

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

The Politics of Musical Amateurism, 1968-1981

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in
Musicology

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Politics of Musical Amateurism, 1968-1981

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Professor Tamara Judith-Marie Levitz, Chair

This dissertation defines “amateurism” to include a characteristic set of beliefs, a body of knowledge, and a way of knowing, all organized around the principle that it is possible, and perhaps preferable, to play music without established musical knowledge. I investigate how musicians confront hierarchies, both political and epistemological, with an amateurist insistence on their ability to perform without established knowledge. Typically, established musical knowledge conforms to standards and norms of technique, training, or education, which enact a powerful regulation of musical cultures. Through my research, I found that musicians who appear to lack or reject musical knowledge entirely nevertheless rely upon a wealth of subjugated epistemes and that every musical performance draws upon some type of knowledge. I examine four examples of musical amateurism from London and New York City in the 1970s in order to describe the use of amateurism as a political tool to critique epistemological hierarchies. Each example highlights musicians who articulated participation as a central tenant of their alternative

episteme, in contrast to established musical knowledge. Each example highlights musicians who articulated participation as a central tenant of their alternative episteme, in contrast to established musical knowledge: 1) Cornelius Cardew's attempt to create an anti-hierarchical experimental ensemble (Scratch Orchestra) that united skilled composers and untrained amateurs; 2) the widely-accepted claim that the Sex Pistols, and punks generally, could not play their instruments; 3) how "no wave" musicians, including Lydia Lunch, drew on supposedly instinctual performance practices to supplant technical instrumental skills; and 4) how amateurism became racialized as "primitive" when white downtown musicians confronted black rap musicians from Harlem and the Bronx. Whether these musicians were authentically able to disestablish hierarchies, or whether they merely re-codified their bodies of knowledge, depends on whether one wants to give a reading that gives undue force to the political possibility of musical amateurism. I argue that these performers' appeals to musical amateurism effectively upset prevailing notions of musical knowledge in the 1970s, even if they themselves were limited in their ability to reconfigure power structures.

The dissertation of Benjamin Court is approved.

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Introduction

Bobo and Klara, the 13-year-old protagonists of *We Are the Best!* (2013), confess to one another that they cannot play their instruments. They are the only two punks in their school, and in spite of their insistence that they are in the best band in the world, they have only ever touched a musical instrument a handful of times at their local youth center. In their first rehearsal, Bobo and Klara (playing the drums and bass, respectively) bang on their instruments haphazardly. They are absolute beginners who know only the songs they have heard on their favorite punk records. But they have never actually seen anyone play them, let alone received any instruction themselves on how to play them. One of the running themes of the film is the standards of musicianship, or lack thereof, are no impediment to the punks' insistence on their own greatness. In this sense the film expresses a classically punk ideal, that a lack of skill or knowledge should not prevent anyone from starting a band.

When Bobo and Klara recruit Hedvig, a gifted guitarist, to join their band, their rehearsals suddenly change shape. The first time Hedvig joins them she explains some fundamentals of music to her new bandmates: how to count beats, what the word “chord” means, even how to hold their instruments. The unrestrained energy of the first rehearsal slowly transforms into something more cohesive. These first two rehearsals depict the earliest moments in two musical lives—common experiences for young musicians that are rarely shown so genuinely in film.

By the end of the rehearsal with Hedvig, Bobo and Klara are able to play a rudimentary song that they composed themselves. Even though Bobo has difficulty keeping time, and Klara changes frets slowly and misses notes, they undoubtedly know how to play music. How, though, can we describe the sounds they produced during their first rehearsal? Are these first sounds any

less “musical,” simply because Bobo and Klara did not know how to hold their instruments or count beats when they produced them?

The film concludes with the band performing in the small city of Västerås, Sweden, where they are mocked before they play a single note for being both punks and girls. The audience revolts when they begin to play and they are eventually run out of town along with the other bands from the youth center with whom they had travelled to Västerås. On the bus ride back to Stockholm they continue to insist “we are the best!” although nearly every person who has ever heard them disagrees with that.

The band is obviously aware that they are widely disliked, and that people think they are unskilled amateurs. Yet, their amateurism is partly what makes them “the best.” To assert their own greatness in spite of their apparent lack of knowledge and skill is, for them, a political act. Klara consistently emphasizes the band’s need to “be political,” and in this case they use their amateurism to critique the local hard rock musicians who have consistently mocked and belittled them. These hard rock musicians may know how to play complicated solos, but they are not “the best.”

The questions raised in *We Are the Best!* about the sounds Klara and Bobo produce together in their first rehearsals inspired this dissertation. I hypothesize not only that these sounds were musical, but also that Bobo and Klara never entirely lacked musical knowledge. Hedvig offered her bandmates new musical knowledge that allowed them to structure their sounds and organize them in a recognizable way. But Bobo and Klara knew certain things from the very beginning—for example, they knew what kinds of sounds were attractive to them, how to produce some of them, and how to play together.

In this dissertation, I define “amateurism” to include a characteristic set of beliefs, a body of knowledge, and a way of knowing, all organized around the principle that it is possible, and perhaps preferable, to play music without established musical knowledge. Depending on context, established musical knowledge can take any number of forms. Typically, established musical knowledge conforms to standards and norms of technique, training, or education. These standards and norms enact a powerful regulation of musical cultures. By performing music in opposition to these standards and norms, musicians appear to lack or reject musical knowledge entirely. As a way of knowing, amateurism offers an alternative to established musical knowledge.

To gain insight into musical amateurism as a set of beliefs, body of knowledge, and way of knowing, I investigate four situations of music making in London and New York City in the 1970s. In each of my examples, musicians emphasize participation as a central tenant of their alternative episteme, and means of opposing established musical knowledge. In chapter one, reveal the structures of knowledge behind Cornelius Cardew attempted to create an anti-hierarchical ensemble—the Scratch Orchestra, which he aimed to unite skilled composers and untrained amateurs. In chapter 2, I explore how the idea of not being able to play your instrument functioned as a sign in the British media in the early history of the Sex Pistols. In chapter 3, I interpret how “no wave” musician Lydia Lunch drew on supposedly instinctual performance practices to create amateurism as an aesthetics of performance. Finally, in chapter 4, I analyze how amateurism became racialized as “primitive” when white downtown musicians confronted black rap musicians from Harlem and the Bronx.

The Politics of Amateurism

I define musical knowledge according to Michel Foucault's theory that knowledge is inextricable from power. One of my primary aims in this dissertation is to unsettle the assumption that musical knowledge, or any musical episteme, is a given. I seek to unpack the unspoken assumptions that form our determinations of whether a musician either does or does not know how to play. Too often, musicians and scholars alike assume to know what it means to have musical knowledge without critically examining the forces that produced it. Foucault draws on Aristotle and Nietzsche in order to define what he calls a "fundamentally interested knowledge," or knowledge founded in pleasure or the will. He refers to Nietzsche's notion of knowledge as an "invention" which he describes as produced by an "interplay of instincts, impulses, desires, fear, and will to appropriation."¹ He believes that systems of knowledge can be studied through discursive practices. For Foucault, it is important to understand power as a productive, rather than merely repressive, force: "What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it . . . induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse."²

Specifically, I interpret musical amateurism as a type of "subjugated knowledge." However, I do so critically. Each of my chapters addresses political issues that arise around Foucault's analysis of the "insurrection" of subjugated knowledges. With the term "subjugated knowledge," Foucault refers to two distinct, yet associated forms of knowledge. On the one hand, he refers to an "erudite" form of knowledge, namely, "those blocs of historical knowledge which were present but disguised within the body of functionalist and systematizing theory and

1 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974); quoted in Michel Foucault, "The Will to Knowledge," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow translator Robert Hurley (New York: The New Press, 1997), 14.

2 Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. and trans. Colin Gordon, (New York: Random House, 1980), 119.

which criticism—which obviously draws upon scholarship—has been able to reveal.”³ Foucault offered examples of such erudite forms of subjugated knowledge in *Madness and Civilization* and *Discipline and Punishment*, in which he showed how “the historical contents allow us to rediscover the ruptural effects of conflict and struggle that the order imposed by functionalist or systematizing thought is designed to mask.”⁴ On the other hand, “subjugated knowledge” refers to low-ranking knowledge, “a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity.”⁵ Foucault describes this type of subjugated knowledge as a “popular knowledge,” not because it is widespread, or considered to be common sense, but rather because it is local, particular, and opposed to everything surrounding it. Both erudite and local forms of knowledge are “subjugated” because they involve a struggle with power. In both, “there lay the memory of hostile encounters which even up to this day have been confined to the margins of knowledge.”⁶ The bodies of knowledge I consider in this dissertation contain elements of both types of subjugated knowledge. My investigation reveals a subjugated form of erudite knowledge behind Cornelius Cardew’s attempt to introduce untrained amateurs to experimental art music. Specifically, Cardew wanted to create musical scores that could be performed by people who lacked the learned body of knowledge traditionally required to understand them. Nevertheless, Cardew’s traditional music conservatory knowledge that framed the compositional choices involved in creating these scores. Lydia Lunch’s insistence upon playing the guitar according to “instinct,” rather than by learning

3 Michel Foucault, “Two Lectures,” in *Power/Knowledge*, 82.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., 83.

traditional rock techniques, indicates that she is appealing to a popular form of subjugated knowledge. Her instinctive mode of performance suggested a non-cognitive, naïve way of knowing that is in opposition to standard knowledge of how to play the guitar.

My archival inquiries in this dissertation are influenced by Foucault’s notion of archaeology. Whereas historians had traditionally undertaken the task of memorializing monuments of the past by transforming them into documents, scholars who embraced the new “archaeology of knowledge” reversed this formulation and “transform[ed] documents into monuments.”⁷ In other words, “There was a time when archaeology, as a discipline devoted to silent monuments, inert traces, objects without context, and things left by the past, aspired to the condition of history, . . . it might be said, to play on words a little, that in our time history aspires to the condition of archaeology, to the intrinsic description of the monument.”⁸ The fundamental feature of archaeology is to read history not as continuous, or to apply narrative structures that make sense of history as a totality, but rather to focus on the moments of rupture or discontinuity as particularities.⁹

Drawing on Foucault’s methods throughout this dissertation, I pay close attention to the discourses that shaped musical knowledge, especially in Chapters 2 and 4. In Chapters 1, 2, and 3, I also draw upon first-hand accounts and oral history as a means of nuancing and supplementing these wider discourses. In Chapter 3, I analyze the aesthetics of performance of amateurism in detail, and offer additional close-reading analyses of musical performances and recordings in Chapters 1 and 4. Furthermore, archival materials—including journals and

7 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Random House), 7-8.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid., 9.

unpublished writings, photographs, press and publicity clippings, homemade fanzines, scores, articles of clothing, course syllabi, and film, television, and audio recordings—comprise the foundation of the historical evidence in this dissertation.

My understanding of the politics of amateurism has also been shaped by Jacques Rancière’s theory of “the distribution of the sensible,” as described in *The Politics of Aesthetics*. Rancière defines the distribution of the sensible as, “the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it.”¹⁰ For Rancière, “politics is aesthetic in principle” because politics and aesthetics are both organized and experienced in the sensorial realm.¹¹ Rancière identifies a commonality between politics and aesthetics that “reveals who can have a share in what is common to the community based on what they do and on the time and space in which this activity is performed.”¹² Thus, artistic practices and political actions both intervene in “ways of doing and making as well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility.”¹³ However, this relationship between politics and aesthetics does not repeat the formalist logic that changes in artistic forms either enact or reflect changes in political relations.

Rancière argues, “The arts only ever lend to projects of domination or emancipation what they are able to lend to them, that is to say, quite simply, what they have in common with them: bodily positions and movements, functions of speech, the parceling out of the visible and the

10 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2007), 12.

11 Ibid., 57-58

12 Ibid., 12

13 Ibid., 13.

invisible.”¹⁴ In other words, Rancière sees art as a singular regime, freed from any specific rule, hierarchy, or subject matter, but also unmoored from the social order from which it arises: “[The aesthetic regime of the arts] simultaneously establishes the autonomy of art and the identity of its forms with the forms that life uses to shape itself.”¹⁵ This theory limits the political purview of aesthetics and allows for an exploration of the politics of musical amateurism without recourse to simplistic binaries that would read these politics as either resisting or reinforcing structures of domination.

In each of my examples, musicians confront a hierarchy (both political and epistemological) with their amateurist insistence on their ability to perform without established knowledge. Yet, these musicians nevertheless rely upon some type of knowledge, whether established or not, to perform. The results of these challenges are undoubtedly political, in Rancière’s formulation: the politics of musical amateurism forced changes in the distribution of the sensible. Whether these musicians were authentically able to disestablish hierarchies, or whether they merely re-codified their bodies of knowledge, depends on whether one wants to give a reading that gives undue force to the political possibility of musical amateurism. I think these performers’ appeals to musical amateurism effectively upset prevailing notions of musical knowledge in the 1970s, even if they themselves were limited in their ability to reconfigure power structures. As Rancière explains, “[Politics] does not simply presuppose the rupture of the ‘normal’ distribution of positions between the one who exercises power and the one subject to it. It also requires a rupture in the idea that there are dispositions ‘proper’ to such classifications.”¹⁶

14 Ibid., 19.

15 Ibid., 23.

16 Jacques Rancière, “Ten Theses on Politics,” *Theory & Event* 5, no. 3 (2001), 4.

Music scholars have taken two distinct positions on Rancière's philosophy and how it applies to the relationship between music and politics. Barry Shank theorizes that music has political force because it is able to enact a redistribution of the sensible. That redistribution of the sensible occurs through musical beauty because, "the experience of beauty is the recognition of the way things could be, the way things should be. The ability to produce beauty, therefore, is an index of the ability to imagine a better future."¹⁷ Jairo Moreno and Gavin Steingo, in contrast, emphasize music's immanent political potential as a sphere of activity that is radically equal to all others. They argue that "at its most potent, music, *qua* music, does not transcend, distill, clarify, or escape political action, but instead becomes, *qua* action, equal to it: an action like any other."¹⁸ In other words, whereas Shank gives musical beauty particular power to bring about political change, Moreno and Steingo argue that music possesses no special power at all, but is an action like all others, and in this sense can function politically. I am influenced by both of these interpretations as I consider how amateur musicians redistribute the sensible. In my chapters, though, I refrain from drawing conclusions about performers' politics, and from affirming or denying the politics of amateurism. Instead, the subjugated knowledge of musical amateurism, once revealed, challenges the way hegemonic epistemes structure participation in specific musical contexts. As Rancière argues, politics is not a regime for pre-determined political subjects, but rather the act of creating of political subjects.¹⁹

¹⁷ Barry Shank, *The Political Force of Musical Beauty* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 3.

¹⁸ Jairo Moreno and Gavin Steingo, "Rancière's Equal Music," *Contemporary Music Review* 31, nos. 5-6 (October-December 2012), 503.

¹⁹ "[Politics] is the political relationship that allows one to think the possibility of political subject(ivity) not the other way around," Rancière, "Ten Theses on Politics," 1.

My project holds especial relevance now as Musicology grapples with its own crisis of knowledge, as shown in recent debates over “public musicology.” As many scholars have noted, we have not yet defined what public musicology means exactly, or what its aims are. Depending on its use, this term can refer to a broad project of translating academic debates into language that is “accessible” to non-academics, or it can mean ways of teaching classical music appreciation, or sometimes it simply refers to publishing scholarship in more publicly available forums on the internet. This ambiguity about the term “public musicology” is partly a result of musicologists’ failure to identify what kind of public they are trying to reach, other than implying vaguely that there are interested readers outside the university. It is true that there is no shortage of people interested in reading original writing about musical topics outside the university, yet musicologists have failed to reach them. Musicologists have not only been unable to identify their public, but also to clarify, or even describe, what constitutes their own body of knowledge. What, precisely, do musicologists have to offer to non-academic audiences? Moreover, what might non-academic publics want from Musicology? Currently, one of the only answers musicologists have been able to muster to this question is that they can provide “expertise”; yet, they have not specified why that expertise should be of interest. Further, though musicologists often assume that they can offer a distinct set of approaches for thinking about music, the debates about public musicology have revealed that they most often present themselves primarily as trustworthy (i.e. institutionally recognized) experts on the history of classical music. In other words, musicologists have imagined an epistemological hierarchy in musical life and placed themselves at the top of it. They tend to justify this hierarchy on the basis of their own credibility, as provided by their degrees and universities. Unsurprisingly, this self-justification has not convinced the wider audiences they hope to reach.

Defining the Amateur

One goal of this dissertation is to describe the social situations that produce distinctions between “amateurs” and “experts” so that music scholars will be less apt take these terms for granted. My investigation will help to explain why it has been so difficult for scholars to establish a clear method for determining the level and quality a musician’s knowledge. For example, one notable psychological study of musical expertise distinguished between “novices” and “experts” through a strict epistemological binary: “Whereas the focus of attention in novices is directed toward technical, low-level aspects, experts attend to higher-level, strategic or aesthetic issues.”²⁰ The examples I explore in this dissertation not only directly contradict this point, but also upend the very assumption of what constitutes a novice and an expert. Though we may think it is commonsense whether a musician can play or not, or whether they are an amateur, socially and politically informed evaluations directly inform this supposition, not the reverse. As Michel de Certeau points out, the expert is a social position that defines itself in opposition to the “everyman.” Along with philosophers, “[the expert has] been given the task of mediating between society and a body of knowledge, . . . insofar as he introduces his specialty into the wider and more complex arena of socio-political decisions, . . . In the Expert, competence is transmuted into social authority.”²¹ What distinguishes the expert from a mere specialist is the social expectation to be “an interpreter and translator of his competence for other

20 Andreas C. Lehmann and Hans Gruber, “Music,” in *The Cambridge Handbook of Expertise and Expert Performance*, ed. K. Anders Ericsson, Neil Charness, Paul J. Feltovich, and Robert Hoffman (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 462.

21 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Randall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 6-7.

fields.”²² The amateur is considered in this context to lack social authority, regardless of their knowledge.

Antonio Gramsci critiqued this view when he said that, “All men are intellectuals, one could therefore say: but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals.”²³ As he argued, the intellect required for doing and making is inseparable from the intellect required for contemplation. This egalitarian notion of knowledge—“There is no human activity from which every form of intellectual participation can be excluded: *homo faber* cannot be separated from *homo sapiens*”—inspired my investigation into amateur musicians’ knowledge, even when these musicians themselves insisted on their utter lack of knowledge.²⁴ Amateur musicians largely fail to abolish structures of social authority, but rather accumulate a distinct form of capital, as Simon Frith notes: “A similar use of accumulated knowledge and discriminatory skill is apparent in low cultural forms, and has the same hierarchical effect. Low culture, that is to say, generates its own capital.”²⁵ In light of this, Frith pleads with academics to integrate “hallway talk”—the ways of dialoguing about popular music that are generally unacceptable in academic discourse—into “classroom talk” about music.²⁶

The word “knowledge” can refer to several different categories and thus requires a specific definition. In this dissertation, I consider a qualified form of “knowledge-how” in determining whether or not someone can play their instrument. In his landmark text *The Concept*

22 Ibid., 7.

23 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, eds. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 9.

24 Ibid.

25 Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 9.

26 Ibid., 8, 12.

of *Mind*, Gilbert Ryle distinguishes between knowledge-how and knowledge-that (also referred to as propositional knowledge), and argues that actions may depend on one without the other. Whereas knowledge-how delimits the procedures or techniques required to do something, knowledge-that refers to knowledge of facts, which Ryle relegates to the realm of intellect, i.e. to the situation of being knowledgeable that something is or is not the case. The reduction of all knowledge-how to knowledge-that is known as “intellectualism”—a stance of that Ryle disproves: “The consideration of propositions is itself an operation the execution of which can be more or less intelligent, less or more stupid. But if, for any operation to be intelligently executed, a prior theoretical operation had first to be performed and performed intelligently, it would be a logical impossibility for anyone ever to break into the circle.”²⁷ These two types of knowledge are independent, although certain operations may require both. Even in these cases, though, to know-how does not mean only to possess the ability to meet the criteria, or propositions, that describe a successful action.²⁸ Ryle’s thesis, then, seems to support the idea that procedural knowledge is a distinct way of knowing that can inform musical performance, and that includes the myriad ways of knowing that inform amateur performance.

Ryle’s model of knowledge offers specificity, but it also poses a risk in terms of how rigidly it defines the qualities of knowledge. Stephen Davies, for example, builds on Ryle, but breaks down the required know-how of musical performance into three categories, each of which he thinks are necessary for different types of musical actions. He describes these types of know-how as the “always conscious,” “retrievable,” and “cognitively impenetrable.” Always conscious

27 Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Routledge, 2009), 19.

28 As Ryle explains, “To be intelligent is not merely to satisfy criteria, but to apply them; to regulate one’s actions and not merely to be well-regulated. A person’s performance is described as careful or skillful, if in his operations he is ready to detect and correct lapses, to repeat and improve upon successes, to profit from the examples of others and so forth. He applies criteria in performing critically, that is, in trying to get things right.” *Ibid.*, 17.

know-how requires the performer to keep knowledge of skill and its necessary steps in their mind when completing an action. Beginner musicians require always conscious know-how in order to sight read notation, for example. But as Davies points out, “The same surely goes for planned, high-level interpretative or expressive effects.”²⁹ Retrievable know-how, in contrast, refers to actions that are performed unconsciously, but could be described if the performer reflected upon them. This type of know-how describes most instrumental techniques. Cognitively impenetrable know-how describes a type of knowledge that is “opaque to introspection” on the part of the performer.³⁰ This type of knowledge refers to the highest level of ability, when a musician can perform without conscious thought; the most salient example of this know-how is skilled improvisation. These epistemological categories specify and hierarchize the knowledge-how required to play an instrument, yet elide the social contexts that influence them. As de Certeau explains, experts often confuse their social place with their actual ability to engage in technical discourse. Epistemological hierarchies reinforce the expert’s social authority and experts begin to speak “on questions foreign to [their] technical competence but not to the power [they have] acquired through it, pronounce with authority a discourse which is no longer a function of knowledge, but rather a function of the socioeconomic order.”³¹

As Nick Crossley points out, know-how is not subject to a simple binary in which a player either is or is not in possession of a technique. Some musical knowledge can be acquired quickly, and yet there are massive gradations of technique that contribute to our understanding of whether a musician is an amateur or an expert: “The absolute beginner can often play something

29 Stephen Davies, “The Know-how of Musical Performance,” *Philosophy of Music Education Review* 12, no. 2 (Fall 2004), 156.

30 *Ibid.*, 155.

31 de Certeau, 8.

from within a few minutes of their first attempt, whilst even the most skilled virtuosos continue to learn and improve. Both ‘have’ the technique but to varying degrees and both continue to learn.”³² The knowledge one requires to be considered able to play the guitar includes a body of skills that changes according to context: “‘Playing guitar’ actually combines multiple acquired techniques, and which of these techniques are important varies across both music worlds and playing contexts. Whilst a folk guitarist will typically need a range of fingerpicking techniques, for example, a punk guitarist may not. ‘Playing guitar’ entails different elements in different worlds.”³³ Specifically regarding punk, Crossley takes aim at the myth that punk requires little knowledge to perform, pointing out that the original British punk scene was “stimulated by a pool of musicians who had begun to learn their craft before punk existed, and who collectively invented it,” and stating that, “Embodied resources pre-existed and contributed to the emergence of punk, even if punk subsequently stimulated the generation and flow of further such resources.”³⁴

The Effects of 1968

In this dissertation, I explore the politics of amateurism in the aftermath of the 1968, and in the context of the effects it had on culture. Eric Drott’s analysis of these effects resonates with my somewhat Foucauldian approach to the politics of amateurism. As Drott notes, scholars have tended to focus on “cultural hierarchies,” or how divisions of “high” and “low” were established, reproduced, or overturned after 1968. Drott writes:

32 Nick Crossley, “Music Worlds and Body Techniques: On the Embodiment of Musicking,” *Cultural Sociology* (2015), 10.

33 Ibid., 11.

34 Ibid., 13.

This, to be sure, is itself a political issue in that it involves competition over a resource, prestige, that is no less scarce for being intangible. But contests over legitimacy are just one way that the system of musical genres interacts with the political sphere. At a more practical level, differences in how genre organizes musical activities shape the kinds of uses to which these activities may be put. Distinctions based on musical style, performance practices, modes of production and distribution, performance venue, institutional frameworks, and funding sources structure the space in which debates about music's political utility take place.³⁵

And though many consider 1968 to have been a “political failure,” Drott points out that others consider “the movement’s true import elsewhere, in the domains of culture, personal behavior, and social norms”:

In its crudest applications, this interpretive tradition ascribes to the ‘spirit’ of May a whole range of subsequent transformations that took place in culture and society. . . . More sophisticated treatments read the cultural repercussions of the events as a response to the movement’s shortcomings, a kind of psychic compensation for political disappointment. Revolutionary energies, thwarted at the level of the real, are channeled into the task of ‘revolutionizing’ spaces of everyday life and artistic expression.³⁶

Whether or not the musicians in this dissertation are influenced directly by the events of 1968, the “revolutionary energies” nonetheless affected the creative musical spaces of this era. As Kristin Ross argues, though, 1968 was not a merely “cultural” event: “In May, everything happened politically—provided, of course, that we understand ‘politics’ as bearing little or no relation to what was called at the time ‘la politique des politiciens’ (‘the politics of politicians’—specialized, or electoral politics).”³⁷

35 Eric Drott, *Music and the Elusive Revolution: Cultural Politics and Political Culture in France, 1968-1981* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 5-6.

36 Ibid., 11-12.

37 Kristin Ross, *May '68 and its Afterlives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 15.

The cultural hierarchies that Drott references were subjected to radical critique following May 1968 and, as Ross notes, the term “equality” itself underwent a transformation in France:

The invention during the movement of forms of activity that put an end to representation and delegation, that undermined the division between directors and subordinates, practices that expressed a massive investment in politics as the concern of each and every individual and not just the concern of specialists—such an experience threatens everything that is inscribed in our repertoires for describing everyday life, all of the various ways we have to represent the social, all of the finite number of representations to which we can appeal.³⁸

It is no wonder, then, that French theorists, and leftist philosophers around the world, were greatly affected by these events. Foucault and Rancière each found great meaning in the events of May 1968, which shaped their notions of knowledge and equality. Foucault’s break with Marxist conceptions of power was partly inspired by the events of 1968. Years later, Foucault would remark, “One can say that what has happened since 1968, and arguably what made 1968 possible, is something profoundly anti-Marxist. . . . In this calling in question of the equation: Marxism = the revolutionary process, an equation that constituted a kind of dogma, the importance given to the body is one of the important, if not essential elements.”³⁹ Alain Badiou affords May 1968 a special role as a truth-producing “event,” and paid special attention to its aftereffects in *The Communist Hypothesis*: “We would do better to speak of a ‘68 decade’ rather than of ‘May ‘68’ . . . there is the conviction that, from the 1960s onwards, we were witnessing the end of an old conception of politics. Followed by a somewhat halting search for a new conception of politics throughout the decade 1970-80.”⁴⁰

38 Ibid., 11.

39 Foucault, “Body/Power,” 57.

40 Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis*, trans. David Macey and Steve Corcoran (London: Verso, 2010), 52.

Badiou emphasizes that the events of May 1968 in France can only truly be understood in the broader context of the numerous uprisings around the world that year. These uprisings include those emerging from the growing counterculture in the United States, perhaps best exemplified by the protests of the Democratic National Convention that summer. Actions by young leftists in Great Britain, in contrast, were notably tame, also in comparison to the widespread revolutionary events across continental Europe. Nevertheless, no matter what the intensity, the cultural, political, and intellectual effects of 1968 persisted throughout the 1970s. Maoist “Third Worldism” directly influenced many of the young students involved in Cardew’s Scratch Orchestra, for example.

When interpreting the role of popular music in this “’68 decade,” I am careful to acknowledge the specifics and limits of this intellectual lineage. I disagree, for example, with how Alan F. Moore analyzes the effect of 1968 on British progressive rock musicians, which he thinks rests in “the conviction it gave some musicians that popular music need not remain ephemeral in its concerns.”⁴¹ Moore identifies a utopian social vision as well as an expression of a “dystopic near future” in the progressive rock movement of the 1970s, and argues that the musicians who belonged to it explored these twin themes with a passion matched only by the refusal of any vision at all in the ensuing punk rock movement; in developing progressive rock, musicians went beyond mere entertainment,” he claims.⁴² I disagree with this historical narrative. Aside from the fact that Malcolm McLaren was especially influenced by the Situationist philosophers that thrived in this period and emblazoned some of their well-known graffiti

41 Alan F. Moore, “British Rock: The Short ‘1968’ and the Long,” in *Music and Protest in 1968*, eds. Beate Kuteschke and Barley Norton (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 154.

42 Ibid.

slogans—i.e. “Be reasonable, demand the impossible”—on his clothes, Moore misreads utopias and dystopias as themes of 1968. New Left philosophers of utopia, such as Herbert Marcuse and Ernst Bloch, did not emphasize “vision” as Moore does; rather, they developed a negative utopianism that avoided the totalitarian legacy of rigidly structured visions of social order. Moreover, Moore’s affirmation that progressive rockers sought to go beyond “mere entertainment” acknowledges the genre’s aspirations to high art (often through formal and instrumental virtuosity), which effectively solidified, rather than challenged, established cultural hierarchies.

Literature Review

In my dissertation, I respond to the existing literature in part by challenging prevailing myths about the amateurism of punk. Standard histories of popular music (and especially rock music) describe the 1970s as a point of heightened conflict between musicians over issues of musical virtuosity, for example, to which punk is understood to be a reaction. Rock and roll and rhythm and blues musicians in the 1940s and 50s had relied heavily on gaining credibility through traditional expressions of musical competence, at least partially in order to defend themselves against their critics. Rock musicians in the 1960s (most famously, the Beatles) had engaged actively with avant-garde music, embracing its complexity and using it to assert their cultural knowledge and register their refinement and taste. Progressive rock musicians in the following decade relied heavily on displays of musical complexity and virtuosity, sometimes borrowing ideals of performance practice directly from the nineteenth century. According to the standard narrative, punk musicians responded to the pomposity of this music by offering an alternative set of musical values. Although many proto-punk garage bands of the 1960s featured

unrefined or unskilled musicians, only years later, and especially after the release in 1972 of the compilation *Nuggets: Original Artyfacts From the First Psychedelic Era 1965-1968*, did their style of music—now called “punk”—come to be seen as amateur. Bernard Gendron inferred from the “theoretician of punk,” Lester Bangs, that one of the constitutive features of punk has always been “rank amateurism,” or musical ineptness.⁴³ Angela Rodel described the amateur “badness” of punk musical practices as a deliberately developed approach designed to fight against the musical status quo.⁴⁴ In contrast to all these arguments, Steve Waksman describes the punk aesthetic as first and foremost an ambivalent response to musical technique. On the one hand, he claims, expert technique has to be shunned in punk because “the lack of musical ability or talent should not be an impediment to becoming a participant in the scene.”⁴⁵ But on the other hand, the speed and aggression of punk (particularly hardcore punk in the 1980s) presents a number of technical challenges that closely relate to the “new virtuosity” of heavy metal.⁴⁶ In my dissertation, I avoid such causal explanations of amateurism in punk by exploring it from the angles of knowledge, representation, performance, and discourse.

I gained inspiration for my own work, and established my own critique, by reading classic studies in Ethnomusicology on amateurs, professionals, cultural constructions of musical ability, and the distinction between amateurs who act out of love versus professionals who act out of economic interest. Thomas Turino points out that Ethnomusicology is especially well

43 Bernard Gendron, *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club: Popular Music and the Avant-Garde* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 234-245. Also, see Lester Bangs, *Main Lines, Blood Feasts, and Bad Taste: A Lester Bangs Reader*, ed. John Morthland (New York: Random House, 2008).

44 Angela Rodel, “Extreme Noise Terror: Punk Rock and the Aesthetics of Badness,” in *Bad Music: The Music We Love to Hate*, ed. Christopher Washburne and Maiken Derno (London: Routledge, 2004), 235-256.

45 Steve Waksman, *This Ain't the Summer of Love: Conflict and Crossover in Heavy Metal and Punk* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 264.

46 *Ibid.*, 259-265.

equipped to discuss these issues because many musical cultures around the world actively disassociate music from money-making and connect it instead with community, spirituality, and most importantly for this study, love.⁴⁷ Ruth Finnegan's landmark monograph, *The Hidden Musicians: Music-Making in an English Town*, forefronts amateur musicians, for example, and reassesses the distinction between musical amateurs and professionals. Finnegan subtly distinguishes between professionals that act out of economic interest and amateurs that act out of love: "Some [complications] lie in ambiguities in the concept of 'earning one's living,' others in differing interpretations about what is meant by working in 'music' and others again— perhaps most powerful of all—in the emotive overtones of the term 'professional' as used by the participants themselves."⁴⁸ Finnegan even questions the terms of her own study, clarifying that her subjects are not strictly amateurs, but "mainly on the amateur rather than professional end of an overlapping and complex spectrum, taking account of the variations along this continuum."⁴⁹ Moreover, Finnegan recognizes that this continuum often exceeds the boundaries of economic status and implies musical evaluations, social status, cultural prestige and political alignment.⁵⁰ It is these extra-economic considerations of the amateur that are most relevant to this dissertation; although Finnegan's notion of a continuum between amateurs and professionals complicates any definition that would read this relationship as an either/or category, she nonetheless reduces musicians to an identity that falls somewhere in between these terms, rather than recognizing amateurism as a broader concept of knowledge. Finally, Henry Kingsbury considered the

47 Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 225.

48 Ruth Finnegan, *The Hidden Musicians: Music-Making in an English Town* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2007), 13.

49 Ibid., 14.

50 Ibid., 16.

socially contingent meanings of musical “talent” in his ethnography of an American music conservatory. He argued that talent was distinct from “training” in that it could only be conferred by accepted arbiters of talent as part of a larger “cultural dynamic.”⁵¹ Within the particular culture of the conservatory, professionals were socially accepted talent arbiters, while amateurs remain totally outside because they could “only” improve through training. Other significant ethnomusicological scholarship on amateurs includes Charles Seeger's essay on amateur folk music scholars, Christopher Small's monograph on African American music (and particularly his analysis of “musical literacy”), and, more recently, Robert S. Drew's ethnography of regular karaoke performers who exist in the social margins between work and leisure.⁵²

Scholars in the field of music education frequently address musical amateurs, particularly with regard to the pedagogical methods aimed toward the training of amateurs. Because music educators so frequently engage with musicians with less training, the literature within this field often addresses amateurs without referring to them as such. In one of the earliest articles regarding amateurs in music education (published in 1967), Henry S. Drinker advocates for the “active participation” of music students even in music classes that do not require performance. Drinker not only proposes active participation because it provides far greater “pleasure and satisfaction” than “passive listening,” but also because it contains the potential to break the cleavage between professionals and amateurs and act as a “merger of the qualifying members of

51 Henry Kingsbury, *Music, Talent, and Performance: A Conservatory Cultural System* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 68.

52 Charles Seeger, “Professionalism and Amateurism in the Study of Folk Music,” *Journal of American Folklore* 62, no. 243 (1949); Christopher Small, “On Literacy and Non-Literacy,” in *Music of the Common Tongue: Survival and Celebration in African American Music* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), 223-246; Robert S. Drew, “Embracing the Role of the Amateur: How Karaoke Bar Patrons Become Regular Performers,” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 25, no. 4 (1997).

each class into one, *musicians* all.”⁵³ John O’Flynn supports the use of “vernacular” musics (as distinct from the more culturally specified term “popular music”) in educating musical amateurs.⁵⁴ Similarly, Sylvia Ruggeri’s dissertation on the education of adult amateur musicians proposes the idea that the identity of an “amateur” can act as a unifying identity, Turino’s point about non-professional music-making fostering community.⁵⁵ Finally, Susan Hallam’s psychological study of music educators and students elucidates the common considerations of musical ability and concludes that the “least important” features of musical ability for amateurs and professionals alike are, “Having technical skills, being able to compose or improvise, being able to read music, and understanding musical concepts and musical structures.”⁵⁶

In Sociology, Robert A. Stebbins has provided the most literal theorization of amateurs. One of Stebbins’s most significant theoretical contributions to the study of amateurs is his description of a “professional-amateur-public (P-A-P)” system.⁵⁷ If professionals are defined as meeting a certain set of characteristics, and amateurs are defined in opposition to (or at least as special participants in) these characteristics, then publics act as the “clients” whom both groups serve.⁵⁸ This interrelated P-A-P system is what distinguishes amateurs from “hobbyists,” who serve no public and rarely interact with professional counterparts.⁵⁹ Stebbins builds on Jacques

53 Henry S. Drinker, “Amateurs and Music,” *Music Educators Journal* 54, no. 1 (1967): 77.

54 John O’Flynn, “Vernacular Music-Making and Education,” *International Journal of Music Education* 24(2) (2006).

55 Sylvia M. Ruggeri, “Passionate Devotion: A Study of Aesthetic Learning Among Amateurs, in Four Movements” Ed.D. diss., Pennsylvania State University, 2003, 77-82.

56 Susan Hallam, “21st Century Conceptions of Musical Ability,” *Psychology of Music* 28, no. 3 (2010): 308.

57 Robert A. Stebbins, *Amateurs: On the Margin Between Work and Leisure* (New York: Sage Publications, 1979), 23-25.

58 The sociological characteristics of professionals that Stebbins borrows are summarized in Max Kaplan, *Leisure in America* (New York: John Wiley, 1960).

59 For Stebbins’s elaboration on the difference between amateurs and hobbyists, see “‘Amateur’ and ‘Hobbyist’ as Concepts for the Study of Leisure Problems,” *Social Problems* 27(4) (1980).

Barzun's description of the musical amateur, which reads as follows: "He is incompetent, he scatters his energies, and he never sees things from the correct or professional point of view," but he is nevertheless "indispensable;" "the role of the amateur is to keep insisting on the primacy of style, spirit, musicianship, meaning over any technical accomplishment."⁶⁰ For Stebbins, musical amateurs are unique and distinct from "user-oriented users" and "creator-oriented users" of culture.⁶¹

Stebbins defined "modern amateurism" as the result of an inevitable blurring of work and leisure in everyday life. While Stebbins retains in some of his studies a standard definition of the amateur as merely the opposite of the professional, in his theory of the "modern amateur" he goes beyond this to examine the relationship between amateurism, experience, and competence: "Consider the logical difficulties posed by yet another sense of 'amateur' that holds that he is an inexperienced person (i.e., a player) and the patent fact that devotees of an activity quite naturally put in much time at it, thereby achieving remarkable competence in it (i.e., modern amateurs)."⁶² As amateur enthusiasts become more aware of professional standards, they are faced with a crisis, and eventually a "critical choice" to "restrict identification with the activity [of professionals] to a degree sufficient to remain largely unaffected by such invidious contrasts [between the professional and the amateur] or identify with it to a degree sufficient to spark an

60 Jacques Barzun, *Critical Questions: On Music and Letters, Culture and Biography, 1940-1980* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 30-31, 34.

61 Robert A. Stebbins, "Creating High Culture: The American Amateur Classical Musician," *Journal of American Culture* 1, no. 3 (1978): 617. For other works by Stebbins on music, see "Music Among Friends: The Social Networks of Amateur Musicians" in *Art and Society: Readings in the Sociology of the Arts*, ed. Arnold W. Foster and Judith R. Blau (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 227-242; "From Dabbler to Serious Musician and Beyond: Clarifying a Crucial Step," *International Journal of Community Music* 6, no. 2 (2013), 141-152.

62 Robert A. Stebbins, "The Amateur: Two Sociological Definitions," *Pacific Sociological Review* 20, no. 4 (1977): 583-584.

attempt to meet those standards.”⁶³ The first choice leads to the idea that amateurs have no ability to earn a livelihood, and thus no professional standard, creating the impression of amateurs as un-serious dabblers or dilettantes.⁶⁴ The second choice creates a new status of participation that is structured, serious, and systematized, but nonetheless amateur in terms of basic income in comparison with the professional. In both definitions, the amateur is a lover of a particular activity first, but is also thought to be a “superficial participant.”⁶⁵

Chapter Summaries

I do not offer a single, totalizing theoretical approach to the power dynamics at play in amateurism, nor do I attempt to establish an historical narrative. Rather, in each of the four examples in this dissertation, I offer a qualitatively distinct approach to amateurism in the 1970s.

In Chapter 1, I examine how Cornelius Cardew’s model of musical knowledge informed his founding of the Scratch Orchestra—an ensemble open to anyone, and designed to break down the elitism and hierarchies of Western classical music as taught in conservatories. Drawing on Rancière’s idea of “universal teaching,” I describe how Cardew’s pedagogy nevertheless upheld a unidirectional transmission of knowledge that maintained a hierarchical division between master and students. By reinforcing a hierarchical model of musical knowledge, Cardew limited the potential for egalitarian democratic politics in the Scratch Orchestra.

In Chapter 2, I investigate the widely accepted notion that the Sex Pistols could not play their instruments as a significant example of punk’s musical amateurism. As opposed to

63 Stebbins, *Amateurs*, 20.

64 *Ibid.*, 21.

65 *Ibid.*

Dick Hebdige's reading of punk signification, I contend that assumptions about the Sex Pistols' inability to play reduced the symbolism of punk music to merely being anti-establishment. I argue that fans and critics used amateurism in order to mute the Sex Pistols' music into an "empty effect" that signified punk rebellion.

In Chapter 3, I analyze the aesthetics of performance of the New York "no wave" band Teenage Jesus and the Jerks in order to answer, "how does one sound like an amateur?" Drawing on Sianne Ngai's theories of "bad feelings," I highlight "emptiness" and "pretentiousness" as central affects engendered by the band's musical dissonance as well as lead singer Lydia Lunch's bodily gestures and comportment. I argue that Lunch self-consciously drew on her knowledge of guitar technique, musical form, and the performance of affect as a means of enacting the obfuscation of that very knowledge.

In Chapter 4, I consider how amateurism became racialized when white musicians and fans in downtown New York City began listening to rap in the 1970s. I draw on Michael Omi and Howard Winant's concept of racial formation in order to explain how racial segregation in New York City, as well as the everyday racism of the downtown punk scene, informed the practices of white listeners who described rap as a rhythmic noise devoid of pitch content. I argue that that the exclusion and devaluation of black rap musicians as "primitive" in the downtown music scene created a racial double standard that has influenced the white reception of hip hop to the present day.

Chapter 1

Cardew's Mastery: Constructing the Amateur in the Scratch Orchestra

In 1957 when I left The Royal Academy of Music in London complex compositional techniques were considered indispensable. I acquired some—and still carry them around like an infection that I am perpetually desirous of curing. Sometimes the temptation occurs to me that if I were to infect my students with it I would at last be free of it. Cornelius Cardew¹

The third episode of Luciano Berio's *C'è musica e musica*—a twelve-part television series from 1972 investigating new music—concludes with the British composer Cornelius Cardew teaching pigeons how to eat bird seed. This episode, titled “Verso la scuola ideale,” focuses on music education and features interviews with some of the most highly regarded composers of the time, including John Cage, Pierre Boulez, Olivier Messiaen, Morton Subotnik, and Luigi Nono. The two final vignettes in this episode, featuring Cardew, stand out as exceptionally bizarre—or, as Berio refers to them, “*divertenti*” (funny, or amusing). In contrast to preceding scenes of teachers instructing students in instrumental technique and score interpretation, Cardew's final scene shows him on his knees in the middle of Trafalgar Square pecking away at lines of bird seed. The “performance” in Trafalgar Square begins with Cardew distributing bird seed in geometric patterns in the hope that local pigeons will align themselves with the patterns. At first, the pigeons show no interest, prompting Cardew and his students to get down on their knees to demonstrate to the pigeons their role in the performance. The pigeons follow suit, and the performance is a success.

In this television program, which is devoted to showing the newest innovations in music

¹ Cornelius Cardew, *Treatise Handbook*, in *Cornelius Cardew: A Reader*, ed. Edwin Prévost (Essex: Copula, 2006), 132.

education, Cardew is cast as the oddball. The scene immediately preceding Cardew's pigeon performance is not as plainly bizarre, but nevertheless offers insight into Cardew's unusual pedagogy and musical thought. Here, Cardew is filmed in a classroom at the Royal Academy of Music, surrounded by members of the ensemble he founded, the Scratch Orchestra. Everyone in the room is pounding away at whatever instrument they can get their hands on, including one performer who is slapping her hands on the floor. The scene is visually and sonically chaotic; the room can hardly contain all of the performers, many of whom are sitting on the floor, and at least one person has his fingers jammed in his ears to dampen the din. During a break, Cardew explains his educational mission:

I think that if you're so interested in music that you'd like to go to a music school to play music, then you should be able to go into a music school no matter how dumb you are, how clumsy you are, or whatever. If you want to play music, you should be able to. It's a question of having the right mind, not the right finger technique.²

Cardew offers here a telling summary of his approach to music education. He argues that any willing person could and should be able to participate in musical performance, and receive an education in music. Unlike the traditional music education he himself had received as a student at the Royal Academy of Music from 1953-57, the new form of education he envisions emphasizes thought over technical ability.

Between 1967 and 1973, Cardew taught at three notably different schools in London: the Royal Academy of Music, the Antiuniversity of London, and Morley College. Working at three drastically different institutions—a traditional music conservatory, an adult education college, and a politically radical free school—exposed Cardew to students with wide-ranging artistic and

² Luciano Berio, "Verso la scuola ideale," *C'è musica e musica*, directed by Gianfranco Mingozzi (Milan: Fetrinelli, 1972/2013), DVD.

technical musical abilities including amateurs, virtuosos, and many variations in between.

Through his work with these students, Cardew developed a pedagogy that he believed challenged the divisions and exclusions of traditional institutions of music education such as the Royal Academy of Music. Rather than judging performers on their technical skills, level of natural talent, or training, Cardew focused on his students' musical potential. Cardew believed that traditional assumptions about the differences between musicians and non-musicians were false, and that both could play alongside each other with the right type of education. Eventually, Cardew put this theory into practice by developing a pedagogy that served a new type of democrat musical organization: the Scratch Orchestra.

In spite of Cardew's best intentions, philosophical blind spots in his pedagogical approach undermined the democratic ideals of the Scratch Orchestra. In this chapter, I identify three main problems with Cardew's understanding of musical knowledge and explain how these problems prevented the Scratch Orchestra from becoming a fully inclusive, egalitarian ensemble. First, I argue that despite Cardew's rejection of the type of music education offered in traditional music schools he nevertheless upheld a unidirectional transmission of knowledge that encouraged a hierarchical division between master and students. Second, I argue that Cardew's model of musical knowledge contains internal contradictions. He claimed, for example, that performers could seek the musicality of life according to their own methods of exploration. Yet at the same time, he established an episteme that reinforced the primacy of trained musicians over untrained amateurs. Third, and finally, I argue that Cardew's hierarchical model of musical knowledge materialized in his compositions. In his scores from this period, Cardew invites musicians and non-musicians to perform together, yet creates distinct roles that force the latter to defer to the expertise of the former.

Throughout this chapter, I draw on Jacques Rancière's philosophy as a frame for both understanding and critiquing the Scratch Orchestra's educational practices and their implicit political principles. Rancière's philosophy not only bears traces of the radically egalitarian leftism he espoused during the protests of 1968 (and that had also influenced Cardew and other members of the Scratch Orchestra), but also, because of its central concern with equality as a basis for democracy, offers insight into the democratic goals of the Scratch Orchestra. In particular, this philosophy helps to theorize how Cardew's pedagogy contributed to or hindered equality in the Scratch Orchestra.

In this chapter I draw primarily on two texts by Rancière: *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* and *Disagreement*. Rancière's main thesis in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* is that an egalitarian form of pedagogy can emancipate students to seek their own findings. He contrasts this egalitarian form of pedagogy with traditional pedagogy, which is founded upon explicating specific ideas or methods to students in a manner that reinforces inequality. Rancière's idea of "universal teaching" offers an effective lens through which to critique how Cardew transmitted musical knowledge to his students. In *Disagreement*, Rancière argues that disagreement, rather than consensus, is necessary in democratic politics. This theory of disagreement allows me to elucidate how Cardew's model of musical knowledge, which discouraged criticism and disagreement, limited the potential for democratic politics in the Scratch Orchestra.

This chapter contains three main sections. In the first section, I describe how Cardew strove in his pedagogy to make experts and amateurs equal, and how this pedagogy ultimately retained a traditional form of knowledge transfer rooted in the hierarchical division between master and students. To describe Cardew's history as an educator, and how his pedagogy informed the conceptual principles of the Scratch Orchestra, I draw on archival materials from

the Cornelius Cardew Collection and the Scratch Orchestra Archive, interviews with Cardew's students and members of the Scratch Orchestra, and on primary source documents from the Royal Academy of Music, the Antiuniversity of London, and Morley College. In the second section of this chapter, I examine Cardew's published essays and unpublished journals with the goal of defining his model of musical knowledge. Specifically, I explain how Cardew theorized the terms "musical life" and "musical language" and how contradictions between these terms prevented amateurs and experts from becoming fully equal. Finally, in the third section, I analyze two significant works by Cardew: *Schooltime Compositions* and "Paragraph 2" of *The Great Learning*. In both pieces, the score itself demonstrates a fundamental contradiction in how Cardew conceives of musical knowledge. This contradiction contributed to the exclusion of amateurs from full participation in the Scratch Orchestra.

Part I: Towards a Pedagogy of Equality

Cardew delivered his most infamous lesson without speaking a single word. One day, at the Royal Academy of Music (RAM), Cardew exited the classroom without warning and locked the door behind him. He took the key with him, leaving the students locked inside and forcing them to devise a way out. Eventually, their yelling attracted the attention of a porter, who unlocked the door for them. Cardew never explained this lesson to his students, yet the students reported (both in interviews and to the RAM authorities that investigated the incident) that the lesson had taught them a great deal. Richard Reason described it as one of the most instructive lessons he had ever received, and Hugh Shrapnel commented that such unexpected lessons were "designed to make us think somehow, as to what were we doing at the academy."³ Shrapnel

3 Hugh Shrapnel, quoted in Virginia Anderson, "British Experimental Music: Cornelius Cardew and His

admitted that he had initially been skeptical of Cardew's pedagogy. When asked to participate in an exercise that involved writing words on other performers' fingernails, Shrapnel thought, “What's all this got to do with music?” But eventually he began to infer that Cardew's pedagogy had a specific goal: “It was in relation to ideas that were fully developed in the Scratch Orchestra of getting away from the idea of the composer writing a score and the faithful performer playing it . . . towards an idea of dissolving these traditional relationships and creating a music that everybody took part in and formed a communal aspect to it.”⁴

Cardew's pedagogy diverged drastically from the technique-based instruction offered at more traditional institutions and characteristic of British classical music education in the 1960s. Nearly all of Cardew's students have commented on how unusual his pedagogy was compared to their other lessons. Cardew said that, “Music schools are doing their own job in their own way. That's to say they're educating students how to properly obtain certain skills.”⁵ Cardew thought such music schools were single-mindedly focusing on technical skill to the detriment of their students. He believed that performers, and especially performers of improvised music, were “at a tremendous disadvantage” because schools often set out to thwart “individual personality.”⁶ Music schools taught students to value “traditionally notated scores of maximum complexity” and discouraged students from extending themselves beyond this education.⁷ Howard Skempton,

Contemporaries,” MA thesis, University of Redlands, 1983, 43; “Out of School,” BBC Radio 3 (London, May 26, 1993).

4 *Cornelius Cardew: The Content of Our Song*, produced by Stuart Monro (2011; London: Progressive Cultural Association, 2011). Richard Reason wrote this fingernail piece—one of two examples of an “Improvisation Rite” featured in Scratch Orchestra's Draft Constitution.

5 Berio, “Verso la scuola ideale,” in *C'è musica e musica*.

6 These quotes come from “On the Repertoire of Musical Memories and the Disadvantages of a Musical Education,” in *Treatise Handbook*, 130.

7 *Ibid.*, 129-130.

Cardew's first private student, recalled, "Cardew never attempted to direct the course of work in any way, to impose a style, or to encourage his pupil to pursue a particular compositional path; as a teacher he was completely open-minded. The essence of his teaching was that everyday experience could be turned into music."⁸ However, Skempton interpreted Cardew's self-guided tutoring plan as a mark of the composer's evasiveness.⁹ Cardew's pedagogical approach caught many of his students off guard, and some of them inferred that he felt awkward as a teacher. Cardew's students from 1967-68 invariably report on the strangeness of the composer's methods. Christopher Hobbs, one of Cardew's first students at the Royal Academy of Music, had the impression that Cardew did not enjoy teaching composition.¹⁰ Hobbs described Cardew as "not a born teacher, not in that sort of situation. The charisma he possessed in great abundance only came out when was dealing with large groups of people."¹¹ Skempton described his private lessons, approximately eight in total, as uncomfortable, and he felt discouraged by Cardew's criticisms, especially on one occasion when Cardew frankly (and ironically, considering Cardew's future commitment to working with amateurs) disparaged him as a "dilettante."¹² At

8 John Tilbury, *Cornelius Cardew (1936-1981): A Life Unfinished* (Essex: Copula, 2008), 340.

9 Cardew's description of their private lessons in early correspondences illuminates this ambivalence: "About taking pupils, I have arrived at a new decision, which has resulted in no student coming to see me for several weeks now. The idea is that students should come for a consultation rather than a lesson, ie, instead of coming once a week, they come only when they have something they wish to discuss. The price is adjusted with a view to ensuring that this condition is fulfilled." Cornelius Cardew to Howard Skempton, May 12, 1967, Cardew Collection: Music Manuscripts and Papers of Cornelius Cardew (b. 1936...(1955-1981), British Library: Music Collections, M.R. Ref. 789 CARD. Skempton reported that Cardew charged £5 per lesson, a relatively high price at the time. Tilbury, 339.

10 Tilbury, 344. Cardew likely sought teaching positions for primarily economic reasons, as Cardew and his wife, Stella Cardew, had endured several years of financial hardship by 1967.

11 "British Experimental Music: Cornelius Cardew and His Contemporaries," 45. There is ample evidence that Cardew preferred classroom teaching to individual lessons: "It was characteristic of Cornelius' collective, rather than individualistic, approach, even then, that he took us all in a group rather than giving individual lessons," Hugh Shrapnel letter to Richard Churches; "There can be little doubt of Cardew's dislike of formal teaching and of the Teacher-Pupil relationship; ... He seemed to need a certain distance between himself and his students," Christopher Hobbs, "Cardew as Teacher," *Perspectives of New Music* 20, nos. 1-2 (Autumn 1981-Summer 1982): 2.

12 Tilbury, 340.

one point, Cardew told Skempton that he felt he had “very little to teach [him].”¹³ Later in his life, Skempton reflected back on these experiences with a feeling of reverence for his teacher, going so far as to produce a BBC Radio program dedicated entirely to Cardew’s pedagogy. With hindsight, Skempton reinterpreted Cardew’s remarks: “In a sense, we were all amateurs. We were like children.”¹⁴

Cardew began developing a pedagogy of equality in September 1967, when he received his first regular, part-time teaching job at the Royal Academy of Music (RAM)—an institution from which he had graduated ten years earlier. From this point on, the institutions he worked for shaped his pedagogy. RAM principal Sir Thomas Armstrong had hired Cardew in response to the students’ demand for instruction in avant-garde music, and on the recommendation of one student, Philip Pilkington. Yet from the beginning, Cardew's approach was at odds with the RAM's traditional conservatory curriculum. Some of the faculty opposed Cardew's hiring on the grounds that his compositions were too irreverent for a traditional institution like the RAM. Armstrong recalled, “Many people thought them very silly and non-creative, really very disruptive, designed only to ridicule the principles upon which classical music had been written. And some people thought that it was probably a mistake to appoint someone who had these views which were revolutionary, in music.”¹⁵ As a compromise, Cardew’s name was left off the official course listings, forcing students to request him specifically as their instructor. Within a few months, Cardew's Wednesday lunchtime class grew to include a dedicated core of students that included Christopher Hobbs, Philip Pilkington, Hugh Shrapnel, Richard Reason, Robin

13 Skempton, quoted in “Interviews by John Tilbury for a Biography of Cornelius Cardew,” British Library: Sound Archive, C1430.

14 “Out of School.”

15 *Cornelius Cardew: Content of Our Song*.

Thomas, and Diana Gravill. Except for Pilkington, these students remained close to Cardew in the coming years and became key members of the Scratch Orchestra.

In the early days of his appointment at the RAM, Cardew focused primarily on the mannerisms of presenting a score and on notational problems.¹⁶ But as he settled into his appointment, Cardew's lessons grew increasingly experimental, as in the case of the locked classroom. Shrapnel remarked that Cardew's pedagogy contrasted dramatically with that of other RAM faculty:

Cornelius's approach was very radical for me personally, . . . At first I was quite skeptical. In fact, I remember having some arguments with him and Christopher Hobbs because I didn't all together go along with the philosophy of the indeterminacy and so on. . . . But what he did was to challenge our pre-conceptions of what music should be. Because at that time I suppose I had a rather ivory tower attitude toward music.¹⁷

Although Cardew taught at the RAM longer than at any other school, he was never entirely comfortable there. Cardew regularly bickered with RAM administrators over rules and regulations. Further, Hobbs sensed that Cardew improvised many of his lessons. "Sometimes he came in without a thought in his head," Hobbs commented.¹⁸

Cardew began his second teaching position at the Antiuniversity of London, during the school's inaugural term in February 1968. Founded by the poet Bob Cobbing, the Antiuniversity was modeled on other well-known "free schools" that emerged during the 1960s as intended revolutionary alternatives to traditional institutions of education. In the Antiuniversity's prospectus, Cobbing outlined the school's purpose as follows:

The Antiuniversity of London has been founded in response to the intellectual bankruptcy and spiritual emptiness of the educational establishment both in

16 Hobbs, quoted in "Interviews by John Tilbury for a biography of Cornelius Cardew."

17 "Out of School."

18 Hobbs, quoted in "Interviews by John Tilbury for a biography of Cornelius Cardew."

Britain and the rest of the Western World. It seeks to develop the concepts and forms of experience necessary to comprehend the events of this century and the meaning of one's life within it, to examine artistic expression beyond the scope of the usual academy and to promote a position of social integrity and commitment from which scholars now stand aloof.¹⁹

One of the main principles of the Antiuniversity was equality; just as the Scratch Orchestra eventually admitted any willing participant, the Antiuniversity had a stated policy of welcoming any student. In the Antiuniversity's prospectus booklet, Cobbing describes how the school intended to "destroy the bastardized meanings of 'student', 'teacher' and 'course' in order to regain the original meaning of teacher—one who passes on the tradition; student—one who learns how to learn; and course—the meeting where this takes place."²⁰ Faculty at the Antiuniversity faculty included C. L. R. James, Stuart Hall, and other significant artists and leftist intellectuals, as well as visiting faculty like William Burroughs, Stokely Carmichael, and Allen Ginsberg. Cardew described his class on "Experimental Music" in the Antiuniversity's prospectus as a course that, "would involve students in playing and listening. 'I think many people swing towards and away from the experience of music without realizing its proximity. My aim would be to identify the experience and expand and prolong it. Speaking for myself, the concert hall is one of the less likely places to find a musical experience.'"²¹ Yet Cardew's appointment at the Antiuniversity was short-lived. It ended before the completion of the first term because some students reported that he refused to teach anything.²² The Antiuniversity dissolved shortly thereafter, in the summer of 1968, as a result of dwindling enrollment and ideological strife. And yet the school's radical approach helped Cardew to lay the groundwork

19 Robert Walter Cobbing, *The Papers of Bob Cobbing*, British Library: Western Manuscripts, Add MS 88909.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Tilbury, 351.

for future workshops and classes on experimental music and for his creation of the Scratch Orchestra.

In the fall of 1968, Cardew took up a third teaching appointment, this time at Morley College, where he taught another “Experimental Music” class until 1973. Here he encountered a notably different group of students. In the very same month that Cardew began this new appointment, Morley College's student-run periodical, *Morley Magazine*, featured an article that highlighted amateurism as a special source of campus pride:

As soon as the new student begins to explore the many aspects of Morley College, he or she will become aware that it is a stronghold of amateurism in all its forms and aspects. We take pride in this. Apart from the fact that amateurs are doing many things the professionals should do, such as performing plays that are undeservedly ignored by the professional theatre, or reviving undeservedly neglected musical work, it is a fact that only the doers know how best to appreciate.²³

As an adult education college, the intellectual atmosphere at Morley was amenable to amateurism in a way that the RAM was not. Michael Parsons explained that this was precisely the kind of school that Cardew had sought: “Cornelius, particularly, was looking for people who didn’t have musical training. At that time I think we were all a bit disillusioned with highly trained musicians who were thinking in rather specific and rigid ways. . . . and the music establishments. We wanted to break all of that wide open and just explore with sound in a completely unbridled.”²⁴ Though the faculty in the Music Department at Morley were no more welcoming to avant-garde music than the faculty at RAM had been, their curriculum encouraged students to participate regardless of their previous training as the RAM curriculum had not. In

23 “Amateurism Today,” *Morley Magazine* 74, no. 1 (September 1968): 8.

24 Michael Parsons, quoted in “Tilbury's Clear Spot,” *Forty Years From Scratch*, broadcast on Resonance FM, London, May 3, 2009.

the course calendar, “Enjoy Your Voice” is described as a class for “people of all ages to develop and enjoy their voices,” with the confidence that “it is never too late to start.” The department director, Michael Graubart, led a perennial ensemble called “Orchestra for All,” which required no audition: “No amateur need feel he is not ready to enjoy orchestral playing. This orchestra is designed for amateurs to rehearse and enjoy the great classical repertoire.” There was even a course designed for non-musicians to learn about musical notation called “Score Reading for the Listener.”²⁵ Beginning in fall of 1968, Cardew taught a second class titled “Experimental Music,” which the college calendar described as follows: “Participants in this class will be involved in the performance of indeterminate, improvisatory and live electronic music. Each class will be divided into two two-hour periods of which the second, i.e 8 to 10 p.m. will be a public performance. Participants should bring their own instrumental equipment.”²⁶ In the first semester, Cardew focused the content of the course equally on listening and participatory music-making. Each class involved some group improvisation, but Cardew often performed works by himself in order to expose students to the sounds and practices of avant-garde music. The inaugural meeting of this class concluded with Cardew improvising on the cello for over an hour. Subsequent classes featured performances of pieces by Skempton and John White.²⁷

At Morley, Cardew built on the pedagogical experiments that he had begun at RAM and continued to explore unusual teaching methods. One Morley student, Tim Mitchell, recalled that Cardew often assigned tasks that seemingly had no meaning. For instance, in one class, Cardew

25 These course descriptions are from Morley College, *Morley College Course Syllabi* (London: Morley College, 1972-73): 29-64.

26 Morley College Course Syllabi, 1968-69.

27 Cardew performed Skempton’s “A Card for Hillary,” “September Song,” “Humming Song,” “Loop No. 4,” and “Music for Clavichord,” Skempton in “Interviews by John Tilbury for a Biography of Cornelius Cardew.”

asked Skempton to count out loud for the duration of the entire class to see what number he would reach. Another time, he asked students to punch somebody in the nose – an assignment Mitchell recalls that nobody properly completed.²⁸

By summer 1969, students from Cardew's classes at RAM were regularly attending the class in experimental music at Morley, creating the type of mixture of musicians and non-musicians that became characteristic of the Scratch Orchestra.²⁹ Despite these students' varying levels of skill and training, they were united by a shared interest in and knowledge of avant-garde art and music. Due to the secrecy of Cardew's position at the RAM, the only way students could join Cardew's class was through word-of-mouth knowledge of his appointment.³⁰ As a result of this unusual situation, only a self-selected group of students who were especially interested in the avant-garde found their way to Cardew's class. Many of these students felt that Cardew's class offered a welcome relief from their usual coursework, which otherwise ignored avant-garde and experimental music. As Hobbs acerbically remarked, "Little seemed to have changed [at the RAM] since 1945, which was where the music history courses ended each year, on the basis that the premiere of Peter Grimes that year had ushered in an era of modernism with which serious music students need hardly concern themselves."³¹ Although many students lacked musical training at Morley, the class included students who were otherwise trained in the avant-

28 Mitchell in "Interviews by John Tilbury for a Biography of Cornelius Cardew."

29 Hobbs in "Interviews by John Tilbury for a Biography of Cornelius Cardew." Cardew also invited private students, including Howard Skempton.

30 Student access to Cardew was further complicated by the fact that he was rarely present at the Academy due to simultaneous employment at Aldus Books and at a small firm that made radio microphones. Tilbury, 343.

31 Hobbs, 2.

garde, including avant-garde artists that worked in other media and fans of avant-garde music.³²

Carole Finer was a trained fine artist who taught graphic design at the London College of Printing and contacted Cardew after seeing a poster advertising his “Experimental Music” class. She had been interested in experimental music since seeing John Cage and Merce Cunningham perform in London and learned a great deal about the American experimental scene from an exhibit at the Whitechapel Gallery.³³ Psi Ellison, who was in art school when he joined Cardew’s class at Morley, was also knowledgeable about American experimentalism and had been inspired by a performance including Cage, Cunningham, David Tudor, and Robert Rauschenberg at the Saville Theatre in 1966.³⁴ Bryn Harris had never received more than rudimentary lessons on the piano and violin, but had been an avid listener of avant-garde music since the age of 8. He had first learned about Cardew’s music by reading the liner notes of a compilation of electronic music on Turnabout Records that featured works by Cage, Berio, and İlhan Mimaroglu. Later, Harris met John Tilbury at a performance of Karlheinz Stockhausen's +/- and Tilbury introduced him to Cardew at performance of Cage's *Atlas Eclipticalis*.³⁵

Inspired by the mixture of students in his class at Morley, Cardew composed a piece specifically designed for performance by a group of musicians and non-musicians: “Paragraph 2” of *The Great Learning*. When rehearsals for “Paragraph 2” began in January 1969, Cardew sensed that he had invented a type of ensemble that could productively continue to make new music together. Following the premiere of “Paragraph 2” on May 4, 1969, Cardew announced to

32 Kathryn Gleasman Pisaro offers a detailed history of Scratch Orchestra members' arts backgrounds, “Music from Scratch: Cornelius Cardew, Experimental Music and the Scratch Orchestra in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s,” Ph.D. Dissertation, Northwestern University, 2001, 37-40.

33 Carole Finer, interview by the author, London, July 6, 2015.

34 Pisaro, 38.

35 Bryn Harris, interview by the author, London, July 12, 2015.

the performers that he was forming a new ensemble: the Scratch Orchestra. Later that summer, Cardew published “A Scratch Orchestra: Draft Constitution” and rehearsals began that fall. Although the Scratch Orchestra was technically an independent entity from Cardew's classes, its core membership attended the Morley class until eventually the Scratch Orchestra and the Morley class became nearly synonymous.³⁶

Cardew's primary goal with the Scratch Orchestra was to create a fully democratic, egalitarian ensemble. Kathryn Pisaro argues that the Scratch Orchestra achieved a “completely egalitarian structure” and that “all participants had exactly the same job, no matter what their musical training.”³⁷ Although the Scratch Orchestra did not develop into an explicitly Marxist organization until 1971, Cardew implied an egalitarian politics from the organization's inception.³⁸ Cardew worried that overt “political agitation” could weaken the group’s artistic potential; he attempted to steer them toward “a very un-political line at that time.”³⁹ Yet, at the same time, the Scratch Orchestra’s stated policy of including musicians and non-musicians lent itself to an implicit egalitarian politics. Regarding requirements for membership in the Scratch Orchestra, Cardew was clear: “Don't exclude anyone wishing to join the S.O. It is a classless orchestra.”⁴⁰ Moreover, Cardew rejected any leadership title (“no leader in the S.O.”) and built

36 Hugh Shrapnel quoted in *Cornelius Cardew: The Content of Our Song*. By fall of 1972, Cardew’s final year at Morley, the class was explicitly linked to the Scratch Orchestra in the college syllabi: “The class will work towards public performances in association with the Scratch Orchestra, internally at Morley, and independently. The class is to be fully democratic, so that students' and tutors' ideas are genuinely pooled, sifted and developed,” Morley College Course Syllabi, 1972-73.

37 Pisaro, 2.

38 Virginia Anderson theorizes the history of the Scratch Orchestra's political development using Raymond Williams's terms “oppositional” versus “alternative,” in “1968 and the Experimental Revolution in Britain,” in *Music and Protest in 1968*, eds. Beate Kuteschke and Barley Norton (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 171-187.

39 Quoted in Tilbury, 459; “Cornelius Cardew talking about the Scratch Orchestra,” BBC Radio, <http://www.ubu.com/sound/cardew.html>, accessed November 1, 2014.

40 Tilbury, 459.

an anti-hierarchical policy of “reverse seniority” into the Draft Constitution by placing the youngest members in charge of programming concerts.⁴¹ Shrapnel described the RAM as “hardly a hotbed of political activity” during the years that Cardew taught there.⁴² But the RAM students most interested in the avant-garde, and the ones that eventually became founding members of the Scratch Orchestra, were an exception within the context of this apolitical environment. Many of Cardew’s RAM students engaged in leftist political activity, including a small group that were nearly expelled for distributing Mao’s Little Red Book in the student common room.⁴³ Moreover, two of the earliest Scratch Orchestra concerts were at political rallies—one for the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, the other in support of the Chicago Eight. Rod Eley also noted a political undercurrent in the Scratch Orchestra from the beginning, particularly in its members’ shared rejection of two “oppressive” forms of music, “the 'serious' music and art of the establishment on the one hand, and the commercialism of pop, etc., on the other.” Eley elaborated:

The struggle against [these kinds of music] was blind and instinctual rather than conscious at this stage. A number of Orchestra members did think in terms of the Orchestra as a subversion of bourgeois cultural and social values, as have a couple of generations of young artists. ... We were all unconsciously rejecting imperialist art, art as a commodity for sale on the market, a function which has been developed since Renaissance times with the rise to power of the bourgeoisie, but which has now reached the point of bankruptcy.⁴⁴

Members of the Scratch Orchestra did not explicitly condemn bourgeois music until Keith Rowe made his earliest Marxist proclamations in summer 1971, and until the subsequent formation of the Maoist “Ideological Group.” But the group’s “instinctual” politics had heavily implied a

41 Ibid., 457; Cornelius Cardew, “A Scratch Orchestra: Draft Constitution,” *The Musical Times* 110, no. 1516 (June 1969): 617.

42 “Out of School.”

43 Hobbs, 2; Tilbury, 374 n25.

44 Rod Eley, “A History of the Scratch Orchestra,” in *Stockhausen Serves Imperialism*, by Cornelius Cardew (London: Latimer New Dimensions), 11.

leftist agenda from the beginning.

In spite of Cardew's attempt to create a pedagogy of equality in the classroom and in the Scratch Orchestra, he retained in his teaching traditional means of transferring knowledge rooted in a hierarchical division between master and students. In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Rancière describes how traditional education limits students' potential, stultifies them, and reinforces inequality. Specifically, Rancière critiques teaching models that rely entirely upon explication: "To explain something to someone is first of all to show him he cannot understand it by himself. Before being the act of the pedagogue, explication is the myth of pedagogy, the parable of a world divided into knowing minds and ignorant ones, ripe minds and immature ones, the capable and the incapable, the intelligent and the stupid."⁴⁵ The primary axiom of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* is that all people are of equal intelligence. Old forms of education rely upon a "pedagogical myth" that divides the world into two: an inferior intelligence and a superior one. Based on the pedagogy of educational philosopher Joseph Jacotot, Rancière argues that one does not need to know what one is teaching in order to teach it. This argument rests on the notion that the goal of the "ignorant schoolmaster" is not to explicate ideas or methods to students, but rather to emancipate them to seek their own findings. The ignorant schoolmaster does not verify the facticity of their students' findings against any preconceived knowledge, they only verify that students have made the effort to seek their own findings. Because students possess equal intelligence, they are encouraged to pursue their own path as directed by their own intelligence. Thus, the ignorant schoolmaster emancipates their students, "And whoever emancipates doesn't have to worry what the emancipated person learns. He will learn what he wants, nothing

45 Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, translated by Kristin Ross (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 6.

maybe.”⁴⁶ In contrast to the old method of explication, Rancière's method is a type “universal teaching”: “Everyone has done this experiment a thousand times in his life, and yet it has never occurred to someone to say to someone else: I’ve learned many things without explanations, I think that you can too.”⁴⁷ Rancière argues that approaching education under the principle of equal intelligence leads to a more generally democratic society: “Such a society would repudiate the division between those who know and who don’t, between those who possess or don’t possess the property of intelligence. I would only know minds in action: people who do, who speak about what they are doing, and who thus transform all their works into ways of demonstrating the humanity that is in them as in everyone.”⁴⁸

Rancière argues that although the ignorant schoolmaster does not verify the facticity of their students’ findings, they must nonetheless verify that the student is “always searching” with “continuous vigilance.”⁴⁹ Cardew’s pedagogy both exemplifies and contradicts this point. Like Rancière, Cardew believed that traditional music education limited students' potential. As Skempton and others noted, Cardew’s pedagogy was seemingly open-ended and allowed students to explore their own compositional practices. Yet Cardew differs from Rancière’s ignorant schoolmaster in how he continued to verify his students’ findings. Although he largely rejected traditional ideas about the technical skill required to make music, he still verified what his students had learned in a way that resonates with what Rancière calls “explication.” By the time Cardew began teaching amateurs at the Antiuniversity and Morley, he had become particularly focused on teaching “the right mind” and invested in teaching a proper way to think

46 Ibid., 18.

47 Ibid., 16.

48 Ibid., 71.

49 Ibid., 33.

about music. In this regard, Cardew resembles Rancière's old master, even though he sought to achieve his pedagogical goals through open-ended methods.

Cardew most resembled Rancière's old master in his emphasis on demonstration, and on traditions of the Socratic method, as pedagogical tools. Rancière explains, however, how the ignorant schoolmaster's methods must differ completely from the Socratic method. Although the latter can appear amenable to the goals of universal teaching, it actually relies upon explication:

There is a Socrates sleeping in every explicator... Through his interrogations, Socrates leads Meno's slave to recognize the mathematical truths that lie within himself. This may be the path to learning, but it is in no way a path to emancipation. On the contrary, Socrates must take the slave by his hand so that the latter can find what is inside himself. The demonstration of his knowledge is just as much the demonstration of his powerlessness: he will never walk by himself, unless it is to illustrate the master's lesson. In this case, Socrates interrogates a slave who is destined to remain one.⁵⁰

Beginning in his experimental music classes at the Antiuniversity and Morley, and carrying over into his rehearsals with the Scratch Orchestra, Cardew regularly dedicated time to "demonstrations" of experimental music in which students were expected to listen to an experienced musician (usually Cardew himself) perform. Usually the first half of every Morley class began with a demonstration, followed by either a group improvisation or rehearsals of a specific score. One of the primary obstacles to students becoming emancipated in these classes was the lack of criticism in them. While some students described an open-minded approach to composition, others, including Parsons, described Cardew's lessons as "self-justified": "The whole concept of criticism or evaluation never seemed to raise its head."⁵¹ Both Cardew and his students avoided criticism, and in this created an environment in which criticism seemed

⁵⁰ Ibid., 29.

⁵¹ Michael Parsons quoted in "Interviews by John Tilbury for a Biography of Cornelius Cardew."

impossible. Cardew later remarked, “from the beginning our line was ‘no criticism.’”⁵²

The clearest evidence of how Cardew controlled the direction of his students’ learning is in how he structured and organized the Scratch Orchestra. Although Cardew imagined that the Scratch Orchestra would provide an environment in which members would be able to explore music on their own terms, Michael Nyman thought of the ensemble “‘nurturing’ a breed of performers capable of meeting the requirements of experimental scores.”⁵³ In spite of the Scratch Orchestra’s supposedly egalitarian politics, Cardew held a position of power over its members, who described him as the “leader” or the “patriarch.” Originally, Cardew planned to create an “administrative council” of three or four members that would rotate every three months.⁵⁴ While most members accepted Cardew’s leadership and noted his “extraordinary organizational ability,” they also felt that his power over the Scratch Orchestra contradicted the ethos of the group.⁵⁵ The Scratch Orchestra as an organization nominally embraced democracy, but in reality “it was never democratic in the sense that we would come up at a meeting with an idea and say, ‘I want you all to contribute to this.’”⁵⁶ Finer summarized Cardew’s politics ironically as “very democratic—democratic in a paternalistic way.”⁵⁷ Parsons described Cardew’s leadership as “aristocratic paternalism,” and agreed with Finer’s assessment that Cardew often condescended

52 Cornelius Cardew, “On Criticism,” unpublished essay, kept in Scratch Orchestra Archive, privately held by Richard Ascough.

53 Unlike other new music ensembles in Britain at that time, such as the Portsmouth Sinfonia, it was understood that the Scratch Orchestra drew from experimental practices and repertoires, Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1974), 115.

54 Cornelius Cardew, “Scratch Orchestra—Points for Consideration in the Drafting of a Constitution,” unpublished essay in Scratch Orchestra Archives, privately held by Richard Ascough.

55 Psi Ellison, quoted in “Interviews by John Tilbury for a Biography of Cornelius Cardew.”

56 Ellison in *Ibid.*

57 *Ibid.*

to members of the Scratch Orchestra as if they were his children.⁵⁸ Years after the dissolution of the Scratch Orchestra, Cardew confirmed that he controlled the group through “the domination of [his] subtly autocratic, supposedly anti-authoritarian leadership.”⁵⁹ One member noted, “It was almost as if he were using his authority in order to subvert everything but himself. And [he] started to lose control of it when people realised that subversion could be applied to his role as well.”⁶⁰

Cardew’s leadership not only contradicted the Scratch Orchestra’s implied egalitarian politics but also created stark divisions between the “musicians” and the “non-musicians,” reinforcing the importance of the technique Cardew himself so adamantly rejected. Cardew had set out to break down the divisions musicians and non-musicians—or to “emancipate” the student members, in Rancière’s terms—but ended up ironically reifying traditional roles. Finer, who can be considered a non-musician because of her lack of previous musical training or experience, often felt excluded by “the experts” and protested that the musicians in the group created an uneven dynamic by “pulling rank” on important artistic decisions.⁶¹ Ellison recalls that “there was definitely a divide there,” and that Cardew believed that Scratch Orchestra members were at a great disadvantage if they were not “serious” about playing an instrument: “He thought I should get down and study [the violin] properly. . . . You could only mess about if you were highly skilled.”⁶² Most of the Scratch Orchestra members were in fact “highly skilled

58 Ibid.

59 Cornelius Cardew, ed., *Scratch Music* (London: Latimer New Dimensions, 1972), 12.

60 Attributed to an anonymous member of the Scratch Orchestra in Tilbury, 453. Tilbury corroborates this view as “an accurate reflection of an aspect of Cardew’s relationship to the Scratch Orchestra,” 467 fn 49.

61 Quoted in Ibid., 530.

62 Ellison, quoted in “Interviews by John Tilbury for a biography of Cornelius Cardew.”

musicians who belied their skill,” and treated the non-musicians as an underclass.⁶³ Both Finer and Ellison sensed that the musicians essentially used the Scratch Orchestra to advance their own careers.⁶⁴ Politically, the musicians held more power in the Scratch Orchestra. When Cardew did not lead meetings himself he always handed over leadership to one of the other musicians in the group.⁶⁵ The musicians in the group also noticed this division. Parsons thought that, “there was always a certain amount of tension between the musical and non-musical contributions.”⁶⁶ In the Scratch Orchestra's later years, many of the musicians presented the group with scores in standard notation, effectively excluding the non-musicians.⁶⁷ While Cardew and others initially praised the non-musicians for their “enthusiasm,” eventually they considered the non-musicians’ lack of technical skill a barrier to be overcome. The more professional members of the Scratch orchestra held “rectification meetings” at the group's rehearsal space, designed to teach technical musical skills in the explicative manner that Cardew had allegedly rejected in his pedagogy.⁶⁸ In summer 1971, the Scratch Orchestra also offered a Summer School in which members taught traditional lessons in drumming, singing, string playing, windplaying, music history, and notation.⁶⁹

63 “I always felt that was an advantage. Those people that were involved in that particular thing always seemed to have an air of advantage, and it's like the rest of us were messing about,” Ellison in *Ibid*.

64 Finer interview by author, July 6, 2015; Ellison, quoted in “Interviews by John Tilbury for a Biography of Cornelius Cardew.”

65 “Sometimes he would let somebody else take over. I remember thinking he used to get his friends who were musicians and I used to resent that,” Finer in John Tilbury for a biography of Cornelius Cardew.

66 Parsons, quoted in *Ibid*.

67 Notation offered an “alternative to the composers in the orchestra who wanted to do things which perhaps required a bit more concentration and discipline,” Parsons in *Ibid*. Also see Hobbs in *Ibid*.: Tilbury: “So you think the idea of reading conventional notation actually began to be quite important at a certain stage, and people resented or were uncomfortable with it?” Hobbs: “Yeah, it doesn’t seem to be reflected in the kind of music we were playing, but there was definitely an undercurrent of that.”

68 Tim Mitchell in *Ibid*. Finer also recalled that these meetings felt “prohibitive,” interview by author, July 6, 2015.

69 Noted in the Scratch Orchestra agenda for July 11, 1971, in the Scratch Orchestra Archive.

In “A Scratch Orchestra: Draft Constitution,” the founding document of the Scratch Orchestra, Cardew demonstrates the contradictions between his democratic ideals and his pedagogy. In short, Cardew used the “Draft Constitution” to claim the Scratch Orchestra itself as one of his compositions. Cardew published this constitution in the June 1969 issue of *The Musical Times*, and though he had written for that journal before, he hoped this article would have a broader impact than any of his previous pieces. Earlier writings had been characterized by obscure language and non-linear thoughts, so much so that the editors *Musical Times* editors had even requested that Cardew write an explanatory addendum to an essay he published a year before the “Draft Constitution.”⁷⁰ The democratic aspirations of the Scratch Orchestra seemed to require that Cardew use “plain language” in its constitution to reach as many people as possible. But Cardew was ambivalent about this prospect. In a letter to one of his students, Michael Chant, Cardew explained:

One experimental aspect in the composition of the ‘Constitution’ was the use of ‘plain language’, and it was successful within limits, i.e. I don’t think there are many difficulties of comprehension in reading it, it is quite straightforward. (I say limited, because nothing very big or important or inspiring is conveyed in the plain language.)⁷¹

Cardew’s “experiment” in plain language was a reluctant one. He did not believe that this language could convey the full importance of the organization he set out to establish, and in his letter to Chant indicated a subtext of “encoded information.” Chant apparently picked up on this subtext when he replied, “‘Cornelius Cardew’ shows that its [sic] not a draft constitution for a scratch orchestra, but a piece called ‘A Scratch Orchestra: draft constitution.’”⁷² Cardew more or

70 Cornelius Cardew, “Sitting in the Dark,” *The Musical Times* 109, no. 1501 (March 1968): 234.

71 Cornelius Cardew to Michael Chant, June 23, 1969 in Cardew Collection: Music Manuscripts and Papers of Cornelius Cardew (b. 1936...(1955-1981).

72 Michael Chant to Cornelius Cardew, June 19, 1969 in Ibid.

less confirmed Chant's suspicion in his response: "you had correctly received the encoded information in the piece and were ready for the next clue (Treasure Hunt), or the next section of the composition, probably the slow movement, . . . In other words I hope you'll come to the meeting on July 1st."⁷³ Elsewhere, in his private writings, Cardew was less ambiguous: "The Constitution is a composition—not the dogma of a leader (composing could probably be viewed as an essentially dogmatic activity). . . . The elements of the Constitution—Scratch Music, Popular Classics, Musical Journeys—should be given a try just like any other composition submitted by a member of the orchestra."⁷⁴ Thus, from its inception Cardew's role in the Scratch Orchestra was dominant according to the Draft Constitution. Cardew offers the caveat that the "Draft Constitution" is "not the dogma of a leader," but immediately counters this claim by recognizing that composing itself can be understood as dogmatic. Cardew presumed that the Scratch Orchestra was fully inclusive but maintained an undeniable position of power within it from the moment he conceived of it as his composition.⁷⁵

Part II: Cardew's Musical Knowledge

Cardew's "Draft Constitution" begins with a definition: "A Scratch Orchestra is a large number of enthusiasts pooling their resources (not primarily material resources) and assembling for action (music-making, performance, edification)."⁷⁶ Cardew singles out enthusiasm as the only quality capable of enabling a common bond between all orchestra members. Whereas

73 Cornelius Cardew to Michael Chant, June 23, 1969.

74 Tilbury, 457.

75 Skempton has also stated that he believed the Scratch Orchestra to be one of Cardew's compositions and recalls discussing the Draft Constitution in the Morley class as if it were a score, "Interviews by John Tilbury for a Biography of Cornelius Cardew."

76 "A Scratch Orchestra: Draft Constitution," 617.

Cardew praised the Scratch Orchestra in the score of *The Great Learning* for its “high level of differentiation of actions and functions,” noting that the members shared a wide range of skills and abilities, here he focuses on their common quality of being enthusiastic, which alone enables them to build a consensus.⁷⁷ Thus, it is unsurprising that Cardew thought the Scratch Orchestra could “function in the public sphere,” and that “this function [would] be expressed in the form of—for lack of a better word—concerts.”⁷⁸ Though it is not fully apparent what Cardew meant by the term “public sphere,” he clearly imagined that the Scratch Orchestra would perform in venues that reached beyond traditional musical institutions, and that would include the public at large in a way that other musical organizations did not. Equally telling in Cardew’s description of the Scratch orchestra’s potential activities in this definition is its lack of specificity about the type of music-making, performance, and edification that would occur. In an earlier, unpublished version of the “Draft Constitution,” Cardew defined the Scratch Orchestra as “a large number of scratch enthusiasts pooling thier [sic] resources and assembling to evolve and perform experimental entertainment and art in real time.”⁷⁹ While the published version of the “Draft Constitution” says nothing about the type of art or music the ensemble would perform, it is clear based on these notes that Cardew envisioned the Scratch Orchestra as a primarily experimental ensemble.

In the early 1960s, Jürgen Habermas defined the public sphere as a sphere separate from the state, and created by private individuals who brackets out differences and inequalities in

⁷⁷ Cornelius Cardew, *The Great Learning*, (London: Cornelius Cardew Committee, 1969).

⁷⁸ “A Scratch Orchestra: Draft Constitution, 617.

⁷⁹ Cornelius Cardew, “Scratch Orchestra – Points for Consideration in the Drafting of a Constitution,” unpublished notes, Scratch Orchestra Archives, privately held by Richard Ascough.

order to foster rational-critical debate.⁸⁰ In his later writings, Habermas described “communicative action” in the public sphere as emerging from a basic consensus (or shared “life-world”) whereby individuals coordinate their actions on the basis of shared, stated goals. This life-world establishes a pre-understanding by which the “risk of disagreement inherent in linguistic communication . . . is absorbed, regulated and kept in check in everyday practices.”⁸¹ Critics of Habermas’s definition of the public sphere, including Nancy Fraser and Michael Warner, have described how publics that seek participatory parity do not necessarily erase inequality.⁸²

Whether or not Cardew was aware of Habermas’s definition of the public sphere, his descriptions of the Scratch Orchestra bears traces of it. In an attempt to increase musical participation and create a more democratic new music ensemble, Cardew had tried to bracket out the usual distinctions between musicians and non-musicians, as I have explained above, thereby creating a public sphere in Habermas’s sense. Members’ enthusiasm, and their unstated policy of “no criticism,” functioned in this context as a form of pre-understanding that regulated disagreement.

Cardew developed his idea about members of the Scratch Orchestra being able to share enthusiasm in several stages, which he sketched in his writings and journals. Central to this body of musical knowledge was his belief that participating in musical performance allowed people to

80 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, translated Thomas Burger (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2015).

81 Jürgen Habermas, “Actions, Speech Acts, Linguistically mediated Interactions, and the Lifeworld,” in *On the Pragmatics of Communication*, ed. Maeve Cooke (Cambridge, Mass.: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1998), 237.

82 Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Text* 25/26 (1990): 56-80; Michael Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics,” *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (2002): 49-90.

experience a “musical life.” In a tributary essay following Cardew's death in 1981, Hobbs wrote that despite Cardew’s shortcomings as an educator his ultimate lesson was that “life really is worth living.”⁸³ Similarly, Shrapnel recognized that Cardew was preoccupied with the broader role that music plays in everyday life: “Cornelius's approach was very philosophical. He was trying to get us to find ourselves and who are we. Why do we want to be composers? At the time it was quite difficult. It was challenging because he was making me think, what the hell am I doing? Am I a composer? What do I want to do with life?”⁸⁴ In his own journals, Cardew wrote, “from Cage you learn that all sounds have life, from David Tudor you learn that this life can be nourished, from LaMonte Young you learn that you can totally identify yourself with this life of a sound.”⁸⁵

However, Cardew's writings evince a fundamental contradiction between his understanding of universal musical life and more exclusionary ideas about “musical language.” Just as Cardew purported the Scratch Orchestra to be inclusive and democratic even while his practices partially excluded amateurs, he implied that members of the Scratch orchestra should pursue an indeterminate path to experience musical life while simultaneously requiring them to adopt a specific, exclusionary musical language. On the one hand, Cardew asserted that anybody could experience a musical life simply by participating in music-making, without defining the practices and results of this participation. But on the other hand, Cardew specified that performers could seek a musical life only through improvisation, and that this improvisation required a musical score. He further insisted that such practices should foster specific virtues. In

83 Hobbs, 3.

84 *Cornelius Cardew: Content of Our Song*.

85 Cardew's journals from 1967-68, kept in “Cornelius Cardew, Cornelius Cardew: Notebooks and Leaves of Autograph Music,” British Library: Music Collections, MS Mus. 1741.

short, Cardew claimed that performers should seek the musicality of life according to their own exploration, while at the same time enforcing one specific model of how to improvise based on forms of notation that reinforced the dominance of trained musicians over untrained amateurs. This contradiction within Cardew's body of musical knowledge led to a consequential contradiction between Cardew's democratic goals and the hierarchical structure of the Scratch Orchestra.

To understand this contradiction, it is necessary to know what Cardew understood by “musical life.” Influenced by contemporary experimentalists such as Cage and La Monte Young, Cardew aimed to expand his definition of music to include all manners of sound. In particular, Cardew believed that he could teach his students to hear the musicality of everyday sound. As his pupils noted, “the essence of his teaching was that everyday experience could be turned into music.”⁸⁶

Cardew rejected romantic ideals about music’s transcendent qualities; eventually, after the dissolution of the Scratch Orchestra, he also distanced himself from the avant-garde because of its “mysticism.” He taught that “slipping off into cosmic consciousness removes you from the reach of the painful contradictions that surround you in the real world.”⁸⁷ To avoid this mysticism, Cardew articulated a materialist philosophy of music: “My attitude is that the musical and the real worlds are one. Musicality is a dimension of perfectly ordinary reality.”⁸⁸ In order to experience musicality, though, one must learn about music by performing it over an extended time. Cardew draws on Ludwig Wittgenstein’s an analogy between learning about music and

86 Skempton quoted in Tilbury, 340.

87 Cornelius Cardew, *Stockhausen Serves Imperialism* (London: Latimer New Dimensions), 49.

88 *Treatise Handbook*, 133.

getting to know a city to explain this connection:

Entering a city for the first time you view it at a particular time of day and year, with particular weather and light conditions. You see its surface, and can form only theoretical ideas of how this surface was moulded. As you stay there over the years you see the light change in a million ways, you see insides of houses—and having seen the inside of a house the outside will never look the same again. You get to know inhabitants, maybe you marry one of them, eventually are an inhabitant—a native—yourself. You have become part of the city. If the city is attacked, you go to defend it; if it is besieged, you feel hunger—you are the city.⁸⁹

Cardew's metaphor of the city serves well to describe what he understood as the experience of a musical life. Just as one cannot fully become a part of a city without living in it, one cannot fully experience music without immersing oneself in it to the point of living in it. For Cardew, listening to music is a passing interaction equivalent to seeing the surface level of a city, whereas performing music is like immersing yourself in the city. Just as you might become part of the city, "When you play music, you *are* the music."⁹⁰ The experience of a musical life opens up the possibility of transformation: "In full conscience I soil my mouth with these incoherent words for the sake of what they bring about. At the words 'You are the music' something unexpected and mechanically real happens ... the light changes and a new area of speculation opens based on the identity of the player and his music."⁹¹

In the Scratch Orchestra's "Research Project," Cardew elucidated further how his ideas about musical life could be translated into practice. As one of the most important (but least understood) of the five "repertory categories" outlined in the "Draft Constitution," the "Research Project" reveals a great deal about the body of musical knowledge that Cardew implied in his

⁸⁹ Ibid., 126. Here, Cardew quotes himself from an earlier lecture he gave at the University of Illinois on February 25, 1967.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 126.

⁹¹ Ibid.

pedagogy. The description of the Research Project in the “Draft Constitution” evokes the same ideas that Cardew expressed in the analogy with the city he borrowed from Wittgenstein:

Research should be through direct experience rather than academic; neglect no channels. The aim is: by direct contact, imagination, identification and study to get as close as possible to the object of your research. Avoid the accumulation of data; be constantly awake to the possibility of inventing new research techniques. The record in the Scratchbook should be a record of your activity rather than an accumulation of data. That means: the results of your research are in you, not in the book.⁹²

There is no passive or distanced way to conduct research; the only way to conduct research is through “direct experience” and “direct contact.” Moreover, the desired outcome of this research is personal transformation. Just as Cardew hoped to demonstrate with his metaphor of the city that “you are the music,” he indicates here that the results of a “Research Project” “are in you.”⁹³ This repertory category is one of the most salient examples of Cardew's idea that musical life can be universally experienced through hands-on participation. Cardew stressed that not only could any person conduct musical research if they chose, but also that “as a prelude to and in preparation for its public activity the membership should involve itself in research and training.”⁹⁴ In the “Draft Constitution,” Cardew described research as “an obligatory activity for all members of the Scratch Orchestra, to ensure its cultural expansion.”⁹⁵

The universality of Cardew's theory of musical life simultaneously ensured a consensus among members of the Scratch Orchestra while also contributing to the unspoken policy of “no criticism.” For Rancière, however, it is this very consensus that perpetuates inequality by

92 “A Scratch Orchestra: Draft Constitution,” 619.

93 This definition of research resonates with the description of research in the Antiuniversity's prospectus as “action study,” emphasizing the idea of setting up “spontaneous universities” during trips to other parts of England, The Papers of Bob Cobbing.

94 “Scratch Orchestra – Points for consideration in the drafting of a constitution,” Scratch Orchestra Archive.

95 “A Scratch Orchestra: Draft Constitution,” 619.

conflating understanding and agreement. To achieve agreement, those with more power can dismiss those with less power for not fully understanding the terms of the rational-critical debate, in this way limiting disagreement within it. The conflation of understanding and agreement effectively divides people into categories of those who are capable of understanding and those who are not. Politics, in Rancière's formulation, arises precisely from those who have been dismissed as incapable of understanding. Unlike Habermas, Rancière argues that rational-critical discourse necessarily leads to disagreement, and that this becomes a defining feature of politics: “Whatever breaks with the tangible configuration whereby parties and parts or lack of them are defined by a presupposition that, by definition, has no place in that configuration – that of the part of those who have no part.”⁹⁶

Cardew assumes agreement by arguing that all human beings can directly experience a musical life that leads to their personal transformation. Jairo Moreno and Gavin Steingo argue that, according to Rancière's definition of equality, music can function equally by renouncing its alleged singularity: “Music is political only when it activates the presupposition of equality. Political music is, therefore, radically equal to any other action. This equality is both its condition of possibility and its *raison d'être*. With this understanding alone can music be freed from the celebratory singularity—be it material or transcendental—that burdens it with impossible powers.”⁹⁷ It is clear from reading Moreno and Steingo that Cardew's idea of a musical life both reinforces a separation of music as singularly distinct from other actions, and perpetuates a transcendental philosophy of music.

96 Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 29-30.

97 Jairo Moreno and Gavin Steingo, “Rancière's Equal Music,” *Contemporary Music Review* 31, nos. 5-6 (October-December 2012): 502-503.

Cardew inhibited members of the Scratch Orchestra from obtaining equality not only by assuming agreement in the form of encouraging them to explore a “musical life,” but also by implementing rules about musical language that effectively policed them.⁹⁸ He insisted that to participate in musical performance performers had to develop a new musical language. This language had to be based on improvisation, which performers could understand regardless of their previous training.⁹⁹ Borrowing again from Wittgenstein, Cardew asserted that language was the key to life: “To imagine a language is to imagine a form of life.”¹⁰⁰ Citing Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Cardew established the idea of a normative musical language from which improvisation departs: “The gramophone record, the musical thought, the score, the waves of sound, all stand to one another in that pictorial internal relation, which holds between language and the world. To all of them the logical structure is common.”¹⁰¹ According to Wittgenstein, the formal logic of each of these symbolic forms exactly modeled their relation in the world.¹⁰² Cardew cites this passage because he sees improvisation as a radical exception to this rule: “This logical structure is just what an improvisation lacks, hence it cannot be scored nor can it be recorded.”¹⁰³ Due to the automatic, undetermined qualities of improvisation, no

98 For a model of theorizing music's role in what Rancière calls “the distribution of the sensible,” see Barry Shank, *The Political Force of Musical Beauty* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

99 Benjamin Piekut writes on the importance of improvisation, indeterminacy, and other types of spontaneous music in British avant-garde music from this era, “Indeterminacy, Free Improvisation, and the Mixed Avant-Garde: Experimental Music in London, 1965-1975,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 67, no. 3 (Fall 2014): 769-824.

100 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 3rd edition, 1967), § 8.

101 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (New York: Humanities Press, 1961), 4.014.

102 For an explanation of how Cardew's theory diverges from Wittgenstein, see Virginia Anderson, “Well, It's a Vertebrate ...’: Performer Choice in Cardew's *Treatise*,” *Journal of Musicological Research* 25 (2006): 291-317.

103 *Treatise Handbook*, 131.

logical model of it could exist in language. Instead, the logic of improvisation arises spontaneously, during performance. Over time, improvisers can learn to develop shared musical ideas idiosyncratic to the specific group of performers in that moment. Improvisation, according to Cardew, is a musical event that improvisers can properly experience only in the original moment when it occurs. Thus, based upon the live experience, “Improvisation is a language spontaneously developed amongst the players and between the players and listeners.”¹⁰⁴ Cardew justifies this idea by referring to Wittgenstein’s notion that a language is never quite complete, in spite of our assumptions, and that speakers constantly develop new avenues and boroughs around its core, in a manner that can be compared to the expansion of “an ancient city.”¹⁰⁵

The composer’s role in improvisation is to generate a score that helps performers to achieve their shared musical language. The score should not prescribe the exact details of a performance, but rather open up possibilities for musicians to invent their own musical language and to guide performers in collective improvisation. Nyman has remarked that Cardew’s approach to scoring focused primarily on how performers relate to each other: “Cardew has always conceived of notation (in his own works) not as an end in itself or a means of unlocking *sounds*, but as a way of engaging the most valuable resource of any music—people.”¹⁰⁶ Cardew’s scores from this period, as well those of his students and Scratch Orchestra compatriots, employ graphic notation as the preferred way of encouraging open-ended improvisation while maintaining a common visual referent for performers. The language that performers develop through improvisation supposedly nullifies any previous knowledge they

104 Ibid.

105 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §18.

106 Nyman, 115. Cardew also said, “All music notation is meaningless except through the performer,” in Edward Greenfield, “Shoot the Pianist, Not the Composer,” *The Guardian*, August 5, 1967.

brought to the performance. Cardew explained, “Two things running concurrently in a haphazard fashion suddenly synchronise automatically and sling you forcibly into a new phase. . . . the subtlest interplay on the physical level can throw into high relief some of the mystery of being alive.”¹⁰⁷

Cardew thought that improvisation led to the development of specific virtues. In his essay “Toward an Ethic of Improvisation,” Cardew elucidates how he theorized the connection between improvisation and ethics.¹⁰⁸ Although this essay was included in *Treatise Handbook*, which explicitly avoided giving instructions on how to realize the graphic score for *Treatise*, it nevertheless included detailed thoughts on how to interpret indeterminate scores.¹⁰⁹ First, Cardew specifies that the ideal improviser is a rare type of “musical innocent” who has “(a) acquired a visual education, (b) escaped a musical education and (c) have nevertheless become musicians, i.e. play music to the full capacity of their beings.”¹¹⁰ Of these three characteristics, only one (“escaped a musical education”) fits neatly with Cardew's pedagogical ideals. These requirements seem at odds with Cardew's belief that any person could play music, regardless of “how dumb they are” or their ability to employ the “right finger technique.” Cardew contradicts his own ostensible universalism by specifying both the type of knowledge required to improvise, and by encouraging performers to seek out technical expertise. He explains that graphic artists

107 *Treatise Handbook*, 126.

108 Cardew wrote “Towards an Ethic of Improvisation” during a high point of improvisatory activity in his life, particularly with the group AMM.

109 On *Treatise*, Anderson asserts, “Far less emphasis is placed on the structural complexity of many experimental works than in those of the avant-garde, and far more on the philosophical implications of performance; often, greater delight is experienced at a performance solution the composer never intended than an accurate divination of the composer’s wishes,” “Well, It's a Vertebrate . . .’: Performer Choice in Cardew's *Treatise*,” 293.

110 Cardew goes on to say, “Occasionally in jazz one finds a musician who meets all these stringent requirements; but even there it is extremely rare.” It is likely that Cardew is thinking of his AMM bandmates, all of whom came from a jazz background. *Treatise Handbook*, 130.

and mathematicians are most suited to read and interpret graphic scores, but that these professions rarely produce musicians that “have sufficient control of sound media to produce 'sublime' musical performances.”¹¹¹ Elsewhere in “Towards an Ethic of Improvisation,” Cardew delineates “the various different kinds of virtue or strength that can be developed by the musician.”¹¹² Cardew lists seven “virtues that a musician can develop” through improvisation: Simplicity, Integrity, Selflessness, Forbearance, Preparedness (or Awakeness), Identification with Nature, and Acceptance of Death.¹¹³ These virtues reveal further contradictions in Cardew's musical philosophy: whereas improvisation liberates performers from “the slavish practice of ‘doing what they are told’,” it likewise requires a proper mode of thought.¹¹⁴ For instance, Cardew explains that simplicity cannot arise easily if performers approach improvisation without the necessary knowledge, but rather “must contain the memory of how hard it was to achieve.”¹¹⁵ Or in the case of integrity, Cardew explains that improvisers need to have the “right mind” to play music: “What we *do* in the actual event is important—not only what we have in mind. Often what we do is what tells us what we have in mind. The difference between making the sound and being the sound.”¹¹⁶ Again, Cardew invokes here his idea of how performers should become the music itself. But in this instance he elaborates that musical actions need to reflect the right state of mind. It is not enough just to think properly about improvisation, rather, the improvisation itself must indicate that the performer has thought properly.

111 Ibid. Parsons has written about the significant role that the visual arts played in the Scratch Orchestra, “The Scratch Orchestra and Visual Arts,” *Leonardo Music Journal* 11 (2001): 5-11.

112 *Treatise Handbook*, 125.

113 Ibid., 131-33.

114 Ibid., 97.

115 Ibid., 132.

116 Ibid.

In his description of the next virtue, selflessness, Cardew muddles his earlier assertion that “you are the music” by telling performers that, “you should not be concerned with yourself beyond arranging a mode of life that makes it possible to remain on the line, balance.”¹¹⁷ Selflessness teaches performers to avoid “mere documentation,” and specifically to avoid the selfish musical ideal, “I record that this is how I feel.”¹¹⁸ In discussing both forbearance and preparedness, Cardew addresses improvisation as a collective activity. He advises performers “to accept not only the frailties of your fellow musicians, but also your own,” and to cultivate the ability to feel “a great intensity in your anticipation of this or that outcome.”¹¹⁹ The virtue that Cardew calls “identification with nature” contradicts some of his earlier descriptions of how to experience musical life. Improvisation helps to develop this virtue so that performers do not simply drift through life, but rather “lead your life . . . like a yachtsman to utilise the interplay of natural forces and currents to steer a *course*.”¹²⁰ Finally, improvisation teaches an “acceptance of death” by revealing the transience of spontaneous music-making: “The performance of any vital action brings us closer to death; if it didn't it would lack vitality. Life is a force to be used and if necessary used up.”¹²¹

The problem with Cardew’s system of virtues is that it belies the principle of open-ended indeterminacy. Dave Smith recalled that in spite of Cardew's lack of direct instruction in improvisation, “one would discover how to behave.”¹²² Chant criticizes the underlying emphasis

117 Ibid.

118 Ibid.

119 Ibid.

120 Ibid., 133.

121 Ibid.

122 Smith also remarked that the type of improvisation that the Scratch Orchestra engaged in was “not a healthy form of improvisation” as it largely discouraged performers from listening to one another, Dave Smith, interview by author, audio recording, London, July 7, 2015.

on conformance in the final section of Cardew's *Treatise Handbook*: "To imagine one can improve the external world by attempting to bring about its conformance to one's present ideal is thus seen to be an illusion."¹²³ Chant also critiques the inward looking philosophy that these virtues imply, arguing that "concentrating on a one self is to ignore the relationship that exists between self and other."¹²⁴ Regarding the first virtue, simplicity, Chant wrote that when simplicity is understood as "the opposite of complex," it becomes "a state of pure happiness," in which "firstly, we discern no problems, and secondly, we sense no dichotomy between the internal and external worlds."¹²⁵ In other words, Cardew's first virtue describes an ideal improvisatory situation as one that regulates problems, ultimately limiting disagreement. As a result this regulation, Cardew emulated the very structures he sought to dismantle. As Rancière explained, "Equality turns into the opposite the moment it aspires to a place in the social or state organization. Intellectual emancipation accordingly cannot be institutionalized without becoming instruction of the people, in other words, a way of organizing the eternal minority."¹²⁶

Part III: Two Scores: *Schooltime Compositions* and "Paragraph 2" of *The Great Learning*

Cardew's model of musical knowledge, which drew upon his philosophy of musical life and musical language, established a contradictory set of demands on performers. He both claimed that this musical knowledge was available to any person willing to immerse themselves in the experience of musical performance, while at the same time specifying the qualifications they need to obtain it and the outcomes he expected. This fundamental philosophical

¹²³ *Treatise Handbook*, 134.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 133.

¹²⁶ Rancière, *Disagreement*, 34.

contradiction in his pedagogy eventually led to the inequalities and exclusions that destabilized the democratic principles of the Scratch Orchestra. This contradiction also materialized in Cardew's compositions during this period. The pieces that Cardew composed while teaching at the RAM, the Antiuniversity, and at Morley College reflect a preoccupation with how musical knowledge could be taught or learned.

In this section I analyze two pieces that clearly enact Cardew's theory of musical knowledge: *Schooltime Compositions* (1968) and “Paragraph 2” of *The Great Learning* (1969). *Schooltime Compositions* laid a blueprint for the types of scores that the Scratch Orchestra later produced, and offers an excellent example of how Cardew theorized improvisation. In *Schooltime Compositions*, Cardew uses scores as a common point between performers with varying levels of technical skill, based on the assumption that they will develop a new language that opposes the normative musical logic that excludes amateurs. However, this reliance on the score as the basis of improvisation regulates the performers' choices and reinforces the need for a composer as ultimate authority. Cardew wrote “Paragraph 2” of *The Great Learning* specifically for a mixed ensemble of amateurs and experts; the premiere of this piece led directly to the founding of the Scratch Orchestra. However, the strictly specialized roles within this piece exhibit the type of unidirectional, and hierarchical, transferal of knowledge I have been discussing in this chapter.

Written during Cardew's first year teaching at the RAM, and toward the beginning of his time at Morley College, *Schooltime Compositions* is made up of a collection of notational experiments that were scattered throughout Cardew's journals. Originally compiled on a commission from Michael Sargent of the Focus Opera Group, Cardew described *Schooltime Compositions* as an “opera” designed to subvert the typical theatrical experience. In an

explanatory essay entitled “Sitting in the Dark,” Cardew described how this set of scores, which contains no staging, libretto, characters, or any other typical aspect of an opera, is operatic: “Each of the Schooltime Compositions in the opera book is a matrix to draw out an interpreter’s feelings about certain topics or materials. These pieces plus their interpreters are the characters in the opera. . . . My plan is based on the translation of the word ‘opera’ into ‘many people working.’”¹²⁷ Instead of creating a traditional theatrical production, Cardew imagined that the individual pieces, and their performers, would become like characters in an opera. Part of Cardew’s reason for deviating from operatic tradition was his own distaste for the typical context of theatrical music. Cardew wrote, “The theatrical situation arouses disgust in me. The stage world is lit from one side only. A thin gaudy veneer is all that is necessary to reflect the light, a thin film of colour, . . . Actors glory in this artificiality.”¹²⁸ Attempting to break out of this one-sided relationship in the theater, Cardew instructed performers not to use the stage during the premier of *Schooltime Compositions* at the International Students House. He explained that the piece was written with the idea that it was “intended for everyone normally involved in operatic productions: the singers, the players, mimes, even the lighting technician.”¹²⁹ In the initial two-day performance, on March 11 and 12, 1968, the compositions were divided into two parts, titled “Dayschool” and “Nightschool.”¹³⁰ Alongside established musicians like John Tilbury and Christian Wolff, this performance also featured a number of Cardew’s young students, including

127 Cardew, “Sitting in the Dark,” 233.

128 Ibid.

129 “Schooltime Compositions,” *Music in Our Time*, BBC Radio 3, London, October 18, 1968.

130 This premiere part of a night of avant-garde opera, also featuring the British premieres of Ligeti’s *Aventures & Nouvelles Aventures* and Kagel’s *Sur Scène*. In his review, Peter Hayworth wrote that *Schooltime Compositions* “seemed to me lacking in Legeti’s sense of sound and Kagel’s sense of humour,” “Brave New Neo-Dadaism,” *The Observer*, March 17, 1968. Skempton mentions that the general critical reception to *Schooltime Compositions* at this concert was ambivalent, “Out of School.”

Christopher Hobbs, Hugh Shrapnel, and Robin Thompson.¹³¹ Cardew staged these performances to demonstrate the similarities between an audience's experience in the theater, and a student's experience in the classroom:

You sit in the dark absorbed in action proceeding in a pool of light. Just like a classroom: children in the dark of ignorance focusing attention (erratically) on manipulations performed in the light of knowledge by the teacher. Hence *Schooltime*. Children go to Dayschool, grown-ups to Nightschool. We love in children their sagacity; what we love in grown-ups is a childlike quality.¹³²

Building upon his critique of the one-sided conventions of the theater, Cardew drew a connection in *Schooltime Compositions* to what he thought of as the usual relationship between a teacher and students. The description of children “in the dark of ignorance,” in contrast to “the light of knowledge” that the teacher possesses, reads as a snide condemnation of these conventional identities, particularly in light of Cardew's praise of children for their “sagacity.” Though Cardew only directed two other public performances of *Schooltime Compositions* after the premiere, he continued to use some of the pieces included within it as a didactic tool with his students. They also proved influential to his future work with the Scratch Orchestra.¹³³

The score for “Desire” from *Schooltime Compositions* offers a telling example of how Cardew thought a score functions in improvisation [Figure 1.1]. “Desire” consists of two parts: a poem-like set of instructions and two accompanying notes of clarification. The main set of

131 “Out of School.”

132 Cardew, “Sitting in the dark,” 233

133 There are two other performances of *Schooltime Compositions* that involved Cardew: the first was a performance at the Institute of Contemporary Arts on March 23, 1969 and the second is a BBC recording by Musica Elettronica Viva, featuring Cardew. Shrapnel recalls that *Schooltime Compositions* were brought in for his students at the Academy to perform. Hugh Shrapnel letter to Richard Churches, November 22, 1997 in “From Improvisation to Revolution; a History of the Scratch Orchestra (1969-1972)—Its Origins and Development up to and Including the Period of Discontent,” Cardew Collection: Music manuscripts and papers of Cornelius Cardew (b. 1936...(1955-1981). Tilbury wrote that “Cardew's *Schooltime Compositions* was the chrysalis from which the Scratchbook, and Scratch Music, emerged. And out of this the Scratch Orchestra created a *musica practica*, more—a *modus vivendi*—which was wholly original,” 361.

instructions are intentionally vague and resemble both a Fluxus-style text score and the “Improvisation Rites” that would later appear in the *Nature Study Notes*.¹³⁴ Each sentence compels the performer to “want,” “do,” or “be” something, even though the score never clarifies how these actions translate into musical actions. Presumably, there could be a nearly infinite number of musical results to this score. David Jackman claimed that he could “make neither head nor tail of the score,” and saw the *Schooltime Compositions* as an open-ended invitation to

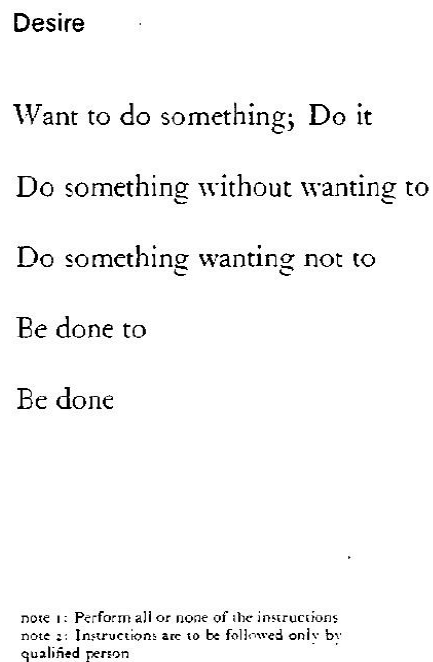


Figure 1.1: Cornelius Cardew, “Desire” from *Schooltime Compositions*

improvisation, much like the later “Scratch Music.”¹³⁵ It is especially telling that the available recordings of *Schooltime Compositions* sound as if they are so heavily based upon improvisation that they offer no sonic evidence as to which of the scores are being performed. In a BBC recording performed by Musica Elettronica Viva, the taped introduction fails to specify which

134 Nyman also connects this piece to Fluxus in *Experimental Music*, 101. Tilbury notes that Cardew had organized and participated in Fluxus events earlier in the 1960s, 376n54.

135 Quoted in Tilbury, 362.

part of the score is being performed; the recording sounds similar to the score-less free improvisation that Cardew performed with AMM. Similarly, the recording of a performance at the Institute of Contemporary Arts makes no distinction between the separate parts of the score.¹³⁶

And yet, Cardew found the score itself necessary. The two “notes” at the bottom make it clear that both the composer and the score are needed. The first directive, “Perform all or none of the instructions,” offers a potentially ironic negation of all of the previous instructions. This note could have been designed to guarantee that each, and not just some, of the instructions be followed; it suggests the piece can be performed by doing nothing at all, if the performers simply choose to perform none of the instructions. The second note unusually negates the open-ended indeterminacy established in the first part of the score: “Instructions are to be followed only by qualified person.” Cardew does not specify what makes a person qualified to follow these instructions, but this note, nevertheless, indicates that such a qualification exists. Rather than providing performers with an open-ended invitation to improvise, Cardew fixes the meaning of the imperative verbs in “Desire” by demanding they be delivered with authority.

Cardew's insistence on the need for a composer and a score in improvisation resembles Rancière's insistence on the need for both the schoolmaster and the book in universal learning – conditions that allowed for the schoolmaster to be ignorant. Jacotot's motto, which Rancière builds upon, is that “one can teach what one doesn't know.” Rancière draws his primary example of this rule from Jacotot's own experience of teaching a group of students who did not share a language with their teacher. Jacotot spoke French and his students spoke Flemish, and none of

¹³⁶ The ICA recording is available in “Tilbury's Clear Spot.” Tilbury mentions that Bob Woolford recorded the performance at the International Students' House, but this recording is not publicly available, 364.

them knew both. Nonetheless, Jacotot was tasked with teaching them literature, so he used a bilingual edition of the book *Télémaque*. When his students learned how to read and write in French, without the explication of a teacher, Jacotot discovered that it was the object they had in common, which Rancière refers to as “the book,” that enabled him schoolmasters to teach from a position of ignorance.¹³⁷ An ignorant schoolmaster can teach, with the use of the book, by verifying that the student is using that book to seek and research.

However, this type of verification that Rancière describes in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* does not exactly match Jacotot's example with *Télémaque*. Jacotot used a bilingual book to teach French to Flemish students. He is then able to verify that his students have learned how to write in French according to an objective standard. Thus, Jacotot verified not only that his students were searching, but also that they learned a specific skill—how to write a new language—by using this book.

Cardew similarly implied performers' access to knowledge that is not contained in the score (or book) in his composition, “Desire.” It is not immediately clear what this score inspired in performers that could not be achieved by improvising freely. Yet, in spite of this, Cardew felt he needed to give performers the directives of wanting, doing, and being, and that he needed to specify that these actions could be performed only by a qualified person. Just as Rancière description of the book slips between something that both can and cannot verify, the scores in *Schooltime Compositions* at once allow the performer's freedom and regulates their qualifications.

“Paragraph 2” of *The Great Learning* provides further proof of how Cardew's contradictory music pedagogy manifested in his compositions. Between 1968 and 1971 Cardew

¹³⁷ Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 33.

composed seven different sections (referred to as “Paragraphs”) of *The Great Learning*, each based on a setting of Ezra Pound's translation of parts of Confucius's *Great Learning*. “Paragraph 1” of *The Great Learning* premiered on July 9, 1968 at the Cheltenham Festival in a performance that Gavin Bryars described as “a total disaster.” Bryars considered this disaster to be a significant turning point for Cardew, who he felt that the “establishment,” as represented by the Louis Halsey Singers – whose founder had held posts at the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Choir and Regent’s College London – had failed precisely due to their formal training. Cardew thought these singers were unable to meet the demands of an experimental score: “They're probably very good at singing Bach and Brahms, but they're not very good at clicking stones together.”¹³⁸ Following this failed performance, Cardew composed “Paragraph 2” with a different set of performers in mind. Inspired by the group students in his class at Morley, Cardew wrote “Paragraph 2” specifically for a mix of musicians and non-musicians. In January 1969, during his second term at Morley, Cardew engaged the class in focused rehearsals of “Paragraph 2,” then an unfinished composition. Cardew wrote “Paragraph 2” for an ensemble of drums and voice and initially imagined that the performers would be able to perform both parts simultaneously. However, he soon realized that most of the students were incapable of playing the drum while singing and he was forced to split up the class into several small ensembles.¹³⁹ Given the need for more musicians, Cardew and his students recruited outside musicians, including friends and family with a wide range of musical abilities. This pool of students, musicians, and friends gathered to perform “Paragraph 2” at the Roundhouse in London on May

138 “Out of School.”

139 Hobbs is quoted recalling the initial difficulties with “Paragraph 2” in Anderson, “British Experimental Music: Cornelius Cardew and his Contemporaries,” 51.

4, 1969. Sensing that he had assembled a unique mixture of talents, and not wanting this group to dissipate following the performance, Cardew announced the formation of the Scratch Orchestra during a morning rehearsal on the day of that performance. Later, Cardew commented that *The Great Learning* was instrumental in the creation of the Scratch Orchestra, and that ultimately the completion the piece marked the end of the ensemble.¹⁴⁰

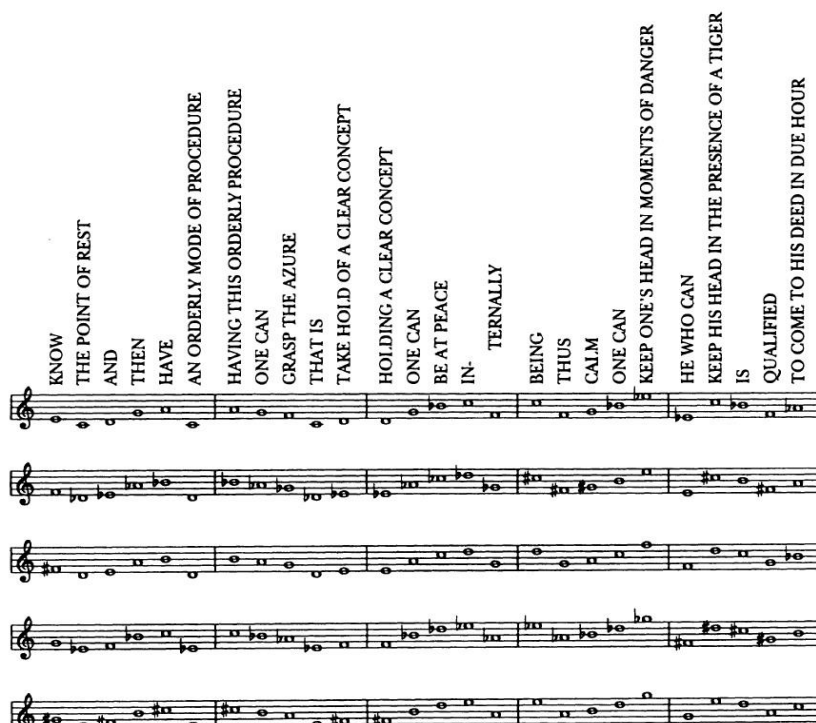


Figure 1.2: Cornelius Cardew, “Singing” from Paragraph 2 of *The Great Learning*

Although Cardew designed this piece to include both musicians and non-musicians, its complex formal structure required a great deal of coordination between the performers. The score for “Paragraph 2” contains two sets of parts, labeled “Singing” and “Drumming,” each written in standard notation. Unlike other works performed by the Scratch Orchestra, the score

¹⁴⁰ Cardew discusses this connection between *The Great Learning* and the Scratch Orchestra in the spoken introduction to “Great Learning: Paragraph 2.” See also Cornelius Cardew to David Ahern, July 8, 1971, Cardew Collection: Music Manuscripts and Papers of Cornelius Cardew (b. 1936...(1955-1981). In “A History of the Scratch Orchestra,” Rod Eley places the number of participants in this performance over fifty, 9.

for “Paragraph 2” prescribes most of the actions performers will make. Performers are divided into groups, consisting of one drummer, one lead singer, and several supporting singers. The singers follow five staves, each divided into five pentatonic melodies [Figure 1.2]. These five pentatonic melodies repeat on each staff, but are transposed into different keys. The 26 pitches in each staff correspond to lines of text and are written as whole notes, with the singers instructed to sing in unison, holding each pitch for one long breath. Each group sings together and only moves on to the next pitch once the last singer in their group has finished their breath. However, the groups

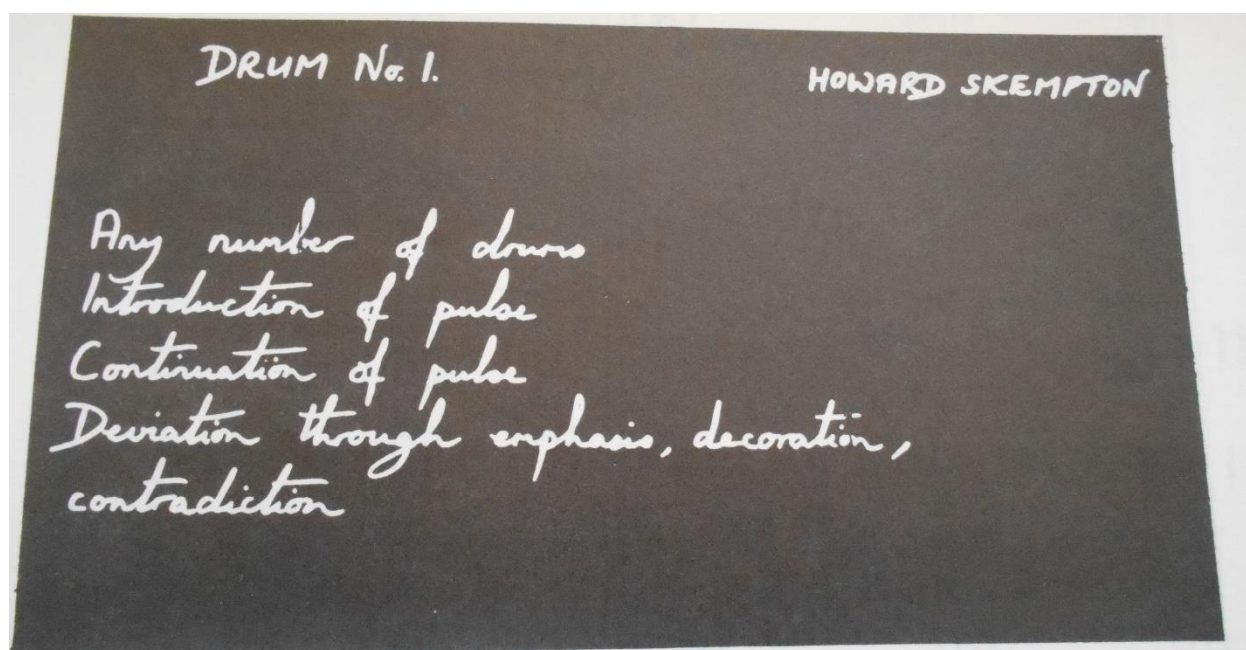


Figure 1.3: Howard Skempton, “Drum No. 1”

themselves move through the score independently of each other, creating unpredictable vocal harmonies.

In early rehearsals for “Paragraph 2,” Cardew used Skempton's “Drum No. 1” to stand in for the drum rhythms [Figure 1.3]. The simple instructions in “Drum No. 1” created an effect of overlapping “deviation” and “contradiction” of a steady pulse. Hoping to emulate this effect,

Cardew created 26 specific drum rhythms and directed performers to choose the order and tempo in which to play them, thus ensuring a wash of sound that would drown out the voices [Figure 1.4].¹⁴¹ Drummers are instructed to repeat their chosen rhythm for the duration of each vocal measure, repeating it “over and over like a tape loop.” Once the group has completed a measure, the drummer coordinates with the lead singer and they switch to a new rhythm as the singers begin the next measure. In order to make the make the drumming part easier, Cardew named each rhythm according to a mnemonic device and instructed the drummers to memorize the rhythmic patterns.¹⁴² The 26 rhythms fall into 11 groups: 2 pentads, 1 tetrad, 4 pairs, and 4 uniques. The rhythms in each group share common features; for example, “Romulus” and “Remus” each begin with two grace notes followed by a fermata, the playing-cards tetrad (Clubs, Spades, Hearts, Diamonds) begins with two simultaneous notes, and each rhythm in the Great Lakes pentad (Superior, Michigan, Huron, Erie, Ontario) contains two rhythms made up of three notes. The drummer for the first group to complete all 25 measures signals the end of the piece by moving to a new position in the performance space to play the twenty-sixth rhythm. The score instructs each drummer from the other group who reaches their twenty-sixth rhythm to play at the same tempo of the drummer who first signaled the end of the piece.

Given the close connection between “Paragraph 2” and the founding of the Scratch Orchestra, it is unsurprising that the formal structure of the piece itself reflects how the Scratch

141 Skempton referred to this aspect of Paragraph 2 as “an homage to Terry Riley,” given the similar form of performer choice in Riley's *In C*, Tilbury, 483. Cardew also offers a disclaimer in the score that opens up the possibilities of interpretation: “This performance is not the only possible one: circumstances may encourage the devising of others (e.g. all members of the chorus could both drum and sing).”

142 This mnemonic device groups related rhythms into categories of related names. For example, the rhythms named “Romulus” and “Remus” both contain fermatas. A thorough analysis of these rhythms can be found in Timothy Taylor, “Moving in Decency: The Music and Radical Politics of Cornelius Cardew,” *Music and Letters* 79, no. 4 (1998): 555-76.

| | | | |
|----------|---|----------|--|
| Mary |  | Smell |  |
| Polaris |  | Huron |  |
| Touch |  | Hearts |  |
| Superior |  | Romulus |  |
| Imek |  | Remus |  |
| Castor |  | Sight |  |
| Pollux |  | Erie |  |
| Taste |  | Diamonds |  |
| Michigan |  | Right |  |
| Spades |  | Left |  |
| White |  | Hearing |  |
| Black |  | Ontario |  |
| Brabazon |  | Clubs |  |

Figure 1.4: “Drumming” from Paragraph 2 of *The Great Learning*

Orchestra divided its members. Designed specifically for Cardew's class at Morley, “Paragraph 2” seemingly allows both amateur and expert musicians to participate. Yet, the score assigns specific roles to performers according to their level of expertise. “Paragraph 2” is based upon a hierarchy of musical knowledge and privileges traditional standards of technique. The different roles for the lead singer and the supporting singers in each group exemplifies this hierarchy. By

notating the singing parts in standard notation, Cardew immediately limited the potential for non-musicians to have an equal role in the performance. The lead singer must not only be able to read standard notation, but also to sight-read and perform difficult leaps and intervals (up to a major sixth) while immersed in the loud sonic texture created by the simultaneous performance occurring in other groups.¹⁴³ The singers in each group do not exactly create a unison chorus; according to the score, the function of the supporting singers is “to support and amplify the leader's voice so that it is not placed under due strain.” The leader begins each new note, while the supporting singers parrot back this note as closely as possible. This delay between the lead singer's performance of each new note and the supporting singers' emulation, along with the intended “amplifying” effect, gives a distinct sonic effect to the singing part of “Paragraph 2.” Rather than melding into a collective community, the singers in each group remain distinguished as unskilled performers who support their leader. Further, the difficulty of the drumming part creates yet another class of experts within the piece that is closed off to amateur musicians. The drumming part also requires knowledge of standard notation, and demands extreme rhythmic skill. In Brian Dennis's review, he wrote, “If Paragraph 2 seems no more than a primitive accumulation of drumming and chanting, move amongst the players and sample the intricacies of their rhythms.”¹⁴⁴ Rather than opting for a straightforward, more indeterminate score like Skempton's “Drum No. 1,” Cardew attempted to institute a mnemonic device that complicated the performance in order to create rhythmic and textural complexity. Moreover, the competing rhythms that result from the simultaneous drum parts in different tempos pose an exceptional

143 Finer remarked that, contrary to Cardew's goals, *The Great Learning* is “very hard to do” and that “everything [Cardew] did was made complicated,” interview by author, July 6, 2015.

144 Brian Dennis, “Cardew's 'The Great Learning,’” *The Musical Times* 112, no. 1545 (November 1971): 1068.

challenge for untrained performers. The drummers and the leader singers, who are required to coordinate with one another, hold leadership roles in “Paragraph 2,” which requires amateur performers to defer to trained experts.

Conclusion

The inequalities in the Scratch Orchestra in many ways guaranteed the group’s eventual dissolution. Scholars agree that the Scratch Orchestra began to break apart as a result of political disagreements that emerged with the formation of the Marxist Ideological Group (or Id Group) in 1971. From 1971-1973, some members of the ensemble developed their latent egalitarianism into explicit Marxist and Maoist politics. However, the divisions that arose within the Scratch Orchestra were not simply between politicized and non-politicized members. Rather, I argue that Cardew’s model of musical knowledge created the divisions that ultimately led to the group’s dissolution.¹⁴⁵ As conflicts grew, members created a “Discontent” file to lodge their critiques. Some members criticized others for “having no communal ideals being crudely ambitious and egocentric, [and] using the orchestra as a vehicle to self indulgence and avoid real work.”¹⁴⁶ One wrote, “Whatever this group achieves it is not worth it if a minority is repressed.”¹⁴⁷ Tilbury’s entry in the Discontent file clearly demonstrates how the Cardew’s model of knowledge had created problems: “As I see it, the expressions of discontent in the S.O. are symptoms of the fact that we have become collectively conscious of the principle contradiction in the orchestra, even

145 Harris remarked that the discontent resulted from the “patriarchal” structure of the organization, Harris, quoted in “Interviews by John Tilbury for a Biography of Cornelius Cardew.”

146 Hugh Shrapnel, Stefan Szczelkun, and Michael Chant, July 19, 1971, Discontent letter in Scratch Orchestra Archive.

147 Judith Ellison Discontent letter in Scratch Orchestra Archive.

though we may not be able to articulate it. In a nutshell our contradiction is the disunity of theory and practice.”¹⁴⁸ Tilbury proceeds to describe twelve contradictions between theory and practice [Figure 1.5]. Among these contradictions, Tilbury argues, “In theory we wish to create an open society. In practice we have built a closed system.”¹⁴⁹

More specifically, Tilbury critiqued the group’s improvisatory practices and “the equation that many of us still insist on making between anti-social behaviour and ‘free’ expression on which the difference between ‘improvisation’ and ‘free-play’ is bound.”¹⁵⁰ Parsons agreed with this critique and felt that the improvisation did not establish a coherent musical language, but rather musical disorder:

In the absence of any clearly defined rules, this was largely dependent on obscure forms of analogical ingenuity or the subjective free-association of the individual performers. Uniquely inspiring and memorable as these occasions were to those who participated in them, audiences remained mystified in the presence of impenetrable collages of sound and activity with no apparent internal cohesion. It was out of such contradictions that the seeds of internal dissent grew, eventually leading to the orchestra's disintegration.¹⁵¹

These expressions of frustration over the lack of rules, coming mainly from the trained musicians context, and the resulting alienation.”¹⁵² Recognizing the failure to bridge the gap fully between musicians and non-musicians, Cardew argued that more determined guidelines, not fewer, would have improved the group's improvisation. At the same time, some amateurs in the group remarked that the rules and roles of improvisation were too rigidly defined. Finer considered Scratch Music to be distinct from true improvisation because of the limitations that the category

148 John Tilbury Discontent letter in Scratch Orchestra Archive.

149 Ibid.

150 Ibid.

151 Parsons, quoted in Tilbury, 527.

152 *Scratch Music*, 9. Pisaro writes about the various uses of the term “Scratch Music,” and how it eventually came to denote a style of performance, 101-117.

In theory we believe in integration and being gregarious.
In practise we are isolationists and parochialists.

In theory we reject the musical establishment.
In practise we ask for it's support, Arts Council grants,
B.B.C. and T.V., Festival Hall appearances.

In theory we wish to be "an instrument of inspiration".
In practise we appear to many as "a pessimistic symptom of a
system in decay."

In theory we welcome new members.
In practise we drive them away.

In theory we wish to create an open society.
In practise we have built a closed system.

In theory we desire freer social relations.
In practise we stifle existing ones.

In theory we regard people as a source of inspiration.
In practise we elude them.

In theory we have no leader.
In practise we have.

In theory we are democratic.
In practise we tend towards paternalism and elitism.

In theory we embrace all activities.
In practise we ignore and undermine non-musical activities.

In theory we are "outside the situation."
In practise we are "inside the situation."

In theory we are free.
In practise we are oppressed.

Figure 1.5: A list of John Tilbury's concerns, from the Scratch Orchestra Discontent file

imposed: "My view is that nothing that we did was improvisation . . . Scratch Music was improvising, but it was improvising to allow that somebody could step out and do a solo. In that sense, it's not pure improvising if you can play but you must allow that someone was able to do a solo while you played."¹⁵³

One of the least clear aspects of Cardew's approach to musical knowledge was how he understood the role of the listener. The fact that Cardew referred to "alienation" during public

¹⁵³ Finer interview by author, July 6, 2016. Elsewhere Chant remarked, "I know no one who claims to understand what Cornelius Cardew means by 'scratch music,'" *Scratch Music*, 17.

performances by the Scratch Orchestra hints at the problematic relationship the ensemble usually had with its audiences.¹⁵⁴ The reference to the orchestra's "cultural expansion" in the "Draft Constitution" implies a quasi-imperial mission to carry a "message" to its audiences; Cardew wanted audiences to know that "music is for everybody, and that everybody can make music."¹⁵⁵ However, the universal enthusiasm that Cardew assumed members of the Scratch Orchestra shared was noticeably absent among audience members. This lack of audience enthusiasm curbed the ensemble's attempts at cultural expansion. When the Scratch Orchestra attempted to carry its message to villages outside of London, they encountered skepticism from their audiences: "The passerby seemed to regard our music as a kind of passing shower, which would soon go away. They had to put up their defences to it."¹⁵⁶ At least two of the concerts from the Cornwall and Anglesey tour were met with open hostility: one at an International Youth Camp (in which the Scratch Orchestra encountered "sullen teenage hostility") and the other at a church in Anglesey that was forced to end early after audience members began throwing stones at the performers.¹⁵⁷ Although the range of reactions depended at least partly on the temperament of the particular audience, members of the Scratch Orchestra have spoken in hindsight about the cultural distance between themselves and the villagers. Cardew felt that audiences in Cornwall reacted as if, "Oh, well they get up to some strange things in London."¹⁵⁸ Published reviews of Scratch Orchestra concerts openly criticized the ensemble for its lack of concern for its audience. One reviewer wrote, "What does it all mean? Masturbation, I admit, was the first thing to spring

154 Richard Ascough recalls that the number of audience members was often smaller than the number of performers at Scratch Orchestra concerts, Richard Ascough, interview by author, London, June 29, 2015.

155 "Up to Scratch – or What Scratch are Up To," *The Northern Echo*, August 26, 1971.

156 Ibid.

157 Tilbury, 416-17.

158 "Up to Scratch."

to mind.”¹⁵⁹ Another wrote, “Some people say the Scratch Orchestra is a cacophony. (Quote: *If this music is the food of love, I think I have just been poisoned.*) With thirty people all going their own way, it can get pretty awful.”¹⁶⁰ In the Discontent files, members lamented the “general contempt for the audience.”¹⁶¹ One newspaper article reported that Cardew pessimistically believed “the music-loving public are so drugged by the standard repertory that they are totally incapable of appreciating what new music is about.”¹⁶² Elsewhere, Chant remarked that, “It has been said that the Scratch Orchestra was its own audience.”¹⁶³ Years later, Shrapnel explained that the Scratch Orchestra's ability to gauge reactions was often the result of guesswork: “What the villagers actually thought we never got to find out, as virtually nothing was said afterwards.”¹⁶⁴

The Scratch Orchestra’s blatant disregard for audiences not only reflects what Tilbury identified as the fundamental contradiction between theory and practice in the ensemble, but also offers startling evidence of how it perpetuated a deeper hegemony of traditional musical knowledge. Cardew wished to invite non-musicians and amateurs to play music, but did so assuming they would share his values. As the leader of the Scratch Orchestra, he implemented his body of musical knowledge in a dedicated attempt to create a democratic musical organization. Although this body of musical knowledge appeared to be inclusive, it was not. In practice the Scratch Orchestra excluded the invited non-musicians from critiquing or shaping this

159 Meirion Bowen, “Scratch Orchestra,” *The Guardian*, November 24, 1970.

160 “Stony Ground,” *The Sunday Times*, August 1, 1971.

161 Hugh Shrapnel, Stefan Szczelkun, and Michael Parsons, July 19, 1971, Cardew Collection: Music Manuscripts and Papers of Cornelius Cardew (b. 1936...(1955-1981).

162 Gavin Barratt, “Music From Scratch,” *The Guardian*, January 26, 1970, 8.

163 *Cornelius Cardew: Content of Our Song*.

164 Hugh Shrapnel to Brian Dennis, June 16, 1994, in Cardew Collection: Music Manuscripts and Papers of Cornelius Cardew (b. 1936...(1955-1981).

knowledge. Just as members of the Scratch Orchestra felt general contempt for their audience, Cardew's limitations on disagreement effectively silenced certain members of the ensemble.

Nevertheless, the Scratch Orchestra, and Cardew's leadership, inspired generations of British composers, musicians, and artists. Many of the Scratch Orchestra members have gone on to become teachers, building on Cardew's pedagogy. One Scratch Orchestra member, Brian Dennis, published an influential textbook that outlines an entire curriculum based upon Scratch-like activities, titled *Experimental Music in Schools*.¹⁶⁵ As a sign of improvement on Cardew's pedagogy, Smith explained that he offers three guidelines for improvisation to his students. One is a quote from "Paragraph 5" of *The Great Learning*: "Don't waste sounds." But the other two are his of own device and offer a necessary corrective: "Listen and act accordingly," and "develop social responsibility."¹⁶⁶

165 Brian Dennis, *Experimental Music in Schools: Towards a New World of Sound* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).

166 Smith interview by author, July 7, 2015.

Chapter 2

Make Sure They Can't Play: The Sex Pistols' Amateur Anti-Music

In Julien Temple's film *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle* from 1980, Malcolm McLaren offers a sensationalized version of how he created the Sex Pistols and consequently sparked one of the most infamous spectacles in British pop history. The film opens with a close-up of McLaren's face in a bondage mask. He whispers: "My name is Malcolm McLaren. I have brought you many things in my time.... About the most successful of all was an invention of mine they call 'punk rock.'" Helen Wellington-Lloyd appears on-screen, dragging a gigantic stone etched with the words "HOW TO MANUFACTURE A GROUP." McLaren proceeds to give three instructions: "Find yourself four kids. Make sure they hate each other. Make sure they can't play."¹

McLaren's instructions offer a telling detail of punk's constitutive amateurism. Not only is it necessary that members of punk groups not be able to play; rather they must "make sure" they cannot play if they want to function properly as punk musicians. Punk rock, as a genre, is widely assumed to have low, or no, standards of musicianship. An iconic example of this alleged lack of standards appeared in an issue of *Sideburns*, a punk fanzine, from January 1977. In a full-page diagram, an anonymous author crudely scribbled instructions for how to play three major chords on the guitar—A, E, and G—and labelled them, "This is a chord. This is another. This is a third. Now form a band" [Figure 2.1]. The author of this diagram presumes that one can start a punk band with only minimal technical knowledge of how to play the guitar. Between the Sex Pistols' first concert in November 1975 and publication of this diagram, an important narrative

¹ *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle*, directed by Julien Temple (1980; London; Boyd's Company), DVD.

had developed about punk musicianship: punk bands, like the members of the Sex Pistols, could not play their instruments according to established rock standards. As McLaren insisted, it was necessary that a punk band not be able to play.

In this chapter, I investigate the widely accepted notion that the Sex Pistols could not play their instruments as a significant example of musical amateurism in the 1970s. I began this research with a question: why exactly did people think that the Sex Pistols could not play? Through the course of my research, I discovered that this claim was typically unjustified. Fans, critics, and even the Sex Pistols themselves agreed that they could not play, but rarely described why they believed this to be the case. Based on my analyses of the discourses around punk in London throughout 1976, I argue that judgments of who could and could not play were not necessarily based on any evaluation of musical or technical skill, but rather emerged from ideologically inflected assumptions about punk performance that eschewed musical sound altogether. In this context, assumptions about the Sex Pistols' inability to play contributed to the reduction of punk music's symbolic function to its superficial anti-establishment values.

More specifically, in this chapter I explore how the Sex Pistols' inability to play became a symbol of their supposed rebellion in order to clarify the practices and ideologies of amateurism in the 1970s. To elucidate the meanings of these practices and ideologies, I draw mainly from Dick Hebdige's influential theory of punk in *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. According to Hebdige, punks used stylistic bricolage to challenge the normalization of signs in dominant culture. Drawing upon a range of Marxist and post-Marxist cultural theorists and philosophers, Hebdige argues that punks appropriated and re-presented everyday signs in their own working-class style, thus imbuing these signs with secret meanings. Hebdige explains that his goal is, "to discern the hidden messages inscribed in code on the glossy surfaces of style, to race them out

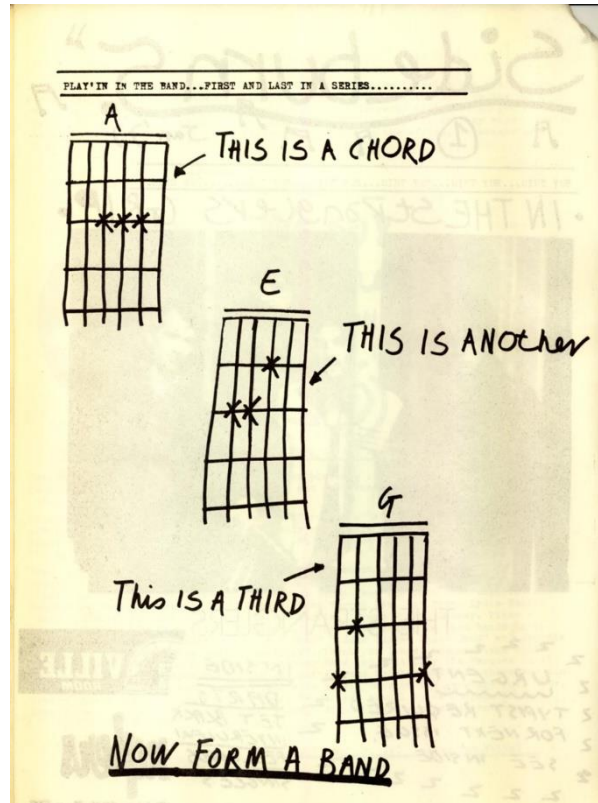


Figure 2.1: “Now Form a Band” drawing from issue #1 of *Sideburns*, published in January 1977

‘as maps of Meaning’ which obscurely re-present the very contradictions they are designed to resolve or conceal.”² For example, Hebdige interpreted punk's stylistic bricolage as “a struggle within signification: a struggle for possession of the sign which extends to even the most mundane areas of everyday life.... ‘humble objects’ can be magically appropriated; ‘stolen’ by subordinate groups and made to carry ‘secret’ meanings: meanings which express, in code, a form of resistance to the order which guarantees their continued subordination.”³ By stealing “humble objects” and making them carry “secret” meanings, punks revealed that the assumed codes carried by everyday signs were “obviously fabricated.” Through this re-appropriation, punks challenged assumptions about the normalized meaning of objects in dominant culture:

They display their own codes (e.g. the punk’s ripped T-shirt) or at least

² Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1979), 18.

³ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

demonstrate that codes are there to be used and abused (e.g. they have been thought about rather than thrown together). In this they go against the grain of a mainstream culture whose principal defining characteristic, according to Barthes, is a tendency to masquerade as nature, to substitute “normalized” for historical forms, to translate the reality of the world into an image of the world which in turn presents itself as if composed according to “the evident laws of the natural order.”⁴

Thus, for Hebdige, subcultural style is “intentional,” rather than natural. Hebdige draws on Louis Althusser's claims about how ideology operates as a system of representation in terms of unconscious structures. Specifically, Hebdige aims to unpack the “*particular* ways of organizing the world [that] appear to us as if they were universal and timeless.”⁵ He claims that individuals tend to accept the meaning of signs as “natural,” when, in fact, these signs have been “shrouded in a 'common sense'” that simultaneously validates and mystifies them.⁶

In the decades since Hebdige published his influential text, scholars have identified a number of problems with his theory of punk as a subculture, and more generally with the methods of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. Andy Bennett critiques the Birmingham School's contention that style functions as a strategy of unified class resistance:

Such a contention rests on the rather tentative notion that, having gained an element of freedom to pick and choose between an increasing range of consumer items, working-class youth was somehow driven back to the fact of class as a way of articulating its attachment to such commodities. It could rather be argued that post-war consumerism offered young people the opportunity to break away from their traditional class-based identities.⁷

Bennett is one of many authors to critique Hebdige for defining punk as a sovereign group

4 Ibid., 101-102.

5 Ibid., 14.

6 Ibid., 11-15.

7 Andy Bennett, “Subcultures or Neo-Tribes? Rethinking the Relationship Between Youth, Style and Musical Taste,” *Sociology* 33, no. 3 (August 1999): 602.

defined by class, without recognizing its fluid boundaries and floating memberships.⁸ Instead of viewing subcultures as tight, coherent social groups, Bennett suggests that we understand them as heterogeneous collections of individuals who share stylistic interests, come from diverse home and family environments, and often move between different social circles. Nick Crossley also challenges the idea that punk arose from the British working class. Based on his own network analysis and earlier research from Stanley Clarke, Crossley concluded that very few working-class youths ever became involved with subcultures, and that there was a strong middle class presence in punk audiences.⁹ Crossley uses this evidence to critique the thesis formulated by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies that punk offered a substantive challenge to bourgeois hegemony; according to Crossley, this argument was immaterial, noting that “the 'magical' nature of subcultural protests at least hint that this resistance goes no further than the symbolic level.”¹⁰

In spite of his detailed exegesis of punk’s visual style, Hebdige largely ignored the role that music played in punk signification. The discursive consensus that the Sex Pistols could not play their instruments, and that they were essentially non-musical, led to a situation in which an inability to play came to be considered a constitutive feature of punk. Undoubtedly, any sign has the potential to carry a range of meanings, or be “polysemic.”¹¹ But, in practice, the Sex Pistols’ inability to play primarily indexed a social taboo. Neither fans nor detractors explained why they

8 Steven Miles, “Towards an Understanding of the Relationship Between Youth Identities and Consumer Culture,” *Youth and Policy: The Journal of Critical Analysis* 51, no. 4 (1995): 35-45; and Gary Clarke, “Defending Ski-Jumpers: A Critique of Theories of Youth Subcultures,” in *On Record: Rock, Pop and the Written Word*, eds. Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (London: Routledge, 1990), 68-80.

9 Nick Crossley, *Networks of Sound, Style and Subversion: The Punk and Post-Punk Worlds of Manchester, London, Liverpool and Sheffield, 1975-80* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 55.

10 *Ibid.*, 50.

11 Hebdige discusses polysemy in *Subculture*, 117-118.

thought the Sex Pistols could not play. And neither side was concerned with detailing (beyond superficial descriptions) the musical results of this inability to play. As Dave Laing points out, “Punk rock’s energy came from its conviction that it was inventing such positions in a revolutionary manner, even when they had been invented over and over again before, even in popular music itself.”¹² Instead of analyzing their position, participants in punk discourses unconsciously accepted both that the Sex Pistols could not play, and that this signified a meaningful, and potentially threatening, social taboo.

Ironically, Hebdige’s unwillingness to engage with punk’s musical qualities contributed to the normalization of “not being able to play” as a sign. In one of Hebdige’s only references to punk music, he describes a homology between various forms of punk signification, “The trashy cut-up clothes and spiky hair, the pogo and amphetamines, the spitting, the vomiting, the format of the fanzines, the insurrectionary poses and the ‘soulless’, frantically driven music.”¹³ Hebdige reads this homology as proof of punk’s stylistic “consisten[cy].”¹⁴ The codes that make up style are “either intrinsically or in their adapted forms, homologous with the focal concerns, activities, group structure, and collective self-image of the subculture.”¹⁵ But critics, such as Richard Middleton, have questioned the validity of homologies that relate a social group's identity to their style. For Middleton, the tendency to establish a homology flattens the aesthetic variations that exist within musical genres and reduce social groups to their most generic representations. I would argue that Hebdige’s list of supposedly homological signs only coheres through a willful

12 Dave Laing, *One Chord Wonders: Power and Meaning in Punk Rock* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1985), 105.

13 Hebdige, *Subculture*, 114.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

hermeneutic interpretation. There is no intrinsic connection between spiky hair, spitting, and frantically driven music. The codes that determine how we read these signs are no less normalized than those found in dominant culture. Further, whether signs operate in the center or the margins of society, they remain nonetheless susceptible to ideology. In contrast to Hebdige, I do not assume homological consistency in punk signification. Rather, I contend that a homological reading of punk style is, in itself, ideologically inflected.

The fact that music was irrelevant in judgments of whether or not the Sex Pistols could play indicates that music, as a signifier, was being “exploited as an empty effect.” Hebdige considers one exceptional case of how punks detached objects from the concepts they conventionally signify in order to create symbols with empty effects: could empty a sign of meaning:

We must resort, then, to the most obvious of explanations – that the swastika was worn because it was guaranteed to shock. (A punk asked by *Time Out* (17–23 December 1977) why she wore a swastika, replied: “Punks just like to be hated”.) This represented more than a simple inversion or inflection of the ordinary meanings attached to an object. The signifier (swastika) had been willfully detached from the concept (Nazism) it conventionally signified, . . . its primary value and appeal derived precisely from its lack of meaning: from its potential for deceit. It was exploited as an empty effect. We are forced to the conclusion that the central value “held and reflected” in the swastika was the communicated absence of any such identifiable values. Ultimately, the symbol was as “dumb” as the rage it provoked. The key to punk style remains elusive. Instead of arriving at the point where we can begin to make sense of the style, we have reached the very place where meaning itself evaporates.¹⁶

Hebdige goes on to describe punk signifiers either as indexing a fixed number of concealed, but legible, meanings, or as polysemic, i.e. indexing a range of meanings.¹⁷ But he acknowledges that the swastika in punk style seems to be separated from its meaning entirely. It neither denotes

16 Ibid., 116-117.

17 Ibid.

its historically accepted right-wing political meaning, nor connotes a secret meaning that resists hegemonic codes. Rather, the “obvious,” well-worn explanation—that the swastika is intended solely to shock—points to an “empty effect” whereby the sign carries no meaning beyond its own taboo. I claim that music became a sign with a similarly empty effect in punk discourse. Both supporters and detractors of the Sex Pistols acknowledged that the band was considerably less musical than any other rock group. If the Sex Pistols could not play their instruments, then it followed that they were not performing music.

In the first part of this chapter, I establish an alternative semiotic model: rather than seeking secret meanings in normalized signs (as Hebdige claims punk did), the Sex Pistols’ fashion designers Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood seized upon those signs’ “forbidden connotations” to reduce their range of meaning and transform them into logos of the Sex Pistols’ anti-establishment aesthetic.¹⁸ As an example, I analyze one of the most significant part of the Sex Pistols’ aesthetic: their clothes. Specifically, I explore in detail the history of three screen-printed nude images on t-shirts that the Sex Pistols wore at an early live gig on February 14, 1976. By tracing the historical origins of these images, and how McLaren and Westwood poached these images from sexual minorities, I revise the theory that punk style expressed a working-class resistance to hegemony. I demonstrate how McLaren and Westwood—and, by extension, punks—concealed, rather than revealed, the hidden meanings of images by reducing the heterogeneity of their meanings and transforming them into symbols of a taboo.

In the second part of this chapter, I detail how the Sex Pistols’ inability to play became a site of contestation for conflicting ideas of commercialism and authenticity in rock music. Specifically, I draw on fan and critical discourses from 1976 in order to argue that the Sex

¹⁸ Ibid., 107-108.

Pistols' inability to play provided an ideological foundation for the prevalent definition of punk as intrinsically threatening and authentically resistant. Participants in these discourses explicitly untethered the notion that the Sex Pistols could not play from musical evaluation, transforming this inability into a flattened sign of the band's subversion. The most ardent punk fans, writing in fanzines, described the Sex Pistols' live experience as producing a kind of "energy," to which the music functioned as an attendant feature. Fans argued that this non-musical energy facilitated an authentic connection between the Sex Pistols and their audiences, thereby countering the inauthenticity of the commercial music industry. Non-punk rock fans, however, articulated a drastically different take on the Sex Pistols' inability to play. These fans, who typically expressed their views in the pages of the mainstream rock press, defended traditional musical values, as well as the importance of talent and virtuosity. Anti-punk critics claimed that the Sex Pistols were not only talentless, but also that what they produced was more "theatre" than music. These detractors believed that the Sex Pistols were duping their fans with their non-musical theatricality (expressed primarily through their clothes and their "attitudes"), and that punk was actually an inauthentic form of rock. In both cases, the Sex Pistols' alleged lack of musical skills formed the basis of a claim that punk was (either positively or negatively) threatening.

In the third part of this chapter, I detail how the Sex Pistols' supposed inability to play became normalized as a symbol of moral degradation. I conclude with an analysis of the broader public discourse that followed the Sex Pistols' infamous appearance on *Today* with Bill Grundy on December 1, 1976. This television appearance caused a national furor, ostensibly because Sex Pistols' guitarist Steve Jones said the word "fuck" on live television. This action elicited extreme reactions in the popular tabloids and broadsheet newspapers; many condemned punk as a violent youth "fashion cult." While arguments about the Sex Pistols throughout 1976 focused on the

band's authenticity and their relationship to the commercial music industry, following the Grundy incident the discourse shifted dramatically. After this event, critics condemned the Sex Pistols for contributing to the total moral degradation of British society. Along with change in discourse, the Sex Pistols' inability to play transformed into a sign that punk was a type of "anti-music" designed to provoke outrage.

Part I: What They Were Wearing

In one of the most famous early photographs of the Sex Pistols, taken by Joe Stevens on February 14, 1976, four naked bodies are visible [Figure 2.2]. Although the Sex Pistols were largely unknown, they received some significant press just two days before this photograph was shot when they destroyed the headlining act's equipment at a gig at the Marquee. In the early days of 1976, the Sex Pistols, along with their manager Malcolm McLaren, were still developing their style and searching for ways to capture the public's attention. Sensing the need to outdo their competitors in the burgeoning punk scene, McLaren strategized about how to spark controversy. This gig—the Valentine's Ball at the loft of London artist and socialite Andrew Logan—offered an opportunity. Upon finding out that Stevens and another *NME* journalist, Nick Kent, were in attendance, McLaren exhorted an employee of his Kings Road fashion boutique—the mononymous Jordan—to shock the two of them into covering the Sex Pistols:

[McLaren] rushed up to me saying, "The *NME* are here!" It's funny to think of it now. "The *NME* are actually *here*. Do something Jords!" He wanted to get them a bit of outrageous publicity. He said: "Take your clothes off, girl." "Naw, I'm not going to." "Go on, we haven't got much time." "I'll do it if John [Lydon] knows and we can do some sort of act." I jumped onstage and John ripped my clothes off. The photos were used everywhere.¹⁹

¹⁹ Quoted in Jon Savage, *England's Dreaming: Anarchy, Sex Pistols, Punk Rock, and Beyond* (New York: St. Martin's, 1991), 148.

McLaren's search for controversy eventually proved successful. By the end of 1976 the Sex Pistols had become the spokesmen of the burgeoning punk movement in London, and McLaren's clothes, created with his business partner and girlfriend, Vivienne Westwood, became punk's signature style.

Jordan's body is the most noticeable in this photograph, but a closer look at singer John Lydon's and guitarist Steve Jones's t-shirts reveals three screen-printed images: a white woman's breasts superimposed over a naked black man holding a football, and a naked child smoking a cigarette. The Sex Pistols' clothes, provided by McLaren and Westwood, played a significant role in the band's overall aesthetic. When asked what made the Sex Pistols such photogenic



Figure 2.2: John Lydon, Jordan, and Steve Jones at Butler's Wharf, February 14, 1976. Photograph by Joe Stevens
subjects, Stevens responded, "Chaos. Beer cans in the air. Spit. And, in the case of the punk rock scene, what they were wearing."²⁰ Stevens's reaction to the Sex Pistols' clothes mirrored that of the general public. There is no known audio recording from this gig, yet the imagery alone offers insights into the early development of punk in London. Put simply, the Sex Pistols shocked as much, if not more, with their looks as with their music. This photograph gives evidence of a

²⁰ Quoted in Matt Kanner, "Shooting the Pistols," *The Sound*, December 17, 2014, accessed August 8, 2016, <http://soundnh.com/shooting-pistols/>.

common tactic that McLaren and Westwood used to generate outrage: using the naked body as a symbol of a taboo.

In this first section, I establish an original theoretical frame for studying punk images, building on the comments I presented in my introduction. I argue that McLaren and the Sex Pistols suppressed certain meanings associated with the images on these t-shirts, which they appropriated from sexual minorities. Instead of using these nude images to reference the meanings held in the subcultures from which they came, McLaren and the Sex Pistols used them to index a general taboo. To begin my argument, I trace the historical origins of the three screen-printed nude images on the Sex Pistols' t-shirts. My aim is to understand how McLaren and Westwood concealed the codes of the communities from which these images originated. By using these images to index a single, fixed meaning—namely, the “forbidden connotations” of sexual deviance—McLaren and Westwood effectively negated the heterogeneity of meanings present in the images' original contexts. I then describe the social event captured in Stevens's photograph as a means of understanding how these images circulated among the social classes from which this fashion emerged. I conclude that these t-shirts did not express authentic working-class subcultural resistance, as Hebdige argues. Rather, British punk fashion in the 1970s emerged from a bohemian class that contributed to the ideological construction of punk style as working-class, regardless of its actual social origins. My primary goal is to lay the methodological groundwork for parts two and three of this chapter, in which I investigate how an inability to play likewise became reduced in punk to a symbol of anti-establishment resistance.

Fashion scholars have noted how trends in the 1970s, particularly in London, borrowed from queer art scenes in order to break taboos. Revising the work of previous scholars who refer to the decade as “The Uncertain Seventies” or “The Schizophrenic Seventies,” Valerie Steele

identifies a “deeper cultural unity” to trends in this era: “To understand 1970s style, one must recognize that fashion was not in fashion.”²¹ New designers in the 1970s, led by Westwood, became increasingly interested in shock and in the overt rejection of good taste. Designers in the second half of the decade embraced overt sexuality and nudity, violence and sado-masochism, and images of trashiness and tastelessness. Westwood attributed the rock and roll imagery in the King's Road boutique to earlier avant-gardists, including Kenneth Anger, who established shared codes between rock and queer sexuality. Shaun Cole sees the explicit gayness of early British punk as an extension of the liberalized homosexuality laws in the UK at the end of the 1960s, especially through the popularity of glam rock's bisexual chic in the years immediately preceding punk.²² Michael Selzer famously coined the term “terrorist chic” to refer to the new punk fashion of the 1970s, which confronted every imaginable social taboo.²³ Westwood's influence on this aesthetic cannot be understated; though she is now a celebrated high-fashion designer, her legacy remains one “against traditional British standards of morality—against petty bourgeois notions of etiquette and propriety.”²⁴

By 1976, McLaren and Westwood were well-known for creating clothes that repackaged niche styles for the high-end clients at their boutique on 430 Kings Road in Chelsea. Paul Gorman describes several significant changes to the pair's boutique at 430 Kings Road between its opening in 1971 and its closing in 1980. Originally opened under the name “Let It Rock,”

21 Valerie Steele, “Anti-Fashion: The 1970s,” *Fashion Theory* 1, no. 3 (1997): 280.

22 Shaun Cole, *Don We Now Our Gay Apparel: Gay Men's Dress in the Twentieth Century* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2000), 11-15.

23 Michael Selzer, *Terrorist Chic: An Exploration of Violence in the Seventies* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1979), 23-28.

24 Rebecca Arnold, “Westwood, Vivienne,” *The Berg Fashion Library*, 2005, accessed August 8, 2016, <http://www.bergfashionlibrary.com/view/bazf/bazf00639.xml>.

McLaren and Westwood's Kings Road boutique initially offered classic rocker and Teddy Boy clothes catered to Chelsea shoppers with expensive taste. They went to great lengths to seek out original rock and roll ephemera from the 1950s to decorate the shop, creating, in Gorman's words, "pure rock n' roll as a means of expressing their disgust with the post-hippy fall-out."²⁵ Eventually McLaren extended his interest to "cult clothes" associated with pop music, such as zoot suits and biker jackets. One point of inspiration was Vince's Man's Shop—a Carnaby Street boutique from the 1950s that specialized in homoerotic apparel and catered to a gay male audience. As McLaren became more interested in cult clothes, he turned his attention toward contemporaneous sex and bondage styles. The bondage shop London Leatherman on Queenstown Road, en route between the Kings Road boutique and McLaren and Westwood's Clapham home, inspired them to explore more openly provocative bondage clothes. They changed the name of the boutique first to "Too Fast to Live, Too Young to Die," and eventually to "SEX," fully embracing elements of fashion that McLaren saw at these underground sex shops. At the time of the Valentine's Ball, the boutique featured many of the early trademarks of punk fashion: bondage trousers, ripped garments held together by safety pins, and explicit graphic t-shirts.

When McLaren began managing the Sex Pistols in late 1975, he envisioned using the band primarily as a publicity tool for this new Kings Road style. Seeking a niche to exploit in both fashion and pop music, McLaren latched onto the transgressions of the underground sex scene and imagined a band that would exploit the alleged offending effect of such deviance on

²⁵ Paul Gorman, *The Look: Adventures in Rock and Pop Fashion* (London: Adelita, 2006), 116.

the mainstream. Jordan explained that, “the music has helped an awful lot,” indicating that the Sex Pistols initially provided publicity for the boutique, not vice versa.²⁶

The t-shirts were among the most popular articles of clothing sold at SEX.²⁷ McLaren and Westwood supplied the Sex Pistols, and their most diehard fans, with shirts from their boutique as a means of advertising their store. They hoped to create an image of their fashion as a type of genuine “streetstyle” worn by working-class youths. However, SEX sold their clothes for a price far too high for working-class kids—about £5 for a t-shirt—and their clientele was primarily comprised of the middle- and upper-class artists who shopped in Chelsea.²⁸ The materials themselves also reflected the artistic class with which McLaren and Westwood operated. McLaren insisted on using extremely high quality fabrics to appeal to customers of distinguishing taste.²⁹ They were on able to screen print these early t-shirts, from 1975 and 1976, because of Glen Matlock’s access to the St. Martin’s School of Art, which he attended as a student. Matlock recalls screen printing two images in particular, both of which are present at the Valentine’s Ball gig: the naked pre-pubescent “Smoking Boy” and the “Naked Footballer.”³⁰ Both of these images stuck out to Matlock for their “forbidden connotations,” and he was initially hesitant to print them, out of fear being expelled. When he voiced this concern, McLaren responded, “Don’t be stupid. Just tell them it’s an artwork.”³¹

26 Quoted in “Fashion at Kings Road,” *The London Weekend Show*, Independent Television News, July 31, 1977.

27 In July 1977, Westwood claimed that t-shirts were the best selling items in the shop, *Ibid.*

28 Glen Matlock, interview by the author, London, July 15, 2015.

29 Westwood claimed that her textiles were “very well-made” by “English craftsmen,” *Ibid.*

30 Glen Matlock, interview by the author.

31 *Ibid.*

Steve Jones's shirt at the Valentine's Ball was one of the first promotional items created specifically for the Sex Pistols. On this shirt, the band's name is spelled out in green and pink letters over an image of an electric guitar and the "Smoking Boy" design [Figure 2.3]. Before Jamie Reid created the iconic Sex Pistols imagery in autumn of 1976, McLaren and the band often wore this shirt at their first gigs as an early type of logo. McLaren specifically connected this image of a nude prepubescent boy smoking a cigarette to the aesthetic he hoped to achieve with the Sex Pistols: "He became my sexy young assassin—a Sex Pistol. All I needed was to announce the group's name and draw a guitar."³² For McLaren, the image evoked sexual danger—it was originally published in a magazine geared toward pedophiles. McLaren found the image in one of his regular trips to London sex shops. The original photograph came from a magazine called *Boys Express*, published by Hans Herbert Hubermahl.³³ The photographer was Don Busby, whose studio was centered in London. Busby regularly supplied images to well-known British pedophile magazines, such as *Bunny Kids*, *Exciting Boys*, and *Super Kids*, the publishers of which were all charged with obscenity when they attempted to export their products to New Zealand and the United States later in 1976. Yet, when McLaren and Westwood added the image of the guitar and the words "Sex Pistols," they transformed the photograph into a logo for the band. Whereas at one point the photograph had expressed meanings, and operated according to codes specific to a pedophilic subculture, when McLaren and Westwood appropriated the image for use on a t-shirt, it came to reference generally the sheer notion of sexual deviance to a broader public.

32 Quoted in Paul Gorman, "For Sale: Sid Vicious SEX Tee and New Boots and Panties!!" *The Look* (blog), May 30, 2010, Accessed August 8, 2016, <http://rockpopfashion.com/blog/?p=249>.

33 Savage, 100.

On Lydon's shirt we can see the other image that Matlock specifically recalls screen-printing at St. Martins: a full-frontal nude photograph of a black man holding a football, referred to as the "Naked Footballer" [Figure 2.4]. The source of this print was a male physique photograph taken in 1969 by Dave Martin and published in the fifth issue of the magazine *Bob Anthony's Beefcake* later that year. Martin was the first San Francisco photographer to specialize in the male physique, opening his studio in 1952 and running it until 1974. In the mid-1950s



Figure 2.3: Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood's "Smoking Boy" t-shirt

Martin was one of many physique photographers and publishers targeted during the Lavender Scare, and briefly served time in jail on obscenity charges. The photograph that McLaren and Westwood lifted featured the model Maurice Spencer in one of several prints that Martin produced of young black athletes. At that time, male physique magazines rarely featured people of color, as evidenced by *Bob Anthony's Beefcake* #5 which featured no black men other than Spencer. Martin explained his attraction to these subjects: "It certainly wasn't for the money. The

pictures didn't sell — no one wanted them. I wouldn't even list them in catalogs. I took them to please myself, for the sheer beauty of the male body. These beautiful black amateur athletic bodies.”³⁴

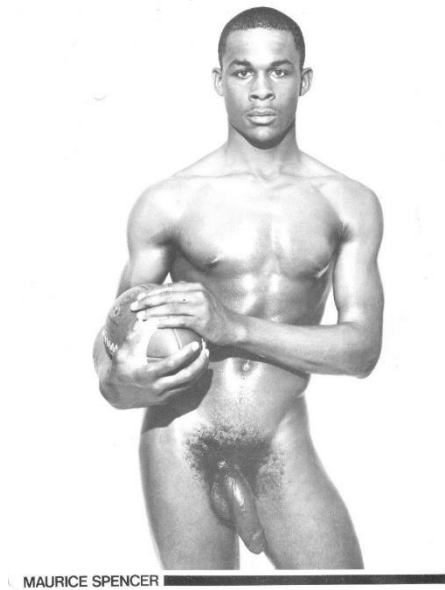


Figure 2.4: Maurice Spencer in *Beefcake #5*, 1969. Photograph by Dave Martin

Male physique photography was constantly under threat of seizure in the 1950s and 60s, particularly by the US Postmaster General, who deemed photographs of nude male models obscene and “nonmailable.” In 1962, the US Supreme Court sided with a beefcake magazine publisher, H. Lynn Womack, ruling that nude male photographs are protected under the First Amendment. Nevertheless, legal challenges to male erotic and pornographic publications continued throughout the 1960s, prompting publishers to protect by arguing for the artistic value

³⁴ “Beefcake: The Physique Photography of Dave Martin,” Cantor Arts Center at Stanford University, accessed August 8, 2016, http://museum.stanford.edu/news_room/pressrelease_cornclass.html.

of the images they printed. The issue of *Bob Anthony's Beefcake* containing Martin's photographs carried the following warning, for example, typical of the era [Figure 2.5]:

Star distributors present Bob Anthony's Beefcake is produced to provide a collection of photo reference studies to be used by the artist and art student in the study of anatomy and the posing of the model. While it is always preferable to use a live model, photographs can provide an invaluable reference when a professional model cannot be obtained. Those desiring erotic or prurient material are warned that such is not to be found in this publication, nor is it our intention to provide material of that nature.³⁵

Though publications such as *Bob Anthony's Beefcake* were, in fact, sold as erotic material, it was important for their publishers to be able to point to the heterogeneous meanings of the images printed within them. While audiences may have read these images erotically, the artists and publishers were quick to point out the technical, artistic values of the photographs. As with many examples in queer artistic production, the artists reveled in the ambiguity of the images being produced as a defense against social, and legal, aspersions.

The third image, which is superimposed over the “Naked Footballer,” is a print that McLaren and Westwood referred to as “Tits” [Figure 2.6]. Paul Gorman traced the roots of the “Tits” design back to the Rhode Island School of Design in 1969.³⁶ Students Janusz and Laura Gottwald designed a t-shirt playing on “The No-Bra Look” championed by young second-wave feminists, and printed it in the school's annual yearbook [Figure 2.7]. Later, the Gottwalds produced the shirt commercially for the San Francisco-based clothing company, Jizz inc. This design spread to small boutiques around the country and eventually onto the chests of famous rock musicians such as Alice Cooper and Charlie Watts (most famously on the cover of the

³⁵ *Bob Anthony's Beefcake 5* (New York: Star Distributors, 1969), n.p.

³⁶ Gorman offers an extensive history of this design, “SEX and the Tits Tee,” *The Look* (blog), August 4, 2009, <http://rockpopfashion.com/blog/?p=177>.

Rolling Stones' *'Get Yer Ya-Ya's Out!'*). Around the same time, John Dove and Molly White in London developed the idea of “painless tattoos,” which consisted of prints that looked like tattoos printed on garments made of sheer material. Working in collaboration with photographer James Wedge and model and boutique owner Pat Booth, Dove and White created a painless tattoo t-shirt featuring a photograph of Booth's naked torso.

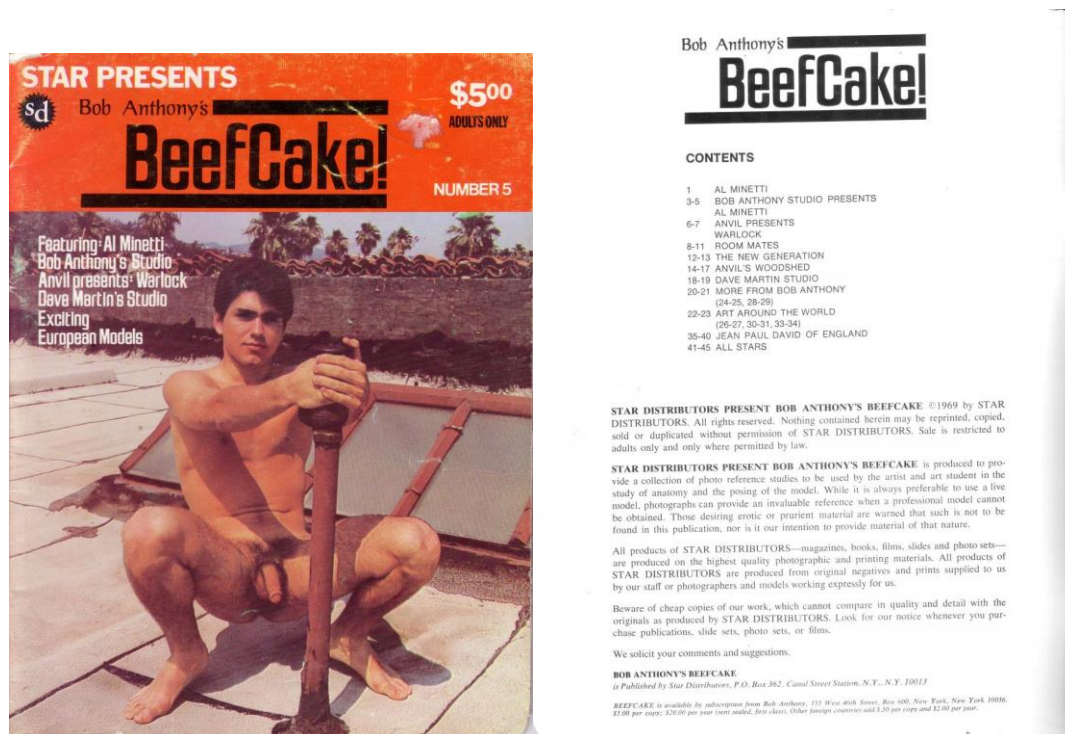


Figure 2.5: *Beefcake* #5, cover and table of contents

McLaren and Westwood visited Dove and White’s studio in 1975, while researching fetish and bondage clothing. In 1975, while on tour with the New York Dolls in the United States, McLaren happened upon a third tits design at a tourist boutique in New Orleans. Printed as a simple blue rectangle that framed a model's breasts while blocking out the rest of her torso, this design became the final version used in the SEX boutique. By the time McLaren and Westwood appropriated this image in the mid-1970s, it had already established a wide variety of

connotations as it passed through different artistic and stylistic worlds. Originally produced as part of a feminist art school project, and having circulated in sex, art, and rock and roll circles, it ended up on one of McLaren and Westwood's most iconic garments, despite the fact that they had little creative input on the design. Yet, in spite of this, the final iteration of this image that appeared in *SEX* seems to capture something significant about their style; like an act of reverse-



Figure 2.6: Steve Jones wearing the “Tits” t-shirt in 1976. Photograph by Joe Stevens.

ensorship, in which all meaning except the most salacious is erased, the more innocuous portions of the woman's body are blocked out while the bare breasts are exposed.

As this history reveals, the three images originated in different contexts, and were targeted at different economies of sexual desire. Whatever the artists, audiences, and publishers personally enjoyed about the original photographs—whether they found them erotic or artistic, or their meanings social or political—there is a sense they interpreted them according to the diverse codes of the specific social groups to which they belonged. By appropriating these

images to sell on t-shirts, McLaren and Westwood ignored these codes and social contexts. Instead, they reduced these images to mere elements of a bricolage. By reframing these images on t-shirts, McLaren and Westwood effectively limited what they could signify. They fixed their meaning by transforming them into what Diana Crane describes as the “slogans and logos”



Figure 2.7: [left] Janusz and Laura Gottwald’s “The No-Bra Look” t-shirt, advertised in the *Los Angeles Free Press*, June 18, 1971; [right] John Dove and Molly White’s “painless tattoo” shirt, from Paul Gorman’s *The Look* (blog)

through which politics, identity, or ideology are communicated specifically on t-shirts. Often used as blank canvases for wearable public statements, t-shirts instantly identify the wearer’s social location.³⁷ Just as the photograph of the “Smoking Boy” was transformed into a logo for the Sex Pistols that indexed their rebelliousness, the “Tits” and “Naked Footballer” images were printed on top of one another as a pile of outrageous body parts, without regard for their individual meanings. The bricolage that Hebdige claimed enabled working class resistance to dominant culture undoubtedly flattened here the expressive voice of minority groups that identified in terms of gender and sexuality. In the case of the “Naked Footballer” and the

³⁷ Diana Crane, *Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender, and Identity in Clothing* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2012), 177.

“Smoking Boy,” images that once circulated in publications with small distribution targeted toward gay men, and, in one case, pedophiles, and purchased in specialty shops, were now being broadcast publicly on the front of a t-shirt. Even if McLaren and Westwood intended to use these images to build a specialized style that catered to an emerging youth subculture (as Hebdige argues), they did so by appealing to a heteronormative value in the dominant culture—the desire to be shocked by deviance.

The t-shirt was an especially important piece of fashion for McLaren, Westwood, and the punks. Westwood embraced the simple form of the t-shirt as an empty canvas on which to apply direct, unambiguous, and ultimately shocking images. Other shirts featured images of violent criminals (e.g. Gary Gilmore and the Cambridge Rapist), Nazi symbolism, and reappropriated children’s images (such as Disney characters with crude words as captions). The Kings Road designers were especially famous for using shirts as a space for terse, confrontational slogans – some borrowed from the Situationists (“BE REASONABLE DEMAND THE IMPOSSIBLE”) and others arranged in the famous cut-up style later emblazoned the Sex Pistols’ record sleeves (e.g. “Create Hell and get away with it”). Inspired by Westwood’s t-shirts, Keanan Duffy wrote, “There is something wonderfully democratic about the T; everyone has worn one, whether a kid or a granddad. It transcends class—though its lingering blue-collar overtones provide street cred—and, most significantly, sex.”³⁸

The movement of styles across social classes that we see in these t-shirts counters the two standard theories of social mobility in fashion studies. On the one hand, Georg Simmel’s “trickle down” model explains how fashions first adopted by the upper class eventually spread to the

38 Keanan Duffy, *Rebel Rebel: Anti-Style* (London: Adelita, 2009), 32-33.

middle and lower classes.³⁹ According to this narrative, lower-class, mass-marketed fashion is a watered-down, less adventurous version of high couture fashion. As the lower classes seek to acquire status by emulating upper class dress, the upper classes develop new styles to distinguish themselves, thus creating a cycle of fashion trends. On the other hand, George Field theorizes a “bottom-up” model that describes the upper class appropriation of styles originally developed by the lower classes.⁴⁰ Ted Polhemus created the term “street style” to refer to the adoption of styles from youth subcultures by people in other age and socioeconomic groups.⁴¹ Yet, neither the trickle down nor the bottom-up model accurately describes how photographs of naked bodies came to circulate in the nascent punk movement at Logan’s Valentine Ball. McLaren and Westwood appropriated images in a manner that is best explained by using Crane’s term, “sophisticated poachers,” which describes clothiers who co-opt styles from sexual minorities and incorporate them into dominant men's fashion.⁴² By integrating images from popular music and queer subcultures into male fashion, sophisticated poachers normalize styles previously considered to be too eccentric or too feminine for men’s fashion. Taking into consideration Crane’s analysis, and my own claim that McLaren and Westwood circumscribed the meaning of the images they poached, Hebdige’s argument that punk style resists hegemonic meanings begins to seem unlikely. Instead, this poaching points to the development of a new stylistic hegemony that attempted to erase codes used by minorities.

McLaren and Westwood exploited punk’s supposed DIY ethic as a means of referencing

39 Georg Simmel, “Fashion,” *International Quarterly* 10 (October 1904): 130-155.

40 George A. Field, “The Status Float Phenomenon: The Upward Diffusion of Innovation,” *Business Horizons* 13 (August 1970): 45-52.

41 Ted Polhemus, *Streetstyle* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 1-5.

42 Crane, *Fashion and Its Social Agendas*, 173.

working-class style without necessarily drawing from actual working class influences. Writing on the structure of class hierarchies in fashion, Angela Partington argues that Simmel's trickle down model reinscribes a class hierarchy that denies cultural agency to the lower classes; if fashion is always trickling down, then style and taste are solely the product of cultural elites. This model also problematically erodes salient class divisions by reading fashion as a unified, if hegemonically imbalanced, social realm.⁴³ In contrast, the designs at the King's Road boutique dramatically revealed class divisions in London during the 1970s. These divisions were not revealed because working-class youth were articulating a style that resisted the trickle-down effect of higher class styles, but rather within the bohemian class itself. McLaren and Westwood were part of this bohemian class and imagined their working-class punk style within it. The Sex Pistols then, in part, reinscribed these styles back on the working classes.

Coming from an art school background and operating within London's bohemian art and fashion scene throughout the 1970s, McLaren and Westwood possessed a relatively high degree of cultural capital due to their personal associations. They sold their clothes to wealthy and powerful clientele, though they did not yet have the pop cultural cache that the Sex Pistols later granted them. Nor did they have a close association with working-class subcultures, other than previous sartorial appropriations from groups like the Teddy Boys. In terms of price, the King's Road clothes were far too expensive for the working classes, and the high fashion experience of the boutique, which was frequented by major rock stars such as Mick Jagger and Iggy Pop, was far from everyday. Juliet Ash writes that, "Vivienne Westwood's garment becomes as much a part of an elitist experience of looking as it is part of a fashion industry which has costed its

43 Angela Partington, "Popular Fashion and Working-Class Affluence," in *Chic Thrills: A Fashion Reader*, eds. Juliet Ash and Elizabeth Wilson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 145-46.

possessions out of the reach of ordinary people.”⁴⁴ Sex Pistols bassist Glen Matlock, who worked in the boutique, recalls that most of the young punks who came to the store either bought day-glo socks (the cheapest item) or nothing.⁴⁵ Though McLaren and Westwood worked to make their style appear working-class, the class dynamics of punk fashion were such that they could borrow enough from lower classes to register as street style, while remaining distant enough from actual lower-class fashion to remain elite. Bradley Quinn claims that the problem with British anti-fashion in the 1970s, as a consequence, was that it reduced its modernist shock elements to superficial, and commodified, aesthetics:

In the meta-category of fashion, the line between the rational and the ridiculous becomes muted as the difference between radical and innovative is confused. Those outside the British fashion establishment regard this paradox as an evolving hallmark of British fashion. As innovative becomes “Innovative” and radical becomes “Radical,” the fashion establishment seem to move further away from the cutting-edge reputation formed by British visionaries.⁴⁶

Here, Quinn argues that British fashion in this era used concepts, such as “Innovative” and “Radical,” much like the logos on the Sex Pistols’ t-shirts. Rather than striving to create an innovative or radical new type of clothing, it was more important for these designers to be seen as innovative or radical.

McLaren and Westwood's clothes were not only expensive, they were also designed by and for knowledgeable, avant-garde bohemians. Crane argues how important their ambivalent relationship to the world of commercial fashion was for the messages their fashion could convey: “Countercultural styles, like punk, are able to violate social taboos to a much greater extent than

44 Juliet Ash, “Philosophy on the Catwalk,” in *Chic Thrills: A Fashion Reader*, 180.

45 Matlock, interview by the author.

46 Bradley Quinn, “Exhibition Review: ‘Radical’ Fashion? A Critique of the Radical Fashion Exhibition, Victoria and Albert Museum, London,” *Fashion Theory* 6, no. 4 (2002): 445.

is possible for designers who have to sell clothes to the general public, and provide the principal examples of this type of avant-gardism,” she writes.⁴⁷ In other words, McLaren and Westwood could not have upset social norms from a position of populism, at least not in the beginning. The new styles at SEX—safety pins, ripped cloths, bondage and fetish gear—were not targeted toward the working classes, but rather toward the avant-garde. Eventually these styles worked their way from the avant-garde back into the mainstream. As Crane explains, “Countercultural styles are frequently copied by fashion designers, an indication of a postmodernist sensibility, but the change of context has the effect of negating oppositional elements.”⁴⁸ Janice Miller argues, in contrast, that the “interdependency between musicians and designers and between the music and fashion industries is a natural consequence of a consumer culture.”⁴⁹ Fashion has an impact beyond this consumer culture, however, and can both powerfully reflect and influence our cultural desires.

Lydon described a tension between the do-it-yourself, self-stylized street style that many punks embraced, and Vivienne Westwood’s high fashion interpretation of punk on King’s Road. For Lydon, punk fashion developed by recycling clothes, especially secondhand clothes that could be reimagined for younger generations. In this sense, punk resulted directly from economic stagnation and unemployment. But it was not solely the result of practical circumstances. The point was to rebel against the status quo: “anything to break out of what the high street was trying to sell you,” Lydon wrote.⁵⁰ Though some of the punks were buying directly from

47 Diana Crane, “Postmodernism and the Avant-Garde: Stylistic Change in Fashion Design,” *Modernism/Modernity* 4, no. 3 (September 1997): 135.

48 Ibid.

49 Janice Miller, *Fashion and Music* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011), 12.

50 Lydon, quoted in Andrew Bolton, with Richard Hell, John Lydon, and Jon Savage. *Punk: Chaos to Couture* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013), 21.

boutiques like Westwood's, they were mixing and matching with their own clothes, adding their own rips and safety pins. This "mix-and-match, DIY brigade" was the source of frustration for Westwood, who saw her clothes as a full uniform that was not to be altered.⁵¹ According to Lydon, this tension between Westwood and the punks offered proof of own trickle-down ideal: "She was trying to dictate to street culture, which was just ridiculous because it should be the other way round. We were generating 'authentic imitations'!"⁵² Lydon's critique of Westwood as trying to dictate street culture, reveals a dissonance in the discourse around punk fashion. Whereas Westwood created a legacy as the most significant punk designer of the era, musicians like Lydon read the "DIY brigade" as the real source of punk fashion. Lydon argues that, in reality, punk fashion was not a single style, and that Westwood's boutique has only been solidified as the definitive "look" of punk in hindsight by the British press. Instead, "there not one particular style that defines it; it's really just a mixture of different people. The second you say it's punk, then it isn't."⁵³

Placed in the context of Andrew Logan's Valentine Ball, the class connotations of these t-shirts become more clear. The crowd at the ball was made up mostly of members of an exclusive avant-garde circle of artists and fashion designers known for their discerning tastes. Logan was a sculptor known throughout London art circles in the 1970s for the elaborate parties that he threw at his loft in Butler's Wharf. Most famously, he held an annual gender-bending beauty contest called Alternative Miss World. Operating largely in a queer art scene, Logan's pageant featured men and women in elaborate costumes and characters competing for the title of Alternative Miss

51 Ibid., 22.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.

World. As the contestants were judged by the overall audacity and fabulousness of their presentation, cross-dressing men won the crown almost every year. Only months before the Valentine's Ball filmmaker Derek Jarman was declared 1975 Alternative Miss World for his performance as Miss Crepe Suzette.

Peter York classified this scene of London artists and designers as simply "Them." To define its stylistic features, York explained their motivations:

Ask yourself why most people dress as they do....either to look socially acceptable—rich enough, couth enough, etc., or to look sexually appealing—as young and good-looking as possible. It is a mark of a Them that he/she does neither of these normal things. Thems are people who will make the supreme sacrifice: to look interesting rather than sexy. Like a book setting out to appeal to a small circle of other writers, a Them's clothes are meant to be interesting or original or allusive or clever or witty to his or her *peers*. Thems are excessively literate in the language of style.⁵⁴

As York explains, Thems were the ultimate artistic and stylistic insiders. Their scene was exclusive and insular, and York referred to Logan as an "ultra Them" at the center.⁵⁵ Thus, it's somewhat surprising that a young group of punks, who were outside the small circle of stylistic literates, would be invited to play a party at Logan's loft. But as Matlock explained, this was made possible by McLaren's connections to Logan and the London art scene. And although punks mocked and dismissed this unabashedly queer bohemian social circle, York argues that, "They were much more tied into Punk's beginnings than any of the punk apologists would admit for *years* afterwards."⁵⁶

The photograph of the Sex Pistols' performance at Logan's loft shows us how punk relied upon London's avant-garde art scene. The stage that the Sex Pistols played on at this gig in

54 Peter York, *Style Wars* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1980), 114.

55 Ibid., 125.

56 Ibid., 128.



Figure 2.8: The court in Derek Jarman's *Sebastiane*

particular offers a glimpse into this artistic milieu. Two major pieces comprise this stage. First, we can see the floral pattern and the Greek meander from a tapestry used on the set of Derek Jarman's film *Sebastiane* [Figure 2.8]. Well-known for its stylized, erotic portrayal of nude male bodies, *Sebastiane* exemplified the literacy of style that York described in this social circle. Jarman had recently finished filming *Sebastiane* and donated parts of the set to Logan for his Valentine's Ball. The pieces visible here are from a scene taking place in the court of the Roman Emperor Diocletian. One of the visible extras in this court scene is Jordan, further highlighting the early cross-overs between punk and Them social circles. The stage design also used materials from the children's section of the recently closed Biba Superstore, most noticeably a large mock castle [Figure 2.9]. Founded by the designer Barbara Hulanicki, Biba represented one of the newest, and chicest, London brands in the early 1970s. Moreover, Logan had organized parties

for Hulanicki earlier in the 1970s, and York associated Biba and Hulanicki directly with the Them's.

Given the significant role of queer artists in the Them's, it is likely that some of this audience might have been familiar with the heterogeneous sexual codes operating in the subcultural contexts from which McLaren and Westwood drew the images on the Sex Pistols' t-shirts. McLaren and Westwood ultimately rejected this circle, however, and positioned themselves in opposition to Them's, forgoing the insider stylistic literacy that York described. Later, McLaren and Westwood designed t-shirts that directly attacked this social circle, and both Derek Jarman and Barbara Hulanicki. One of McLaren and Westwood's most famous t-shirt

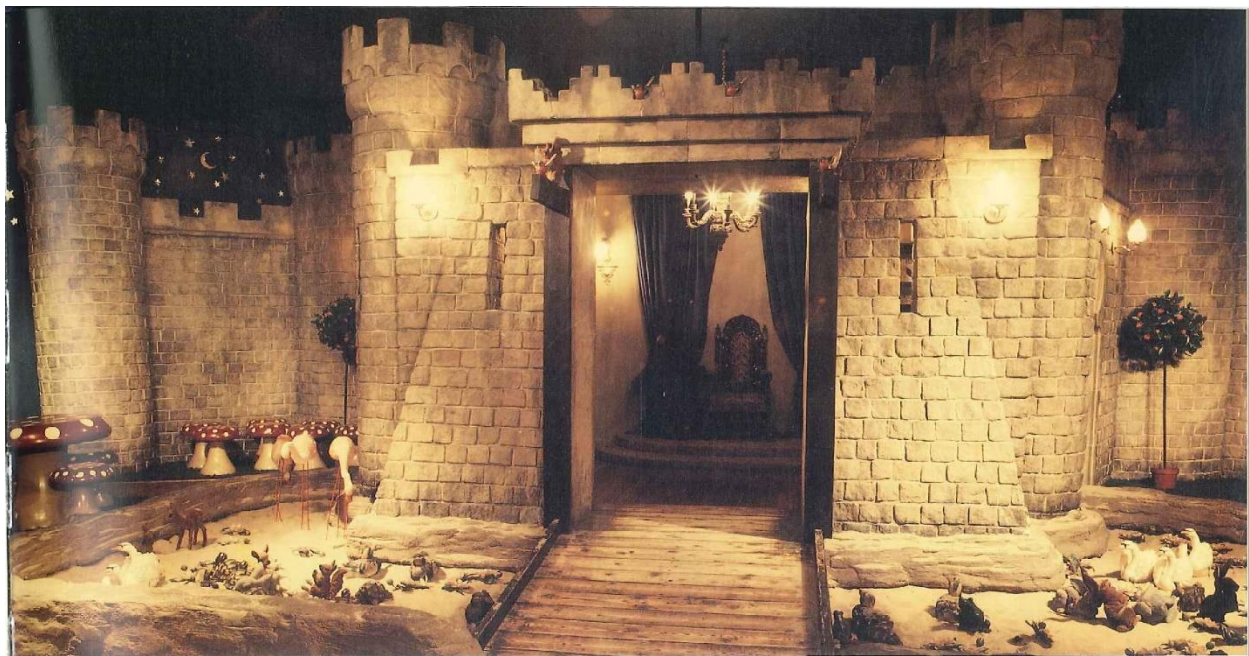


Figure 2.9: Play castle from the children's section of the Biba Superstore. From *Biba: The Biba Experience*, by Alwyn W. Turner

designs, a lengthy list of "loves" and "hates" that purported to speak for punk tastes declared "you're gonna wake up one morning and know what side of the bed you've been lying on," which listed Biba on the "wrong" side [Figure 2.10]. Later, after Jarman released the punk-

inspired film *Jubilee* in 1978, Westwood produced a shirt in a similar style with the title, “Open T Shirt to Derek Jarman from Vivienne Westwood,” declaring it “the most boring and therefore disgusting film I had ever seen.”

The big missing piece in this history is the Sex Pistols' musical performance on the night of the Valentine Ball. There is no audio recording from this gig, but according to Logan, “you couldn’t hear anything—it was deafening.”⁵⁷ The sound reverberated off the loft’s corrugated iron roof, creating a din that drove the audience out of the sizeable loft space and into the cramped adjacent rooms. Most of their set consisted of a long, repetitive version of the Stooges' “No Fun.” There is, however, a silent film, shot on Super 8 by Derek Jarman. In this film, we can see the physical excitement that the Sex Pistols delivered in their early live gigs, particularly in Lydon's engagement with the crowd. At one point, Lydon approaches Westwood and appears to wrestle her to the ground. Simon Barker, an early follower of the Sex Pistols, explained the source of this confrontation:

Logan was freaking out because he had this nice space and there were all these people. John was shut outside and finally he persuaded them to open the door and he was so mad: by the time he got in all the drink had gone. He said to Vivienne: “Where's our fucking drink?” He gave Vivienne the biggest black eye she ever had in her life.⁵⁸

Though we know little about their performance that night, it appears that the Sex Pistols themselves may have functioned as logos, similarly to how the images on their t-shirts did. As some of the only known attendees with actual working-class backgrounds, the Sex Pistols were outsiders to the social circles to which McLaren, Westwood, and Logan belonged. Literally left out in the cold during the ball, their presence became known afterwards largely through

⁵⁷ Andrew Logan, interview by author, London, November 2, 2015.

⁵⁸ Savage, 148.

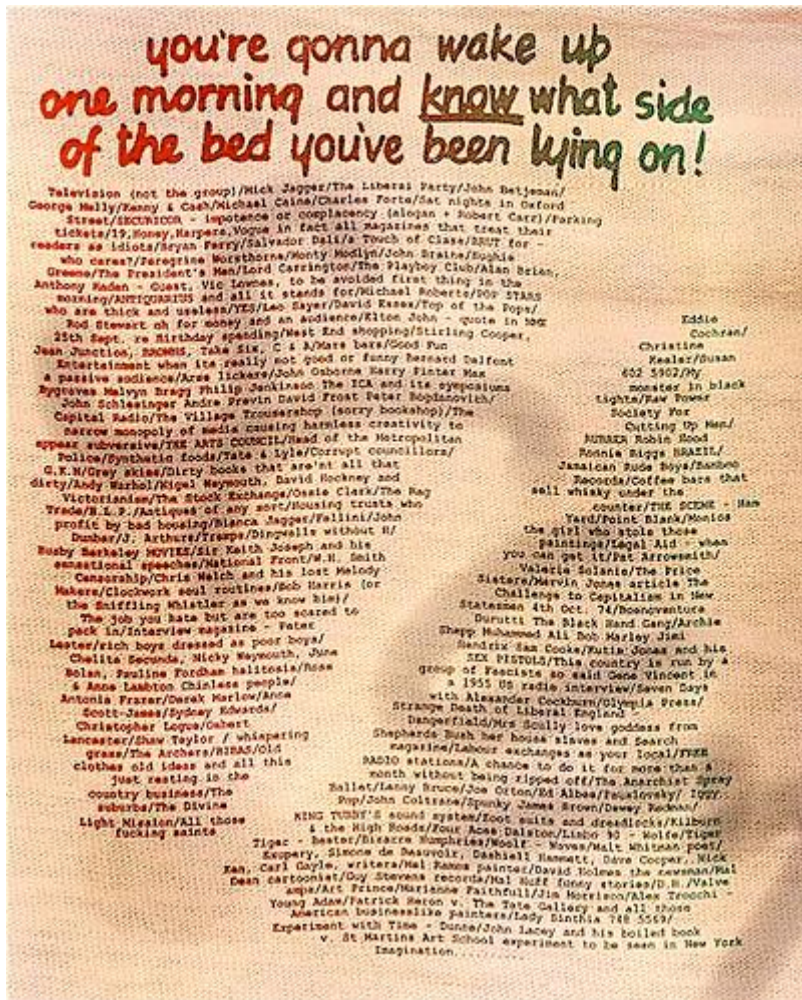


Figure 2.10: "You're Gonna Wake Up One Morning" t-shirt print

photographs that circulated widely. These photographs portrayed the Sex Pistols as, and made them a symbol of, violent, unrefined, working-class youth. The surviving photographs and silent film of the Valentine Ball, in the absence of music, reduce the Sex Pistols into a visual version of themselves as angry, working-class kids hoping to resist hegemony where they see it. By the end of that year, this narrative would be solidified and, despite their growing fame, the Sex Pistols' music further silenced.

Part II: We're Not Into Music

Beginning with the Sex Pistols' earliest press coverage, the print media established a narrative that would persist throughout the group's history: the Sex Pistols could not play their instruments. Neil Spencer, in his review of the Sex Pistols' gig opening for Eddie and the Hot Rods at the Marquee on February 12, 1976, focused almost entirely on the Sex Pistols, practically ignoring the headline act.⁵⁹ The conclusion of this review captures the significance of this notion that the Sex Pistols could not play:

“We're going to play ‘Substitute.’” “You can't play,” heckled an irate French punter. “So what?” countered the bassman, jutting his chin in the direction of the bewildered Frog. That's how it is with the Pistols—a musical experience with the emphasis on Experience. “Actually we're not into music,” one of the Pistols confided afterwards. Wot then? “We're into chaos.”⁶⁰

This early anecdote reveals a paradox concerning the Sex Pistols supposed inability to play their instruments. The heckler clearly meant to insult the band by pointing out that they could not play. Yet, Matlock's defense is not to disagree with the heckler's evaluation, but rather to question its relevance. If the Sex Pistols were more of an “experience” than a traditional rock group, then the traditional standards of judgment simply did not apply to them. Instead, their only aim was to create chaos, which is something distinct from musical sound.

The concluding quote—“Actually we're not into music, we're into chaos”—circulated widely as the Sex Pistols gained notoriety. Critics often focused on the term “chaos,” which lent itself to punk's emerging anti-establishment brand. The Sex Pistols' insistence on their

⁵⁹ This review is usually considered to be the Sex Pistols' first press coverage. But, as Gorman has pointed out, the Sex Pistols' were mentioned in the December 27, 1975 issue of *NME*, “Sex Pistols: The Very First Media Mention,” *Paul Gorman* (blog), April 13, 2011, accessed August 8, 2016, <http://www.paulgormanis.com/?p=2550>.

⁶⁰ Neil Spencer, “Don't Look Over Your Shoulder But the Sex Pistols Are Coming,” *New Musical Express*, February 21, 1976.

disinterest in music in this context carried significant consequences for both punk fans and detractors.

In this section, I trace how fans and critics throughout 1976 constructed the notion that the Sex Pistols could not play their instruments. I argue that the Sex Pistols' supposed inability to play became a symbol of punk's alleged intrinsically subversive mode of cultural expression. On the one hand, punk fans believed that the Sex Pistols created a non-musical "energy" that facilitated an authentic connection between the band and their audiences, thus circumventing the commercial music industry. On the other hand, anti-punk critics claimed that the Sex Pistols were commercial entertainers trying to fool audiences with non-musical "theatre," and were inauthentic as rock musicians. Yet, both groups agreed that the Sex Pistols could not play their instruments and that their performances were, therefore, not strictly musical. As my analysis demonstrates, these discourses effectively muted the Sex Pistols' musical sound, impeding critical examinations of punk's musical characteristics. Building upon on the model I developed in regard to punk fashion in section 1, I explain here how the Sex Pistols' supposed inability became an unquestioned symbol of subversion that simultaneously obscured any possible musical justification of this subversion.

Dave Laing describes the development of punk in the UK as a "discursive formation," or, "system which supplies for anyone entering it a series of positions to adopt, roles to play and rules to adhere to."⁶¹ He argues that punk discourse formed around how the established media and the participants framed the genre's limits. According to Laing's analysis, punk is both included in and excluded from the broader discourse on rock music. The example that he gives relies upon the language used to describe punk in UK newspapers; in these descriptions, punk

61 Ibid., 99.

represents dirtiness, violence, mental and physical illness, and various unpleasant effects. As the mainstream media placed punk on the margins, musicians and pro-punk journalists embraced images of sickness and filthiness, “following the classic shock-tactic of affirming values which were denied by the doxa.”⁶² According to Laing, the mainstream media established the discrete boundaries of societal doxa and placed punk at the margins.

My discourse analysis departs in one significant way from Laing’s. Instead of interpreting the discourse of punk as a set of rules that actors either break or follow, I interpret it as a site of disagreements and affirmations between musicians, fans, media, and various other figures in the music industry. No single person was responsible for determining the constitutive features of punk. Rather, the definitions and aesthetics of UK punk developed as part of process during 1976. Whereas Laing describes discourse as “a kind of collusion” between various participants (who sometimes collaborated), I do not read any unified intentionality into the actions of these participants. Building off of Laing’s basic premise that punk was a system that could be entered either by external institutions (such as the news media) or the participants themselves, I see the terms and motivations of punk as shifting according to the contexts in which they were applied.

Writers in the both the rock press and punk fanzines often ruminated on the Sex Pistols’ physical appearance and confrontational attitude, but rarely offered detailed examinations of their music.⁶³ Following Spencer’s influential early review, fans and critics continued to

62 Ibid., 100.

63 In contrast, dedicated fanzine writers paid the closest attention to the Sex Pistols’ music. Mark Perry wrote, “Certain writers in the established rags are latching on to the new bands in the same way that they change the fashion of their clothes. Writing about punk-rock is the thing to do at the moment. I hope the ‘fashion’ soon dies out, then you’ll be able to find out who really believed in the bands!” “Mark P. Pisses on the Lot of ‘Em!” *Sniffin’ Glue* 5 (November 1976), n.p.

perpetuate the idea that the Sex Pistols could not play their instruments. In one of their earliest mentions in *Melody Maker*, in April 1976, Allan Jones described their gigs as “dreadfully inept attempts to zero in on the kind of viciously blank intensity previously epitomised by the Stooges,” and commented that Steve Jones “played with a determined disregard for taste and intelligence.”⁶⁴ Jonh Ingham, who would become one of the first critics to embrace the Sex Pistols, took this literally, claiming that “the Sex Pistols has only existed professionally since Christmas and that Steve has only played guitar for five months.”⁶⁵ However, it is unclear whether or not the Sex Pistols were as inexperienced as the press claimed. By November 1976, this narrative had become so widely accepted that Cook sought to dispel the myth that they were inexperienced: “Everyone thinks we’ve only just picked up our guitars, ... But we’ve played for three years. We rehearsed every night, just shutting ourselves away from everything.”⁶⁶ In spite of whatever technical skills the Sex Pistols possessed and their regular practice schedule, McLaren and the rest of the band often contributed to the narrative that they could not play. According to both Lydon and McLaren, Lydon’s audition for the band entailed no actual singing, only lip syncing in front of a jukebox; the sound of his voice was not important to McLaren, but his stage presence was. Lydon confirmed this: “I had absolutely no interest in singing. I wrote songs but I didn’t know what I was going to do with them. I was more interested in being obnoxious.”⁶⁷ When reviewers noted Jones’s aversion to guitar solos, Jones explained that this

64 Quoted in Jonh Ingham, “The Sex Pistols Are Four Months Old...” *Sounds*, April 24, 1976.

65 Ibid.

66 Caroline Coon, “Sex Pistols: Rotten to the Core,” *Melody Maker*, November 27, 1976.

67 Ibid.

was both a technical limitation and an aesthetic choice: “I can’t play solos and I hate them anyway.”⁶⁸

Writers and editors at London’s most popular rock publications dismissed the Sex Pistols and questioned their authenticity, even at their first gigs. After Spencer’s initial review, the *NME*—at that time the most widely read and credible rock magazine in the UK—largely ignored punk until December 1976. The Sex Pistols’ perceived amateurism was a major reason why *NME* editors dismissed punk; according to Spencer, established writers like Steve Clarke and Max Bell “would have thought [the Sex Pistols] couldn’t play.”⁶⁹ Chris Salewicz felt that many writers at *NME* looked down on punk as low-brow.⁷⁰ The Sex Pistols’ detractors at *NME* included Nick Kent, who briefly played guitar in an early incarnation of the band but went on to dismiss “this punk stuff” as unintelligent.⁷¹ *Melody Maker* editor Allan Jones saw the Sex Pistols at the Nashville on April 3, 1976, “thought they were a fucking joke,” and was quoted saying, “Let’s hope we never hear from this group again.”⁷² Younger writers at *Melody Maker* and *Sounds* who supported the new London punk movement (primarily Caroline Coon and Jonh Ingham) were met with resistance from more senior staff members like Jones.⁷³ According to Ingham, many of his colleagues jumped at the chance to deride the Sex Pistols before ever having seen or heard

68 Ingham, “The Sex Pistols Are Four Months Old...”

69 Quoted in Paul Gorman, *In Their Own Write: Adventures in the Music Press* (London: Sanctuary, 2001), 221.

70 Ibid.

71 Quoted from Chris Salewicz in Ibid. Tony Parsons also described the anti-punk culture at *NME* in 1976 as “a class thing.”

72 Allan Jones, quoted in Ibid., 212.

73 Peter York commented that it was no coincidence that Coon and Ingham were among the first British journalists to embrace punk, connecting their musical tastes to their savvy fashion sense: “Ingham and Coon are, without a doubt, the best-dressed, most socially clued writers there have ever been in the rock press. ... She mixes high with the Performance Playpower rich hippie world. Ingham ... has exactly the right pleats in his trousers, the right art on his t-shirts,” York, *Style Wars*, 177.

them: “Everybody [at *Sounds*] was resistant to punk. They felt threatened. It had the whiff of something dangerous.”⁷⁴ Others, like Greg Shaw of *Bomp!*, were unimpressed by the Sex Pistols’ blatant use of taboos. Shaw was one of the first American journalists to see the Sex Pistols and was skeptical that the band was as revolutionary as they claimed: “It wasn't an abrupt change. It wasn't a rejection of everything from the past; it was a rejection of all the obvious stuff from the past.”⁷⁵ Chas de Whalley, who wrote at both *NME* and *Sounds* in the mid-1970s, thought that the generation gap between rock journalists was most notable in their differing approaches to the music: “This was another generation of writers who couldn't care a fuck about music. . . . The function of the rock critic was to knock. Music played a secondary role to fashion and political ideologies.”⁷⁶

Contrary to writers in the rock press, punk fanzine writers openly embraced punk’s shoddiness as proof of its authenticity, and reflected on this aesthetic in their publications. In the inaugural issue of *Sniffin' Glue*, Mark Perry (also known simply as Mark P.) condemned the rock press as elitist and wrote about the necessity of writing about punk from a fan’s perspective: “The weeklys [sic] are so far away from the kids they can't possibly say anything of importance to punk-rock fans. I can't spell, I wouldn't win any awards for literature but at least I don't write down to yer!”⁷⁷ Like many of the punk bands he wrote about, Perry often emphasized the “amateur” quality of *Sniffin' Glue*; in this particular passage he exaggerates his semi-literacy in

74 Jonh Ingham, interview by author, London, July 16, 2015.

75 Quoted in Gorman, *In Their Own Write*, 213.

76 Quoted in *Ibid.*, 207.

77 Perry also described punk as “rock in its lowest form,” “The London Scene – Punk Wise!” *Sniffin' Glue* 1 (July 1976).

order to assert an authenticity lacking in the mainstream rock press.⁷⁸ Perry resented how the rock press covered punk, claiming that these publications represented the very establishment that punk opposed: “SOUNDS, NME, MELODY MAKER & the new crap-ROCKSTAR should stick to writing about the established artists. Leave our music to us, if anything needs to be written, us kids will do it. We don't need any boring old fart to do it for us!”⁷⁹

While writers in the established rock press associated a musician's authenticity with how well they could play, punk fans rejected that very same kind of ability as inauthentic. The most ardent punk fans, writing in fanzines, read the Sex Pistols' anti-virtuosity as a challenge to rock norms. They believed that the Sex Pistols offered a live experience that was more authentic to the rebellious spirit of rock 'n' roll. Overt displays of virtuosity from popular rock bands like Yes and Pink Floyd disconnected rock musicians from audiences who were typically not able to imitate what they heard without considerable practice.⁸⁰ The Sex Pistols envisioned themselves at the forefront of a new movement in the 1970s, with Lydon calling for “more bands like us.” By the Punk Rock Festival at the 100 Club in late September 1976, a new scene had developed in London that was consciously focused on youth, and “the belief that the old farts like the Stones, Beatles, Yes – in fact, the entire pantheon of rock aristocracy – should have been carted off to the euthanasia centre years ago.”⁸¹

78 In the opening editorial of the zine, Perry explains, “It's a bit amateur [sic] at the moment but it is the first go isn't it, I mean we can't be Nick Kents over night can we,” contrasting his own work with *NME* writer (and original Sex Pistols' guitarist) Nick Kent, “MP's Sniff Contents,” *Sniffin' Glue* 1 (July 1976), n.p.

79 Perry, “Mark P. Pisses on the Lot of 'Em!”

80 Crossley identifies one of the standard narratives of punk's genesis as an “aesthetic frustration” with prog rock and the mainstream. Crossley rejects this narrative, however, claiming, “It was as much positive identification with these alternatives as hostility towards prog and the mainstream that energised the formation of the punk world,” Crossley, *Networks of Sound, Style, and Subversion*, 49, 60-61.

81 Jonh Ingham, “The (?) Rock Special,” *Sounds*, October 9, 1976.

Punk fans argued the Sex Pistols enacted a more participatory, and ultimately subversive, type of rock performance. Specifically, the Sex Pistols were able to break through the elitist notion that rock stars were somehow more gifted than their audience. Appealing to an emerging do-it-yourself aesthetic in punk, McLaren and the Sex Pistols emphasized the band's ability to connect with young audiences. "You've gotta be able to access," McLaren said, "you don't want these cold, distant characters who can't connect with you."⁸² Established stars like the Rolling Stones had long since abandoned their rock 'n' roll ethos, leading Lydon to claim, "I don't even consider them a band. They're more a business."⁸³ In this context, punk audiences came to look upon the Sex Pistols as leaders, hoping they would inspire others to create their own bands, regardless of their ability, and create a movement (or "new wave") to destroy the commercial music industry. Caroline Coon noted, "Participation is the operative word. The audiences are reveling in the idea that any one of them could get up on stage and do just as well, if not better, than the bands already up there. . . . The growing punk rock audiences are seething angry young dreamers who want to put the boot in and play music, regardless."⁸⁴ McLaren recognized a salient connection between the perception that the Sex Pistols could not play and their youth appeal: "The Pistols don't play great and as such, a kid in the audience can relate to that. . . . A kid can visualise himself being up there on stage. Kids can't relate to Led Zeppelin; all those barriers, big auditoriums...ridiculous."⁸⁵

82 Simon Harper, "Rock 'n' Rules: Malcolm McLaren," *Clash*, November 11, 2009, accessed August 8, 2016, <http://www.clashmusic.com/features/rocknrules-malcolm-mclaren>.

83 "Punk Rock," *The London Weekend Show*, Independent Television News, November 28, 1976.

84 Caroline Coon, "Punk Rock: Rebels Against the System," *Melody Maker*, August 7, 1976.

85 Nick Kent, "Malcolm McLaren: Meet the Colonel Tom Parker of the Blank Generation," *New Musical Express*, November 27, 1976.

At the core of the Sex Pistols' anti-virtuosic authenticity was the notion that they generated an “energy” that transcended musical sound. Perry, along with *Sniffin' Glue* contributor Steve Mick, summarized the energy of a Sex Pistols gig:

The Sex Pistols are a force, you get that feeling from their audience and it sticks in your mind. The clothes, the hair and even the attitude, of the audience has a direct link to the band. On a club level it's a weird thing, even I've got cropped hair now, you just can't help getting into it! As the Pistols pounded out their “music” the image was in every corner of the club. Their sound is pure energy, you can't describe it in stupid words—you've got to experience to understand it.⁸⁶

Perry and Mick make a clear distinction between the Sex Pistols' scare-quoted “music” and all of the attendant features that bind the audience together, including clothes, hair, and attitude. But most important is the ineffable “pure energy” that can be understood only through first-hand experience. In *Bored Stuff*, Mark T. raved about a Sex Pistols concert at the Outlook Club on September 27, 1976, writing that “the first 30 seconds of the set blew out most of what had been done in rock music for years past,” but he also noted that he could “hardly remember” the music played that night: “the visual aspect alone was a complete knockout, and prevented any objective judgment.”⁸⁷ Even supporters in the rock press described the Sex Pistols' live experience in these terms. Jonh Ingham tried to capture the notion that the Sex Pistols were a powerful force indifferent to the usual standards of musical skill: “Coming on like a Lockheed Starlighter is more important to them than virtuosity and sounding immaculate. This quartet has no time for a pretty song with a nice melody.”⁸⁸

Almost immediately, the rock press associated this brand of authenticity with working-class subcultures, despite any substantive evidence regarding the socio-economic background of

86 Mark Perry, “Sex Pistols – Any Club, Any Date,” *Sniffin' Glue* 3 (September 1976), n.p.

87 Mark T., “Pistols – Early Shoot Outs...” *Bored Stuff* 1 (1976), n.p.

88 Ingham, “The Sex Pistols Are Four Months Old...”

punk participants. Rock critics specifically identified punk as a reaction against the gentrification of rock. Ingham wrote, “It has to be cheap or free because most of them are unemployed and living on £11.10 a week doesn’t leave much spare change for guitar and amp payments,” and that punks shared, “for the first time in rock, a background that [was] 99% working class.”⁸⁹ As Coon summarized, “Millionaire rock stars are no longer part of the brotherly rock fraternity that helped create them in the first place. Rock was meant to be a joyous celebration; the inability to see the stars or to play the music of those you can see is making a whole generation of rock fans feel depressingly inadequate.”⁹⁰ For Coon, this wealth gap was a direct result of the economic success that previous generation of rock stars had achieved. By the mid-1970s, rock musicians were playing larger venues and charging higher ticket prices for major rock spectacles. The performance aesthetics of rock bands had developed to highlight showmanship – technically challenging guitar solos, complex formal arrangements, mastery over expensive state-of-the-art synthesizers and electronic instruments, and expensive visuals and staging. These changes had an adverse effect on some rock fans, as Coon indicates, causing them to feel “depressingly inadequate” to the larger-than-life musical and visual personas that these rock musicians constructed.

Other writers, such as Greg Shaw, presumed that the Sex Pistols tapped into a frustration that was essential to the working class, writing that Lydon “taunts the audience into a violent mood that seems to come more naturally to the English working class.”⁹¹ The assumption that punk was by and for working-class youths continues to circulate in scholarship in present day.

89 Ingham, “The (?) Rock Special.”

90 Coon, “Punk Rock: Rebels Against the System.”

91 Greg Shaw, “The Sex Pistols: 100 Club, London,” *Phonograph Record*, June, 1976.

David Simonelli argues that the core tenants of early punk—such as anarchy, chaos, and violence—were direct expressions of working class identity at a time that unemployment was rapidly growing in the UK, especially among young people. Yet, Simonelli’s analysis primarily considers representations of class without interrogating the ideological underpinnings of those representations. Punks undoubtedly embraced working-class imagery, even though they did not necessarily come from the working class.⁹² As Crossley’s research reveals, there is little evidence to support Ingham’s estimate that 99% of the punk audiences were working class.⁹³

Anti-punk rock fans held a drastically different view of what it meant for punks not to be able to play. These fans believed that the Sex Pistols’ inability to play effectively undermined established standards of taste, talent, and musicianship. While pro-punk fans embraced the non-musical aspects of the Sex Pistols’ live performances, anti-punk rock fans argued that this spectacle was an intentional distraction from the fact that the Sex Pistols could not play. As rock magazines, such as *Sounds*, began to cover punk regularly, many of its readers opposed the so-called new wave. These readers were especially critical the Sex Pistols’ image, which they believed eclipsed the band’s music. One reader summarized these criticisms:

Isn’t anybody, connected with your paper, interested in plain old music? Why all the hysterics as soon as some new concept band come along. “Concept rock” is what the Sex Pistols and their kind are into! . . . I’m getting a bit sick of being told to take things like ‘punk rock’ seriously. It’s just another passing fad in the history of music. So called punksters like Rotten and his crew are merely sublimating their frustrated ambitions to be a part of the theatrical fraternity. They’re not, or so

92 “Punk was never a respectable working-class movement in the Victorian sense, but rather representative of a new vision of what being working-class meant—to be angry, politically focused and violent in rhetoric. Punks accurately represented the feelings of disenfranchised working-class youth in 1976 and 1977, if they represented them in an extremely radical fashion that not all working-class kids were comfortable with,” David Simonelli, “Anarchy, Pop and Violence: Punk Rock Subculture and the Rhetoric of Class, 1976-78,” *Contemporary British History* 16, no. 2 (2002): 127-128.

93 Crossley, *Networks of Sound, Style, and Subversion*, 50-60.

it seems to me, really concerned about music, just doing their thing.⁹⁴

Many readers echoed these concerns, particularly the call to focus on “plain old music.” One reader scolded punk rock fans about “an unheard of concept called music” that made older rock bands like Led Zeppelin, Santana, and the Rolling Stones valuable.⁹⁵ Others considered the Sex Pistols to have gone a step too far in the radicalization of rock music, and were concerned that they had abandoned the basic principles of music: “Up until now I have been in sympathy with most ‘musical revolutions’ and can in no way accept this rubbish. Punk rockers get back to the beginning and practise your instruments.”⁹⁶ Readers that criticized also criticized punk listeners. These anti-punk readers questioned the value of articles that catered to people who were not “serious” music fans: “Aren’t you concerned that your once brilliant paper is going to the dogs? Don’t you care that you’re losing all your serious readers?”⁹⁷ Readers stereotyped punk fans as “pre-pubescent degenerates,” and suggested they listen to more edifying bands, such as Pink Floyd, because, “As well as being a work of Art, it’s harmless, not anti-social and not a method of getting oneself wet between the legs – but an improving of the mind. OK!”⁹⁸

The notion that the Sex Pistols could not play so strongly contributed to their anti-establishment image that when rumors of their impending record contract began to circulate in 1976, a minor controversy arose over the credibility of the Sex Pistols’ alleged subversion of the commercial music industry. If the experience of a Sex Pistols’ performance was essentially non-musical, then it seemed contradictory for them to sign a major label contract. In an article in

94 Stewart, letter to the editor, *Sounds*, October 30, 1976.

95 Andy Hughes, letter to the editor, *Sounds*, November 20, 1976.

96 Tom Caldwell, letter to the editor, *Sounds*, November 20, 1976.

97 J. Foster, letter to the editor, *Sounds*, November 13, 1976.

98 Outraged, letter to the editor, *Sounds*, November 13, 1976.

NME describing how the Sex Pistols obtained their eventual deal with EMI, Staverton George explained that McLaren had attracted a number of interested record labels, but that these labels quickly abandoned “any ideas they [had] entertained of putting rock’s latest horror show onto vinyl” after seeing the Sex Pistols perform at a label showcase.⁹⁹ On why he declined to offer the Sex Pistols a record deal, Dave Dee from Atlantic Records explained, “As a musical thing I found them very unmusical – perhaps the fact that it wasn’t disciplined prevented me from liking it. . . . I can’t see it going anywhere further than where it is right now.”¹⁰⁰ When the Sex Pistols did sign with EMI, one fan wrote, “They’re becoming big stars now, and it’s inevitable that they’re going to get even bigger. Some of the followers can’t accept it cos they’re not the same as they used to be.”¹⁰¹ Another fan considered the Sex Pistols’ deal with EMI to be “a real sell-out” and lamented that “a big chunk of their credibility [had] gone out the window.”¹⁰² The *NME* also questioned the seriousness of the Sex Pistols’ anti-establishment claims: “Here they are, all punked up, ripe for a battle with the establishment, and no-one’s fighting back. . . . Full frontal coverage and six-page pull-out supplements in the music press, gigs reviewed, every pose applauded, and all this before the first record release.”¹⁰³ Perry expressed worry that the punk scene would be swallowed up by “all those big companies out to make more money on the new, young bands,” but nevertheless believed that “the Pistols will be the first to sign,” adding, “I know that they’ll stay like they are—completely independent!”¹⁰⁴

99 Staverton George, “Pistols – That Four Figure Signing,” *New Musical Express*, October 30, 1976.

100 Quoted in Ingham, “The (?) Rock Special.”

101 “Sex Pistols – Middlesex Poly, Hendon,” *48 Thrills* 1 (November 1976), n.p.

102 Quoted in George, “Pistols – That Four Figure Signing.”

103 “Anarchy in the UK,” review, *New Musical Express*, December 4, 1976.

104 Mark Perry, “Hope I Die Before I Get Old,” *Sniffin’ Glue* 3.5 (September 28, 1976), n.p.

While writers and fans generally agreed that the Sex Pistols could not play, some critics began to diverge from this accepted view shortly before the Sex Pistols gained widespread fame. Critics began to often note improvements in the Sex Pistols' live performances and frequently set out to complicate the narrative that they were incapable musicians. Mark T., writing for the fanzine *Bored Stuff*, noted that the earliest reviews of Sex Pistols' gigs essentially fell into three camps: "a) they were very bad, b) they were very good and c) they were one of the most exciting new bands in years regardless of whether they were technically good or not."¹⁰⁵ In June, Ingham wrote that the Sex Pistols "were awful," but that "the music continues to improve," and by July he wrote, "The best thing about the Pistols is the rapid improvement they make from gig to gig... Steve and Glen are really beginning to rein in the power, both piling on the energy through the solos."¹⁰⁶ Charles Shaar Murray reviewed the Sex Pistols as if they were the seasoned professionals on the bill: "The first thirty seconds of their set blew out all the boring, amateurish artsy-farts mock-decadence that preceded it purely by virtue of its tautness, directness and utter realism."¹⁰⁷ At the famous 100 Club Punk Special on September 20-21, 1976, "the Sex Pistols were terrific. Compulsively physical, frightening in their teenage vision of the world disintegration, refreshing in their musical directness," with a standout set "exemplary in its professionalism."¹⁰⁸ Perry wrote that this set clearly disproved the notion that the Sex Pistols could not play: "The Pistols were fucking brilliant! They were really on form, there was kids on

105 Mark T., "Pistols – Early Shoot Outs..."

106 Jonh Ingham, "Sex Pistols: 100 Club, London," *Sounds*, June 5, 1976; Jonh Ingham, "Sex Pistols/Buzzcocks/Slaughter and the Dogs: Lesser Free Trade Hall, Manchester," *Sounds*, July 31, 1976.

107 Charles Shaar Murray, "The Sex Pistols, the Clash, the Buzzcocks: Screen on the Green, Islington, London," *New Musical Express*, September 11, 1976.

108 Caroline Coon, "Parade of the Punks," *Melody Maker*, October 2, 1976; Giovanni Dadomo, "Punk Rock Festival, 100 Club, London," *Sounds*, October 2, 1976.

chairs, tables...the following they've got is amazing. No one in their right mind could say they 'can't play', they're getting better every gig.”¹⁰⁹ When the Sex Pistols released their first single, “Anarchy in the UK,” Coon wrote, “This time they were meticulous and their care and attention pays dividends, totally destroying the myth that UK punk rock revels in untuned instruments and sloppiness.”¹¹⁰ By the end of 1976 the mainstream media had seized on punk rock, and this brief period of praise ended. Mainstream journalists sustained and reified the myth that the Sex Pistols could not play their instruments.

Part III: Say Something Outrageous

On December 1, 1976, the Sex Pistols appeared on *Today* with Bill Grundy as last minute replacements for the originally scheduled musical guest, Queen. “They are punk rockers,” Grundy noted in his introduction, “The new craze, they tell me. Their heroes? Not the nice, clean Rolling Stones. You see, they're as drunk as I am. They're clean by comparison. They're a group called the Sex Pistols.” After this backhanded introduction, the camera panned out to show the Sex Pistols sitting in front of four members of their entourage, often referred to as the “Bromley Contingent”: Siouxsie Sioux, Steve Severin, Simon Barker, and Simone Thomas. The band lounged indifferently, drinking and smoking, with their feet kicked up. Their appearance was striking; they wore mostly clothes from McLaren and Westwood's boutique, with the Bromley Contingent sporting outrageously dyed hair and extravagant makeup. Many of McLaren and Westwood's signature items could be seen: Simon Barker wore a stenciled button up with a

109 Steve Mick, “100 Club Punk Fest!” *Sniffin' Glue* 3.5 (September 28, 1976), n.p.

110 Coon, “Sex Pistols: Rotten to the Core.”

swastika armband, Lydon a black and white mohair sweater with safety pin earrings, and Jones a sleeveless version of the “Tits” shirt [Figure 2.11].

Grundy begins the interview by asking the band about the £40,000 contract they had recently signed with EMI. This exceptional sum of money later became a major focus for journalists shocked by the fact that such a successful and respected label would fund a band of punks. What was most surprising for Grundy, though, was that the band had already spent their money, or as Jones put it, “We've fuckin' spent it, ain't we?” The first swear word in the interview goes unnoticed. Grundy then attempts to turn the conversation toward music, and condescendingly compares the Sex Pistols to Beethoven, Mozart, Bach, and Brahms. When Lydon sarcastically remarks, “They really turn us on,” Grundy asks, “Well suppose they turn other people on?” Quietly under his breath Lydon remarks, “That's just tough shit.” When Grundy asks Lydon to speak up, Lydon attempts to move on: “Nothing. A rude word. Next question.” But Grundy exhorts, “No, no...What was the rude word?” “Shit,” Lydon replies. Lydon says the first noticeable swear word, but only after Grundy insists. Finally, Grundy turns his attention toward Siouxsie Sioux and Simone, prompting the final exchange:



Figure 2.11: The Sex Pistols, the Bromley Contingent, and Bill Grundy on *Today*, December 1, 1976

Grundy: Are you worried, or are you enjoying yourself?

Siouxsie: Enjoying myself.

Grundy: Are you?

Siouxsie: Yeah.

Grundy: Ah, that's what I thought you were doing.

Siouxsie: I always wanted to meet you.

Grundy: Did you really?

Siouxsie: Yeah

Grundy: We'll meet afterwards, shall we?

Jones: You dirty sod. You dirty old man.

Grundy: Well keep going, chief, keep going. Go on, you've got another five seconds. Say something outrageous.

Jones: You dirty bastard.

Grundy: Go on, again.

Jones: You dirty fucker.

Grundy: What a clever boy.

Jones: What a fucking rotter.

Following this exchange, the telephone switchboards at Thames Television (the Independent Television (ITV) network that broadcasted *Today*) immediately jammed with calls from angry viewers. Later that evening Thames issued a formal apology. By the next morning the incident was front-page news in every British tabloid, generating iconic headlines like the *Daily*

Mirror's "The Filth and the Fury!" Many could not understand who the Sex Pistols were, what they were doing on television, and why they were swearing. The earliest reactions often ignored or dismissed the Sex Pistols, instead focusing their outrage on Grundy and the producers of *Today*. Viewers and journalists held Grundy responsible for encouraging the band to "say something outrageous," and many investigated Grundy's quip, "They are as drunk as I am."¹¹¹ The Sex Pistols presented themselves as a blatantly shocking pop group, but viewers expected Grundy to maintain decency on his own show, even when his guests were determined to do otherwise. Many viewers believed that Grundy had egged the Sex Pistols on, and when articles reported that the band were "plied with drink," these viewers held *Today* and Thames Television responsible. Others focused on the Sex Pistols' age and appearance, and particularly on how "dirty" and "disgusting" they were. Very little of Grundy's interview had addressed the Sex Pistols' music, and journalists' passing reference to them as a pop group was overshadowed by descriptions of them as "foul mouthed yobs" and a gang of "little bastards."¹¹²

In this final section I analyze the public's reactions to the Sex Pistols published in tabloid newspapers and broadsheets in order to trace how punk came to be understood as a type of "anti-music" designed to provoke outrage. While earlier critiques of the Sex Pistols focused on their ability and their authenticity, the media coverage of the Grundy incident largely ignored the fact that the Sex Pistols were musicians at all. When the Sex Pistols swore on *Today*, they exposed themselves to one of the most commonly discussed themes, and the great source of anxiety in

111 Jones claimed, "Grundy was falling about all over the place." Quoted in John Jackson and Roger Beam, "Night of the Nasties," *Daily Mirror*, December 3, 1976. The *Daily Mirror* even called Grundy's wife, Nicky, to comment: "Of course he drinks and of course he swears....Bill is certainly no stranger to drink or controversy. But he always makes it a strict rule never to drink before or while he's working." Quoted in Stuart Greig and Gordon Hughes, "Yobs! Grundy Raps Punk Group and Says 'I Wasn't Drunk,'" *Daily Mirror*, December 3, 1976.

112 "The Foul Mouthed Yobs – by TV's Bill Grundy," *The Evening Standard*, December 2, 1976; Clive James, "A Load of Punk," *The Observer*, December 5, 1976.

British society at the time: obscenity. Conservative commentators were especially worried about the significant role that television played in households, dismayed by how some families felt they could not reasonably mediate the constant flow of information broadcast directly into their own living rooms. In order to reconstruct how the Sex Pistols contributed to this larger moral panic, I juxtapose reactions to their interview with Grundy with seemingly unrelated punk controversies and other proximate examples of television obscenity. Specifically, I uncover how detractors interpreted the Sex Pistols' supposed inability to play as a sign of punk's opposition to music, and how this anti-musical stance became normalized as a symbol of moral degradation.

By the time the Sex Pistols appeared on *Today*, the British media had latched onto a prefabricated narrative of punk's moral indecency. Often, the media focused on exaggerated reports of violence at punk gigs, stringing together isolated incidents to create the impression of a seemingly catastrophic social problem, or what Stanley Cohen had earlier called, in relation to the Mods and Rockers, a "moral panic."¹¹³ Journalists used the Sex Pistols' destruction of Eddie and the Hot Rods' equipment and subsequent banning from the Marquee, as well as their performance at the 100 Club Punk Festival—where a young girl was blinded by a broken pint glass—in to draw the conclusion that punk gigs encouraged violence. Frith and others have explained how such interpretations of violence in popular music can be better understood if one takes into account the historical relationship between the music industry and the state in Britain. Through acts of regulation, licensing, promotion, and censorship, the British state often determined which musics were allowed where. Dating back to the nineteenth century, the "rational recreation movement" distinguished appropriate forms of leisure from disreputable

113 Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1972), lvi.

ones, often drawing the line strictly between working class and upper class leisure activities.¹¹⁴ As a result of the governmental regulation of leisure, the music industry became subject to state control, and diversions from this control came to be seen as significant social transgressions. Before punk, “routine moral panics about teenage musical behaviour,” such as those associated with blues, skiffle, and rock and roll had frequently occurred, placing pressure on local authorities to limit and censor popular music.¹¹⁵ The Sex Pistols’ association with the working class and with anti-statist anarchists meant that their performances struck at the core of two deeply entrenched regulations in the British music industry.

The Grundy incident prompted a level of outrage that demonstrated the severity of the taboo that had been broken. In one of the most famous reactions to the broadcast, a 47-year-old truck driver named James Holmes, incensed, kicked in the screen of his new £380 television. Grundy, however, and not the Sex Pistols, was the target of his rage: “I am not a violent person, but I would like to have got a hold of Grundy. He should be sacked for encouraging this sort of disgusting behavior.”¹¹⁶ Other reactions to the Sex Pistols’ appearance were immediate and extreme.¹¹⁷ One angry viewer went straight to his local police station to report what he had just seen.¹¹⁸ Concert organizers on the Sex Pistols’ planned 20-date UK tour quickly canceled their

114 Simon Frith, Matt Brennan, and Emma Webster, eds., *The History of Live Music in Britain, Volume I: 1950-1967: From Dance Hall to the 100 Club* (London: Routledge, 2016), 31.

115 Ibid., 29.

116 Quoted in “TV Fury Over Rock Cult Filth,” *Daily Mirror*, December 2, 1976.

117 The day after the Sex Pistols’ appearance on *Today*, union workers at the EMI record packing plant refused to pack their single in protest of their perceived obscenity, Keith Deyes, “Pistol Packin’ Mommas Angry at Disc,” *The Sun*, December 4, 1976.

118 Arthur Pearson of Manor Park, East London, quoted in Barrie Mattei, “Rock Group Start a 4-letter TV Storm,” *The Sun*, December 2, 1976.

gigs.¹¹⁹ Council officers for the Civic Hall at Guildford believed that young people “should not be subjected to this kind of behaviour.”¹²⁰ The student union president at Lancaster University, Maggie Gallagher, explained that they banned the Sex Pistols “not because of their language...because they are sexist.”¹²¹ At the band’s first gig following the *Today* appearance, Lydon exacerbated the controversy when he opened the concert by dedicating a song called “Fuck Ya” to both Grundy and the Queen, prompting some students to walk out calling their music “rubbish.”¹²²

The outrage directed at the Sex Pistols' swear words hinted at wider concerns about the moral failures of British society the band represented. Grundy dismissed the Sex Pistols as “silly little children saying naughty words in front of the vicar.”¹²³ But others took the matter more seriously. One writer wondered about the full extent of the outrage: “Was it that their homes had been violated by an unsolicited barrage of foul language? Or were they appalled at the evidence placed before them of the final collapse of all decent standards?”¹²⁴ Speaking of the Grundy interview, one viewer wrote, “That interview was the most diabolical and degrading spectacle that could possibly have been put on the screen. One cannot deny that Bill Grundy was leading the group on, but their whole performance was obscenity at its worst. . . . Can we wonder why young people go off the rails when they see this filth on television?”¹²⁵ The press characterized

119 The University of East Anglia cited safety concerns when they canceled their scheduled Sex Pistols concert. But many students were unhappy with this unilateral decision on the part of the university and 50 students staged a sit-in in protest. See Peter Hillmore, “Record Sales After TV Row,” *The Guardian*, December 4, 1976.

120 Quoted in “Punk? Call it Filthy Lucre,” *Daily Express*, December 3, 1976.

121 Quoted in “Off! ‘Pistols’ Are Sent Packing,” *Daily Mirror*, December 3, 1976.

122 Michael Kilbane, “Clean It Up! Pistols Get EMI Ultimatum,” *Evening Standard*, December 7, 1976.

123 Quoted in “The Foul Mouthed Yobs – by TV's Bill Grundy.”

124 Keith Waterhouse, “The Punk and the Junk,” *Daily Mirror*, December 6, 1976.

125 L. A. Whichelow, letter to the editor, in the *Daily Express*, December 7, 1976.

the Sex Pistols and their fans as anti-social, and as openly rejecting social norms: “They like to be disliked.”¹²⁶ Journalists often discussed the band's “rudeness” and “obnoxiousness” as evidence of punk’s general anti-social tendencies. One widely reported anecdote in the aftermath of the Grundy incident was that Lydon first achieved fame by walking down King's Road and spitting on people “because they were stupid.”¹²⁷ Those that defended Grundy praised him for revealing the Sex Pistols for what they are “really like,” namely a “nasty and loutish pop group.”¹²⁸

Most viewers directed their outrage toward Grundy and Thames Television for allowing the Sex Pistols on television and for encouraging them to say something outrageous. The *Daily Mirror* issued a comment on December 3 that placed the blame squarely on “the faceless bosses of Thames Television,” who must “share the shame of red-faced Bill Grundy.”¹²⁹ According to the *Daily Mirror*, Grundy and Thames “knew well in advance” what to expect from the Sex Pistols because “that’s Punk Rock style;” their interview should have been pre-recorded and broadcast only at late-night hours, the tabloid argued.¹³⁰ Viewers described the event as a “shocking insult to the public” and called in to say that “Bill Grundy should be ashamed of himself.”¹³¹ The Independent Broadcasting Authority called the incident “inexcusable” and Thames Television apologized to their viewers in an announcement that a high-level inquest had

126 “Kings of the Punk Cult,” *Daily Mirror*, December 2, 1976.

127 “Grundy Banned – Today Team Accused,” *The Guardian*, December 3, 1976; “Punk? Call it Filthy Lucre.”

128 Ronald Butt, “The Grubby Face of Mass Punk Promotion,” *The Times*, December 9, 1976. Another example is the letter from D. Carter, featured in “What YOU Say About Those Punk Shockers,” *Daily Mirror*, December 8, 1976: “Bill Grundy did a public service to parents by demonstrating on a 'family' programme the sort of dangers their children might face following this cult.”

129 “Mirror Comment,” *Daily Mirror*, December 3, 1976.

130 Ibid.

131 Mattei, “Rock Group Start a 4-letter TV Storm.”

begun into Grundy's role in the situation. In his own defense, Grundy refused to admit that he had goaded the Sex Pistols, instead claiming that he “merely followed the theme of outrage and the group complied.”¹³² As the controversy grew, the public demanded accountability from Grundy and his broadcast team. Shortly after the incident made headlines, Thames director of programs Jeremy Isaacs decided to ban Grundy from the air for two weeks, citing “‘a gross error of judgment’ caused by inexcusably sloppy journalism.”¹³³ *The Sun*’s commentator took pity on Grundy, arguing, “At the end of the day, the real responsibility lies not with the hapless Mr. Grundy but with the bosses. From now on there must be far more careful vetting of some of the so-called artists paid to ‘entertain’ us.”¹³⁴ Ronald Butt at *The Times* wondered “who decided to give these youths television time and why,” and what those in charge “[thought] they are doing with the immense power they have to create taste, fashion and behaviour by some of the money grubbing exercises they promote.”¹³⁵

A national conversation about obscenity was well underway by late 1976, and the Sex Pistols’ appearance on *Today* only served to exacerbate existing concerns about television as a medium that facilitated obscenity. On the surface, the controversy surrounding the Grundy incident was about the live broadcast of uncensored swear words on television. The word “fuck” had rarely been heard on British television to that point, and certainly would have come as a shock to viewers at “tea time, with children and Nan around.”¹³⁶ The sustained outcry in the

132 Quoted in “Fury at Filthy TV Chat,” *Daily Express*, December 2, 1976.

133 Quoted in “Off! Two Week Ban on TV’s Bill Grundy,” *Daily Mirror*, December 3, 1976. In addition to Grundy’s suspension, Thames reprimanded producer Tom Steele and studio producer Mike Housego, “Punk? Call it Filthy Lucre.”

134 “Mr **** Grundy,” *The Sun*, December 3, 1976.

135 Butt, “The Grubby Face of Mass Punk Promotion.”

136 “Mirror Comment.”

media that following this event revealed heightened emotions around the theme of obscenity in Britain at this time, and that this probably had little to do with any the word that Jones or Lydon spoke. Following the *OZ* obscenity trial in 1971, debates in Britain about obscenity and the new “permissive society,” earned extensive media coverage due in part to Mary Whitehouse’s grassroots “Nationwide Festival of Light” movement. Television in particular became a target for members of these groups, who worried about families’ decaying ability to filter and control which signs appeared in their living room.

This loss of control over information on the part of the private individual placed a greater burden on people working in the media to act as responsible moral gatekeepers. Only a few weeks after the Grundy incident, *The Guardian* ran a special article on the topic of censorship, in which they gathered perspectives from film, theatre, art, and television critics. Opening his portion of the article, Peter Fiddick wrote, “There cannot be any argument about the status of censorship in British television. Simply, television is the most censored form of communication in our society.”¹³⁷ Fiddick explained:

Television has a rare power of intrusion, not just into our homes but into our relationships; it is possible for a family to pretend they have not seen a four-letter word, a nude female, in their newspaper, if that is their way; if they are grouped round the screen they are forced to acknowledge—even if nothing is said—that they have all heard it, all seen it, and that is what disturbs and embarrasses.... This special quality of television’s, along with its potential for instantaneous, simultaneous, national dissemination, now seems to have got it attributed with some curious focal quality. The Sex Pistols affair is a classic example of that. Observe that this group, and others like them, had been doing their act for some time, up and down the land, contracted to a leading record company, booked by universities and middle-road dance hall alike. But one short outburst on a television programme seen only in one region, and a nationwide hunt starts.¹³⁸

137 “The Protection Business,” *The Guardian*, December 17, 1976.

138 Ibid.

Thus, the problem for many was not that the Sex Pistols used swear words, it was when and where they used them. Their vulgarities became “obscenities” only in the context of live daytime television. McLaren decried the “hypocrisy” of this outrage, pointing out that Jones and Lydon were only speaking in “everyday language.”¹³⁹ Siouxsie Sioux defended their language, stating “I knew all those words when I was in kindergarten and they are harmless.”¹⁴⁰ Even the truck driver that kicked in the screen of his television made a distinction between everyday swearing and swearing on television: “I can swear as well as anyone, but I don’t want this sort of muck coming into my home at teatime.”¹⁴¹ Writers that decried the Sex Pistols’ language nonetheless wondered about the curious double standard that seemed to apply to television: “None of us wants any of this junk on television—but the wider question is, do we want it at all? And if not, why are we horrified only when we catch a ninety-second glimpse of it on a glass screen in the corner?”¹⁴² One viewer wrote, “Those viewers who phoned Thames TV to complain about the language used in the Sex Pistols’ interview infuriate me. Why didn’t they simply change channels or switch off? . . . I am fed up with people like Mary Whitehouse dictating to me what I should or should not watch or listen to.”¹⁴³

The Sex Pistols’ “filth” was far from isolated. The Grundy incident occurred at a time when there were many controversial programs on British television that, according to some viewers, breached the limits of decency. At the same time as the Grundy incident, the media reported on two other controversial television programs that aired on Thames Television: *Sex In*

139 Quoted in Jackson and Beam, “Night of the Nasties.” Simone Thomas also defended their use of words that she heard “every day,” quoted in “Off! ‘Pistols’ Are Sent Packing.”

140 Quoted in “Off! ‘Pistols’ Are Sent Packing.”

141 Quoted in “TV Fury Over Rock Cult Filth.”

142 Waterhouse, “The Punk and the Junk.”

143 M. B. Gray, letter to the editor, *Daily Express*, December 7, 1976.

Our Time and *Pauline's Quirkes*. *Sex In Our Times* was a seven-part educational documentary that the Independent Broadcasting Authority banned “on the grounds that parts of the series could be considered offensive and not in good taste.”¹⁴⁴ This program, like the Grundy episode with the Sex Pistols, was criticized for its potential to corrupt families who were innocently watching television. The documentarians included frank sexual discussions and some medically-relevant sexual images, with the express intent not to offend. But critics dismissed the series as “a sophisticated attempt to provide sexual titillation in the seclusion of home viewing.”¹⁴⁵ The controversy surrounding *Pauline's Quirkes* arose on the exact same day as the Grundy incident, and was often discussed side-by-side with the Sex Pistols as part of a growing debate on indecency on television. Aimed primarily at teenagers, *Pauline's Quirkes* upset many moral commentators with its overt sexual innuendo and mature sense of humor. The main controversy around the program involved the show's house band, a young teeny-bop pop group named Flintlock. In one episode, the 17-year-old host, Pauline Quirke, “whipped the young girls in the audience into a frenzy” when she suggested that Flintlock perform in the nude, leading the audience in a chant: “Get ‘em off! Get ‘em off!”¹⁴⁶ Alan Coren of *The Times* wrote a scathing review of this episode, claiming, “*Pauline's Quirkes* is the endorsement of ignorance, the celebration of vulgarity, the apotheosis of trash. It is as much of a threat to your kids as pornography or violence.”¹⁴⁷ The show's producer, Roger Price, claimed that it was made “exclusively for partially literate teenage girls,” and that it was actually a satire or pop music,

144 George A. Cooper, letter to the editor, *The Times*, December 1, 1976.

145 Lance R. Shilton, letter to the editor, *The Times*, December 15, 1976.

146 John McCormick, “TV Hostess Gets Rocket From Mum,” *Daily Express*, December 2, 1976.

147 Alan Coren, “Pubescent Smut,” *The Times*, November 30, 1976.

designed to teach the audience to “think carefully about the words of the songs the boy groups sing and what a put-down they are, in fact, for girls.”¹⁴⁸

The media latched onto the comparisons between *Pauline’s Quirkies* and the Sex Pistols. Journalists noted that, like the Grundy incident, *Pauline’s Quirkies* featured a pop group that offended standards of decency, on Thames Television, “at 4.45 pm on a Monday, when all self-respecting toilers are grinding away in the hope that their children, at least, may reap the benefits of their labour.”¹⁴⁹ The Sex Pistols undoubtedly sparked a more sustained outrage, and many noted differences between the two: “Pauline and her musical chums Flintlock are as innocent as babes compared with the appearance, the avowed intentions and the lifestyles of the loathsome punk pop groups.”¹⁵⁰ Nonetheless, journalists tied these seemingly unconnected programs together. The unifying theme between each of these controversies was the new role that television played in transmitting, and determining, images directly into living rooms. As one editorial explained, “Mr. Price seems to have fallen into the same trap as Mrs. Grundy’s little lad Bill did, . . . What none of them seemed to appreciate is that TV’s enormous power is limited to the extent that people take it literally.”¹⁵¹

Following the Grundy incident, journalists began to describe punk not as a musical phenomenon, but as a dangerous anti-music youth cult. At a time when most readers were being introduced to punk for the first time, the *Daily Express* defined punk rock as “anti-music music” and determined that the real “code” of punk rockers was, “*We hate everyone.*”¹⁵² Others

148 McCormick, “TV Hostess Gets Rocket From Mum.”; Valerie Jenkins, “The Not-so Perilous Pauline,” *Evening Standard*, December 6, 1976.

149 Coren, “Pubescent Smut.”

150 “The Not-so Perilous Pauline,” Valerie Jenkins, *Evening Standard*, December 6, 1976.

151 Terence Ryle, “Not In Front of My Children, Pauline,” *Daily Express*, December 3, 1976.

152 “Punk? Call it Filthy Lucre.”

explicitly declared punk to be “a social rather than a musical phenomenon,” and explained that the Sex Pistols “possess no great musical expertise.”¹⁵³ Reviews of the concerts that immediately followed the band’s appearance on the *Today* show focused on disaffected audience members who walked out on the band, calling their music “rubbish,” declaring them “unprofessional,” and going so far as to declare them “the worst group I have ever heard....Their music was just so bad.”¹⁵⁴ The BBC made this judgment official when they declared that punk possessed little musical value. Shortly after the Sex Pistols’ appearance on *Today*, the BBC issued a statement claiming that they played records only according to their musical merit and that “Radio One considers that some records now being issued which are described as punk rock are arguably not in this category.”¹⁵⁵ On December 2, Russell Miller, who had planned to write a sensational report about punk before the Grundy incident occurred, re-worked his article for the *Daily Mirror* to declare the Sex Pistols “Kings of the Punk Cult,” branding them “obnoxious, arrogant, outrageous” in the byline.¹⁵⁶ Miller summarizes their music in one sentence: “Punk rock is the aggressive, fast and loud music of kids with cheap guitars and more enthusiasm than talent.”¹⁵⁷ Instead of speaking about music, Miller’s article focuses primarily on the danger that punk rock poses. Alongside a photograph of “PUNK WEAPONS: A bizarre and deadly collection taken from fans at a London concert,” Miller writes extensively about gigs that ended in fist fights, trashed hotel rooms, and the verbal “abuse” that bands regularly doled out to their audiences.¹⁵⁸

153 “The Punks – Rotten and Proud of It!” *Evening Standard*, December 2, 1976.

154 “Walkout on Pistols,” *The Guardian*, December 7, 1976; Kilbane, “Clean It Up! Pistols Get EMI Ultimatum.”

155 Quoted in “Grundy Banned – Today Team Accused.” At that point the Sex Pistols had only been played on the BBC during John Peel’s late night program.

156 “Kings of the Punk Cult.”

157 Ibid.

158 Ibid.

To justify their claims that punk was against music, newspapers often procured “expert opinions.”¹⁵⁹ Clive James wrote that the Sex Pistols had ushered in the sad end of the “pop dream”: “One had already grown used to pop performers born after the release of the first Elvis Presley singles who dressed up in silly clothes and pretended to be horrible. But here were performers born after the release of the first Beatles singles who were dressing up in silly clothes and really *were* horrible.”¹⁶⁰ Within a month, experts were declaring punk a passing fad. James Johnson wrote in his year-end review for the *Evening Standard* that “the music was not ready to live up to the hyperbole,” and that the Sex Pistols did not pose a serious challenge to the “established superstars” like the Rolling Stones.¹⁶¹ George Shaw attempt to prove punk’s eventual demise in his review of Tony Palmer’s pop music survey *All You Need is Love*. According to Shaw, the history of popular music unequivocally demonstrates “that only the musically good survive. . . . All the milestones in pop were created by rebels . . . but they were rebels with a cause and – talent.”¹⁶²

In contrast to these journalists, however, McLaren, the Sex Pistols, and representatives from EMI embraced the notion that the band was opposed to playing music well. Paul Watts, the manager of EMI's pop division (who had recently signed the Sex Pistols), agreed with the interpretation that the Sex Pistols could not play: “It is true they may not be proficient musically, but we don't think that is a major consideration. What is important is that they generate

159 The “unsophisticated” sounds of punk rock were often compared to skiffle because of the perception that both genres were relatively easy to learn, “The Anarchic Rock of the Young and Doleful,” *The Guardian*, December 3, 1976.

160 James, “A Load of Punk.”

161 James Johnson, “They're Still the Kings of Punk...But How Long Can It Last?” *Evening Standard*, December 31, 1976.

162 George Shaw, “Why Punk is Sunk,” *Daily Mirror*, December 9, 1976.

excitement.”¹⁶³ McLaren actively encouraged the idea that punk is “defined as music that isn't played very well.”¹⁶⁴ But the fact that McLaren and EMI acknowledged that the Sex Pistols could not play, and supported them nonetheless, only served to feed the outrage. One reader wrote that “the saddest things about it all is that a respected record company like EMI should fall over themselves to sign the Sex Pistols,” and was dismayed that “even their manager admits they lack musical talent.”¹⁶⁵ When EMI eventually dropped the Sex Pistols, in early January 1977, readers wrote in to praise the record label: “The action was taken, I know, because of their inexcusable behaviour. But equally the ‘music’ they produce gives pop in general a bad reputation—it is sheer, boring amateurism.”¹⁶⁶

The emerging view that punk was an anti-musical youth cult, and that the Sex Pistols’ appearance on *Today* was a publicity stunt, contributed to solidifying the already established impression that the Sex Pistols’ inability to play was related to anti-establishment values. Before the Grundy incident, detractors questioned the Sex Pistols’ authenticity as musicians; however, following the outrage, the notion that the Sex Pistols could not play held higher stakes. Critics continued to denounce the Sex Pistols’ crass commercialism, but now found that it came at a more severe moral cost: “Today it is their children’s minds which are exploited to make quick bucks by the million for the record companies, the promoters, the agents, the cinema chains and some publishing houses.”¹⁶⁷ Viewers now simply accepted the notion that the Sex Pistols could not play as a fact. Under the famous headline, “Punk? Call it Filthy Lucre,” the *Daily Express*

163 “Kings of the Punk Cult.”

164 “Grundy Banned – Today Team Accused.”

165 J. Waterfield, letter to the editor, *Daily Mirror*, December 8, 1976.

166 R. Simpson, letter to the editor, *Daily Express*, January 11, 1977.

167 Butt, “The Grubby Face of Mass Punk Promotion.”

declared that, “the real four-letter word behind [the Grundy incident] was CASH.”¹⁶⁸ Angry viewers described themselves as victims of a crass publicity stunt: “mass taste, fashion and behavior in entertainment...doesn’t come out of the blue. It is promoted very hard by mass communication and reproduction for very big money and the promoters have so far minded little what they try to persuade young people to adopt as the latest cult provided it’s a money-spinner.”¹⁶⁹ EMI denied that the Sex Pistols’ appearance on *Today* was a publicity stunt, but the *Daily Express* speculated that the attention launched the band into the Top Ten and generated as much as £30,000 per week for the record label. The Sex Pistols’ first single, “Anarchy in the UK,” was released less than a week before the band’s appearance on *Today* and had received little attention up to that point. On the day after their television appearance, supported by only meager radio play, it suddenly sold 1800 copies.¹⁷⁰

Conclusion

In 1977, punk fans were forced to reckon with the scenario they feared: punk’s incorporation into mainstream society. Despite, or perhaps due to, the punk backlash following the Grundy incident, the Sex Pistols became famous pop stars, almost instantaneously. As the Sex Pistols continued to sell records and gain fans, punks expressed concern about their authenticity in the pages of punk fanzines. The Sex Pistols continued to seek outrage—first with their disruption of the Queen’s Silver Jubilee, then with the title of their LP, *Never Mind the Bollocks*—but now media maintained an ambivalent relationship with them, at once profiting

168 “Punk? Call it Filthy Lucre.”

169 Butt, “The Grubby Face of Mass Punk Promotion.”

170 Hillmore, “Record Sales After TV Row.”

from the outrageous headlines and disparaging their alleged obscenity. In many cases, fanzine writers incorporated the signs of outrage including sensational headlines and photos of Bill Grundy into their fanzines as symbols of punk's defiance.

The cover of the first issue of Jon Savage's zine *London's Outrage*, for example, published in late 1976, bears a classic punk bricolage of cut-and-paste images and text, pulled from a hodgepodge of printed sources [Figure 2.12].¹⁷¹ Among these images, cutup bits of newspaper text describe punk as a social threat. For example, under a headline asserting that "Punk Rock Violence is Sinister," one news clipping provides an especially negative description of a live gig: "On stage the Pistols are the most aggressive, nasty band ever." Another, more surprising, bit of text appears in the corner of the cover, quotes Hannah Arendt:

What the Nazis did, Arendt said, was something new; they altered the limits of human action. In doing so, the Nazis provided humanity with more than a burden—the need to comprehend their actions—they also provided a legacy: "It is in the very nature of things human that every act has once made its appearance and has been recorded in the history of mankind stays with mankind as a potentiality long after its actuality has become a thing of the past. . . . Once a specific crime has appeared for the first time, its reappearance is more likely than its initial emergence could ever have been."

¹⁷¹ Jon Savage, *London's Outrage* 1, November 1976.



Figure 2.12: Issue #1 of *London's Outrage*, Jon Savage, 1976

Arendt's quote describes Nazism as a legacy for humanity in the sense that its crimes became a potentiality for mankind. Yet the inclusion of this quote on the cover of *London's Outrage* casts it in a different light. Amidst all of punk's oppositional rhetoric was the genuine belief that punks were opening up a revolutionary new way of thinking that would be impossible to suppress. Juxtaposed with the stark anti-punk headline "Punk Rock Violence is Sinister," Arendt's quote on the cover of this zine implies that punk, like Nazism, has also altered the limits of human action. But unlike Nazism, punks embraced a more positive view of the consequences or potentiality of the "crimes" it committed.

What would it mean for punk to alter the limits of human action? And how can one imagine how the "crime" of punk will reappear, now that it has been committed and thus become a potentiality? On the one hand, thinking of punk in this way confirms its social import. On the other, the consistent reappearance of punk's "crime" signals its incorporation into the hegemonic

culture it absolutely opposed. It was undoubtedly important for punks to maintain this oppositional position, especially as bands like the Sex Pistols became more widely accepted. In a different zine, *Cells*, Geoff Mann described punk as an “‘Us and Them’ situation,” and that, “If the Sex Pistols were ‘them’ I didn’t feel like an ‘us’ anymore. . . .I preferred the Clash musically but the Sex Pistols got through to us on a basic one-to-one level of if you’re in with us join us if not fuck off.”¹⁷² Similarly to the swastika in Hebdige’s analysis, this “us and them situation” makes no claim to a new system of values, but rather communicates the “absence of any such identifiable values.” In order to create an image of punk that was destructive and chaotic, the Sex Pistols had to depend on the legibility of that image outside of punk circles. In other words, the use of anti-punk headlines in the pages of punk zines demonstrates that punk writers had recognized that mainstream newspapers were not misunderstanding punk, but that they read punk’s signs accurately.

Others would disagree with this conclusion. In the wake of the British media’s sudden obsession with the Sex Pistols, many fanzine writers took it upon themselves to prove that the media’s anti-punk coverage demonstrated the continuing threat that punk posed. A cartoon featured in the first issue of *Breakdown* captures what punk fans imagined to be “How a Reporter Gathers His Facts For His Stories” [Figure 2.13]. The cartoon shows a violent brawl between police, punks, and Teds on a corner of Kings Rd (which has been crossed out and renamed Teds Rd). The violence is indiscriminate, senseless, and excessive—one man is impaled on a lamppost, another is being thrown through a shop window, and a third is being stuffed into a sewer drain. However, the punchline reveals that the entire scene exists only inside the reporter’s thought bubble, implying that he simply imagined the entire thing. One writer wondered, “So

¹⁷² Geoff Mann, “The Sex Pistols,” *Cells* 4 (1977): n.p.

what's to be done about these sort of people (who by the way are themselves capitalising on “punk rock” by writing long, ignorant and profitable articles on it...),” and suggested, “we show them just exactly what it's about – we show them the bloody violence that they revel in is just a figment of their overtime-working imaginations.”¹⁷³ Others were more alarmist: “Don't let the bastards get to you, DON'T SAY A WORD TO ANYONE FROM A NATIONAL NEWSPAPER. THEY'LL ONLY SLANDER YOU AND TRY AND STOP THE MOVEMENT.”¹⁷⁴

As the Sex Pistols became more commercially successful, fans began to question their own assumptions regarding the authenticity of the band's rebellion. In a lengthy polemic titled “Elitism in the U.K.,” one zine writer lamented, “THE PISTOLS ARE NO LONGER SUPPRESSED UNDERDOGS BUT HOT COMMERCIAL COMMODITIES, AND DON'T KID YOURSELF THEY AREN'T.”¹⁷⁵ Another fanzine writer predicted a social schism between an elite of “‘true’ followers” that saw the Sex Pistols before the Grundy incident and the “‘hip’ middle classes” that followed punk as fashion.¹⁷⁶ As a result, writers also began questioning whether or not the Sex Pistols were ever really the revolutionaries they claimed to be. One writer commented that, “the elite liked it because it did not pose an alternative musical threat to their own brand of music.”¹⁷⁷ Others thought punk enforced a new fundamentalist standard that actively discouraged musical diversity: “New wave bands who are essentially different are

173 *Breakdown 1* (1977): n.p.

174 Geoff Mann, “Is There a Future?” *Cells 4* (1977): n.p.

175 “Elitism in the U.K.” *In the City 4* (1977): n.p.

176 Geoff Mann, “The Future of the New Wave,” *Cells 3* (1977): n.p.

177 “Elitism in the U.K.”



Figure 2.13: “How a Reporter Gathers His Facts for His Stories,” from issue #1 of *Breakdown*

slammed as unconventional by a percentage who have drained convention of its life-blood and who are too short-sighted to realise that the elite musical spectrum they support and defend is dying on its feet right in front of their eyes,” one writer noted.¹⁷⁸ Geoff Mann embraced this idea of punk as a standard when he wrote that, “Getting back to the music itself I don't think the more sophisticated and newer groups will do as well as the older ‘rawer’ ones. As soon as the music loses its basicness, or simplicity if you like, it will begin to go downhill.”¹⁷⁹

Like the cover of *London's Outrage*, the cover of the third issue of *Hanging Around*

178 Ibid.

179 Mann, “The Future of the New Wave.”

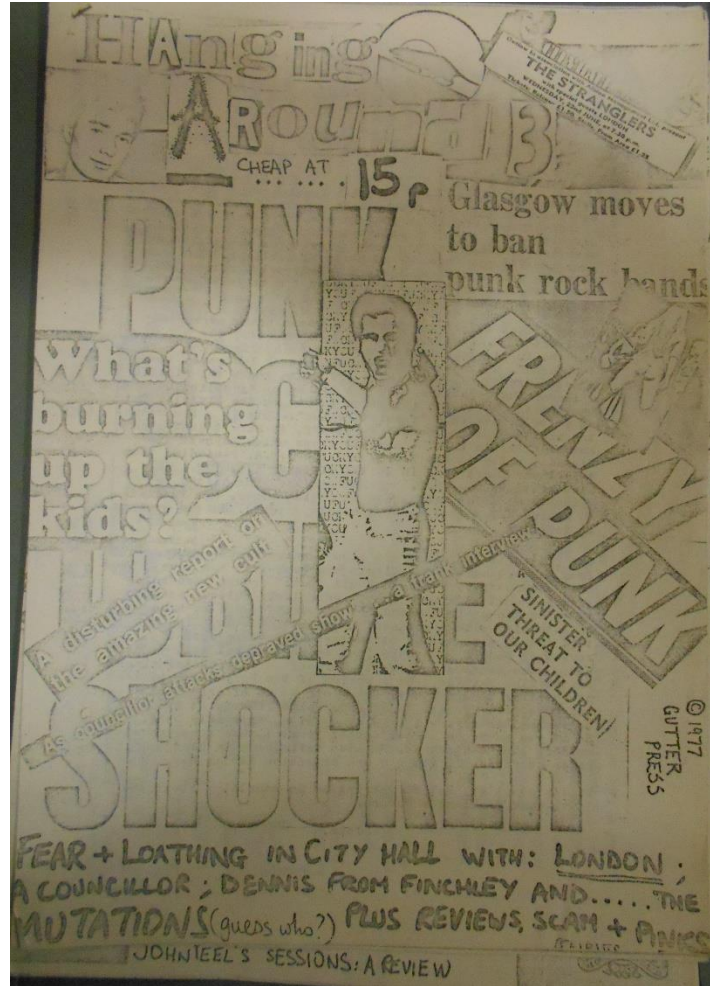


Figure 2.14: Issue #3 of *Hanging Around*

incorporates anti-punk headlines into its cut-and-paste aesthetic [Figure 2.14]. In the center of the cover, a photograph of a man giving the middle finger appears in front of a repetitive background text, “FUCKYOU.” The man directs both his gaze and his finger at the reader, offering a paradigmatic example of punk’s oppositional attitude: punks say “fuck you” to everyone and everything, including other punks. This image is framed with several headlines from newspapers and tabloids that summarize public attitudes toward punk: “Sinister threat to our

children”; “A disturbing report on the amazing new cult”; “What’s burning up the kids?” This particular cover of *Hanging Around* offers an example of how these headlines fit with the glibly oppositional, “fuck you” punk attitude. On the one hand, we can imagine that this zine is directing a middle finger toward the sensationalized publications that mischaracterize punk as a danger. But, on the other hand, the headlines appear to corroborate the message sent by the middle finger. As the author of *Cells* explained, “Punk is a rebellion and a blind assertion against irrelevance and hypocrisy and must continue to reflect this blind rebellion and anger as long as there is no other way of showing dissatisfaction.”¹⁸⁰ The emphasis, here, is on the blindness of punk’s rebellion—the dissatisfaction that punk expresses is not only indiscriminate, it is also ungrounded, or without meaning.

180 Mann, “Is There a Future?”

Chapter 3

No Wave Knowledge: Lydia Lunch's Instincts and Amateurism as an Aesthetic of Performance

Brian Eno arrived in New York City in early summer 1978 to finish recording the Talking Heads' second album, *More Songs About Buildings and Food*. Earlier that spring, when he had first begun recording with the Talking Heads, he had gone out every night and acquainted himself with hundreds of different musicians working in the vibrant downtown music scene. In May, Eno had attended a five-day festival organized by Michael Zwack at Artists Space, which featured two different bands performing each night. This event was notable because it introduced Eno to the nascent, and ultimately short-lived, "no wave" scene. Upon his return to New York later that summer, Eno contacted the four bands that had closed out the festival at Artists Space festival—DNA, the Contortions, Mars, and Teenage Jesus and the Jerks—to record a compilation album that eventually became the flagship record of this scene, *No New York*.

Though Eno later became one of the most well-known producers of pop, experimental, and ambient records, *No New York* was a relatively early experiment in his production career. He had begun his music career in London during the early 1970s, and had been closely associated with members of the experimental music scene there; he was well-known for his performances with the Portsmouth Sinfonia and, by his own account, had participated in some of the final concerts given by the Scratch Orchestra. By the mid-1970s, Eno had begun to take an interest in the London punk scene and was part of the same art and fashion networks as Malcolm McLaren, Vivienne Westwood, and Andrew Logan. In 1975, Eno and Peter Schmidt published a deck of cards titled "Oblique Strategies," designed to offer challenging constraints and imaginative aphorisms for artists to overcome creative blocks. Many of these strategies exhibited the

influence of his experimental contemporaries, including Cornelius Cardew, and reveal a latent philosophy of amateurism that resists standards of knowledge and judgment: “Ask people to work against their better judgment”; “Discover the recipes you are using and abandon them”; “Don't be afraid of things because they're easy to do.” When Eno and Schmidt published the second edition of “Oblique Strategies” in 1978, they added a card that even more overtly appealed to amateurism: “Use ‘unqualified’ people.”¹

When asked that year what attracted him to the obscure no wave scene in New York, Eno responded by addressing the conceptual balance that the bands in this scene struck between intellect and intuition. In Eno’s words, “There’s a slightly intellectual approach to playing which I like here. The word always has bad connotations in rock, people are frightened of it, but there’s a use of consciousness, if you like, over and above intuition – not therefore seeking to deny intuition, but to direct it into certain areas, rather than just letting it flow wherever it wants to – just defining an area of research and then studying it.”² In many ways, Eno’s experiences and creative approach perfectly aligned him with the musicians in the no wave scene, who shared this sense of guided intuition. As Eno noted, wholly intuitive musical practices often obscure the underlying constraints that operate in any act of artistic creation, whether or not the artist acknowledges them. Eno rejected “[t]he kind of intuitive ‘let it all hang out,’” which he described as, “obviously a major sort of conceptual mistake, because if you say that, all you do is surrender yourself into a set of rules that you can’t control—like the limitations of the instrument, the limitations of your physique, acoustic limitations.”³

1 Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt, *Oblique Strategies: Over One Hundred Worthwhile Dilemmas*, second edition, 1978.

2 Eno quoted in Tom Carson, “Brian Eno in New York,” *New York Rocker* 1, no. 13 (July-August 1978): 10.

3 Eno quoted in *Ibid.*, 11.

In this chapter, I build on Eno's comments to explore amateurism as an aesthetic of performance. To do so, I focus on one of the four prominent no wave bands that Eno recorded: Teenage Jesus and the Jerks. I focus on how the band, and especially lead singer and guitarist Lydia Lunch, performed the song "Orphans" with the goal of determining how Lunch's insistence on what she called "instinctive" playing techniques create an impression of amateurism, or what I am calling amateurism as an aesthetic of performance. Specifically, I analyze the contradictions between formal precision and dissonant sound, and the bad feeling conveyed in the live performance of this song, as indicators of how Lunch's instinctive playing technique contributed to amateurism as an aesthetic of performance. My goal is not to define amateurism as a style, even though by the time Teenage Jesus and the Jerks record "Orphans" many of the sonic tropes they employed, such as dissonant ugliness, had already been modernist intuition, improvisation, and indeterminacy. Rather, I focus on the aesthetics of performance, and on how such aesthetics function to obscure musical knowledge. I demonstrate this by revealing how Lunch self-consciously drew on her knowledge of guitar technique, musical form, and the performance of affect to enact the obfuscation of that very knowledge. First, I analyze Lunch's performance of the instinctive sonic dissonance she uses in "Orphans" to blur the musical knowledge the band requires to develop the song's precise formal structure. Second, I theorize the bad feelings of Teenage Jesus and the Jerks' live performances and how these feelings contributed to establishing amateurism as an aesthetic of performance.

My interpretation of amateurism in this chapter diverges slightly from the interpretations of amateurism I gave in chapters 1 and 2. In Chapter 1, I argued that Cornelius Cardew conceived of amateurism according to a specific model of musical knowledge characteristic of his conservatory education and equated this knowledge with traditions associated with Western

classical music. Although Cardew wanted to reinvent how this traditional musical knowledge was transmitted in order to allow amateurs access to certain kinds of music-making, his understanding of what it meant to be an amateur depended on the very knowledge he was transmitting, leading to contradictions in his pedagogy.

In Chapter 2, I examined how journalists, fans, and the Sex Pistols themselves contributed to the widespread belief that punk musicians could not play their instruments, and how this became a sign that indexed an anti-establishment ethos. This sign eventually became normalized as a symbol of punk's opposition to music itself, and contributed to the widespread erasure of any attention to musical detail or musical aesthetics in the media discourses around punk.

Whereas these two previous chapters describe historical examples of specific epistemes that contextualized musical amateurism, in this chapter I turn my attention to no wave performance aesthetics—specifically, Teenage Jesus and the Jerks' performance of "Orphans"—in order to answer the following question: how does one sound like an amateur? My focus will be on how amateurism as an aesthetics of performance functions to obscure musical knowledge.

On its surface, "Orphans" sounds notably dissonant because Lunch uses extended techniques on the electric guitar that are designed to generate the loudest, most abrasive sounds possible. Though Lunch does not position her instrumental approach as "anti-knowledge," her understanding of musical instinct appears to position it as the opposite of expertise; the more one knows about how to play the guitar, the harder it is for one to play Teenage Jesus and the Jerks' songs. In order to identify Lunch's specific guitar techniques, I draw on original interviews with Lunch and Weasel Walter, who currently plays guitar in Lunch's band. Lunch openly described herself as both lacking and resistant to standards of musical knowledge: "I couldn't play the

guitar, but that wasn't the point. I developed my own style, which suited the primal urgency I needed to evacuate from my system before I exploded like a miniature nuclear power plant."⁴ Here, Lunch identifies her "instinct" as that which enables her to compose and perform music. Yet, as my analysis of "Orphans" will show, to create that "instinctual" sound, Lunch and her bandmates had to draw on bodily techniques that are no less difficult to learn than traditional rock techniques, in spite of the unusually dissonant sounds they produce.

Lunch was aware of the "internal contradictions" in the band's approach to music, and often spoke about these contradictions in interviews. She sometimes described these contradictions in terms of the band's "deceptively simple" sound, noting that the "extreme minimalism" of their performances concealed the highly structured and precise forms in the music. She also emphasized the band's unexpected expertise, in terms of their rigorous practice regimen: "I knew it had to be extremely precise. We rehearsed all the time. You don't get that tight by accident," Lunch explained.⁵ Lunch described this precision as a matter of integrity. If the band missed a small detail, such as the upstroke on the guitar, "the song is ruined" and the performance is an "outrage."⁶ This emphasis on musical precision reveals a deliberate artistic attempt to create a musical dissonance that can signify amateurism. However, this same insistence on precision belies Lunch's claims to instinctive musical performance and amateurism.

My exploration of amateurism as an aesthetic of performance in Teenage Jesus and the Jerks' "Orphans" is not limited to this contradiction between instinct and precision, nor to

4 Quoted in Simon Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again: Postpunk 1978-1984* (London: Faber & Faber, 2009), 148.

5 Lydia Lunch interview by author, New York City, April 4, 2016.

6 Ibid.

musical sound alone, but rather includes a more thorough investigation of Lunch's performance of "bad feeling" at live gigs. Lunch described these gigs as a type of performance art, with the music as background sound for the presentation of the band's bodies. In these performances, Lunch's body, performed amateurism by creating the illusion of instinct. As Peggy Phelan explains, "In performance, the body is metonymic of self, of character, of voice, of 'presence.' But in the plenitude of its apparent visibility and availability, the performer actually disappears and represents something else—dance, movement, sound, character, 'art.'"⁷ Lunch's goal in this performance art was to foster "bad feelings" in her audiences: "Whatever it brings up—it's not a pretty time, it's not pretty music. . . .It's not supposed to feel good."⁸ The obvious dissonance in the band's music contributed to this goal of creating distance between themselves and the audience. Although bad feelings, such as anger, were a common feature of punk performances, Teenage Jesus and the Jerks articulated such feelings, and especially, rage in an acutely different way than contemporaneous punk bands. Even at their most disaffected, punk musicians expressed anger as a means of targeting society at large for having failed them. But in the case of Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, anger became a generalized mood, or "tone," neither evinced directly by the band members or Lunch herself, nor reciprocated by the audience. Rather, Lunch's performances established a general tone of "irritation" by drawing upon affects that she described variously as "coldness," "frigidity," and "surrealist rage." With their sonically contradictory music serving as a background, Teenage Jesus and the Jerks' bodily gestures and comportment articulate bad feelings, which further contributed to amateurism as an aesthetics of performance. I conclude by highlighting a prominent, central affect in their performances that

7 Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), 150.

8 Lunch, interview by author.

both complements and contradicts the modernist shock of their musical dissonance, namely a feeling of “emptiness” or “pretentiousness.”

Part I: Instinct and Ability

Lydia Lunch, one of the central figures in the no wave scene, ran away from her home in Rochester at the age of 16 to join New York’s literary and music scenes. Originally Lunch’s creative interests were in writing, and she moved to New York to pursue poetry and spoken word. She began to compose music after applying words to a cheap, broken guitar given to her by a friend. Although rock instruments were accessible and relatively inexpensive in New York in the 1970s, Lunch initially had no interest in starting a band: “I don’t even like the guitar, which I guess is why I used it.”⁹ When Lunch arrived in New York City, she was turned off by what she perceived to be a musical staleness among many of the downtown punk bands. As the no wave scene developed, and emerged as a distinct artistic network, popular punk musicians like Richard Hell and the Voidoids, Television, and Johnny Thunders and the Heartbreakers came to be seen as a kind of “conservative” establishment in comparison to radically experimental bands like Suicide and Mars.¹⁰ Though Lunch moved to New York in part because of the punk scene, “what had inspired [her] at 14, of course at 17 was no longer extreme enough.”¹¹ Punk, according to Lunch, was merely a regurgitation of rock tropes from the 1950s and 60s: “People have tried to associate me with punk rock, and I’m like, I hate punk rock. To

9 Ibid.

10 Lydia Lunch 1 at Orchard Street (Year Unknown), Nightclubbing Archive by Pat Ivers and Emily Armstrong 1970-2009 (Bulk 1975-1980) MSS 305, New York University: Downtown Collection at the Fales Library, Box 11, Media: ID: 305.0207.

11 Marc Masters, *No Wave* (London: Black Dog Publishing), 76.

me it was ignorant. The music was horrible. It was Chuck Berry-based music, it was chord-based, it was everything I tried to break down with Teenage Jesus.”¹² In 1977, Lunch formed Teenage Jesus and the Jerks with James Chance on saxophone, Bradley Field on drums, and Reck on bass. Chance departed the band in September 1977 to form his own band, the Contortions, Reck departed shortly after, to be replaced by Gordon Stevenson on bass. In 1978, Lunch fired Stevenson and replaced him with Jim Sclavunos.

As Lunch rejected the supposed conservatism of the punk scene, she began to associate with the nascent, and contemporaneous downtown no wave scene that operated alongside it, and overlapped with it, during the mid- and late-1970s. Though this punk scene was known to embrace crude, stripped down, and “minimal” musical and visual aesthetics, no wave musicians took these aesthetics to a new extreme. Bernard Gendron argues that, “[P]unk, which had previously been encumbered with its own inner art/pop binary, now became the pure pop component in another binary, itself only a subordinate unit in a larger musical scheme. No wave, it seemed, was simply punk meeting the avant-garde on the aesthetic boundaries between art and pop.”¹³ As Simon Reynolds further notes, the no wave scene was “united less by a common sound than by [a] shared determination to sever all connections with the past.”¹⁴ No wave musicians like Lunch distinguished themselves from other rock and punk musicians in New York in the 1970s by forming bands around a specific concept, “Having a great idea first and worrying about the technical aspects of it later – and maybe that’s where some of the freshness

12 Lydia Lunch 1 at Orchard Street (Year Unknown).

13 Bernard Gendron, *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club: Popular Music and the Avant-Garde* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 279.

14 Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, 140.

came from.”¹⁵ Weasel Walter summarized the no wave approach to composition as one that emerged from more general ideas rather than any specific notion of musical characteristics: “I think [the no wave bands] had great ideas, and they were able to articulate those ideas effectively. That’s the most important thing about music, for me, not technical ability—it’s having a great concept, then executing the concept.”¹⁶

Although Lunch’s network of no wave musicians overlapped with punk musicians in New York City, there were significant differences in their approaches to expertise and amateurism. Members of the New York punk scene were similar to the punk musicians described in Chapter 2 in how they claimed to lack musical ability or experience.¹⁷ But Lunch was skeptical of these claims, and specifically critiqued punk musicians for their backwards-looking references to early “Chuck Berry-based” rock and roll. For Lunch, punk musicians were musically conservative and failed to live up to the anti-establishment values they asserted in their visual style. Walter made a stark distinction between Lunch’s music and her punk contemporaries: “Teenage Jesus instantly made the supposedly ‘nihilistic’ and ‘raw’ current wave of so-called punk acts sound like slick, good-timey pop music by comparison.”¹⁸ In contrast to the sound of punk, Lunch described the sound of no wave generally as “unfriendly, dissonant, usually unmelodic,” but added that, “It’s really a much more personalized sound. It can only be defined, usually, by what it is not.”¹⁹ No wave musicians deliberately avoided the idea that their music revived any earlier pop music movement; in the case of Teenage Jesus and

15 Weasel Walter interview by author, New York City, April 3, 2016.

16 Ibid.

17 “I thought the Sex Pistols were a joke—a reason to sell t-shirts,” Lunch, interview by author.

18 Weasel Walter quoted in Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, *Live 1977-1979*, Other People OP035, 2015, CD liner notes.

19 Lunch, interview by author.

the Jerks, no wave was “an absolute divorce from rock and roll.”²⁰ Lunch’s aversion to the electric guitar was, in part, a result of her reaction against musical styles she considered too traditional. Despite being a fan of earlier rock music, Lunch nonetheless hoped to create something newer sounding: “The basic thing was that I had to do something to rebel against the traditional shit that inspired me, and it had to sound like nothing else.”²¹

Instead, no wave musicians, including Lunch, distinguished themselves by self-consciously aligning their music with explicitly modernist traditions. This allegiance to modernism, instead of to popular genres like rock and roll, not only served to distinguish no wave from punk, but also it helped to define no wave’s constitutive musical amateurism. Lunch’s aversion to musical expertise was rooted partly in an attempt to create new musical sounds that broke noticeably from popular music traditions. Lunch wanted to form a band that was, “because of [her] limitations, an absolute divorce from rock n roll. It had to be something much more brutal.”²² Despite all of the “personalized” musical styles among in no wave scene, the emphasis on unfriendly, dissonant, and (usually) unmelodic sounds, indicates that Lunch aimed to affect, and upset, audiences, rather than entertain them. No wave retrospectives often compare the brief movement to earlier avant-garde moments, particularly to Dadaism, and Lunch has embraced these connections: “I wasn’t expecting the toilets at CBGB’s to be the bookends to Duchamp’s urinal, but then again, maybe 1977 had more in common with 1917 than anyone at the time could have imagined.”²³ Lunch placed her music in an avant-garde lineage that is “post-

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Lunch quoted in Thurston Moore and Byron Coley, *No Wave: Post-punk. Underground. New York. 1976-1980* (New York: Abrams Image, 2007), 4.

surrealist, -dada, -Situationist.”²⁴ However, Lunch also explicitly distanced herself from the contemporaneous downtown art world, and rejected the idea that Teenage Jesus and the Jerks were artists. In a 1978 interview, Lunch claimed, “I am not art. There’s nothing Soho about us. We are anti-artistic, if anything.”²⁵ Shortly after this interview, Lunch fired the Teenage Jesus and the Jerks bassist Gordon Stevenson for referring to the band as an “art project.”²⁶

Meanwhile, some critics, such as John Rockwell, observed that Teenage Jesus and the Jerks appeared to be more inspired by punk than other no wave bands were, particularly “the punk sartorial tradition . . . what with crazed/eccentric costuming, heavy makeup, exotic hair styles and steady, zombie frowns.”²⁷

Lunch simultaneously appealed to and rejected avant-garde tradition in order to justify and support the authenticity of her instinctual approach. Lunch had never played music before she formed Teenage Jesus and the Jerks in 1976; even today she describes herself as an entirely untrained musician: “I don’t know chords, I don’t know keys, I don’t know notes.”²⁸ When talking about the source of her musical abilities, Lunch articulates a specific notion of innate knowledge, or rather, the idea that performers are only able to make sense of her music “if you know the instinct.”²⁹ She describes her artistry as an innate “style” that is either “there or it

24 Lunch, interview by author.

25 Roy Trakin, “Out to Lunch,” *New York Rocker* 1, no. 13 (July-August 1978): 20. Scholars (including Gendron and Masters) have divided the no wave scene into two different groups centered in the Soho and the East Village. The Soho scene was more connected to established New York art institutions such as the Kitchen.

26 After firing Stevenson, Lunch hired Jim Sclavunos: I think I just said, ‘Do you play bass?’ and he said ‘No,’ and I said, ‘Fine, you’re in Teenage Jesus. Pick it up!’ And he did,” Masters, 80.

27 John Rockwell, “Rock: Underground,” *New York Times*, May 8, 1978.

28 Lunch, interview by author.

29 Ibid.

isn't."³⁰ Similarly, reflecting on his own ability to play no wave music, Walter explained that he felt unusually qualified because he was in touch with "the emotional/intellectual motivations behind the music."³¹ Walter identifies a tendency among no wave to rely upon "a certain intelligence" that emerged from a "feral" instinct, rather than from education, and described no wave as "an intellectual recasting of the basest instincts."³²

Lunch's insistence on instinct plays an important conceptual function in *Teenage Jesus and the Jerks*. I explore this idea further in Part III of this chapter, but before I begin my musical analysis it is important to note that this instinct is not only independent from expertise. Rather, Lunch believes that it actively allows her to resist traditional notions of musical knowledge: "The more professional a musician is, the harder it is for them to comprehend or play *Teenage Jesus*."³³ Despite the fact that Lunch has been a professional musician for forty years, she insists that her artistry is divorced from either musical knowledge or technical ability: "No, I don't learn anything. Why should I improve?"³⁴ Instead, Lunch describes her artistry as an innate "style" that is either "there or it isn't."³⁵ However, as always, *Teenage Jesus and the Jerks*' alleged instinctiveness is countered by their experiential knowledge and expertise. Walter believes, for example, that his own musical ability, as an instrumentalist and composer, far surpasses the no wave musicians that inspired him.³⁶ Despite Lunch's own lack of technical skill, Walter sees his musical ability as a great advantage when playing Lunch's music. This ability offers an

30 Ibid.

31 Walter, interview by author.

32 Ibid.

33 Lunch, interview by author.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 Walter, interview by author.

advantage not because it enables Walter to perform technically challenging musical passages. Rather, Walter thinks he has an advantage, because in his words, “I have a lot of technical ability and I’ve thought about music a lot, I can see the macro/microcosms of these things. Because I’ve done it a lot, I have a sensitivity to the parameters that a lot of people don’t.”³⁷ It is this combination of “the right sensibility” and advanced technical skills that allowed Walter to play Lunch’s music properly: “I think that you can play this music terribly wrong if all you had going for you is technical ability.”³⁸

Part II: Extreme Dissonance and Extreme Formal Precision in “Orphans”

Critics rely on severe metaphors to describe the equally severe dissonance in the music of Teenage Jesus and the Jerks. Reynolds categorized their sound as “a tolling death knell rhythm midway between spasm and dirge.”³⁹ Referring to the first Teenage Jesus and the Jerks single, “Orphans” b/w “Less of Me,” Walter remarked, “If ever there was an evocation of Grand Guignol aesthetics on 45 rpm plastic, the odious, screaming, slide-playing of Lunch on the A-side is it. Lester Bangs once compared Lunch’s string mangling, quite accurately, to a ‘Chilean torture chamber.’”⁴⁰ Lunch herself frequently describes the sound of her guitar as “a slug crawling along a razor blade.” These metaphors rely upon images of pain and violence to evoke the band’s frequent use of harmonic dissonance and exceptionally harsh guitar timbres. But these images also demonstrate how Teenage Jesus and the Jerks’ exceptional dissonance is the most obvious aspect of their sound.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, 149.

40 Walter quoted in Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, *Live 1977-1979*, CD liner notes.

In this section, I deepen my analysis of amateurism as an aesthetic of performance by exploring how dissonance functions in contradiction to formal precision in the Teenage Jesus and the Jerks' song, "Orphans." In this analysis, I directly confront the widespread perception that no wave musicians, including Lunch, circumvented traditional rock technique by creating new, idiosyncratic approaches to playing the guitar. The notion that Lunch lacked the knowledge to abide by rock music's conventions is central to her claim to amateurism. Specifically, Lunch's supposedly instinctive performance implies a departure from traditional instrumental techniques. The dissonant sounds of no wave, often created using extended techniques, evoke the notion that these musicians employed specific physical gestures, or "body techniques," that were wholly new and unusual in the history of popular music. Given Lunch's claims about her own lack of musical knowledge, and the modernist tradition that inspired her, she and her bandmates in Teenage Jesus and the Jerks conveyed the idea that the dissonance they produced resulted directly from their atypical performance techniques. If Lunch and her bandmates were able to produce a unique sound through atypical techniques, then this claim implies they were developing an entirely new, idiosyncratic musical episteme. Lunch suggests that she produced her own body of musical knowledge, as an amateur, from scratch. However, this assumption obscures the ways in which Lunch's techniques conformed to epistemological norms.

I investigate how Teenage Jesus and the Jerks built upon epistemic standards in rock performance yet veiled the very standards they borrowed from. I argue that Teenage Jesus and the Jerks produced dissonant sounds through technically accomplished techniques that are no less challenging to learn than traditional rock techniques. My analysis reveals several important musical features of "Orphans" that illuminate how Lunch and her bandmates established amateurism as an aesthetic of performance. The first feature I focus on is the formal structure of

“Orphans,” which I analyze with particular attention on the guitar riffs, texture, and motivic development that reveal Lunch’s emphatic compositional precision. My formal analysis will provide a sense of the song’s technical and epistemological underpinnings. I will then focus on two prominent musical features that illustrate a principle “contradiction” in Teenage Jesus and the Jerks’ music that I identify as central to amateurism as an aesthetic of performance: the band’s exceptional dissonance (particularly the dissonance created by Lunch’s slide guitar) and their simultaneous rhythmic monotony. My analysis of these two musical features exemplifies Lunch’s own description of her reliance upon “internal contradictions.” I elaborate on the significance of these musical contradictions in Part III, in which I detail the resulting affective “contrarianism” that contributed to Teenage Jesus and the Jerks’ development of amateurism as an aesthetic of performance.

When Lunch founded Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, she did so with the specific intention of creating something “so unmusical, but so precise.”⁴¹ According to Lunch, her goal was to compose music that was “primal, fascist, pounding, painful, dissonant,” but also, “structured and tight.”⁴² Teenage Jesus and the Jerks embraced musical dissonance, as most no wave bands did; but, according to Lunch, this dissonance was highly calculated. Walter explains that Lunch’s intuitive, but structured, approach reveals her range of skills as a guitarist and composer: “Her approach—rife with squeaking palm harmonics, extremely dissonant chromatic chords made from the widest possible intervals, and intentional density created by tonally unrelated open strings—was deceptively simplistic, revealing itself to be an intuitive but very specific

41 Lunch, interview by author.

42 Lydia Lunch 1 at Orchard Street (Year Unknown).

organizational system.”⁴³ Trakin wrote that Teenage Jesus and the Jerks’ music was “deceptively simple,” and that despite Lunch’s compositional tendency to “reduc[e] music to a single beat,” she added complexity through texture, by “layering a controlled number of elements around a constant pulse.”⁴⁴ Lunch agreed with this evaluation, claiming that her music was not as simple as it seemed and, “It could be much more simple; I could have one drum and that’s it. . . . There’s a lot more involved than what meets the eye and I’m just not gonna expose it.”⁴⁵

The idea that Lunch employed a variety of distinct, and uniquely unconventional, body techniques is implicit in her claim to lack technical skill and musical knowledge, as well as her claim to an instinct-based performance. Marcel Mauss originally coined the term “body techniques,” which he defined simply as the ways in which people, from society to society, know how to use their bodies.⁴⁶ More specifically, though, Mauss used this term to understand bodily habitus, or how the body forms to “societies, educations, proprieties and fashions, types of prestige. In them, we should see the techniques and work of collective and individual practical reason.”⁴⁷ As Nick Crossley points out, the significance of Mauss’s theory is that he recognizes body techniques as a category of knowledge and understanding, rather than as entirely distinct from the mind.⁴⁸ However, Crossley offers two important revisions to Mauss’s theory, which are

43 Walter quoted in Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, *Live 1977-1979*, CD liner notes.

44 Trakin also wrote that this apparent simplicity “belies the fact that [Lunch] is one of the few spontaneous geniuses in contemporary popular music,” Trakin, “Out to Lunch,” 19.

45 Ibid., 20.

46 Marcel Mauss, “Techniques of the Body,” in *Incorporations*, eds. Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 455.

47 Ibid., 458.

48 See Nick Crossley, “Music Worlds and Body Techniques: On the Embodiment of Musicking,” *Cultural Sociology* 9, no. 4 (2015): 473 “Body techniques are not merely patterns of movement, however. Anticipating the work of Merleau-Ponty (1962) and Dewey (1988), Mauss claims that they are forms of practical reason which embody meaning, know-how and understanding. To learn a body technique is to acquire a new way of knowing, understanding and relating to the world and perhaps also to oneself. Such understanding and knowledge are pre-

helpful in understanding why Lunch's instrumental techniques necessarily have to conform to convention, and cannot be entirely instinctual. First, regardless of any unusual extended techniques Lunch created for the guitar, she nevertheless repeated and rehearsed the gestures required to perform these techniques to a point at which she could perform them on cue at live gigs. As Crossley explains, learning to play an instrument, in any way, is an embodied process: "It may involve reading books and theoretical knowledge, but this is optional. Physical engagement with the instrument and 'body modification' are not. Muscles must be strengthened (e.g. the embouchure of the saxophonist or the finger strength of the guitarist), dexterity and coordination sharpened, and detailed nuances of movement mastered."⁴⁹ Lunch undoubtedly underwent some form of "body modification" in order to perform the fundamental physical gestures involved in playing the guitar, such as pressing the frets, strumming in upstrokes and downstrokes in various rhythms, and isolating specific strings with her picking hand. Moreover, Crossley explains that this process of body modification is not "merely physical," and, "What is acquired is a form of embodied practical reason. Learning to play an instrument is not learning to play particular songs by rote but rather mastering a set of transferable skills and principles."⁵⁰ Second, regardless of the broader rock and pop conventions for guitar performance, Lunch's extended techniques fit comfortably with the conventions of the no wave scene within which Teenage Jesus and the Jerks operated. Crossley points out that conventions are always rooted in social exchange between musicians and audiences: "'Convention' invites us to consider whether and to what extent particular body techniques facilitate coordination between participants.

reflective. The actor often cannot explain how they do what they do. They 'just do it'. But what they do embodies knowledge, understanding and meaning. Body techniques facilitate mastery over particular types of environment."

49 Ibid., 9.

50 Ibid.

Learning to play guitar, for example, is not only an individual accomplishment, nor merely a practice typical of teenage boys. It enables an actor to fit their music-making activities with those of others and to engage the culturally-rooted expectations of an audience.”⁵¹ Lunch’s guitar techniques, and the gestures used to produce them, were conventional among guitarists such as Connie Burg and Sumner Crane of the band Mars, whom Lunch cites as the most direct influence on Teenage Jesus and the Jerks.⁵² Lunch performed for audiences that included other no wave guitarists, such as Arto Lindsay, Pat Place, Glenn Branca, and Connie Burg, who used similar techniques. Finally, as Crossley points out, shared conventions such as these influence body modifications, as the practical needs and resources inform how “networks shap[e] the body techniques which particular participants acquire.”⁵³

In the studio recording of “Orphans,” the song essentially alternates between two sections: the main riff of the A Section and an instrumental B Section [Figure 3.1]. In the four bar introduction to the song, Bradley Field on drums and Gordon Stevenson on bass introduce the rhythm that forms the foundation of, and remains unchanged in, both the A and B Sections. Though each iteration of the A Section is fundamentally the same, except for the first time the band members play it without lyrics, this section grows longer over the course of the song as they repeat the riff. The length of the instrumental B Section also grows, but this is partly due to how Lunch develops her motivic slide guitar part.⁵⁴ The consistent pulse of the drums and bass

51 Ibid., 11-12

52 Lunch, interview by author.

53 Crossley, 18.

54 Live recordings of “Orphans” from their May 17, 1978 concert at Max’s Kansas City and a gig at the Horseshoe Tavern in Toronto on August 3, 1978 show even greater variation in the form. In these performances, Lunch only sings during the final performance of the A Section and the length of each section varies widely.

| |
|--|
| Intro—4 bars [2 bars bass / 2 bars bass and drums] |
| A Section—6 bars [no lyrics] |
| B Section—4 bars |
| A Section—10 bars [first 4 without lyrics] |
| Little orphans running through the bloody snow |
| Little orphans running through the bloody snow |
| Little orphans running through the blood through the blood through the |
| B—6 bars |
| A—10 bars [first 4 without lyrics] |
| No more ankles and no more clothes |
| Little orphans running through the snow |
| Little orphans in the blood in the blood in the |
| B—12 bars |
| A—18 bars [first 4 without lyrics] |
| Little orphans running through the bloody snow |
| Little orphans running through the bloody snow |
| Little orphans running through the blood through the blood through the blood |
| No more ankles and no more clothes |
| Little orphans running through the snow |
| Little orphans in the blood in the blood in the |
| B—22 bars |

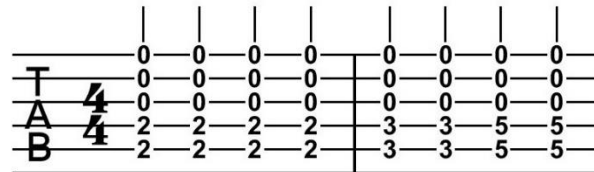
Figure 3.1: The form and lyrics of Teenage Jesus and the Jerks’ studio recording of “Orphans”

contrast with Lunch’s voice and guitar, which are the only instruments that vary between the two sections, giving the distinct impression that she is in charge of the form.

The rhythm section is noteworthy for its consistency across the entirety of the recording. While Lunch’s guitar part shifts between a main riff and an instrumental slide guitar part, Field and Stevenson perform steady quarter notes throughout the song. Field’s drum set was notably sparse, consisting solely of a snare, a tom, and a single cymbal, and in “Orphans” he performs entirely on the tom. Moreover, the physical gestures Field performed in this song were striking and contributed to the minimalist feeling evoked by the band; during live performances, Field used both hands and lifted his arms to his shoulders with each strike to bang out the repetitive

quarter-note pulse. Stevenson matched this pulse with consistent downstrokes on the A string, playing an unaltered ostinato throughout.

The guitar riff in the A Section of “Orphans” provides a telling example of how Lunch embraced rather than circumnavigated her own technical limitations. She riffs on three chords, alternating between a full measure of an E minor chord in standard voicing, and a measure that ascends to two tonally ambiguous chords [Example 3.1]. These chords share the same voicing as the initial E minor, with her left hand fretting a perfect fourth (B-E) on the A and D strings. Lunch simply raises her perfect fourth up the fretboard—first a half-step to C-F and then another whole step to D-G. In other words, Lunch only uses a single left-hand voicing during the entire song, transposing it up the fretboard. Moreover, this voicing only requires two fingers—presumably to free up a finger for the slide, but also requiring minimal adjustment in the left hand as she moves it. Though the bass follows a similar pattern—beginning on E and ascending to F and G—Lunch’s guitar mars the harmonic clarity by continuing to sound the open strings of



Example 3.1: The main guitar riff of the A section of “Orphans”

the initial E minor chord: E, G, and B. Writing about Lunch’s distinctive “guitar language,” Walter identified this technique as a kind of “intentional density created by tonally unrelated open strings.”⁵⁵ In this example, Lunch’s open string technique undoubtedly contributes to the textural density, and sense of musical “contrarianism,” in the A Section. But it also creates an

⁵⁵ Walter, interview by author; Walter quoted in Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, *Live 1977-1979*, CD liner notes.

effect of two parallel harmonies: one an ascending E minor to F minor to G minor, the other an E minor drone comprised of the three open strings.

In order to achieve the staccato feel to the main riff in “Orphans,” Lunch continuously mutes the strings with her right hand after each strum. Her right hand rests on the strings, lifting just enough to strum down for each quarter note of the riff. Lunch focuses her strums especially on the higher strings, emphasizing the consistent drone of the open G, B, and E strings, even as she ascends the neck with her left hand on the A and D strings. When Lunch plays the eighth-note flourish at the end of each measure as part of the main riff, she follows the fourth downstroke with an upstroke, leading directly into the first downstroke of the next measure instead of muting the strings.

The focus of the instrumental B Section is squarely on Lunch’s extravagantly noisy slide guitar part. In some respects, Lunch’s choice to use a slide guitar indicates a tendency toward harmonic simplicity and reflects her musical inexperience. As Reynolds noted, there was an irony to her using an instrument traditionally employed by blues and country musicians. Although many of the best-known slide guitarists in rock history were renowned for their instrumental virtuosity, no wave musicians seemingly reappropriated the slide as a means of creating maximum dissonance with minimum effort: “[the guitar] slide offered musical novices the quickest way to generate startling sounds. It wasn’t necessary to learn how to hold down chord shapes on the guitar strings.”⁵⁶ One of the unique features of Lunch’s slide guitar parts in “Orphans” is her tendency to strum chords that are between two chromatic pitches, embracing the microtonal possibilities opened up by the slide. In most traditional uses of the slide, guitarists remain in tune by emphasizing notes on the strings directly over the metal frets. This method

56 Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, 140-41.

ensures that the strings vibrate as they would if the guitarist fretted them without the slide, maintaining the temperament of the instrument. But Lunch usually emphasizes pitches between the metal frets. Lunch's unusual use of the guitar slide in the B Section bears two significant aesthetic consequences. First, Lunch's use of the slide guarantees a squall of noise that emerges above, and contrasts with, the unified quarter-note rhythm created the bass and drums. Second, the slide drastically limits the available harmonies and, given Lunch's technique, reduces the focus of Lunch's performance to its melodic contour.

Though Lunch's use of the slide guitar seems to prevent a typical analysis of the pitch content in the instrumental B section, its contents are, nonetheless, motivic. A closer analysis reveals motives that are developed over the course of the song. Lunch extends the range of rhythmic and harmonic variety of the slide section with each iteration. The nuanced particularities of these developments indicate that Lunch's claim about the need to be precise when performing Teenage Jesus and the Jerks' songs holds true—the specific hand motions (like the “upstroke”) are important, even if the resulting sounds vary.

In the first instrumental section, Lunch establishes the basic motif that she will later throughout the song [Example 3.2]. In the first measure of this section, Lunch slides up the neck and strums a syncopated rhythm over the 17th fret on the D and G strings, creating a dyad between F[♯]/B and G/C. This syncopated rhythm continues in the second measure, but begins on the 17th fret of the G and B strings (between B/D[♯] and C/E) and ascends to the 19th (between D^b/F and D/F[♯]) and 21st frets (between E^b/G and E/G[♯]). In this measure, each eighth note works like a grace note as Lunch slides back down to an indeterminate point on the neck before landing on each fret for a quarter note. This technique obscures the pitch content of the eighth notes and balances the ascending feel of the passage with descending grace notes. Following this measure,

In the opening measure of the third instrumental section, Lunch diverges from the previous two sections by beginning with eighth notes instead of the usual syncopated rhythm, and by playing a more clearly tonal dyad of Eb/Ab [Example 3.4]. The next three measures proceed as they did in the second instrumental section, including the alternating eighth notes between the 22nd and 21st frets of the G and B strings. However, in the fifth measure, Lunch descends to play a dyad over the 16th fret of the D and G strings, recalling the opening notes of the second instrumental section. Lunch then returns to the alternate dyads on the 22nd and 21st frets of the G and B strings, but with a more syncopated rhythm. In the seventh measure, Lunch descends again, but only by a whole step, remaining on the G and B strings, then returns back to the alternating dyads. In the final four measures of this section, Lunch moves between the 22nd fret and the strings above the pickup, alternating between a syncopated rhythm and straight eighth notes.

The final instrumental B section begins on the same tonal dyad as the third, Eb/Ab [Example 3.5]. Similarly, Lunch proceeds up the next on the 17th, 19th, and 21st frets of the G and B strings. But in this final motif, Lunch skips the vamp between the 22nd and 21st frets that may

Example 3.3: The guitar part of the second instrumental B section of “Orphans.” ? represents an indeterminate point on the neck, * represents a point beyond the highest fret. The fret numbers in this tablature indicate a microtonal point below the actual fret on the instrument.

now be expected by the listener and goes directly to the dyad a half-step beyond the fret board. Lunch alternates between this dyad and the 22nd fret, only dropping below this highest fret to descend down to the 16th fret of the G and B strings, recalling the same interpolation that she used in the third instrumental section. Lunch performs this interpolation twice, and after the

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|-------------------------|-----------------|-------------------|-------------------------|--|--|--|--|
| | | | | | | | | | |
| T | 4 | 13-13-13-13-13-13-13-13 | 17-?-19-19-?-21 | *-22-* 22-*22-*22 | 22-22-22-22-22-22-22-22 | | | | |
| A | 4 | 13-13-13-13-13-13-13-13 | 17-?-19-19-?-21 | *-22-* 22-*22-*22 | 22-22-22-22-22-22-22-22 | | | | |
| B | | | | | | | | | |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---|--|----------------|------------------|---------------|------------------|-------------|--|--|--|
| | | | | | | | | | |
| T | | *-22-* ^*-22-* | *-22-*22-*22-*22 | *-*-*-*-*-*-* | *-22-*22-*22-*22 | ^*-^*-^*-^* | | | |
| A | | *-22-* ^*-22-* | *-22-*22-*22-*22 | *-*-*-*-*-*-* | *-22-*22-*22-*22 | ^*-^*-^*-^* | | | |
| B | | | | | | | | | |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---|--|----------------|----------------|------------------|-------------------------|--|--|------------------|--|
| | | | | | | | | | |
| T | | ^*-^*-^*-^*-^* | *-22-* ^*-22-* | *-22-*22-*22-*22 | | | | *-22-*22-*22-*22 | |
| A | | ^*-^*-^*-^*-^* | *-22-* ^*-22-* | *-22-*22-*22-*22 | 16-16-16-16-16-16-16-16 | | | *-22-*22-*22-*22 | |
| B | | | | | 16-16-16-16-16-16-16-16 | | | | |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---|--|-------------------------|-------------------------|----------------|--|-------------------------|--|--|--|
| | | | | | | | | | |
| T | | | | | | ^*-^*-^*-^*-^* | | | |
| A | | 16-16-16-16-16-16-13-13 | 16-16-16-16-16-16-16-16 | ^*-^*-^*-^*-^* | | 16-16-16-16-16-16-13-13 | | | |
| B | | 16-16-16-16-16-16-13-13 | 16-16-16-16-16-16-16-16 | | | 16-16-16-16-16-16-13-13 | | | |

Example 3.5: The guitar part of the fourth instrumental B section of “Orphans.” ? represents an indeterminate point on the neck, * represents a point beyond the highest fret, ^ represents a point more than a full step higher than the highest fret. The fret numbers in this tablature indicate a microtonal point below the actual fret on the instrument, except for the opening tonal dyad of Eb/Ab.

notes of the syncopated rhythms. This technique can give the impression that Lunch is relying upon instinct. Yet, as my analysis shows, Lunch develops the sections motivically in a way that forgoes the possibility of an instinctive performance. Drawing on Crossley’s additions to Mauss’s theory, we can assume that such playing techniques were learned in a community and clearly, in this song, through repetition.

The most striking sonic feature of “Orphans,” however, is the “contradiction” between its steady beat and Lunch’s gestural dissonances. This song stands as a paradigmatic example of what Lunch describes the “contrarian nature of [her] schizophrenic musicality.”⁵⁷ Lunch explicitly emphasized these kinds of contrasts in nearly all of Teenage Jesus and the Jerks’ songs; specifically, she pointed out how the rhythmic structures and instrumental textures of

⁵⁷ Lunch, interview by author.

these songs rely upon the juxtaposition of drastically opposite musical elements. Critics often tried to make sense of Teenage Jesus and the Jerks' approach to musical textures, and particularly the band's excessive use of noise. Trakin noted that the band anchored their music with a consistent pulse: "Making each of the instruments subordinate to the drum beat allows the self-confessed experimenters a chance to briefly explore the primary elements of music—those features which identify music as music rather than haphazard sound."⁵⁸ Trakin's description closely matches the rhythmic and timbral contrasts I described between Lunch's guitar part and the rhythm section in "Orphans." When referencing this compositional tendency to structure sounds around a loud, plodding pulse, Lunch recalled the invitation she extended to the band's original drummer, Bradley Field. Lunch asked Field to "play drum" to which he replied, "I can't play drums." However, Lunch clarified, "I'm not asking you to play drums, I'm asking you to play drum."⁵⁹

Lunch explained how Teenage Jesus and the Jerks' "extreme minimalism" resulted directly from her intention to create a "precise operation": "I knew instinctively that if it was going to be so minimal, it had to be really tight."⁶⁰ In this context, the word "minimal" differed from its commonplace use in music history. Rather than referring to repetitive structures, or drones, Gendron described Teenage Jesus and the Jerks in terms of "brutal simplicity."⁶¹ Lunch distinguished between true minimalism and the "reductionary" elements in punk: "[Punk] was ridiculous, it was redundant, it wasn't intellectual enough, it wasn't smart enough. It was

58 Roy Trakin, "Nobody Waved Goodbye," *New York Rocker* 1, no. 13 (July-August 1978): 18.

59 Lydia Lunch 1 at Orchard Street (Year Unknown).

60 Masters, 76.

61 Gendron, 280.

reductionary. Minimal, yes, but do not reduce things.”⁶² Walter also complicated the usual assumptions about what a minimalist style of music entails, arguing that no wave was a “decadent music,” and that in spite of its nihilism and relative simplicity, it was, in fact, “Dionysian.”⁶³

These contradictions effectively confuse how Teenage Jesus and the Jerks present their musical knowledge and ability. Lunch’s “instinctive” belief that their type of minimalism demanded a precise operation points to a deeper contradiction between a simplicity that implies crudeness and inability and a level of formal complexity that could only be achieved with some degree of musical knowledge. On the one hand, critics took notice of “Lydia’s expressionless droning tones,” and associated her coldness with both the monotony and stupidity of “Bradley’s dum dum drumming.”⁶⁴ Byron Coley noted, “I really liked the way the Jerks could make one bunch of stoopids real happy, while just across the room another bunch of stoopids fingered their ears, clenched their anuses, and copped similar gestures of true agony.”⁶⁵ On the other hand, Teenage Jesus and the Jerks distanced themselves from punk by presenting their music as more “intellectual.” In the final section of this chapter, I explore such contradictions, which I find fundamental to amateurism as an aesthetic of performance in Teenage Jesus and the Jerks’ performance of this song.

62 Lydia Lunch 1 at Orchard Street (Year Unknown).

63 Walter, interview by author.

64 Janis Cafasso, “Pressed Lips,” *New York Rocker* 1, no. 10 (November-December 1977): 58.

65 Byron Coley, “Lydia Lunch: Way Out West with 8-Eyed Spy,” *New York Rocker* 1, no. 28 (May 1980): 18.

Part III: Performing Bad Feelings

In one of the earliest reviews of a Teenage Jesus and the Jerks gig, Robert Christgau captures the band's trademark pessimism. "The drummer looks about 40 and affects the demeanor of a Meadowbrook outpatient," Christgau wrote, "banging funereally on the two snares that make up his entire kit, while the lead singer, a stout young woman whose black hair looks like an extension of her black leatherette pantsuit, recites lyrics that are pessimistic in mood: 'Across the window/Under the curtain/Break the glass/Feel the pain.' After 15 minutes I figure I get the idea and leave."⁶⁶ Christgau's review inadvertently captures a significant aspect of Teenage Jesus and the Jerks' live performances: brevity. Though he clearly meant it as a critical barb, Christgau's claim that he could "get the idea" after fifteen minutes is one that Lunch would have agreed with. Teenage Jesus and the Jerks prided themselves on the shortness of their live performances, and considered this to be a significant feature of their music; most of their songs were no longer than two minutes and their sets rarely exceeded ten minutes in total.

This aspect of Teenage Jesus and the Jerks' live performances points to the aesthetic significance of the band's broader visual presentation during them. In order to understand how Lunch imagined her performance aesthetic as amateur, and how historical accounts of no wave continue to frame it as such, one must consider these performances. Lunch is clear about her intentions when performing live with Teenage Jesus and the Jerks: "It was not just have a band, make music. It was have a band that was like nothing else, that was based on my primal anxiety, anger, and hatred, that caused fear and panic in those not on the stage. It had nothing to do with putting on a nice show for people to stand there smiling about. That was just a repulsive reaction,

⁶⁶ Robert Christgau, "Diary," *Village Voice*, September 19, 1977.

and the last thing I wanted.”⁶⁷ The affective tone of the performance, and the audience’s affective response, were central to the live experience of Teenage Jesus and the Jerks. Lunch explained, “Whatever it brings up—it’s not a pretty time, it’s not pretty music. . . .It’s not supposed to feel good.”⁶⁸ Regarding Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, Walter described a specific emotional motivation that emerged from a surreal type of “rage and aggression.”⁶⁹

Lunch’s insistence that her music served as background to the visual performance in Teenage Jesus and the Jerks’ live concerts opens us up to developing a deeper discourse about the role of the body in no wave as performance art. Commenting on the power of her own bodily representation in these live gigs, and the effect of her sexuality as a young girl in the Downtown New York art and music scene, Lunch noted that she was acutely aware that her body became a point of focus for audiences, perhaps more so than her music. In this sense her body functioned as an “explicit body,” which, as Rebecca Schneider theorizes, “in representation is foremost a site of social markings, physical parts and gestural signatures of gender, race, class, age, sexuality—all of which bear ghosts of historical meaning, markings delineating social hierarchies of privilege and disprivilege. The body made explicit has become the *mise en scene* for a variety of feminist artists.”⁷⁰ Lunch’s emphasis on live performance implies that any analysis of Teenage Jesus and the Jerks’ music demands a more comprehensive look into the role of her body during their performances. In other words, any analysis of “Orphans” that is limited to the recording as a text is incomplete. Peggy Phelan points out, “Performance’s only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the

67 Masters, 74.

68 Lunch, interview by author.

69 Walter, interview by author.

70 Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (London: Routledge, 1997), 2.

circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance. To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology.”⁷¹ Lunch is clear about the significance of the Teenage Jesus and the Jerks’ live performances, and that “[music] was a particular tool to get across the emotional impact.”⁷² Lunch has also released several live recordings of Teenage Jesus and the Jerks concerts, but even in these recordings, it is important to acknowledge that, “the document of a performance then is only a spur to memory, an encouragement of memory to become present.”⁷³ For Phelan, there is a uniqueness to performance spectatorship because, “there are no left-overs, the gazing spectator must try to take everything in,” and this constitutive ephemerality thusly affects the value of performance art: “Performance resists the balanced circulations of finance. It saves nothing; it only spends. While photography is vulnerable to charges of counterfeiting and copying, performance art is vulnerable to charges of valuelessness and emptiness. Performance indicates the possibility of revaluing that emptiness; this potential revaluation gives performance art its distinctive oppositional edge.”⁷⁴

In order to understand the affect in a Teenage Jesus and the Jerks performance, I draw on Sianne Ngai’s study of bad feelings. Ngai provides a model for understanding “how sociohistorical and ideological dilemmas, in particular, produce formal or representational ones.”⁷⁵ As Ngai explains, a theory of affects may appear less structured than a more precise analysis of a specifically located emotion, but this is only because affects tend to conceal these

71 Phelan, 146.

72 Lunch quoted in Simon Reynolds, *Totally Wired: Postpunk Interviews and Overviews* (New York: Soft Skull Press), 148.

73 Phelan, 146.

74 Ibid., 148.

75 Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), 11-12.

dilemmas. Often, bad feelings are not merely simplistic representations, but can derive from “the global affect of ‘against,’” of which, “the negativity at stake is algorithmic or operational, rather than value- or meaning-based, involving processes of aversion, exclusion, and of course negation.”⁷⁶ I support my affective reading of “Orphans” through Lunch’s own claims about the function of negativity in her performance. References to the “‘syntactically’ negative” recur in Lunch’s lyrics and interviews, critical reviews of Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, and even in the very term “no wave.” Ngai points out that bad feelings rely upon the syntax of negativity, “in the sense that they are organized by trajectories of repulsion rather than attraction, by phobic strivings ‘away from’ rather than philic strivings ‘toward’.”⁷⁷

Moreover, the affect I describe is one not necessarily felt by every audience member, nor necessarily Lunch or her bandmates. Rather, it is an affect of the performance itself. The negative affect, as Ngai describes, can be located in the “tone” of the band’s performance. Ngai uses the term “tone” to generalize affects in the sense of creating a “collective mood”:

To speak of tone is thus to generalize, totalize, and abstract the ‘world’ of the literary object, in a way that seems particularly conducive to the analysis of ideology. There is a sense in which tone resembles the concept of collective mood frequently invoked by historians, . . . but poses the additional difficulty of aesthetic immanence, of being something that seems ‘attached’ to an artwork.⁷⁸

Ngai explains that this mood is not subjective, but rather found within the object itself: “It should be clear that by ‘tone’ I mean less the dramatic ‘attitude’ adumbrated by the New Critics than a global and hyper-relational concept of *feeling* that encompasses attitude: a literary text’s affective bearing, orientation, or ‘set toward’ its audience and world.”⁷⁹ If this affective frame

76 Ibid.

77 Ibid.

78 Ibid., 43.

79 Ibid.

seems to obscure the actual locus of feelings in the performance, it is because the concept of tone reflects the opaqueness of the feelings themselves, particularly an audience's judgment of these feelings' authenticity. As Ngai summarizes, "There is a crucial similarity between the affective-aesthetic idea of tone, which is reducible neither to the emotional response a text solicits from its reader nor to representations of feelings within the world of its story, and the slippery zone between fake and real feelings, or free-floating and subjectively anchored feelings."⁸⁰

The syntactically negative is most obviously present in Lunch's text. The lyrics to "Orphans," and Lunch's delivery of them, not only contribute to the song's rhythmic monotony, but also establish its tone. Lunch often emphasized the importance of her lyrics, and originally formed Teenage Jesus and the Jerks not in order to compose music but as a means of sharing her poetry. The lyrics to "Orphans" are notably short and repetitive, consisting of variations on two lines, "Little orphans running through the bloody snow" and "No more ankles and no more clothes." The syllables of each word often dictates the vocal rhythm. For example, in the two main lines of text, Lunch tends to assign eighth notes to two-syllable words and quarter notes to one-syllable words. The exception to this rule comes at the end of the first line, which conjoins "through the" into two eighth notes and emphasizes the word "bloody" by drawing out each syllable into a quarter note. Lunch repeats this method of drawing out the syllable into a quarter note in the lines immediately following "No more ankles and no more clothes," first changing the line "Little orphans" into four equal quarter notes, then reverting the word "orphans" back into two eighth notes. The simple rhythmic division of these lyrics into eighth notes and quarter notes follows the same rhythm of the guitar part during the sung portions of "Orphans." Lunch adds a rhythmic embellishment in her guitar strums over the last beat of each measure, when she

⁸⁰ Ibid., 41.

is no longer singing. However, when she begins to sing, she removes this rhythmic embellishment and simply matches the quarter note pulse in her voice to the bass and drums. This shift back to quarter notes not only creates a more unified instrumental texture, but also contributes to the overall rhythmic monotony and sense of simplicity conveyed by the bass and drums. As with the bass and drum parts, this rhythmic monotony contributes to the notion that it is easier to sing the rhythmic variations in the text while strumming a quarter note pulse than it would be to include the rhythmic embellishment at the end of each measure. The pitch content of Lunch's vocal melodies is unclear, and does not appear to harmonize with the guitar or bass, but rather consists of a generally descending line to match each line of text. A notable exception occurs on the word "bloody," when Lunch allows her voice to crack in an upward leap. Lunch repeats this vocal crack with the word "orphans" each time she sings the variation, "Little orphans in the blood in the blood in the." Further, each verse ends with an incomplete lyric. The verse ends with "the," leading directly into the B section, as if the slide guitar has interrupted the lyrics. Though Lunch's vocal melody remains largely monotonous, matching the band's rhythm section, her extreme emphasis on the words "bloody" and "orphans" establishes a tone of syntactic negativity.

With her body, Lunch performed "primal anxiety, anger, and hatred" and a particularly petulant form of generalized rage that was more generalized than the rage of her punk contemporaries. As Lunch explained, "The difference with no wave was that everyone was speaking about their personal insanity, punk was speaking about a social insanity."⁸¹ Teenage Jesus and the Jerks' lyrics and affective tone were notably undirected in their expression of bad feeling. As Ngai notes, philosophies of anger going back to Aristotle always rely upon

81 Lunch, interview by author.



Figure 3.2: Teenage Jesus and the Jerks live at Max's Kansas City in New York City, 1978, stills from *Lydia Lunch: Video Hysterie: 1978-2006*

identifying the feeling's source in order to justify it. In this sense, anger serves a social or political function: "The observation that justice conversely requires anger, and cannot be imposed solely by reason, underscores the passion's centrality to political struggles throughout history—a point also made provocatively by Audre Lorde. Its *justifiability* seems always in question."⁸² But instead of providing a source for her anger, Lunch merely expresses "irritation," an affect Ngai identifies as related to anger that is particularly linked to the body and physical sensation. Irritation can express both physical feelings of discomfort, like chafing, as well as a type of emotional hypersensitivity, and, according to Ngai, has both bodily and emotional meanings: "Whether 'irritation' is defined as an emotional or physical experience, synonyms for it tend to apply equally to psychic life *and* life at the level of the body—and particularly to its surfaces or skin. . . . it always threatens to slip out of the realm of emotional experience altogether, into the realm of physical or epidermal sensations."⁸³

Lunch created a specific performance style with Teenage Jesus and the Jerks that emphasized remaining "cold" and "distant" from the audience [Figure 3.2]. In their brief live performances, Lunch and her bandmates never engaged their audiences and purposely remained

82 Ngai, 181-82.

83 Ibid., 183-84.

as rigid and still as possible. Lunch described the Teenage Jesus and the Jerks' music as, "Alienated music, based on my own alienation," and modeled her bodily comportment on this alienation.⁸⁴ This performance choice was partly a reaction against the traditions of rock showmanship: "Rather than make a fool of myself and fall all over myself, jump around like an idiot with my guitar strangling me, I stand still and try to maintain some dignity. I refuse to do somersaults with my guitar, like some performers I know."⁸⁵

Lunch's decision to maintain a cold distance from her audience hints at her implicit gender politics, and, more specifically, at the gender politics of rock music she and her band were reacting against. Despite the relative gender parity in the New York no wave scene, Teenage Jesus and the Jerks nevertheless stuck out in male-dominated rock venues like CBGB's and Max's Kansas City. Lunch's performance choices reflect her reluctance to rely upon the clichéd sexual tropes of women in rock music: "I refuse to fall down to the floor and have to have the guitar players pick me up, like some other female performers we know."⁸⁶ Rather, Lunch sought to "exploit" the typical images of rock sexuality in her performances: "You could say I'm exploiting America: I'm American, I'm a girl, I'm 18...I'm exploiting teenagers, I'm exploiting music, I'm exploiting the guitar, I'm exploiting the clothes I wear...I'm just a walking mass of exploitation."⁸⁷ Mirielle Cervenka, who briefly served as the band's manager, described Teenage Jesus and the Jerks as "one of the first authentically subversive bands," due to their ability to make audiences uncomfortable: "I think an end has come to the subversiveness of

84 Lunch fired the band's original saxophonist, James Chance, for engaging the audience too much. Lydia Lunch 1 at Orchard Street (Year Unknown).

85 Trakin, "Out to Lunch," 19.

86 Ibid.

87 Ibid., 20.

punk. . . . We assault the audience that thinks they've seen and heard it all. Teenage Jesus is the band you love to hate. I love to shock people. I'd love to project the image of a deprived child."⁸⁸

While Lunch sought to avoid the clichéd sexual tropes of rock music, she nonetheless embraced imagery of violent sexuality when describing her performance style. Sclavunos explained that the band's performance style drew upon a specific sexual metaphor: "Lydia and I agreed that it should be the aural equivalent of rough sex, a good cold hard hate-fuck. We managed to say what we needed to say in ten minutes, quick and to the point. And just in case there were any masochists or deluded intellectuals in the audience who were getting off on the show, we needed to thwart and frustrate that pleasure with a cruel premature withdrawal."⁸⁹ In this metaphor, the band's truncated live performances were designed to "frustrate" audiences (especially "deluded intellectual"), rather than satisfy them. Lunch directly connected her performative coldness to sexuality as a means to upset usual assumptions of "frigidity." For Lunch, "Just because you have sex doesn't mean you're not frigid or, just because you don't have sex doesn't mean you're frigid. I am frigid, but it's not a sexual frigidity, if you know what I mean. There's more than one way."⁹⁰

Lunch's desire to perform the frigidity and crudeness of "rough sex" contributed to her vision of Teenage Jesus and the Jerks as fundamentally violent. Lunch described the band's rehearsals as violent training sessions, during which she threatened her bandmates and flogged them with coat hangers if they made a mistake.⁹¹ According to Lunch, the band's structured

88 Quoted in Steve Meisel and Anna Sui, "Mirielle," *New York Rocker* 1, no. 12 (April-May 1978): 50.

89 Quoted in Masters, 82.

90 Trakin, "Out to Lunch," 20.

91 Lunch, interview by author.

precision was a direct result of their violent rehearsal sessions: “I did have a strict way of rehearsing: I would literally beat them with coat hangers if they made any mistakes at a gig! So we rehearsed ad nauseam and we were pretty fucking tight. It’s pretty fascist sounding, and I was the fucking dictator.”⁹² The bad feelings of the band’s live performances also reflected a type of violence, which Lunch compared to the “boxing match” between herself and the audience.⁹³ Sclavunos summarized one of the band’s performances in the summer of 1979 at O.S. 42, a leftist café in Berlin, as such: “Feedback. Breaking glass. Barfing noises. Pig squeals. Screaming. Teenage Jesus was performing its opening number. Threats were exchanged. Lydia threw a beer mug at a photographer and it shattered against his camera. . . . I would like to point out that Lydia was absolutely ravishing for this performance (as well as all performances).”⁹⁴

Critics noted Teenage Jesus and the Jerks’ affective tone and reacted negatively to the overt performativity of Lunch’s intentional bad feelings. The transparency of this affective tone translated to an “overall pretentious posing.”⁹⁵ Robert Christgau dismissed Teenage Jesus and the Jerks as “one of those bands that used to hang around the Mercer during the Dolls’ time—very ‘visual,’ very ‘minimal,’ very ‘arty,’” and later referred to them as “arty and empty.”⁹⁶ Reviews of their early gigs, such as the Artists Space festival in May 1978, indicate the critics’ wariness when faced with the simplicity of the band’s aggressive dissonance. John Rockwell noted a “new orthodoxy” emerging from the no wave tendency to rush toward aesthetic extremes, warning that “if everyone is being brutally simple and gratingly loud and glumly

92 Lunch quoted in Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, 148.

93 Lunch, interview by author.

94 Jim Sclavunos, “Teenage Jesus on Tour: Diary of a Jerk,” *New York Rocker* 1, no. 24 (November 1979): 46.

95 “The Top 40,” *New York Rocker* 1, no. 11 (February-March 1978): 45.

96 Christgau, “Diary”; Robert Christgau, “Artists Space New Wave Rock,” *Village Voice*, May 8, 1978.

angry, the whole thing can pall pretty fast.”⁹⁷ Roy Trakin, however, offered a specific analysis of why Teenage Jesus and the Jerks remained appealing in spite of their pretensions: “The pretensions of Teenage Jesus would be unbearable were it not for Lydia’s saving graces: her sense of droll humor, her vulnerable ‘little girl cries’ and, last and certainly least, the simple fact that she is theoretically correct.”⁹⁸

These critics’ remarks strike at the core of the connection between Teenage Jesus and the Jerks’ affective tone and amateurism an aesthetic of performance. In spite of Lunch’s claim that Teenage Jesus and the Jerks were “anti-artistic,” critics felt that their “artiness” was prominent in their live performances. The band’s simultaneous rejection of and self-conscious appeal to art, contributed to the critics’ impression of their pretentiousness. Most importantly, the critics’ assessment of Teenage Jesus and the Jerks’ pretentiousness acknowledges the performativity of their aesthetic. At least some audiences registered the tonal affect of their performance as a performance. Lunch’s insistence on bad feelings, and on coldness and frigidity created a distance between herself and audiences that functioned much like the band’s musical dissonance, namely to obscure their musical knowledge.

Conclusion

Through their exceptional dissonance and performance of bad feelings, the members of Teenage Jesus and the Jerks obscured their musical and artistic knowledge in order to create the impression of amateurism. Lunch self-consciously drew upon a critical knowledge of performance aesthetics that enacted the obfuscation of that very knowledge. The performance

97 Rockwell, “Rock: Underground.”

98 Trakin, “Nobody Waved Goodbye,” 18.

Lunch called “instinctive,” was in fact rooted in a deep understanding of aesthetics, performance, and affect. And what has considered to be her idiosyncratic musical technique, in reality drew upon a wealth of body techniques that required learned skills. In “Orphans,” we see and hear amateurism as an aesthetic of performance that obscures musical knowledge and ability.

Chapter 4

Racializing Amateurism: Punk Primitivism Meets Rap in New York City, 1979-1981

“The Punk Map of N.Y.C.,” featured *Punk* magazine from May/June 1978, offers a cartoonish view of New York City.¹ Along with famous tourist destinations and iconic punk destinations such as CBGB and Bleeker Bob’s record store, the “cartographer” Roscoe Weiner also depicts the dangers of the city, including a murder in Central Park and a “floating suicide” in the Hudson River. The map represents New York City from the skewed perspective of downtown Manhattan, with Harlem and the South Bronx lumped together on its northern edge [Figure 4.1]. The South Bronx, backed by flames, is depicted as a dangerous, distant location inhabited only by cockroaches and the most egregious black stereotypes—a hustler running a game of three-card monte, a pimp with a cigar in his mouth, and group of cannibals holding spears, cooking a white man in a pot. Immediately to the east, the prison on Ricker’s Island is occupied by a sea of anonymous black faces. *Punk* magazine rarely covered music made by black musicians, but black caricatures regularly appeared in its comic strips. In one comic, “Blackout Funnies,” the two main characters are invisible, presumably due to the rolling blackouts that struck New York in 1977, but are identifiable only by their speech patterns: one speaks with a Caribbean patois and the other uses black “jive talk” [Figure 4.2]. The Caribbean tries to convince the black character to buy a television from him; as a punchline, the black character ropes in a stereotypical Italian and a stereotypical Jew, and then robs all three.²

1 *Punk* 1, no. 14 (May/June 1978): n.p.

2 *Punk* 1, no. 11 (October/November 1977): n.p.

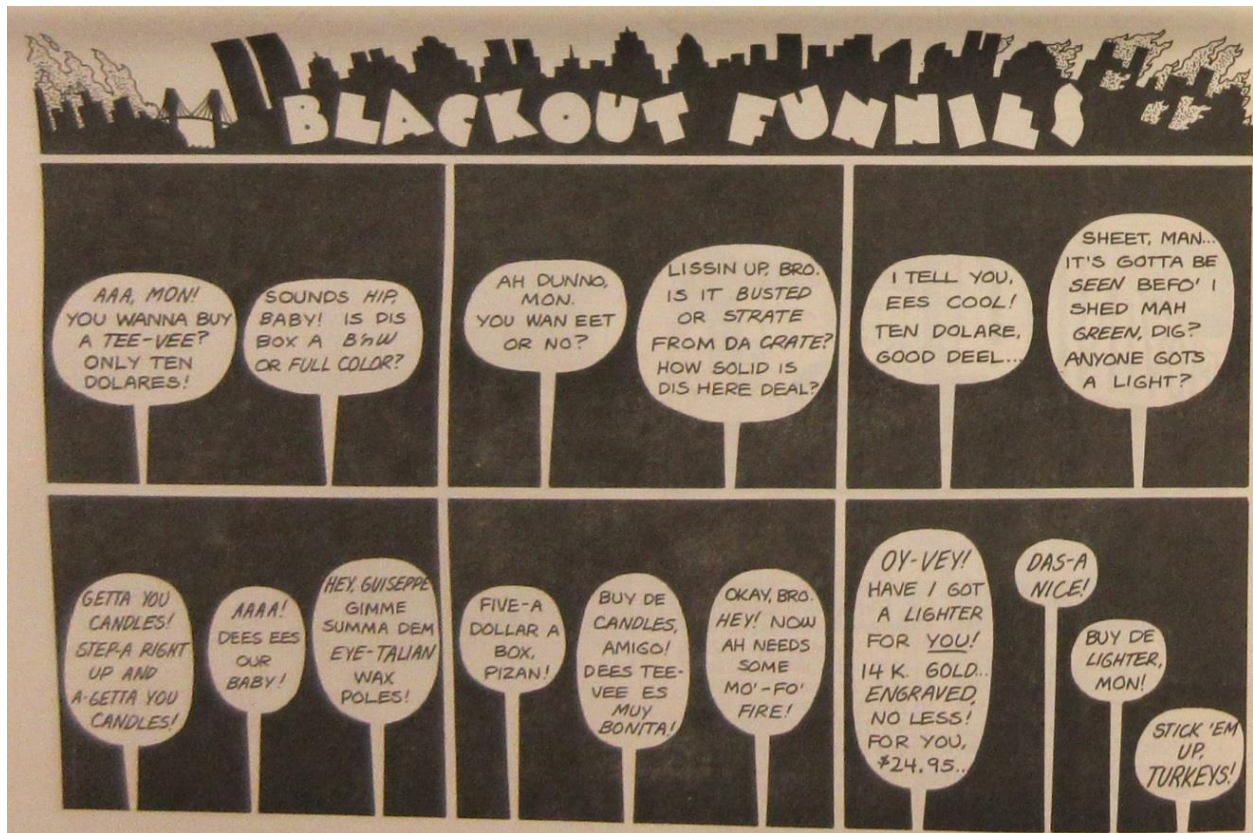


Figure 4.2: “Blackout Funnies” from *Punk* magazine vol. 1, no. 11, October/November 1977

appeared in 1979. Black musicians in New York City had become ghettoized through decades of racial segregation and redlining. Around the time rap became a recorded artform pop radio was likewise entering its most segregated period since the 1940s.³ Even when rap musicians began to perform in disco nightclubs, they continued to be ghettoized; the City Planning Commission and the Board of Standards and Appeals aggressively zoned residential areas to keep discos, and their black and queer club-goers, from encroaching beyond Harlem. As Richard Goldstein reported, these zoning tactics were a blatant attempt to “confi[n]e minorities so the gentry can breathe

³ Alan Light, ed., *The Vibe History of Hip Hop* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998), 26-27.

free.”⁴ As late as 1987, the New York City chief of city artists’ accreditations would not accredit any rap musicians “because she did not consider their work to be music or art.”⁵

Mark Anthony Neal argues that early hip-hop emerged from a de facto state of racial segregation in a post-industrial urban landscape, and that this segregation was, arguably, more insidious than the legal segregation of the pre-Civil Rights era.⁶ Federal housing projects ostensibly built for the working poor also ensured that the poorest blacks remained socially and economically isolated.⁷ Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, approximately 60,000 Bronx homes, whose residents were disproportionately black and Puerto Rican, were razed. The racial minorities who were displaced lived in the South Bronx in the 1970s, “while facing social isolation, economic fragility, truncated communication media, and shrinking social service organizations, began building their own cultural networks, which would prove to be resilient and responsive in the age of high technology.”⁸ And yet the popular media depicted “the black poor or underclass as human spectacle . . . parlaying a clear sense of social difference from ‘blackness’ for many mainstream consumers.”⁹

In this chapter, I describe how amateurism became racialized when white downtown musicians confronted black rap musicians from Harlem and the Bronx in New York City in the 1970s. I first show how the historical exclusion of black musicians from the downtown scene led

4 Richard Goldstein, “Got to Slo Disco,” *Village Voice*, November 12, 1979.

5 Quoted in Richard Kostelanetz, *Artists’ SoHo: 49 Episodes of Intimate History* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 186.

6 Mark Anthony Neal, “Postindustrial Soul: Black Popular Music at the Crossroads,” in *That’s the Joint!: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*, ed. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal (New York: Routledge, 2004), 366.

7 *Ibid.*, 367.

8 Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 31, 33-34.

9 Neal, 367.

to a segregated music scene that influenced the racial formation of both groups. By comparing how critics and artists used the term “primitivism” to describe the music of both white downtown musicians and black rap musicians from Harlem and the Bronx, I demonstrate how a term intended to identify a positive energy in the former became derogatory when describing the latter. In the last part of this chapter, I investigate the racialized discourses that shaped the listening practices of audiences who claimed rap had no melody, and who characterized rappers as inept musicians. Through an analysis of the Funky Four Plus One’s performance of “Rappin’ and Rockin’ the House” at the Kitchen in 1980, I demonstrate how such opinions were based on false perceptions of the music caused by racial biases.

Michael Omi and Howard Winant define “racial formation” as “a process of historically situated projects” by which “racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed.”¹⁰ These projects are a matter of both social structure and cultural representation. In other words, racial formation occurs “through a linkage between structure and representation. . . . Racial projects connect what race *means* in a particular discursive practice and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experiences are racially *organized*, based upon that meaning.”¹¹ Racial projects are the building blocks of racial formation and operate through a social hegemony that is simultaneously structuring and signifying.¹² On the micro-social level, this linkage often appears as “common sense,” i.e. through the assumption and expectation that people will act out their apparent racial identities, and “indeed we become disoriented when they do not.”¹³ Omi and Winant interpret this common sense as part of a thoroughly racialized social

10 Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 55.

11 Ibid., 56.

12 Ibid., 68.

13 Ibid., 59.

structure that we are inserted into, often unconsciously through “quintessentially ideological” racial projects.¹⁴ Racial formation is always historically situated, yet Omi and Winant are careful to point out that contemporary racial formations are “the present-day outcomes of a complex historical evolution.” “By knowing something of how it evolved,” they argue, “we can perhaps better discern where it is headed.”¹⁵ My investigation into how racial discourses around the amateurism of early rap shaped white audiences’ listening practices in the late 1970s and early 1980s help to explain why racist perceptions of rap as amelodic and non-musical have persisted to the present day.

Part I: Segregation, Racism, and “Primitivism”

Self-conscious primitivism was central to punks who prized their inability to play and lack of musical knowledge. Fans and critics used such terms as “primitive” to describe the Sex Pistols’ lack of ability and to frame the band as unintelligent low-brows who, nonetheless, authentically tapped into rock ‘n’ roll’s anarchic rebelliousness. Lydia Lunch—who performed alongside members of the New York punk scene—described her approach to performance as one based on instinct and “primal urgency.”

Punks, and punk critics, defined the genre, in part, by its primitivism. Drawing on Norman Mailer’s definition of the hipster as “the wise primitive in a giant jungle,” Mark Jacobson described the punks he saw on the Bowery as, “a collection of wise primitives making incisive comments about a culture nobody even wanted to admit existed.”¹⁶ Similarly, Bernard

14 Ibid., 60.

15 Ibid., 61.

16 Mark Jacobson, “Cool in an Uncool Time: Teenage Hipster in the Modern World,” *Village Voice*, August 7, 1978.

Gendron argues that Lester Bangs and his colleagues at *Creem* defined punk in part by pointing out its particular “ineptness and amateurism.”¹⁷ Bangs wrote that the Stooges, for example, embodied the punk aesthetic through “the magic promise eternally made and occasionally fulfilled by rock: that a band can start out bone-primitive, untutored and uncertain, and evolve into a powerful and eloquent ensemble.”¹⁸ In an editorial in *Punk*, an unnamed author defines the word “punk” as “a beginner, an inexperienced hand,” and clarifying this with the conventional explanation that punk rock articulates the notion that “any kid can pick up a guitar and become a rock ‘n’ roll star, despite or because of his lack of ability, talent, intelligence, limitations and/or potential.” More specifically, though, the author explains that punk rock is rooted in rock ‘n’ roll as a “very primitive form of expression—like cave paintings or jungle sculpture.”¹⁹

Musicians and rock journalists initially pointed to similarities between rap and punk rock. Given their historical and geographic proximity, arising as they did in New York City during the 1970s, summaries of rap and punk rock were linked as “essentially grass-roots phenomena with dedicated followings of younger fans who view the music as something distinct from the slicker, more conservative sound of old-line bands.”²⁰ Bangs described rap as an essentially noisy genre, like punk, and wrote that he was “firmly convinced that one reason for the popularity of rap music, like disco and punk before it, is that it's so utterly annoying to those of use whose cup of blare it isn't.”²¹ Chris Stein from Blondie also referred to rap as “the closest thing to punk rock,”

17 Bernard Gendron, *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club: Popular Music and the Avant-Garde* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 234-235.

18 Lester Bangs, “Of Pop and Pies and Fun: A Program for Mass Liberation in the Form of a Stooges Review, or, Who’s the Fool?” *Creem* (November/December 1970): n.p.

19 This definition was included in an editorial reply to a letter written by Peter Crowley, the music director of Max’s Kansas City. “Editorial,” *Punk* 1 no. 3 (April 1976): n.p.

20 Stan West and Don Snowden, “Rap, Rap, Rapping at Top 10’s Door,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 21, 1981.

21 Lester Bangs, “A Reasonable Guide to Horrible Noise,” *Village Voice*, September 30, 1981.

comparing the do-it-yourself roots of punk to the technological innovations of turntablists and rappers: “As far as generation of kids who are literally finding their own voice, which is what the rapping literally is...the technology of the thing is fascinating, the turntables and that stuff.”²²

But Stein also pointed out significant class differences between the two groups: “Where the C.B.G.B. crowd, lower-middle and middle-class kids, had access to guitars and stuff, these guys don't have access to anything – all they have is microphones and voices.”²³

In spite of these similarities, white critics, shaped by implicit and explicit racial bias, criticized rap as a “simplistic” and “naïve” type of music. Richard Grabel, in one of the earliest mentions of rap in *New Musical Express* described the “grass roots” origins of a genre he thought was created by “fresh-faced and naïve” youth “who know more about street hustling than media hustling.”²⁴ In the *New York Times*, Stephen Holden remarked, “Not since the halcyon days of doo wop, has a style of street music emerged that combines this much innocence with a real communal exuberance.”²⁵ Patrick Goldstein declared that “unlike most dance records, the production is simple,” and that “[m]ost of rap’s appeal is in its joyous simplicity. Like most good pop music, it’s essentially the work of amateurs who often sound as if they had to sneak past the guard to get into the studio.”²⁶ The press also emphasized the “African ancestry” of rap music, linking the genre to “African rituals which call on young men to boast about themselves in order to build self-confidence on reaching manhood.”²⁷

22 Quoted in Andy Schwartz, “The Chick Side of Blondie,” *New York Rocker* 1, no. 34 (June 1981): 20.

23 Quoted in *Ibid.*

24 Richard Grabel, “The Funky Four + One: Rap, Rap, Rap,” *New Musical Express*, May 30, 1981.

25 Stephen Holden, “Pop: Flash and Furious 5,” *New York Times*, August 4, 1981.

26 Patrick Goldstein, “Rappin’: The New Sound of Soul,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 11, 1981.

27 West and Snowden, “Rap, Rap, Rapping at Top 10’s Door.”

As rap came into broader public awareness, the notion of its “primitivism” became linked directly to the narratives about the danger and decay of the Bronx. Jacobson explained that punks like Legs McNeil had extremely limited awareness of black experiences and that, “blacks were mostly on the radio, making the rotten disco music he hated, or in the first three pages of the *Daily News* hurting people.”²⁸ Li'l Rodney C from the Funky Four Plus One lamented that white people rarely ventured to the rap clubs in the Bronx because they viewed them as dangerous, while his bandmates Keith Keith and Jazzy Jeff thought that these fears were greatly exaggerated: “It wasn't about fighting or nothing. Everybody'd just be dancing and we'd be hip-hopping and it was a good party.”²⁹ Rock journalists contributed to this narrative by depicting rap as an as “aural dark alley, a seemingly anarchic collage of ghetto patois and jagged rhythms” that would “disorient” listeners used to “the sunny, squeaky-clean rock popular today.”³⁰ The photographer who worked on Grabel’s feature about Grandmaster Flash suggested taking a photo of Grandmaster Flash in front of “a particularly wasted-looking shell of a building” in his neighborhood, to which the musician responded by “screwing up his face in distaste at the idea.”³¹ Nonetheless, Grabel opened his feature on Grandmaster Flash with a gritty depiction of the Bronx as a “wasteland”: “[T]he evidence of advanced decay is everywhere. The buildings at the end of the block are abandoned, their windows smashed or boarded up. Garbage and rubble is piled on the sidewalk. The vacant lots that dot the landscape are also strewn with rubble. Grandmaster Flash lives on this block.”³²

28 Jacobson, “Cool in an Uncool Time: Teenage Hipster in the Modern World.”

29 Grabel, “The Funky Four + One: Rap, Rap, Rap.”

30 Patrick Goldstein, “Rappin’: The New Sound of Soul.”

31 Richard Grabel, “Grandmaster Flash: Flash is Fast, Flash is Cool,” *New Musical Express*, September 26, 1981.

32 Ibid.

The racial biases that mark the white punk reception of rap reflect the segregation that kept these musical scenes apart from one another throughout the 1970s.³³ Richard Grabel noted, “It’s a symptom of the cultural gulf that separates black and white in America, . . . that rappers music could have been fermenting in the clubs of Harlem since 1972 without anyone south of 96th Street being aware of it till barely a year ago.”³⁴ When rappers began releasing commercial recordings in 1979, it took two years for the *Village Voice*, one of the most widely read downtown newspapers, to start reviewing them. The music editor of the *Village Voice*, Robert Christgau, had a policy of not reviewing twelve-inch singles—a format that was largely reserved for DJs and dance records. Regarding the art scene that operated parallel to punk in downtown Manhattan, Bangs bluntly pointed out that, “Most of the SoHo bands are as white as John Cage.”³⁵ The standard historical narrative of the downtown art scene is that artists thrived in the cheap, dilapidated lofts of SoHo, which allowed them to congregate in large, affordable spaces. This financial concern was certainly an important factor in the development of the downtown scene, but as Ann Fensterstock points out cheap real estate was available in a number of New York City neighborhoods. A wider set of political, economic, and cultural variables ultimately led downtown Manhattan to become an attractive site to these artists.³⁶ In the early 1960s, land developers targeted the empty lofts these artists later occupied. However, the New York City Planning Commission report, written by Chester Rapkin, an economics professor at Columbia

33 Jonathan Toubin detailed the key artists and events that eventually brought together these segregated artistic scenes, describing them as actively working to forge connections in spite of so many geographic and cultural barriers. Jonathan Toubin, “Uptown-Downtown: Hip Hop Music in Downtown Manhattan in the Early 1980s,” in *Critical Minded: New Approaches to Hip Hop Studies*, ed. Ellie M. Hisama and Evan Rapport (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 42.

34 Richard Grabel, “Kurtis Blow: Blow by Blow,” *New Musical Express*, October 11, 1980.

35 Lester Bangs, “The White Noise Supremacists,” *Village Voice*, April 30, 1979.

36 Ann Fensterstock, *Art on the Block: Tracking the New York Art World from SoHo to the Bowery, Bushwick and Beyond* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2013), 1-14.

University, demonstrated that 40 percent of the workforce in the 650 businesses belonging to the garment, rag, and hat industry in SoHo was Puerto Rican, 20 percent black, and the remainder were largely Jews and European immigrants.³⁷ By arguing that these industries were crucial to protecting minority livelihoods in New York City, Rapkin was able to protect SoHo from redevelopment. By the end of the 1960s, about 2000 artists had moved into the SoHo lofts.³⁸

Throughout the 1970s, musicians from Harlem and the Bronx were almost entirely absent from the downtown punk and art music scenes, and yet there were occasions for contact. A distinction also must be made here between the punk scene around the Bowery and the avant-garde/SoHo scene. Downtown art galleries started exhibiting graffiti around 1973, when the United Graffiti Artists were featured at the Razor Gallery. The first lasting connections between downtown artists and Bronx artists came about when the SoHo artist Stefan Eins opened the gallery Fashion Moda in the South Bronx in 1978. Eins chose to open a gallery in the South Bronx “partly because of its media image as the worst ghetto in the nation,” hoping to connect “the street . . . with the international art world.”³⁹ Starting in 1979, before rappers ever performed in downtown Manhattan, Fashion Moda hosted concerts that featured both downtown rock bands and local Bronx rappers, such as the Wicked Wizards. In June 1980, Fashion Moda co-curated, with the art collective Collaborative Projects, “The Times Square Show,” a massive exhibit in an abandoned massage parlor in Times Square that presented work from over 100 artists and included a mix of both downtown and uptown artists. In *Artforum*, Lucy R. Lippard described the “The Times Square Show” as “a weird kind of cultural colonization that worked because

37 Ibid., 29.

38 Ibid., 30.

39 Quoted in Calvin Tomkins, “The Art World, Alternatives,” *New Yorker*, December 26, 1983.

colonizers and colonized had something in common,” namely a need to exhibit “‘unsalable’ works.”⁴⁰ Lippard’s review portrayed the exhibit as “a cry of rage against current artworldliness and a ghastly glance into the future of art.”⁴¹ Richard Goldstein compared the conceptual approach of the artists involved in “The Times Square Show” to punk’s stripped-down aesthetic referring to the exhibit as “three chord art anyone can play.”⁴² Lippard described the art’s “ineptness, and the ramifications of that ineptness” as the most significant outcome of the exhibit. Specifically, Lippard interpreted an egalitarian politics in “The Times Square Show”: “the artists’ role may be to open up the making and distribution of art to everyone . . . Mass production *by* the masses instead of *for* the masses.”⁴³

Black musicians did perform in downtown Manhattan during the 1970s but were excluded from many white institutions of new music, including the Kitchen. In 1979, the Kitchen came under criticism for almost entirely excluding black composers and performers from their *New Music, New York* festival.⁴⁴ When some participants questioned why the festival was so heavily weighted toward white musicians, *Village Voice* critic Tom Johnson dismissed any potential racism behind the Kitchen’s programming. He claimed the organizers went beyond “black Americans vs. white Americans” by excluding music by artists from pretty much every racial and ethnic group in the city, and that the decision had “more to do with recent history than with overt racism.”⁴⁵ According to Johnson, “Loft jazz has been quite visible and successful in

40 Lucy R. Lippard, “Sex and Death and Shock and Schlock: A Long Review of The Times Square Show,” *Artforum* 19, no. 2 (October 1980): 51.

41 Ibid.

42 Richard Goldstein, “The First Radical Art Show of the ‘80s,” *Village Voice*, June 16, 1980.

43 Lippard, 54.

44 Tim Lawrence, *Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor, 1980-1983* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 85-86.

45 Tom Johnson, “New Music, New York, New Institution,” *Village Voice*, July 2, 1979.

its own way, and for an institution like the Kitchen an attempt to take this genre under its own wing would be far more patronizing than constructive.”⁴⁶ The loft jazz that Johnson refers to was, at the time, one of the central, thriving jazz scenes in the United States and was known for holding concerts in lofts that literally surrounded the Kitchen. Gendron points out that downtown lofts had become the major showcase for jazz performers in New York, including jazz experimentalists Rashied Ali and David Murray.⁴⁷ Yet Johnson’s statement evades the problem of how racial biases may have been affecting programming choices. The Kitchen had not programmed any jazz performances until 1976, and when they finally chose to open their doors to improvised musicians there was “considerable outrage among members of the art music community.”⁴⁸ Chatham wrote that “‘improvisation’ was a dirty word in the hallowed halls of the music establishment” at the Kitchen, and that in the mid-1970s, “There was a very real perception of an hierarchical pyramid with classical music on the top, ‘jazz’ somewhere lower down in the middle; and of course, rock was barely considered music.”⁴⁹ In his lecture at *New Music, New York*, Johnson lamented “the Kitchen syndrome” that “represents the last of the ethnocentric movements in new music,” and questioned, “isn’t it crucial for artists to begin thinking about forms of music that will communicate to more than one ethnic group?”⁵⁰

Many white punk musicians and critics in the downtown music scene viewed black people as almost fictional characters of city life, and treated black musicians with outright

46 Ibid.

47 Bernard Gendron, “The Downtown Music Scene,” in *The Downtown Book: The New York Art Scene, 1974-1984*, ed. Marvin J. Taylor (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 49.

48 Rhys Chatham, “5 Generations of Composers at the Kitchen,” in *The Kitchen Turns Twenty: A Retrospective Anthology*, ed. Lee Morrissey (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 19.

49 Ibid., 15-16.

50 Tom Johnson, “The Decline of Western Music,” *Village Voice*, July 23, 1979.

hostility and racism. In his essay, “The White Noise Supremacists,” Lester Bangs criticizes the widespread racism and systemic white supremacy that had come to define the downtown music scene by 1979. According to Bangs, the punks’ position of self-marginalization made racial epithets and racist attitudes seem hip and cool. Bangs blamed himself in part for contributing to a punk culture, in the pages of *Creem*, that “represented a reaction against the hippie counterculture and what a lot of us regarded as its pious pussyfooting around questions of racial and sexual identity, questions we were quite prepared to drive over with bulldozers.”⁵¹ One of Bangs’s black friends, quoted in his essay, describes CBGB’s, “like down they’re *striving* to be offensive however they can, so it’s more vocal and they’re freer. It’s semi-mob thinking.”⁵² As Bangs explained, punks prided themselves on being uniquely abject: “One of the things that makes the punk stance unique is how it seems to assume substance or at least style by the *abdication of power: Look at me! I’m a cretinous little wretch! And proud of it!*”⁵³ Over time, punks’ attempt to create a new backlash against decency developed into a culture of everyday racism and “[a]fter a while this casual, even ironic embrace of the totems of bigotry crosses over into the real poison.”⁵⁴ The swastika, for example, stands as a metaphor for how punks’ compulsive need to shock can generated the cynical, misanthropic attitude that led to everyday racism: “This scene and the punk stance in general are riddled with self-hate, which is always reflexive, and anytime you conclude that life stinks and the human race mostly amounts to a pile of shit, you’ve got the perfect breeding ground for fascism.”⁵⁵ Putting it bluntly, the “resident

51 Bangs, “The White Noise Supremacists.”

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

punk” and co-founder of *Punk* magazine Legs McNeil declared, “blacks have their culture and we have ours.”⁵⁶

Some critics also heard an explicit emphasis on musical whiteness in punk’s careful revision of the blues tropes that had informed rock ‘n’ roll up to that point. Bangs described “an evolution of sound, rhythm, and, stance running from the Velvets through the Stooges to the Ramones and their children that takes us farther and farther from the black-stud posture of Mick Jagger that Lou Reed and Iggy partake in but that Joey Ramone certainly doesn’t.”⁵⁷ Christgau argued that punk was a style formed by a new generation of rock musicians who ignored, or openly rejected, the most overt blues-based features of rock ‘n’ roll. He described this style as “rock and roll that differentiates itself from its (fundamentally black and rural) sources by taking on the crude, ugly, perhaps brutal facts of the (white and urban) prevailing culture, rather than hiding behind its bland façade.”⁵⁸ Mark Jacobson similarly theorized that punks had broken significantly with Norman Mailer’s notion of American “hipster” subculture by not striving to present themselves as the “white negro.”⁵⁹ As Jacobson explained, black culture began to be redefined as middle-class, and thus “square,” in the 1970s, causing a serious dilemma for the white negro model of hipsters: “If Legs were a hipster, and CBGB a hipster scene, where were the blacks? I can’t remember seeing more than three or four blacks in any CBGB crowd. Not one punk-rock band has been dominated by black musicians. No CBGB band even seems to borrow

56 Quoted in Jacobson, “Cool in an Uncool Time: Teenage Hipster in the Modern World.”

57 Bangs, “The White Noise Supremacists.”

58 Robert Christgau, “Avant-Punk: A Cult Explodes...and a Movement is Born,” *Village Voice*, October 24, 1977. Gendron later noted that punk discourses in the 1970s were largely shaped by a generation shift among white male teenagers. “Punk/new wave may well be the first significant rock music movement not to display an explicitly blues or soul foundation,” he wrote. Gendron, *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club*, 284.

59 Jacobson, “Cool in an Uncool Time: Teenage Hipster in the Modern World.”

firsthand from traditional R&B or blues sources.”⁶⁰ Instead, young punks like McNeil began to look toward white ethnic cultures—especially those of Italians and Irish Americans—to find new paradigms of countercultural toughness. This toughness was marked by aggressive racism because “by black-fearing Squares (as well as black-fearing hipsters)” these ethnic groups were supposedly “the only group of whites capable of fending off the onrush of ‘them.’”⁶¹

Punks often direct their racial fears toward disco, which the younger generation of punks associated explicitly with “black music.” In an interview with WPJL radio DJ Tony Pigg, Pamela Brown revealed *Punk* magazine’s biased tendency to equate disco with blackness:

Punk: What do you like?

Tony: I like black music.

Punk: (horrified) Disco?!

Tony: No! How old are you?

Punk: 22.

Tony: Black music is like... young people tend to think black music is disco music...that it means the same thing. It doesn’t.⁶²

For Brown and punks of her generation, the term “black music” immediately referenced disco.

McNeil was known to use racial epithets liberally when referring to disco, which he considered to be the result of an “unholy alliance between blacks and gays.”⁶³ Bangs also noticed this attitude amongst New York punks when he would DJ records by black artists: “I did what we always used to do at parties in Detroit—put on soul records so everybody could dance—I began to hear this: ‘What’re you playing all that nigger disco shit for, Lester?’ ‘That’s not nigger disco shit,’ I snarled, ‘that’s *Otis Redding*, you assholes!’”⁶⁴ One of the only punk-associated acts in

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid.

62 “Interview with Tony Pigg,” *Punk* 1, no. 3 (April 1976), n.p.

63 Jacobson, “Cool in an Uncool Time: Teenage Hipster in the Modern World.”

64 Bangs, “The White Noise Supremacists.”

downtown New York during the 1970s to borrow from disco explicitly, the no wave band James White and the Blacks, did so condescendingly; as the bandleader James Chance explained, “disco is *disgusting* . . . There’s something in it that’s always interested me—*monotony*. It’s sort of jungle music, . . . Really primitive.”⁶⁵ On the first page of the first issue of *Punk*, the flagship magazine of the New York punk scene, editor-in-chief John Holmstrom declared the magazine’s position on disco: “Kill yourself. Jump off a fuckin’ cliff. Drive nails into your head. Become a robot and join the staff at Disneyland. OD. Anything. Just don’t listen to disco shit. I’ve seen that canned crap take real live people and turn them into dogs! And vice versa. The epitome of all that’s wrong with western civilization is disco.”⁶⁶ Further, disco regularly ranked toward the top of *Punk*’s “Bottom 99” list—a feature that listed all things hated by punks, based partly on suggestions sent in by readers. Though the authors of this list regularly included ironic and self-effacing entries—including “John Holmstrom” and “*Punk* magazine”—they placed disco alongside other things genuinely despised by the magazine staff, including “faggots,” “feminists,” and “affirmative action.”⁶⁷ Despite the fact that Holmstrom thought Donna Summer was “DISCO SHIT and [he] REALLY HATE[S] DISCO SHIT,” he wrote a review of one of her singles after Casablanca Records sent a press kit to *Punk*. Holmstrom’s entire review focuses on Summer’s appearance, without even mentioning the name of the record: “Donna Summer is beautiful and sexy and pretty and sexy with those big thick sexy lips and thick sexy thighs and I don’t care if it is disco shit. I play it and I like it. The first song is this dumb acorn that takes up the entire first side and it’s all about how Donna wants to get laid.” At the end of the review,

⁶⁵ Alan Platt, “No Chance,” *SoHo Weekly News*, January 4, 1979.

⁶⁶ John Holmstrom, “Death to Disco Shit! Long Live the Rock!,” *Punk* 1, no. 1 (January 1976), n.p.

⁶⁷ *Punk* 1, no. 16 (March/April 1979), n.p.; *Punk* 1, no. 17 (May/June 1979), n.p.

Homstrom offers a particularly dehumanizing summary, declaring, “I’m not threatened by Donna Summer. I’d do it.”⁶⁸

The earliest rap recordings were closely associated with disco. Most of the early rap records sampled from disco recordings—such as the Sugarhill Gang’s “Rapper’s Delight,” which borrows its instrumental track from Chic’s hit disco song, “Good Times”—and rappers often performed in disco nightclubs. Moreover, journalists described rap as a tougher, more grassroots version of disco: “Rapping may be the current form of black, teenage street music, but it has ample antecedents. The call-and-response is analogous to field hollers and gospel music; the sexual bravado comes from blues and soul; the beat is an extension of disco.”⁶⁹ In *Rolling Stone*, John Morthland described the difference between the “older and more affluent blacks” in mid-town nightclubs who “preferred disco music with vocals and rappers who used crowd response” and the “ghetto” version rap: “Up in Harlem and the South Bronx, ghetto kids (dubbed B-Boys, for Bronx-Boys, Beat-Boys or Break-Boys, depending on who you ask) liked DJs who rapped all the way through breaks without crowd response.”⁷⁰

The first times punk rock audiences heard rap music live, they reacted with shock, and occasionally with violence. When Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five opened for the Clash on June 20, 1981 at the Bonds International Casino in Times Square, for example, fans booed and pelted them with trash. (Though rappers had been performing in nightclubs and discos for several years by this point, it had only been a few months since the first ever rap concert at a live music venue, when Sugar Hill Records hosted the “Ritz Rap Party” at the Ritz in March of that

68 John Holstrom, “Review,” *Punk* 1, no. 4 (July 1976), n.p.

69 John Morthland, “Kurtis Blow Raps His Way to the Top,” *Rolling Stone*, March 4, 1981.

70 Ibid.

year.)⁷¹ Undoubtedly, few of the audience members had ever heard rap music before seeing Grandmaster Flash at Bonds. Bonds was a rock club that had recently been converted from a gay disco, and that had a legal capacity of 1750. One reporter estimated that the club sold over 4000 tickets to that night's concert.⁷² The June 20 concert was the first of a 16-night engagement for the Clash. The cramped crowd had clearly come to see a "hard rock show" and did not "give a tinker's cuss about The Clash's leftist principles or third world connections. They have come for their money's worth and nothing more."⁷³ Mick Farren lamented the audience's "thick-ear conservatism," and a "racism that lurks just below the surface of the Clash audience." "Their talkover funk interplay was clearly too much for three quarters of the crowd," he wrote, "white, Wonderbread-fed, post-Travolta kids from the suburbs. To them, rap is the anthem of the ghettos, the music of the kids with whom they fight in high school. The Furious Five flee the stage after a scant 15 minutes in a hail of garbage."⁷⁴ One member of the Furious Five noted that this was an unusual experience, and that the Clash's audience was unusually aggressive, remarking, "We've played a lot of places to a lot of faces, but we've never seen shit like this."⁷⁵ Other black opening acts for the Clash, including Mikey Dread and ESG, experienced a similarly negative response. These reactions upset Mick Jones from the Clash: "It's disgusting, it's so fucking narrow-minded. . . . They're like little kids with roller skates and Walkmans on their heads. I don't think our influence gets through to them at all. It's really cushioned here. It's the mass hypnotism." Flash remarked that they were not prepared for the punk rock crowd, and

71 Toubin, 50.

72 Mick Farren, "How the Clash Fed the Wonderbread Generation, Made the Mountain Come to Mohammed—And Other Miracles," *New Musical Express*, June 20, 1981.

73 Ibid.

74 Ibid.

75 Ibid.

actually forgave the audience for their prejudices “‘cause they don't understand it. It's like teaching a baby to talk. It takes a while to learn.”⁷⁶ He even blamed himself for being “egotistical” and resolved to adjust to the crowd the next time they had an opportunity to open up for a punk group, “do my homework on what they enjoy and try my best to be flexible. Rather than just go on playing disco, which they can't relate to, go out with some punk rockish records for that one particular day.”⁷⁷

White audiences accepted transgressions from white punk bands, which could be contextualized in the tradition of rock rebellion. But new music from black teenagers was inherently confusing, and potentially threatening. When Christ Stein and Debby Harry of Blondie invited the Funky Four Plus One to perform on *Saturday Night Live* on February 14, 1981 after seeing them perform at the Kitchen, they “freaked everybody out.” Stein attributed this reaction to racial fear: “But if we'd brought, I dunno, the fuckin' Dickies or the Damned on, it would've just been ‘well, here they are, nice boys, super-loud though, turn it down, would you, boys?’ and that would've been it. When you bring in four black kids with microphones and a deejay, it's ‘uh-oh, what is this?’”⁷⁸ Despite the similarities that critics noticed between white punk rock bands and black rap groups, when the Funky Four Plus One performed rap music on national television for the first time they did so as complete outsiders.⁷⁹ The *Saturday Night Live* producers were especially skeptical of allowing a live turntablist. Stein recalled, “I remember trying to explain to [the producers] how scratching worked. Trying to verbalize what that is for

76 Grandmaster Flash, quoted in Grabel, “Grandmaster Flash: Flash is Fast, Flash is Cool.”

77 Quoted in Ibid. The following year, the Clash returned to New York with another rapper, Kurtis Blow, as their opening act who was “treated politely.” Stephen Holden, “Rock-Rap: The Clash,” *New York Times*, September 5, 1982.

78 Quoted in Schwartz, 20.

79 Toubin, 47.

someone who has no idea, it's really difficult," and ultimately the Funky Four Plus One were forced to use a prerecorded backing tape.⁸⁰

Part II: Racializing Listening Practices

The reception of rap was somewhat different in the SoHo avant-garde scene than in the punk scene in downtown New York. When the Funky Four Plus One gave the first ever rap performance in downtown New York at the Kitchen on November 22, 1980, for example, as part of a three-night festival "Dubbed in Glamour," they were well-received by their mostly white audience. Organized by the art critic Edit deAk, "Dubbed in Glamour" featured performances, slideshows, videotapes, films, and live music by women artists. In a review of the performances, John Howell wrote that Manhattan was "another world to these Bronx groovers" who "took turns at individual capsule bios spoken/sung in alliterative slang."⁸¹ The context of this feminist art festival may partly account for the positive reaction the Funky Four Plus One received, compared to the negative reaction to their *Saturday Night Live* performance only a few months later. Frank Rose argued that the racism in the punk scene derived from its machismo; tough guys treated racism as "the final badge of manliness" that fed into a "white man's fantasy" that middle-class teenagers could gain some working-class authenticity, creating a link between "the suburban kid and the macho preserve of the all-American shitshoveler."⁸² Audiences at the Kitchen during this time were steeped in minimalist music, and had witnessed performances by composers who sought to critique the Western art music hierarchy that privileged harmonic

80 Quoted in Andrew Mason, "Sound Image," in *Wax Poetics* no. 60 (December 2014), 44.

81 John Howell, "They Live By Night," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 5 (1981), 12.

82 Frank Rose, "The Butch Fantasy: America Goes Punk," *Village Voice*, August 9, 1976.

variation over rhythm. As one reviewer for the the *East Village Eye*, wrote rap made sense to the art music scene because it was “something different and exciting to listen to, . . . After all, isn’t this what ‘New Music’ is all about?”⁸³

Not all white critics and audiences reacted to rap with hostility. Some rock critics, for example, tended to approach rap with distanced curiosity. Rock critics in the 1970s were almost entirely white men concerned with legitimizing white rock musicians; in the rare instances when a critic from *Creem* or *Rolling Stone* covered black musicians, they often placed their music into a separate, lesser category: “One *listened* to white rock for significance and one *danced* to black music for fun.”⁸⁴ Grabel warned other critics against the tendency “to play instant sociologist” with a new, unfamiliar style of music like rap, which he described as “so dripping with authenticity it’s in danger of being put on a pedestal.” Referencing the Funky Four Plus One’s performance at the Kitchen, Grabel wrote, “There is a tendency among the white, downtown art elite in New York to treat rap as exotica to be put on display.”⁸⁵ David Samuels argued that the well-received social commentaries in the music of early rappers like Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five were “for the most part transparent attempts to sell records to whites by any means necessary. . . . drawing fulsome praise from white rock critics, raised on the protest ballads of Bob Dylan and Phil Ochs.”⁸⁶ Mark Anthony Neal argues otherwise, and considers Grandmaster Flash’s “The Message” to “counter the iconography of fear, menace, and spectacle that dominated mass-mediated perceptions of contemporary black life by giving voice to the

83 “Grandmaster Flash and Melle Mel, ‘White Lines (Don’t Do It),’” *East Village Eye*, November 1983.

84 Gendron, *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club*, 284.

85 Grabel, “The Funky Four + One: Rap, Rap, Rap.”

85 Ibid.

86 David Samuels, “The Rap on Rap: The “Black Music” that Isn’t Either,” in *That’s the Joint!: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*, ed. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal (New York: Routledge, 2004), 149.

everyday human realities of black life in ways that could not be easily reduced to commodifiable stereotypes.”⁸⁷ Whether or not groups like Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five did this, some white critics nonetheless still saw their music as appealing to an “evocation of an age-old image of blackness: a foreign, sexually charged, and criminal underworld against which the norms of white society are defined, and, by extension, through which they may be defied.”⁸⁸

Although white critics noted the rhythmic complexity in rap, they also displayed a distinct bias against rhythm as a “problem.” They believed that rap lacked pitch content, which they considered a constitutive feature of popular music. They were unable to hear melody or harmony in this music. Grabel referred to the Funky Four Plus One’s single, “That’s the Joint,” as “the rhythmic paradigm of the form” and described it in terms of its virtuosity: “The rap-rhyming is almost choral in arrangement, the five voices cutting back and forth in counterpoint, teasing the beat, pulling back and then rushing to the break— ‘That's the joint’ chanted in unison. The backing track is impeccable.”⁸⁹ Meanwhile, John Rockwell wrote in the *New York Times* that, “Rap has its limits, in that it eschews the melodic element that has been essential to most popular music” in favor of this increased attention on rhythm.⁹⁰ Stan West and Don Snowden, music critics for *Los Angeles Times*, explained that rap, as a genre, had “some problems” because “most rap records are just displays of macho-man boasting” and that the “unanswered question is whether the rappers can create enough different rhythmic grooves to sustain interest over the long run.”⁹¹ In one review, Patrick Goldstein quoted from record store

87 Neal, 372.

88 Samuels, 147-148.

89 Richard Grabel, “The Funky Four + One: Rap, Rap, Rap.”

90 John Rockwell, “Rap: The Furious Five,” *New York Times*, September 12, 1982.

91 West and Snowden, “Rap, Rap, Rapping at Top 10’s Door.”

patrons who referred to Grandmaster Flash's music as "awful" and "garbage," and a record store clerk who declared his preference for "melody" over "jive-talking."⁹² Robert Palmer bluntly described the Funky Four Plus One as "a kind of rhythmic noise," and explained that "melody and harmony have no place in their music."⁹³

This critique of rap as lacking melody and harmony is based on false perceptions of the music. In the video recording of their performance of "Rappin' and Rockin' the House" at the Kitchen, the Funky Four Plus One's music clearly relies upon both harmony and melody. The backing track, played by DJ Breakout, is the instrumental track featured on the B-side of group's recorded single. This instrumental track quotes and modifies elements of Cheryl Lynn's disco single from 1978, "Got to Be Real." Rather than sampling the song directly, the group's record label, Enjoy Records, hired the studio producer Errol Bedward (better known as Pumpkin) to record a new version with a live studio band. Though "Got to Be Real" is instantly recognizable to fans of disco and soul, the sole musical feature that Pumpkin retained from the original is the bass line. The ostinato bass relies on strongly functional harmonic tendencies. The song is in the key of A minor, but the bassline begins on F, which acts as a tendency tone, dropping down to E in the next beat before resolving to the tonic. The instrumental track of "Rappin' and Rockin' the House" strips away the keyboards, horns, and strings from "Got to Be Real" and adds an extra layer of hand percussion over the live drums, leaving a relatively thinly textured rhythm section of guitar, bass, drums, and hand percussion. Moreover, Pumpkin added an instrumental introduction and interlude that features hand percussion over a steady quarter-note pulse from the drummer, as well as simplifying the bass line and guitar chords by reducing their harmonic

92 Patrick Goldstein, "Rappin': The New Sound of Soul."

93 Robert Palmer, "Pop: The Sugar Hill Gang," *New York Times*, March 13, 1981.

function to a F minor to A minor (bvi-i) progression. The guitarist on “Rappin’ and Rockin’ the House” closely matches the chords of the original riff, but directly alters the harmonic content of the instrumental track by adding an extra ornament by highlighting the flat 7th that appears at the turnaround of each phrase.

Despite impromptu changes to the song in this live version, the group responds flawlessly to appropriate call-and-response passages and come together for unison recitations without fail. Other than the intact introduction—in which each member offers an introductory couplet—the Funky Four Plus One performed a highly altered version of “Rappin’ and Rockin’ the House” at the Kitchen. The group skips several verses, and each rapper cuts lines out of their verses while adding and improvising others. Many of the transitional lines at the ends of each verse, in which the rappers “pass the mic,” are entirely original and distinct from the recorded version of “Rappin’ and Rockin’ the House.”

As the Funky Four Plus One’s performance at the Kitchen shows, white critics’ insistence on rap’s musical limitations, and their description of it as “rhythmic noise” that lacked pitch content is not accurate. Such criticisms reveal not only these critics’ unstated, unexplained biases about rhythm, but also show how critics failed to acknowledge the myriad ways groups like the Funky Four Plus One used vocal inflections in conjunction with several distinct rhythms to create a sense of flow. As one example, in the final two verses of their Kitchen performance Jazzy Jeff and Sha Rock rap about 14 different rhythms in these two verses alone [Figure 4.3]. In the first part of Jazzy Jeff’s verse (beginning at 5:30), the rapper cycles through about five different rhythms, adding significant ornaments and alterations to each rhythm as he raps. Beginning with the line, “Just give me a minute, you’ll never forget it,” Jazzy Jeff then shifts into a new rhythm, which he repeats for five lines, before shifting to an entirely

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| <p>Jazzy Jeff [5:30-6:25]</p> <p><u>See I'm Jazzy Jeff I am the best</u> R1</p> <p>I can make your body move from right to left R2</p> <p>I can make your body move from left to right R2</p> <p><u>I can make your body move, I mean, all night</u> R2*</p> <p><u>I'm the one M.C that's proven to be</u> R3</p> <p><u>The ladies number one nominee</u> R4</p> <p>Cause I got a little rep and a fancy style R2</p> <p>I'm above M.C's, I'm on top of the pile R3</p> <p><u>See I rhyme all the time I mess with mine</u> R1*</p> <p>I make M.C's want to bite my rhyme R1*</p> <p>I consider myself as one of the best R3</p> <p><u>Cause I have in store the keys to finesse</u> R5</p> <p>My rhymes are slick my rhymes are bad R1</p> <p><u>It's something other M.C's never had</u> R2*</p> <p>Cause when I start to rock I just don't stop R1</p> <p>I said def def rhymes no M.C can top R5*</p> <p>[Just] give me a minute, you'll never forget it R6</p> <p><u>[Just] give me the hour, I'll give you the power</u> R6</p> <p>[Just] give me the test, I'll do it the best R6</p> <p>[Just] give me the time, I'll give you a rhyme R6</p> <p>[Just] give me a while, you'll like my style R6</p> <p>Just give me the mic and I'll rock rock all night R6*</p> <p>[[Rock the house, <u>Jazzy Jeff rock shock rock turn it out</u>]] R7</p> <p>Sha Rock, don't stop lil lady R8</p> <p>Just get on your mic R9</p> <p>[Just] get on your mic R9</p> <p>[Just] <u>get on your mic [[and rock the house right]]</u> R9*</p> | <p>Sha Rock [6:25-7:15]</p> <p>Let's go to work, to the go to work R10</p> <p>You go, there go to, go, go, to go to R11</p> <p>Work your body, work, work your body R11</p> <p><u>But make sure you don't jerk your body</u> R12</p> <p>Then do it [do it], and then do it [do it] R13</p> <p>And then, do it, do it, do do it, do it R11</p> <p>Say do that body to the funky side R6*</p> <p>Come on everybody it's party do time R6*</p> <p>Get up a get down to the funky sound R6*</p> <p>Everybody out there come on and get down R2*</p> <p>Uptown rock the house and R14</p> <p>Downtown rock the house and R14</p> <p>Eastside rock the house and R14</p> <p>Westside rock the house and R14</p> <p>Manhattan rock the house R14</p> <p>Wherever you are keep cooling out R12*</p> <p>To the beat that makes you wanna rap R1</p> <p>C'mon Rockwell cut out the crap R5*</p> <p>And when you get on the mic and start the rap R5*</p> <p>And let everybody know you can never be the wack R2</p> <p>[You know that] R13</p> <p>You know that R13</p> <p>[And I know] R13</p> <p>And he know R13</p> <p>[And we know that] R13</p> |
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Figure 4.3: The two concluding verses to the Funky Four Plus One's performance of "Rappin' and Rockin' the House" at the Kitchen, November 22, 1980. Each line is identified as one of 14 different rhythms. A single underline indicates the first motive, emphasizing an internal rhyme. A double underline indicates the second motive, with an ascending pitch that drops at the end of the line.

different set of rhythms that concludes his verse and transitions to Sha Rock (at 6:25). Rather than cycling through a set of rhythms, Sha Rock instead uses three repetitive rhythmic motives at different points throughout her verse, with some lines in between. First, she begins her verse by breaking from Jazzy Jeff's rhythm with faster, syncopated lines. Then, Sha Rock raps a modified form of the rhythm that Jazzy Jeff uses in the second part of his verse, before entering into a new rhythm with the line, "Uptown rock the house." Four lines after this section, Sha Rock concludes her verse by returning to one rhythm she established toward the beginning with the lyric, "Then

do it, and then do it.” Now, she passes this rhythm back and forth with K.K. Rockwell with the lyric, “And you know that.”

The rhythmic diversity in these two verses along with the pitched inflections of the rappers’ voices create a sense of continuity between the lines, or “flow.” For example, the first line of Jazzy Jeff’s verse, “See I’m Jazzy Jeff I am the best,” not only rhymes with the second line, “I can make your body move from right to left,” but also contains an internal slant-rhyme with the words “Jeff” and “best.” Jazzy Jeff emphasizes this internal rhyme by pitching down each word. As the verse carries on, he often pitches down the last syllable of his lines in order to emphasize the rhyme. But in two other lines—“I’m the one MC that’s proven to be” and “See I rhyme all the time I mess with mine”—Jazzy Jeff emphasizes the internal rhyme scheme by repeating the melody that he established in the first line, pitching down two of the syllables in each line.

In the fourth line, Jazzy Jeff establishes another rhythmic motive that recurs through his verse. Jazzy Jeff raps the line “I can make your body move, I mean, all night” with a gradually ascending pitch contour until reaches the highest inflection on the word “all,” then leaps down for the final word “night.” This particular contour—gradually ascending to a high point, then leaping down at the end of the line—appears six more times in Jazzy Jeff’s verse. This melodic motive creates a sense of melodic phrasing between lines throughout the verse that mostly do not share rhythms. Moreover, this melodic contour flows with the rest of Jazzy Jeff’s verse by pitching down the rhyming syllable at the end of the line. This motive appears one last time, when Sha Rock raps the line, “But make sure you don’t jerk your body.” This contour appears

throughout their performance of “Rappin’ and Rockin’ the House,” and though it seem to be a natural or intuitive vocal inflection, the group’s unison employment of this melody in the lines “Jazzy Jeff rock shock rock turn it out” and “and rock the house right” indicate that this motive was a conscious, rehearsed aspect of the composition.

Conclusion

In 1984, the New York art and punk scenes were forced to confront their notions of primitivism when the Museum of Modern Art opened a vast exhibition, “‘Primitivism’ in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern.” This exhibition spawned numerous essays and exchanges regarding the meaning and legacy of the term “primitivism” in the 1980s. As Hal Foster pointed out, “Historically, the primitive is articulated by the West in deprivative or supplemental terms: as a spectacle of savagery or as a state of grace, as a socius without writing or the Word, without history or cultural complexity; or as a site of originary unity, symbolic plenitude, natural vitality.”¹ James Clifford wrote that one of the unintended effects of the exhibition was “to show, once and for all, the incoherence of the modern Rorschach of ‘the primitive’,” and that the curators failed to demonstrate any “essential affinity” between the tribal and the modern, “but rather the restless desire and power of the modern West to collect the world.”² The exhibition seemed to reinscribe the colonial “souvenirism” of the modern artists it

94 Hal Foster, “The ‘Primitive’ Unconscious of Modern Art,” *October* 34 (Fall 1985): 58.

95 James Clifford, “Histories of the Tribal and the Modern,” *Art in America* (April 1985): 169.

featured, unveiling “the way our cultural institutions relate to foreign cultures, revealing it as an ethnocentric subjectivity inflated to coopt such cultures and their objects.”³

The confrontation between white downtown and black rap musicians only a few years before this exhibition prefigured this neo-colonial relation. Artists and critics centralized white Western musical practices by casting primitivism as a positive creative concept for white downtown musicians and as a sign of danger and ineptness in black rap musicians. As Clifford explained, the primitivism debates “unravel[ed] for good the category of the primitive, exposing it as an incoherent cluster of qualities that, at different times, have been used to construct a source, origin or alter-ego confirming some new ‘discovery’ within the territory of the Western self.”⁴ In this case, white downtown musicians used this term to structure and signify racial differences between their own amateurism and the amateurism of rap musicians from whom they were culturally and geographically segregated.

96 Thomas McEvelley, “Doctor, Lawyer, Indian Chief,” *Artforum* 23 (November 1984): 60.

97 Clifford, 176.

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