Introduction

Punk Rock and History

Public perceptions of history and what historians actually do have diverged in recent years. Much of the public still thinks of history through the Great Man theory, which dominated the historical field until relatively recently. This approach positions famous individuals at the center of historical narratives. Generally speaking, men (often white men) are considered the primary agents of change over time through heroic individual action. Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves. Winston Churchill and the royal family kept the British public together during World War II. Elvis Presley created rock-n-roll. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. ended segregation in the United States. Ronald Reagan ended the Cold War, and so on. The rest of humanity has little agency in affecting change over time; their lives are merely shaped by happenings outside of their control. These historical narratives argue that major events such as wars, politics, or the ends of empires are the primary engine of historical change. Events that happen outside of these history-shaping structures are merely seen as precursors or tangential to "real" historical developments. History written in this manner just becomes "one damn thing after another" for many. It is often dull and dry and has no real connection to our lives. People find it hard to see themselves as people who can make history without becoming one of those "great men." Historical change, good or bad, becomes seen as something that happens to people, not as something that we cause. Because of this, many people believe that history has no real or direct connection to their lives.

Since the 1960s, many historians have come to reject this outmoded understanding. Instead they focus on how everyday people are just as much agents of historical change as the elites whose names we all know. Modern

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Figure I.1. Even Worse flyer from 1981. (Used by permission of Jack Rabid, created by R. B. Korbet)

historians write bottom-up, complicated histories that rarely offer easy answers to the “so what?” question. Historians in this mode present the reader with the complexity and contingency of events. They refuse to sidestep the difficulty of charting the “why” of historical change. As a result of this shift,

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modern historiographies are filled with more than just great men in stuffy rooms. Ordinary people in pedestrian locations help drive historical change just as much (if not more) than elites. The historical field has become more democratic. The topics historians investigate have also changed. Politics and important men still make their appearance in historical narratives, but so do the mundane days and the ordinary people. Books that explore earth-shattering events share shelf space with books on those smaller, quiet moments that are more relatable. Social and cultural histories have helped us understand that everyday life matters just as much as the big events. In fact, they might tell us more about what really produces change over time. Each big historical moment has a longer trajectory shaped in various ways by numerous individuals—well-known and less so.

This newer approach to history has had its public advocates. Historians like Howard Zinn argued for the importance of writing history aimed at the general public that put ordinary people at the center of the narrative.[1] His years of teaching and engaging with the public helped popularize a more people-centric version of public history, a growing field of history. Journalists have also been part of opening up grassroots approaches to history for the general public. Nikole Hannah-Jones's 1619 Project published in the *New York Times* explored how racism in US society today has roots in the first enslaved people arriving in Jamestown.[2] History that is connected and engaged with the lives of everyday people shows how we all can be agents of change. That resonates, and that resonance can be turned into motion. If people understand that those who came before made change in the world, they might be more inclined to believe that they, too, can make change.

This brings us to the topic of this book: punk rock. Punk evokes strong emotions in people. For years, punks and others have endlessly debated the meaning, origins, and current mortality of punk rock. Although scholars in other fields have been writing about punk since its inception, academic historians have only recently started to focus on punk as a historical phenomenon. The best way to gauge what historians are interested in is by searching for dissertations. If you search on ProQuest's dissertations and thesis database for dissertations in the field of history, you get about 60 hits, a number that expands to over 600 when other fields are included. Some include punk as a part of a larger set of arguments. There are now some dissertations with punk as their central concern. Trailblazer Dewar MacLeod completed his dissertation "Kids of the Black Hole" in 1998. MacLeod used punk as a lens for understanding changes happening during the 1970s. He sought to understand why hardcore punk emerged

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in locations like Southern California, especially against the backdrop of a shift from suburban communities to exurban. He argued that it "reflected transformation in both the position of young people in American society and the landscape of Southern California."[3] MacLeod has since published his dissertation as a book.[4] Other historians followed in MacLeod's footsteps. Montgomery Wolf completed her dissertation at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2007. "We Accept You, One of Us?" took a different focus, on society and self during the 1970s. She said that trying to define punk is "like trying to nail Jello to the wall."[5] She argued that punk was an example of a shift in focus to individualism during the 1970s and 1980s. This meant that it was an "unstable" construct and thus a "moving target."[6] A year after Wolf defended her dissertation, Brock Ruggles defended his at Arizona State University. In "Not So Quiet on the Western Front," he argued that punks organized against the "conservative ascendancy" that began during the Reagan era. This produced a sort of punk "intelligentsia" that influenced the direction of the punk subculture and the political beliefs of many involved in it.[7] More recently, historians have studied punk in other parts of the world. In 2013, Jeff Patrick Hayton completed his dissertation on punk rock in East and West Germany. In the introduction, he discussed a museum to the Ramones found in Berlin. He argued that it made sense for the museum to be there because punk "had a more lasting and deeper cultural resonance on German culture, society and politics than it has in either the United States or Great Britain."[8] This activity means that we will see more historians delve into the field and give their own spin on this topic. This does not even address all the popular histories of punk. Some are more hagiographic—an uncritical celebration of punk rock with little interest in historicizing it. Others seek to wrestle with the meaning of punk and make historical arguments about it. All work to show us why punk matters.

The point of this book is to add to this messy discourse in the hope of clarifying for the punk and nonpunk audience the "so what?" of punk rock. I want to show you why punk matters in the larger historical scheme of things. Punk was and is a genre of music, a social movement, and a set of cultural practices that changed how we think about popular culture and its role in our lives. The critical insights that punks brought to bear on music production are now a regular feature of our cultural life. Punk helped us consume music, literature, and film in a more thoughtful and critical manner. Punk has also become a term that we often positively associate with rebelling against stifling conformity. After the 1960s and 1970s, a

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new-found cynicism crept into American life with regard to institutions—government entities, corporations, churches, family, and so on. Punks shared in that cynicism. But punk evokes a demand for truth and authenticity via connection with others. Punks built democratic institutions—or perhaps counterinstitutions—to fill that need for connection and structure. Over the years punk has become incorporated into mainstream culture, but it also led to more democratic and less commercial ways of making music and art. More artists across genres are willing to put themselves out there without the structures of the recording industry. Punk has reminded us that music is not just a commodity but a means of building community through a shared understanding of the world. It was a new iteration of the dialectical conversation about culture as a commodity that came with the modern era. The story of punk highlights how we can build new things out of necessity and become deeply resistant to change. It reflects a larger set of changes since the 1970s with regard to how we interact with and understand ourselves via music. Punk illustrates just how people take a commodity created for profit and forge it into a plowshare of community and social sustenance. But it became a divisive descriptor subjected to colonization by corporate interests. The story of punk can be found in these contradictions. This book will show how punk shaped our understanding of the production of popular culture and the role that culture plays in our lives. It has become more than just an amorphous genre of music or an empty exercise in rebellion via consumption. Rather, it is a set of cultural practices—modern invented traditions where participants seek to inject communal values into the production and consumption of music.

The subtitle of this book came from a quote by Ian MacKaye in the zine *Punk Planet*. People had asked him about "the function" of his band Fugazi, which was making music. Perhaps the askers expected something more dramatic given MacKaye's reputation as a political punk. He told Dan Sinker that "music is the currency of life" and argued that music has "been one of the most important forms of communication *forever*."[9] In other words, he felt that music was important not just because it is entertaining or it can generate wealth for some. It matters because it is constructive and communicative. The history of punk music and the social movements that grew around it reveal just how important music can be for communication, community-building, and making changes in our modern, media-drenched society. Punk music is an important form of communication that brought together an imagined community that crossed international boundaries. Punks shared tastes in music and dress, as well as beliefs about how music

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should be made and shared. They created artist-controlled record labels, alternative distribution networks, spaces for performances and socializing, and their own media. In other words, they created a durable counterpublic to the corporate music culture by what Josh Kun called an audiotopia. Kun called music "an architecture of sound" and argued that music could be a means of imagining alternatives to what exists.[10] Punks imagined the world differently in their songs. They built alternative social structures through their activities. Although it remains an underground phenomenon today and thrives online, the structures that punks built up for more than four decades also had an effect on how mainstream culture thinks about music production. The language and critiques that punks had about the mainstream music industry can be seen in the mainstream media today in discussions about cultural production. Many of today's young pop artists regularly seek a high level of control and independence over the music they make. They are often willing to talk about the political economy of making music, in addition to other issues like racism, misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia. Many music consumers today think more critically about music, too. This partly due to the mode of sharing music online being shaped by the punk underground that predated widespread internet usage. Punk was more than just a brief moment of nihilistic rebellion in the late 1970s that burned bright and flared out. Rather, punk was—and remains—a translocal underground counterculture based on the production and consumption of music. It is translocal in that it is connected across national boundaries but enacted locally. It has made important changes to how we think about music production and consumption. The people who made up the community of punk rockers changed history.

Chapter 1 is a prehistory of punk. We start with the early modern era and end with the postwar youth cultures that developed in the United States and elsewhere. The chapter explores the rise of the modern world-system and how that changed how we think about youth and our relationship to culture. It addresses how the commodification of culture was connected to the rise of a new social category in modern life—the teenager. This became globalized in part because of the cultural Cold War, where the United States promoted American popular culture to gain an edge over the Soviet Union. We see the discussions between artists, philosophers, and young people about mass culture during the twentieth century before punk. Popular music (and other culture) became a contested terrain as it was made into a commodity through sound recordings.

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In Chapter 2, I turn to the rise of punk in the 1970s. I begin with what are known as the proto-punk bands (who are identified in hindsight). These are bands that were somewhat out of step with their contemporaries, and they influenced the sound and attitude of punk music. I try to locate the earliest use of the word "punk" as applied to music. From the start, what became known as punk rock was transnational and contested. The first-wave punk bands were not underground as we understand the term. Some of the bands that came out of these first scenes in New York and London had a good deal of mainstream success, and most did not object to that.

In Chapter 3, in the 1980s the first wave of punk gave way to a translocal underground punk scene that continues today. This was shaped in part by late Cold War politics, which came roaring back with a vengeance after the end of detente in the age of Reagan and Thatcher. Punk became more than just a music genre—it grew to a set of cultural practices that included a do-it-yourself ethos. It was in part driven by the sense of mistrust in institutions of the time. By the late 1970s, punk had emerged in the larger public imagination, had been subjected to a public backlash, and influenced a new wave of punks that splintered into several different subcultures. I focus primarily on the second wave of punk rock known as hardcore punk. Hardcore became the primary definition of what people meant by punk rock. Hardcore punks forged a translocal underground, connected via independent labels with distribution networks, globally circulating punk countermedia (such as the long-running zine *Maximum Rocknroll*), and punks traveling the world. A growing hostility toward punk in the form of "punk panics" in the United States, the West, and the socialist countries led to a growing sense of a shared cultural identity that crossed various boundaries. It also politicized punk scenes. Controversies emerged in punk communities, such as violence at punk shows and who should be considered a punk—with white, straight men coming to dominate many scenes.

In the Chapter 4, new divisions emerged out of the controversies of the 1980s. Women and LGBQT+ punks sought greater space and visibility in punk scenes. They embraced punk practices not only to stake their claims in punk itself but to bring awareness to the struggles they faced in a world full of misogyny and homophobia, in addition to other social ills. They objected to how many punk scenes just replicated forms of discrimination found in mainstream society. They worked to make punk communities more reflective of how many imagined themselves—as creating communities that are more democratic and egalitarian. At the same time, many felt like their

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scenes were being invaded by the increasing levels of attention punk was getting. During the 1990s, the mainstream music industry "rediscovered" punk rock. In 1991, Nirvana's surprise hit album *Nevermind* set off a frenzy among major labels to sign independent artists, although independent music had been making inroads into the public consciousness during the 1980s. After Nirvana, many independent music labels—including some punk labels—ended up being gobbled up by the major labels. This reignited discussions over whether punk was just another genre of music or something more. Several new, nationally distributed zines emerged out of the conflict that arose over the meaning of punk in the wake of corporate interest. Plus, a new wave of punks came into underground scenes because of the higher profile of some punk bands. Some bands on independent punk labels garnered mainstream audiences, which was facilitated by several high-profile "alternative" music festivals that started in the 1990s. Punk panic was waning, but not completely gone. By the end of this period, many punks decided that ignoring the mainstream and reinforcing their own communities was the better part of valor.

In the final chapter, I turn to punk in the 2000s. Punks started to go online as early as the 1980s. Many punk practices made the transition to the internet rather seamlessly. Punks were already used to organizing across vast distances. Zines began to appear online in the late 1990s. By the 2000s, the ways many people used the internet socially was influenced by punk's DIY mindset. Punk as a musical genre splintered further. I use the example of punks who embraced folk music. We look at several "ethnic punk" genres that explored the realities of different ethnic or racial groups. This often came from diasporic communities or those struggling with postcolonial conditions. As such, they were often an attempt to make sense of their lives and connect with others who had the same struggles.

In the conclusion, I show how people seek to embrace the term "punk" for their own purposes, while ignoring the punk underground that exists today. We also look at the punk scene in Myanmar that has gotten some mainstream media attention.

Punk itself never "died," as some are fond of saying. It exists as both a genre of music and a set of cultural practices that have exerted influence outside of popular music. This connection through music and ideas about the role culture should play in our lives can be seen all over the place. The punk DIY ethos has led to new ways of thinking about the production of culture and the institutions that make that culture. Many more people are willing to seek alternatives to mainstream culture industries. Punk went

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from a marginal subculture to a translocal counterculture that exists today all over the world. This set of invented traditions is shared across traditional boundaries (nation, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, etc.) and age groups. It tells people that you do not have to wait for an expert to come along and make the culture and community you want to see. Rather, you can make that community yourself, right now, with like-minded individuals. Punk tells us that if you build it, others will come and help you.

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