

The rise of punk in
70's Britain.



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hDuring 1970s Britain, life was a picture of austerity and hardship for many members of the public.

The country was facing the worst economic recession since the Great Depression of the 1930s and large numbers of the electorate were quickly beginning to grow tired of the failing policies being touted by both Labour and Conservative minority governments. The experience of Britain for many in the 1970s was one of drawn out decline and decay, the consensus politics of the 1960's was falling apart and Harold Macmillan's notion of 'You've never had it so good' couldn't have been further from the truth. It could be argued that the aforementioned factors played a role of importance when assessing the largely spontaneous emergence of the punk movement into British society. Economic recession, not only in Britain but in other major world nations, was ever increasing, mainly due to the 1973 oil crisis which eventually cost Heath his post as prime minister and paved the way towards 'The Rise of Thatcherism'. The crisis was due to the Arab members of the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), announcing, as a result of the ongoing Yom Kippur War, that they would no longer ship oil to nations that had supported Israel in its conflict with Syria and Egypt. These nations included the United States of America and their allies in the shape of Britain and Japan. British industry suffered a great deal due to the lack of oil being imported into the country, Britain began to face major competition from other major economies, such as Japan and the USA, in certain sectors such as manufacturing, which had previously been a large and consistent area of income.

With the flight of capital in the face of increasing working class militancy, it soon became clear that Governments in the industrialised economies could no longer sustain a commitment to full employment. As factories within these newly competitive industries were forced to close due to falling sales, it consequently had the effect of rising unemployment. By the mid 1970s unemployment had reached well over a million people and did not show signs of ceasing at any point soon after. The electorate began to resent the emergence of mass unemployment as it had not played any real part within British politics since the years shortly following the end of World War I, a period of British history which the British public would not look back on with any great affection and certainly would not want to revisit. Considerable amounts of workers who had been recently made redundant began supporting trade unions on a more regular and meaningful basis. The unemployed became aggrieved with the failing British economy and felt adamant that they deserved better support and welfare than they were currently receiving due to the government's current inadequacies. Now that the trade unions had a much greater support, albeit in unfortunate circumstances, they began to put increasing pressure on Heath's conservative government to pass legislative measures to aid the unemployed in their hour of need.

Workers from almost all of the country's key industries such as mining, ship building and car manufacture went on strike to demonstrate their frustrations and vent their anger towards the incompetence of the Tory administration. The refusal by either party to make compromises on their respective arguments only furthered the problems and deepened the mire

which Britain was steadily descending into. Due to the prolonged strikes by the mining community which started on the 10th February 1974 and lasted until 7th March of the same year, Britain found herself being exceedingly stretched to the point of what resources they had left circa the aforesaid strike action. Electrical power was deemed to be being consumed at too much of a prompt pace and under the rule of Edward Heath, the Conservatives decided on the introduction of the 'Three Day Week'. The Three Day Week was a policy in which commercial users of electricity would be limited to a quota of three specified consecutive days use in a week long period. General members of the public also had to deal with the consequences of the striking populations' actions. Ministers solemnly urged the populace to share baths and brush their teeth in the dark.

Television, which by now was one of the nation's favourite pastimes, was brought to an untimely end at 10.30pm each evening. Heath had promised "tomorrow would be better than today", but he couldn't even keep the lights on. An image synonymous with the mid to late 1970s was that of piles of rotting rubbish collecting on pavements throughout the country. Waste centres were closed and emergency refuse sites were opened in town streets after binmen joined in months of strikes. This only became a further irritant to the British electorate who were becoming increasingly restless waiting for the government to develop new strategies in order to tackle the ongoing disrepute between themselves and Britain's workforce. The social and economic problems of Britain, however, could not be solved simply by government legislation.

Unrest was caused by much more than Heath's perceived shortcomings as a Prime Minister. The problems of society ran far deeper than that. A process of fallout from the 1960's had occurred; a sizeable part of the generation born at the end of the late 50's and early 60's were coming into maturity and most were without the guarantee of a job, economic stability and a sense of community. The younger generations within Britain began to feel alienated from their peers and it could also be argued that some may have wished alienation upon themselves to escape from what was fast becoming a dire excuse for a society. The youth of the time were on the lookout for an escape from their lives of conservatism, conformity and control. This accumulated feeling of resentment towards the authoritarian government manifested itself in the form of the Punk movement. From late 1976, kids started to appear on Britain's streets in attire which shocked the everyday British citizen.

Ripped t-shirts with hastily drawn band logos, safety pins, bin liners and spiked hair defined a new image. Since the 1960s any diversity became a wagon to jump on; any music, fashion or ideologies that were incorporated within the 'free love' scene were no longer something that the uninspired youth of the '70s aspired to be part of. Mods, Rockers and Hippies were all fast becoming sub-cultures that were deemed to be clichéd by the nation's youth. The '60s scene had been entirely commercialised by the establishment and had been turned into areas of profit by large record companies. These record labels however also were not putting any interest or faith into anything new in the music industry, they wanted to stick with what had brought them so much profit and it seemed nothing would be able

to shift their 'if it's not broken, don't fix it' mentality. The establishment of the 1960's-70's did not want their youth creating counter-cultures, thus the average youth felt the need to rebel and so the DIY culture exploded.

Although punk never reached the forefront in the 60's, the rebellious ethos of the movement was beginning to show, mainly in American acts and specifically within the New York rock scene.

Teenagers influenced by the R; B styled groups of the decades earlier years began to form their own garage bands across the United States. Various trends and events would occur at the inception of the 1970's that would be helpful in advancing the music industry and working towards the growth of punk rock, namely the deaths of Jimi Hendrix and Jim Morrison which seemed to have brought the popular music lovers into a state of uncertainty and would now mean music journalists would have to find new acts to write about. In Great Britain, bands and artists such as David Bowie had started to refine their sounds in hope of reviving their careers. The result of this was the so called 'glam' movement, which saw artists like T-Rex and Roxy Music beginning to blend pop song structures with harder edged guitar based material. Back in the New York Scene, a trashy streetwise orientated version of glam was starting to surface. A band eager to take to the throne of this was the New York Dolls. The Dolls, and later, The Ramones would serve as somewhat of a prototype, from which later came the Sex Pistols and many other of London's punk bands such as The Clash, The Jam and Siouxsie and The Banshees.

By the mid '70s many music lovers had become tiresome towards the industry's 'run of the mill' rock that the public were being force-fed.

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Members of the public began to see rock and roll acts as nothing more than that acts - artificial, manufactured and uninspiring. The world of rock had become a tightly controlled, moneymaking machine in which record sales and success held precedence over any passion or true emotion. Essentially people yearned for a rock and roll that was innovative and fun again. On December 1st 1976 an infamous event occurred that made sure that anyone who was not aware of the emergence of punk was now fully conscious of its presence. The Sex Pistols appeared on the 'Today' show as a last minute replacement. The band was interviewed by Bill Grundy who naively on his part, proceeded to provoke the band to "say something outrageous".

For Mick Jones in particular, he took this as an open invitation and obliged with a barrage of expletives, which not surprisingly, shocked the early evening audience. The following day the front page of various national newspapers contained pictures of the band on the show and a summary of their antics. The older generation of Britain, needless to say, were in outrage. This however was exactly the kind of reaction the band had dreamed of. It gained them column inches and further made the public aware of their existence. Whilst in the public spotlight the band released arguably their most famous single, 'God Save The Queen'. The song came at a time when opposition to royalty was still seen as treasonous and frowned upon by the majority of British people.

The record was quickly refused airtime by the BBC whose station, Radio 1, dominated the broadcasting of music at the time. Only DJs such as John Peel dared to play punk in succession to other popular music hits of the era. Nevertheless, during the week of Queen Elizabeth II's silver jubilee, the single

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'officially' reached number two in the UK charts although many large record stores knew that 'God Save The Queen' was outselling Rod Stewart's "I Don't Want To Talk About It" by four to one. Unbelievably, the charts had been rigged so the music industry would not be red-faced by such a spectacle. However this did not deter the band from putting out further material. 'Pretty Vacant' and 'Holidays In The Sun' were released to promote the Sex Pistols' first and only full length album, 'Never Mind The Bollocks - Here's The Sex Pistols', which was released in November and subsequently went straight to the top of the album charts despite many stores refusing to stock it. After another tour, this time held in secret to avoid bans, The Pistols' final gig took place at Ivanhoe's in Huddersfield on Christmas Day 1977 before they took off for the ill-fated U.

S. tour in January 1978. They had originally been scheduled to start the tour in December 1977, beginning with a performance on Saturday Night Live, but due to the band's run-ins with the law, were unable to get their passports in time, so Stiff Records' band, Elvis Costello and the Attractions, went on in their place. The eight show tour of the U. S. was a badly planned and dispiriting experience for all concerned. Sid Vicious, the band's bassist, was beaten by the bodyguards who were hired to protect him, Johnny Rotten was ill and the band's performances were destroyed by awful sound and hostile audiences.

On the final date of January 14th at the Winterland Ballroom in San Francisco, Rotten quit, famously asking "Ever get the feeling you've been cheated?" before walking off. Punk bands continued to play the usual haunts around London, but never again did anyone come close to causing the

outrage or having the success which the Sex Pistols had experienced. I went about organising a question and answer session with my father Martin, who was in his teens during the emergence of punk and also followed the movement with great interest. Through summarising the feedback I gained from the aforementioned interview I was given a great personal viewpoint on the society of the mid 1970s as well as his own personal experiences of the same period. ' Through the 1970s the news was all about strikes, economic downturns and lost opportunities. As a teenager I can recall the 3 day week when places of work closed to save energy, my dad would be at home on reduced pay (he worked for the GPO – now BT) and the newspapers would print schedules showing when your area would have power cuts, which were a regular part of life. I remember my dad taking my sister and me for a drive in the car to Falkirk to get out of the house and keep warm rather than sit in the house with no power.

TV stations shut down after the news at 10. 30 in the hope that people would just go to bed and save electricity. A mate of mine bought packets of candles from the market in Glasgow and made a decent addition to his pocket money by selling them round the neighbourhood where he lived. Also the entitlement to dole money for school leavers had been stopped which meant that you couldn't sign on and get money straight away, you had to wait for a number of weeks before you'd get a " Giro". Unemployment was making the headlines in the papers and for the first time in years people were leaving school believing that they wouldn't get a job, or at least wouldn't get one that was worth having as the factories and shipyards which traditionally paid well were closing. I started to become aware, mainly

through the pages of the NME, a number of bands from London who were playing music inspired by early Iggy Pop and The Stooges as well as The Ramones. The latter had made front page headlines in The Glasgow Evening Times, which had got itself in a state of moral outrage over the song “Sniffin’ Glue” arguing that the number of kids dying from glue sniffing could be increased due to the song.

Bearing in mind how few copies it sold, it was nonsense. John Peel once said of the punk era “ You don’t know you’re bored, until you stop being bored. ” I was 17 in 1976 and probably the only band I was currently into was Dr Feelgood. They were a band playing Chuck Berry influenced songs, wearing bad suits! The prevailing music of the time was bland, inconsequential, middle of the road rubbish by Rod Stewart, The Eagles and Queen. I still remember vividly the moment I first actually heard the Sex Pistols in November 1976. My friend Davie had borrowed a copy of ‘ Anarchy in the UK’ from his friend in school and we played it in my bedroom. I can remember us both laughing out loud at how different it was and how blown away we were by it.

We must have played it 10 times in a row. Looking back, I think we felt like we were part of a “ privileged few” who had heard the song as it was subsequently banned by all radio stations at the time, this is hard to imagine now. The 3rd single released by the Pistols, “ Pretty Vacant”, could only be played on Radio 1 after 10pm. If anything, it only reinforced the Pistols credentials as the band you most wanted to be associated with. We started to see and hear of people dressed as “ punks” around the city, though what constituted the punk look was very difficult to describe. It could be anything

from old school jumpers ripped and worn inside out, t-shirts torn or cut and held together with safety pins with band names scrawled on in biro or marker pen or even t-shirts made from bin liners. For girls the look was heavily based on Jordan (Pamela Hook) and Siouxsie Sioux; short skirts, fishnets, and heavy eye make-up.

. Glasgow District Council decided to withdraw licences of any venue which had booked punk acts, effectively banning punk in the city. Occasionally you'd hear of a secret gig being played somewhere in Glasgow and you had to meet up to be told where it was. By the Summer of 1977 I'd left school and got a job in an independent record shop and remember the clamour when the first Pistols album came out. People were waiting around in the shop for it to be delivered. Every box that arrived, we'd be asked if that was the album. First one out of the box went onto the sound system at maximum volume and we couldn't keep up with people shoving to the front of the queue.

Eventually the council lifted the ban and loads of bands came to Glasgow, many playing small gigs and doing signing sessions in the shop where I worked, including The Clash who were considered to be the most overtly "political" band of the era. '