

The History of Punk Culture in America

I. Introduction

- A. **Attention Getter:** Disgusting, raunchy, violent. These are all terms that I have heard be used to describe punk culture and music. These are all valid claims. But, punk is also freedom. It refuses to be controlled and lets no one say or do otherwise.
- B. **Audience Connection / Credibility Establishment:** I would identify myself as somewhat of a punk, and chances are, you have probably done, said, or acted in ways that could be considered punk as well. In fact, if there's been a single moment where you have broken a rule that you thought was baseless and oppressive, spoke out against injustice, or gone against the grain to express yourself, that was pretty punk rock of you.
- C. **Thesis Statement:** I'm going to explain a little bit of punk rock history to you and talk about its origins. What exactly is it? When and why did it start? I hope that by the end of this talk, you'll know the answers to these questions.
- D. **Preview Main Points:** First I want to talk about what punk is. Then I will describe the beginnings of punk music and the culture that followed.

[So, what even is punk?]

II. Body

- A. **Main Point #1:** Punk is freedom

1. **Subpoint:** Punk is a subgenre of rock music, and a counterculture movement. It's honestly hard to put punk into a box, and in reality that was kind of the point. There are subgenres of punk, and there's different ideas about what the core of punk really is depending on who you ask, but I can say that essentially it is music, style, and belief based. It relies heavily on individuality and expression of self and values.

a) **Support:** In an article for *The Non Conformist Magazine*, a writer who studied philosophy and grew up with punk influence in his life, Alexander B. Wolke says that "Punk is a reaction to an experience. That experience can be injustice, existential crises, abuse, abandonment, oppression, etc. Punk is the freedom to react to an experience one has in a raw form."(Wolke 2020)

Subpoint: He also states that "Punk is an entire philosophy promoting freedom of the individual and working against conforming to the cookie-cutter form of existing we are told we must fit into." Wolke (2020) I concur. I chose to share those quotes because I feel that they are about as close to a definition for punk that you can get.

2. **Support:** In all honesty, punks weren't sitting around trying to define themselves and their lifestyles, they were just doing and living it. The result of that is what became "punk".

[Now let's talk about how it all started]

B. **Main Point #2:** There are some songs and artists that paved the way for the sound of punk, but it took full form in the 1970's. Bands like the Velvet Underground, the Ramones, and the Stooges were some of the first American bands to be considered the punk rock pioneers.

1. **Subpoint:** The word "Punk" was first used to describe music in the early 1970's after a specific garage-rock type sound needed its own term for what it was turning into.

a. **Support:** It's somewhat difficult to say for sure who the very first person to use the term "punk" to describe rock was and there's some discourse about it. However, the best source I could find was from *A Journal Of Musical Things' website*, saying that it was Dave Marsh in an article for Creem from May of 1971. The only other answer I got was from the Steve Hoffman music forums where someone found an old Rolling Stone article, published a month prior to Marsh's, where author Greg Shaw refers to rock band Guess Who as

“punk rock and roll”. But regardless of who said it first, they probably weren’t thinking all that much about the impact it would come to have.

2. **Subpoint:** The American punk scene started in New York.

Particularly at a club on Bowery street called CBGB’s, and it only grew from there. CBGB’s became in a sense the very place that punk, especially hardcore, started. In fact, on the club’s website <https://www.cbgb.com/about> they state that “CBGB is the undisputed birthplace of punk”, and they aren’t wrong to make that claim.

a. **Support:** Early punk bands including the Ramones, Talking Heads, The Dead Boys, The Cramps, and more played at CBGS making it a hotspot for punk rockers to go to and play shows at. It was also one of the few places that a punk rocker could go to find community, and that is what made it so prominent. It was a place for people to go and get some action. Eric Weisbard an American music critic said in an interview with VH1 that “If punk rock is anything, it’s the bathroom at CBGBs”. (Weisbard 2001) I find that quote amusing and relatable in a sense.

[Now how about the social aspect of things]

C. Main Point #3: Aside from just the music, punk was a way for the youth of the 70's to express not only boredom but their discontent with mainstream culture and politics.

1. **Subpoint:** Culturally speaking, punks historically despised the very popular hippie lifestyle.

a. **Support:** As American journalist Legs McNeil puts it in another VH1 interview, "*We made lousy hippies, you know? We liked cheeseburgers, we liked tv. We didn't like earth shoes and bellbottoms.*" (McNeil 2001) While the hippies of society were focused on peace and love, the punks didn't buy into it. They had a different approach. Punks were more hands-on and action oriented while hippies were usually more sensitive and passive about things, and the punks didn't want to swing that way.

b.

2. **Subpoint:** Punk also sought to do-away with the corporate and curated sound of mainstream rock music. They felt that rock had become so diluted as to appeal to the masses. They wanted to rock the boat and boot the boat rock.

a. **Support:** Even bands that had punk and new wave elements like Blondie, were heavily criticized for their pop-like sound. That's why diy bands started to be more

unhinged and unpolished, some say that the musicians could barely play their instruments, and they booked shows anyways. But that's exactly what early punk rockers were searching for.

[So in conclusion]

III. Conclusion

- A. **Resummarize Main Points:** So all in all, punk is a subgenre of rock and a counterculture. Its American birthplace is in NYC, specifically at CBGB's, and it started because the kids of the 70's were fed up with mainstream rock and hippie culture, as well as authoritative figures like the government and religions.
- B. **Restate Thesis:** It is my hope that after listening, you now know more about punk itself, why it was born, and where it all started.
- C. **Clincher:** Thank you for listening. Rock on!

All work must be your own. All supporting points and any information not created by you must be cited both in-text with APA citations and on the reference page. Your reference page should be a separate page included at the end of this outline.

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