

CHAPTER 7

THE MID- TO LATE-70S—PUNK

INTRODUCTION

In the late 1960s, the groundwork was established for a new generation of rockers that emerged in the mid-1970s and vehemently rejected the status quo. This so-called “punk” movement was shunned by the media and the majority of listeners; however, ironically, it was ultimately subsumed and sanitized by major record labels in the late-70s/80s and mass-marketed as “New Wave.” Through the rapid dissemination of Music Television (MTV) in the 1980s, this high-tech version of corporate rock attracted an enormous audience.

I. THE PRECURSORS OF PUNK

Late-60s predecessors to punk included **The Velvet Underground**, **The Who**, **MC5**, and **Iggy Pop and The Stooges**. In the early 70s, **The New York Dolls** made the most significant move towards punk, while taking a giant leap beyond the dolled-up theatrics of **David Bowie** and **Roxy Music**.

The Velvet Underground (formed in 1964)

Lou Reed/guitar-vocals; John Cale/viola-bass-organ

Sterling Morrison/guitar; Nico (Christa Paffgen)/singer-actress

*Maureen ‘Mo’ Tucker/drums; [original drummer= **Angus MacLise**]*

While playing at a local New York City “Beat” happening, Reed-Cale-Morrison-MacLise of The Velvet Underground¹ met the famous pop-artist **Andy Warhol**, who became prominently involved in the group’s promotion. During their four-year run, this group developed a unique mix of psychedelia, blues, classic/hard rock and even early punk aspects (ten years before the Sex Pistols). Their first recording effort was rejected labels as too long and controversial by several major record labels, but it was ultimately released by MGM/Verve in 1966 as *The Velvet Underground and Nico*. Though groundbreaking in approach, **Lou Reed**’s shocking subject matter (drugs, homosexuality, sado-masochism, quasi-voyeurism, transvestitism,) and the band’s stark/experimental sound caused the album to be shunned by radio stations and even the West Coast underground subcultures. Nico left the band for a solo career in 1967, and Cale departed the following year. After the release of their most successful album *Loaded* (1970, featuring “Sweet Jane”), Reed left to start his own solo career, which was highlighted by the bizarre 1973 hit “Take a Walk on the Wild Side.”²

The Who (discussed previously in Chapter 3)

Although The Who are musically far-removed from punk, their angry/equipment-busting demeanor and anti-establishment lyrics influenced the rebel bands of the late 60s/early 70s.

¹ Angus MacLise adopted the name “The Velvet Underground” from the title of a 1960s paperback book.

² Here is an example of lyrics excerpted from the first verse of Reed’s “Take a Walk on the Wild Side”: “Holly came from Miami F-L-A, Hitchhiked her way across the U-S-A, Plucked her eyebrows on the way, Shaved her legs, Then he was a she, She says ‘Hey babe, Take a Walk on the Wild Side . . .’”

The Rolling Stones (discussed previously in Chapter 3)

In the late 60s/early 70s The Stones (particularly Jagger and Richards) adopted a raunchier attitude, preparing the way for the commercial viability of punk in the later 70s.

MC5 (the “Motor City Five”; formed in 1964/disbanded 1971)

Rob Tyner/vocals; **Wayne Kramer** (guitar); **Fred “Sonic” Smith** (guitar)
Dennis Thompson/drums; **Michael Davis**/bass
 original band also included: **Bob Gaspar**/drums and **Pat Burrows**/bass

This Detroit-based band—formed in 1964 by students at Wayne State University—began with a psychedelic image/sound (replete with marijuana/LSD) and ended with an intensely aggressive blues style. By 1966, they had a fanatical local following and signed with Elektra records. The sexual/drug content of their songs, as well as drug-related problems of band members and their manager John Sinclair (of the White Panther Party) kept them from attracting a wider audience. Their radical political stance led them to perform for rioters outside the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Their initial and most important album was *Kick Out The Jams* (1969, featuring “Motor City is Burning”)—recorded live at Detroit’s Grande Ballroom.

Iggy Pop and The Stooges (formed 1966/disbanded 1974)

Iggy Pop/lead vocals; **Ron Asheton**/guitar
Scott Asheton/drums; **Dave Alexander**/bass

In the American rock scene of the late 1960s, **The Stooges**—led by frontman **Iggy Pop** (birthname = James Osterberg)³—were even more outrageous and more pervasively influential than **MC5**. Their on-stage antics included violent verbal/physical interaction with the audience, self-mutilation, vomiting, etc., and their angry, simplistic/hard-edged sound predated grunge by nearly fifteen years. Before their drug-related breakup in the early 70s, The Stooges recorded two important albums on Elektra Records: *The Stooges* (1969) and *Fun House* (1970). After a hiatus, Pop began a solo career in 1977 with two David Bowie-produced albums, *The Idiot* and *Lust for Life* (featuring “The Passenger”).

The New York Dolls (formed 1972/disbanded 1977)

David Johansen/lead vocals; **Johnny Thunders**/guitar
Sylvain Sylvain/guitar-piano; **Arthur Kane**/bass; **Jerry Nolan**/drums

In retrospect, The New York Dolls served as the critical transition between the Rolling Stones/MC5/The Stooges of the late 60s, and hardline “Punk” of the late 70s. Their blatantly cross-dressed/glam rock image proved to be too outrageous for contemporaneous rock audiences, and it overshadowed their first-rate musical abilities. In 1973, their self-titled debut album (produced by Todd Rundgren and featuring “Back in the USA” and “Personality Crisis”) was hailed as a rock landmark, but this did not

³ Osterberg’s unusual stage name—Iggy—was a nickname he acquired when drumming for a high school band called “The Iguanas.” The “Stooges” were originally called “The Psychedelic Stooges.”

translate into commercial success. The following year came the prophetic *Too Much Too Soon*, which clearly demonstrated the toll that alcohol and drug addiction had taken on the band. In 1975, the band briefly came under the management of the British punk fashion designer/promoter **Malcolm McLaren**, who ultimately passed the torch to his next clients, **The Sex Pistols**. Soon after Johansen quit to pursue a solo career (under the pseudonym “Buster Poindexter”), and Thunders left to form **The Heartbreakers**.

Selected Examples of Pre-Punk

- **MC5**: “Motor City Is Burning” (1969)
- **The Velvet Underground**: “Sweet Jane” (1970)
- **Lou Reed**: “Take a Walk on the Wild Side” (1973)
- **The New York Dolls**: “Back in the USA” (1973)
- **Iggy Pop**: “The Passenger” (1977)

II. PUNK

Hardline Punk began in the US around 1974, achieved some degree of commercial success by 1976, then died out in a flash by 1978 and was transmuted into New Wave and various “Alternative” styles in the 1980s.⁴ Though American Punk preceded its British counterpart by several years, by comparison it was less violent/confrontational and less interested in denigrating traditional rock aesthetics than the Brits. Although most of these groups secured little more than local interest, some such as Blondie and The Talking Heads moved to superstar status, as Punk was commercially sterilized into New Wave.

American Punk (New York City)

The birthplace of Punk was **CBGB’s**⁵—a small, relatively low class bar in the Bowery of New York City—owned and operated by **Hilly Kristal**. In 1974, bands like **Television** began to play there regularly, and by 1975 this veritable “dive” had become the showcase for such diverse “Punk-oriented” groups as **The Talking Heads**, **The Patti Smith Group**, **Richard Hell and The Voidoids**, **The Ramones**, **Blondie**, and **The Heartbreakers**. Although these groups differed in style and approach, they had a sort of unified, counter-cultural purpose. As so aptly put by Rock historian Richie Unterberger, “they were angry outsiders who insisted that the only way to change rock & roll was to dismantle it and rebuild it, thereby reclaiming it.”⁶ Eventually, some of these bands were signed by independent record labels such as Sire (founded by Seymour Stein) and Arista (headed by Clive Davis), expanding the influence of this underground Punk movement across the US and over to Britain.

⁴ It should be noted that the term “Punk Rock” was originally coined by rock critics Dave Marsh, Lester Bangs and Lenny Kaye (later, the guitarist of The Patti Smith Group) to describe the teen “garage-rock” bands of the mid-1960s.

⁵ The 4-letter acrostic “CBGB” is short for Hilly Kristal’s original name for the bar: “Country, BlueGrass, Blues and Other Music for Uplifting Gourmandizers.”

⁶ Richie Unterberger, “American Punk,” *The All-Music Guide* (San Francisco: Miller Freeman, 1995), p. 914.

Television (formed 1973/disbanded 1978)

Richard Hell/bass-vocals; **Tom Verlaine**/guitar-vocals;
Billy Ficca/drums; **Richard Lloyd**/rhythm guitar

Transmuted from The Neon Boys in the early 70s, Television became the first of the US punkers to secure a steady gig at CBGBs (early 1974). Richard Hell's torn T-shirt (the result of real impoverishment) ultimately inspired British fashion promoter **Malcolm McLaren** to market this ragged look via The Sex Pistols. In 1975, after a dispute with Tom Verlaine (birthname = Tom Miller), Richard Hell (birthname = Richard Myers) left the group to form **The Heartbreakers**. After adding Fred Smith from Blondie as a replacement bassist, Television signed with Elektra Records and recorded their debut album *Marquee Moon* in 1977. Though essentially neglected in America, this album was deemed a landmark release in the UK. Their follow-up effort *Adventure* (1978) was poorly-received, leading to the break-up of the group.

The Patti Smith Group (formed 1973/disbanded 1977)

Patti Smith/vocals; **Lenny Kaye**/guitar; **Richard Sohl**/piano;
 (added later): **Ivan Kral**/bass; **J. D. Daugherty**/drums

In 1971, Patti Smith began a collaboration with guitarist Lenny Kaye, who for the next three years provided the only musical accompaniment to Smith's trance-like recitations of her avant-garde poetry. In 1973, Sohl came aboard, and the following year this first prototype of The Patti Smith Group had become regulars at CBGBs. In 1975, they were signed by Arista Records and recorded *Horses*, which included Smith's unusual adaptation of "Gloria" by Them (a mid-60s group featuring Van Morrison—see Chapter 3). For the next two years, Smith struggled for recognition, and then in 1977 her career was further undermined when she fell offstage and suffered a broken neck. After a lengthy recuperation, Smith married former MC5 guitarist Fred Smith, and took a hiatus from active performing to raise a family.

The Ramones (formed 1974/disbanded 1996)

Joey Ramone/vocals (Jeffrey Hyman); **Dee Dee Ramone**/bass (Douglas Colvin);
Johnny Ramone/guitar (John Cummings); **Tommy Ramone**/drums (Tommy Erdelyi)

The Ramones fused together the "buzz-saw" guitar attack of The New York Dolls and Richard Hell's punk style with high-volume intensity and a faster tempo. Through their release of *The Ramones* in 1976 on Sire Records, they became the first to record and widely disseminate the new Punk style. Their modernized, stripped-down adaptation of Rockabilly (complete with black leather jackets, torn jeans, T-shirts and their characteristic "1-2-3-4!" countoff) is represented in songs such as "Rockaway Beach" (1977), "Now I Wanna Sniff Some Glue" (1977), and "Teenage Lobotomy" (1977). The Ramones kept true to their vision for over two decades before disbanding in the mid-90s.

The Talking Heads (formed 1974/disbanded 1991)

David Byrne/guitar-vocals; **Tina Weymouth**/bass;
Chris Franz/drums; **Jerry Harrison**/keyboards

The so-called “art-school” punks Byrne, Franz and Weymouth met in the early 70s while students at the Rhode Island School of Design. In 1974, they were chosen as the opening act for The Ramones at CBGBs and quickly established themselves as the intellectual spirit behind the New York Punk movement. Shortly after adding keyboardist Jerry Harrison in 1976, they signed with Sire Records. The following year, their well-received debut album, *Talking Heads '77* including songs such as “Psycho Killer” and “Pull Me Up.” Almost immediately, they turned towards “New Wave” (see Chapter 8).

Richard Hell and The Voidoids (formed 1976/disbanded 1978)

Richard Hell/bass-vocals; *Bob Quine*/guitar;
Ivan Julian/guitar; *Marc Bell*/drums

After leaving **Television** in 1975 to form **The Heartbreakers** (with guitarist Johnny Thunders of The New York Dolls), Richard Hell soon left The Heartbreakers to form his own group—**The Voidoids**. They signed with Sire Records in 1977, and released the Punk anthem *Blank Generation* (1977). Originally, the “blank” was supposed to be filled in by the listener, but instead, this void became synonymous with the hopelessness of the punk mindset. The group began to dismantle in 1978 when Bell left to join the Ramones, and Quinn departed to become a recording “session” musician.

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British Punk

By late 1975, the Brits had taken over the Punk movement with a vengeance, shocking mainstream listeners, the media, and the very foundation of the rock industry—which at the time was focused on soft-pop and disco in both the US and UK.

The Sex Pistols (formed 1975/disbanded 1978)

Johnny Rotten/vocals; *Steve Jones*/guitar; *Paul Cook*/drums;
Glen Matlock/bass (later replaced by *Sid Vicious*)

Upon returning to London in mid-1975 (after briefly managing The New York Dolls), the British alternative-fashion entrepreneur **Malcolm McLaren** reformulated The Swankers into **The Sex Pistols**.⁷ Led by “singer” (screamer) **Johnny Rotten** (birthname John Lyden), the group immediately took on an angry, anarchistic demeanor. They attracted a local following of teenagers, who quickly adopted McLaren’s deftly-marketed spiked-hair/hole-torn T-shirt fashion image. The Pistols’ performances became synonymous with violence, which reached its climax when a teenaged girl was blinded by a glass-breaking stunt by their most notorious disciple—Sid Vicious. Despite the resounding negative publicity the group was signed by EMI in 1976 and released their first single, “Anarchy in the UK.” While promoting the song on the live BBC-TV weekend talkshow *Today* (hosted by Bill Grundy), The Sex Pistols

⁷ McLaren and his wife ran a fetish-fashion boutique called The Sex Shop, designed to attract a clientele of angry post-adolescents who could be persuaded to follow McLaren’s anarchistic political stance.

used extreme on-the-air profanity, causing a massive backlash that eventually forced EMI to drop the band from their label. In February 1977, Matlock was replaced by Vicious, and the group was immediately picked up by A & M Records. Within a week, they were dropped from the roster and signed with the small independent label, Virgin Records. Their next controversial single, “God Save The Queen” (1977)—released during the celebration of the Queen’s Jubilee Year, was banned in the UK and led to violent reprisals by monarchial loyalists who attacked both Rotten and Cook with razors, knives and iron pipes. Despite the ban, the song rose to Number 1 on *The New Music Express* chart, largely because of McLaren’s well-staged string of publicity stunts. Later that year, they released an album-compilation entitled *Never Mind The Bollocks—Here’s The Sex Pistols*, and then embarked on an ill-advised/poorly-conceived American tour. In early 1978, after a performance in San Francisco, Rotten announced he was leaving the band (according to McLaren—Rotten was fired). McLaren attempts to reconfigure the band were abruptly ended on October 12, 1978, when Vicious was arrested for the murder of his girlfriend. While out on bail, Vicious took an overdose of heroin, dying in his sleep on February 2, 1979.

The Clash (formed 1976/disbanded 1986)

Joe Strummer/guitar-vocals; **Mick Jones**/guitar;
Nicky “Topper” Headon/drums; **Paul Simonon** bass ;
 (**Keith Levene**/ guitar and **Terry Chimes**/drums left in 1977)

Joe Strummer formed The Clash in 1976 after watching the Sex Pistols perform in London. The group served as the front-act for The Pistol’s 1976 “Anarchy” tour, but soon became a more influential *musical* force in the Punk movement. They signed with CBS/Epic in 1977, releasing their debut album *The Clash*, which was deemed by *Rolling Stone* magazine as “the definitive punk album. Strummer and Jones’ brilliant compositional blend of angst, message, melodic substance and pop-style “hooks” can be heard in such songs off this album as “I’m So Bored with the USA” and “Garageland.” Their most important effort was the double-album *London Calling* (1979), which was well-received in both the UK and the US. In the early 80s, The Clash played to packed houses and graced the covers of rock magazines. In the early 1980s, they began to infuse Jamaican elements as heard in their albums *Sandinista* (1980) and *Combat Rock* (1982). In 1982, they also performed with The Who on their US Tour, causing many of their fans to reject them for over-commerciality. The resulting tension between Strummer and Jones led Jones to quit the band in 1983. Without his input, the group struggled to maintain its original artistry. Though The Clash officially disbanded in 1986, they compiled a highly-acclaimed retrospective album *The Story of the Clash* (1988), and then made a surprising return to the charts in 1991 when their 1982 Top 20 hit “Should I Stay or Should I Go” reached No. 1 after appearing in a Levi jeans TV ad.

Generation X (formed 1978/disbanded 1981)

Billy Idol/vocals; **Tony James**/bass-vocals; **Bob Andrews**/guitar;
 Original drummer **John Towe** was replaced by **Mark Laff** in 1976

Generation X was clearly the smoothest and most pop-oriented of the punkers. Their biggest hit was “Your Generation” (a response to The Who’s ‘60s anthem “My Generation”), from their self-named debut album released on Chrysalis Records in 1979.

Other British Punk Groups

Other important contributions to British Punk in the late 70s were made by

- **The Damned:** *Damned, Damned, Damned* (1977)
- **Siouxsie and The Banshees:** *The Scream* (1978)

Selected Examples of Punk

American Punk

- **The Patti Smith Group:** “Gloria” (1975)
- **The Ramones:** “Rockaway Beach” (1977)
- **The Talking Heads:** “Psycho Killer” (1977)
- **Richard Hell and The Voidoids:** “Blank Generation” (1977)

British Punk

- **The Sex Pistols:** “Anarchy in the U.K” (1976), “God Save The Queen” (1977), “No Fun” (1977)
- **The Clash:** “Garageland” (1977), “London Calling,” (1977), “I’m So Bored With the USA” (1977)
- **Generation X:** “Your Generation” (1979)

III. POLITICS IN LATE 70S BRITISH ROCK

During the late 70s, a wave of anti-Black sentiment was on the rise in Britain. Strong racist rhetoric was voiced by both David Bowie and [surprisingly] Eric Clapton (while in a drunken stupor), leading to the formation of a “Rock Against Racism” coalition, headed by artists such as The Clash, Elvis Costello, and The Who’s Pete Townshend. By late summer 1978, over 30 anti-racist concerts had been held across England, attended by over 200,000. British police and The National Front attempted to obstruct such concerts, with the National Front going so far as to burn down two auditoriums that hosted “Rock Against Racism” events. In 1979, British police invaded the Southall Musician’s Cooperative (a home base for punk and reggae musicians), destroying instruments and equipment. Punks were also attacked on the street by racist Skinheads and Teddy Boys, while right-wing extremists mockingly formed “Rock Against Communism.”

IV. HARDCORE

After Punk exploded at the hands of British bands, several extreme US punk bands arose in Los Angeles, laying the foundation for the thrash/hardcore movement of the 1980s. Leading L.A. hardcore-based bands include:

The Germs (formed 1977/disbanded 1980)

featuring **Pat Smear**/guitar and **Darby Crash** [Paul Beahm]/vocals

The Germs were perhaps the purest/wildest of the LA punkers, as seen in songs such as “Suicide Madness” (1979). Crash committed suicide in December 1980, following the lead of his idol, Sid Vicious of The Sex Pistols.

X (formed 1977/disbanded 1981)

John Doe [John Nommensen]/lyricist-vocals; **Exene Cervenka**/poet-vocals;

Billy Zoom [Tyson Kindale]/guitar; **Don Bonebrake**/drums

Produced by former Doors organist Ray Manzurek

Though more “alternative” than “punk”, X was strongly influenced by the hard-edged punk sound of The Ramones. Their style is represented by “Johnny Hit and Run Paulene” from *Los Angeles/Wild Gift* (1981).

Black Flag (formed 1978/disbanded 1987)

Greg Ginn/guitar;

Keith Morris/vocals (replaced in 1981 by **Henry Rollins**)

Chuck Dukowski/bass (replaced in 1984 by **Kira Roessler**)

Brian Migdol/drums (replaced by **Robo**, **Bill Stevenson**, **Anthony Martinez**)

Despite many personnel changes, Black Flag played an important role in the LA hardcore scene, as represented by songs such as “Revenge” from their *Damaged I* album (1981).

<p>Selected Example of LA Hardcore/early “Alternative” Rock</p>
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- **X**: “Johnny Hit and Run Paulene” (1981)

In 1981, hardcore began to get airplay on LA radio stations, and independent record companies such as Frontier, Posh Boy, Epitaph and SST began to record/distribute this previously underground material. Hardcore soon spread to other urban centers, especially

- **Washington DC**

Minor Threat (featuring Ian MacKay/vocals)

This was one of the first hard rock bands to reject drugs and alcohol. Their style was characterized by short songs with biting political commentary.

- **San Francisco**

The Dead Kennedys—(featuring Jello Biafra [Eric Boucher]/vocals)

Leftist politics showcased in their songs, as seen in “California Uber Alles” (1979; condemning California Governor Jerry Brown), “Holiday in Cambodia” (1980) and “Kill The Poor” (1980).

- **Minneapolis**

Husker Dü (see “Alternative Rock” in Chapter 9)

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FEATURED SONGS FOR CHAPTER 7

[w] = Audio and/or lyrics available on the class website

[Time-Life Video] = Time-Life History of Rock and Roll Series

PRE-PUNK

- MC5: “Kick Out The Jams” [w] (1969)
- THE VELVET UNDERGROUND: “Sweet Jane” [w] (1970; Time-Life DVD 5a)
- LOU REED: “Take a Walk on the Wild Side” [w] (1973)
- IGGY POP AND THE STOOGES: “The Passenger” [w] (1977; Time-Life DVD 5a)
- THE NEW YORK DOLLS: “Back in the USA” [w] (1979; Time-Life DVD 5a)

AMERICAN PUNK

- THE PATTI SMITH GROUP: “Gloria” [w] (1975; Time-Life DVD 5a)
- THE RAMONES: “Rockaway Beach” [w] (1977; Time-Life DVD 5a)
- THE TALKING HEADS: “Psycho Killer” [w] (1977; Time-Life DVD 5a)
- RICHARD HELL AND THE VOIDOIDS: “Blank Generation” (1977; Time-Life DVD 5a)

BRITISH PUNK

- THE SEX PISTOLS: “Anarchy in the U.K.” [w] (1976; Time-Life DVD 5a);
“God Save The Queen” [w] (1977; Time-Life DVD 5a); “No Fun” (1977; Time-Life DVD 5a)
- THE CLASH: “Garageland” [w] (1977; Time-Life DVD 5a); “London Calling” [w] (1977;
Time-Life DVD 5a); “I’m So Bored With The USA” [w] (1977)

L.A. HARDCORE

- X: “Johnny Hit and Run Paulene” [w] (1981; Time-Life DVD 5a)