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?

Yasmin Rees, ‘Geographical Problem’ (Warped Records), 1979

WD: One aspect of punk culture that is often overshadowed by the political facets is the humour. The idea of ‘novelty 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’. Graham Fellows’ chart success in the guise of Jimmy John indicates there was some kind of market out there. I guess in the DIY spirit, it seems like it was easy for anyone to join in and take the piss out of the genre (gently or otherwise), and in fact it could be quite self-deprecating. From the point of view of your research, I’m curious to know the extent to which these kinds of humorous regional ‘voices’ and idiosyncrasies are manifested in the sleeves and lyrics. And with this in mind, do you think punk is taken too seriously?

RB: Punk is taken far too seriously! Actually, that statement presents something of a dichotomy for me—I am a lifelong follower of punk music, and have always felt that punk as a ‘serious’ profile alongside say jazz or folk music, both of which have their own well established fields 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 feels like 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. In fact, the closer you look, the more clear it becomes that humor is embedded across a wide range of UK punk, and is evident in the unlikeliest of places.

In some cases, such as the punk parodies of the Water Pistols, Alberto Y Los Trios Paranoias, The Punkettes, Matt Black I. The Doodletogs, Jilted John, and The Monks, the ‘comic voice’ is up-front and self-evident. In others, these examples were created by outsiders to the punk scene—cabaret and performance groups and comedians, as well as those wishing to cash in on a new trend with significant media interest. Even 1950s/60s comedian Charlie Drake got in on the act, releasing the comedy single ‘Super Punk’ in late 1976, and many British comedians incorporated a punk sketch within their stage and television acts.

A second set of comic punk commentators came from within the subculture itself. Even early on in UK punk’s development, groups such as Alternative TV, The Adverts, Television Personalities and The Levellers passed critical comment on the way that the new wave was being co-opted by the media and fashion industries, and (in their eyes at least) misinterpreted by new groups of stereotypical ‘punks’ and outsiders. The Television Personalities classic ‘Where’s Bill Grundy Now’ EP included a comment on punk fashionists in the song ‘Posing At The Roundhouse’, and on the ways in which bandwagon jumpers and trend followers were filtering into the scene in their most famous track, ‘Part-Time Punks’.

Interestingly, this kind of internal discourse within the punk movement carried on throughout the period I’ve been researching—many later Second Wave punk groups became quite obsessive about ‘authenticity’, and this was 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: Anarchopunk centred on the notion of anarchism in 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 toOi, 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:

Weaving braces, the red, white, and blue
Doing what he thinks he ought to do
Used to be a punk and a mod too
Or is it just a phase he’s going through?

Some groups utilised this obsession with authenticity in an openly humourous way: Speldgensabounds, Chaotic Dischord, the Anti-Nowhere League, and The Ejected wrote songs which commented on the punk scene and its internal dialogue in a clearly comic manner. The Anti-Nowhere League’s visual demeanour, combined with songs such as ‘I Hate... People’ and ‘Let’s Break The Law’, saw them adopt a cartoon punk identity which proved successful with punk audiences, though not with music press critics. Chaotic Dischord were a Hardcore/Trash punk parody group from Bristol, formed as an incognito offspring of successful New Punk group Vice Squad: their record releases included the debut Fuch The World/EP (1982) and the album Fuch Religion, Fuch Politics, Fuch The Lot of You! (1983), and despite their obviously over-the-top and tongue in cheek offensiveness they went on to be successful in the independent record charts. In fact, the theme of punk groups adopting comically offensive approaches could be seen as a key underlying trait—The Pork Dukes had adopted similar tactics five years previously for their singles Bend A$$ And Telephone Masturbate.

However, beyond these groups and songs whose intention was to amuse their audience, humour was a far greater underlying theme across a lot of UK punk than often assumed. If you bring in themes of sarcasm, irony, parody and satire it covers most punk output in some way. The Adverts, Alternative TV and X Ray Spex commented directly on the growing punk scene in their songs—though it does have to be said that this is less evident in their record sleeve design. The Sex Pistols’ lyrics were witty and sarcastic, rather than simply thuggish and aggressive, and Jamie Reid’s sleeve designs followed suit. Reid’s later work for the Sex Pistols was, in my opinion, some of his best: a strategy adopted by Reid, particularly during the later phase of the Sex Pistols’ musical career and the 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 (1979) featured graphics developed for the fake products created by Reid as props 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 Lemonade’, ‘Rotten Bar’ chocolate and ‘Anarkee-Ora’ (a pun on Kia-Ora, a brand of soft drink often sold in cinemas). The full range of dummy packages were featured in a scene at a snack kiosk in a cinema foyer when audience members arrive to see the new Sex Pistols film, with veteran comic actress Irene Handl and singer Eddie Tenevole as others.

Similarly, even some of the most ‘serious’ of the later political Anarchopunks, Crass and The Subhumans, embodied a sense of underlying wit in their record output, employing satirical humour in their lyrics as well as their sleeve
designs. Crass also contributed to the punk authenticity debate with the sleeve to their second single, ‘Bloody Revolution’, released in 1980. The image, a gouache illustration by Gee Vaucher, is based on a publicity photograph of the Sex Pistols from 1977, reconfigured with the individual’s heads substituted by those of the Queen, Pope John Paul II, the statue of justice and Margaret Thatcher. This complex image works on a number of levels: primarily, it satisﬁes the Sex Pistols themselves as ﬁgures of authority and the state, passing an ironic comment on their failure—and that of the punk ‘establishment’—to live up to a ‘revolutionary’ ideal. However, the use of iconic individuals for the heads of the ﬁgures also works as a direct détournement of those icons themselves, within the context of a punk rock record. Crass strongly criticised the failure of the punk movement in general to engage with a political direction, satirising The Clash, the Sex Pistols and other punk ‘heroes’ in their lyrics, and this attitude was reﬂected in their early artwork.

As I have said previously, punk’s adoption of an ‘anyone can do it’ philosophy led directly to widespread regional interpretations of the subculture. Regional voices were reﬂected in vocal styles and accents, in the locations of group photographs on record sleeves, and within the songwriter’s lyrics. Humour often played a key part in getting that message across, whether it be a comment on suburban boredom (The Clash’s ‘The Prisoner’, The Members’ ‘Sound Of The Suburb’, Buzzcocks’ ‘Running Free’, The Skids’ ‘Sweet Suburbia’), or local government policy and the lack of venues for bands to play in their local areas (Special Duties’ ‘Colchester Council’, Resistance 77’s ‘Nottingham Problem’). There was anger in many of these songs, but it was also infused with an idea 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 commercialisation, 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 crossover 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 (centre on the perceived ‘working class’ nature of the 1980s Hardcore and New Punk movements. While certain arguments about class credibility and punk authenticity might be called into question, it is broadly true to say that many Third Wave groups and fans did voice a general opposition to what they termed the ‘middle class’ roots of earlier punk, and towards students in particular. Songs such as ‘Student Wankers’ by Peter E. The Test Tube Babies and ‘Are Students Safe?’ by Chaotic Dischord display a certain antipathy towards their subject. With a widespread rise in unemployment in the early 1980s, particularly amongst the young working class, and an accompanying increase in the divide between rich and poor, the ‘new Art School’ optimism of the First Wave was largely replaced by the ‘old dolts queers’ pessimism of the Third Wave.

Academic research into punk, whether it be based in cultural studies, history, or a study of the visual and musical ‘voice’ of the subculture, is bound to encounter some opposition, or at least a number of questions as to the motivation of the questioner. I have been lucky in many ways, in that I have been involved as a punk fan (and unsuccessful musician!) for many years, and I came to academia from within the subculture, not outside. As such, I can ﬁeld many questions in relation to my own ‘authenticity’ and my longstanding interest in the subject. More punk histories have been written recently from within the subculture itself, and it isn’t quite so unusual to see punk being analysed and written about by the likes of Alex Ogg, John Robb, Ian Glasper and Paul Marko, all of whom have a high level of trust within the scene. It is a ﬁne line though, and I have often had to present a quick summary of my own intentions before asking the actual questions I wish to ask. As I have also exhibited a lot of the visual material in large galleries and institutions (including the British Film Institute, Southampton Millais Gallery and the London College of Communication), and at the Rebellion punk festival in Blackpool and on 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.

WeD: 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 development
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
less significant after this time frame?

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
other genres during the early 1980s did
eventually have an impact on Third Wave punk
formats, and even on music styles themselves:
labels such as Cherry Red and Riot City moved
production towards multiple track twelve-inch
disks, while others adopted some production
styles from the mainstream and began creating
extended remixes of standard seven-inch single
tracks specifically for a club market. Meanwhile
seven-inch single sales suffered a widespread
decline across all music genres, at least until the
growth of the indie/DIY scene of the late 1980s,
itself a successor to the punk DIY sub-genre.

Technological changes also had a major
impact on the market for recorded music during
the early 1980s. Improvements to the cassette
tape format, which had been around since the
mid 1970s, together with the launch of the Sony
Walkman personal cassette player in 1979, led to
a shift away from vinyl in the early 1980s, with
cassette sales accounting for more than 95% of
the album market by 1986. However, the success
of the format was to be short lived. The Dutch
Philips and Japanese Sony
Corporations had been developing digital
recording and playback technology since around
1980, and the compact disc was launched in Japan
in October 1982 and in Europe in March 1983 as a
new, superior quality, pre-recorded music format
which was set to dominate the market over the
next twenty years. New technologies were also
to have a dramatic effect on the graphic design
and printing industries during the late 1980s: on
January 24 1984, Apple Computer launched the
Macintosh, a desktop computer which was to
have an enormous impact on the graphic design
profession over the following twenty years.

The various punk sub-genres had also
become strongly fragmented by the period
1983–84, in many cases evolving away from
‘punk’ definitions altogether. New Punk record
sales were diminishing, and both the Oi and
Anarcho Punk sub-genres had gone underground
in opposition to the punk movement well outside
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
Charts 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, 1980–1982 (1997) and Greg Shaw’s
contemporary listing New Wave On Record:
England & Europe 1975–8 (1978). There are also a
number of retroactive listings, such as those by
Martin Strong (1999), Vernon Joynson (2001) and
Henrik Bech Poulsen (2002). In 2007 Mario
Panciera published what I think is the definitive
guide to the records which brought punk up to
1979, 49 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
tavel through my 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 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, Droncos 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 Wooling Dog Off Me), The Fruit Eating Bears (Chevy Heavy), The Wall (New Way) and the Colt Maniacs (Black Horse and Jacy 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 glowering 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!
The Jerks
Get Your Woofing Dog Off Me
Underground, R&B, 1977
Designer: group member

Pork Dukes
Telephone Masturbator
Wood, WOOD56, 1978
Designer: Simou Gooley
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, GOSZ, 1978
Designer: Terri Hooley

Crass/Poison Girls
Bloody Revolution
Crass, 421984/1, 1980
Designer: Gee Vaucher
Armed Force
Aryan
Armed Force, AF1, 1979
Designer: Armed Force

The Strand/Positive Signals
Here Today, Gone Tomorrow
YOB, YOB001, 1980
Designer: unknown
Disco Zombies
Invisible EP
Uptown, WIZZ01, 1979
Designer: Eleventh Hour

Angelic Upstarts
I'm An Upstart
Warner Bros, K17354, 1979
Designer: Record Label Design Group