

**The late 70s saw the heyday of political pop. Since then it has waned. Or has it?**

## Simon Frith Post-punk Blues

In this article I want to raise some questions about the effects of punk. What long term changes, if any, did that 'explosion' of 1976 make to the music business? What is the political significance, if any, of pop music now? Much of what I'll say derives from the music session at the Moving Left Show, and I remember one question in particular. 'All I want to know,' said someone plaintively, 'is what music I should be listening to?' The left notion that out there somewhere is 'correct' music dies hard. It is, in fact, punk's most misleading political legacy.

The punk concert I remember best happened late in the story. The Rough Trade Show played Digbeth Town Hall, Birmingham, a typically dismal provincial fun palace — gloomy bar upstairs, cold dance floor downstairs, punks and skinheads wandering tensely about, as if pulled by an undertow of violence. The musicians — Lora Logic, Robert Rental and the Normal, Stiff Little Fingers — slowly bound this surly, aimless crowd into a dancing snake of energy and optimism and good will. I still have a vivid picture of Martin Culverwell (who was to become manager of the socialist feminist band, the Au Pairs) wandering around the hall as it emptied, shouting with delight at anyone who would listen.

### New vistas

It's important to remember punk this way because in its heyday (1976-9) it mattered not as theory but as experience and inspiration. It has often been suggested that the Left seized on punk opportunistically, clumsily adding punk signs and symbols to its existing rhetorical repertoire, but punk's politics mattered to pop fans too, and that Rough Trade night embodied a cluster of arguments. Stiff Little Fingers, for example, were working class youths from Belfast, sang

about the repressive British state, shot their music through with a hoarse call to militant youth action. Lora Logic was a female sax player whose sounds owed as much to the surprises of free music as to the certainties of pop. Robert Rental and the Normal were electronic technicians whose very stage presence — turning the knobs on their tape recorders — threw into question the usual idea of the rock star. Along with everyone else in that hall that night I believed that punk challenged the multinationals' control of mass music, that it was possible for musicians to seize the technical and commercial means of musical production. Along with everyone else I believed in punk as a class-conscious music which sprang not from correct theory (the theorists came along afterwards) but from the pop rank and file itself. Punk, in short, was not just another calculated political use of a pop form (like protest in the 1960s) but, rather, marked the politicisation of 'ordinary' musicians and 'ordinary' fans.

There were numerous dubious assumptions in this argument (left orthodoxy at the time), but such optimism remains the experience against which many people (as was apparent at the Moving Left show) still measure new music. For example, Stiff Little Fingers (now disbanded) have just released a 'greatest hits' LP, and to hear 'Alternative Ulster' again, a classic cry of justice, is to be overwhelmed with nostalgia for the days when pop singles seemed to matter, to realise how much it's taken for

granted now that they don't. Today the ingratiating Peter Powell (not John Peel) is the Radio 1 deejay young musicians most want to impress (he has the A&R departments' ear) and video has become music's best selling device. Groups have to pass through new gate-keepers, TV producers and packagers, whose reactionary ideas are obvious in their presentation of women: video-pop has meant the return of the female performer as little-girl-cum-vamp. 'Political' music has been driven to the pop fringe and so, ironically, British musicians (after the 'provincial' limitations of punk) are once more appearing in the US charts.

### Rough Trade

Pop music has failed, then, to realise the political fantasies that were piled on punk. Two points can be made about this. Firstly, the idea of an 'alternative' record business turned out to be wishful thinking. This is best illustrated by Rough Trade's own story. It became Britain's most radical record company (from its base as an alternative shop and distributor) as a sort of facilitating agent, a means of access to the music market not patrolled by the usual contract-waving, commercially-calculating gate-keepers. To begin with, then, Rough Trade did profit-sharing deals one record at a time. It didn't take on the cost of promotion (Rough Trade acts had to do their own); it didn't regard musicians as long term investments; it didn't lay down career plans. In the last couple of years, though, this policy has had to change. Rough Trade (suffering the effects of the record sales recession like everyone else) has had to shift from a short term to a long term strategy — it needs assets to show to banks, to guarantee credit, and this means star-building, forward planning, musical calculations that aren't about seizing the moment (like the first Stiff Little Fingers LP) but eyeing the future until, inevitably, the old A&R terms (quality, talent, exploitations) creep back in.

The consequences are obvious in the changing significance of Scritti Politti, the first group to benefit from Rough Trade's new investment policy. Scritti Politti's original, Marxist records were packaged with details of how the product was made and priced — this was, in the group's words, 'the cost of meaning, the economy of language, the language of the economy.' The group's 1982 LP, *Songs To Remember*, by contrast, comes in a sleeve designed like an expensive cigarette pack, features a soulful picture of Green, singer as pin-up. From the consumer's point of view, Rough Trade's marketing of Scritti Politti today is not, in essence, any different from EMI's marketing of a vacantly

# ROUGH TRADE



Alternative Ulster — Stiff Little Fingers

pretty pop group like Duran Duran. It seems appropriate that this Christmas's best-selling 'alternative' record was Rene and Renato's Italian bistro hit, 'Save Your Love'.

### The Victorian poor

Post-punk music has 'failed', secondly, to mobilise a political pop audience — hence the decline in organisations like Rock Against Racism, the shifts in the pop concerns of both musicians and fans: Punk was 'dole queue rock' and the 1981 'riots' took place to the soundtrack of the Specials' *Ghost Town*, but since then, while youths' position in the labour market and on the streets hasn't changed (except for the worse), pop's response most certainly has — the idea now is to *dress misery up*. 1982's dole queue hit, Wham's *Wham Rap*, was, for example, a determined dance floor attempt to translate unemployment into leisure. The 'affluent teenager' may be, by now, an anachronism, but you wouldn't know it from the charts — *Smash Hits'* witty, cynical celebration of consumerism outsells the rest of the music press put together, and there are more youth pop shows on TV than ever. The young unemployed are acknowledged — like the Victorian poor, they are always now going to be with us — but music is offered to them, as to the suburban mainstream, simply as a diversion.

Punk rock itself still exists, but no longer as the sound of left optimism. Rather, as Paul Morley put it in the *New Musical Express*, 'punk has become a sad homesickness, a sickness for a 'home' that's never been had, a diffuse nostalgia for an unspecific human climate, an emptiness that manifests *itself* mostly with mere uncouthness, or futile contempt.' Punk has become less politically significant as it has become more authentically proletarian — those 1976-8 pioneers were, in reality, bohemians, artists, schemers; even Stiff Little Fingers sang words written by their manager, the *Daily Express's* man in Belfast.

### The Jam

The implications of this are made clear by the story of the Jam, Britain's most important populist group. When they began playing publicly, in 1976, the Jam were dismissed by Julie Burchill and Tony Parsons, by 'real' punks everywhere, as suburban Tories, lower middle class sneaks. When they broke up at Christmas they were the best loved band in this country since Slade. While Johnny Rotten became a New Yorker and the Clash an American band, the Jam remained stolidly true to the spirit of 76 — proudly provincial, righteously suspicious of success; these days it's Paul Weller (not



*The Jam*

those 'real' punks) who turns up at CND meetings and right-to-work rallies.

The Jam became popular by celebrating the mod notion of the good life even as its context changed. Weller followed his audience through Thatcherism and his songs got more careful, more tense. Unlike his 1960s models, Weller didn't get flabby or mystical or self-obsessed; he remained fixed on the idea of lyrical solidarity, concerned to *represent* his audience, to be impersonally 'honest'. His ambition was to 'put some joy back in this town called malice,' but while the Jam's songs are taut narratives, they aren't exactly joyful, and on stage the group's constricted sound was decidedly oppressive. The audience would stare intently at the band, their experience (boredom, idleness, the continued nagging dependence on parents and instructors and dole) honoured by the music but not stirred by it. Jam crowds were always strangely subdued, and the problem of the Jam's live sound is apparent on their valedictory LP, *Dig The New Breed*. The earliest tracks (from 1977) have immediacy — Weller's throttled words, the band's crashing rhythms come spilling out in their eagerness to be heard — but by 1979 such excitement had become a mannerism, a rock'n'roll sign which conceals the group's lack of glee or menace.

### The best of a bad situation

Paul Weller made graphic images out of the ideology implicit in working class youth pop from Slade to Oi. This music is about making the best of a bad situation; it is not about changing it. It is structured by class consciousness - a brooding sense of 'us' and 'them' — but it is, for all its angry petulance, oddly complacent. The key to youth culture in Weller's account of it is a wry, defensive, pragmatic realism — imagination is suspect, joys are fleeting, solidarity a dour necessity. The Jam long ago shook off their Tory tag (and *The Gift*, for example, uses straightforward left slogans) but the problem remains: the Jam flourished as the voice — defiant, assertive, but, in the end, cheerless — of youth in retreat.

Punk failed to change the way popular music works because it is, in capitalist practice, impossible to construct an 'alternative' business, and because, in their very claims to 'social realism', musicians were committed to a form that confirmed rather than challenged their audience's expectations. Such music can't 'mobilise' people, only make them feel temporarily better, and, from this point of view, there's no particular reason to think that the Jam's music is better than, say, Imagination's exuberant disco flash. The tragedy of punk was not that it

'failed' to change pop but that so many people (musicians, fans, commentators) thought that it could.

**Just another spectacle**

This point is argued powerfully in *The End of Music*, a pamphlet written anonymously in Leeds in 1978 and just reissued.<sup>1</sup> The pamphlet is, in some respects, an angry restatement of the Frankfurt critique of mass culture, but with the emphasis on pop as spectacle not commodity. The author argues that punk, far from being progressive, by turning political rebellion itself into spectacle, was the most insidiously reactionary music of all, though, 'as usual, the Left concentrated on the content of the lyrics and not the form of production.' The pamphlet quotes Sting: 'There isn't much difference between rock'n'roll and teaching, mind you. It's the same job. You're entertaining delinquents for an hour.' To entertain means to contain, and the central argument of *The End of Music* is that to play people's experience back to them as spectacle is to deny them the *active* possession of their lives — all art is 'a substitute for creative self-expression.' The author applies to punk

the arguments that other left theorists apply to the rest of pop. Punk couldn't 'transform' the pop process, whether in terms of production or consumption, because it was part of it.

I agree with this but not with *The End of Music's* other conclusions. Left accounts of music assume that it should work either as *agit-pop* — do things to people, instruct them — or *as folk-pop*, the direct account of collective experience; punk was celebrated because it seemed to put both pop forms together — to raise people's consciousness by articulating their experiences rawly, by-passing the usual commercial constraints. But while *The End of Music* convincingly suggests that punk musicians didn't and couldn't do this — even when they have kept complete control, like Crass, they're implicated as artists in the capitalist spectacle — it still assumes that these are the necessary measures of pop's 'correctness'. I want to conclude, by contrast, that popular music's importance has other components, that its significance (which punk obscured) *depends* on its role as a mass, leisure medium.

**Pop and the Falklands**

One of the more important (and least remarked) aspects of Falklands fever was that while the rest of the media were awash


with nostalgic jingoism, pop wan't. As far as I know, the only song directly or indirectly about the Task Force was Robert Wyatt's *Shipbuilding*, a moving, melancholy comment on war, unemployment and hope. What's important here is not what music 'does' to its listeners (though *Shipbuilding* is one of the best selling Rough Trade singles ever), but what contribution it makes to the media swirl of public images, assumptions and ideals. In this context — playing records while reading the papers, listening to songs between Radio 1 news bulletins, watching the groups who punctuate the TV flow —

**the pop record is about the only public account of Thatcher's Britain that makes any emotional sense**

it's clear that pop does still matter as a source of attitudes not found elsewhere. Paul Weller's claims for the Jam are, in this respect, quite right—the pop record is about the only public account of Thatcher's Britain that makes any *emotional* sense of what it means to be young or unemployed or black. What's at stake here is not political mobilisation or ideological challenge, but, more simply, pop's role in providing a public

<sup>1</sup> *The End of Music* is published by Box V2, 488 Great Western Road, Glasgow.

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account of private lives. Such an account is certainly necessary for any politics, even if it is not political in itself. Thus, for example, reggae music feeds into black politics not in any straightforward agit or folk pop way, but as a crucial source of a language through which experiences can be shared and thus politicised — even a 'light-weight' black pop group like Musical Youth uses the signs of black solidarity.

Popular music, for all its 'mass' appeal, works as a mediation between public and private lives, translating public events (like unemployment or nuclear war) into private codes of fear and outrage, making public symbols (like the Jam or the best of the neo-punks, Southern Death Cult) out of private feelings of frustration and despair. Pop, then, rarely relates to politics in terms of class and class organisations, but, rather, via movements in which the relationships between the personal and the political, the individual and the collective are themselves an issue of dispute. Music's political effects are as fantasy, and it is too easy for outside commentators to get fantasies wrong (so that for example, the Left never understood that the New Romantics were as important as the punks, and, in many ways, more authentically working class). To raise the question of fantasy and ideology from another medium: what does it mean that Yosser Hughes has become a 'folk-hero' (there *are* numerous pop songs about him)? Is he politically correct? Does such a question make any sense?

**A form of pleasure**

This leads, finally, to the question of pleasure. What sort of pleasure does pop music offer? What sort of desires does it define? These were the questions (particularly in relationship to sexuality) that the immediate post-punk political musicians like the Gang of Four, the Au Pairs and Scritti Politti were most concerned to answer. If pop is a form of pleasure then one way of

we need to look not at what's happened to the music, but at what's happened to our feelings

making it political is to politicise its pleasures, to lay bare their construction, to challenge their taken-for-granted dance floor fun. What began, though, as an earnest pop version of semiotic debate, was soon translated into the more dubious art school claims of 'new pop': groups like ABC and the Human League may design self-con-

sciously complete packages, their image and sales patter elaborate, self-referential jokes, but such artifice is, from the audience's point of view, no different from the traditional commercial artifice of Dollar or Bucks Fizz. The politics of pleasure lies not in what art school musicians put into their packages, but what pop fans take out.

What does pop mean to its audience? It's a measure of our limited assumptions about music that this remains such a difficult question to answer, particularly if we want to place pop response against some ideal of collective action. If music has its effect via emotion and fantasy then what's at stake is not its *direct* political effect, but its play of individual feeling — this was the Jam's problem: how to be collectively joyful about individual despair. I can only add two

points. First, the most interesting pop musicians at present (Elvis Costello and the Beat, for example) are precisely concerned, as performers, with pop's mediating role between public and private experience. This doesn't make their music political in the punk sense, but it can't be dismissed as non-political either. Secondly, the 'correctness' of pop can only be defined by its audience. Popular musics which are obviously politically important (some folk traditions, some black musics, for example) are so because they feed into a political community that exists already — they don't create it, but are absorbed by it. If *pop felt* political in 1976 but doesn't now then we need to look not at what's happened to the music, but at what's happened to our feelings. □

