the back half

Edited by Frances Stonor Saunders

Trying to find a focus for revolt: Johnny Rotten and Sid Vicious in Julien Temple's *The Filth and the Fury*

Neurotic outsiders

Was punk merely a scam, or was it a movement that served notice of Britain's cultural and political stagnation? **John Harris** re-examines punk's assault on orthodoxy and asks: Is pop music today all washed out?

"Listening now to The Sex Pistols' records," wrote Greil Marcus in *Lipstick Traces*, "it doesn't seem like a mistake to confuse their moment with a major event in history."

Marcus has long traded in grand, often unfathomable contentions, but his point stands up. Most rock groups stamp their moment with high chart positions, sell-out concerts and the like; The Sex Pistols' short era was bound up with moral panic, generational warfare and the last crucial brickbats being hurled at the postwar consensus. Their precise intent – clouded by myth-making, the inconsistency of their own accounts and the fact they were merely a four-piece band – isn't an issue: all that matters is that, if you want to understand Britain in the mid-1970s inside three minutes, you should listen to "Anarchy In The UK".

The Filth and the Fury, Julien Temple's soon-to-be-released film about the group's rise and fall, makes the point explicit. Whereas his previous Pistols' movie, *The Great Rock-'n'-Roll Swindle*, made the group out to be little more than a gleeful scam, this rewrite insists that they served vital notice of Britain's social decay. It begins with very seventies scenes – vast tower blocks, brazen police brutality – and ascends to a sequence in which a burly London pensioner loudly decries the presence of "niggers" on his estate. The suggestion is that rage and iconoclasm were only to be expected.

Back then, although the children of the 1960s had become either respectable or debauched, there was the residual idea that dissent was one of pop music's functions. However moribund the mainstream became, the Neurotic Outsider remained a powerful cultural stereotype, squatting on the margins, plotting revenge on all manner of enemies. The ▶

▶ Pistols' camp contained two: John Lydon (aka Johnny Rotten), the second-generation Irish north Londoner who walked the King's Road wearing a "I Hate Pink Floyd" T-shirt; and Malcolm McLaren, the band's 30-plus manager, who cut his insurrectionary teeth in May 1968, and held a fervent desire to avenge the sell-out perpetrated by the hippies.

Their alliance was short-lived, but they briefly led an assault on "everything". Other punk groups, such as The Clash, framed their rebellion in traditional left-wing language, but The Sex Pistols' bugbear was orthodoxy of any political stripe. Watching *The Filth and the Fury*, some will smart at Lydon's insistence that the Labour Party did next to nothing for the UK's working class – here, there is no reverence for the achievements of 1945-51, no cap-doffing to the generation that endured two world wars – but to smart is to miss the point. If the UK was to be woken up ("There is no future in England's dreaming" went "God Save The Queen"), then every last edifice would have to be knocked down.

It was cruelly ironic that the idea was partly shared by the Thatcherites. While the punks alerted the country to its political and cultural stagnation, and in the process spread palpable fear, the newly elected Tory leader rooted her revolt in the idea that something very British was under threat – indeed, in that sense, the punks were part of the problem. As in France in 1968, subversion begat reaction. McLaren was no doubt aware of the parallels.

These days, McLaren's anti-authoritarian instincts have led him to his much-ridiculed bid for the London mayoralty. On close inspection, his rhetoric is founded on similar beliefs to those that fired The Sex Pistols: his disdain for new Labour is his old hatred of the hippies, refocused on new targets. He may also think that the political stage, rather than the music business, is the best place for its espousal. Dissent and iconoclasm, after all, are not well suited to latter-day British rock music – and it's that realisation that makes *The Filth and the Fury* such an arresting experience.

There are countless hackneyed explanations for the washout that slowly took hold in punk's 20-year slipstream. Music industry symposiums are regularly regaled with the news that it is no longer possible truly to shock people, or that rock music has fallen victim to the constraints of postmodernism and is destined for little more than endless pastiche. Temple's film suggests that such developments are epiphenomenal; the real issue is the fractured social conditions on which British music used to be founded.

Put simply, there are no Neurotic Outsiders any more. The expansion of higher education, the continuing economic boom, the fact that the corporate world is now fluent in youthspeak – they have all but killed the idea that to be young is somehow to be cheated. "Inclusiveness", a Blair-word that has not been heard for a year or two, has eddied into pop culture; whereas Johnny Rotten once seemed to speak for an immovable constituency of post-adolescent refuseniks, he would now be considered a very ignorable oddity.

So, whereas "Anarchy In The UK" was a musical emetic, designed to seize on underlying disaffection and bring it speeding to the surface, the most successful modern rock songs are balmy hymns to the notion that everything's going to be alright. Pop music and major historical events have become uncoupled, and our groups are little interested in much besides their record collections and royalty rates. When he wrote the keynote ballad on Oasis's *What's The Story, Morning Glory?* Noel Gallagher probably didn't intend to capture the spirit of the age, but "Don't Look Back In Anger" was perfect.

"The Filth and the Fury" (15) is due for general release in May

John Harris writes regularly for the "Independent on Sunday"

Blank generation

PUNK CULTURE

PHIL JOHNSON talks to Richard Hell, one-time hellraiser and American father of punk

The idea that punk was a British invention is one of the great canards of pop culture. In reality, while we may have provided much of the elbow grease, and all of the spit, the original music, fashion and attitude came from America. When Malcolm McLaren painstakingly constructed The Sex Pistols from the substandard materials available – rather in the manner of a youngster assembling a wonky Meccano kit – he already had several working models in New York to copy from.

One of these was the band Television, formed in 1974 by Tom Miller and Richard Meyers, who as schoolboys in the late 1960s had run away to New York from Delaware and Kentucky. Following the example established by the self-invented superstars of Andy Warhol's Factory, they changed their names to Tom Verlaine and Richard Hell. The new monikers reflected their impressively recondite, yet touchingly teenage, interests in poetry and evil.

Television – which had evolved out of an earlier group, The Neon Boys – began to play gigs at Lower East Side clubs such as CBGB. There, they were spotted by McLaren, who was by then managing The New York Dolls, just before they broke up. Hell's spiky hair, torn clothes, declamatory singing style and sloganeering lyrics – he had a song whose catchy chorus went "I belong to the blank generation" – clearly struck a chord. The rest is history.

It was certainly history for Hell, because Verlaine kicked him out of Television shortly afterwards, before the group went on to become successful. A while later, Hell formed his own group, Richard Hell and the Voidoids. Their first album, *Blank Generation*, was released on the Sire label in 1977 and remains one of the most important documents of punk. It has just been re-released in Britain, where it is available on CD for the first time.

Hell, now aged 50, is a writer rather than a rocker these days. His striking first novel, *Go Now*, appeared in 1996 (when it was reviewed, rather unfavourably, in the *New Statesman*), and he is currently at work on another, as well