***Anarchy in Woolworths—*Punk Comedy and Humor**

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*Definitions of punk inevitably revolve around the subculture’s provocative, political, or subversive conventions. This chapter outlines the ways in which punk’s embrace of comedy and humor—through strategies including satire, hyperbole, parody, self-deprecation and profanity—is central to an understanding of its language and practice. Comedy also embraced punk—taking punk’s media storm as a supposedly easy target for ridicule. This chapter highlights some of the overlaps and distinctions between external commentators and the internal discourse of the subculture. Punk and comedy are closely connected, though the often caustic and abrasive nature of punk’s internal discourse may obscure its humorous intent for observers outside the subculture.*

The punk movement has been critiqued, deconstructed, and stereotyped ever since it first burst into public consciousness in the US, UK, and Europe in the summer of 1976. To an extent, the hyperbole afforded punk has vastly outweighed the significance of its original moment, at least in terms of mass participation, and what might have been a relatively minor sidestep in popular culture (in commercial terms at least) has assumed a far higher critical profile than could, or perhaps should, have been the case. Punk’s (sub)cultural capital has ebbed and flowed over the past forty years, though it has never disappeared altogether. Intermittent “significant” anniversaries, usually initiated by the invisible hand of marketing corporations trying desperately to wring one last drop out of its ageing fans, have paralleled an underlying sense of empathy (or envy) among media commentators toward punk’s patina of “authentic” rebellion.

Meanwhile, what it means to “be” punk has evolved and mutated from an initially fashion and pop music-led phenomenon to a lifestyle choice. The original eclecticism and diversity of a subculture in formation has been honed into a range of stylistic, moral, and ethical conventions that are at once widely acknowledged and at the same time contested. Punk now spans generations and geographies, with wide variation in participants’ interpretations of its history, cultural reference points, and ideology. Internecine squabbling over the doctrine (or otherwise) of punk is the order of the day, and this is reflected within the academic environment, where punk’s supposed ideological and political values are often foregrounded over its musical, aesthetic or pop-cultural history (Bestley “I Want”).

The punk subculture spread worldwide over the past forty years, extending its reach from North America, Europe and Australia to South East Asia, China, South America, India, Africa, Russia and the Middle East. Ironically, this proliferation has often led to a narrowing of musical styles and ideological positions. Some of these may be necessary to the survival of punk as a distinct genre—simple, loud, fast, brash music has always been central to what is commonly viewed as punk rock, separating it from other forms of popular music. However, the adoption of other punk stereotypes—anger, a rejection of authority, politicized messages—has led to some clichés gaining deeper traction purely through repetition, almost to the point of forming universal truths. An archetype taken from the subsequently dominant sub-genre of mid-’80s, politically driven, hardcore punk has become the basis upon which other models are constructed, and the diversity of earlier punk styles has been at least partially obscured from view. One aspect of this narrowing definition has been the erasure of the subculture’s links to humor, comedy and satire.

**Incongruity, Parody and Satire**

Humor has been broadly categorized within three theoretical models: superiority, where the protagonist exercises or asserts a superior position to the target of the humor; incongruity, the disruption of expectations, often involving wordplay or similar strategies; and relief, the venting of nervous energy through breaking taboos and moral or ethical codes. A common factor is the meeting of incongruous or discordant ideas, the result of which is to elicit either amusement or a deeper understanding of the origins and meanings of those ideas themselves. This also often leads to a reward, the satisfaction of solving the riddle, getting the joke, and sharing cultural understanding. Humor is therefore dependent on the historical and cultural context, world-view, and shared communal understanding of the participants in the exchange. The main point is not the incongruity *per se*, but its realization and resolution, and humor can be critical or rhetorical, as well as a source of amusement.

British humor has often been closely associated with parody and satire. Parody requires a degree of prior knowledge or familiarity with context, as Jerry Palmer suggests: “…parody always consists of the imitation (allusion, if not direct quotation or misquotation) of some other text or texts, even if only by using stylistic devices which are typical of the text(s) in question… the role of imitation means that, from the first, intertextuality is integral to parody”(Palmer 84). Satire, meanwhile, is a mode of social criticism that adopts a scornful, mocking, or sarcastic tone in order to improve, destroy, or increase awareness of the object of its ridicule—themes not only important to British cultural identity but also clearly central to British punk’s ideological critique. In both instances, decorum, “[…] a decision about the form of expression which is publicly judged appropriate for a given setting and theme”(Palmer 82), is a key element. This is important in the context of punk humor, particularly in its ability to shock, and an expression that might be “publicly judged appropriate” may vary between protagonists within the punk community and the wider recipients of the message (who may, equally, be part of the butt of the humor).

Ken Willis outlines the ways in which humor is based on group cohesion and acceptance, in both “reference groups” (social groups in which other people place individuals) and “identification groups” (social groups in which individuals place themselves). Willis draws on Hay’s model of *recognition*, *understanding*, and *appreciation* of humor, noting the gap between understanding and appreciation: while a “joke” may be recognized and understood, its appreciation is determined by social factors related to the receiver’s “humor competence” (Willis 126-145). However, care needs to be taken to evaluate both the protagonist and the butt of the humor, and to identify the sometimes indistinct or fluid interrelationship between the two. When Hay’s model is applied to the use of humor within early punk, it can be seen that such strategies may have drawn together fans who did, at least to an extent, recognize, understand, and appreciate the “joke,” while alienating others—as Pauline Murray, vocalist with the punk group Penetration, recalls:

[…] the first time I saw the Sex Pistols was in a very small nightclub in Northallerton, North Yorkshire, in the spring of 1976. The regular Friday night customers were in attendance, and when the band took to the stage, the expression on their faces was incredulous. That in itself made me laugh… Their [the Sex Pistols’] attitude was funny—like snotty kids who didn't give a shit. The whole thing had a sense of humor rather than violence. The violence came from peoples' reaction to them (Murray).

**Gimme That Punk Junk**

As soon as punk began to gain critical attention in the United Kingdom—as a growing market sector ripe for exploitation and commentary—it appeared on the radar of comedians, satirists, and cultural commentators. Punk’s notoriety drew media attention wherever it appeared: it was almost inevitable that those outside the subculture would comment on it, either to jump on the bandwagon or for comic effect. Negative publicity, with stereotypical references in the British press to punks vomiting, spitting, swearing, and generally being outrageous, led to a nationwide boom in punk comedy spoofs, from Larry Grayson, the Barron Knights, and the Two Ronnies on television to records by Charlie Drake and Andy Cameron. In November 1977, comedy trio the Goodies (Tim Brooke-Taylor, Graeme Garden and Bill Oddie) dedicated an entire episode of their eponymous hit television series to a punk parody entitled *Punky Business*. The satirical effect of these attacks on the burgeoning punk movement was further complicated by the growth in punk novelty records by mystery groups, including the Water Pistols (“Gimme That Punk Junk”), Norman and the Hooligans (“I’m a Punk”), the Punkettes (“Going out wiv a Punk”), and the Duggie Briggs Band (“Punk Rockin’ Granny”). Many of these existed in a sort of hinterland between external establishment assault and active subcultural participation; they were comic commentaries on punk by artists who demonstrated at least some tacit knowledge and understanding of the subculture.

As well as the concept of songs offering a humorous reflection on the punk movement, it is worth considering the form and content of many of these parodies. Charlie Drake had charted with the novelty songs “My Boomerang Won’t Come Back” and “Mr. Custer” in the late 1950s, and starred in successful television comedies, *The Charlie Drake Show* and *The Worker*, over the following decade. Drake’s attempt at punk parody adopted a stereotypical view of widely perceived punk conventions, such as safety pins and swearing, all recited in a Cockney accent over a plodding, rock-and-roll backing. The addition of a slide guitar solo is somewhat incongruous to the overall effect, but the theme of basic rock music, “working class” accents, and lyrical clichés was paralleled in many other punk parody records. The Water Pistols followed suit, offering a series of punk stereotypes including chains, booze, swearing, and being “rotten,” over a generic pop backing track, though it was redeemed to a large extent by the inspired, and genuinely witty, chorus line “…anarchist, anarchist / an’ I kissed a couple of local girls.” Norman and the Hooligans at least managed to emulate something of a punk musical vibe with “I’m A Punk,” claiming “I’m a punk, and I don’t give a damn” over a basic riff reminiscent of the Who*.* Meanwhile, witha vocal style and deliberately dropped vowels reminiscent of British television comedienne Wendy Richards (*Are You Being Served?*, *EastEnders*) the Punkettes managed to evoke a ‘60s girl group vibe, though with contemporary “punk” lyrical references to “mugging old ladies” and being sick, topped off with a wonderfully off-key final line “…it isn’t always ‘eaven, going out wiv a punk.” Many of these “punxploitation”1 records found their way into the hearts and collections of punk fans alongside supposedly “more genuine” punk recordings.

Other punk novelty records achieved greater popular and commercial success. “Jilted John,” the eponymous debut single of an artist called Jilted John (the alter-ego of Manchester Polytechnic drama student Graham Fellows), was released by local independent Rabid Records in July 1978, before being picked up by EMI International and reaching #4 in the UK charts. The record tells the fictional story of its protagonist’s failed relationship with his girlfriend Julie, who left him for Gordon; built around a catchy one-chord guitar riff, the coda *“Gordon is a moron”* became a popular catchphrase across the UK. The record was something of a conundrum: it was clearly a parody, but like many of the best parodies it managed to strike an affectionate chord within the subculture it mocked.

A distinction can perhaps be made here between novelty punk, punk parody and comedy recordings that commented on punk—many were produced by people on the fringes of, or outside the subculture, but the level of criticism aimed at the punk scene differed, as did their acceptance within it. Artists such as Jilted John, Alberto Y Lost Trios Paranoias, even the Punkettes and the Duggie Briggs Band, could sit alongside other comic performers such as John Cooper Clarke and Patrik Fitzgerald within the punk canon, while a (typically older) range of established comedians who were attempting simply to use punk as a vehicle for their humor were dismissed as an awkward embarrassment. Since punk itself made widespread use of heavily ironic, satirical and humorous forms of communication, it was a difficult target to satirize from the outside.

**Cretin Hop: Comedy in Punk**

In the US, proto-punks the Dictators took the raw power of MC5 and the Stooges and added a healthy dose of humor to the equation, in turn providing the template for the Ramones, with front man (and former band roadie) Richard ‘Handsome Dick’ Manitoba providing something of a comic parody of a “rock star” persona on songs such as “Master Race Rock” and “(I Live For) Cars and Girls.” In turn, the Ramones were never far from comedy and self-parody, particularly in songs such as “I Don’t Wanna Go Down to the Basement”, “Beat on the Brat”, “Cretin Hop,” and “Teenage Lobotomy.” The last of these featured the lyric: “Slugs and snails are after me / DDT keeps me happy / Now I guess I'll have to tell ’em / That I got no cerebellum.”

In the UK, the Damned were often criticized in the “serious” music press for their openly playful approach, particularly as it ran contradictory to the radically politicized rhetoric that became attached to the new movement through journalists such as Caroline Coon, Tony Parsons and Julie Burchill.2 The Sex Pistols may have used barbed humor as a weapon, but the Damned’s more immediately apparent comical approach saw them tagged by some critics as cartoon characters, not part of the same revolution as their contemporaries—an interpretation exacerbated not only by the group’s reputation as hell-raisers, but also by the marketing strategies of their record label, Stiff, itself a keen proponent of the art of the humorous one-liner.3 Equally, the Damned were no strangers to comic performance, with bassist Captain Sensible often appearing on stage in fancy dress outfits, and the band’s reputation for chaotic live shows embraced a form of slapstick vandalism. The group’s motto celebrating each year of “anarchy, chaos and destruction” on badges and posters was only partly tongue-in-cheek.

A significant element of the punk subculture has, then, always employed humor in the pursuit of entertainment, in the tradition of popular music that goes back decades, if not centuries (Bestley “I Tried”). Other comedy traces could be observed in the hugely popular *Carry On* films (1958 to 1978), working class end-of-pier comic entertainment, and the Music Hall tradition of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—most notably performers such as Frank Randle and Max Miller. Indeed, journalist Garry Bushell, who championed the Oi! movement during the early 1980s, made repeated references to its links with traditions of working class comedy and Music Hall. His own “punk pathetique” band, the Gonads, recorded several Music Hall numbers including Gus Elen's “Half a Pint of Ale” and Charles Coburn's “Two Lovely Black Eyes,” while other groups and performers associated with the nascent Oi! scene, including the Adicts, Splodgenessabounds and Peter and the Test Tube Babies, adopted a conspicuously comic approach from the outset. British punk’s self-styled working class stereotype resonated within this historical context—whether through working class performers, or through affectation by participants who sought to project the “right” kind of authentic image (Barker and Taylor). This approach to punk as a form of popular entertainment can be traced from the Ramones and the Damned through the Lurkers, the Rezillos, the Undertones, the Yobs, the Notsensibles, and the Toy Dolls.5

Other punk artists utilized shock tactics, particularly through the use of swearing and taboo topics: comparisons might be drawn with the spoken-word recordings made by British comedians Peter Cook and Dudley Moore under the pseudonym Derek & Clive—the albums *Come Again* (1977) and *Ad Nauseam* (1978) featured dialogues that sought to be as deeply offensive and puerile as possible. A similar approach can be seen in the output of a number of early UK punk groups, including the Snivelling Shits and the Pork Dukes. Dozens more followed—some employing offensive titles purely for shock value (including Raped, whose debut *Pretty Paedophiles* EP at the end of 1977 on the Parole Records label was widely banned). Others utilized taboo subjects and unsavory language as a vehicle for provocation and insurrection, including the Sex Pistols and the Stranglers.

In the US, similar distinctions could be made between punks employing shock tactics and vulgarity as a kind of comic catharsis and those who used similar strategies for more political or critical ends. Examples of these different purposes include, respectively, Los Angeles punks the Rotters, who released their debut single “Sit on My Face Stevie Nicks” on their own Rotten Records label in 1978 and San Francisco hardcore pioneers Dead Kennedys, whose songs such as “California Über Alles,” “Holiday in Cambodia,” “Kill the Poor,” “Let’s Lynch the Landlord,” and “I Kill Children” were darkly humorous commentaries on modern life, consumerism, and politics in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Other US hardcore punk groups employing overt forms of comedy included Fear—whose 1981 appearance on *Saturday Night Live* as special guests of comedian John Belushi resulted in $20,000 damage to the set—the Meatmen (who released the notorious *Crippled Children Suck* EP in 1982), and the Angry Samoans (who masqueraded as the Queer Pills for their *The Depraved* EP in 1981, which included the controversial track “They Saved Hitler's Cock”). The US West Coast has become something of a center for the evolution of comic punk performers, from the sped-up cartoon parodies of well-known pop songs by the Dickies in the 1970s through to NOFX, Me First, and the Gimme Gimmes in the 1990s and beyond.

A strain of comedy-based punk became further embedded through the late 1970s, and new groups formed to fit within the evolving genre—in the US, NOFX and the Queers, and in the UK the Toy Dolls, Splodgenessabounds, and the Macc Lads, among many others. The Toy Dolls and Splodgenessabounds both achieved UK chart hits in the early 1980s—the former with a punked-up cover of nursery rhyme “Nellie The Elephant” and the latter with their own composition, “Two Pints Of Lager & A Packet Of Crisps *Please*.” As a more overtly political strain of hardcore punk began to emerge in the early 1980s, a divide began to develop between punk generations, and many punk performers began to position themselves as carriers of political truth and justice. This was not well received by some longer-standing participants, as Gareth Holder, formerly of UK independent punk band the Shapes, reflects:

[…] when did punk really start to come off the rails? In my opinion, it was day it lost the capacity for humor, and the ability to laugh at itself… Subtlety left, and nobody was really listening to anything anyone else had to say, which in its way is the ultimate irony of an art form that existed initially to do the very opposite. (Holder)

However, while a shift away from a model of punk as entertainment toward more ideological objectives was regretted by some participants, others saw its newly austere, serious, and sober self-image as an opportunity for parody. Chaotic Dischord formed as an incognito offshoot of high profile local group Vice Squad in a rather unsubtle but commercially successful parody of the developing thrash movement. The group’s record releases were deliberately juvenile and shocking, including the debut album *Fuck Religion, Fuck Politics, Fuck the Lot of You!* (1983), and despite (or possibly because of) their obviously over-the-top and tongue-in-cheek offensiveness, they went on to be successful in the independent record charts. At times, however, Chaotic Dischord could be sharply satirical without resorting to blunt offence—their 1984 track “Anarchy in Woolworths” brilliantly pillories the absurdity of punk’s political posturing, simply by relocating its po-faced rebellion within a mundane high street chain store. The Anti-Nowhere League gained a degree of notoriety when their debut single, “Streets of London” (1981) was seized by police under the Obscene Publications Act due to the offensive lyrics on the flipside, “So What.” The band’s debut album, *We Are the League* (1982), also saw their record label facing obscenity charges, and was quickly withdrawn. However, with their reputation and subsequent bad boy notoriety, the self-effacing wit of the band’s lyrics was sometimes overlooked, as on the album title track, “We Are the League”: “We are the League and we are shit / But we’re up here and we’re doing it / So don’t you criticize the things we do / ‘Cos no fucker pays to go and see you.”

**Punk Humor as Strategy and Practice**

Like most music-based subcultures, punk was, and is, centered on notions of community, identity and authenticity. In fact, those themes are even more prevalent, given the highly critical and reflective nature of punk: from the outset, commentators engaged in a high degree of introspection and reflection on the nature and outlook of the subculture, with protracted public debates encompassing everything from correct nomenclature to its “natural” political direction (Coon; Sabin; Worley “Shot”; Worley “No Future”). The use of humor as a bonding strategy, to delineate inclusion and exclusion from a cultural group, is also an important factor. According to Mahadev L. Apte, “joking relationships [can] mark group identity and signal the inclusion or exclusion of a new individual” (56), and, consequently, they “manifest a consciousness of group identity or solidarity” (66). Iain Ellis, meanwhile, compares rituals of humor implicit in popular culture in US southern states prior to the twentieth century to English pub rock of the mid-1970s (an important precursor to UK punk), noting that “both employ a vernacular and accented humor that serves to bind their respective working-class communities; both use that humor as a defense-offense device that protects their community’s dignity while chastening the phoniness of the ‘outside’ world.” (70). Cliff Goddard’s linguistic analysis of Australian humor, specifically the nature of what he terms “deadpan jocular irony,” is another potentially useful model here, as the rationale appears to reflect certain humor codes prevalent within the punk subculture—a “humour practice” that is based on “challenging the addressee’s mental alertness and predicated on assumed ‘solidarity’, i.e. the assumption that the addressee is ‘someone like me’” (64). In other words, punk employs an internal discourse that relies, in part, on the exchange of friendly insults between individuals as a form of inclusion and acknowledgement.

Nick Holm outlines the key theories of humor developed by Freud in relation to transgression, relief, and tendentious methods of joke-telling: “…tendentious jokes allow humourists to communicate otherwise unacceptable opinions or ideas, which must normally be repressed, thereby allowing the humourist and their audience to temporarily escape their socially determined bounds” (112). Holm takes these principles further, extending Freud's distinction between the formal “joke-work” of humor and its potential to give voice to repressed statements of socially forbidden aggression and obscenity within what the author terms “edge-work”:

… I present the notion of “edge-work” to name a formally distinct mode of humour premised on an intentionally failed engagement with social standards of taste and decency and suggest the political potential of such forms of humour. (Holm 108)

As the punk subculture matured and evolved, an internal dialogue developed that embraced humor as one weapon within a sophisticated armory that could be drawn upon to tease, mock, question, or insult rival groups and individuals within the same subculture, as well as external targets set up for ridicule. Internecine rivalries have prevailed throughout punk’s history; notable examples include John Lydon’s lyrical put-down of the New York Dolls and the Heartbreakers in the Sex Pistols’ “New York” (“an imitation from New York / You’re made in Japan from cheese and chalk”) and Joe Strummer’s caustic side-swipe toward rival group the Jam (“they’ve got Burton suits, huh, you think it’s funny / Turning rebellion into money”) on the Clash’s “(White Man) in Hammersmith Palais.”

Similarly ironic and parodic approaches to peers, audiences, and the establishment can be observed throughout the history of punk, both in the UK and worldwide. The Stranglers were well known for baiting critics within the music press, and for playing up to negative stereotypes where they felt unfairly slighted. When accused of misogyny on their debut album, they responded with the overtly sexist “Bring on the Nubiles” on the follow-up, and employed strippers to accompany them on stage at a gig in Battersea Park in September 1978. The group’s notorious album track “I Feel Like a Wog” also evoked a great deal of consternation, while the lyrics alluded to a level of critical self-awareness perhaps missing in some of the negative commentary:“I tried to make him laugh, he didn’t get the joke / And then he said I wasn’t right in the head.”

The Sex Pistols were renowned for shocking and provocative behavior, but their use of satire and a particularly cutting and sarcastic form of English wit is often overlooked—from vocalist Johnny Rotten’s enunciation of the lyrics to “Pretty Vacant” (articulated as “pretty va-cunt”), guitarist Steve Jones’s blunt but witty asides and Jamie Reid’s satirical graphic interventions (Bestley “Art Attacks and Killing Jokes”), to Sid Vicious’s infamous comment about the “man in the street.”4 Following the Pistols’ rancorous split in February 1978, the comedy element became even more prominent, particularly in the film *The Great Rock ’n’ Roll Swindle*, eventually released in 1980 (directed by Julian Temple). Ostensibly a fictionalized retelling of the band’s story, largely from the perspective of manager Malcolm McLaren, the mockumentary was basically a series of short sketches and musical interludes featuring a number of mainstream British comedy actors. To compound the comedy, the accompanying soundtrack climaxed in a reworking of a bawdy rugby song, “Friggin’ in the Riggin,’” and included comic performances by Edward Tudor-Pole (“Who Killed Bambi?” along with an inspired, and deeply offensive, ad-libbed coda on “The Great Rock ’n’ Roll Swindle”6), and a guest appearance by fugitive train robber Ronnie Biggs on “No One is Innocent”: “God save the Sex Pistols / They’re a bunch of wholesome blokes / They just like wearing filthy clothes / And swapping filthy jokes.”

A significant element of punk performance and participation has always centered on comedy and humor. Equally, much punk language and discourse employs barbed and acidic humor, in the form of sarcasm, irony, parody and unconcealed cynicism, alongside working-class comic traditions employing crudeness, bawdiness, and profanity. These strategies are sometimes adopted purely for comedic effect, but also at times as a form of critical commentary or political activism. Humor has long been utilized as a strategic tool within punk communities, for entertainment and amusement, to facilitate inclusion and exclusion, as well as a rhetorical practice. However, like many other social processes that employ humor as a bonding ritual, the subtlety of such strategies and the often very dry nature of the “joke” can be easily overlooked by those unfamiliar with its specific subcultural context.

**Endnotes**

1. Punk fans and collectors have retrospectively applied the term “punxploitation” as a colloquial idiom for punk-themed records and other ephemera designed deliberately to exploit the popularity of the subculture for financial gain. The etymology of the word reflects similar definitions within film, notably the term *Blaxploitation* to denote films that employ stereotypical roles for black characters. The fact that it is used both to critique and celebrate is of particular importance to a discussion of the genre.

2. Though the Damned were fêted by the same journalists early in their career, their position came under fire during 1977 as debates about the politics of punk took hold. Notably, Kris Needs at *Zigzag* magazine was one of the first journalists to pick up on punk’s humorous undercurrent.

3. The term “stiff” is music industry shorthand for a record that fails to sell. Early Stiff sleeves incorporated self-mocking catchphrases, including “Artistic breakthrough! Double B side” and “Today’s Sound Today”, while perhaps the label’s most notorious marketing phrase exclaimed “If it ain’t Stiff, it ain’t worth a fuck.”

4. Asked by a journalist what he thought about the anger felt toward the Sex Pistols by the “man in the street”, Vicious replied, “I’ve met the man in the street, and he’s a cunt.”

5. Recordings by the Notsensibles included “(I'm In Love With) Margaret Thatcher” and “I Thought You Were Dead,” while Toy Dolls titles include “Spiders in the Dressing Room,” “Glenda and the Test Tube Baby,” “Nellie the Elephant,” and “I’ve Got Asthma.”

6. Tudor-Pole’s ad-libbed tirade includes references to “Elvis Presley—white nigger” and “Elton John—hair transplant,” among others.

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