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LETTERS
INTRODUCTION

Two years ago Radical America received the following letter to the editor. Because it set in motion the process which has led to this special issue on youth and popular culture, we print it here:

Dear Editors:

I am a student at Purdue University and found a copy of your magazine in the storage area of the library. I found it very interesting. Unfortunately the copy was over a year old; I'm hoping you haven't quit publishing.

One note of criticism to the issue that I saw—you seem to dwell so much on the youth of the sixties. Granted it was a time of great awakening, but we are not living in the sixties any longer and there is a new youth movement generating. It centers around a kind of music called hardcore punk. I write this as an expression of my own beliefs and not to be taken as a generalization of all punks. But as I see it this movement is more revolutionary and radical than a lot of stuff done in the sixties. Most (and I hate to generalize) punks are far left wing and many, like myself, are anarchists, believing that all governments are evil. There are already several anarchistic collectives world wide, including the US. This movement is growing rapidly among the youth of the world, especially in European countries like Finland, Italy and even traces in Russia. Also large punk "scenes" as they are called have appeared in the last few years in Brazil, Lebanon, Israel, South Africa, and in almost every city in the US. The scenes are managed by punks, meaning the kids put on the shows (all ages, no corporate slugs) in old warehouses, club houses, or anywhere else. Bands make no money, promoters make no money, shows are inexpensive, and usually five or six bands play. Politically, it seems most bands are left wing or anarchistic and the music itself is very intense with all the energy a band can muster going into every song. The lyrics are what count. The lyrics to a song by the Rejectors are, for example:

Why do we live in fear
Victims of a nuclear age
It's clear to me
that we could live more peacefully ourselves
With anarchy
And build a world that's truly free
The choice is ours
The time is here
Reclaim our lives, destroy our fears
Fight establishment, fight establishment

Bands are generally anti-drugs, government, religion, apathy and because we are such a minority, (maybe 50,000 world wide), everyone seems to know everyone else. There is a bond that ties everyone together because we are so different. There are literally hundreds of fanzines that people put out expressing their own views and telling the world what's going on. Please don't forget that a whole new generation is here fighting for what we believe.

Carl Haynes, III
W. Lafayette, IN

Subsequent contacts with the editors of Maximum Rock and Roll, a punk fanzine interested in the links between youth culture and politics, raised similar issues.
Why was there such a distance between the visible Left, including feminism, and many of those, especially young people, who identified with the rebellious spirit of punk music and the subculture that surrounds it? While Rock Against Racism promoted concerts and cultural events with explicit political goals, the subculture that grew up among urban black and Latino youth with Hip Hop, graffiti-art, and breakdancing was rarely on the Left agenda. Youth had been discarded as a political category, as a force for transformation. While many of us from the New Left pondered why we hadn’t reproduced ourselves as a political generation, younger editors and our readers pushed us to rethink our notions of politics.

We realized that not since 1969 had Radical America focussed on youth or youth culture in the U.S. At that time the editors sought to explain the sources and elaborate the political meaning of the youth rebellion of which they were part.

Today, the public recognition of youth and the attempts to engage them politically have come from the Right, even if the appeal is clearly to a particular segment of youth. The fact that a growing number of those under 25 identify with the Republican Party and in 1984 voted for Reagan shaped our own view of youth politics as basically conformist, that is, “anti-youth.” The media reinforced this view with images of clean, white youth lining up behind Reagan. In contrast, Black and Latino youth have been cast as threatening—unemployed, violent or pregnant. For the most part, people’s awareness of the subcultures which oppose these dominant images is through their depiction in mass culture—in high fashion or in films like Suburbia, Beat Street, Breakin’ or Decline of Western Civilization. Yet, the surfaces more than the content emerge: the subcultures become “styles,” their inner workings, support systems, life-blood remain hidden.

In the face of the images of Reagan youth (the ironic name of a punk band) we were alerted to the significance of youth subcultures by letters like Carl Haynes’. Fanazines, like Maximum Rock and Roll (MRR), exposed us to the intensity and vibrance of an elaborate international network of youth. Jeff Goldthorpe, interviewer of the MRR editors, wrote to us last year:

“In an era when rightist cultural politics prevail, it might seem of consequence if an international youth subculture sprouted up in which scathing criticism of “the system” was the norm. It might seem notable that respected musicians in that subculture railed against apathy, US war preparations and racism. At a time when major left presses are often teetering on the brink of financial ruin, it would be surprising to find that such a subculture in the US could spawn over a hundred grass roots publications, many produced by teenagers. It might also seem of import if there was a national magazine, run by avowed socialists and anarchists, with a paid circulation of 6,000, linked to a syndicated radio show heard over 25 or so stations, both of which strove to encourage a critical, thinking attitude in the subculture and cooperation among musicians, instead of the ethics of the marketplace. It would appear to be phenomena for a mostly-older generation of militants to take a serious interest in.”

Goldthorpe confronted us with the subculture’s critique of the 60s legacy. The younger generation faces a future that appears bleak, unchanged by the 60s rebellion. The utopian impulses of the previous counterculture and political activism find no place in this high tech world where technological innovations reflect the goal of domination on the part of the elites: scientific, political and military. Artificial intelligence and robots service a militarized culture. These developments measure a distance between the forms of power confronted by the 60s generation and the youth of today. The unnaturalness of US society is reflected in punk images, society’s barbarism, captured in punk symbols. In playing with the underside of the dominant culture, the youth rebellion exists on a dangerous edge. Whether the anger becomes linked to an idea of social transformation depends, in part, on how progressive politics take shape: our receptiveness to expressing alienation—our willingness to take up a critique of the culture.

The interview with Maximum Rock and Roll was provocative, generating the discussions of the left and youth sub-cultures raised above. It also contributed to breaking our perception of youth as solely allied to conservative politics,
yet many questions remain. We wondered about the limits of irony and whether the success of punk parody results in an inability to define and confront their own stake in the future. Discussion of the class and cultural origins of punk lacked a self-consciousness about the deeper meanings of those issues for the subculture itself. Fusion between hardcore and other musical styles, with all the possibilities that raises, receives only a mention. Likewise, the discussion of gays in the punk scene stopped short, with an acknowledgement of homophobia. This seemed to contrast sharply with punk presentation, the express desire to subvert convention, but perhaps highlights the ambiguity of exposing cultural norms by displaying their logical excess.

While we were captivated by the energy of MRR and other fan and photozines, we were struck by the overwhelming projection of men and male images. The interview failed to answer our questions about the images and the reality of women in punk: how women project themselves into a scene so predominantly male, whether the questions of style take on different meanings for them, how women define their relationship to the violence or pseudo-violence of the scene. While we were disappointed with some aspects of the interview, a lively discussion about these issues does continue in the pages of MRR. In fact, the compelling character of the subcultures is well documented in the fanzines. If we ignore these developments we miss an opportunity to learn how youth organize themselves against prevailing norms, we miss their insight into the meaning of generations, into the motivating factors for youth in seeing themselves as political agents. This issue is a beginning effort to make more visible some of the themes the current youth subcultures are concerned with: the politics of style and image, the integration of art into everyday life, the relationships between the cultural artist and the cultural audience and their own internal debates on sexism and racism.

Rebee Garofalo, in his article “Hip Hop,” focuses on U.S. black and Latino urban subculture of the 70s and 80s which includes rap music, graffiti art and breakdancing. Like Maximum Rock and Roll, the Hip Hop subculture shows a relationship between music, fashion, style and a sense of alienation which is both cultural and political. Hip Hop rises out of both an oppressive urban setting and a sense of black and identity politics.

Hip Hop’s beginnings, like those of the punk subculture, were locally organized and decentralized. This youth-defined rebellion took shape in creative expression; for example, DJs, rather than becoming passive conveyors of top down pop music, are active creators of rap and scratch, appropriating and re-energizing mainstream music. Young graffiti writers, through their bold use of spray paints, and their focus on subway trains and buildings as public canvasses, reveal creativity and cultural expression in what was initially seen, outside the subculture, as vandalism.

In contrast to American punk, which rejects conventional standards and produces an aesthetic which reflects the ugly underpinning of the clean and sanitary veneer of American suburbia, Hip Hop develops as an attempt to transform the barren burned-out landscape of inner city areas like the South Bronx. Punk emerges from a white, primarily middle-class
experience and has its basis in the negation and rejection of that experience. Hip Hop is a set of art forms which both describe and go beyond the experience of urban black and Latino youth. While graffiti reveals alienation and rebellion, its artistry speaks in a positive way, providing an alternative cultural identity to be claimed by otherwise marginal youth.

More so than punk, which actively rejects commercialization, Hip Hop has been subject to the assault of mainstream absorption. As presented on records, films or television, Hip Hop often loses the hard edge of alienation which produced it. The harsh realities of the urban life become blurred by a romance with style and success. This process also shatters the isolation which fostered its early development. Garofolo points out that some Hip Hop artists have successfully been able to negotiate the integration of their work into mass culture and major record labels, and that the national film attention did revitalize breakdancing. However, he also points out that, as in the case of graffiti writers, the change of audience from inside to outside the subculture itself, from subway cars to studios, from illegal to legal, irrevocably breaks down the political form and message of the art.

It is important to note that while young women were active from early on within the Hip Hop, rap, and breakdancing movement, and in fact were prominent characters in films such as “Wild Style,” the competitive nature of breakdancing crews and rap teams eventually shut young women out.

Stuart Cosgrove’s article on the Zoot Suit riots in the US in the late 30s and 40s reminds us that Hip Hop had precursors. As with Hip Hop, young men who donned the zoot suit, and their female counterparts in short skirts and tight-waisted jackets, defined their identity as black and Latino youth in tension with the dominant culture. The flamboyant and extravagant fashions adopted by the gangs were defiant, visual declarations of racial difference and non-conformity to national patriotic demands for austerity and self-sacrifice. Wearing the zoot suit represented the open refusal of black and Latino youth to participate in the war effort. This refusal erupted into violent riots when Zoot Suit gangs clashed with patriotic, racist, white servicemen.

Style and fashion as expressions of a rebellious identity or as erotic communication have been a male prerogative. Women/girls have been constrained by their status in the culture, as objects to be looked at, and by real threats of assault, rape, and harassment, that is, by men assuming their right to define and invade the female body. The freedom of men to play with image and the constraints on women find common ground: the power of men in the culture.

Sheryl Garratt and Sue Steward, two English writers, explore these issues in “What Shall I Wear?”. The many women musicians they interviewed (across genres, race and age) present the tension between self-definition and the demands of the commercial music market. At the intersection of subcultures and the dominant culture, they confront the limits on women’s ability and men’s continued power to define the meaning of images. The women’s liberation movement disrupted this power. Women refused to project images pleasing to men, but in their rebellion, feminists tended to deny meaning to style and image except as repressive forms of masquerade. Women’s embrace of “the natural” too often meant the denial of the body, the ceding of fashion, image, and erotic communication to men.

We print material from the local Rock
Against Sexism (RAS), in part to present one way women have tried to open a space within the subculture to engage with music, style, fashion and politics on their own terms. By challenging old images of women in rock music, confronting the ramifications of violence in various musical scenes and encouraging women to emerge publicly as musicians, critics and DJ’s, RAS puts forward a feminist critique which contrasts with the MRR interview.

Like Hip-Hop, the energy and activities of RAS do project a future. It was striking to us that the demand for an alternative cultural space emerged from those for whom tension with the norms arose around race and gender, and whose identity is linked with a legacy of social movements. This contrasts with the deep cynicism reflected in the male-defined, primarily white subcultures.

Perhaps reflecting the divided political and cultural self, two fictional personas in “Rock & Roles: Fear & Loathing on the Cultural Front” discuss the possibilities of rapport between the Left, subcultural groups and coalition-building. Using the format and language of a leftist cultural legacy, through the devices of a “manifesto” and an “interview,” the article includes up to the minute reports from the subcultural front seen from the eyes of a political DJ. The interviewer asks pointed questions about right wing punks, the macho, aggressive ethic in punk style and the actual level of overt political consciousness present in punk scenes.

Those of us who have worked putting together this issue finish it with an unexpected sense of elation. The debates that have been provoked for us, and which we’ve tried to convey here, have been intensely compelling. We have absorbed some of the spirit and urgency that fanzine readers and writers bring to their internal debates. The endless pages of closely spaced print, running off the columns and pages reminded us of the early look of magazines like Radical America. We hope that this issue will also provoke our readers to respond to its themes and interpretations, its look and its spirit, and that we can continue the discussion begun here.

As we go to press, we are heartened by renewed activity on the campus, particularly protest around apartheid, as well as actions against nuclear weapons and the C.I.A. at Brown University, Boulder, and elsewhere this year. We wonder whether this is a beginning of a larger youth political momentum, and invite those involved in such activity to send us materials on the directions and possibilities of this activism.
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SEE AD ON BACK COVER
Most people's exposure to the punk subculture is limited to television or magazine photos of young men and women in England and Western Europe, with hairstyles ranging from shaved heads to so-called Mohicans, dressed in chains, with either leather or rag-tag dress. As alternative periodicals brought increased coverage of large anti-war mobilizations across Europe over the past few years, more and more of the faces appearing in the coverage were those of young punks. With otherworldly makeup and a music that defies easy entry by most observers, punks have been typified as modern-day vandals, latter day Hell's Angels, or nihilistic thrill seekers by media observers.

In *RADICAL AMERICA*, Vol 13, No. 2 (March-April 1979), Paul Thompson described the origins of the punk movement in Britain and the involvement of a large part of that culture in anti-racist and progressive political struggles. While the American version of that scene has been visible since about that time, little substantial coverage, even in the alternative press, has explored this subculture and its activities. The following interview with editors of *MAXIMUM ROCK N ROLL*, an international punk fanzine based in San Francisco, is an attempt to provide some entry into the politics, styles and culture of the American hard core scene. The interview was conducted by Jeff Goldthorpe and has been edited for inclusion here. The MRR collective, a group of men and women ranging in age from 20 to 40, is represented by Jeff Bale, Ruth Schwartz, and Tim Yohannan.
J: How did Maximum Rock 'n Roll the radio show get started?

TY: We started in '77 when punk was just getting started. We broadcast from KPFA in Berkeley, which is a Pacifica listener-sponsored station. We've been doing it weekly since '78. Three years ago we started syndicating the show nationally. Now we're on 30 stations weekly. Two and a half years ago we started a fanzine (a fan-run magazine, a common way for punks to communicate with each other) and now do that monthly, 72 pages, 10,000 copies monthly. We've also put out two albums in the interim. We run as a non-profit entity. The magazine does make money and it goes into projects we're doing or other people are doing. There is some intellectual stuff in the magazine but basically it's cultural and a gut level response to things. Our objective has always been to reflect the progressive side of the punk scene.

J: How do you raise political discussion in the show or magazine?

TY: I look at the lyrics of the songs. Most punk songs are two minutes or under, so I try to get people who have some background to write articles on those subjects. We'll have an article on Nicaragua, on teenage runaways, on American business connections to the Nazis, squatting. We ran the Radical America comic "Underhanded History of the US."

J: One of the most interesting parts is the letters column. You get not only argument and discussion, but these things from north Michigan: "Somebody write me, I'm locked up in a room."

TY: One of the definite things we have accomplished is to have strengthened this network of communication. In every issue we must print at least 100 addresses. You have kids from Poland, kids from Japan, who are writing to people in Brazil, who write kids in Ohio.

Part of the whole punk ethic is the "do it yourself" thing, a rejection of rock and roll being taken over by corporations and an attempt to put out our own records, magazines, shows. We're seven, eight years down the road in punk and the independent distribution is still strong.

Punk in the USA

JB: There is an infrastructure within which people can organize and communicate, which isn't dependent on external sources of financial support or media. There must be at least 5 or 6,000 independent records now.

TY: Records are not just records anymore. They come with lyric sheets and there's all sorts of information in them, political stuff, addresses, iconoclastic representations of existing society.

J: The participatory nature of it seems to reflect what goes on in the concerts.

JB: When some people first go to punk shows, they think, "My God it's a riot, there's all this violence going on." Mobs of people are on the stage, flying around, going crazy. Sometimes you can't see the band on the stage anymore. It simply represents the blurring of the borders between performers and audience.

Most of the kids who are into the hard core scene now were not into English punk when it first came out. They were too young. Initially there was the New York proto-punk scene
[mid-70s] then there was the English punk scene [1976] and the English came back, especially to California in 1977-78. Around late '78 it was really looking dim, it seemed that new wave pop was going to totally dominate. Then there was this whole new generation of suburban bands down in Los Angeles, those were the immediate inspiration.

**J:** Many first became exposed to hardcore through *The Decline of Western Civilization*, a movie about the Los Angeles scene.

**JB:** That movie is set in time just before the explosion of new political bands. Some are the older punk bands like X, the Germs. The newer bands like Circle Jerks, Black Flag: they represented the new suburban wave of punk bands. There was a geographical dispersion. Nowadays the suburban areas, the outlying areas are getting to be more influential. Punk has rallied people who’d otherwise be atomized, individual rebels.

**RS:** If you read the letters columns, the scene reports, you go to these small places, it is hot and it is genuine. Everybody who’s in the scene runs the band or runs the club, runs the local fanzine. Yeah, it’s the metropolitan areas that suck now. It’s the towns that are exciting. All the bands that tour talk about, “Yeah Kansas City was great . . .” It’s not New York or LA that’s fun.

**J:** Hardcore’s strength is its rejection of all existing standards. That’s where it’s guts come from. Where does it go?

**JB:** Hardcore is a new genre of punk: it’s faster, shorter, rawer. Thrash music has the rebellious raw spirit that rock ‘n roll was originally associated with. There’s post-punk, experimental types of music that still have an edge. On another level there’s garage bands from nowhere, not influenced by external trendy factors. In thrash there is a heavy metal sound and the more straightforward, no melody stuff. Then there’s funk-punk, like the Minutemen. There’s this band from Michigan, the Crucifucks. It’s hard to describe them. The aesthetic is pure punk, but the music is slower.

**RS:** There’s a lot of bands around now that are adding soul, black roots stuff, are going towards rootsy psychedelic-era, Butthole Surfers, Husker Du. Meat Puppets went to a country thing. All this music has elements it draws from the past.

**TY:** It’s also important to say there is no single homogeneous punk outlook. You’ll find people to the anarchist side of the left. You’ll find people to the right in punk.

**JB:** Although most of the people in the middle have healthy anti-authoritarian instincts.

**TY:** It’s as much a battleground of ideas as the rest of society.

**JB:** Even the right within the punk scene is not the conservative right. They’re radical right people, who don’t want anyone to tell them what to do. They interpret people telling them what to do as “communist.” Tim and I are both huge record collectors and the number of overtly reactionary punk records is about ten.
Dear MRR,

I have a daughter who’s into punk and I’ve met a lot of her friends (punks). Most of them are decent kids with some intelligent ideas about the world around them. It saddens me when I see a few who do stupid things and give all of you a bad name. That’s where movies, etc., get their “stereotyped” image of punks—from the few.

I’d encourage parents to listen to their kids, get to know them, and judge them as individuals, rather than being prejudiced against all punks because of the media image or the way they look. I’ve seen this prejudice in action from the way police treat kids to burger places refusing to serve kids.

And I’d encourage kids to think before they do something that will hurt all of you—for example, if a few kids tear down a club or destroy property in the neighborhood, soon the club will be closed.

Janet Starkey/A concerned mom/Long Beach, CA

P.S. To the STEPS and MAD PARADE: keep up the good work—you’re going to make it as bands!

Dear MRR,

I need to thank all of the people who “drafted” me into military service. I wrote a “registration” letter in the Sept issue and I thought I’d better write a letter to MRR to get a little help from you guys. I was surprised at the response I got. To be honest, I was surprised at the help I received.

To be think that shows that punk isn’t the only way to get help. OK, when people are upset, other people are upset. Thanks for the feedback everybody.

Peter H. 625 N Riley St/Kendallville IN 46755

Dear MRR,

I am currently in the United States Army. I am in training. If you would like to talk to me I will be happy to talk to you. I am a part of the army. I am a part of the army. I am a part of the army. I am a part of the army.

Dear MRR,

There’s an old saying, “United we stand, divided we fall.” Which has been something worthwhile. But it does mean the hardcore horizon. I see more and more what I call the “punks” are saying that doesn’t seem to be good enough any more. People are politicalizing each other more and more. For instance, all the blacks, whites, and everything else.

This is a generalization, but it does go on, and it is becoming more and more prevalent.
Dear MRR,

On Oct 13, a couple of friends and I ventured over the Berlin Wall for a punk concert in the East. We had telephone contacts with some of the punk scenes in the East to find out the exact location of the gig. After getting through the phones, we were allowed to meet our contacts from East Germany. They had to contact us from the East because they could not tell us over the phone for fear of being traced. The concert started late in an old church in East Germany. It is like a church going into the morgue. Organized like a church, but no music. The police cannot go inside, and the guards cannot be heard. The concert was held in an old church, which is the site of the first punk concert ever in East Germany. Punks, skins, and hooligans were present. The music was very raw. The punk scene in East Germany is very strong, and there is a lot of music coming from there. It is the only punk band there. It is a far away town, so it's no surprise that almost every punk in the country was there.

The punks from the East are definitely not into punk fashion, but it is a lot of guts and dedication to be a punk in East Germany. They could be arrested for this. It is illegal to wear a badge from that does not support the government. Most of the people were wearing leather jackets and bandanas. The police want to arrest anyone who is wearing any kind of punkish thing. It's difficult for them to buy any of the items we use to communicate with. Sometimes the kids from the West can be easy to be refused at the border. When the older people from the West (D.D.R.) reach a certain age, they are allowed to visit the West. So, the D.D.R. kids get surprised to see kids in bondage pants and SUBHUMANS t-shirts. It's illegal to be in a punk band, and this results in jail if you are caught playing. When they want to play in public, they must first apply for a license. To get this license, they must perform for government council approval—just to make sure the music is normal and not thought-provoking! For a band to have good sound, they must be rich or work very long hours. A rich or work week would cost around $1,600. The band we talked to, SCHLEIM, paid over $400 for the average Marshall cabinet, they pay over $400 for a 2 years to guitar. The band worked 2 years to get it, and they saved for the license, which is a lot of money. They had to have a lot of good music to say it, buy equipment. Though I hate to say it, but the sound wasn't very good, but the emotion and energy put into the music was amazing.

In Spain, the punks had met a club in an old factory because they had a "real" club. The people of the Falange would firebomb the club. The punks are retaliated against the Falange and 2 guys who were well-known anarchists got jailed for it. I got into a fight leaving their "club" one night when Falangist youth groups attacked people. It was a hairy-assed scene, with people being thrown through windows, etc.
LM: Where would you put a song like “White Minority” by Black Flag?

JB: I told them that song is really fucked, people are going to take that at face value. The guitar player told me the song was meant to point out the stupidity of those attitudes [white racism]. They don’t do that song anymore. It was too ambiguous, wide open to be misinterpreted. We’ve contacted a lot of those people. Most of the time somebody’s trying to make a satire, but it didn’t come off. We criticize bands and say: be more careful, be clear in your meaning. There’s always going to be people who misinterpret everything, no matter how straightforward it is.

J: Some people have misinterpreted “Kill the Poor” despite the irony, the whole thing the Dead Kennedys are about.

JB: Yeah, not so much punks, but other people, conventional people, these so-called geniuses of the left.

LM: That brings us to a real important point, about irony.

JB: Yeah, there’s a lot of irony, a lot of scatological humor. Like the Meat Men have this song about the Beatles called “One Down, Three to Go.” It’s a really vicious satire, but some people would take it literally.

Class and Race Roots

J: Some say: punks are basically upper-middle class kids, they’ve got swimming pools, they’re brats, and whereas British punks are working class. A lot of kids here are from the suburbs.

RS: Hardcore came out of Los Angeles. We’re talking suburbia-land. It’s one massive suburbia. America does not really have a working class like European countries. But you’re right, I think punk is from more an intellectual class. They’re coming from the liberal breed and rejecting that.

J: The scene seems to be pretty much a white thing—even though there are some black kids or Latin or Asian kids who get into it just as much as anyone else. I don’t know how that works out.

RS: Punk is pretty middle class. In San Francisco it’s pretty white, some mix. The rap stuff is just as underground, in that it has a hard time reaching the mainstream.

J: To what degree have rap styles come into punk? Does that lead to audience integration?

RS: Occasionally. The most integrated it gets—there are punk bands that play rap songs or have taken that funky guitar or bass licks into their music, even if they’re hard core. The Beastie Boys, the Vandals, Hoes. A lot of New York bands. Beastie Boys were the first ones. They did that “Cookie Puss” rap song, “Part Time Christians” here in SF do a bunch of rap songs. Every fifth record you pick up will have a rap song on it. There’s been a lot of racially mixed bands who either bring in elements of both cultures or reggae, Bad Brains being the example of that. [An all black band that played reggae and hardcore]
Musical Dissolution

J: As opposed to a year and a half ago, hardcore seems to have reached some limit. Bands like Black Flag, Meat Puppets, Husker Du have gone off in different directions. On the radio show, you seem to play a wider variety of things than a couple of years ago. It leads me to question whether the music you’re going to be covering in the next year will be part of a scene or a musical genre anymore.

JB: In 1977 there was a punk style and after a couple of years, people began to grow bored with it, mainly the musicians. They wanted to branch out. That led to a wider spectrum of musical development for a while, then thrash, the ultra-fast super-intense style took up the original punk mantle. That was a reaction against the self indulgent experimentation developing out of the original punk, and of course to its commercialization. The thrash style predominated for a couple of years, now people are becoming dissatisfied with that. The whole history of rock’n roll is recycling riffs and juxtaposing them in slightly different combinations. That’s the process going on now. It is a style of music, but it’s also an attitude. So that people can produce music that does not conform to the standard punk format and still be considered punk.

TY: There’s this influence of heavy metal into punk now.

JB: I hated heavy metal all along and I still hate it with a passion. It’s mostly rehashes of old blues riffs and cliche-ridden musically speaking. I hate everything about the ethos of it. There has been a lot of crossover in the last year between the metal and the hardcore audiences. There’s people who are just getting into it and yet they still maintain the attitudes associated with heavy metal fans, which are 99 per cent reactionary.
"It could never happen in little liberal Seattle," we assured ourselves for a long time. But on Friday, Sept. 14th, after the fire and Police departments shut down the DOA, Unwanted and GSML show at the Lincoln Arts Center, the S.P.D. showed themselves to be like any other cops; happy to use the legal safety of "superior weaponry" to teach us that they wouldn't put up with any anger or backtalk. When they tell us to move they want us to obey blindly like good citizens.

"Obedience to the Law is Freedom"
World Music of the Industrial Youth

J: What about the international aspect of MRR?

JB: After the initial bands started coming out of England, that attracted attention of rebel- lious people elsewhere. You had a lot of people in Europe and the US forming bands. Today, not only have the scenes expanded geographi- cally to reach industrialized countries in Latin America and Eastern Europe, but there is more communication between scenes.

TY: Suddenly we’ll make contact with somebody who’ll write a scene report for us, and he’ll talk about the whole historical back- ground on punk in Austria going back to 1977. It’s like archaeological digging. And then there’s an outside avenue to communicate with people all over the world, they don’t feel so isolated.

J: With earlier American rock, its meaning was transformed when it got to a Third World coun- try. For example, when the Chilean coup was happening, they were playing Beatles music and the Woodstock album over the radio to calm people down, as if it were Muzak. In Mexico, where you have an incredible importation of American culture, to what extent can this become an indigenous thing, without people losing a sense of themselves?

JB: One may say that this is just another form of cultural imperialism. I think that’s completely wrong. In every culture there’s a lot of rebel- lious people. Maybe they don’t have a vehicle to express themselves. Then punk comes along and they can identify with it on an emotional level. They begin to adopt it themselves and in the process, they begin to adapt it to local cir- cumstances. It’s the response of alienated, disenfranchised people in industrializing and par- ticularly in post-industrial societies. People are responding on some intuitive level that they’re really not in control. It doesn’t matter if the governments are communist like in Yugoslavia or rightist authoritarian like in Brazil.

J: From the magazine, it seems that two places where a lot has happened are Poland and Yugoslavia. Has the music scene interacted with the Solidarity movement in Poland?

JB: In Poland it seems that people who are con- nected to the punk scene are the supporters of Solidarity. Some of the people we’ve talked to from Yugoslavia said that although they may not be anti-communist in the general sense of the term, they are anti-communist in terms of the way it actually exists. Just as in the US and Western Europe it’s considered a subversive anarchist development. Let’s face it: punks are not going to appeal to authorities in any socie- ty.

Punk Romance and Sexuality

J: The narrowness of punk form makes me question: if someone wants to write a song that deals with some other area of love beside when you’re breaking up with someone, you have to go to another musical genre. In all this branch- ing out, is this something that will ever get re- integrated into the music?

JB: It’s not a question of love per se. What people are rejecting is this facade of schmaltzy romance.

TY: There’s a lot of songs which deal with love, but not the bourgeois romantic aspect. They deal with the quirky side of love, or the neurotic side or destructive side of love, the reality of love.

JB: Everything develops its own rituals and sometimes those rituals prevent further development, become cliches.

J: You flip through the magazine and you see pictures of bands. It’s almost always men. Cer- tainly that carries over into modes of expres- sion. How do you look at the relation between men and women in the scene?

JB: In the early days of punk, there were proba- bly more women involved than in any other form of rock ‘n roll, not only as singers but as musicians and songwriters. Over the years the percentage of women has grown less. Recently
there has been increased participation of women in bands.

**RS:** Most bands are all-male and it's still novel to be an all-woman band. But now there's a whole bunch of bands that have women in them, mixed bands. One guy called up the station and said, "Hey, why aren't you playing any women?" I said, "How do you know? 'Cause you didn't hear a female voice? Do women have to sing?" There's more women drummers than ever before, women guitar players and bass players.

**TY:** Women have been heavily involved in the fanzines, booking shows and managing bands. About four years ago when thrash started, it was mainly coming out of a younger crowd.

With the younger crowd, you have kids in their teens and they're going through this rites of passage stuff.

**J:** Some women have said they have to spend time fighting to be able to slam dance without having men pick on them, to be treated like anyone else out there. But when it comes time to pair off, the same guys that put them through male standards go after women with long hair and miniskirts on the sidelines, who they labelled "wimps."

**JB:** A lot of people who do that are new to the scene. They are still attracted to the old style of what a conventional woman is supposed to look like. It's true, certain macho elements in the punk scene have limited the participation of women in the dancing.

**RS:** You'll find more women out to see Frightwig, an all-woman band, or Redd Kross who've got a woman in it, more women out to see the Dicks, who've got a woman in it. I love it when there's a woman in the band, who's not playing this status quo-sexy-singer thing but as an integral part of the band. On the other hand, the music itself is a very aggressive form of music, very phallic, just like heavy metal but not as bad. The lyrics of heavy metal are what make it extremely sexist. Heavy metal is about getting your piece of some girl, getting your drugs, money and gettingucked.

**J:** When you get into the styling—what people do with their hair [in the punk scene] you don't have to be "beautiful" . . .

**RS:** That's why feminists should look at the women involved with punk. Women involved with punk are breaking down a lot of traditions, whether they know it or not, breaking down the ways they view their own bodies and their own beauty. There's a real heavy androgynous thing, which is good and bad.

A lot of the women also get a tough attitude, not aggression but forthrightness, a real strong feeling of who they are. They're capable and they go places where most women would be scared to go, and they take on a group of guys that are assholes and put them in their place.
J: Is there more openness in the scene towards gays than the outside world? Is there space to live a different way?

RS: There are a lot of lesbian punks.

J: But they don’t have a public presence in a way that could make it clear to straight punks that homophobia is not okay. My experience at shows is that there’s a strong hostility towards gay people, up on stage, mocking the “clone” style.

RS: No, it’s straight male dominated. But then it depends, Austin, Texas is very tolerant. It’s got the second largest gay population next to SF. There are a lot of gay punks from Austin.

Skins and Violence

TY: There are people who go to shows to hurt people, and the majority of those people are what we call skinheads.

JB: Skinheads as a sub-cultural group emerged in England, as an offshoot of the Mod/Rude Boy sub-cultures in the mid to late 60s. In the early 70s they faded away. When punk came out, that led to the revival of skinhead—they like the same music basically. By 1980-81 there was a division between punks and skins in Europe, between left and right. Skinheads became associated with the extreme right—the National Front in Britain and equivalent groups in France and Germany. Among the English skins, a lot of them are consciously adopting right-wing values, even if they were originally recruited with free beers.

J: What is the process that’s been happening here? Does it mirror the European experience of skins moving to the right?

JB: Originally in the US, around 1980 when thrash took off, there were people who looked like skinheads—at that time they weren’t different than punks. It’s not really a clear cut thing: there are punk that are not progressive, there are skins who are really cool. People adopt the skinned look—it’s not only the shaved head, it also involves wearing the English skinhead at-tire: Doc Martin boots, suspenders—with the adoption of that, the values have also crept in. Only in the last year and a half did the same polarization which occurred in Europe start in the scene in the US.

J: What level has this split been on? You talked about Europe—that it’s connected to a political split.

JB: That has not happened in the US, but the general notions of skinheads, this “solidarity,” nationalism—are becoming widespread among US skinheads. Solidarity means any skinhead, whether he’s right or wrong, if he gets involved in any altercation, all his friends are going to be over to help him. That leads to the gang mentality.

TY: This may be a small knot of people in the punk scene, but because they are organized in the sense of solidarity and into physical violence, a lot of punks even though they’re in the majority, will not take them on. Punks tend to be more individualistic and anarchistic.
RS: It's the most amazing thing to watch a bunch of assholes in front of the Dicks. They're terrorizing an entire group of people in a club. And Gary [the lead singer] says, "This is for you: I ain't no Nazi's friend!" And they'll start dancing! Do they get it? Are they going to stop terrorizing people? No.

J: I hear now that people are not going to concerts.

JB: That's the first phase. You don't want to go because hostile vibes are in the air. But there's all these new people filling the ranks. Like all human beings they're going to be sick of being brutalized and intimidated—they're going to fight back. Frankly, I can't wait for that to happen.

J: Why don't you explain the dialogue about this that MRR initiated?

TY: We've been dealing with the whole subject in the magazine and radio show with the objective of emboldening people driven away because of this violence, in an attempt to galvanize peer pressure. The first step is to communicate with these people [skinheads] and maybe neutralize them.

J: What has the response been to your attempt to raise this discussion?

JB: I don't think it's had much effect. I don't think education is what's really going to resolve this situation. People are going to have to get fed up. This kind of division is not peculiar to punk—like in the 60s there were bikers, people whose values were antithetical to the majority, who through intimidation or organization were able to have a negative influence.

The Independent Network

J: To what extent are people who are part of this thing into it because they are making a living, and to what extent is it people who are idealistic? Are these things run in a way that is open to some larger community or is it basically a small business thriving off a small market?

RS: At its best it is both. There's a moral stance involved which is not necessarily anti-capitalist but is definitely anti-corporate. It's like kids on the street who say: "I won't get a job, I will eat in the soup kitchens, I will sleep in the dirt. . . ."

There's this circuit of independent labels, fanzines, radio (college stations, etc.) who support this music. There's a distribution system all that goes through. The label gets together with the band and they produce the record. The record gets sold to some independent distributors world-wide. And if you've got a really good record, people are hearing about it, there's a demand for the record, everybody likes this band; people like Dead Kennedys or Husker Du right now. You can saturate the independent market until you just can't do more, and you know that the potential is there to
reach more people.

Do you have to co-opt yourself to break out of this network? Selling 5,000 records is decent for a punk record, but it ain't nothing when you talk about how many people could be listening. Bands who've been playing around a long time say: "I want new people to play to. I've played to the same people for years. I want to get to more people." So how do you continue to do what you're doing and also break through that limit?

J: It seems there are only two ways to make that happen: to find a corporation that has some wider view, has capital, is willing to facilitate things without ruining the independent network, or you get more people who are part of it, with loyalty and values.

Punk and Left Politics

J: Another problem in the dispersal effect is other elements in the scene going in different directions. You have this amorphous group called peace punks. Now at demonstrations there are people, activists, who are punks. Is there a polarization here of skinheads versus peace punks?

JB: It's not a simple as that. In the punk scene there have always been different kinds of people: violent people, intelligent people and a lot of people in the middle. Now the only difference is they have "groups" within the scene with which they can become affiliated.

J: Do you think that questions the viability of the scene as a whole. Will it become different scenes?

JB: I wouldn't mind if it did. I don't see the point in unity within the punk scene unless it's unity about certain values, rather than people who listen to the same kind of music.

J: But then isn't that changing into something [different] from a subculture?

JB: I'm not saying people have to be conscious and articulate about what they believe in. To me, the reason punk is so exciting is variety, all kinds of people are doing bizarre things. I wouldn't want a situation where everyone thought the same and did the same—it would become totally boring.

J: At the 1984 Democratic Convention, on the one hand are the big official marches, pressuring the convention for a better platform. On the other hand you had people who were challenging the whole idea of the Democratic Party. A key element of that opposition were punks into direct action tactics.

JB: There always were punks consciously involved in oppositional activity, but the established left didn't recognize them—that's still the case as far as I can see.

J: To me, it's new that there are peace punks who are a real force to be reckoned with.

JB: Before people used to write [radical] lyrics and if you talked to them, they might espouse a politics, but when it came down to doing anything, there wasn't much going on. Now people are willing to put themselves on the line and protest, and that's a really good thing.

TY: But in talking about the left, most punks view the left with the same disdain that they view the right.

JB: And in many cases they're correct. Many left groups have an authoritarian hierarchical caste and are stuck in the past, talking about "labor strife" as if the labor movement had a goddamn thing to do with anything anymore. The only contact a lot of these people (punks) have with the organized left is with dogmatic speakers mouthing off or idiot groups haranguing them on the street about "proletarian internationalism." Although there are leftists groups which are not like that, look at any left periodical. Most of them never have anything to do with punk. Even those who do cover "culture" like In These Times or The Nation, you will never see anything about punk. And those few who do deal with punk usually deal with it in a condescending hostile tone and maintain the same distortions about punk that the mainstream media have created. Only the
squatters movement in Europe, and here too, is there a real strong mix between remnants of the 60s left and punks.

J: In the actions in the summer of 1984 here (in San Francisco) you had a mixture of punks and people from Livermore Action Group working together.

JB: That’s a recent development I hope becomes extended. The Livermore Action Group has a decentralized form of interaction which appeals to punks a lot more than old style organizational methods. They’re not what I call an established left group.

A Little Itch

JB: What’s going to happen now with punks is the same thing that happened to the hippies. There’s going to be a small core of people who come out of the punk scene that are going to continue having radical views. There’ll be others who’ll be burn-outs, causalties and psychological rejects.

LM: And there’ll be others that carry, this is maybe the largest group, a lot of memories of what they have lived through in this scene, which is going to be like this little itch. At some future time that’s explosive material.

JB: And some are going to end up as future David Stockmans. We’re not trying to tell people what to think or present some rhetorical line; the important thing is to inculcate a critical spirit in people, to question what they hear and see around them.

RS: I think the network is the most important thing. The underground music scene, the independent network is going to continue.

TY: We’re trying to say this is how we live our lives: we publish our finances, we’re very accessible. We’re older, yet we still believe, we’re still crazy. So we stick ourselves out and we get a lot of shit for it. We’re trying to appeal to people’s intelligence, to their sanity. To me, the prerequisite to changing anything for the better is having the self-confidence that your beliefs
come from you and not because you're part of
this group.

Jeff Goldthorpe is an activist and student in
San Francisco who writes political essays and
unpublished fiction. He recently helped or-
organize a "Deadly Connections" conference and
the End of the World's Fair in May 1984. Louis
Michaelson also participated in the interview.

A GLOSSARY FOR NON-PUNKS

Dance styles—Pogo, Robot, Skank and Slam.
Slam dancing is done in fairly close quarters
and involves people banging into one another,
frequently tossing other dancers into a knot of
people. A lot more coordinated than it seems,
with some degree of care. Stage diving is a
punker running up to the performance area and
throwing themselves into the crowd, to some
usually waiting hands.

Music—there are variations in punk or hard
core music. Reggae-style, psychedelic and even
a rap punk. Thrash is the most common and is
typified by fast loud guitar and drum beat,
screamed vocals in a constant pace. Slower
variations, or mixing slowed vocals with
gradually building frenetic crescendo is also
common.

Hairstyles—can range from shaved heads
(skinhead look) for both men and women to
Mohawks with long central mane and vari-
ations with spikes (hair pressed with glue, grease
or spray) and colors from black to day-glo
varieties. "Official" skinheads have a more
rigid code—suspenders, Dr. Martin (an English
brand) boots; affecting a working-class look
based on a subgroup of the English scene. Most
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CALL FOR ARTICLES

History Workshop Journal is planning an issue (Fall 1986) edited from the United States. The editors are eager for articles, reviews, reports, etc. of all lengths on areas of American history, written with the journal’s mainly British readership in mind. Areas we’re particularly interested in include: public history; current, local and/or history projects; city politics and political machines; women’s history; the Depression in the US (especially compared with Europe); origins of Reaganism; democratic traditions in American culture; black history; gay and lesbian history; the American musical heritage in relation to popular movements.

Articles are due by the end of 1985, and prospective contributors should contact the editors as soon as possible: Jane Caplan, Dept. of History, Bryn Mawr College, Bryn Mawr PA 19010/or Sean Wilentz, Dept. of History, Princeton University, Princeton NJ 08544.

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Massachusetts Rock Against Racism, currently in its sixth year of operation, is a multi-racial community organization which uses popular music and the mass media as educational tools in the struggle to combat racism. For the past couple of years, we have been working directly with local teenagers to produce events, performances, and cable television programs which showcase urban youth culture. Our assumption is that by working with cultural forms which are meaningful to young people, we will be able to promote cultural awareness and engage the group in a critical analysis of issues of racism.

Currently the cultural form which is the most attractive to our youth group is Hip Hop, a Bronx-based subculture which includes breakdancing, rap music, and graffiti art. The following article is an example of how we attempt to address critical issues through working with this cultural form. It was first written as background material for a workshop on Hip Hop delivered at a RAR retreat held on February 1-3, 1985.
From the late 1960s through the early 70s, street gangs dominated many neighborhoods in the Bronx. Around 1973, as gang violence began to decline, some leaders, like Afrika Bambaataa, were influenced by political groups like the Black Panthers and the Young Lords and religious organizations like the Nation of Islam. They began to understand that fighting each other was not very productive. As the subculture underwent change, a new form emerged called Hip Hop, which included breakdancing, rap music, and graffiti.

Hip Hop started as a local street movement in the heart of the ghetto. Since many white outsiders never entered the scene, it developed for more than five years before people began finding out about it. During this period, the only part of Hip Hop which existed outside the Bronx was the graffiti on subway cars which wound its way through the other sections of New York.

From the beginning, independent DJs with portable sound systems were very important to Hip Hop. When disco first started in the early 1970's, people began to think of DJs as artists because they were the ones who kept the music going. But Bronx-style DJs were different. In the first place, they played hard core funk like Jimmy Castor’s “It’s Just Begun,” “Apache” by the Incredible Bongo Band and James Brown’s “Get on the Good Foot” (cited by Bambaataa as the first breakdancing record). They also developed a different style of handling records. The disco DJs concentrated mainly on “mixing” records smoothly from one cut to the next. Hip Hop DJs, like Kool Herc—the first well-known one, started spinning only the most danceable part of each record—the “break.” According to Steven Hager, author of *Hip Hop: the Illustrated History of Break Dancing, Rap Music and Graffiti*, "Herc played break after break to create an endless peak of dance beats." The music Herc played was called “break-beat” music, and the “b-boys” who danced to it came to be known as “break”dancers.
Originally, breakdancing was solo dancing which focused only on the legs and feet. Very quickly the more acrobatic elements like backspinning and headspinning were added by early breakers like the Zulu Kings. By this time, breakdancers performed in “crews” and the crews competed against each other. Soon, it expanded to include other styles and techniques like “Electric Boogie” (invented on the West Coast), “Moonwalking,” “Popping,” “freezes,” mime and the “Robot.”

By the late 1970s, young blacks, who developed the style for over five years, started to get tired of breakdancing. At the same time, Puerto Rican youth who had mostly been into disco styles like the “Hustle” began to get interested in breakdancing. Latino crews like the Rockwell Association and, later, the Rock Steady Crew kept alive the acrobatic style of breaking even after black youth switched their attention to the “Freak” around 1978.
During this early period (1973-78), there were three main Hip Hop DJs—Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaataa, and Grandmaster Flash—and dozens of other lesser known DJs. Later, they were joined by the Grand Wizard Theodore, a thirteen year old who invented the art of “scratching.” Around 1977, a Puerto Rican named Charlie Chase who was into break-beat music helped to bring young Latinos into the Hip Hop subculture.

Hip Hop DJs tried to outdo each other by playing outrageous combinations of records. In addition to rhythm and blues/soul type performers like James Brown, Sly and the Family Stone, and the Jackson Five, one of Bambaataa’s sets might also include the theme from the movie “Pink Panther,” and the music of rock groups like the Beatles, Grand Funk Railroad, the Rolling Stones, the Monkees and Kraftwerk. Hip Hop had multi-cultural influences from the start. In his book, *The Rap Attack: African Jive to New York Hip Hop*, David Toop says: “Hip Hop was the new music by virtue of its finding a way to absorb all other music.”

These Bronx-style DJs got their start by spinning records at small house-parties. Sometimes Flash and Mean Gene would “hot-wire” their turntables into street lamps and throw a party in the park. As break-beat music became more popular, the best DJs outgrew the small house parties. By 1976, they had moved into clubs like the Hevalo and the Black Door, community centers like the Bronx River Community Center, and finally into the Audubon Ballroom which could hold 3,000 people.

In these clubs and larger halls, DJs began to use members of their crews as MCs. According to Grandmaster Flash, “Vocal entertainment became necessary to keep the crowd under control.” Just
like the DJs and the break crews, these MCs soon developed their own style, which came to be known as “rapping.” By 1978, rapping had become the most important part of the subculture.

As with breakdancing, rapping started in the streets as a solo art. There would be one DJ and one MC. Among the first solo MCs were people like Eddie Cheeba, DJ Hollywood, and later Kurtis Blow. But their style was more disco-oriented. The first one to come up with Bronx-style was Kool Herc. Then, Grandmaster Flash expanded the idea to include whole groups of MCs. Soon rap groups were popping up all over the Bronx with names like Double Trouble, The Treacherous Three, and the Funky Four Plus One. Flash put together the Furious Five, which is still one of the best known of the rap groups. Afrika Bambaata started working with a number of rap crews including the Jazzy Five, the Cosmic Force, and his current group, the Soulsonic Force.

According to David Toop, the roots of rap can be traced to the Caribbean Islands and all the way back to West Africa. Elements of rap can be found in Jamaican “toasting” and, in this country, in prison songs, competitive urban word games like “signifying” and the “dozens,” in the poetry of Muhammed Ali and the Last Poets, and in the lyrics of James Brown and Gil Scott-Heron. Two records which illustrate some of these influences are James Brown’s “King Heroin,” and “Hustler’s Convention,” an album recorded by Lightnin’ Rod, who had been the leader of the Last Poets. Rap music comes from the streets and its themes are often very political. This is clear, in the case of titles like “How We Gonna Make the Black Nation Rise,” “Problems of the World,” and “White Lines.”
Graffiti has also been used to make political statements. In the 1950s, street gangs used it to mark the boundaries of their “turf.” The current wave of New York subway graffiti started before Hip Hop and many of the “writers” came from outside the Bronx. The writer who first made subway graffiti famous was a fifteen year old Greek boy named Demetrius who used the “tag” TAKI 183. A writer named Topcat moved to Manhattan from Philadelphia and developed the style called “Broadway Elegant.” There was a Brooklyn form of graffiti known as “Wild Style.” Phase 2, a black youth from the Bronx, invented the “bubble” style.

Graffiti writers began to gather at special “writers’ corners” and soon they started to organize themselves into groups like the Ev- Vandals, Wanted, Magic Inc., and the Soul Artists, who became well-known in the 80s. In 1972, a sociology student at City College named Hugo Martinez organized United Graffiti Artists (UGA) which was almost entirely Puerto Rican at first. It was Martinez who first brought graffiti writers to the attention of the art world. By 1972, the best artists in the group were selling paintings for as much as $3,000 each. But UGA was troubled by personality problems and racial tension between black and Puerto Rican members and the group fell apart. Graffiti writers went underground and did not mix with the art world again until the mass media “discovered” Hip Hop.

By the time the media got interested in Hip Hop, the movement was already more than five years old. But when the record companies, radio stations, art dealers, news media, and filmmakers moved in, they changed the way Hip Hop would develop in the future.

Bronx-style rapping had been around since 1976, but it was not put on record until 1979. Before 1979, rap music existed only on home-made cassettes. Aside from live performances, the only way
it could be heard was on “ghetto blasters” in the streets and this activity was clearly centered in the Bronx. But the first two rap records did not come from the Bronx. “King Tim III (Personality Jock)” was recorded by the Fatback Band, a Brooklyn group, and the Sugar Hill Gang who made “Rappers Delight” were based in New Jersey. The success of “Rappers Delight” also attracted other outsiders to the Hip Hop scene. The first rap record to reach number one on the pop charts was “Rapture” by the white new wave group Blondie.

Except for Blondie’s hit, putting rap music on record marked the decline of female rappers. In the early days of Hip Hop, there were lots of female rappers like Sha Rock, Lisa Lee, and the Mercedes Ladies. But according to Grandmaster Flash, the scene got too competitive and the young women “gave up.”

Media attention also changed the nature of graffiti art. In the beginning, graffiti artists thought of themselves as guerilla outlaws. Lee Quinones was a writer who built his reputation by painting beautiful “whole-car” murals. With four other writers he formed the Fabulous Five, which was considered the best writer’s group in the city. According to Steven Hager, “They robbed paint stores, drank beer, stayed up until dawn, and spent endless hours doing nothing but painting trains.”

In 1979, a young black promoter from Brooklyn named Fred Braithwaite (also known as the Fab Five Freddy and later Freddy Love) brought Quinones’ work to the attention of some important art dealers. Soon writers like Quinones and Ali and Futura 2000 from the Soul Artists which later included Keith Haring were painting on canvas instead of subway cars and having shows in places like Rome, West Germany, and in expensive Manhattan art galleries. For the best graffiti artists, this change was certainly safer and financially more rewarding than painting subway cars, and it was legal. But many writers found it difficult to make the change from outlaw to studio artist and in the end the movement lost a lot of its energy.
Following the commercial success of rap music and graffiti art, the media started to get interested in breakdancing around 1981. Steven Hagar says that at that time “there were only a handful of breakers left in the city, but within months television camera crews, reporters and independent film makers were scouring the city in search of more.” All this media attention gave Hip Hop a new life, as rap music, breakdancing, and graffiti art came to be seen as related parts of a complex subculture. Soon Hip Hop entered the downtown club scene and the world of film.

Like other well-known Hip Hop DJs, Afrika Bambaataaa was invited to play in places like the Mudd Club, the Ritz, the Peppermint Lounge, Negril, Danceteria, and finally the Roxy where he brought in crowds of up to 4,000 people every Friday night. In clubs like these, Hip Hop attracted a large white audience. In the process it also attracted more white performers, managers and producers like the Tom Tom Club, Malcolm McLaren, and Trevor Horn. In a few cases outsiders added something new to the subculture, but mostly they just moved the control of Hip Hop further away from the Bronx.

As early as 1980 Charlie Ahern, an independent film maker, announced plans to make a movie about Hip Hop called “Wild Style.” This low budget film featured Lee Quinones and Fred Braithwaite among others and showed a pretty accurate view of the subculture. It was released in 1983, the same year that the blockbuster movie “Flashdance” turned breakdancing into the hottest thing in the country.

This kind of exposure is a mixed blessing. On the negative side, “Flashdance” made it look like breakdancing techniques were invented by Jennifer Beals (or her double). The only hint of reality in the whole movie was the five minute appearance of the Rock Steady Crew breaking in a park as Beals looked on. The films which followed like “Breakin’” and “Beat Street” at least used real breakdancers. On the positive side, these films brought Hip Hop to the attention of a much bigger audience. During this period some of the best rap records were produced. Two of the best known are “Planet Rock” by Afrika Bambaataaa and the Soul Sonic Force and “The Message” by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five. More recently, Run—DMC, a rap group from Queens, recorded the first million-selling rap album. The subculture has already “infected” other cultural forms from ballet to modern dance, to fashion design and studio art, and to other musical forms such as rock, funk, jazz and pop.

Rebee Garofalo is a founding member of Mass. Rock Against Racism, and has been involved in the production of benefit concerts, cable television programs and other cultural events. He is the co-author of “Rock ‘n’ Roll is Here to Pay: The History and Politics of the Music Industry” and teaches at the College of Public and Community Service at U. Mass./Boston. For information about Massachusetts Rock Against Racism, you can write to them at Box 77, Boston MA 02117.
Feminism and the left

For years, the left has been telling the women’s movement what its politics should be. Now, three women who have long been active in both movements are telling the left what it must learn from feminists.

Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal and Hilary Wainwright, in Beyond the Fragments: Feminism and the making of socialism, suggest that many progressive groups fail because of their oppressive internal structure. The women’s movement, on the other hand, has found important new ways to approach political theory and practice. These feminist methods can be integrated into political organizing, say these women. In fact, they must be integrated, and they show how it can successfully be done.

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Students checking out books in the Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School in Sudbury, Massachusetts, have a choice of two wrap-around book covers (see photos above). One cover (right) is distributed nationwide by the Army National Guard to promote enlistments. Calling Guardsmen, “Americans at their best,” the cover shows Guardsmen treating an injured child and another jumping from a helicopter, gun in hand. It tells the students, “Find out what the National Guard can do for you.” The other book cover (left) was produced by two of the school’s history teachers, William Schechter and Thomas Thacker, and features photographs of National Guardsmen firing on students at Kent State University in 1970 and
of a military funeral. It tells students, “Find out what the National Guard can do to you.” Calling the original cover “propaganda,” the teachers, former student activists, claim the Guard’s material “glorifies war and lures students with romanticized images.” One recruiting sergeant attempted to remove the alternative covers from the library but was stopped. Although the school and local school committee allowed the alternative covers to stay, the chairwoman of the school committee remarked, “I don’t think the school is under moral obligation to present an alternative viewpoint to everything that comes into school. We’d be pretty busy if we did.”
THE ZOOT-SUIT AND STYLE WARFARE

STUART COSGROVE

INTRODUCTION: THE SILENT NOISE OF SINISTER CLOWNS

What about those fellows waiting still and silent there on the platform, so still and silent they clash with the crowd in their very immobility, standing noisy in their very silence; harsh as a cry of terror in their quietness? What about these three boys, coming now along the platform, tall and slender, walking with swinging shoulders in their well-pressed, too-hot-for-summer suits, their collars high and tight about their necks, their identical hats of black cheap felt set upon the crowns of their heads with a severe formality above their conked hair? It was as though I’d never seen their like before: walking slowly, their shoulders swaying, their legs swinging from their hips in trousers that ballooned upward from cuffs fitting snug about their ankles; their coats long and hip-tight with shoulders far too broad to be those of natural western men. These fellows whose bodies seemed—what had one of my teachers said of me?—‘You’re like one of those African sculptures, distorted in the interest of design.’ Well, what design and whose?"
The zoot-suit is more than an exaggerated costume, more than a sartorial statement, it is the bearer of a complex and contradictory history. When the nameless narrator of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* confronted the subversive sight of three young and extravagantly dressed blacks, his reaction was one of fascination not of fear. These youths were not simply grotesque dandies parading the city's secret underworld, they were 'the stewards of something uncomfortable', a spectacular reminder that the social order had failed to contain their energy and difference. The zoot-suit was more than the drape-shape of the 1940s fashion, more than a colorful stage-prop hanging from the shoulders of Cab Calloway, it was, in the most direct and obvious ways, an emblem of ethnicity and a way of negotiating an identity. The zoot-suit was a refusal: a subcultural gesture that refused to concede to the manners of subservience. By the late 1930s, the term 'zoot' was in common circulation within urban jazz culture. Zoot meant something worn or performed in an extravagant style, and since many young blacks wore suits with outrageously padded shoulders and trousers that were fiercely tapered at the ankles, the term zoot-suit passed into everyday usage. In the sub-cultural world of Harlem's nightlife, the language of rhyming-slang succinctly described the zoot-suit's unmistakable style: 'a killer-diller coat with a drape-shape, reat-pleats and shoulders padded like a lunatic's cell.' The study of the relationships between fashion and social action is notoriously underdeveloped, but there is every indication that the zoot-suit riots that erupted in the United States in the summer of 1943 had a profound effect on a whole generation of socially disadvantaged youths. It was during his period as a young zoot-suirer that the Chicano activist Cesar Chavez first came into contact with community politics, and it was through the experiences of participating in zoot-suit riots in Harlem that the young pimp, "Detroit Red," began a political education that transformed him into black radical leader Malcolm X. Although the zoot-suit occupies an almost mythical place within the history of jazz music, its social and political importance has been virtually ignored. There can be no certainty about when, where or why the zoot-suit came into existence, but what is certain is that during the summer months of 1943, "the killer-diller coat" was the uniform of young rioters and the symbol of a moral panic about juvenile delinquency that was to intensify in the post-war period.

*Harlem Riot, 1943/UPI*

At the height of the Los Angeles riots of June 1943, the *New York Times* carried a front page article which claimed without reservation that the first zoot-suit had been purchased by a black bus worker, Clyde Duncan, from a tailor's shop in Gainesville, Georgia. Allegedly, Duncan had been inspired by the film 'Gone with the Wind' and had set out to look like Rhett Butler. This explanation clearly found favor throughout the USA. The national press forwarded countless others. Some reports claimed that the zoot-suit was an invention of Harlem night life, others suggested it grew out of jazz culture and the exhibitionist stage-costumes of the band leaders, and some argued that the zoot-suit was derived from military uniforms and imported from Britain. The alternative and independent press, particularly
Crisis and Negro Quarterly, more convincingly argued that the zoot-suit was the product of a particular social context. They emphasized the importance of Mexican-American youths, or pachuco, in the emergence of zoot-suit style and, in tentative ways, tried to relate their appearance on the streets to the concept of pachuquismo.

In his pioneering book, The Labyrinth of Solitude, the Mexican poet and social commentator Octavio Paz throws imaginative light on pachuco style and indirectly establishes a framework within which the zoot-suit can be understood. Paz's study of the Mexican national consciousness examines the changes brought about by the movement of labor, particularly the generations of Mexicans who migrated northwards to the US. This movement, and the new economic and social patterns it implied, had, according to Paz, forced young Mexican-Americans into an ambivalent experience between two cultures.

What distinguishes them, I think, is their furtive, restless air: they act like persons who are wearing disguises, who are afraid of a stranger's look because it could strip them and leave them stark naked... This spiritual condition, or lack of spirit, has given birth to a type known as the pachuco. The pachucos are youths, for the most part of Mexican origin, who form gangs in southern cities; they can be identified by their language and behavior as well as by the clothing they affect. They are instinctive rebels, and North American racism has vented its wrath on them more than once. But the pachucos do not attempt to vindicate their race or the nationality of their forebears. Their attitude reveals an obstinate, almost fanatical will-to-be, but this will affirms nothing specific except their determination... not to be like those around them.

Pachuco youth embodied all the characteristics of second generation working-class immigrants. In the most obvious ways they had been stripped of their customs, beliefs and language. The pachucos were a dispossessed generation within a disadvantaged sector of North American society; and predictably their experiences in education, welfare and employment alienated them from the aspirations of their parents and the dominant assumptions of the society in which they lived. The pachucos subculture was defined not only by ostentatious fashion, but by petty crime, delinquency and drug-taking. Rather than disguise their alienation or efface their hostility to the dominant society, the pachucos adopted an arrogant posture. They flaunted their difference, and the zoot-suit became the means by which that difference was announced. Those "impassive and sinister clowns" whose purpose was "to cause terror instead of laughter," invited the kind of attention that led to both prestige and persecution. For Octavio Paz the pachuco's appropriation of the zoot-suit was an admission of the ambivalent place he occupied. "It is the only way he can establish a more vital relationship with the society he is antagonizing. As a victim he can occupy a place in the world that previously ignored him; as a delinquent, he can become one of its wicked heroes." The zoot-suit riots of 1943 encapsulated this paradox. They emerged out of the dialectics of delinquency and persecution, during a period in which American society was undergoing profound structural change.

The Zoot Suit style reaches London, 1944

The major social change brought about by the United States' involvement in the war was the recruitment to the armed forces of over four million civilians and the entrance of over five
million women into the war-time labor force. The rapid increase in military recruitment and the radical shift in the composition of the labor force led in turn to changes in family life, particularly the erosion of parental control and authority. The large scale and prolonged separation of millions of families precipitated an unprecedented increase in the rate of juvenile crime and delinquency. By the summer of 1943, it was commonplace for teenagers to be left to their own initiatives while their parents were either on active military service or involved in war work. The increase in night work compounded the problem. With their parents or guardians working unsocial hours, it became possible for many more young people to gather late into the night at major urban centers or simply on the street corners.

The rate of social mobility intensified during the period of the zoot-suit riots. With over 15 million civilians and 12 million military personnel on the move throughout the country, there was a corresponding increase in vagrancy. Petty crimes became more difficult to detect and control; itinerants became increasingly common, and social transience put unforeseen pressure on housing and welfare. The new patterns of social mobility also led to congestion in military and industrial areas. Significantly, it was the overcrowded military towns along the Pacific coast and the industrial conurbations of Detroit, Pittsburgh and Los Angeles that witnessed the most violent outbreaks of zoot-suit rioting.4

"Delinquency" emerged from the dictionary of new sociology to become an everyday term, as wartime statistics revealed these new patterns of adolescent behavior. The pachucos of the Los Angeles area were particularly vulnerable to the effects of war. Being neither Mexican nor American, the pachucos, like the black youths with whom they shared the zoot-suit style, simply did not fit. In their own terms they were '24-hour orphans', having rejected the ideologies of their migrant parents. As the war furthered the dislocation of family relationships, the pachucos gravitated away from the home to the only place where their status was visible, the streets and bars of the towns and cities. But if the pachucos laid themselves open to a life of delinquency and detention, they also asserted their distinct identity, with their own style of dress, their own way of life and a shared set of experiences.

Liberty, Disorder and the Forbidden

The zoot-suit riots sharply revealed a polarization between two youth groups within wartime society: the gangs of predominantly black and Mexican youths who were at the forefront of the zoot-suit subculture, and the predominantly white American servicemen stationed along the Pacific coast. The riots invariably had racial and social resonances but the primary issue seems to have been patriotism and attitudes to the war. With the entry of the United States into the war in December 1941, the nation had to come to terms with the restrictions of rationing and the prospects of con-
scription. In March 1942, the War Production Board’s first rationing act had a direct effect on the manufacture of suits and all clothing containing wool. In an attempt to institute a 26 per cent cut-back in the use of fabrics, the War Production Board drew up regulations for the wartime manufacture of what Esquire magazine called “streamlined suits by Uncle Sam.” The regulations effectively forbade the manufacture of zoot-suits and most legitimate tailoring companies ceased to manufacture or advertise any suits that fell outside the War Production Board’s guidelines. However, the demand for zoot-suits did not decline and a network of bootleg tailors based in Los Angeles and New York continued to manufacture the garments. Thus the polarization between servicemen and pachucos was immediately visible: the chino shirt and battledress were evidently uniforms of patriotism, whereas wearing a zoot-suit was a deliberate and public way of flouting the regulations of rationing. The zoot-suit was a moral and social scandal in the eyes of the authorities, not simply because it was associated with petty crime and violence, but because it openly snubbed the laws of rationing. In the fragile harmony of wartime society, the zoot-suiters were, according to Octavio Paz, “a symbol of love and joy or of horror and loathing, an embodiment of liberty, of disorder, of the forbidden.”

The zoot-suit riots, which were initially confined to Los Angeles, began in the first few days of June 1943. During the first weekend of the month, over 60 zoot-suiters were arrested and charged at Los Angeles County Jail, after violent and well publicized fights between servicemen on shore leave and gangs of Mexican-American youths. In order to prevent further outbreaks of fighting, the police patrolled the eastern sections of the city, as rumors spread from the military bases that servicemen were intending to form vigilante groups. The Washington Post’s report of the incidents, on the morning of Wednesday 9 June 1943, clearly saw the events from the point of view of the servicemen.

Disgusted with being robbed and beaten with tire irons, weighted ropes, belts and fists employed by overwhelming numbers of youthful hoodlums, the uniformed men passed the word quietly among themselves and opened their campaign in force on Friday night.

At central jail, where spectators jammed the sidewalks and police made no effort to halt auto loads of servicemen openly cruising in search of zoot-suiters, the youths streamed gladly into the sanctity of the cells after being snatched from bar rooms, pool halls and theaters and stripped of their attire.

During the ensuing weeks, of rioting, the ritualistic stripping of zoot-suiters became the major means by which the servicemen re-established their status over the pachucos. It became commonplace for gangs of Marines to ambush zoot-suiters, strip them down to their underwear and leave them helpless in the streets. In one particularly vicious incident, a gang of drunken sailors rampaged through a cinema after discovering two zoot-suiters. They dragged the pachucos on to the stage as the film was being screened, stripped them in front of the audience and as a final insult, urinated on the suits.

The press coverage of these incidents ranged from the careful and cautionary liberalism of The Los Angeles Times to the more hysterical hate-mongering of William Randolph Hearst’s West Coast papers. Although the practice of stripping and publicly humiliating the zoot-suiters was not prompted by the press, several reports did little to discourage the attacks:

...zoot-suits smouldered in the ashes of street bonfires where they had been tossed by grimly methodical tank forces of servicemen. The zooters, who earlier in the day had spread boasts that they were organized to ‘kill every cop’ they could find, showed no inclination to try to make good their boasts. Searching parties of soldiers, sailors and Marines hunted them out and drove them out into the open like bird dogs flushing quail. Procedure was standard: grab a zooter. Take off his pants and frock coat and tear them up or burn them. Trim the ‘Argentine Ducktail’ haircut that goes with the screwy costume.

The second week of June witnessed the worst incidents of rioting and public disorder. A sailor was slashed and disfigured by a pachuco gang; a policeman was run down when he tried to question a car load of zoot-suiters; a young Mexican was stabbed at a party by drunken
Marines; a trainload of sailors were stoned by pachucos as their train approached Long Beach; streetfights broke out daily in San Bernardino; over 400 vigilantes toured the streets of San Diego looking for zoot-suiters, and many individuals from both factions were arrested. On 9 June, The Los Angeles Times published the first in a series of editorials designed to reduce the level of violence, but which also tried to allay the growing concern about the racial character of the riots.

To preserve the peace and good name of the Los Angeles area, the strongest measures must be taken jointly by the police, the Sheriff’s office and Army and Navy authorities, to prevent any further outbreaks of ‘zoot suit’ rioting. While members of the armed forces received considerable provocation at the hands of the unidentified miscreants, such a situation cannot be cured by indiscriminate assault on every youth wearing a particular type of costume.

It would not do, for a large number of reasons, to let the impression circulate in South America that persons of Spanish-American ancestry were being singled out for mistreatment in Southern California. And the incidents here were capable of being exaggerated to give that impression.

The Chief, The Black Widows, The Tomakawk Kid

The pleas for tolerance from civic authorities and representatives of the church and state had no immediate effect, and the riots became more frequent and more violent. A zoot-suited youth was shot by a special police officer in Azusa, a gang of pachucos were arrested for rioting and carrying weapons in the Lincoln Heights area; 25 black zoot-suiters were arrested for wrecking an electric railway train in Watts, and 1,000 additional police were drafted into East Los Angeles. The press coverage increasingly focused on the most “spectacular” incidents and began to identify leaders of the zoot-suit style. On the morning of Thursday June 10, 1943, most newspapers carried photographs and reports on three “notorious” zoot-suit gang leaders. Of the thousands of pachucos that allegedly belonged to the hundreds of zoot-suit gangs in Los Angeles, the press singled out the arrests of Lewis D. English, a 23-year-old black, charged with felony and carrying a “16-inch razor sharp butcher knife”; Frank H. Tellez, a 22-year-old Mexican held on vagrancy charges, and another Mexican, Luis “The Chief” Verdusco (27 years of age), allegedly the leader of the Los Angeles pachucos.

The arrests of English, Tellez and Verdusco seemed to confirm popular perceptions of the zoot-suiters widely expressed for weeks prior to the riots. Firstly, that the zoot-suit gangs were predominantly, but not exclusively, comprised of black and Mexican youths. Secondly, that many of the zoot-suiters were old enough to be in the armed forces but were either avoid conscription or had been exempted on medical grounds. Finally, in the case of Frank Tellez, who was photographed wearing a pancake hat with a rear feather, that zoot-suit style was an expensive fashion often funded by theft and petty extortion. Tellez allegedly wore a colorful long drape coat that was “part of a $75 suit” and a pair of pegged trousers “very full at the knees and narrow at the cuffs” which were allegedly part of another suit. The caption of the Associated Press photograph indignantly added that “Tellez holds a medical discharge from the Army.” What newspaper reports tended to suppress was information on the Marines who were arrested for inciting riots, the existence of gangs of white zoot-suiters, and the opinions of Mexican-American servicemen stationed in California, who were part of the war-effort but who refused to take part in vigilante raids on pachuco hangouts.

As the zoot-suit riots spread throughout California, to cities in Texas and Arizona, a new dimension began to influence press coverage of the riots in Los Angeles. On a day when 125 zoot-suited youths clashed with marines in Watts and armed police had to quell riots in Boyle Heights, the Los Angeles press concentrated on a razor attack on a local mother, Betty Morgan. What distinguished this incident from hundreds of comparable attacks was that the assailants were girls. The press related the incident to the arrest of Amelia Venegas, a woman zoot-suiter who was charged with carrying, and threatening to use, a brass knuckleduster. The revelation that girls were active within pachuco subculture led to consis-
tent press coverage of the activities of two female gangs: the Slick Chicks and the Black Widows. The latter gang took its name from the members’ distinctive dress, black zoot-suit jackets, short black skirts and black fish-net stockings. In retrospect the Black Widows, and their active part in the subcultural violence of the zoot-suit riots, disturb conventional understandings of the concept of pachuquismo.

As Joan W. Moore implies in *Homeboys*, her definitive study of Los Angeles youth gangs, the concept of pachuquismo is too readily and unproblematically equated with the better known concept of machismo. Undoubtedly, they share certain ideological traits, not least a swaggering and at times aggressive sense of power and bravado, but the two concepts derive from different sets of social definitions. Whereas machismo can be defined in terms of male power and sexuality, pachuquismo predominantly derives from ethnic, generational and class-based aspirations, and is less evidently a question of gender. What the zoot-suit riots brought to the surface was the complexity of pachuco style. The Black Widows and their aggressive image confounded the pachuco stereotype of the lazy male delinquent who avoided conscription for a life of dandyism and petty crime, and reinforced radical readings of pachuco subculture. The Black Widows were a reminder that ethnic and generational alienation was a pressing social problem and an indication of the tensions that existed in minority, low-income communities.

Although detailed information on the role of girls within zoot-suit sub-culture is limited to the very brief press reports, the appearance of female pachucos coincided with a dramatic rise in the delinquency rates amongst girls aged between 12 and 20 years old. The disintegration of traditional family relationships and the entry of young women into the labor force undoubtedly had an effect on the social roles and responsibilities of female adolescents, but it is difficult to be precise about the relationships between changed patterns of social experience and the rise in delinquency. However, war-time society brought about an increase in unprepared and ir-
regular sexual intercourse, which in turn led to significant increases in the rates of abortion, illegitimate births and venereal diseases. Although statistics are difficult to trace, there are many indications that the war years saw a remarkable increase in the numbers of young women who were taken into social care or referred to penal institutions, as a result of the specific social problems they had to encounter.

Later studies provide evidence that young women and girls were also heavily involved in the traffic and transaction of soft drugs. The pachuco sub-culture within the Los Angeles metropolitan area was directly associated with a widespread growth in the use of marijuana. It has been suggested that female zoot-suiters concealed quantities of drugs on their bodies, since they were less likely to be closely searched by male members of the law enforcement agencies. Unfortunately, the absence of consistent or reliable information on the female gangs makes it particularly difficult to be certain about their status within the riots, or their place within traditions of female resistance. The Black Widows and Slick Chicks were spectacular in a sub-cultural sense, but their black drape jackets, tight skirts, fish net stockings and heavily emphasized make-up, were ridiculed in the press. The Black Widows clearly existed outside the orthodoxies of war-time society: playing no part in the industrial war effort, and openly challenging conventional notions of feminine beauty and sexuality.

Towards the end of the second week in June, the riots in Los Angeles were dying out. Sporadic incidents broke out in other cities, particularly Detroit, New York and Philadelphia, where two members of Gene Krupa’s dance band were beaten up in a station for wearing the band’s zoot-suit costumes; but these, like the residual events in Los Angeles, were not taken seriously. The authorities failed to read the inarticulate warning signs proffered in two separate incidents in California: in one a zoot-suitier was arrested for throwing gasoline flares at a theatre; and in the second another was arrested for carrying a silver tomahawk. The zoot-suit riots had become a public and spectacular enactment of social disaffection. The authorities in Detroit chose to dismiss a zoot-suit riot at the city’s Cooley High School as an adolescent imitation of the Los Angeles disturbances. Within three weeks Detroit was in the midst of the worst race riot in its history. The United States was still involved in the war abroad when violent events on the home front signalled the beginnings of a new era in racial politics.

Official Fears of Fifth Column Fashion

Official reactions to the zoot-suit riots varied enormously. The most urgent problem that concerned California State Senators was the adverse effect that the events might have on the relationship between the United States and Mexico. This concern stemmed partly from the wish to preserve good international relations, but rather more from the significance with Mexico for the economy of Southern California, as an item in the Los Angeles Times made clear. “In San Francisco, Senator Downey declared that the riots may have ‘extremely grave consequences’ in impairing relations between the United States and Mexico, and may endanger the program of importing Mexican labor to aid in harvesting California crops.”

Harlem Riot, 1943/UPI
These fears were compounded when the Mexican Embassy formally drew the zoot-suit riots to the attention of the State Department. It was the fear of an "international incident" that could only have an adverse effect on California’s economy, rather than any real concern for the social conditions of the Mexican-American community, that motivated Governor Earl Warren of California to order a public investigation into the causes of the riots. In an ambiguous press statement, the Governor hinted that the riots may have been instigated by outside or even foreign agitators:

As we love our country and the boys we are sending overseas to defend it, we are all duty bound to suppress every discordant activity which is designed to stir up international strife or adversely affect our relationships with our allies in the United Nations.13

The zoot-suit riots provoked two related investigations; a fact finding investigative committee headed by Attorney General Robert Kenny and an Un-American activities investigation presided over by State Senator Jack B. Tenney. The Un-American activities investigation was ordered "to determine whether the present zoot-suit riots were sponsored by Nazi agencies attempting to spread disunity between the United States and Latin-American countries." Senator Tenney, a member of the Un-American Activities committee for Los Angeles County, claimed he had evidence that the zoot-suits were "Axis-sponsored" but the evidence was never presented.2 However, the notion that the riots might have been initiated by outside agitators persisted throughout the month of June, and was fuelled by Japanese propaganda broadcasts accusing the US government of ignoring the brutality of US Marines. The arguments of the Un-American activities investigation were given a certain amount of credibility by a Mexican pastor based in Watts, who according to the press had been "a pretty rough customer himself, serving as a captain in Pancho Villa’s revolutionary army." Reverend Francisco Quintanilla, the pastor of the Mexican Methodist church, was convinced the riots were the result of fifth columnists. "When the boys start attacking servicemen it means the enemy is right at home. It means they are being fed vicious propaganda by enemy agents who wish to stir up all the racial and class hatreds they can put their evil fingers on."2

The attention given to the dubious claims of Nazi-instigation tended to obfuscate other more credible opinions. Examination of the social conditions of pachuco youths tended to be marginalized in favor of other more "newsworthy" angles. At no stage in the press coverage were the opinions of community workers or youth leaders sought, and so, ironically, the most progressive opinion to appear in the major newspapers was offered by the Deputy Chief of Police, E.W. Lester. In press releases and on radio he provided a short history of gang subcultures in the Los Angeles area and then tried, albeit briefly, to place the riots in a social context.

The Deputy Chief said most of the youths came from overcrowded colorless homes that offered no opportunities for leisure-time activities. He said it is wrong to blame law enforcement agencies for the present situation, but that society as a whole must be charged with mishandling the problems.2
On the morning of Friday June 11, 1943, *The Los Angeles Times* broke with its regular practices and printed an editorial appeal, “Time For Sanity,” on its front page. The main purpose of the editorial was to dispel suggestions that the riots were racially motivated, and to challenge the growing opinion that white servicemen from southern states had actively colluded with the police in their vigilante campaign against the zoot-suiters.

There seems to be no simple or complete explanation for the growth of the grotesque gangs. Many reasons have been offered, some apparently valid, some farfetched. But it does appear to be definitely established that any attempts at curbing the movement have had nothing whatever to do with race persecution, although some elements have loudly raised the cry on this very thing.29

A month later, the editorial of July’s issue of *Crisis* presented a diametrically opposed point of view:

These riots would not occur—no matter what the instant provocation—if the vast majority of the population, including more often than not the law enforcement officers and machinery, did not share in varying degrees the belief that Negroes are and must be kept second-class citizens.30

But this view got short shrift, particularly from the authorities, whose initial response to the riots was largely retributive. Emphasis was placed on arrest and punishment. The Los Angeles City Council considered a proposal from Councillor Norris Nelson, that “it be made a jail offense to wear zoot-suits with reat pleats within the city of LA”31, and a discussion ensued for over an hour before it was resolved that the laws pertaining to rioting and disorderly conduct were sufficient to contain the zoot-suit threat. However, the council did encourage the War Production Board (WPB) to reiterate its regulations on the manufacture of suits. The regional office of the WPB based in San Francisco investigated tailors manufacturing in the area of men’s fashion and took steps “to curb illegal production of men's clothing in violation of WPB limitation orders.”32 Only when Governor Warren’s fact-finding commission made its public recommendations did the political analysis of the riots go beyond the first principles of punishment and proscription. The recommendations called for a more responsible co-operation from the press; a program of special training for police officers working in multi-racial communities; additional detention centers; a juvenile forestry camp for youth under the age of 16; an increase in military and

* A young zoot suit is protected from a racist mob during an outbreak of street violence in Detroit.
shore police; an increase in the youth facilities provided by the church; an increase in neighborhood recreation facilities and an end to discrimination in the use of public facilities. In addition to these measures, the commission urged that arrests should be made without undue emphasis on members of minority groups and encouraged lawyers to protect the rights of youths arrested for participation in gang activity. The findings were a delicate balance of punishment and palliative; it made no significant mention of the social conditions of Mexican laborers and no recommendations about the kind of public spending that would be needed to alter the social experiences of pachuco youth. The outcome of the zoot-suit riots was an inadequate, highly localized and relatively ineffective body of short term public policies that provided no guidelines for the more serious riots in Detroit and Harlem later in the same summer.

The Mystery of the Signifying Monkey

The pachuco is the prey of society, but instead of hiding he adorns himself to attract the hunter's attention. Persecution redeems him and breaks his solitude; his salvation depends on him becoming part of the very society he appears to deny.35

The zoot-suit was associated with a multiplicity of different traits and conditions. It was simultaneously the garb of the victim and the attacker, the persecutor and the persecuted, the "sinister clown" and the grotesque dandy. But the central opposition was between the style of the delinquent and that of the disinherited. To wear a zoot-suit was to risk the repressive intolerance of wartime society and to invite the attention of the police, the parent generation and the uniformed members of the armed forces. For many pachucos the zoot-suit riots were simply hightimes in Los Angeles when momentarily they had control of the streets; for others it was a realization that they were outcasts in a society that was not of their making. For the black writer, Chester Himes, the riots in his neighborhood were unambiguous: "Zoot Riots are Race Riots."36 For other contemporary commentators the wearing of the zoot-suit could be anything from unconscious dan-

dyism to a conscious 'political' engagement. The zoot-suit riots were not "political" riots in the strictest sense, but for many participants they were an entry into the language of politics, an inarticulate rejection of the "straight world" and its organization.

It is remarkable how many post-war activists were inspired by the zoot-suit disturbances. Luis Valdez of the radical theater company, El Teatro Campesino, allegedly learned the 'chicano' from his cousin the zoot-suitter Billy Miranda.37 The novelists Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright both conveyed a literary and political fascination with the power and potential of the zoot-suit. One of Ellison's editorials for the journal Negro Quarterly expressed his own sense of frustration at the enigmatic attraction of zoot-suit style.

A third major problem, and one that is indispensable to the centralization and direction of power is that of learning the meaning of myths and symbols which abound among the Negro masses. For without this knowledge, leadership, no matter how correct its program, will fail. Much in Negro life remains a mystery; perhaps the zoot-suit conceals profound political meaning; perhaps the symmetrical frenzy of the Lindy-hop conceals clues to great potential powers, if only leaders could solve this riddle.38

Although Ellison's remarks are undoubtedly compromised by their own mysterious idealism, they touch on the zoot-suit's major source of interest. It is in everyday rituals that resistance can find natural and unconscious expression. In retrospect, the zoot-suit's history can be seen as a point of intersection, between the related potential of ethnicity and politics on the one hand, and the pleasures of identity and dif-
ference on the other. It is the zoot-suit’s political and ethnic associations that have made it such a rich reference point for subsequent generations. From the music of Thelonious Monk, and Kid Creole to the jazz-poetry of Larry Neal, the zoot-suit has inherited new meanings and new mysteries. In his book *Hoodoo Hollerin’ Bebop Ghosts*, Neal uses the image of the zoot-suit as the symbol of Black America’s cultural resistance. For Neal, the zoot-suit ceased to be a costume and became a tapestry of meaning, where music, politics and social action merged. The zoot-suit became a symbol for the enigmas of Black culture and the mystery of the signifying monkey:

But there is rhythm here  
Its own special substance:  
I hear Billie sing, no Good Man, and dig Prez,  
Wearing the Zoot suit of life, the Porkpie hat tilted at the correct angle; through the Harlem smoke of beer and whisky, I understand the mystery of the Signifying Monkey."

13. Details of the riots are taken from newspaper reports and press releases for the weeks in question, particularly from the *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Washington Star* and *Times Magazine*.
16. Ibid.
20. Although the Detroit Race Riots of 1943 were not zoot-suit riots, nor evidently 'youth' or 'delinquency,' the social context in which they took place was obviously comparable. For a lengthy study of the Detroit riots, see R. Shogun and T. Craig, *The Detroit Race Riot: a study in violence* (Philadelphia and New York, 1964).
23. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
32. Labyrinth of Solitude, p. 9.
34. El Teatro Campesino presented the first Chicano play to achieve full commercial Broadway production. The play, written by Luis Valdez and entitled 'Zoot Suit' was a drama documentary on the Sleepy Lagoon murder and the events leading to the Los Angeles Riots. (The Sleepy Lagoon murder of August 1942 resulted in 24 pachucos being indicted for conspiracy to murder.)
Stuart Cosgrove is from Perth, Scotland and lectures in the Department of Performing Arts at West London Institute. He has written for Screen, Theatre Quarterly and History Workshop Journal and his writing on black music appears regularly in New Musical Express, Black Echoes, City Limits and the German magazine Spec.

REFUGEE AWARENESS

*Drawings by the Children of El Salvador* is an exhibit and an appeal to promote awareness of the plight of refugees. These pictures, drawn between October 1983 and January 1984 by Salvadoran children ages 6 to 12, tell a tale of unrelenting horrors in the war waged against the civilian population of their country. The children fled the war and are now living just across the border in refugee camps at San Antonio and Colomonacagua in Honduras.

In January 1984 the collection of children’s drawings was given to a small group of North Americans traveling through Honduras. At some risk to themselves from Honduran army searches, they promised to carry the collection out of that country.

The collection is available for use as an exhibit to promote refugee awareness. For further information, or if you would like to set up an exhibit and presentation of these materials, write Ken Lawrence, Box 3568, Jackson MS 39207; phone: (601) 969-2269.

BEQUESTS TO RADICAL AMERICA

RADICAL AMERICA has never received a bequest from a reader in our entire history. To tell you the truth, we’re glad and we hope that signals good health and long-life among our subscribers. But since every other left publication is printing notices like these nowadays, we figured we’d put in our two cents. Bequests should be left to RADICAL AMERICA through the Capp St. Foundation. The RA paralegal is available to help with any questions or special problems.

We encourage our readers, though, to lend their support now, by becoming a sustaining subscriber for $50 or $100. You can use the form on our tear sheet for that purpose. We’d like your help—and your feedback.

The Editors
A woman on stage—whether she’s wearing a side-split dress with a low-cut neck, or a casual street outfit—can expect to be assessed on the basis of her looks first, regardless of what she’s doing. Each article of clothing carries its own associations, from leather fetish-wear to a woolen twinset. What at first seems spontaneous or trivial, often emerges in interviews with women performers to have more serious or interesting motives. Alannah Currie of the Thompson Twins wears outsize Foreign Legion/baseball hats which have become something of a trademark:

I thought that the hat was really funny the first time I saw it. It’s a totally practical thing, because I have long hair, and I didn’t want to cut it off. On stage, I couldn’t keep jumping around because when I started sweating, it all stuck to my face. And I’ve got blonde hair and I’m quite small and people have a certain attitude to small blondes. So I figured I should do something whereby I looked taller and bigger on stage, which would give me more power. The hat works because it focuses attention away from my body, and they’ve started getting larger and more outrageous.
Practical considerations are another factor: clothes have to allow a performer to move on stage; for some women comfort is important, too. The strapless dress that keeps slipping paralyses many singers—Randy Crawford had an object lesson in what *not* to wear on stage as she shuffled to save herself from exposure. Comfort can also mean sheltering *behind* a look: wearing make-up like a mask, for instance. Dolly Parton is adept at disguise, fending off any prying into her ‘real self’ with her brilliant costumes and wigs.

The slits were one of the few groups whose female members looked totally at ease and uninhibited on stage, wearing clothes that both looked ‘feminine’ and sensual, without becoming jailbait. Viv Albertine describes another common sartorial problem:

One of the biggest things for me to work out—never having seen a woman on stage playing a guitar—was how to wear a skirt. I didn’t know what length it should be, whether higher or lower than the guitar, what you should wear on your feet, how you should move nor your skinny legs were hanging out the bottom of the guitar, instead of being covered by jeans which looks normal to the audience. You had to change their ideas of what they’d seen and still hold their interest and admiration. That was really hard.

**Costume Changes**

From time to time, it has been argued that ‘dressing down’—wearing street-clothes on stage—can actually lessen the gap between performer and audience. Some 1970s folk-rockers adopted this stance; punk rejected glamour and make-up as “pop phenomena,” unless they were used as a parody of a mask. Jordan’s white face with its violet lightning-streak, or Siouxsie’s black geometrical patterns were both OK, as they were outside of the beauty game—although of course, Siouxsie style soon filtered into mainstream good looks through fashion mags, models, and trade make-up lines.

For many people the Raincoats represented an inspiring match of theory and practice. But looking back to that period, Vicki Aspinall is

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careful to emphasize the difference between the media’s version of their looks (dowdy feminists, and scruffy, serious girls) and how they saw themselves:

We did have total disregard for glamour, but it was misrepresented by the media equation of feminists as humourless, dowdy and dull stereotypes. We thought a lot about what to wear on stage, and enjoyed dressing-up for gigs, but it wasn’t a conventionally glamorous style.

Some black women refuse to go along with the options open to them. For years, A & M records have had to contend with Joan Armatrading’s resilient determination not to conform to any stereotypes. She maintains a very low-key stage and publicity image—blouses and T-shirts with jeans—and promotion shots have had, therefore, to look to other ways of offering her visually. Publicity shots generally tend to be studio fantasies, giving little or no information about the artist’s talent or work, and it is interesting that Joan is treated differently—she is often shown playing guitar.

Images in India are totally stereotyped. You can’t be normal people. Singers are either goddesses or vamps; all the Indian actresses who play the goody-goody in films are the goody-goody off-screen as well; only the Westernized actresses—good looking, good figures, that sort of thing—are supposed to have ‘fast lives.’ Film singers are supposed to be very ‘good’: Lata Mangeshkar’s image is that she doesn’t drink, doesn’t care about money, and prays every day. Because we’d done a fast pop song, we were told we have to be zany and gregarious. We just said, ‘We’re just going to be what we are, and if you don’t like it, tough.’ I strode around in jeans because that’s what I wore here, I wasn’t going to change.

Almost unwittingly, the Hassans shattered the stereotypes that had held true in India for many years, challenging the assumptions about Western music and dress which had previously been taken to indicate loose morals. They also introduced disco into a pop music that had previously consisted entirely of film sound-
tracks sung by veterans such as Lata Mangeshkar.

Notions of exotica do change, of course. What is exotic in one culture can be commonplace and everyday somewhere else. Possibly because of his prolonged stays in the USA and London, the Nigerian politician/pop star Fela Kuti understands the effects of calculated 'exotica' on Western audiences, and wilfully exaggerates and exploits it. Fela's travelling show includes a handful of his 27 wives ('Queens') as singers and dancers. Several of them have worked as Paris fashion models, and they look exquisite: their painted and made-up faces and beaded hair designs combine traditional styles with a dash of Pari-sian elegance. They are the focus of the band, even though they only appear a few times... led on stage by one of the band, they split up and dance on one spot, a hypnotic, hip-swilling routine. But... they are deliberately used by Fela: in their tiny mini-skirts and bikini tops, their function is indistinguishable from that of exotic go-go dancers in Western night-clubs—and they're a long way from being the envoys of Yoruba culture that Fela pretends.

Some, like Nigerian Queen Selawa Abeni, wear loose, traditional gowns and sometimes head-dresses, too, for their performances of neo-traditional music. The 18-piece (all policewomen) Les Amazones de Guinee (Guinea) wear vibrant dresses in local prints whose styles, like their music, reveal signs of Western influence. Ironically, when African stars come to play in the West, the audiences tend to want them to look 'African.'

For black women living in Western culture, the problems are different. They have to contend with the dominant notion that their sexuality is somehow less inhibited, more animalistic, than that of white women. Tina Turner's 1984 tour was publicized through a huge poster showing her rushing towards the camera, in a skirt made from animal furs, with tails hanging from her waist. The caption reads: "Captured live... Tina Turner." Mr. Syl Johnson's hit soul record, 'Ms. Fine Brown Frame' featured this kind of imagery, while Grace Jones was once portrayed in a publicity picture on all-fours, caged and snarling at the viewer.

One male reviewer said he felt "emasculated" by Millie Jackson's unrelenting attack on male sexual prowess. Disco-singer Sharon Redd also uses her stage performances to twist expectations in a positive way: men who made advances during her show at a London gay club, Bolts, were taken up on their offers with such gusto that they withdrew whimpering! Whether such tactics would work outside the gay scene is another question. Indeed, it is interesting that most of the performers who are sexually explicit, potentially threatening to male egos, or a challenge to conventional ideas of femininity or female beauty, perform mainly on the (male) gay circuit. Both Grace Jones and Bette Midler started their singing careers on the gay scene where their "outrageousness" was more acceptable and many, such as Laura Pallas, remain there. In fact, a whole genre—"Hi-energy", created especially for the gay market—involve women singing sexually assertive songs such as Miquel Brown's "So Many Men, So Little Time."

An alternative is to avoid this sexualization altogether. "Dignity" is a word that recurs again and again in interviews with black women.
working in all fields of music. Probably most successful in reshaping perceptions of black women performers was the “African Queen” image. Adopted by both the black Muslim movement in the US and the Rastafarians, this reinvented image of Africa is exemplified by Bob Marley’s backing group, the I-Threes: long, flowing, brightly coloured dresses cover the body, wrapped turbans and scarves cover the head, creating a sensual and beautiful appearance without appearing as mere fodder for male fantasies. It can be restrictive, though. Soul singer Ruby Turner described how she eventually tired of the look, reverting instead to clothes closer to her everyday self, an office-worker from Birmingham. However, the new image was still, she stressed, “dignified.” Though English lovers’-rock singers favor a similar style of sophisticated, everyday clothes, a new breed of British reggae singers is emerging. Led by Sister Audrey and Ranking Ann and Shani Benjamin, they wear mainly army-surplus gear, like their male counterparts; their tough, militant look is matched by strong lyrics that attack both racism and sexism. It is certainly an exciting new direction.

Stay As Sweet As You Are

Pop music, so the story goes, is made by the young for the young. But one look at the charts will usually debunk the myth, with the likes of Queen, Billy Joel and Diana Ross regularly waving the flag for the over-thirties. In reality, both the producers and the consumers are older than the market would like to acknowledge. The myth persists because it is profitable: as rock’n’roll limps into its fourth decade, producers don baseball caps to pretend they’re not balding, the Stones continue to believe they are making music for “the kids,” and everyone politely ignores the fact that Rod, Mick and Cliff aren’t 20 any more. Rock is about rebellion, the generation gap, Real Men and fast chicks, and although these horny old myths are dying, there’s still no room for people who admit to being old, and look it. For women, especially, age is an important factor—men become more “distinguished” with the years, while women “decay.”

But it is only mainstream, Western pop and rock which sets such a premium on youth. For jazz aristocrats like Sarah Vaughan and Ella
Fitzgerald, age and reputations are seen as proof of authenticity and skill: a link with the music’s history, respected almost like vulnerable museum-pieces. “I’m glad I saw her before she dies,” breathed one Nina Simone fan at her season at Ronnie Scott’s club in London in early 1984. Simone is just 50.

Most other kinds of popular music have their own hierarchies where older women influence and entertain audiences of all ages and are often powerful enough to stop successors until they decide it is time to step down. India’s most idolized star, for example, is the film soundtrack singer Lata Mangeshkar, a woman well into her sixties. She is, nevertheless, respected as a performer. On her rare visits to Britain, her concerts sell out to old and young alike, huge audiences wearing everything from saris to disco-gear. Celia Cruz, New York’s Queen of salsa and madonna of the city’s thriving Latin dance music, is again a woman old enough to be collecting a pension in the UK. Incredibly, her career stretches from pre-Castro night-clubs in 1940s Havana to Madison Square Gardens in the 1980s. Her fans include her own exiled contemporaries as well as young inhabitants of electro-New York who have never even seen Cuba. Then there is the Cajun accordion-player Queen Ida, who didn’t begin performing until her children had grown up and left home. Every year, she brings her stuttering, exuberant Louisiana music to England accompanied by a band young enough to be her kids.

These examples are a curious non-rock phenomenon: they are integral to the pop music of their own cultures, but none share the attitudes to age that permeate the rock industry.

So what does happen to old rock stars? Though rock is a relatively new genre, already there are familiar routes for women who are either bored with the fast changes of pop charting, or whose days of chart success are over. The more versatile—such as Cilla Black and Lulu—have found their niches in variety entertainment. Combining comedy, singing, dancing, and chatting to guests, they host standard TV family shows, work the seaside shows in summer, and do pantomimes at Christmas. Their fans are largely people of the same age who remember them as bright young stars and who, like the stars themselves, now have families and mortgages, too.

For those who prefer to keep singing as their main focus, there are the working-men’s clubs, cabarets, and night-clubs, and for the lucky few, such as Shirley Bassey, the international Las Vegas-style circuit.

Perhaps of all the 1960s women still around,
Vi Subversa, singer and guitarist with the Poison Girls, broke far more taboos than either Tina Turner or Joni Mitchell: she began at 40. In 1975, Vi was singing in public for the first time, looking—a part from her clothes and ‘Crazy-colored’ hair—like the middle-aged mother she was. It was a shock, even during the heady, politically aggressive, late 1970s. She, more than anyone, has confronted audiences with their false assumptions about age:

Well, we were old, let’s face it! We must have looked like their mums and aunties and social workers: authority figures getting in on their act. But it didn’t take long to break that down, and there’s a lot of affection that keeps us going now.

I think ageism is as terrible as sexism, in the sense that the dividing-line separates people from each other. The sexual game that goes on between women and men means that at least they talk to each other and are involved in each other’s lives. But older and younger people just split off more and more: there’s no basis for dialogue most of the time.

The pop press, which is managed mostly by people older than its readers, find this aspect of the Poison Girls difficult to cope with:

NME (New Musical Express) deals with us at the end of tongs from time to time. Obviously we’re not a number one Smash Hits band, but the odd feature could go in, nevertheless. There’s huge resistance to us on that level. They’ve actually said, ‘Oh, but the kids don’t want to see older women.’ And they quote letters from their young fans, which is precisely why we ought to be in there. The barriers of ageism and sexism are connected in that not only am I older, I am also female.

Last word to Millie Jackson, mistress of sex and soul. Her most recent trip to England (she was 39 at the time) prompted the same question in almost every interview: ‘How long can you keep on doing this?’ As long as her plastic surgeon’s skill allows, she joked. More seriously, she added that she would probably drop half of her band and work as a comedy act. She had a line ready for that day: ‘Is there any of you young folks out there can do it now like I used to do?’

only Tina Turner and Joni Mitchell have come close to the Dorian Grey quality apparently achieved by the old men of rock. After the break with her husband, Ike, Tina Turner persevered with a solo career and finally charted again with a cover of Al Green’s “Let’s Stay Together.” But she is tolerated in spite of her age, as well as because of the pedigree it gives her. She is still sold in the same terms as her younger sisters—looking their age, too, with her blonde wig, super-fit body, and costumes which reveal her still shapely trademark, her thighs. Joni Mitchell, on the other hand, has maintained a consistently comfortable elegance, the style of a wealthy, independent woman. She escapes pop pundits’ age prejudice because she’s respected as more than “just a singer” and, being judged on her musical merits, manages to carry an audience of more than her contemporaries.
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twice, and it was not until his death that his secret was discovered: he was a woman.
Women weren’t allowed to vote at that time, let alone stand for government; lesbians were not
given even the little space they have today.

Few of us are willing to go as far as Murray Hall, and completely give up our female identity. But dressing like a man has a safe place and a long tradition in show biz: from the English music hall stars like Vesta Tilley and Ella Shields in their men’s suits, silver canes and white carnations, to Annie Lennox, in her steel-grey suit and boxing boots. The point about the current vogue, however, is that we know it’s a game. George opts for smocks not frocks. Both have so far been careful to be ambiguous about their sexuality. Cuddly Mad Hatter George proclaims that he’d rather have a cup of tea, anyway, cleverly rendering himself safe, sanitized and cute. Lennox takes care, too, to balance her images, never leaving any doubt as to her true sexual identity. In the “Who’s That Girl?” video, butch-boy Annie is countered with Annie in a long blonde wig, the femme fatale.

Only Grace Jones plays it almost for real. In her “One-Man Show” at Drury Lane in 1982 during “Pull Up To the Bumper” (a song full of sexual innuendo), she dragged a man out of the audience and simulated anal sex with him. Grace the Man can also be homosexual. Which can be seen as either the ultimate expression of masculinity, or the ultimate threat to it, depending on where you stand in the sexual debate. Even though you know she’s a woman, there’s still something abnormal in her taking the dominant (“masculine”) role. She is threatening, aggressive (and black), which is why the media were never as attracted to her as they were to Lennox or O’Dowd. Grace is acting the part of a man, not a boy; Clint Eastwood rather than Depeche Mode. She’s also drawing on the long history of “women as men” in her choice of images: in the same show, she made her entrance in a gorilla suit, moving on stage for a while before yanking off the head to reveal herself—a shock. But not for those who had seen Marlene Dietrich do exactly the same in Blonde Venus, 50 years earlier. Dietrich was the woman who brought trousers to Hollywood and, in the same film, sang a

number dressed in a white tuxedo. Also, the idea of playing an opposite has racial as well as sexual significance for Grace. Interviewed by Kristine McKenna in NME in 1983, she mused, “I’ve always had this kind of image that’s allowed me to pass the color barrier, and I have an idea for a film where I could play a white girl... it would be similar to de Niro’s gaining weight for Raging Bull—I like the political implications of that.”

Despite her popularity, Annie Lennox is a fantasy figure for most women and girls. She is powerful, free to move and to be up on stage with the boys; she is also vulnerable-looking, fragile and beautiful. Able to be loved.

There’s yet another new style emerging for women, and the image is already filtering into music: muscles. Perhaps this is the first trend with the potential to offer a real, rather than an illusory, gain in power. On the cover of the Eurythmics “Touch”, Annie Lennox is shown
flexing her arm (although maybe the joke is on her assuming such a male pose when her arms are so fragile). Grace Jones is a Zulu Warrior; Carol Kenyon’s first single, ‘Warrior Woman,’ was promoted with a picture of the former session-singer releasing a falcon with a strong, well-developed arm. The strong-woman option is one that is open to all women—not just those with sculpted faces and waiflike figures—and may, in the 1980s, prove to be the basis for women to realize their own autonomy as women.

Marketing Values

The standards imposed on women are impossibly high. The rules and restrictions of what is acceptable are much more rigid than for men, though men do sometimes experience similar bullying—especially in the mid-1980s phase of dewy-eyed, pretty pop boys. They can contend with it by the fact that they possess more of a sense of self outside their bodies. To criticize or remodel a woman’s appearance often also affects both her ideas about herself and how others perceive her. It is far harder for a woman to take off her image when she goes home at night.

Finally, because both the media and the music industry are still seen to be dominated by men, there is a tendency to see female artists as male creations. So with Grace Jones: just as her music is often seen solely as a product of Sly Dunbar’s and Robbie Shakespeare’s virtuosity, her image is frequently described as the creation of her photographer and ex-lover, Jean-Paul Goude—a claim which Grace Jones herself vehemently refutes.

There have always been women who’ve colluded in the creation of their images. The results may not reflect how they want to look or how they appear in private; they do reflect the artist’s awareness of what will help sell her product. Sheena Easton works closely with makeup artists and with photographer Brian Aris to produce images appropriate to her latest release—from (modern) “girl next door” to sophisticated James Bond lady. Alannah Currie of the Thompson Twins not only controls her own image, but also that of the two men in the band. Such autonomy doesn’t always pay off in terms of record sales—and this is presumably one reason why the “experts” are reluctant to relinquish control to the artist. The cover of the Slits’ first LP, Cut, showed the three women half-naked and coated in mud. It brought shrieks from all corners. The Slits were naïvely shocked by the reaction, as Viv Albertine remembers:

Nobody could see the strength, the joke, the little twist that we were all a bit fat. They were thinking we were trying a come on and sell our image. What would they prefer—as all dolled up in something fashionable? We wanted to write songs that wouldn’t go out of fashion and we felt that about the cover, too. We didn’t expect to have to explain it! But in the end, everything we did solidified our image; you get a lot of shit for not fitting into a box. And gradually we had to accept that we weren’t going to shake off the Slits’ Wild Women of Wongo image. No A&R men were interested in us for a long time, and even when we signed to CBS, we still couldn’t get the radio DJs to relent on their opinion of us.
Since the new awareness and emphasis on artistic control introduced by punk, artists have been increasingly involved in their own marketing. The problems of control for women continue, however. The Slits’ LP cover was still too ambiguous and subversive for the market, and they suffered for it. Some changes to women’s images have more serious implications. When Judy Mowatt’s album *African Women* was released in Jamaica, its status as a militant call for liberation was reflected in the Rastafarian Twelve Tribes cover symbolism; Island Records replaced this with a muted glamour portrait, taking Mowatt’s music out of the political context of her Rasta beliefs.

The new independent labels of the mid-70s were no better in their handling and treatment of female artists than the majors they criticized. When the Adverts signed to Stiff records, bassist Gaye Advert had posed for photos wearing a coat. The pictures that actually appeared showed her head superimposed on a naked body. Stiff compounded the insult when promoting the single: Gaye was offered as the prize to the sales rep who sold most copies of the record. ‘That was a joke,’ Gaye said afterwards. ‘I wasn’t actually going to do anything. I got £10 for it, and a free LP, too.’

Women’s bodies are used to sell their own music in the same way they are used to sell records made by men, guitars, hi-fi speakers, and any other consumer item. It is expected of them. And women such as Siouxsie of the Banshees, who first refused to be featured on her record-sleeves or advertisements, now toe the line. It is not always a simple case of flesh-baring for sexually inviting pictures: sometimes it is more subtle—simply being there is enough. Hence, the appeal of having a woman in the group.

Sue Steward’s work in pop music dates from the early 1970s. She was an active member of the short-lived but influential Music for Socialism, and worked for several years as an organizer/programmer for the London Musicians’ Collective. She is a co-editor of the irregular music magazine, Collusion. She is a regular contributor to the weekly paper, Echoes, specializing in African pop music. She works occasionally as a club DJ in London, and has appeared as a guest radio DJ.

Sheryl Garratt was involved in Rock Against Racism while at school in Birmingham. She helped organize gigs, wrote for fanzines on music and politics, and then moved to London as a student. She works as a freelance journalist and has contributed to New Music Express, The Face, Collusion and NY Rocker. She is currently music listings editor for the weekly London magazine City Limits.

*Viv Albertine of The Slits
photo: David Connell*
MAKING WAVES:
Rock Against Sexism

We’re a group of women and men, people of
different ages, hair colors, and sexual inclina-
tions. We are rock against sexism, racism,
classism, heterosexism, looksism, able-
bodiedism, militarism, Reagonomics and
hemorrhoids. We plan to chase away your in-
hibitions, steal your sexist ideas, and seduce
your support.

Rock music has been the property of rich
white men in three-piece suits for too long.
Rock is people’s music. Buried under the lyrics
pushing love as the solution to every problem is
the incitement to rebel. Rock is passionate,
dangerous music. It makes you want to skip
school, tell your boss to shove it, or dance
yourself dizzy.

All music—be it folk, pop, or rock—makes a
political statement. Reactionary or radical,
every song carries a message. Even a seemingly
innocuous song like Sheena Easton’s Morning
Train (“My baby takes the morning train/He
works from 9 to 5 and then/He takes it home
again/To find me waiting for him.”) could fuel
the backlash against the women’s movement.
The girlish submission in Easton’s voice and the
pretty melody emphasize the message: women
are supposed to stay at home and wait for their
man to bring home the bacon.

But however vapid the lyrics, rock music
stimulates you to respond, not just be a passive
listener. When Elvis Presley put a white face to
black music and twitched his hips, parents
feared for their children. In his day, Presley
was not only sexy, he was downright subver-
sive. His music excited feelings of rebellious-
ness, which boys carried out by acting tough,
while girls sighed and swooned. Without a
social movement, rock creates the urge (to
rebel), but doesn’t show the way.

In the sixties, rock music became the sound-
track for the political events that were un-
folding. Most of the popular bands of the day
—the Beatles, the Stones, the Who, the Jeffer-
son Airplane—performed socially conscious
music. Black artists like Jimi Hendrix, Sly & the
Family Stone, and Stevie Wonder, were popular
with both black and white audiences, not
isolated as “black acts.” But women who
played electric instruments were still an oddity.
Except for many fine women vocalists, rock
music was men’s business.

In the seventies, rock music got so laid back
it practically laid down and died, as did much
of the political enthusiasm of the sixties.
Women were prominent as folk-rock singer/
songwriters, not as rock musicians. Art rock
and heavy metal bands—both music dominated
by white men—lumbered into concert
stadiums.

Meanwhile, disco—a music made primarily
by black people and popularized by gays—brought dancing back into fashion.
 Disco energized and partially integrated the
music scene, but did not politicize it. Disco
made explicit the sexual innuendos of early
rock’n’roll, but this emphasis on sexuality still
restricted women to their role as sex objects.

New wave music gave the compliant music
scene a kick in the pants. When Patti Smith
burst on the scene singing “Gloria/I’m gonna
shout all night”, she gave new meaning to what
had been a standard boy-lusts-after-girl
lovesong. In punk and new wave music, women
began expressing their own view of the world.
The political demands of the women’s move-
ment were at last making an impact on the
music industry. While women’s liberation
music—recorded on women-only labels like
Olivia, Redwood, and Wise Woman—was
making explicit feminist and lesbian
statements, women in punk/new wave were
making implicit ones: “I’m special,” crowed
Chrissie Hynde of the Pretenders; “Mind your
own business,” warned the Delta 5; “Bondage,
up yours,” Poly Styrene shrieked.

The punk/new wave movement has lots of
progressive political implications. In its heyday
(the mid-to-late ’70s in Britain), it captured the

This article is reprinted from the monthly calendar of Boston-area progressive events,
What’s Left.”
traditionally been an expression of male sexuality. Rock has an expression of masculinity.

"There is a danger of sexism in rock, and you could hear the megaphone ordering surrender."

"Rocks says, 'Oh, Jane!'"
imagination of millions of working-class youths. Old-guard rock bands like the Stones had become smug jet-setters, disconnected from their working class roots. High unemployment, the rigid class structure, and straight-laced morality sparked a sense of rebellion in working-class kids. They could see no place for themselves in society, "no future," as the Sex Pistols sang.

Punk culture rose up as a challenge to the rock'n'roll "Establishment." Alienated fans wanted to hear songs they could relate to, and if the superstars wouldn't play them, the fans would make it themselves. Musical experience and "talent" were no longer the main criteria for playing in a band. Energy and enthusiasm were the key. People recorded their own singles and formed independent record labels, liberating control of their work from the music-for-profit capitalist barons.

The outrageous, often violent and self-destructive punk behavior was a deliberate effort to shock people. They were acting out their frustrations, not making a specific protest. Punk styles, hair colors, clothing, and art reflected the do-it-yourself expression of the music. It was wildly creative and celebratory. By taking outrageous risks, the punks gained a sense of freedom otherwise unavailable in their lives.

Many leftists and feminists have posed valid criticisms of the punk/new wave scene. It is often unclear if bands are parodying the violent, sexist, racist behavior of society or simply reproducing it. Women in rock are still harassed and exploited. It still tends to be a very white scene in the U.S., ignoring the contributions black artists have made to the rock tradition.

Nevertheless, popular culture has already been positively influenced by the progressive aspects of punk/new wave. Rock Against Racism (R.A.R.) started in the U.K. in 1978 as a response to growing racist attacks on blacks and Asians by the National Front, a fascist party in Britain. The Anti-Nazi League of the Socialist Workers Party, along with non-affiliated leftists in R.A.R., organized rock festivals in the parks. Huge crowds came to hear black reggae and white punk bands perform together. A "two-tone" movement of racially mixed bands also opposed racism. Local R.A.R. chapters raised money and consciousness for anti-racist work.

Similarly, Rock Against Sexism (R.A.S.) attracted well-known bands to "come out against sexism" and encourage more women to form and play in bands. The "anyone can be in a band" punk credo encouraged many women to give it a go. R.A.S./U.K. puts on live events and publishes a sporadic newsletter.

Boston Rock Against Sexism was inspired by the British organization, but has taken on a unique local flavor. We have five stated purposes: to raise the consciousness of musicians, listening audiences, and the music industry to sexist traditions in rock'n'roll; to expose new music to people who believe that rock'n'roll is hopelessly offensive to women, gays, and people of color; to provide a comfortable playing, listening and dance space for people who don't like or can't get into many of the clubs because of age, sexuality or the price—R.A.S. events are wheelchair accessible whenever possible; to support and showcase women's and non-sexist bands and their music; and to hold workshops (some especially for women) that demystify equipment, technology, and the music industry in general.

Rock music has a chance to affect the mainstream culture in a way that all our speeches, demonstrations, and explicitly political music seldom do. The left has been talking to itself for too many years. It's about time we started to Rock for Revolution!

Myrna "Aubergine" Greenfield is a writer and graphic designer who has been known to play electric guitar on occasion.

Boston Rock Against Sexism sponsors jam sessions for women musicians, interviews local women in rock for radio shows, publishes a playlist of non-sexist rock music (available to the public), and holds DJ tea dances and live gigs promoting local bands. The group plans to revive its arts/newsletter, and is open to new members, men and women. The future is open for everyone to define. Anyone interested can contact: Liz Mania, 464 Harrison Ave. (basement), Boston, MA 02115, (617) 734-1672.
All

RATED R (vulgar language, simulated group sex).

RATED PG-13 (lots of killing, mostly by sword and crossbow).
The following interview was conducted for *RADICAL AMERICA* by freelance writer Shirley Holmes. This interview is part of a series being conducted by Holmes and other members of the U.S. Aural History Project. The interviews and discussions with people working in the sound medium (musicians, DJs, singers and technicians) and with young people representing a variety of “youth subcultures,” will be edited for inclusion in an anthology on youth and popular culture to be published later this year. According to Holmes, the project was initiated by people who come from a background in the New Left and “who still take a decidedly non-determinist view of the role of culture in society.” “We definitely feel that music and styles of dress and other related forms of activity—particularly among young people—are too often discounted, minimized, or seen as some form of ‘coming of age’ phase,” she added. The USAHP began by drawing up a statement of purpose (see sidebar in following interview) and circulating it to potential interviewees. As their statement reads, the group seeks to challenge the ceding to the Right of the popular culture domain. In particular, they accuse the Left of ignoring important forms of resistance among youth at a time “when revolutionary vision and imagination is needed more than ever.”

Holmes’ interview with Johnny Scab, a self-styled “movement DJ,” took place in Boston in early March of this year. Scab had just completed work at a fundraising dance party for a local Central America solidarity group. The opinions expressed in the interview should not be seen as necessarily reflecting those of *RA* or its editorial board.
I assume that Johnny Scab is not your real name? Let’s just call it my altered ego.

Well, the reason I ask is that I’ve been watching your work at this fundraiser tonight. Your name, hairstyle, and that Dead Kennedys t-shirt, indicate a sort of punk style. But the music you played was anything but punk. I mean it was an interesting variety of dance music, but it would hardly qualify as hard core.

I want to get paid. Seriously, it’s interesting that you see me as punk. It’s a reaction I get a lot, particularly when I cut my hair shorter a couple of years back, and took to wearing some of these outrageous t-shirts. I remember, during what I call my Clash stage, buying every t-shirt I could find with them on. My friends assumed punk, which I encouraged, but that was 1982, well after the Clash had passed from punk into more of new wave, more commercialized style of rock. News tends to lag behind on the Left, and most folks were just getting turned on to the fact that there might be political bands on the punk scene and that the Clash were coming out with some of the more radical rock. They had just produced a double-album, “Sandinista,”—I think it’s their best—with some hard rock, some ska [a rock-reggae mix] and some other hybrid forms. Anyway, I do listen to hardcore, like going to shows when I get a chance, but really I just enjoy that level of musical and social energy I hear in hard core. I mean the scene here is somewhat different than Europe, and has even changed from when it started in the U.S. seven or eight years ago.

But why keep this style when you’re playing some pretty conventional music at a political fundraiser? Isn’t it just some kind of posing?

Yeah, it’s posing, I guess. But, you know, for me, that’s part of the energy and excitement of punk—or at least my notion of it. On one level it’s a challenge to people, a shock effect—which I love to do—and on the other, it’s an attempt to engage people, you know, with a style they don’t encounter very much. It represents a challenge on a number of levels—music-wise, dress style, and in behavior... I mean I know there are problems in the subculture, god there’s plenty of problems on the Left, but I just can’t buy the blanket dismissal of the American scene, and the put down of even the more political European scene, as being some sort of youthful, nihilistic rebellion. Some of the reaction is to the anarchist politics of parts of the scene...

...well, before we get into that, let’s talk about tonight. I’m curious about what it’s like DJing a political party. Do you enjoy it?

There are trade-offs. I mean, I’m actually there early but since I have to set up, I don’t have to worry about the sparse crowds around the bar and those awkward conversations. Yeah, I enjoy it but it can be nerve-wracking. It’s a pretty fragile entity, sort of a cultural coalition, a lot of competing styles and tastes, and political crowds make a difficult audience sometimes.

In what ways?

Well, I’ve been doing this freelance stuff for about a year now and it’s sort of like that quote from Emma Goldman, only the quote becomes, “If I can’t dance to it, then I don’t want any part of your revolution.” It’s just that when it comes to dance music, and stuff around popular culture, the progressive community, white progressive community, can be as opinionated and exclusionary as any other group.

But isn’t that what you’re paid for, to give people what they want? You’re not exactly a performance artist?

But I can aspire to that, can’t I? Look, I try to use some of the money I get for these gigs to build a pretty eclectic record collection. I think I can respond to any variation in the audience. But it can be a pretty diverse audience, although usually very white, so how the “mix” sits with the crowd is a big question.

Tonight it seemed to go well, once folks got dancing they looked to be having a pretty good time. It had its ups and downs. For me, at least, the music not played provides an interesting commentary as reactions to the playlist. It’s easy to make a fairly accurate guess as to who’s gonna be at these things. Like tonight I figured there’d be some Latins, given the sponsoring groups and their connections. But, it’s a pretty rigid role, keeping the party going, making everybody happy, and in a crowd like this, dealing with requests. I don’t know, it seems that people have a pretty instrumental view about music sometimes. “I know what I like dancing to, and I wanna hear it.” But, it’s tough to engage people because talk about music selection, and new
forms of music, doesn’t go on much, even as part of the discussions that go on at these things. Most of the conversations about music I tend to have at these gigs are with the few young people who come, they love to go on about their faves, you know, and talk about music, the meanings they hear in it.

You mentioned not playing some types of music, what did you mean by that?

It’s like the playlist I set up in my head. It’s flexible but I sort of put things under what I call “musts, possibilities, chances, and sneaks.” Sneaks are my favorites, sometimes a recent release, but something that’ll have to be played early on or when the party is winding down, because I don’t want to chance breaking the momentum. Tonight, it was that song you asked me about, “World Destruction.” Like that’s a wonderful, angry political rap by Afrika Baambaata, a Hip Hop rapper, and Johnny Lydon, who used to be Johnny Rotten of that British punk band “The Sex Pistols.” But, I figured there’d be complaints about the undanceability of rap, and about Lydon’s punky whine, so I kept it for later. Then, for example, under musts, I include pop, rhythm and blues, soul, reggae and some rock. The New wave, ska, and a heavier dose of rock and roll come under possibilities. Salsa and merengue are chances and depend on the turnout. And then, rap and breakdance and even funk come under the sneaks, hard core and any more than a couple of ska songs are out of the question.

It seemed to work for this crowd.

Well, the musts brought out the crowds, along with the heavily-lobbied-for Michael Jackson. The possibilities seemed to work, and the chances turned out to be just that. It was a very small turnout of Latins. I actually faded out the third Salsa song in a series when no one appeared. You know, overall it went well, but people’s takes to dance music sometimes shut off other possibilities. More sense of who’s not in the audience. I mean it is like a coalition and the ease, or lack of it, in being exposed to other cultures—even when they’re filtered through the popular culture melting pot—can just point out some things to us. It doesn’t have to drop a pall of political correctness over the proceedings.

Engaging people like that, at a party, seems a little unrealistic. I know I look forward to kicking my shoes off and getting away from the world at these things. Sometimes I feel I’d rather engage people elsewhere about it.

Maybe you’re right. And, maybe there’s gotta be space for some of this mixed-music play and some more stylized selections. I mean, people should have fun. It’s just that they shouldn’t freak about encountering, if not enjoying, different styles of music. Listen, it was a revelation to me—that you could dance to other styles of music. I mean I’ve even gone through a Saturday Night Fever stage, the whole John Travolta disco bit, didn’t listen to anything else—for a thankfully short while. The class aspect of that style when it first came out, for kids breaking from the workaday routine and being close to samba and salsa steps, it cut across lines of cultural style. But, like this summer, this woman came over to me at a party and asked me why I was playing Salsa. Nobody was dancing. Well, five or six people were, it just turned out that they were the only Latins or folks that liked that music there. Why should they be shut out? I used to not play any of that kind of music, I just couldn’t relate to it. Then, I happened to go to some parties where that was the only music played—Salsa, merengue, soca (a
soul/calypso mix) and Brazilian. So, I danced, had fun, and figured it made sense to include it. But, people categorize music so easily, Funk and rap is for blacks, disco for blacks or gay men, young kids—white kids—are heavy metal, so on. It’s really limiting.

People can get into a lot of different music. We’re just not culturally very literate. I am bored with Michael Jackson. Good dance music, granted, but folks, it’s a big, wide world out there. I almost expect Pepsi cans to appear. Motown is another case of hazy 60s nostalgia. One or two a night is OK, but I get requests to play five or six in a row. Now play some ska and people stand back. What’s that? People do like reggae, others like rock, and here’s a mix, a very danceable, and often quite political mix. Ska came out in England as part of a “Two-tone—black/white—movement” and the bands were multiracial, men and women, dress styles, buttons, the whole thing. And just like parts of punk culture, they actually did the whole self-distribution thing. Producing their own records, merchandise, and a number of the songs were big hits, without a major label. But it peaked in the late 70s in England and the influence didn’t really hit here, although there are local bands in Boston that show some of that influence. The early English Beat, Specials, Selecter, Bodysnatchers, and Madness—they’re still around—were some of the bands.

But, people really got out there when you played “Nelson Mandela.” Folks love it. And it’s ideal right now with all the shit hitting the fan about South Africa, really makes a good link. It’s a great song, political and danceable, but hardly anyone knows the group or the history that the band came out of. Unfortunately, it seems the Special AKA folded after that album.

I hope you’re not making a case for playing hard core at these parties. I’ve heard it. The lyrics are great, the names of the bands are wonderful, but whoa. You need ear plugs to go near that stuff live. It’s definitely an acquired taste. I guess if I played hard core at one of these parties, it’d have to be turned down so much, it would really be a joke. I don’t think I’d try. But, taste and listenability aside, folks are much too quick in their quick put down of punk. With bands called the Dead Kennedys, Crucifix, Black Flag, Millions of Dead Cops, Reagan Youth, Circle Jerks, and locally, like Gangreen, D.Y.S., Stranglehold, and Jodie Foster’s Army, it’d be a tough sell to try to interest people outside the scene. The lyrics are pretty amazing, there’s a lot of irony and a lot of turning terms and convention upside down. And, it’s an involved community, bands in almost every city, a real international network, hundreds of fanzines in the U.S. alone, attempts at self-distribution and production, organizing tours. This is a very interesting grassroots phenomenon. A number of groups are pretty active in political benefits, part of the Rock Against Racism and Rock Against Reagan tours.

You’re waxing pretty romantic, what about the more overtly rightwing punks, and at least for me, what seems to be a pretty macho ethic from the dancing style to the composition of the bands and their fans?

Well, like I said before, there’s some differences between the beginnings of the scene in England and the various evolutions in this country. The British scene involved working class, lower middle class kids and took on a very political tone. It seemed to be as much a reaction to the blandness of British “glam,” or glamour, rock, and the social situation of young people with the unemployment, dead end paths in jobs and the like; the scene here was more rooted in the middle class. I think the violence is there, I think it’s also part of a direct expression of the real and psychic violence we shove down on kids, too. I think the powers-that-be know if kids are pissed off enough, and organized, similar to what happened in the 60s, with black students and white students, and kids in the inner cities, that they can really upset the apple cart. That’s why there’s so much talk of control these days. Teenage drinking, kids on drugs, let’s go back to the classics in education, secure the family, some of that stems from a kind of scapegoating that goes on with other groups—blacks, gays, uppity women—and it seems to be diverting attention from the things that are really sucking the lifeblood out of this society, like the military buildup, lack of housing, shit jobs for kids.
There are some elements of the movement, certain reactionary groupings that are totally nihilist or really racist, sexist, and homophobic. And there is limited entry for girls and an exclusiveness in dance styles like slamming, that keep girls deliberately at a distance, but there’s also something in a subculture that deemphasizes skill and “contacts” and has real egalitarian roots, removed from the superstar syndrome the media pushes with musicians. And that breaks down the audience-performer split. There are gay bands—the Dicks are communist and gay, some women’s groups, black and mixed-race groups.

But how conscious is the process? It seems to me that in the energy to oppose, a lot of anger can get really misdirected?

I think it’s tough for us to say. You could easily look at the misdirected anger in all the world systems today, let alone in individuals like Reagan and Bernie Goetz. You can see quite a bit of discussion of the problems going on in fanzines like MAXIMUM ROCK N ROLL. Whole sections of the letters pages in MRR deal with the problems of gangs, skin head violence, drug abuse, drinking, and other questions. MRR might as well be publishing on another planet. But, the Left response does travel the whole spectrum—outright dismissal, patronizing commentary, and even uncritical romanticizing . . .

. . . who falls under those categories?

Naming names, huh. Well, The Guardian put out some pretty blank dismissals six or seven years ago, some of their later stuff is better, but still emphasizing the nihilism and not putting energy into seriously looking at, or even talking to kids, about the full aspect of the scene. More socially conservative factions shun any mention of this deviation, or else they’ll print diatribes against graffiti. They’re plugged into a very economic view of things and youth don’t make it as an oppressed class, so the politics of a good part of the scene goes unmentioned. I mean, if they even printed the names of some of the bands, god knows what the reaction would be from the readers. Decency, order, all that crap. They’re just into boring into the Democratic Party, while the Democrats are trying to bore people into action. The Revolutionary Community Party (R.C.P.), on the other hand, is into simple romanticizing. They mimic punk-style and incorporate it into their youth organizing. They’re out at a lot of the concerts, leafletting, I saw them at a Clash concert last year looking very “revolutionarily punk.” One of their local graffiti slogans, mimicking the Prince song, is “Let’s Go Revolutionary Crazy.”
So, when you look at reactions these kids have, their perceptions of the Left, just like a lot of the public perception—is of a group that doesn’t talk to them, unless it's in some leeching kind of way. Of course, Madison Avenue notices them. It’ll try and sell anything back to people. So you look at some of the dress styles, hairstyles. At the minimum now, every other commercial on TV looks like a music video. They’d have a tough time with some aspects of punk, which I think is part of the ethos of the scene.

You talked a little bit about differences between the U.S. and European punk scenes, and I know you visited Europe last summer, what kind of takes did you have?

A lot of differences, and a lot of similarities. I spent some time in punk squats in Berlin and at a club, “The Nox Club,” which is a grungy hole in the wall with a couple of air vents and two steel doors, that are opened and closed separately to keep the noise in. It musta been 100° inside there. There were two German bands, two Italian bands, a small dancefloor area which had a knot of punks slamming into one anoth-

The John Lennon wall in Prague, Czechoslovakia, covered with graffiti by Lennon fans.
Wall to wall people, leather, chains, mohawk haircuts, the whole bit. Nearly got my eye poked a couple times by hair spikes. But, it was friendly—in a funny sort of way. Everyone bumped into one another, people would grab your cigarette or your beer, finish it, and walk on, and after a while, you just get into doing that yourself. There were no fights and while people can get hurt slam dancing, it’s almost, like the stage-diving, a coordinated, very mutual ritual. The majority of the squatters, like in London and Amsterdam, are punks. They’re also the troops for a lot of the anti-nuke demonstrations and anti-Nazi protests. The Right is rising in Europe and England, just like here, but in a more open way—anti-immigrant racism, anti-communist and very anti-Communist. In some cities, like Amsterdam, there are whole communities of punk squatters, with their own cultural institutions—cafés, record stores, community centers, etc.—there’s an amazing infrastructure.

Is the music just like the American style, same type of lyrics?

Yes, much so. It’s thrash style of hard core, 4/4 time, guitar, screamed lyrics, two minutes or so, and words are English for the most part. In that last one, like the general invasion of American music culture. You have to try real hard to avoid being ranked with US top 40 songs, just like the others, they’re everywhere. Most of the punk songs are locally produced or covers of English-language songs. That, as much as the defined space and sphere, changes the context and meaning of the music. But the American style you refer to has mixed in—some of it traces back to garage band music in 60s US, other sections to the English punk bands in mid-70s. One form was a reaction to the Britwave of bands imported to the US along with the glamour rock and the general political disper-

What other musical forms would you say were popular among Europeans?

Well, reggae and a very reggae-type of rap, of “dub,” music was the other visible music among both West Indian youth and punkers in England. There have been very strong connections between what the English writer Dick Hebdige calls “subcultural resistance forms.” The sound systems employed in the West Indian community are quite impressive. Massive walls of speakers, and during the Carnival in London, they were lined up all along the streets. Very close in style of presentation to Hip Hop but with an obviously more West Indian and reggae form. The hybrid music that came out in the late 70s there, Ska or bluebeat music, was an exciting mix of cultures and two very clear traditions of resistance. In the particular situation of England in that period, with the rise of the fascist Right, and a heavy anti-immigrant reaction, the music and the related political movement, Rock Against Racism, and the black rebellion in the cities, forged a unique bond. It gave the movements a cultural voice, it was a powerful moment. But that just underlies why I like using a link in the music at parties. Moving from rhythm and blues, to rock; from reggae to ska to new wave; or other combinations that really bring out those links. Rock and roll is a very multicultural form of music, and it’s not just the assimilation factor of something strained through an economic system that turns everything into commodi-

There were boys breakdancing along the main street in West Berlin, and the style of punk graf-

Europe is very much related to the wild Hip Hop in the streets. There’s a lot of cultural mixing and experimentation. Just like some pretty rigid—and hostile—separations.
connection comes out in punks having an affinity for reggae. For some, those will be the only forms of music they listen to. Really diametrically opposed in rhythm, in origins, but linked by a social tradition. To the British punks, the West Indian rebellion and cultural expression in the rude boys smokin’ ganja and bein’ too bad is not too different from the rebel street punk.

In the fact of white skin privilege, there is a difference for the white working class rebels, since they can pass into society at a given point, but the links are there nonetheless.

Of course, both of those traditions present to me a very limited, defined role for women—both in music and culturally. How is that reflected in what’s coming out now? Is there much of a switch? Some. But for some strange reason, it seems to be the role breakdown that’s one of the most difficult. When I’m playing a lot of this dance music, it’s hard to ignore, particularly when you’re hearing these songs over and over, even if you like them. But some of the audiences play off that too. Lesbians really getting into “It’s Raining Men” or “Too Many Men, Too Little Time.” Women playing out song lines in a dance parody, like to some of Grace Jones’ stuff. Same-sex dancing and people turning words to songs around on their irony. It’s recognizing the frame out of which the songs come, but enjoying a shared group deciphering. Lack of women musicians, women songwriters or producers is the obvious role isolation. I think the fact that some of that is breaking through in reggae, punk and rock is amazing considering the political climate and the reactions to affirmative action and the so-called sexual revolution. The open, very sexual lyrics, women voicing that and not just romantic pinings for men written by men, the sex-role play and androgyny “cult”—which cuts both ways—are all parts of that. Gay musicians and gay-identified songs, stuff like Bronski Beat and Frankie Goes to Hollywood, and General Public, whose lead singer is openly bisexual, are leading to some songs getting banned by the BBC from airplay, but making it on the charts nonetheless. In fact, as one critic wrote recently, talking about Bronski Beat not being part of the Band Aid Africa famine super record “Don’t They Know It’s Christmas,” they were one of the most active bands in benefits for the recent miners’ strike. A whole host of British bands, all styles, were playing benefits, there was a real upsurge in linking music and political organizing that way. It’s much safer to be in a project like “We are the World” or the Bandaid song, “political” statement, that’s wrapped in a generic humanitarianism, which still reeks of colonial generosity.

EXCERPTS FROM THE STATEMENT OF THE U.S. AURAL HISTORY PROJECT

In the face of the political, economic and social dread of the mid-1980s, it may seem absolutely utopian to search the confusing patchwork of popular culture for signs of resistance, or even, non-conformity. But there is a battle underway, as much over the control of the means of cultural production as over “meaning.” For the Left to sit back and cede those terms to the Right is wrong. To assimilate the patriarchal, xenophobic, and anti-youth style of the Right is also just as deadening to the spirit, as to the letter, of any counter-strategy. . . . The “Imaginari” typified in 60s lyrics and music translates now into an accommodation marked by privatized consumption and/or wistful nostalgia. The Left cannot join that chorus, nor should it swallow the false history being promulgated that the troubles of today stem from mistakes, excesses, and false expectations of that era. . . .

We need to fight both the Right’s revision of this history and culture of the 1960s, and the negation by sections of the Left of that era’s legacy. It may seem easy now to submit to pessimistic evaluations of youth counterculture, even Rock ‘n Roll music, as failed moments quietly incorporated into the leisure industry; its “community” so many easily manipulated consumer groups; its revolutionary claims unmet. . . .

That legacy is still with us. Even with the sharpened ability of the state to coopt, redefine and re-package dissident strains of popular culture, and to sap the vitality of subcultural forms, we must recognize that the existence of such a dialectic reveals a weakness in the coopter as clearly as it reveals a dynamic force in the object of that cooptation. . . .
Out of curiosity, and given that comment, would you play “We are the World” at one of your parties? It’s not a very good dance song. And besides, you can almost see the Pepsi cans.

Well, I feel it’s a somewhat sappy song too, but it seems in a way to offer some break from the mean-spirited, self-obsessed style so approved of these days, self-fulfillment as self-absorption.

You’re half right about that. But part of the reason that it’s such a media success, hundreds of stations playing the song at the same time, is that it’s safe, a way to free oneself of guilt. It is exciting to see all those people, different styles, come together and blend magically. But the political tenor of the times gets expressed as much by “We Are the World” and a group that calls itself “USA for Africa”; and the British band was a little bit more right-on in naming itself Band Aid. That’s a good statement, really describes the effort, is, at its crudest, but then they sing “Do They Know It’s Christmas.” I mean we’ve got this heavy metal rock group, the Stray Cats, now singing about Jesus. Madison Avenue ads, about $10 million each, going into a campaign to sell “The Book,” various stars on TV spots, “Fame”-style dancers, participants and observers of popular culture, we document forms of resistance as they emerge, youth, and in racial and ethnic subcultures, as recognizing the long history of radical cultural in the U.S. Our emphasis, however, is to the voices of youth; and other dissenting groups currently evident in popular resistance. It is a link currently by the Left for perceived excesses of the right. And although the present offers a vastly wide array of concerns, terms and context, than that held by previous generations, there is a vital now. It is a history of resistance that trails back to slavery, various wartime conscriptions, the Watts Riots, and the modern civil rights, anti-war, and gay and lesbian movements and itself to sections of the punk and Hip Hop scenes, and to young women in the peace movement, these are voices—in music, style, or creative of “disobedience”—that need to be heard, it is our hope finally, that the Left will be able to view these people, their cultures, and their relationship to popular culture, in an open, less deterministic and minimalizing way. JANUARY 1985
even ex-football players Dick Butkus and Bubba Smith—from those Miller beer commercials—panhandling this readable, popularly written Bible. Must be “Reads Great, Less Filling.” They’re aiming for the young people and most of our approach is stuck back generations ago. The Disney Channel has an ad of Donald Duck wiggling his DA to Little Richard’s “Tutti Frutti.” If the 60s was strictly an adolescent acting out period, nothing more, I don’t want middle-age.

Shirley Holmes is a freelance writer and a member of the Aural History Project collective. Johnny Scab is a writer and part-time DJ. He buys his MAXIMUM ROCK N ROLL and hard core records at Newbury Comics in Harvard Square, Cambridge.

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COMING SOON: A SPECIAL PARAPOLITICS ISSUE!
Downing, who teaches communications at Hunter College in New York, spends the first third of the book on the United States. He offers candid and informative discussions of the Guardian; KPFA, the Pacifica radio affiliate in Berkeley; Union Wage, the San Francisco-based women workers' paper that was published from 1971 to 1982; the Native American publication Akwesasne Notes; NACLA's Report on the Americas; and Third World and California Newsreels. There is also a short section on independent film-making in Puerto Rico.

The challenge that these projects have faced, Downing states, is that of linking disparate economic and social groups—what he terms the "U.S. Micronesian archipelago." Rejecting the conventional equation of size of audience with political importance, Downing shows how this sample of US alternative media has, in varying ways and with varying degrees of success, built bridges among the islands of that archipelago. He goes so far as to suggest that radical media "may well be stronger today," thanks to their firmer footing, "than they were in the headier 1960s."

Downing demonstrates the same political conviction in his sections on Western and Eastern Europe. The former begins with a look at Portugal, where alternative media such as Radio Renascença and the daily paper Republica played a major role in the popular movement that followed the overthrow of fascism in 1974. It was in the Portuguese case that radical media were most successful in moving from the margins to the very center of a transformed political environment, and Downing, no mere cheerleader for movements, shows how the media reflected both the strengths and weaknesses of popular struggles.

For a period in the 1970s, radical media in Italy also ended up at the epicenter of an earthquake. The late 1960s upheaval in that country did not fizzle out as happened elsewhere, and Italian workers kept up a level of militancy into the 1970s that was perhaps unmatched anywhere else in the developed world. Downing shows how newspapers such as Il Manifesto and Lotta Continua and alternative radio stations in many cities helped to express and solidify a movement that spread from factories and universities to all corners of Italian society.

One of the main virtues of Downing's book is his insistence on the unity of popular struggles in the Soviet bloc and the West. His final section, which deals with Eastern Europe, shows the importance of uncensored media in Czechoslovakia's rebellion of 1968. He does an excellent job of conveying the excitement surrounding autonomous communication both during the Prague Spring and the period in Poland leading up to and during the reign of Solidarity.

It is especially in the discussion of Eastern Europe that Downing's left libertarian perspective serves him well. He has no difficulty sympathizing with the...
aspirations of Czechs and Poles to establish unmanipulated channels of communication, and he makes no tortured distinctions between what has happened in the East and the West. What matters are the efforts of people to break down hierarchical structures and replace them with democratic alternatives, including what Downing calls "lateral communication channels."

He sees radical media as having both "defensive and offensive moments." The first is that of overcoming the political atomization present in both Western and Soviet models of domination. This has been accomplished, or at least attempted by radical media in reaching out to different constituencies and in reflecting social diversity in the composition of their staffs.

The second and more ambitious step is that of building political autonomy. This process, Downing says, "means creating our own spaces which we carve out from the political territory presently carved up by capital and the state. Whereas in third world situations this space is usually a geographical area (i.e. liberated zones), he suggests that in developed countries it may very well be found in media. Downing acknowledges that the battle for autonomous media is not the only arena for change, but he makes a convincing case for abandoning the traditional preoccupation with the economic sphere and placing renewed emphasis on the politics of the written and spoken word.

Philip Mattera

LETTERS

Dear Friends,

I have been meaning to write to you for some time—actually, ever since January when I received the copies of Radical America which contained my article. Thanks for sending me the extra copies. And I wanted to tell you that the lay-out was really nice. You certainly presented the article in an attractive manner.

I have a couple of questions/problems with the form in which it was published, however, and wondered if you would be willing to run an "erratum" notice, or something. First, you changed the title of the article without (so far as I can remember) even asking me about that. The title I submitted, "Community and the Empowerment of Women: Lessons from Mujeres Libres" was rather different from that under which you published it. (In particular, "individuality and community" seems to repeat precisely the opposition between those two terms, so prevalent in liberal theory, which I was attempting to criticize in the article.) More important, you neglected to print the acknowledgments: i.e. that the article was first delivered as my presentation in the Bunting Institute Colloquium Series last spring, and then a listing of the people I wished to thank, which included colleagues at the Bunting Institute, Barbara C. Johnson, and Denni Leibowitz. It is of concern to me that people who provided important sources of support did not get appropriate recognition; and I would appreciate your rectifying that in your next issue.

Philip Mattera

ERRATUM

In "Sharing the Shop Floor: Women and Men on the Assembly Line" by Stan Gray in RA Vol 17, No. 5, there were two typographical errors we wish to correct. On page 81, in the second full paragraph in the right column, the last sentence should read, "I thought of how much easier it would all have been if our union had backed up its shop reps, used its considerable resources to promote workplace integration."

On page 82, the second full paragraph should have been inserted before the sentence that begins "There was obviously . . ."

Our apologies for any confusion.

THE EDITORS

Martha Ackelsberg
Northampton, MA

Editors reply: We apologize for the title change, which was due to last-minute production pressures. The other two omissions were proofreader mistakes. Thanks for bringing them to our attention.

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