‘Memorex for the Krakens’: The Fall’s Pulp Modernism,” Smith intentionally subverted these two expected poles of rock singing.

> “Smith’s strategy involved aggressively retaining accent while using, in the domain of a supposedly popular entertainment form, highly arcane literary practices. In doing so, he laid waste the notion that intelligence, literary sophistication and artistic experimentalism are the exclusive preserve of the privileged and the formally educated.”[61]

In other words, Smith and company were exploring progressive, experimental ambitions within the supposedly lowbrow structures and sonic palettes of punk rock. In its earliest moments of rebellion, like the Sex Pistols’ Lesser Free Trade Hall shows, punk rock was about open-ended possibilities. This meant that there was initially a place for the Fall

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60 Wood, “Rebellious Jukebox,” 61.

61 Mark Fisher, “Memorex for the Krakens: The Fall’s Pulp Modernism,” *Mark E. Smith and The Fall: Art, Music and Politics*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2010. p. 95.

within the genre, even though punk rock quickly became codified and genericized, and the Fall were left to pave a singular path that made explicit their unusual amalgam of influences. According to Stewart Lee's entry "The Fall" in *The Wire Primers: A Guide to Modern Music*, the punk genre was only a temporary refuge for the band: "The Fall were sheltering from the spit-storm behind the convenient punk umbrella, while in fact defining themselves in opposition to any prevailing orthodoxies. As youngsters, Smith and his cohorts were nourished by the 1970s countercultural drip-feed of Krautrock, Iggy Pop, Captain Beefheart, and weird prog."[62]

Many of those antecedents similarly blur the line between punk and prog. Allmusic.com defines Krautrock as "German bands of the early '70s that expanded the sonic possibilities of art and progressive rock." The music did not have the art music ambitions of British and American progressive rock. Instead it moved more toward electronic textures and mechanical dance rhythms. The Fall were especially influenced by Can, a group whose virtuosic but repetitive and improvisational grooves provided a template for many of the Fall's open-ended song structures. The 1985 Fall song "I Am Damo Suzuki" references a former Can singer in its title and lyrics, and the music contains explicit musical references and quotations from Can songs. The Velvet Underground, another influence, were, like the Fall, sometimes minimalist, realist, and anti-virtuosic, but still inclined toward extended song forms and musical abstraction. And the Fall were directly influenced by progressive rock bands. The liner notes of the 2004

62 Stewart Lee, "The Fall." *The Wire Primers: A Guide to Modern Music,* ed. Rob Young, New York: Verso, 2009, 22.

Castle Music CD reissue of *Live at the Witch Trials* by Daryl Easlea, mentions the Manchester prog band Van Der Graaf Generator as an early influence.[63]

The Fall had a long, eclectic, prolific career from 1976 until Smith's death in 2018. The group released 32 studio full-lengths, along with innumerable EPs, compilations, and live albums. This vast discography is partially a result of Smith's proudly proletarian work ethic.

Although the Fall's music often contains the common signifiers of punk and other aggressive rock styles—loud, distorted guitars and hard-hit drums—this is not always the case. In another departure from punk orthodoxy, the band has often been early adapters of new technology and musical innovations, including incorporation of various electronic music forms and instruments like synthesizers and sequencers. Unlike most original punk bands, which quickly burned out or faded away, its permeability between genre tags has enabled the durability of the Fall. The group often ran counter to prevailing musical trends in Britain—sometimes deliberately, sometimes just at the whims of Smith.

"Over the years, the group has mixed rockabilly rhythms, pounding riffs, experimental collages, misappropriated electronica, a subversive pop sensibility, and a dark and often deceptive sense of the absurd," wrote Lee. He describes the band's output circa 1982, including the critically acclaimed album *Hex Enduction Hour* as "a new and unique mode of expression that mixed rock's primitive structures with a transcendental, avant garde aesthetic."[64] That description, using rock music to achieve "transcendental, avant garde" music, is similar to the aims of a lot of progressive rock. *Hex Enduction*

63 Daryl Easlea. The Fall, *Live at the Witch Trials* liner notes. Castle Music CD, 2004.

64 Lee, "The Fall," 23.

Hour includes extensive collective and solo improvisation and other forms of experimentation. “The LP had all the hubristic ambition of prog rock combined with an aggression whose ulcerated assault and battery outdid most of its post-punk peers in terms of sheer ferocity.” wrote Fisher about *Hex Enduction Hour*.[65] That description, a combination of “primitive structures” with “a transcendental, avant garde aesthetic,” is similar to the aims of a lot of progressive rock. *Hex Enduction Hour* includes extensive collective and solo improvisation

The band’s 1988 album *I Am Curious Oranj* is a concept album about William of Orange written as a ballet to accompany choreographer Michael Clark’s company of dancers. Historical concept albums meant to accompany ballets are the exact kind of highbrow progressive rock gestures that the advent of punk rock was supposed to have erased.

“During the synthesizer boom of the early to mid-1980s, Smith hectored wildly over walls of guitars,” wrote Dave Simpson in *The Fallen: Life In and Out of Britain's Most Insane Group*. “In the 1990s, when Britpop brought a return to straightforward rock anthems, Smith, contrarily, added everything from violins to complex computerized sounds.”[66]

In 1990, the band collaborated with British electronic dance music duo Coldcut, and added Dave Bush, a techno DJ, to the group from 1991 to 1995. “Smith poured scorn on the burgeoning punk nostalgia bandwagon [in the 1990s], fashioning instead a Fall

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65 Fisher, “Memorex for the Krakens,” 107.

66 Dave Simpson, *The Fallen: Life In and Out of Britain's Most Insane Group*. Edinburgh: Canongate, 2010, 11.

that sounded undeniably contemporary by bringing the group's sound into the digital age," wrote Lee.[67]

Only ever a group with modest commercial success, the Fall's critical esteem continues to grow and has expanded into academia. In May, 2008, the University of Salford presented a musicology symposium entirely focused on the music of the Fall, titled "Messing Up the Paintwork."[68] "The Fall are a lacuna in these ways—an interloper caught between these histories, between locations (are they Mancunian or Salfordian?), between the singular and plural (Smith, or Smith and/or group?), between past and present (the sound of the old, post-industrial North? And yet surely the critique of the new?), and between a number of generations," wrote Michael Goddard and Benjamin Halligan, the editors of *Mark E. Smith and The Fall: Art, Music and Politics*, an anthology of papers presented at the symposium.[69]

To that litany of dichotomies, the Fall's position between punk and prog is an illuminating addition. Smith often employed inexperienced, amateurish musicians—punks—but through a variety of means, including bullying and psychological manipulation, inspired them to play avant garde, experimental forms of music. Simpson's book of interviews with former members of the Fall is full of stories of manipulation and references of being in the band as akin to being a subject in a "psychological experiment." Smith's rule over the band was somewhat similar to James Brown's iron-

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67 Lee, "The Fall," 25.

68 The title is a reference to a "Paintwork," a song from the 1985 Fall album *This Nation's Saving Grace*.

69 Michael Goddard and Benjamin Halligan, editors. *Mark E. Smith and The Fall: Art, Music and Politics*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2010, 7.

fisted control over his groups. Brown famously docked musicians' pay if they made any mistakes.

The debate between punk and prog, between modernist innovation and satirical postmodern neoclassicism, is a real schism, representing different definitions of rock authenticity. But not every rock band that began during the original punk era fits neatly into one category or the other. In fact, the Fall's long career means it was perhaps the most prolific and enduring band from the original punk era. Perhaps this hallowed status is at least partly a result of Smith's steadfast refusal to adhere to common musical genre allegiances. Given a black-and-white choice, Mark E. Smith and the Fall chose the gray.

Chapter Five

"Typical Girls Are Unpredictable": The Slits

By the mid-1970s, popular bands like the Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin, and Pink Floyd had established the archetypes of what international rock stars should look like: long-haired, skinny, white, boyishly handsome British men. The first wave of British punk bands, like the Sex Pistols, the Damned, and the Stranglers, featured some people excluded from this rock star archetype: the bald, the fat, the rugged, and the homely—but the groups were still primarily comprised of young white men.

Although punk, like most previous forms of rock, was dominated by men, there were several exceptions among the UK punk bands of 1976-77, such as Pauline Murray, the lead singer of Penetration; Gaye Advert, the bass player of the Adverts; and vocalist Poly Styrene and saxophonist Lora Logic of X-Ray Spex. The most well-known British punk groups, like the Sex Pistols, the Clash, and the Buzzcocks, were all men, but several other important bands included women in prominent roles. Arguably the most significant of these groups was the Slits, a group sometimes referred to as the first all-female British punk band.[70] However, the group's recorded music does not adhere to the usual strictures of the punk genre. Instead, it draws inspiration from punk and reggae in roughly equal measure, making it an early exemplar of post-punk. The musical amorphism and ambiguity of post-punk enabled unsung identities to be heard—particularly women. Inversely, the presence of underrepresented perspectives created fruitful new musical possibilities.

If, as Dick Hebdige demonstrated, British punk rock was in some ways a complementary musical reaction to the black musical styles of the era, funk, disco, and

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70 For example, a 2019 interview with drummer Palmolive published on the music website Tidal, has the headline: "Palmolive talks the Slits, punk's first female band." http://read.tidal.com/article/slits-cut-40

reggae, then post-punk, which was often an attempt to synthesize punk with those black genres, provided opportunities for new identity associations. If black men played reggae, and white men played rock, then who played post-punk? The answer was, and remains, open-ended. And the Slits were perhaps the band that most adeptly combined reggae with punk to form a startling hybrid.

The Slits were formed in London in 1976 by drummer Palmolive (Paloma Romero) and 14-year-old vocalist Ari Up (Ariane Forster) with early members Kate Korus and Suzi Gutsy, who were replaced by guitarist Viv Albertine and bassist Tessa Pollitt by early 1977. The members were insiders of the earliest London punk scene, having played in other bands with the Sex Pistols' Sid Vicious and dated members of the Clash. The women were untrained musicians, and the band's early gigs were fast and loose, by-the-numbers punk rock, notable mostly for the novel level of estrogen onstage. Over the course of the group's original career, 1976 to 1982, the musicians' technical skills improved as they developed a more nuanced approach to songwriting and performance, but the perception that the group was comprised of wild, inspired amateurs persisted. Even many writers who praise the Slits, then and now, often do so in terms of that emphasize the group's primitivism or "natural" talents, rather than the group's innovative melding of disparate genres. For example, Joy Press in her essay "Shouting Out Loud: Women in UK Punk Rock" described the group thus: "Untamed and untrained, the Slits came off like a girl gang of raucous savages; they dressed like ragamuffins. … And they courted chaos musically, too, their joyfully shambolic punk-reggae practically bursting with spastic percussion and the unison vocals of four caterwauling girls."[71] For listeners attuned to the punk aesthetic, which emphasizes raw expression over technical virtuosity, this description might sound appealing, but it does emphasize the group's

71 Joy Press, "Shouting Out Loud: Women in U.K. Punk" from *Trouble Girls: The Rolling Stone Book of Women in Rock*, ed. Barbara O'Dair. New York: Rolling Stone Press, 1997, 297.

joyfully lowbrow appeal instead of their musicianship or songcraft, both of which were eventually accomplished and formidable.

In many ways, as a group that began alongside the earliest punk bands but was quickly able to incorporate musical elements from black genres, in this case, mostly reggae, the Slits are the quintessential early post-punk band, bridging the confrontational, do-it-yourself aesthetic of punk with the rhythmically and sonically complex explorations of post-punk. However, Simon Reynolds, in *Rip It Up and Start Again*, his otherwise excellent history of post-punk, gives the band somewhat short shrift. Rather than devoting an entire chapter to the group, he writes about them in tandem with a male group, the Pop Group, another innovative early London post-punk group, who incorporated jazz and disco elements. Reynolds, like other writers, emphasizes the Slits' genuine inexperience: "Whereas some bands talked about not being able to play, but were secretly competent, the Slits were genuinely inept."[72] This kind of narrative depicting raw, untrained, outsider talent has long been used to characterize women in all the arts. It's a way of partially including female artists within a canon while simultaneously reinforcing their marginal status.

However, the members of the Slits themselves reinforced their image as primal, untrained, natural talents. "Although they'd started out with the intention of demystifying rock (both musically and in terms of its gender stereotypes), the Slits went mystical themselves, hankering for a less alienated way of life, and talking about 'natural rhythm' and tribal consciousness," wrote Press.[73] Perhaps this approach, emphasizing the "natural" and "tribal" elements in their music, was a cunning marketing strategy—commercially and creatively. It allowed the Slits to embrace the often condescending, sexist, and sexualized characterizations they encountered, and push them toward parodic

72 Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, 45.

73 Press, "Shouting Out Loud," 299.

extremes that satirized, scandalized, and implicated the patriarchy. Establishment figures, both within the context of rock music and within the larger Western society, operated with the assumption that if a woman was onstage, it usually was for the purpose of titillating a male audience. Women in rock are supposed to be sex objects? The group reacted to this widespread assumption by choosing a band name that was slang innuendo for female genitalia—but also had connotations of violence. In this way, the band members not only directly acknowledged their identities as women, and the degrading, sexualized assumptions that might accompany those identities, but they also turned their sexuality into a direct threat. Female musicians are supposedly more primitive than their male counterparts? The Slits appeared on the cover of their debut album, *Cut*, covered in mud, wearing nothing but rudimentary skirts, with grim expressions and wild hair, looking like prehistoric Amazon warriors. Lead vocalist Ari Up wore wild, provocative outfits—her underwear outside of her clothes and her hair in dreadlocks.

In *Pretty in Punk: Girl's Resistance in a Boy's Subculture*, Lauraine Leblanc described the careful positioning of early female punk musicians: "These female punk performers made important contributions to the stylistic punk parody of female sexuality, beginning with Patti Smith and Debbie Harry in the New York scene. In London, women in bands continued this process, alternately playing with hypersexual and asexual images."[74]

Despite these women's efforts to subvert sexist expectations about female stage performers, in practice they were still subjected to male objectification. "Whereas punk women intended to present these garments in such a way as to discredit their effect as fetishistic, sexually titillating items, the overriding cultural view of women as sex objects may have worked at cross-purposes with their intent," wrote Leblanc. Perhaps it was a

74 Lauraine Leblanc, *Pretty in Punk: Girl's Resistance in a Boy's Subculture*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002, 45.

case of a parody that hewed close enough to actual desires as to be misinterpreted as wish-fulfillment. “Their attempt at resistance, when contained within the subculture’s private code, could be, and was, often read by the mainstream press and by observers more in terms of its accommodation, rather than resistance, to feminine sexual stereotypes.”[75] And sexist reactions were also heard from within the supposedly more tolerant, progressive punk community. Malcolm McLaren, the opportunistic impresario who assembled and managed the Sex Pistols, wrote a movie script meant to star the Slits. “He envisaged them not as rebels, like the Pistols in his script for *The Great Rock ’n’ Roll Swindle* film, but as pathetic victims.[76] His scenario had the Slits playing four girls who ‘believe in the whole fabulous thing of a rock ’n’ roll group’ but who instead end up as strippers ‘being fucked from one end of Mexico to the other,’” wrote Press.[77] Perhaps the clearest demonstration of this potentially problematic, potentially empowering paradox is the cover artwork of *Cut*. The cover features the three women then in the band, Ari Up, Viv Albertine, and Tessa Pollitt, bare-breasted and covered in mud. (By the time of the recording of the band’s first album, drummer Palmolive had left and joined another early all-female punk group, the Raincoats. She had been replaced by a male drummer, Peter Edward “Budgie” Clarke.) Their expressions are grim and defiant, and their stances are confidant. Some observers might find the cover image to be an expression of the willful primitivism of the music, or a deliberate, defiant taunt of the heterosexual male gaze, but others might just see the nude breasts—and react lasciviously or angrily, whichever they are predisposed to do.

The Slits reacted to this sexism the best way possible: with defiant improvement. The group worked hard. “The whole thing was about looking at things from a fresh eye,

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75 Leblanc, *Pretty in Punk*, 46-47.

76 Press, “Shouting Out Loud,” 294.

77 Press, “Shouting Out Loud,” 294.

and sexuality had to be looked at, there were so many problems there that had to be solved," said guitarist Albertine. "And that meant stepping back. We all worked on each other's guitar, bass, singing, everything. It was painful, but we were very strict with each other."[78] This work ethic, and the songcraft that came along with it, is an aspect of the Slits' music often overlooked by narratives that highlight the group's supposed primitivism: There was in fact a strain of un-punk progress in their development as a band, as evidenced by the difference between the group's sloppy performances on early live recordings and the sophisticated, nuanced musical hybrids found on *Cut*. The songs on *Cut* are full of carefully crafted tempo and dynamic changes. They draw from dub reggae and punk rock equally. They're recognizably post-punk: historically connected to the culture of punk, and informed by punk's aesthetic values, but not simply punk rock in the strictest genre sense. And, in the case of the Slits, the music was written and performed by women with identities somewhat outside of the usual strictures of punk.

Just as the musicians of the Slits represented identities distinct from the traditional punk—a skinny, snarling, white British guy, with black leather jacket and spiky hair—so too was the Slits' music different. The Slits' strategy for musical innovation was hybridization, combining seemingly disparate influences into a new synthesis. This is a common strategy for post-punk musicians, one of the genre's defining features. In fact, it's a strategy for many artists across all disciplines during the postmodern era. However, the Slits were white women who created music heavily influenced by black styles, which was presented and perceived as primitivist. "For a lot of post-punk musicians, male and female, the sinuous grooves of reggae, funk, and African music were less rigid than rock, more connected to nature," wrote Press.[79] For the Slits, and other post-punk groups like

78 Brian Cogan, "Typical Girls?: Fuck Off, You Wanker! Re-Evaluating the Slits and Gender Relations in Early British Punk and Post-Punk," *Women's Studies*, 41:2, 2012, 418.

79 Press, "Shouting Out Loud," 8.

the Pop Group, this was a willful adaption of Otherness that was close to sensationalist appropriation. But the Slits did not recreate dub reggae wholesale.

The Slits attempted to create a form of reggae as if it had been invented by British women with a punk background. Again, this might seem like it crosses into problematic appropriation, but, as Brian Cogan notes, the musical space of reggae allowed the Slits room to innovative in a style that was distinct from their white male counterparts:

> Like many of their contemporaries, they were becoming increasingly fascinated with Jamaican reggae and dub, and unlike many of their contemporaries (with the exception of the Clash) they had also decided that the outsider music of Jamaica was the perfect vehicle for expressing the outsider music of women in the punk rock community.[80]

The Slits embraced reggae partially through collaboration. *Cut* was produced by Dennis Bovell, a Barbados-born dub reggae producer. Dub was reggae subgenre that emerged in the 1960s and ’70s following the innovations of producers like Lee “Scratch” Perry and Augustus Pablo. The style involved prominent use of the studio as an instrument. Producers would often begin by taking an existing recording and manipulating it in the studio, adding effects like delay, echo and reverb, drastically altering tempos, and manipulating mixes, often re-emphasizing the low end of recordings. This approach of using studio techniques to create new music from existing recordings presages hip-hop, post-millennial mashups, and many other electronic music subgenres. But dub producers would also employ some of those same techniques in the studio when recording new music. And evidence of dub techniques is audible throughout *Cut*: the bass is supple and prominent in the mix, the guitar is awash in spacious reverb, and the vocals are often chased by trails of echo and delay.

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80 Cogan, “Typical Girls?,” 126.

"I think what reggae really taught punk musicians was about space, and being brave enough to let there be holes and gaps—and dub even more than that," guitarist Albertine said during a 2010 interview.[81] "Because punk was very strict, very fast—get through it fast as possible—very, very urban. Whereas reggae also came from an urban background, but it was about letting go, being loose, and it was such a relief after the strictness and the minimalism of punk." And, as in the music of Gang of Four and other post-punk groups, the use of space—rests and spacious rhythms—is important to the music of the Slits.

In terms of chart success and enduring presence on anthologies and compilations, the most famous Slits song is "Typical Girls." In addition to appearing on *Cut*, the song was also released as a single in 1979.[82]

Like many dub reggae songs, and indeed many post-punk songs, the structure of "Typical Girls" is built around the bassline. The song begins with the kick drum and the bass guitar holding a steady pulse on a single note: a low E played in a repeated short-long pattern, an eighth note followed by a dotted quarter note. Over this pulse, the guitar plays a skittish chromatic descent, and vocalist Ari Up intones in a low voice, almost a whisper, "Don't create. Don't rebel." This introduction is in recognizably punk territory. The lyrics invoke alienation, and the music feels claustrophobic. The key of E is common for punk because the lowest and highest strings of the guitar are usually tuned to E, making it an accessible key for rudimentary guitar players. The slippery, chromatic guitar

81 *Reggae Britannia*, film (BBC, 2011).

82 The B-side of the single (1979, Island Records) was a thrilling, uptempo cover of Norman Whitfield and Barrett Strong's "I Heard It Through the Grapevine," which had already been a hit several times over for different artists, most notably Marvin Gaye (1968). This points toward another important black American influence on British post-punk: Motown, a record label that specialized in accessible soul. It turned out hundreds of hit songs in the '60s and '70s and was one of the most successful black-owned American businesses of the era.

line introduces a degree of punk-like dissonance, but it also makes the key unclear, beyond the obvious tonal center established by the bass.

After four bars, the music seems to open up. The guitar drops out, and the drummer introduces a clear backbeat on the snare drum. The bass maintains the heartbeat pedal point, but then something remarkable happens: a piano clearly establishes an E-major chord. This is noteworthy for two reasons. First of all, it's remarkable because, given the dissonance and alienation during the song's introduction, most listeners might have assumed the song was in a minor key, but the piano part establishes the mode as major. Secondly, the mere presence of a piano in the song belies the assumption that the Slits were a wild band of feral, untamed Amazons. The piano, with its immobile size, its connotations of wealth, its tonal clarity, and a name which literally means "quiet," is not an instrument usually associated with punk, a genre of fast action, street urchins, distortion, and loud volume. It's not necessarily an instrument associated with dub reggae either, but it's used in "Typical Girls" as a kind of studio effect, giving form, shape, and tonal clarity to the song.

After six bars, the song then segues into a section that resembles reggae. The bass moves away from the tonic into a rollicking figure centered around B-major, the V chord of the key. The guitar re-enters, first playing a slide glissando (which functions more like a sound effect than a tonal, rhythmic, or melodic statement) and then, along with the rhythm section, into a heavily syncopated groove. The slide part and the syncopated rhythm guitar part were clearly recorded separately—there's brief overlap—reiterating the studio-as-instrument approach to the recording of the song. This syncopated section moves at a much faster tempo than most dub reggae, but, with the melodic bass and the staccato guitar upstrokes on the up counts, the influence is unmistakable.

The syncopated section also reintroduces Up's vocals: "Typical girls get upset too quickly/Typical girls can't control themselves/Typical girls are so confusing/Typical girls,

you can always tell/Typical girls don't think too clearly/Typical girls are unpredictable, predictable." She sings with audible glee, there's lilt and vibrato in her voice, but also mockery and open derision toward the subject matter: conformist young women. It's a punk perspective and punk approach toward singing, joyfully antagonistic, but set against a non-punk musical backdrop: uptempo, piano-heavy reggae grooves. It's this startling juxtaposition that makes the song definitively post-punk.

The song alternates among those three sections, the claustrophobic introduction, the piano interlude, and the reggae groove, for the duration. There are variations in the lyrics and the vocal lines throughout the song, which including backing vocals from guitarist Albertine and bassist Pollitt. The lyrics continue to taunt and tease, with lines like, "Typical girls feel like hell/Typical girls worry about spots/Fat and natural smells/Stinky fake smells." Over the course of the song, Up repeats the word "typical" nearly 40 times. When she sings it during the first verse, her voice, as mentioned, sounds gleeful, albeit mocking, but by the end of the song, she attacks the word, seeming to spit across the plosive sound of the letter T, and nearly swallowing the rest of the word. But the lyrics build to a somewhat startling denouement: "Who invented the typical girl?/Who's bringing out the new improved model?/And there's another marketing ploy:/Typical girl gets the typical boy." This implicates not just the conformist young women themselves, but also their male counterparts, and, even more significantly, the commercial and cultural forces that construct these identities. It's the sort of cultural critique that many punk bands aspire toward but is conveyed through more nuanced musical strategies.

It's also a cultural critique from a female point of view and a feminist perspective, something made accessible to women by punk's theoretical disdain for convention and even more accessible by the open-ended musical possibilities of post-punk. "Punk rock's disdain for virtuosity, its lyrical focus on topics other than male teenage sexual angst, and

its focus on style allowed girls more access to the subculture's core than they had ever before enjoyed in any previous U.S. and British youth subculture," wrote Leblanc.[83] Elsewhere, she clarified further: "In mainstream rock youth culture, female fans had only submissive roles in the consumption of rock music: they could be teenyboppers, and when they grew older, groupies, with the groupie role providing a real-life extension of the sexualized hero worship of the teenybopper. Punk provided other roles for women, not only as musicians but as consumers of the music."[84] The idea that women could be tastemakers as well as performers is key to the Slits' prominent role in post-punk. They weren't just a band that brought token femininity to the punk, they were the band that brought a love of reggae to a punk audience.

And, as Cogman describes, their identity as women was central to their ability to introduce the punk audience to a new genre:[85]

> Lead singer Ari Up had developed a strong range, and a ferocious, frightening image. To outsiders, particularly male members of the audience (and the other bands), Ari Up came across as a truly frightening figure, a young and ferocious woman, unafraid of exploring her sexual nature in a political sense, and using punk clubs as an open space for questioning ideas of gender identity. ... Ari Up, who was starting a life long fascination with dub reggae, had grown her hair out in dreadlocks previously only scene worn by Jamaican immigrants in London's West End, further setting her apart from her punk contemporaries, and demonstrating that the Slits had an affinity for the outsider and the other even before incorporating reggae into their music.[86]

Punk blurred the lines between audiences and performers, not to the same degree as what was happening in dance music at the same time, but much more than what had been happening in previous iterations of rock music. Punk was about deconstructing and

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83 Leblanc, *Pretty in Punk*, 48.

84 Leblanc, *Pretty in Punk*, 46-47.

85 Cogan, "Typical Girls?," 125.

86 Cogan, "Typical Girls?," 125.

destroying the rock 'n' roll narrative that had started 20 years earlier. Punk was an ending; post-punk was a new beginning. The Slits' taste in music and culture—which is to say, their perspective—mattered as much as their performances. Furthermore, the perspectives informed the performances, and vice versa. The band's origin as untrained British musicians in the mid-1970s place them firmly in the continuity of punk, but their musical and tastemaking perspectives, their willingness to embrace sophisticated studio techniques and, most especially, their unabashed loved of reggae, a black genre associated with Jamaica and the West Indies, and their ability to incorporate that style into their own music, demonstrate why the Slits are a keystone of post-punk.

Guitarist Albertine's post-Slits career has including acting in movies, directing for British television, and writing funny, eloquent, and poignant memoirs. Because of her continued career in the arts, she is the former member of the Slits most likely to appear in documentaries, television shows, and the like, to discuss the legacy of the Slits. And in almost every interview, whether in print or on camera, she expresses that the group wanted to express themselves through "anti-macho-rock rhythms."[87] The fact that the Slits were women was important to their development as songwriters and performers. They were actively looking for rhythms that were removed from the hard rock clichés, like Chuck Berry and AC/DC guitar riffs, that were ubiquitous in late '70s punk. They associated those hard rock clichés with masculinity and idiocy. The Slits were looking for rhythms that expressed the alienation and Otherness they felt as female punks in London in the late '70s. And, like previous generations of British musicians, they found inspiration for the rhythms and the sounds they wanted by looking toward a historically marginalized group of people: black Americans.

87 Cogan, "Typical Girls?," 134.

The music of the Slits is joyful and energetic, alien and unusual, expressive and danceable. They took energetic anger from punk and learned to express alienation through dance rhythms from reggae. The joy they created themselves.

Chapter Six

Conclusion

The Mudd Club is one of the first venues discussed in *Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor, 1980-1983*, Tim Lawrence's insightful survey of New York's dance scene in the early '80. The Mudd Club, which opened in 1978, was ostensibly a punk club, but unlike the punk clubs that had opened only a couple of years earlier, the Mudd Club had a dance floor. Lawrence describes how New York punk DJs began to embrace dance music. "The frequently homophobic, racist, and sexist backlash against disco rendered punk's opposition anachronistic."[88] During their sets, the Mudd Club's began enacting "the ultimate punk move by selecting disco."[89]

> The Hegelian struggles of the 1970s were approaching the point of implosion. Punk and disco had respectively challenged the stagnant status quo, only to swerve into a dialectical battle of their own. But instead of concluding with a winner, the bout ended in a draw as the contestants clasped one another, exhausted, and in that moment grasped that victory could lie in amalgamation rather than annihilation."[90]

That amalgamation was post-punk. By drawing inspiration from concurrent black genres, like disco, funk and reggae, post-punk musicians, in Britain as well as New York, were able to disrupt rock's musical and social hierarchies. The music they created has proven both influential and, paradoxically, underappreciated. Post-punk is music that balances a staggering array of dichotomies. Arguably the two most important of these dichotomies

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88 Tim Lawrence, *Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor, 1980-1983*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2016, 26.

89 Lawrence, *Life and Death*, 26.

90 Lawrence, *Life and Death*, 28.

are punk rock and progressive rock, and black and white. One of those dichotomies is musical and aesthetic. The other is historical and cultural.

By exploring the intersections of these dichotomies, post-punk opened up innumerable possibilities for musical hybridity, balancing appealing aspects from several different genres. It took the energetic, critical aesthetic of punk and combined it with the prominent rhythm sections and innovative studio approaches of funk, disco, and reggae. It also incorporated some of the ambitious sonic experimentation of progressive rock.

By emphasizing the bass and drums, the music of Public Image Limited embraced signifiers of genres usually associated with African American music, which bestowed the music with a sonic signification of Otherness and alienation. The music of Gang of Four reveals a political intention to post-punk's sonic embrace of African American music. The band's funk-inspired arrangements emphasized the bassist and drummer equally with the vocalist and guitarist. This egalitarian balance reflected the band's neo-Marxist lyrics, which espoused working class equality and astute cultural criticism.

An important difference between post-punk and previous forms of rock is the role of the guitar. In most rock prior to the late '70s, such as blues rock, psychedelia, progressive rock and even punk, the guitar was the central instrument, the heroic voice. In post-punk, the aesthetic choices placed the electric guitar in a prominent but often secondary, even satirical, role. The important, but decentralized role of the guitar in Gang of Four resonated with the humanist lyrical rhetoric of the punk aesthetic.

The conventional wisdom among many rock fans and critics is that the initial late-1970s boom of punk was entirely a reaction against progressive rock, a subgenre that emphasized virtuosity and aspirations toward high art. But the Fall, a group that began

alongside some of the most prominent names in punk, incorporated techniques and musical approaches usually associated with prog rock. Those techniques include prominent use of keyboards, extended song forms, lyrics drawn from literary sources, and a willingness to collaborate with ballet dancers. The music of the Fall debunks the myth that punk was solely a reaction against the pretensions of progressive rock—and the implication that punk, and by extension post-punk, was anti-intellectual.

Post-punk has often been understood as simply an outgrowth of punk—punk rock with improved musicianship. But this project has attempted to demonstrate the post-punk is a synthesis of punk with disco, funk and reggae, and that its musical strategies disrupted the longstanding musical hierarchy of rock, which placed emphasis on the guitar over any other instruments. And by disrupting the musical hierarchy of rock, post-punk also disrupted rock's social hierarchy. The Slits represent simultaneous disruptions of rock's musical hierarchy and its social hierarchy. The band's music combines punk and reggae, and the group's songwriting offers cultural critiques from a feminist perspective, something made accessible to women by punk's disdain for convention and even more accessible by the open-ended musical possibilities of post-punk.

The music of these groups demonstrates that, in the late 1970s and early '80s, these post-punk bands were willing to draw from sources outside the codified traditions of rock. This allowed them to create music where professional virtuosity could coexist with punk energy, where distorted guitars could coexist with space-age keyboards, and where there was room for a diversity of perspectives.

Musical innovation is often the result of combining disparate genres to synthesize new creations. In British and American music of the 20th and 21st centuries, these

musical innovations have often been the result of transgressing the racial boundaries of otherwise segregated societies. Jazz, rock 'n' roll, and hip-hop were all created around this principle. But post-punk was an equally innovative, but often overlooked, synthesis of black and white styles.

In 2020, most contemporary popular music fans and scholars are familiar, to one degree or another, with jazz, rock 'n' roll, and hip-hop. Most even have some idea about punk, although those ideas might be muddled by the term's conflicting definitions, which include punk as a historic era, as a genre, and as an aesthetic approach. Post-punk is rooted in the aesthetics of punk, but because of its open-ended musical discourse, it's a much more difficult genre to identify and is therefore less well known. But for lasting musical influence, post-punk is more substantial than punk, and a startling and historic synthesis of white British and black American genres.

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