

*chapter one*

## Let's Make a Scene

---

THE MULTIPLICITY OF CONJUNCTIONS and disjunctions among punk's desires do not separate out readily into discrete fields, but, for the purposes of this chapter, I will group them into seven major scenes, major because the participants in each scene number in the thousands rather than in the hundreds. Each of the major scenes emerges in a specific geographic site as a determinate constellation of commodities/desires. The seven scenes are: the New York Scene, the English Scene, the California Hardcore Scene, the Washington, D.C., First Wave Straight Edge Scene, the New York Second Wave Straight Edge Scene, the Riot Grrrl Scene, and the Berkeley/Lookout! Pop-Punk Scene. I have chosen to concentrate upon these specific scenes, because punks describe them as the largest and most influential in the history of punk.<sup>1</sup>

If punk artifacts/commodities are understood as the effects and accretions of the emergence of repressed desires, then these artifacts can be interpreted for clues to the desires that formed them. One difficulty with approaching punk scenes, however, is that each one amasses myriad artifacts within the social field that it establishes. Even creating a taxonomy of only the most significant artifacts for any scene would prove an exhaustive and possibly useless endeavor. For these reasons, I have chosen to focus upon certain artifacts, sifted out of each scene, that, while by no means defining the scene, serve as nodes at which either new (to a particular scene) or recurring (from scene to scene) desires intersect. I will draw these examples from the major social groupings and genres of punk textuality: bands, music (recorded and performed), style (especially clothing), the printed word (including zines), cinema, and events (punk happenings apart from shows).

### THE NEW YORK SCENE

The New York Scene emerged in 1974, lasted through 1976, and was centered around two small nightclubs, CBGB and OMFUG (the name of *one* of the clubs; the initials stand for Country Bluegrass, Blues and Other Music for Uplifting Gormandizers) on Bowery Street in lower Manhattan and Max's Kansas City in Greenwich Village (also in Manhattan).<sup>2</sup> The bands most integral to establishing the scene included the Ramones, Television, Patti Smith, and Blondie; later, Suicide, the Dictators, the Heartbreakers, Richard Hell and the Voidoids, Talking Heads, and the Dead Boys, all attracted to the hype around the clubs, bands, and New York, joined the scene. The epicenter for the scene, however, was CBGBs and the Ramones that, together, serve as a locus where several of punks' early desires intersect.

Hilly Kristal opened CBGBs in March 1974, when very few venues in New York City booked underground rock bands. Clinton Heylin defines "underground" in the context of the New York Scene as a term referring to "bands self-consciously aligned with noncommercial popular music trends. More specifically, it refers to New York City bands supported by cult followings developed through live performances at local nightclubs rather than recording contracts and mass media hype" (135). Writing for *The Nation*, Mark Crispin Miller notes that, in 1974, the "Big Six" major record companies—Warner, CBS, PolyGram, RCA, MCA, and Capitol-EMI—controlled 81 percent of the U.S. market share (11). In short, when Kristal opened CBGBs, commercial music could be equated with the Big Six; all other record labels and unsigned bands were considered "underground" or noncommercial, provided that they did not appear to be aping the aesthetic choices of commercial acts in the hope of obtaining recording contracts.

In 1974, CBGBs became the only club in New York dedicated exclusively to underground music,<sup>3</sup> and Kristal charged patrons one dollar to see unsigned bands play there. Read as an artifact, CBGBs attests to one of the most fundamental desires that constitutes not only punk's first scene but all of punk: the desire to resist the commercial realm, and especially commercial music—the Big Six in 1974. This desire is synonymous with punks' felt need to escape from the realm of the economic. In 1964, Herbert Marcuse defined "economic freedom" as "freedom from the economy—from being controlled by economic forces and relationships; freedom from the daily struggle for existence, from earning a living" (4). Although I do not read CBGBs as expressive of a desire for anything as profound or sweeping as Marcuse's "economic freedom," the club does represent early punks' desire to establish a realm not wholly conditioned by economics, a realm in which music and entertainment could concern themselves with something other than making money. Under capitalism, the club could not wholly succeed in this endeavor; Kristal did charge a dol-

lar, but this token charge downplayed the role of economics in the realm of punk, as did the underground aspect of the bands. The fact that the bands and Kristal were not making much money, while the audience was not parting with much of its money, allowed for the possibility that both audiences and bands gathered at CBGBs for predominantly noneconomic reasons. The audience did not come solely to purchase entertainment, and the musicians did not come solely to earn a living.

However, CBGBs was a bar, and although Kristal did not charge customers much to see bands they still had to purchase their alcohol. Participants in the first three punk scenes—New York, London, and California—were famous for their excessive drug and alcohol use, which contributed to the deaths of many band and scene members. These well-publicized deaths, and especially the drug-related deaths of Sid Vicious and his girlfriend, Nancy Spungen, forged associations, for punks and non-punks, between punks and drugs that continue to linger, even where they no longer actually exist (such as in the Straight Edge Scenes).<sup>4</sup>

CBGBs was (and still is) a small nightclub. Tricia Henry notes that its size “allowed freedom of movement of the audience [and] close proximity to and interaction with the performers. . . . This was a far cry from what was by then a traditionally distant physical relationship maintained between performers and their audiences at rock concerts” (53). She adds that “band members mingled with the audience before and after a set, and watched other groups” (53). The club’s layout materially renders another of the desires that constituted the New York Scene: the desire to erode the difference between performer and audience member, to allow these roles to become interchangeable so that any audience member could also be a performer and vice versa. This desire finds its expression in the literal proximity between band member and audience member in CBGBs: it is a small step from the floor to the stage.

Simon Frith describes early punk as, in part, “a challenge to the multinationals’ control of mass music, an attempt to seize the technical and commercial means of music production” (“Art Ideology,” 463). Frith’s Marxian claim that punks seize the means of production correlates with Jacques Attali’s concept of “composition” in *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (1977). As Susan McClary explains in her 1984 afterword to this book, “It is this demystified yet humanly dignified activity [the creation of music] that Attali wishes to remove from the rigid institutions of specialized musical training in order to return it to all members of society. For in Attali’s eyes, it is only if the individuals in society choose to reappropriate the means of producing art themselves that the infinite regress of Repetition . . . can be escaped” (156). For Attali, taking control over composition allows people to avoid Repetition and, with it, the reproduction of the dominant mode of production. The desire of the New York punks to be both audience members and performers suggests

that they intuit what is at stake for them: if they cannot make music without passing through the commercial mechanisms that will condone their music making, then most of them will never make music at all, and each new musician or set of musicians will merely reproduce the already-existing mode of music production that the Big Six oversees.

In the conclusion to *Noise*, having built toward them gradually, Attali finally advances these conclusions on what “composition”/“composing,” or seizing the means of music production, means or could mean:

We are all condemned to silence—unless we create our own relation with the world and try to tie other people into the meaning we thus create. That is what composing is. Doing solely for the sake of doing, without trying artificially to recreate the old codes in order to reinsert communication into them. Inventing new codes, inventing the message at the same time as the language. Playing for one's own pleasure, which alone can create the conditions for new communication. A concept such as this seems natural in the context of music. But it reaches far beyond that: it relates to the emergence of the free act, self-transcendence, pleasure in being instead of having. (134)

The New York Scene did not bring to fruition all of the results that Attali imagines might grow out of composition, but it bore desires similar to Attali's and a partial enactment of his hopeful program. Beginning in 1974, punk tried to seize the means of music production within the context of its historical conditions of possibility: the New York Scene attempted to wrest the right to create music from the Big Six and thereby democratize that right. Describing the first punk scene, McClary comments that “[m]any of the original groups began as garage bands formed by people not educated as musicians who intended to defy noisily the slickly marketed ‘nonsense’ of commercial rock” (156).

Frith notes that, during the '70s, as the music industry became consolidated, the cost of producing rock albums rose until “the average ‘rock ’n’ roll album’ cost between \$70,000 and \$100,000 in studio time, and any rock ‘sweetening’ (adding strings, for example) could add another \$50,000 to the bill; promotion budgets began at around \$150,000 and rose rapidly” (*Sound Effects*, 147). Although McClary claims that composition, as a force, attacks the “rigid institutions” of “musical training” (156), punk seeks to free music less from music schools and instructors than from the Big Six, the economic institutions that control the performance, recording, production, distribution, and promotion of rock music. In an interview in Legs McNeil and Gillian McCain's book, *Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk*, Joey Ramone, the lead singer for the Ramones, invokes the economic desires that underlie punk when he congratulates himself and his band for how quickly and cheaply they recorded their first album (*The Ramones*):

Money wasn't tight yet—some albums were costing a half-million dollars to make and taking two or three years to record, like Fleetwood Mac and stuff. Doing an album in a week and bringing it in for sixty-four hundred dollars was unheard of, especially since it was an album that really changed the world. It kicked off punk rock and started the whole thing—as well as us. (229)

Despite Joey's hyperbolic claims, the first Ramones album and the cost of its production spoke to punk's desire to gain and democratize access to the means of production. Because the band's music could be produced so inexpensively, a small independent label such as Sire Records, run by Seymour Stein, could afford to sign the band in 1976 and release its first album without needing to sell millions of copies of it in order to recoup its investment in the band (Heylin, 254). Commenting upon Stein's reasons for fronting the money for Ramones albums, Craig Leon, the producer of *The Ramones*, notes that "they were very inexpensive records by industry standards, so why not?" (254). The specific set of economic conditions within the music industry that Frith describes explains why some of the New York scene's punk rock and especially the Ramones' music could be played, recorded, and produced cheaply enough to facilitate a shift within punk from music consumption to music production.<sup>5</sup> Punk bands and the independent labels that grew up around them did not require the outlay of capital that the major labels did.

Many of punk's commentators have also understood punk as an attempt to open up the possibility of performance to people not formally trained in music. Neil Nehring, writing on the English punk scene, makes a comment that also applies to the New York Scene: "Performance . . . was a possibility that virtually everyone involved contemplated, with the do-it-yourself aesthetic of the music; the barre chords on guitar, simple but versatile chord forms, were a staple of punk" (315). (A barre chord is played by pressing one finger flat against the fret board of the guitar and strumming the strings with the other hand.) In terms of difficulty, most guitar chords are no easier to learn than single notes; each chord or note requires a specific positioning of the fingers. However, chords, which are produced when several notes are played together, fill out a band's sound in a way that individually played notes cannot. In order to avoid the time and money needed to learn to play the guitar well, technically speaking, guitarists in bands such as the Ramones learned to play a few chords, thereby becoming capable of producing a full sound, and they eliminated solos in order to sidestep the need to play lengthy "riffs"—progressions of individual notes or combinations of chords and notes. What makes the first Ramones album an "unheard of" project, as Joey Ramone describes it, is its literally unheard aspects—its lack of solos. Instead, the Ramones popularized what has come to be known in punk—not pejoratively—as "three-chord punk."

The relative ease with which punk could be played contrasts with the “progressive rock”<sup>6</sup> that in 1975 nudged its way into the U.S. charts when Led Zeppelin’s *Physical Graffiti* (Swan Song/Atlantic) was the eighth-best-selling album of the year. Progressive rock bands such as Led Zeppelin required musicians who could play solos, because the songs tended to be long and inevitably contained lengthy guitar solos and, occasionally, solos for each instrument in the band. Dee Dee Ramone, the Ramones’ bass player, recalls that when the Ramones first formed, its members “didn’t know what to do when we started playing. We’d try some Bay City Rollers [a pop, rather than progressive, band] songs and we absolutely couldn’t do that. We didn’t know how. So we just started writing our own stuff and put it together the best we could” (McNeil and McCain, 183).

Although Nehring stresses the underlying assumption of Dee Dee’s comment—that anyone could play punk—the sort of technical proficiency that progressive rock signifies, with its lengthy songs (by rock standards) and solos, was not actually necessary or prominent in much of the popular music of the mid-’70s. Led Zeppelin was the only progressive rock band that had a best-selling album between 1974 and 1976, and no progressive rock single made the yearly top forty for those years (Theroux and Gilbert). In 1974, when the Ramones began to play regularly at CBGBs, the top-grossing LPs in the United States were John Denver’s *Greatest Hits* (RCA), Elton John’s *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road* (MCA),<sup>7</sup> and Paul McCartney and Wings’ *Band on the Run* (Apple). The top-selling single was Barbra Streisand’s *The Way We Were* (Columbia) (Theroux and Gilbert, 231).<sup>8</sup> In 1975, two Elton John LPs (*Greatest Hits* [MCA] and *Captain Fantastic and the Brown Dirt Cowboy* [MCA]) occupied the first and third slots in the list of top ten albums, Earth, Wind and Fire’s *That’s the Way of the World* (Columbia) was second, and the top single of the year was Captain and Tennille’s *Love Will Keep Us Together* (A&M). In 1976, the year that Sire released *The Ramones*, Peter Frampton’s *Frampton Comes Alive* (A&M), Fleetwood Mac’s *Fleetwood Mac* (Warner Brothers), and the Eagles’ *Greatest Hits* (Asylum) were the top-grossing LPs, while Johnnie Taylor’s *Disco Lady* (Columbia) was the top single. All of these top-selling albums and singles required immense outlays of capital from their labels to cover performance, recording, production, distribution, and promotion costs. However, none of the acts was a progressive rock release; they were all pop, with the possible exception of *Disco Lady*. Looked at in terms of the type of proficiency that rock could require, it seems clear that the barriers that prevented a rock fan from becoming the next Elton John or Peter Frampton were tied to economics more than to skill.

As I will explain in more detail in relation to the Sex Pistols, what passes as skill in the music industry changes over time. Beginning with the New York Scene, punks interrogated notions of skill in rock and pop and demonstrated

that the owners of the means of production produced the ruling definitions of skill (to paraphrase Marx). In other words, it was not Elton John's greater skill that differentiated him from punk but the fact that the music industry capitalized him to a greater extent than the Ramones.

Although the first two desires that I draw from CBGBs and the Ramones, treated as artifacts, relate to economics—punks' attempt to carve out a social space that is not governed by money and their attempts to situate themselves within that realm as active participants by seizing control of the means of production, both from the Big Six and from progressive rock musicians—I do not mean to suggest that economic concerns were the only obstacles separating the New York punk scene from the Big Six or that all of the scene's desires were economic. The first scene's aesthetic choices also signified a social desire.

The New York punk scene bore the desire to create a realm of music production not wholly governed by economics, and the scene thereby raises two questions: if punks sense that the commercial sphere of music production represses what I propose are certain non-individuated desires and felt needs, then what are those desires? Can they be read in their desublimated forms in punk cultural productions? I have derived the desire to erode the barrier between audience and band member from the size of CBGBs and the interactions between audience and band members that it encourages. A desire for collectivity can also be read in CBGBs and the Ramones. As I mentioned above, CBGBs is a small club whose size prevented punk bands from establishing the sheer distance from their fans that the best-selling pop and rock bands of the mid-'70s could maintain in their "arena-rock" performances. Because the major labels' costs for producing rock music escalated throughout the '70s, their bands needed not only to tour but to tour the largest venues that they could fill, so that the labels could recoup the huge investments that they had made in them. Popular bands such as Elton John and John Denver could not afford to play shows in clubs the size of CBGBs. In contrast to arena-rock, CBGBs expresses, in a material form, punks' desire to resist the physical distance between popular performers and their audiences, which precludes collectivity.

The social desire for collectivity also took on aesthetic forms within punk's sound and style. From 1974 to 1976, punk reacted not only to the Big Six but to the cult of the pop star (and glam and glitter rock star) that the conditions that I have outlined above foster. First, since supposedly anyone can perform punk, its audiences do not feel compelled to lionize its performers. Additionally, the lack of solos in the music of the Ramones signifies a further move toward group rather than individual production. A solo trains an audience's attention upon a specific performer and grants her or him a type of identity within the rock world by showcasing individuated skills. Without

solo to guide its investment of interest in specific band members, the audience experiences a band as more of a collective, and band members seem more approachable and less like the distant prodigies that mid-'70s pop superstars had become. A lack of solo also allows an audience to experience music as a set of voices (instrumental and human), each of which can be picked out by the listener but all of which combine into a collective sound.

The clothing style of the Ramones also reflected a desire for communal-ity. The Ramones played in matching T-shirts, leather jackets, jeans with holes ripped in the knees, and cheap sneakers. Pete Frame, author of *Rock Family Trees* (1980) (a two-volume study devoted to New York underground rock), understands the clothing styles prevalent in CBGBs as “glitter-backlash . . . jeans, T-shirts, leather jackets, ordinary” (27), and Hilly Kristal adds, in an interview in 1986, that “CBGB bands and audiences weren’t style conscious in the way the glitter groups or the English punks were later on. The only style was torn T-shirts and torn jeans. They just came as they were—the way kids in the East Village dressed then. . . . Even though CBGB is referred to as a punk club, there was never much of that fashion here” (Henry, 58). Understood as “glitter-backlash,” the Ramones positioned themselves against bands such as the New York Dolls, who performed frequently at the Mercer Arts Center in New York City until it closed in 1973. Rather than attempting to outdress and shock their audiences—as the Dolls had when they dressed in drag or in red, pseudo-Soviet uniforms—the Ramones emphasized their connections to their audiences. Henry comments that the “New York Dolls confounded traditional images of gender distinction in their stage performance,” but their “[g]ender blurring and outrageous attire were simply means by which to shock the general public and show rock audiences something they had never seen before” (40). In contrast, the Ramones’ clothing expressed an impulse toward anonymity, suggesting that they had emerged from the audience themselves, an effect that in turn suggested not only that they maintained ties with that audience but that other audience members might emerge as performers in their own right.

There is one final sense in which the Ramones’ style signified a desire different from the high fashion or parody thereof embodied in the mystery, pretensions, and aloofness of glitter and Glam Rock performers, such as Lou Reed and David Bowie (Bowie’s song, “Fame,” was the third-best-selling single of 1975 [Theroux and Gilbert, 231]). Unlike the Dolls, whom Henry describes as following “the precedent set by David Bowie and Lou Reed in blurring gender distinctions,” the Ramones rejected the ambiguously gendered clothing of glam and glitter rock and the forms of collectivity that might have emerged from that style. Instead, they opted for a more traditionally masculine and heterosexual style of clothing and its concomitant version of collectivity.

In the New York Scene, another desire ran alongside those that I have enumerated above: the music industry's desire, which was not sublimated, to commercialize potentially lucrative phenomena. The Ramones exemplified this occurrence in New York. According to Jon Savage, New York's most prominent zine, *Punk*, drew the seemingly varied trajectories of the scene together, enacting a "successful translation of CBGBs into a package that record executives like Seymour Stein [of Sire Records] could readily understand" (139–40). Stein signed the Ramones to Sire in January 1976, and the label released their first album, *The Ramones*, that February. The label quickly began arranging for the Ramones to tour in support of their album. The first tour began on July 4, 1976. Sire released the band's second album, *Ramones Leave Home*, in early 1977, and the supporting tour began in spring of the same year. A third album, *Rocket to Russia*, was released in late 1977 and was followed by a winter tour in 1978–79.

Although the Ramones did not entirely cease playing CBGBs between '76 and '79, their recording and touring schedule loosened their connection with the New York Scene and its home base of CBGBs. Additionally, as early as the autumn of 1975 the Patti Smith Group signed with Arista, while other key bands in the CBGBs scene—including Blondie, Talking Heads, Television, and Richard Hell and the Voidoids—were garnering record company interest. All of these bands signed with labels within a year: in 1976 Blondie signed with Private Stock, Talking Heads signed with Sire, and Richard Hell and the Voidoids signed with Ork. Television signed with Elektra in 1977 (Savage, 552). The push toward commercialization moved to the fore, the desires to resist commercialization, seize control over the means of production, and collectivize were momentarily absorbed, and the New York Scene dissolved by the end of '76.

## THE ENGLISH SCENE

The English Scene arose in London in 1976, continued until 1978, and included several bands: the Sex Pistols, The Clash, The Damned, The Stranglers, X-Ray Spex, The Buzzcocks, The Vibrators, The Adverts, Generation X, and Chelsea. Similar to the manner in which the Ramones and CBGBs serve to exemplify artifactual evidence of the New York Scene's desires, the Sex Pistols and "punk style" will serve, here, as nodes where a set of specific desires, some carried over from New York and some new to punk, intersect and find cultural expression as commodities and social groupings.

Commentators on the New York Scene rarely link desire with punk, but those mapping out the English Scene frequently do so. Greil Marcus's work on punk exemplifies this tendency.<sup>9</sup> In *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the*

*Twentieth Century* (1989), he proffers Johnny Rotten, the lead singer of the Sex Pistols, as the simultaneous culmination and degradation of the expression of a type of desire, arguing that “an unknown tradition of old pronouncements, poems, and events, a secret history of ancient wishes and defeats, came to bear on Johnny Rotten’s voice—and because this tradition lacked both cultural sanction and political legitimacy, because this history was comprised of only unfinished, unsatisfied stories, it carried tremendous force” (441). Marcus’s book invokes a utopian impulse that throbs through the avant-gardist projects that he traces through the twentieth century and sees culminating in the Sex Pistols. He finds this pulse gathering strength because it is not “sanctioned” or “legitimate,” suggesting a repressive logic to cultural desires.

Adhering to Freud’s conceptualization of the repression of desire and its ineluctable return, Marcus follows the force of avant-garde desire as it changes in magnitude but not in terms of type or direction over the course of the twentieth century. In a succinct summary, he tracks the desire that he has identified and variously defined through seventy years:

Measured against the demands its precursors made, punk was a paltry reflection; measured against the records the Sex Pistols and their followers made, the leavings of dada, the LI [Lettrist International], and the SI [Situationist International] are sketches of punk songs; all in all it is the tale of a wish that went beyond art and found itself returned to it, a nightclub act that asked for the world, for a moment got it, then got another nightclub. In this sense punk realized the projects that lay behind it, and realized their limits. (442)

In short, punk becomes the most recent bearer of a transhistorical charge that Marcus describes at different times as utopian, nihilistic, and negative (negating), but punk falls short of the original energy that infused the dadaists, Lettrists, and Situationists because it, more quickly than its predecessors, disappears from history. Capitalism subsumes it; at least, Marcus would have it so. Consequently, it is disheartening to find him complicit with this process of subsumption in his admitted attempt to codify in particular the Lettrists but also punk. He confesses: “I have tried to make the ethos the LI claimed into a narrative to fill in the gaps, to make it at least half as clear as it was to Debord, Wolman, Bernstein [all prominent Lettrists] and the rest—inevitably to make their old papers into something *fit for rational consumption*. They didn’t” (398, my emphasis).

Marcus’s attention to punk proves useful in three ways: he links punk with desire, capitalism, and history. In contrast to Marcus, I have been proposing that desire be thought not in transhistorical or individuated terms (as belonging to Johnny Rotten exclusively, for example) but situated within the specific historical, economic, and regional conditions from which it emerges.

---

Such a conceptualization of desire forces me to map and name the specific components of a scene in ways that Marcus's generalized and transhistorical notion of desire does not. The connection between the English Scene and capitalism and punk's links with history also require unpacking.

According to *New Musical Express* writers Julie Burchill and Tony Parsons's account of the New York and English scenes, *The Boy Looked at Johnny*, English punk emerged from a specific socioeconomic moment, the result of repressed forces and desires. In 1975, there was a "mood of economic crisis [and] depression prevalent in a UK torn by one million plus unemployed and legions of school-leavers swelling their ranks every day, the three-day week, teeming assembly-line education and the Tory mis-rule" that culminated in "miners' strike black-outs" (26). Against this economic background, Burchill and Parsons note that rock venues became "giant stadiums at which the opulent rock aristocracy occasionally deigned to play" (26). It is in the light of this context that the Sex Pistols' "fury made them innovators; for the first time a band was directly reacting against the music business monolith" (34).

The Sex Pistols and their manager, Malcolm McLaren, were not resisting the dominant economic mode of production for rock music, though. In *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock 'n' Roll*, Simon Frith writes that "by the end of the 1970s . . . [w]here capital investment was important the majors still had no rivals. In Britain, EMI, Decca, Pye, Phonodisc, CBS, and RCA manufactured and distributed most of the records that were issued (EMI alone manufactured one in four of all records sold, and distributed one in three)" (138). The commercial system that CBGBs and the Ramones initially eschewed was still in place in 1976, but instead of resisting it, the Sex Pistols and McLaren courted the major labels, and the Sex Pistols signed with not just one but two of them. On October 8, 1976, the Pistols signed with EMI. On January 5, 1977, the label, tired of being connected to the several scandals that the Pistols had generated in a few months, dropped the Pistols (Savage, 285), but A&M signed them on March 10 of the same year, only to drop them six days later for vandalizing the company's offices and verbally abusing A&M employees. On May 12 the band signed with an independent label, Virgin Records.

The desire to avoid commercialization that ran through the New York Scene did not reappear in the English Scene, whose bands embraced the major label attention directed at them after the Sex Pistols had whipped up media attention around punk.<sup>10</sup> Within a few months after the Sex Pistols signed with EMI, The Clash had signed with CBS, The Damned with Stiff, and The Stranglers with UA, in addition to numerous other punk signings. However, although the disdain for the major labels evident in New York did not reappear in London, one component of the desire to democratize access

to the means of producing rock did. The simplest and most famous expression of this desire appeared in a set of diagrams in the December 1976 issue of a zine devoted to the Stranglers, *Sideburns*. The diagrams demonstrate how to play three guitar chords—A, E, and G—and alongside them runs the text: “This is a chord. This is another. This is a third. Now form a band.”<sup>11</sup>

Read as an artifact or constellation of artifacts, the career of the Sex Pistols also exhibits a mild thrust toward making performers of audience members. Originally, the Sex Pistols was composed of Johnny Rotten on vocals, Steve Jones on guitar, Glen Matlock on bass guitar (later replaced by Sid Vicious), and Paul Cook on drums. None of the band members ever took lessons, and they were not accomplished musicians. Three of the band’s original members—Matlock, Cook, and Jones—had used stolen equipment (Jones stole it piece by piece over the course of two years) to teach themselves how to play and had formed a garage band called the Swankers. Malcolm McLaren, the owner of a King’s Road clothing boutique called Sex that sold bondage wear, converted the Swankers into the Sex Pistols and persuaded Johnny Rotten to sing for the band.

According to Jon Savage’s account in *England’s Dreaming: Anarchy, Sex Pistols, Punk Rock, and Beyond*, for the Pistols’ first show the band opened for Adam Ant’s band, Bazooka Joe. Ant remembers their set: “There were no guitar solos, it was just simple songs. They did five and that was it: goodnight. The rest of my band hated them because they thought they couldn’t play: in fact somebody said as much to Glen [Matlock] and he said: ‘So What?’” (qtd. in Savage, 142). What Jacques Attali identifies as the will to composition surfaces here, understood as the desire to seize control over the means of producing music, but in England it took a diluted form compared to its earlier U.S. version. Technical proficiency prohibited both U.S. and English musicians to a much lesser degree than commercial music’s institutions, and, while the Sex Pistols provided an English incarnation of the desire to produce music regardless of technical training, their manager, Malcolm McLaren, actively sought out commercial backers.

The Pistols’ initial contract with EMI promised the band forty thousand pounds in non-returnable advance money: twenty thousand pounds upon signing and an additional twenty thousand pounds a year later. A&M signed the Pistols for seventy-five thousand pounds five months later, Virgin signed them for fifteen thousand pounds two months after A&M’s signing (and an additional fifty thousand pounds a month after that), and Warner Brothers paid fifty thousand pounds in 1977 for the only LP that the Sex Pistols ever recorded, *Never Mind the Bollocks* (1977). Other bands followed suit; Julie Burchill and Tony Parsons comment that, by “the spring of 1977, there were four Pretenders to the Sex Pistols inviolate throne—The Damned, the Jam, the Clash and the Stranglers. Their names never became household-words

synonymous with ‘Punk Rock,’ but all four consoled themselves with hooking a meal-ticket from a major label” (29). The Clash signed with CBS for an advance of £100,000. Especially when considering the fact that the monetary amounts above were only the advances paid and that numerous other punk bands were signed in addition to these five, the significant amount of capital that the majors invested in punk does not speak to the desire to shift economic control over music production from the major labels back to the producers themselves.

While the lack of solos and formal training that conditioned the music of the Sex Pistols can be read as traces of the same move toward anonymity and collectivity that the music of the Ramones signifies, little else about the Pistols echoes the New York Scene’s investment in collectivity. In place of collectivizing, the Pistols aimed at antagonizing. Adam Ant describes their first gig, which exemplified the band’s behavior over the course of its brief lifespan: “At the end Rotten slagged off Bazooka Joe [for whom the Pistols were opening] as being a bunch of fucking cunts” (qtd. in Savage, 142). Savage summarizes the Pistols’ public stance in 1976: “It quickly became clear, as they moved out into the world, that the Sex Pistols were programmed for confrontation. McLaren was ambitious for his group: as his instrument, they would act out his fantasies of conflict and revenge on a decaying culture” (150). Although the English Scene maintained, in diluted form, only two of the New York Scene’s three determinant desires, all three returned in later punk scenes. However, new non-individuated desires become legible within the artifacts of the English Scene, if those artifacts are approached as material objects and social structures that harbor imprints of the collective desires that punk produced. One such desire is a drive to create, or recreate, history as a narrative in which punks could feel that they actively participated.

The subtitle of Greil Marcus’s *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century*, warrants attention. Marcus explains in the prologue that two questions shape his book: “Is it a mistake to confuse the Sex Pistols’ moment with a major event in history—and what is history anyway?” (4). He dispenses with the first question quickly, answering it in the negative, and, one hundred fifty pages later, proffers the beginning of an answer to the second question. He describes the secret history of “the performing space” as

a place where revolution goes to die, where its spirit, to use a favorite situationist word, is “recuperated”: *where the shout of what should be is absorbed into the spectacle of what is*, where the impossible demand is brought back into the fold of expectation and result, where the disease of collective vehemence is cured; where “revolution” means a moment in which people say no, enter into festival, are then in one way or another pushed out of history, their moment dropped down into a footnote. (151, my emphasis)

Marcus proposes to write the “secret history” of the Lettrists, Situationists, and punks—groups that have been pushed out of History proper; however, it is worth noting Marcus’s implied concept of History. In his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Walter Benjamin warns that “[t]here is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (256). Marcus’s argument initially invokes what Benjamin would term the “History of the victors,” and, consequently, events that “drop out of History” seem to Marcus to open up the possibility that “secret” histories could be written, oddly enough, in an effort to reinsert them into History. Marcus’s project seems to violate the spirit of the “secret” history: if being pushed out of History is what allows a group to live a secret history, then to be recuperated would mean the opposite, for the Situationists especially but also for the Lettrists and punks; a recuperation would mean a reinsertion into official History that, by definition, must not include them. In a more generous reading of Marcus, I might highlight the possibility that he does not mean to recuperate punk for History but to destabilize the concept of History by forcing it to include and account for secret histories. However, he situates punk within the already existent history of the Lettrists and Situationists, as its final chapter. As such, it does not break with tradition and traditional means of representation that, as I will explain below, a destabilizing of History necessitates.

Instead, recuperation appears to be Marcus’s project, and he fulfills it. He narrates the story of punk’s desires, and his narration enacts their closure; he renders them consumable, a part of History, and shepherds them into the “fold of expectation,” thereby sheltering them and us from confronting or learning from them as unfulfilled desires. In Marcus’s narrative, punk’s translation from utopian impulse (“what should be”) into spectacle (“what is”) marks the site at which History contains punk and makes a footnote of it; History itself becomes a spectacle. In contrast to Marcus, I propose that the Sex Pistols exhibited the will, prominent within the English Scene, *to live historical time*, in Guy Debord’s words. In *Society of the Spectacle*, Debord describes the rise to power of the bourgeoisie and explains that the “victory of the bourgeoisie was the victory of a profoundly historical time—the time corresponding to the economic form of production” (104): official History becomes “economic history” or the History of the economy. He adds that “history, which had hitherto appeared to express nothing more than the activity of individual members of the ruling class, and had thus been conceived of as a chronology of events, was now perceived in its general movement—an inexorable movement that crushed individuality before it” (105). It was the desire to retain the notion of a history that could be participated in that flowed through the English Scene.

One response to this problem of history/History appears in McLaren’s attempt to figure, along with the Sex Pistols, within official, economic History. It appears in an unrepressed form—since this desire is in no way inimi-

---

cal to the commercial production of music—in McLaren's pursuit of the major labels and the series of contracts that he and the Pistols signed with them. The manager and band obtained an at least momentary place within the economic History of the commercial record industry.

More in line with my project here, however, is punk's method for mediating between economics and some other method of formulating history. Punk's mediatory strategy is negation; it is the attempt to live history by negating Historical tradition through breaking with it and thereby clearing a space for a new form to emerge.<sup>12</sup> As Peter Bürger writes, “[T]he historical avant-garde movements cause a break with tradition and a subsequent change in the representational system” (63). Although punk might occur too late to be considered avant-garde, its negation does cause a shock which creates a break that marks the vanguard of a new “representational system.” Bürger adds that in “contrast to the constant change of individual *means* of representation, which marks the development of art, the change of the system of representation . . . is a historically decisive event” (116). I attribute this “decisiveness” in part to the *collective* rather than individual aspect of the change. The Sex Pistols alone were not enough to constitute a real break, nor have I been arguing that they were, but the will to history that they bore, and that eventually informed the English Scene as a whole, constituted a shift in mass culture's means of representation.

As Bürger indicates, the shift begins with a break made possible by a shock. Before punk and the Sex Pistols, mass culture and especially its music component had become reified and remote from what Dick Hebdige considers “working class concerns.” According to Hebdige, in the mid-'70s Glam Rock held sway in England, with fans who were over twenty adhering to David Bowie, Lou Reed, and Roxy Music (62). He adds that glam “tended to alienate the majority of working-class youth” because of its musicians’ “extreme foppishness, incipient élitism, and morbid pretensions to art and intellect” as well as their “lyrics and lifestyles” that became “progressively more disengaged from the mundane concerns of everyday life” (62). Hebdige credits the most financially successful glam rocker of the mid-'70s, David Bowie, with “opening up questions of sexual identity which had previously been repressed, ignored or merely hinted at in rock and youth culture” (61) but closes down the possibility that those questions could figure among English youth culture’s “everyday concerns,” which he describes as characterized by a “working classness,” a “scruffiness and earthiness” (63), and focused upon how “the passage from childhood to maturity was traditionally accomplished” (62). Hebdige elides the gendered aspect of what he reads as punk’s rejection of ambiguously constructed sexual identities in favor of heterosexually constructed ones.

Although the popularity of glam is debatable, as I have indicated above, by the mid-'70s the commercial record industry (the Big Six) in the United States and England was investing large amounts of capital in primarily pop

and rock performers: John Denver, Elton John, Paul McCartney and Wings, and Barbra Streisand in 1974; Elton John and Captain and Tenille in 1975; and Peter Frampton, Fleetwood Mac, the Eagles, and Johnnie Taylor in 1976. In the arena, the space in which these acts performed, the distance between the audience and the stage dramatized the class differences between the two. Arena rock fits the model for the spectacle that Debord describes, with reference to “cultural centers,” as capable of recapturing “isolated individuals as individuals *isolated together*” (122). He adds that, in the spectacle, “[a]ll that once was directly lived has become mere representation” (12). The spectacle radically separates the few performers from the immense audiences and denies the possibility of interchanges between them, producing “a flat universe bounded on all sides by the spectacle’s *screen*, [so that] the consciousness of the spectator has only figmentary interlocutors which subject it to a one-way discourse” (153). The pop and rock stars stood alone and at a great remove from their audiences and performed as the spokespeople for the Big Six that lurked, invisible, in the wings behind them.<sup>13</sup> The names of the bands from the ’70s also emphasize the cult of the rock “artist”/“musician”: of the ten groups that I list above, seven were named after the principal performers, encouraging audience members to cathex these individuals while regarding the rest of the bands’ members as back-up musicians.

In my description of the relations between major label performers and their audiences, I do not mean to shut down the disruption that audience members have the potential to embody at a major label artist performance or the possibility that a single person, group of concert goers, or entire audience might create readings of performances that the music industry neither intends nor condones. Such disruptions and readings would, again, fall outside of the History of the music industry. In short, I do not mean to construct a rigid opposition between active performers and passive audiences. However, while I have attempted to leave open the possibility of active major label audiences, in examining the material arrangements of punk and major label shows, the punk venues strike me as much more likely to facilitate active audiences, while major label shows seem calculated to prevent them.

The pop and rock music industry as a spectacle was punk’s target. In order to enter into the history of mass culture, punk had to assault and break with the tradition put in place by the creators of that history—the commercial music industry. To change the means of representation, the old means had to be attacked and exposed as false and contradictory. Toward this end, English punk attempted to negate the spectacle itself, but its attack upon the spectacle assumed the paradoxical form of hyper-spectacle, of endeavoring to push all the way through the spectacle in order to expose its contradictions in an unconscious effort to come out the other side of it and arrive at something that was *not-spectacle*.

A question now arises: What aesthetic form did the music of the spectacle take in the realm of mass culture and music? Even if accomplished with extremely broad strokes, the task of sketching the aesthetics of mid-'70s pop and rock looms as a daunting project that I will not undertake here.<sup>14</sup> However, the *form* of the music industry's major product of that era can be quickly delineated. As I mentioned above, the capital investment in rock and pop, the arena venues that that investment necessitated, the consequent distancing of musicians from their audiences in the social and material spaces of class, and the immense salaries that performers garnered all combined to establish the apotheosis of the singer-songwriter as the creative "artist" doing "important work" in the mid-'70s. Such work supposedly warranted the large advances that the major labels paid performers. In short, the very form of the arena-rock spectacle served to guarantee that the audience maintained the proper attitudes of awe and respect toward the spectacle of the performer. As Simon Barker, an early member of the Sex Pistols's fan club, the Bromley Contingent, says about Glam Rock in England, whose labels trafficked in similar means of representing their artists: "It became a lifestyle. Roxy [Music, an English glam band] perpetuated that: seeing [Brian] Eno have tea with Salvador Dalí. Bowie had paved the way but they took it a little further" (qtd. in Savage, 145). Barker's comment suggests that Brian Eno, as a representative of the music industry, deliberately and publicly demonstrated the differences between himself and his fans, who presumably could not arrange to have tea with an iconic surrealist painter such as Dalí. Punk might also constitute a range of lifestyles, but for Barker these "styles" would not hinge upon differences between the social mobility of the performers and the audiences. Additionally, punks would not publicly attach themselves to a representative of an already-established form of high art, such as Dalí.

In 1976, the year before A&M signed the Sex Pistols, the label had the top album of the year: Peter Frampton's *Frampton Comes Alive* sold more than thirteen million copies. Frampton was a singer-songwriter and guitarist who established himself in the late '60s in two bands, the Herd and Humble Pie (Theroux and Gilbert, 242). On May 10 of the next year, hard on the heels of its success with Frampton, A&M signed the Sex Pistols outside of Buckingham Palace. Although the history of the Sex Pistols offers numerous examples of the hyper-spectacular, the signing of the Pistols to A&M serves as a moment in which the desires underpinning the English punk scene became visible, especially in relation to Peter Frampton's work, if this staged signing is read as an expression of collective desires in an encoded form. Signing a "talent" such as Frampton, whose singles "Show Me the Way," "Baby I Love Your Way," and "Do You Feel Like We Do" carried his album to the top of the charts, maintained the arena rock spectacle: although Frampton's performance was pure spectacle, it did not acknowledge itself as such. Instead, it leaned

upon the music industry's rationalization of the spectacle, which was that the artist was worth an impressive advance because of his talent and proficiency. No doubt Frampton's most impressive talent, for A&M, was actually his ability to move more than thirteen million units.<sup>15</sup>

The signing of the Pistols signified something else: it publicly demonstrated that a major label<sup>16</sup> would sign a band to a two-year, £150,000 contract *solely on the basis of its spectacular image*, hoping and trusting that spectacle would translate into sales. The signing reads as the English Scene's desire to pierce through the fiction of the spectacle and show it for what it is: the Pistols demonstrated that, when tempted, the same apparatus that, to sell its products, mobilizes the fiction of a depth model, of a real talent or artistry behind a band or artist's image or appearance, will also forsake that model and all claims of quality or aesthetics in order to sell a band that announces itself as nothing but spectacle, nothing but appearance. In this exposure of the spectacular character of the music industry, the money becomes foregrounded and attached directly to spectacle rather than to aesthetics: A&M was obviously not signing the Pistols for any reason other than to fashion them into commodities. This signing therefore falls back, retroactively, upon all signings to taint them with their spectacular character, with the fact that the spectacle itself is the commodity, perhaps even the newly dominant form of the commodity, as Debord claims.

The signing itself demonstrated, in microcosm, the type of spectacular behavior that the Pistols had already become famous for by March 1977 and maintained, on or off stage, from the beginning to the end of their short career. The actual signing of the papers in front of the palace was uneventful, although the juxtaposition of a punk band with English royalty suggests some parallels: both lack depth and are figureheads, for an industry or a nation. Both are types of spectacle. Later, after a press conference at which the band drank heavily, the Pistols arrived with McLaren at A&M's offices. Paul Cook and Sid Vicious fought in the limousine on the way over. McLaren describes their subsequent arrival: "When we arrived at A&M Records, they all got out, Sid without any shoes, Paul with a black eye and blood dripping down his shirt. Steve was carrying bottles in his jacket and in his inside pocket, and the same went for Sid who was catatonic" (qtd. in Savage 317). They visited the offices to discuss their first single for A&M, to meet the people with whom they would be working, and to celebrate the signing. None of these events occurred, but Sid cut his foot, swore at a secretary, smashed a toilet bowl and a bathroom window, and then bathed his foot in another toilet. Cook and Johnny Rotten threw wine around the offices and at Sid, and Steve Jones went into the women's bathroom by mistake and propositioned the women whom he surprised there (Savage 319). Jon Savage concludes: "The Sex Pistols were supposed to be bad but they were stretching the limits of the playpen.

Although Green [the A&M executive who oversaw the signing] had expected a certain wildness, the spectacle at the New King's Road offices was both excessive and squalid" (318).

While the show that the Pistols put on for the A&M employees only accounts for one of the registers in which they performed, I have concentrated upon it because it marks a point at which the English punk scene directly encountered its primary target: the commercial music industry. McLaren's strategy was to attack it from within its ranks, as a member, not in order to replace it with another option but to expose its contradictions. The English punks' collective desire to create a type of history in which they could participate surfaced at A&M's offices when McLaren and the Pistols attacked the music industry's official History of what rock means and what its means of representation signify. In order to establish an unofficial history, the English Scene's punks created a moment of shock in which they broke with the spectacle of the History of rock, which is the spectacle of rock's *economic* history—the history of the most popular and best selling albums and singles—masked as the History of "rock as art." The break took the shape of a hyper-spectacle, a spectacle that acknowledges itself as spectacle, an image and an appearance that does not pretend to correspond to anything beyond itself. Specifically, the English punk scene foregrounded its spectacular character in order to disavow the deeper meanings that might adhere to commercial rock sold as the art of singer-songwriters. However, in announcing that the rock industry was just economics whose History was the narrative of its labels' financial successes and failures, English punk can be read as expressing the desire that rock could mean something besides economics, that it could represent something besides sales. The English Scene's attempt to push beyond spectacle without ever arriving there itself betrayed a desire for an outside to economics.

A further desire emerges from England's early punks, the desire for an identity that was neither founded upon nor represented by appearance. Again, punks attempted to face down spectacle but this time in the form of fashion, and, again, they turned the spectacle back upon itself in their hyper-spectacular clothes. Dick Hebdige takes a different tack in approaching punk fashion. He describes it as a "rendering" of "working classness metaphorically in chains and hollow cheeks, 'dirty' clothing (stained jackets, tarty see-through blouses) and rough and ready diction" (63). For Hebdige, punk fashion can be read semiotically as a system of signs that represents the working class. In response to English Glam Rock in particular, punk renders visible, for the cultural theorist at least, contradictions between the upper class that Glam Rock fashion represents and the working-class significations of punk. In short, Hebdige locates in punk the expression of a cultural desire to reassert the existence of the working class within the field of commercial rock, where upper-class trappings were privileged and signs of the working class were for the most part invisible.

If I extend Hebdige's semiotic approach, I might argue that English punk fashion represents not just the working class. Safety pins and clothespins for fastening clothes, threadbare, hole-filled, and dirty garments, as well as trash can liners used as clothing could all serve as stylized reminders of the lumpen proletariat living at or near the poverty level, a group that mass culture forms such as Glam Rock in England and mid-'70s arena rock in general ignored in favor of valorizing notions of art, glamour, and beauty. With these signs of poverty and of the working class, punk is demanding that someone recognize and acknowledge the existence of the working class and the lumpen proletariat. But who would do the acknowledging, and what forms would that acknowledgment take? Would a mediated demand emerging from a mass culture group require a mediated response from another such group? More importantly, why does punk style need to be understood in Hebdige's strictly indexical terms, where signifier *x* represents *y*, a signified class position? These questions seem particularly troublesome in light of the English Scene's relations with the spectacle that I have outlined above. If punks' bad and shocking behavior correlates less with authentically bad and shocking acts than with the exaggeration of those acts as spectacle, then why would style obey a different logic? What I propose, instead, is that a variety of often conflicting markers that work in a number of ways constitute punk style. Two sets of markers in particular—Nazi paraphernalia and sexual bondage gear—suggest a reading different from Hebdige's.

Following the logic of Hebdige's index, punk's adoption of Nazi accoutrements—and the swastika in particular—and fetish-wear would represent Nazis and practitioners of bondage and sado-masochism. In contrast, Mark Sinker writes that English punks' styles reflected their desire

no longer to be noticed. Dressing-to-shock (zips, rips, binbags, tattoos, the pretty-slut tease, fetish-wear taken casually public) is adopted against the instant society *stops* being shocked. Stops being shocked by surface gestures anyway. . . . [Punks] only wanted a world where what you wore was all just fashion: where how you look isn't who you are. (124)

He adds that "Sid and Siouxsie wore swastikas because they *weren't* Nazis. . . . The only acceptable function of fashion was the overthrow (for all time) of the very metaphysics of fashion" (125). Sinker's argument suggests that one of the desires reflected in fashion parallels those attached to spectacle that are legible in punk behavior. Punks adopt fashions that mix codes related to class, fascism, and sexual practices not to represent those categories but to exaggerate them, to demonstrate that the surface markers of fashion, and by association all clothing, are purely spectacle and, as such, do not correlate with their supposed social referents. In short, if punk fashion can be read as a critique of any