**WE'RE SO BORED WITH LONDON, PART II**

Wayne Daly in conversation with Russell Bestley

**Kids in the city say they're bored, but what about us in the sticks?**

Varicose Veins, ‘Geographical Problem’ (Warped Records), 1978

**WD:** One aspect of punk culture that is often overshadowed by the political facets is the humour. The idea of ‘novely records’ conjures up thoughts of poorly-judged Christmas singles, but it seems an entirely appropriate term for some pretty funny stuff like the Water Pistols’ *Gimme That Punk Junk*.

**RB:** Punk is taken far too seriously! Actually, that’s a little more succinctly, I think ‘punk’ has become a ‘serious’ profile alongside say jazz or folk music, both of which have their own well established field of academic study and cultural dialogue. However, as a fan I also feel very protective towards the ‘subculture’ (even calling it that presents me with something of a problem), and I really don’t want it colonised by outsiders and cultural theorists. My research often seeks a tightrope between these opposing positions—I fully sympathise with punk fans who are deeply mistrustful towards academics researching their culture, but at the same time I see punk history as just as important as the histories of jazz and blues, the sixties folk revival, West Coast hippiedom etc.

Still, to answer your original question a little more succinctly, I think ‘punk’ has become stereotypically associated with protest, anger and vitriol, and this unfortunately belies the breadth and range of punk voices, at least in the UK. My next planned stage of research focuses on the notion of humour, particularly as evidenced within punk lyrics and graphic design.

**RB:** Punk focused on the original punk ideals as they were further developed during the early 1980s Third Wave. By then, punk had fragmented into a number of different, and sometimes opposing, factions and sub-genres: Anarcho Punk centred on the notion of anarchist politics voiced during the First Wave of UK punk (though, in their eyes, not followed through, while Hardcore and Real Punk focused on the original punk ideals as they saw them, of independence and protest. Authenticity was central to Oi, the crossover skinhead/punk movement of the early 1980s, and many groups voiced disgust at the ‘poseurs’ buying into the scene before moving on to another new trend. This can be seen through the lyrics of songs such as ‘Poseur’ by Combat 84 and ‘Clockwork Skinhead’ by the 4 Skins.

**RB:** Punk humour in their lyrics as well as their sleeve graphics developed for the fake products created by Reid as props for filming of *The Great Rock ‘n’ Roll Swindle*, centred on the presentation of the group as a cynically marketed ‘product’, without any creative or artistic merit. The sleeves for a series of singles were designed to ram the point home: while some featured stills from the film itself, others such as *Silly Thing* and *CMon Everybody* featured examples of graphics developed for various scenes in the film. While *Silly Thing* featured ‘Sex Pistols Popcorn’ packaging, *CMon Everybody* had an image of a ‘Vicious Burger’ on the front of the sleeve. Other bogus products used in the film included ‘Gob Ale’, ‘Piss Lemon-ade’, ‘Rotten Bar’ chocolate and ‘Anarkee-Ora’ a pun on Kia-Ora, a brand of soft drink often sold in cinema foyers when audience members arrive to see the new Sex Pistols film, with veteran comic actress Irene Handl and singer Eddie Tenpole as others.

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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 f**ker pays to go and see you

WD: So has the academic nature of your research presented any problems—have you encountered any mistrust?

RB: I think ‘mistrust’ is a good word to use in this context. Many underground ‘subcultural groups’ are based on a strong sense of ‘authenticity’, and I think this applies to punk probably more than most others. Outsiders to the subculture—or those seen as outsiders at least—are often accused of trying to cash in on a fairly exclusive scene, or of having some kind of ulterior motive for becoming involved. Given the outwardly antagonistic and anti-authoritarian viewpoint expressed by many punk groups and fans, this sense of resentment isn’t at all surprising, and academic investigations can also suffer from being seen as in some way pretentious, high-brow, middle class attempts at recuperation of what is often seen from within as a determinedly low-brow, anti-intellectual, working class culture.

Interestingly, early UK punk groups (and more especially their managers) flirted with the worlds of high art, fashion and ‘culture’ for a while, crossing over into art schools and galleries and therefore being to an extent in league with at least the artistic side of academia. Later on, as street punk and its variants became more prominent, the two worlds moved further apart once again. This comes back to an earlier discussion we had about provincial ‘outsiders’ coming into the London clique and ‘getting it all wrong’ (at least from the viewpoint of certain ‘insiders’ who had found a comfortable, and influential, space within that clique). Vivienne Westwood went on to become a perfect example of punk’s crossover into the high fashion elite, but it is also interesting to note that many punks, especially what could be termed those in the Second Wave, rejected the idea of spending large amounts of money on ‘designer’ punk clothing, and were highly critical of any kind of overt commercialism, including expensive punk boutiques on the King’s Road. This filtered down to the design and marketing of records, with more emphasis on lo-tech, black and white sleeves, a rejection of glossy production values, and a return to mass-produced, black vinyl records rather than limited edition coloured vinyl ‘collectors’ items.

The English obsession with class is incredibly important here: many punk fans came from lower middle or working class families, and the ways in which punk identified itself as ‘real’ and not ‘fake’, or a ‘pose’, were wrapped up in a kind of overt and confrontational class rhetoric. The language, coming from ‘the street’ and not ‘manufactured’ mirrored other youth subcultures, for instance the late Hippie underground, which also influenced the development of Pub Rock. Much Heavy Metal also characterised itself as a genuinely street-level phenomenon, with few pretensions to high art or culture, as did the skinhead revival of the late 1970s, and it’s no surprise that there were strong connections and cross-links between these areas.

Much of the Third Wave of UK punk, as we have already discussed, was regional, and strongly influenced by younger, and often less culturally advantaged, groups. A number of interviews conducted by Ian Glasper for the Third Wave book Burning Britain: The History of UK Punk 1980–1984; and the website, I have been very aware of the potential issues and conflicts between the punk underground, major cultural and educational institutions, and audiences both familiar and unfamiliar with either the material, or the notion of academic discourse in the area of popular culture.

WD: You mentioned previously your decision to confine your research to a nine-year period (1976–84); is there a story to be told after the mid-eighties? Or to put it another way, is it
possible to identify a point at which the move-
ments which you’re discussing began to become
less significant after this time frame?

RB: Yes, there is certainly a story to be told
after the mid-eighties with regard to the develop-
ment of whatever we might describe as the punk-
related underground, as there is equally a history
of what can be described as Proto Punk prior to
1976. However, my decision was in many ways
pragmatic, and related not only to a decline and/
or dissipation of the subculture, but to a distinct
change in both formats and the technology
involved in music packaging and distribution.

Many punk groups continued to record
and perform throughout the 1980s and 1990s
and, indeed, a significant underground/DIY network
continues to thrive, together with something of
a revival circuit for older groups. There are,
however, a number of factors for choosing to
end this study at this point: the seven-inch single
was in decline in the market from around 1982
onwards, particularly with the impact of the
twelve-inch single as a widely adopted
alternative format offering better sound quality
and potentially longer playing times. The
widespread shift to twelve-inch singles across
styles from the mainstream and began creating
new genres for the mainstream music industry. Hardcore punk
was evolving and forming crossovers with Heavy
Metal, both musically and graphically, and DIY
records were becoming more diverse and
removed from any obvious punk heritage, with
a strong market for the growing ‘Indie’ scene
which impacted heavily on the national charts
in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

RB: Before the start of the research, I owned
probably around 60% of the records in the study.
I had been buying and collecting punk records
since I was a teenager, so it presented a decent
range of material to start with. However, it was
important to my methodology that I try to be as
inclusive as possible, to cover the broadest range
of punk and punk-related releases across the
period I was investigating.

This meant setting some kind of benchmark
against which I could map my ‘data’—the full
sample of records under review. I used a number
of secondary sources to build a listing of relevant
records to include: The Complete Book of the British
Chairs and Barry Lazell’s Indie Hits: The Complete UK
Independent Charts 1980–1989 (1997) were useful
guides to national and independent chart records.

Other invaluable sources included George
Gimarc’s Punk Diary 1970–1979 (1994) and Punk
Diary, 1980–1992 (1997) and Greg Shaw’s
contemporary listing New Wave On Record:
England & Europe 1975–8 (1978). There are also a
number of retrospective listings, such as those by
Martin Strong (1999), Vernon Joynson (2001) and
Henrik Bech Poulsen (2005). In 2007 Mario
Panciera published what I think is the definitive
guide to punk record releases between 1976
and 1979, 45 Revolutions, though this goes further
than my study could and is more clearly a
collectors reference guide rather than a ‘history’.

My own collection and experience was also,
of course, relevant—I started by listing the ‘big
names’ from the period such as the Sex Pistols,
The Clash, The Jam, The Damned, The Stranglers,
Buzzcocks, Siouxsie & The Banshees etc., then
those who made the greatest impact on the
Second and Third Waves, including Sham 69,
The Rezillos, The Undertones, UK Subs, Stiff
Little Fingers, Cockney Rejects, Vice Squad,
The Exploited, Discharge and Crass, and the
great ‘unknowns’ who were revered by critics
and/or fans: Desperate Bicycles, The Lurkers,
The Vibrators, Television Personalities,
Subhumans, Anti Pasti. So, my starting point was
to list and scan the complete range of seven-inch
releases by each of these groups—which meant
I had to source those records to fill any gaps in
my collection as I went on. Similarly, as the
secondary listing search coupled with my own
collection threw up new artists, groups and labels to include, then these names
led to further avenues to explore. For instance,
some groups disbanded and members moved on
to form other punk-related or Post Punk groups,
and some groups worked together to tour or
release joint recordings, and each of these
offered new selections of material.

I already owned records by many of the
groups listed in my research, though personal
taste coupled with the fact that I was not a
wealthy teenager at the time meant that I had
only ever bought a fraction of the totality of
punk releases each month. I had acquired more
over the years, but there were still obvious
gaps—especially when it came to groups or
sub-genres that I didn’t particularly like at the
time. Since many punk sub-genres existed in
opposition, or at least competition, with each
other, this isn’t really surprising—like most
record buyers, I was purchasing records as a
fan, not as a curator of a punk museum.

The second question—
the need for critical detachment against my
own personal attachment to the subject matter.

Histories are always going to be subjective,
though many historians would try to support
their arguments and interpretations through the
use of extensive research and supporting
evidence. In my case, I have very strong personal
preferences toward some of the records I have
included in the study—that is almost a given
with something as personal as a record collection
and the investigation of a youth subculture in
part experienced by the researcher. However,
I was also forced to include popular releases by
groups I had ignored or avoided at the time, for
whatever reason (anything from reading a bad
review to simply never seeing a copy for sale in
local record shops), and this has led to something
of a revised opinion on my part.
I have discovered some fantastic, long-lost (or never ‘found’ in the first place) classic singles by the likes of Blunt Instrument, Blitzkrieg Bop, Demob, The Parisians, Drongos For Europe, Joe Cool & The Killers, Headache, No Choice, The Pigs and a whole host of others, plus a few previously unknown (to me) new personal lifetime favourites by The Jerks (Get Your Woofing Dog Off Me), The Fruit Eating Bears (Chevy Heavy), The Wall (New Way) and the Colt Maniax (Black Horse and Icy Love). I have also discovered a personal fascination with punk parody records by the likes of The Monks, Norman & The Hooligans, and Neville Wanker & The Punters, and punk’s internal critics such as the Television Personalities, Snivelling Shits, The Ejected, and Chaotic Dischord—hence my renewed interest in punk humour. So I guess my opinions and tastes have changed along the way too—though ‘objectivity’ means I still had to include records and groups which I personally see no redeeming features in and probably never will be a great fan of: The Gonads, Cock Sparrer and the 4 Skins never appealed to me much, nor some of the more esoteric releases on Crass Records by the likes of Andy T and Annie Anxiety, but I can’t deny the fact that they are all important to the substance of the research.

WD: Finally Russ, what’s your favourite and least favourite sleeve from the collection? I’m going to offer Here Today, Gone Tomorrow by The Strand and the very dubious Woman in Winter by The Skids (with apologies to Jill Mumford) as my respective choices.

RB: Well, that’s a hard question! I’ve just spent some time elaborating the methods by which I could put a sense of objectivity into the research, and now we’re back to subjective judgements and personal favourites. As I said earlier, the subject is such a personal, emotive issue for most people who engage with it, it’s very hard to get away from those individual responses in the first place.

Still, I’ll give you a couple of answers. Firstly, as a fan it’s impossible to completely remove myself from my own memories and experiences surrounding my own interaction with these records—a bit like that character in the Nick Hornby novel High Fidelity who arranges his records alphabetically, chronologically, and ultimately autobiographically. Therefore I’m going to nominate Grip/London Lady, the first single by The Stranglers, a record that triggered more than 30 years of fascination in punk for me in the first place. Not a great piece of design, though I think it does capture something of the gloowering menace of the group at the time and is perfectly in keeping with the new ‘punk threat’.

My second answer is really in retrospect, as part of my design analysis and history of the punk sub-genres, so I can try to be a little more objective. I have some great nominations for ‘favourite’, including UK Subs C.I.D., Blitzkrieg Bop Let’s Go, 999 Emergency, Disco Zombies Invisible EP, The Vibrators Baby Baby, and Headache Can’t Stand Still, but I am going to go for The Angelic Upstarts I’m An Upstart—a brilliant combination of several iconic punk visual devices all in one sleeve, including ransom note typography, a black strip across the main character’s eyes, childlike rebellion against authority (and adults), and coarse halftone photographic reproduction. You just know what it’s going to sound like as soon as you see it.

For least favourite, I would tend to agree with Jill Mumford’s Woman in Winter sleeve—I’m not really sure what’s going on there—or any of the later punk picture discs, a format completely unsuitable to the genre. A perfect example of record company management getting a little ahead of themselves in the marketing department!
Antisocial
Made In England EP
Beat The System, SOCIAL1, 1982
Designer: Barry Lights

Chaotic Discord
Punk The World EP
Riot City, RIOT10, 1982
Designer: group member

Combat 84
Rapaz
Victory, VIC2, 1981
Designer: Barry Glasson

Cult Maniax
Fenzi
Next Wave, NXT2, 1981
Designer: Bunker

The Duggie Briggs Band
Post Rock'Gaysy'
It Records, IT1, 1978
Designer: unknown

Fruit Eating Bears
Chry-Hnary
Lightning, GLU29, 1978
Designer: Record Label Design Group

Headache
Can't Stand Still
Levi Records, LOU1021, 1977
Designer: unknown

Jilted John
Going Stoned
Rabid, TOSH105, 1978
Designer: Record Label Design Group

Midnite Cruiser
Rich Rich
It Records, IT2, 1978
Designer: Keith Bogue

Nine Nine Nine
Emergency
United Artists, LP18399, 1978
Designer: George "God" Snow

Nipple Erection
King Of The Bop
Soho, SH1/2, 1978
Designer: Phil Smee

O Level
We Love Malcolm
Kings Road, K00021, 1978
Designer: group member

Resistance 77
Nowhere To Play EP
Riot City, RIOT16, 1983
Designer: Baz Singleton

Nipple Erectors
King Of The Bop
Virgin, VSK101, 1980
Designer: Jill Mumford

The Snivelling Shits
Terminal Stupid
Ghetto Rockers, PRE2, 1977
Designer: group member

The Stranglers
Grip
United Artists, UP18211, 1977
Designer: Record Label Design Group

The Users
Kicks In Style
Warped, WARP1, 1978
Designer: James James

The Vibrators
Baby Baby
Epic, EP122, 1977
Designer: Record Label Design Group
The Jerks
Get Your Woofing Dog Off Me
Underground, RRSH, 1977
Designer: group member

Pork Dukes
Telesopone Masturbator
Wood, WOOD56, 1978
Designer: Simou Godley
The Monks
Johnny B. Rotten
EMI, DAE29999, 1979
Designer: Record Label Design Group

4 Skins
Yesterday's Heroes
Secret, SHH118, 1981
Designer: unknown
Sex Pistols
"C'Mon Everybody"
Virgin, VS272, 1979
Designer: Jamie Reid

Sex Pistols
"Silly Thing"
Virgin, VS256, 1979
Designer: Jamie Reid
Victim
Strange Thing By Night
Good Vibrations, GOT2, 1978
Designer: Terri Hooley

Crass/Poison Girls
Bloody Revolution
Crass, 421984/1, 1980
Designer: Gee Vaucher
The Strand/Positive Signals
Here Today, Gone Tomorrow
YoB, YOB001, 1980
Designer: unknown

Armed Force
Popstar
Armed Force, AF1, 1979
Designer: Armed Force

City of Westminster
THE STRAND

1. HERE TODAY, GONE TOMORROW
2. CHANGING WORLD
YoB 001
Disco Zombies
Invisible EP
Uptown, WZZ01, 1979
Designer: Eleventh Hour

Angelic Upstarts
I'm An Upstart
Warner Bros, 17354, 1979
Designer: Record Label Design Group