**Punk London (and Beyond)**

**Russ Bestley**

*Punk was an explosion of creative energy in music, fashion and design that continues to resonate around the world.*

We are currently witnessing another very active phase in the official narration of punk history, at least in the United Kingdom. Commemorations are underway to mark the *40th Anniversary of Punk* under the banner of Punk London. Old photographs are being dusted down and hung in galleries, former scene leaders, punk celebrities and commentators are being called upon to tell the story of punk’s birth – and demise – over a brief period in time following the initial explosion of the Sex Pistols into public consciousness during the Long Hot Summer of 1976. This is a reflection on a significant ‘cultural moment’, with various institutions wishing to re-engage with a particular point in popular cultural history, to resurrect a story and draw in new – and old – audiences.

So, has punk come of age? Is it now safe for consumption within the prestigious halls of our cultural institutions? Was forty years something akin to its radioactive half-life, making it now safe to handle, perhaps with protective gloves and the correct level of risk assessment? The first question relates to the very notion of an anniversary in the first place. Without wishing to point out the obvious, there are hundreds, or thousands, of ‘significant’ anniversaries that could be commemorated in relation to punk. Some would span closer to 50 years, others perhaps a decade or less, depending on their location, social, cultural or historical context. To a young punk in Indonesia or Mexico in 2016, should the anniversary of an event that took place thousands of miles away and years before they were born have any significance whatsoever? Or would the commemoration of the first punk gig that they attended, or the first homegrown punk record released in their country be more important to them?

Specifying a date of origin is also deeply problematic, like trying to retrace biological evolution all the way back to the primeval swamp. Punk, after all, did not evolve in a vacuum, but occupied a particular position within a cultural continuum. There were many precursors and antecedents to the punk explosion in the US and UK: musically, from early rock ’n’ roll and garage rock to the then-contemporary pub rock scene; socially and politically, in relation to the 1960s counterculture; and aesthetically, with punk’s visual language taking its cue from activist and transgressive art and design approaches dating back to the Situationists, Surrealists, Dada and beyond. From the fashion innovations of Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren to Jamie Reid’s highly charged graphics for the Sex Pistols, Arturo Vega’s iconic Ramones logo, Mark Perry’s *Sniffin’ Glue* fanzine, Barney Bubbles’ playful visuals for Stiff Records or Malcolm Garrett’s graphic identities for Buzzcocks and Magazine, the first wave of punk gave rise to some hugely influential and long-lasting design output. But it also empowered thousands more amateur ‘designers’ to create their own interpretation of a visual language that mirrored the excitement and ambition of the new scene – some of it highly innovative, some of it awkward, ugly, cheap and nasty, but collectively comprising what could be called a punk aesthetic.

Of course, the unique aspects of punk’s own evolution should also not be overlooked, from the “punk diaspora” – where an outspoken ideology that declared ‘anyone can do it’ and an overtly nihilistic attitude toward the music industry led to a situation where ‘anyone’ did, in fact, ‘do it’ – to the resulting deluge of independent, do-it-yourself records, concerts and networks of activity that threatened to seriously disrupt the commercial stability of the popular music business, albeit temporarily. Little attention has been paid to the range of local interpretations of punk and post-punk styles, the groups and clusters of individuals from further afield than major cities such as London or Manchester who responded to punk’s initial call to arms to ‘do it themselves.’ There are many examples of punk output reflecting a connection to geographical localities and regional cultural histories, and the sense that often small-scale local agendas operated alongside and in parallel to higher-profile national and international developments is key to understanding punk’s wider subtext. This sense of local identity was played out in record sleeves, lyrics, song titles, band names and in the graphic identities of groups and labels across the UK – and beyond.

Punk’s migration did not follow the more traditional pattern from rural areas towards the major commercial centres (as had happened in the development of country music, jazz and blues in the USA, for instance), but rather acted inversely, as a largely inner-city urban style which shifted over time away from the city centres and out to the regions. Equally, punk did not encompass a general shift toward either commercial acceptance (as with country music and rock & roll) or a growing status as a form of high art (as with jazz) – although certain developments such as ‘new wave’ were to evolve from the genre as a more acceptable commercial interpretation of punk style. A significant strand of punk engaged in a constant battle with the music industry to remain underground, avant-garde and resolutely uncommercial. As the music industry invested in new wave, a number of increasingly aggressive, abrasive and deliberately awkward sub-genres (such as hardcore, oi! and anarcho-punk, as well as the more radical elements of DIY and post-punk) sought to distance themselves from what they saw as the commercialisation of the movement. These developments can be seen to have been both political and aesthetic – from the lyrics and public statements of the groups involved to the musical and visual styles of their records.

But punk’s diaspora was also not limited to the UK or US, and parallel developments were happening around the globe. What would become known as punk scenes had been developing in Australia, France, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Belgium and Scandinavia since the earliest days of a nascent UK punk movement, and even as punk in the UK reached its commercial peak and began to decline (at least in terms of its public profile), ‘punk’ was being discovered, invented or adapted in far-flung places below (Western) critical radar. There are now hundreds of variants of what might be termed ‘punk’ around the world, from as far afield as Eastern Europe to South America, South East Asia and the Himalayas, to the point that perhaps the catch-all term itself has become meaningless. Certainly there is evidence of a crossover of generations, with older punk bands still touring and producing records and newer participants evolving their own sounds and styles. Many contemporary punk concerts draw audiences from a wide range of ages and backgrounds – in many ways it is surprising how long-lasting that initial burst of energy has endured, along with its sense of community, a term that appears alien at first glance to the history of the subculture.

The impact of a harder-edged, more political hardcore punk movement should not be underestimated in this regard – while early bearers of the punk banner traced their roots along similar lines to the early US and UK punks (primarily through garage rock and 60s R&B, tied to a do-it-yourself ethos) or set out to follow in the footsteps of the Ramones, Sex Pistols or Clash, a more widespread international hardcore scene was driven more by ideology and underground networks rather than aesthetics. Indeed, it could be argued that the DIY principles of US bands such as Black Flag, the Minutemen and Dead Kennedys – visiting towns and cities well off the standard rock touring circuit and playing shows in disused buildings and basements – along with the highly political anarcho-punk scene in the UK led by Crass and Poison Girls influenced the next generation of hardcore punks in a similar way to the first wave diaspora, only in many ways it was even further-reaching. The accompanying visual language of hardcore and anarcho-punk, created by leading figures such as Raymond Pettibon, Winston Smith, Gee Vaucher and Brian Schroeder, was extended by a host of amateur designers, often with no ambition to professional status beyond their personal commitment to the subculture.

Other punk sub-genres evolved in different directions. The sense of empowerment brought about by the do-it-yourself punk and post-punk scene played a major role in the growth of independent music more broadly – though the conflation of the term to ‘indie’ and the (partial) recuperation of that movement by the major labels goes some way to hide its more radical history from popular view. New wave – in some respects denoting the re-appropriation of punk by the music industry, though perhaps more generously a way to describe the incorporation of avant-garde, experimental and angular styles within the pop music aesthetic, continues to hold at least some influence. Certainly the breadth and depth of pop and rock music styles have expanded well beyond traditional blues-based rock ’n’ roll forms, and – while keeping a critical eye on the fact that popular music has always adapted and evolved – some of that radical experimentation (not least in terms of audience acceptance) can still be traced back to the punk explosion of the late 70s and early 80s.

**Further Reading**

*England’s Dreaming*, Jon Savage, Faber & Faber 2005

ISBN-10: 0571227201 ISBN-13: 978-0571227204

*Punk: An Aesthetic*, Johan Kugelberg & Jon Savage (eds.), Rizzoli 2012

ISBN-10: 0847836622 ISBN-13: 978-0847836628

*The Art of Punk*, Russ Bestley & Alex Ogg, Omnibus 2012

ISBN-10: 1780381301 ISBN-13: 978-1780381305

*Up They Rise – The Incomplete Works of Jamie Reid*, Jamie Reid and Jon Savage, Faber & Faber 1987

ISBN-10: 0571147623 ISBN-13: 978-0571147625