

P4 Never mind the boundaries: how UK Punk shatters traditional cultural divisions

Richard Temple-Purcell

With this essay I will demonstrate how UK punk ideology breaks down traditional boundaries and hierarchies without succumbing to partisan arguments or political posturing¹. Central to this argument, is the idea that McLaren, Westwood & Rhodes' co-opting of the American punk rock music style into a confrontational Situationist assault on the Establishment², in combination with the uncompromising Irish working-class honesty, intelligence and insubordination of their intended stooge Lydon^{3 4}, shattered the perceived boundary between artist and audience^{5 6}. The immediate and visceral effect on the audience of this disregard for traditional roles and expectations, empowered an overarching belief that their ideas and art could be as valid as the artist they were viewing, regardless of ability, commerciality or technical skill, resulting in a cultural explosion of self-expression that defied genre or background.⁷

I will examine how the machinations of educated middle class artists and agitators inadvertently triggered a mass gestalt shift in attitudes to art and societal norms that self-perpetuated through the resultant 'do it yourself' ideology⁸ that was embraced by people of all backgrounds who felt disempowered by the cultural status quo.

I will, in turn, look at a number of boundaries that would traditionally define a subculture, and demonstrate how punk shattered barriers of social class, gender, politics, race, disability and sexuality, at a point in British history when this was unthinkable. I will furthermore argue that punk art, music, fashion, comedy, film and literature is not subject to recognisable style and genre boundaries, despite the accepted mainstream media portrayal of the movement.

¹ Gordon Alastair. *The Authentic Punk: An Ethnography of DIY Music Ethics*.
(Loughborough UK: Loughborough University Institutional Repository, 2005)

² Britton Amy. *Situationism explained! and its affect on punk and pop culture. (sic)*
(Nottingham UK: Louder Than War, 2012)

³ Lydon John, Andrew Perry. *Anger is an energy: my life uncensored*.
(London UK: Simon & Schuster UK, 2014)

⁴ Clarke Victoria, Shane MacGowan. *A drink with Shane MacGowan*
(London UK: Pan MacMillan Ltd, 2001)

⁵ Goddard Stuart. *Stand & Deliver: the autobiography*.
(London UK: Pan MacMillan Ltd, 2006)

⁶ Robb John. *Punk rock: an oral history*
(London UK: Ebury Press, 2006)

⁷ Simpson Dave. *The FALLen: Life in and out of Britain's most insane group*
(Edinburgh UK: Canongate Books, 2008)

⁸ Moon Tony. *Sideburns fanzine issue 1*
(London UK: self-published, 1977)