

The History of Rock Music: 1976-1989

New Wave, Punk-rock, Hardcore

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Punk-rock

(These are excerpts from my book ["A History of Rock and Dance Music"](#))

London's burning

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The effervescence of New York's underground scene was contagious and spread to England with a 1976 tour of the Ramones that was artfully manipulated to start a fad (after the "100 Club Festival" of september 1976 that turned British punk-rock into a national phenomenon). In the USA the punk subculture was a combination of subterranean record industry and of teenage angst. In Britain it became a combination of fashion and of unemployment. Music in London had been a component of fashion since the times of the Swinging London (read: Rolling Stones). Punk-rock was first and foremost a fad that took over the Kingdom by storm. However, the social component was even stronger than in the USA: it was not only a generic malaise, it was a specific catastrophe. The iron rule of prime minister Margaret Thatcher had salvaged Britain from sliding into the Third World, but had caused devastation in the social fabric of the industrial cities, where unemployment and poverty reached unprecedented levels and racial tensions were brooding.

Add the pre-existing "hooligan" phenomenon and a passion for drinking and fighting, and "punk" came to mean something much more serious than the Ramones ever intended: it basically ignited an explosive mixture of social and economic problems.

The difference between UK and USA was both quality and quantity: the USA had many more teenagers that were truly frustrated and identified with the new wave and punk-rock, whereas the UK had fewer punks that were truly punks but those who were... were extremely violent. In the USA the masses ignored the phenomenon: it was definitely not cool to be a punk. In the UK the masses loved the phenomenon: it soon became cool to dress like a punk. Therefore, in a few months London alone had many more punk bands than the entire USA. In a few months both the underground and the mainstream press were afloat in reportages about the punk scene, mirroring closely what had happened in the "swinging London" and in Liverpool with the Mersey-beat.

The real punks had enough loathing for society in their lungs to scream above the fad.

They were cynical, ferocious, anarchic, brutal, amoral and illiterate. They were often described as the new "barbarians", mainly because they were. Their live performances were the musical equivalent of throwing up in a toilet. They hated everybody and everything. It wasn't anger, it wasn't depression: it was sheer loathing. They wanted the fight and they never missed a chance to get in trouble.

Their music was the ultimate in simplicity: just scream a refrain as loud and possible and as fast as possible. Arrangements became an embarrassing trait of the bourgeois society. Cute melodies were off-limits. Maniacal attitudes were welcome. Songs shrank and shrank: basically, the title was most of the song. It was the ultimate in "generational anthem": the song was a motto, a slogan and little else.

Malcom McLaren was the manager who virtually invented punk-rock in Britain. He invented both the sound, when he launched the Sex Pistols (the Ramones on heroin and valium), and the look (Richard Hell transposed in the London slums), thanks to his London boutique.

Rock'n'roll had always had a fascination with the juvenile delinquent, but the [Sex Pistols](#) (1) certainly brought it to a whole new dimension. They seemed to exist only to wreak havoc, generate scandal and elicit outrage. Johnny "Rotten" Lydon screamed like a hostile, rabid beast, while his cohorts unleashed a primal, feral fury. They were not as gifted as the Rolling Stones, but they were their equivalent in the new "swinging London" of the 1970s. *Anarchy In The UK* (1976) and *God Save The Queen* (1977) had clear political overtones, although their album, **Never Mind The Bollocks** (oct 1976/aug 1977 - oct 1977), was more genuinely "anthemic" in the tradition of Rolling Stones, Who and Animals. They lasted only one year, but it was enough to feed a punk frenzy throughout the kingdom.

The [Damned](#) (1) had actually been the first punks out of the blocks. Their **Damned Damned Damned** (sep 1976/jan 1977 - feb 1977) was the quintessence of British punk-rock, even though with **Black Album** (may/jul 1980 - oct 1980) they converted to melodic hard-rock.

After the Sex Pistols, came the [Clash](#) (12), by far the most intellectual and among the first punk bands to take aim at social issues. They "were" the epitome of "anthemic". *White Riot, Complete Control, Clash City Rockers* and *London's Burning* channeled the rage of the "lumpenproletariat" into simple, melodic, riff-driven and noisy rave-ups. **The Clash** (feb 1977 - apr 1977), one of the greatest punk-rock albums of all times, was a vehement call to arms. Unlike the Ramones, the Clash were aware of the sociopolitical status of their country. Unlike the Ramones, the Clash could relate private angst and public life. Joe "Strummer" Mellors and Mick Jones were also capable musicians, and they proved it on **London Calling** (aug/nov 1979 - dec 1979), a milestone recording that was the exact opposite of what punk-rock was meant to be: far from being illiterate and nihilistic, the sermons on this album were a musical encyclopedia (drawing from country, rock, rhythm'n'blues, boogie, funk, ska, calypso, etc) and relied heavily on melody. **Sandinista** (feb/aug 1980 - dec 1980) forsook the "punk" and kept only the "rock" of the equation. A sprawling artistic and political statement, it summarized 25 years of music, from Chuck Berry to Bob Dylan to George Clinton to Bob Marley. It was also one of the earliest wide-scale appropriations of third-world music by western musicians. Completing the 180-degree U-turn, **Combat Rock** (sep 1981/apr 1982 - may 1982) sold that sound to the discos. The band had coined a distinctive sound, equally appealing to the rockers and to the dancers, that Mick Jones would continue to explore on his Big Audio Dynamite (B.A.D.) project.

Billy "Idol" Broad's [Generation X](#) (1), were also unique in that they did pay attention to melody: their songs were actually hummable and **Generation X** (fall 1977/winter 1978 - mar 1978) was actually musical. The [Buzzcocks](#) were even more melodic (beating the Ramones at their own game) and virtually invented punk-pop with *Orgasm Addict* (1977) and *Boredom* (1977), as did the vastly under-rated [Vibrators](#) (1), whose **Pure Mania** (apr 1976 - jun 1977) was one of the real classics of British punk-rock.

The vast majority of British punk bands, including [Sham 69](#), and the Adverts, with **Crossing the Red Sea** (late 1977 - feb 1978), merely copied the Sex Pistols,

Time would tell that there was more to British punk-rock than barbaric anti-social aggression. In fact, many punks were more literate than the average of rock music, coming from a leftist background and promoting a neo-socialist agenda. Many of them, far from being nihilistic and anarchic as the press (and their publicists) depicted them, actually believed that they could change the world. And most punks (even the angriest ones) were fundamentally poking fun at the British establishment, in a tradition of satirical writers and music-hall comedians that goes back centuries. At heart punk was even, in its own peculiar way, very puritan.

Australia

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While the focus was on London, there were other important scenes. The Australian scene was closely related to the British scene, but the results were different, as [Radio Birdman](#) and the [Saints](#) (two of the greatest punk bands of all times) opted for the raw and wild style of Stooges and MC5 rather than the Sex Pistol's primal assault. Radio Birdman (1) unleashed a rock'n'roll orgy on **Radios Appear** (? 1976/? 1977 - jul 1977) while **Living Eyes** (apr 1978 - mar 1981) adopted a more atmospheric approach. The Saints (2) debuted with the only album that can compete with the Ramones' demented style, **I'm Stranded** (oct 1976 - feb 1977), but then veered towards a hysterical form of rhythm'n'blues with **Eternally Yours** (oct 1977 - feb 1978).

Art-punk

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Wire, Fall and Swell Maps were the artsy bands of early punk-rock. [Wire](#) (12) evolved rapidly from the demented and decadent punk-rock of **Pink Flag** (sep/oct 1977 - nov 1977) to the surreal atmosphere of **Chairs Missing** (apr 1978 - aug 1978), which betrayed Brian Eno's influence and incorporated the synthesizer. That anathema instrument, the very nemesis of punk-rock, became prominent on **154** (spring 1979 - sep 1979), an exercise in bleak soundscapes, drenched in psychedelic nightmares and industrial alienation. **A-Z** (? 1980 - oct 1980), the first solo album by Wire's keyboardist [Colin Newman](#) (10), expanded on those ideas with an apocalyptic cycle of menacing dirges, and achieved a demented intensity that was the musical equivalent of expressionism.

Mark Smith's [Fall](#) (2) were punks, but the emphasis of albums such as **Live At The Witch Trials** (dec 1978 - mar 1979) and **Hex Enduction Hour** (sep/dec 1981 - mar 1982) was on noise and anarchy, not on violence and sarcasm. They mostly saved their energy for brutal raids on harmony, of the kind pioneered by Captain Beefheart and

Pere Ubu. Even the much more accessible sound of **This Nation's Saving Grace** (jul 1985 - sep 1985) and **Frenz Experiment** (summer/fall 1987 - jan 1988), when Smith compromised with traditional formulas, still contained substantial doses of mental insanity.

One of the most inventive bands of the British new wave, despite lasting only a few months, the [Swell Maps](#) (1) bridged the worlds of punk-rock, acid-rock, avantgarde music and pop music. Led by brothers Nikki Sudden and Paul "Epic Soundtracks" Godley, the band applied psychedelic chaos and catchy refrains to a magma of free-jazz improvisation, demented dissonances, killer riffs, found objects, Stooze-ian distortions, industrial bacchanals. **A Trip To Marineville** (feb 1975/apr 1979 - jul 1979) was a monument to anarchic nonsense.

John Langford's [Mekons](#) (2) were also employing skewed rhythms and intoxicated harmonies, but they were an old-fashioned pub-band of incorrigible drunkards, disguised as punk-rockers. The shamelessly incompetent rock'n'roll of **Quality Of Mercy Is Not Strnen** (? 1979 - nov 1979) turned them into icons of the independent/alternative scene, but they found their true mission with a populist, sarcastic country-rock, for example on **Fear And Whiskey** (? 1984/? 1985 - ? 1985).

The [Slits](#) were the first female punk band, a predecessor of the riot-grrrrls, and **Slits** (? 1980 - apr 1980) was one of the first feminist albums since Joy Of Cooking.

[Birthday Party](#) (2), which also came from Australia, were absolutely unique in their dissonant, awkward and deranged approach to punk-rock. **Prayers On Fire** (dec 1980/jan 1981 - apr 1981) and **Junkyard** (apr/aug 1981 - may 1982) offered grotesquely dislocated blues and fake jazz, while vocalist Nick Cave tested human hearing with absurd vocal performances worthy of Captain Beefheart.

Funk-punk fission

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Britain was coming out of a decade of progressive experiments. Punk-rock was largely born as a reaction against the excessive cerebral/militant approach of those experiments, but displayed from the early days the influence of the very school it was reacting against (one of punk's many inherent contradictions). Quite a few punk musicians toyed with jazz and funk. They rediscovered the "savage" essence of jazz, which is, after all, African music, and the vibrant feeling of funk's syncopated rhythm. Jazz and funk were, in other words, closer to the punk spirit than any punk would ever want to admit. The founders of jazz and funk had been "punks" themselves, although in a wildly different world (one in which the "punk" would be hanged from a tree or banned from society, not one in which the punk became a celebrity).

The landscape of bands that focused on jazz and funk was far less homogeneous but far more creative than the landscape of straightforward punk-rock.

The band that legitimized this hyper-fusion of genres was the [Pop Group](#) (110) and rarely has a name been more misleading. The Pop Group was the quintessential experimental (and agit-prop) combo, integrating elements of jazz, funk, rock, dub and classical music. Their music was revolutionary in word and in spirit. **Y** (? ? - apr 1979), one of the most intense, touching and vibrant albums in the history of rock music, was the outcome of the Pop Group's quest for a catastrophic balance between primitivism and futurism: the new wave's futuristic ambitions got transformed into a

regression to prehistoric barbarism. At the same time, the band's furious stylistic fusion led to a nuclear magma of seismic funk syncopation, monster dub lines, savage African rhythms (Bruce Smith), dissonant saxophone (Gareth Sager), and visceral shouts and cries (Mark Stewart). The lyrics celebrated the unlikely wedding of punk nihilism and militant slogans. Both the method and the medium were permeated by an anarchic and subversive spirit. In fact, Stewart's declamation was closer to Brecht's theater than to "singing". Another dose of lava-like anger was poured into the funk-rock foundations by the anthemic rants of **For How Much Longer Do We Tolerate Mass Murder** (feb 1980 - mar 1980). Both albums sounded like assortments of mental disorders. A sound so revolutionary (in both senses of the word) had not been heard since the heydays of the Canterbury school.

When the Pop Group broke up, saxophonist Gareth Sager and drummer Bruce Smith joined keyboardist Mark Springer and Don Cherry's daughter, Neneh, to form [Rip Rig & Panic](#) (12), a band that offered a lighter version of the Pop Group's afro-funk-soul-jazz-punk hyper-fusion. Reaching back to the 1940s and 1950s, they delivered a spectacular revision of big-band swing and rhythm'n'blues on **God** (? - ? 1981), in a frenzy of dancing and plagiarism. The equally feverish **I Am Cold** (? 1982 - ? 1982) and **Attitude** (? 1983 - ? 1983) mitigated the volcanic exuberance of the group with increased jazz and ethnic elements.

Mark Stewart associated with Tackhead and continued the original program of dynamiting the song structure, albeit in a hip-hop framework.

Other groups that experimented with funk and jazz were the [Gang Of Four](#) (1), whose **Entertainment** (jun 1978 - sep 1979) was as deranged a work as Pop Group's debut album, and their offshoot [Shriekback](#); [A Certain Ratio](#) (1), one of the most sophisticated, a hybrid of Joy Division and Talking Heads, even though their best material may be on the 1980 singles rather than on the pretentious album **To Each** (? 1981 - may 1981); [Ludus](#), [Glaxo Babies](#), [Shock Headed Peters](#), [Slab](#), [Stump](#).

The last salvo in this tradition was shot by the [Wolfgang Press](#) (2), whose the abstract psychological dance meditations of **Standing Up Straight** (jan/mar 1986 - may 1986) returned to the "modern dance" of Pere Ubu and the Talking Heads, and attained a deeper meaning on the eclectic and atmospheric **Bird Wood Cage** (? 1988 - nov 1988).

These groups had in common an odd balance of primitivism and futurism: their music was, at the same time, reaching back to African tribal music and arching forward to envision the soundtrack for the post-industrial world, a harrowing fresco of human society after the nuclear apocalypse.

Punk never dies

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The second wave of British punk bands, that came out when the originals had already disbanded or changed style, simply increased the original level of violence: [GBH](#) (1), whose explosive **City Baby Attacked By Rats** (? 1982 - jul 1982) sounds like the British version of the Dead Kennedys, [UK Subs](#), [Newtown Neurotics](#) (1), whose **Beggars Can Be Choosers** (? 1983 - ? 1983) still embodied the spirit of 1977, [Nihilistics](#), [New Model Army](#) (1), whose **Vengeance** (? 1984 - apr 1984) was one of the best political albums of the age, and, in Ireland, the great [Stiff Little Fingers](#) (1), whose furious, anthemic, loud and fast **Inflammable Material** (fall 1978 - feb 1979)

may have been the most influential of them all on future generations.

Anarchists

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A significant branch of punk-rock was devoted to anarchism. They were agit-prop bands that sang about revolution and terrorism, the ideal children of MC5. The moral leaders of the movement, [Crass](#) (1), frequently didactic and rarely musical but sincerely and tragically gripping on **Stations Of The Crass** (aug 1979 - fall 1979), and [Discharge](#) (1), whose **Hear Nothing See Nothing Say Nothing** (? 1982 - may 1982) erupts with a blind destructive fury that predates grindcore, produced some of the most radical sounds of the time.

The most creative extremists were probably two bands that debuted around 1981: [Rudimentary Peni](#) (2), who released **Death Church** (apr 1983 - may 1983) and **Cacophony** (? 1987 - early 1989), a 30-song musical aberration that sounds like a concerted effort by Captain Beefheart, Sonic Youth and Clash; and the [Subhumans](#) (1), whose **The Day The Country Died** (jun 1982 - ? 1983) served one of the scariest batch of angry rants.

The whole thing lasted a few years. The first wave was dead after a few months, but punk-rock kept producing ever new bands that took over and prolonged the agony of a genre that was not meant to last. It lasted longer than any other genre in the history of rock music.

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