

Punk Rock through a Historical Lens: Unified Efforts to Resolve Widespread Issues

AP Seminar

2019

Word Count: 2,127

Introduction

The defining elements of punk rock could be summarized as the following: simple instrumentals, snarling vocals, and low-fidelity sound. The punk genre has distinguished itself within the vast landscape of musical styles as being loud, aggressive, and emotionally charged. Punk, due to its promotion of a do-it-yourself ethic, allows inexperienced musicians to express themselves in a way that they otherwise would not be able to in mainstream genres that generally demand accessible songwriting and a pre-established position in the music industry. The subculture surrounding punk is generally strongly anti-establishment and in some instances embraces anarchism, though it almost always fosters egalitarian views. In addition to this, the punk genre has proven itself to be an effective political vehicle, an expected result of its already highly political nature. As such, musicians in the punk genre have been able to convey a wide variety of political messages to listeners. However, while communicating a message is certainly an important component of any form of media, it is not the same as actually motivating action. This begs the question: Has the punk genre ever successfully motivated unified efforts to resolve widespread issues? The theme connecting the articles included in the Stimulus Packet is unified efforts to resolve global issues. Similarly, this paper will examine the punk movement through a Historical Lens in order to find certain instances in which punk rock encouraged unified efforts that attempted to resolve widespread issues. As Bob Dylan sang in "Blowin' in the Wind", the answer to many problems exist somewhere just out of reach, as elusive as the blowing wind. As a whole, the punk genre takes a more assertive stance on the matter, the musicians of the movement setting out to find the answers for themselves.

The Punk Movement and Freedom of Expression, or Lack Thereof, within the German Democratic Republic

The act that would eventually lead to the separation of Germany occurred in April of 1946, when the Social Democratic Party of Germany joined the Communist Party of Germany to create the Socialist Unity Party. The Socialist Unity Party, or SED, refused to participate in free and fair elections and cemented its role as the ruling party of the Soviet zone by obliging all other parties to ally under a permanent coalition that it headed. The German Democratic Republic, or GDR, was established in October of 1949 in response to the formation of the Federal Republic of Germany, thereby solidifying the independent existences of East Germany and West Germany (Bayley and Wallace-Hadrill).

Life in the German Democratic Republic could be characterized as being "prescribed" (Flanagan) and "hyper-politicized" (Mohr). Inculcation into the singular, uncontested political party, the aforementioned SED, began at a young age and was accompanied by participation in youth groups, in which membership was not mandatory, "yet membership rates hovered around 85 percent" (Mohr). Careers were determined based on assessment results and unemployment was punishable by imprisonment, a policy inherited from Nazi Germany. An impression of the unspoken standards and tacit constraints within the GDR were ingrained into the mindset of its citizens, while the looming yet certainly physical reminder of boundaries represented by the Berlin Wall physically prevented any attempts of deviation.

The barrier, a literal Iron Curtain, was erected in 1961 and continually enhanced throughout the following two decades to protect East Germany's economic viability, as specialists, workers, and intellectuals were immigrating en masse to West Germany in the 1950s

due to declining living conditions in East Germany. The structure – which was a series of barriers, such as fortifications, electric fences, and concrete walls – ran 45 kilometers through Berlin and was surrounded with additional defensive measures (Augustyn et al.). While the Berlin Wall and the guard towers, barbed wire, and mines outlining it were undoubtedly effective at confining people within the German Democratic Republic, it was not fully impenetrable: Western radio and, subsequently, punk influence were able to bypass the barricade.

What started with songs by the Sex Pistols on Radio Luxembourg (Mohr) escalated into a full-fledged Stasi panic. East German youth who embraced punk culture dressed themselves in torn clothing, cut their hair in intentionally unsightly styles, and adorned themselves with safety pins, chains, and patches as a way to visibly differentiate themselves from those abiding by the GDR's government-sanctioned normality. East German punks, or alternatively *ostpunks*, were primarily focused on opposing the previously mentioned prescribed lifestyle that was typical of residence in the GDR, a sentiment that manifested in the ostpunk mantra "Don't die in the waiting room of the future" (Flanagan). Operating in dilapidated East Berlin boroughs, long-abandoned bunkers, and behind decaying facades, ostpunks sought to determine the course of their lives of their own accord in spite of the invasive attempts at intervention by the dictatorship.

While the actions of ostpunks would have been viewed as lively acts of rebellion of little consequence in Western countries at the time, they were considered criminal offenses in the GDR and punished harshly. "So while Johnny and Sid were breaking hood ornaments off Mercedes and getting away with it, Major [an East German punk] was doing time in the women's labor prison in Dessau for her punk inclinations" (Daniel). Stasi officials were ordered

to severely punish punks to prevent the movement from escalating and scrutinize punks in order to catch them committing an “offense for which they could be arrested under the criminal law” (Brauer 53). Despite the many attempts at stamping out the punk movement, ospunks persevered in the oppressive environment of the GDR.

In short, ospunks reacted to the “abundance of future” (Flanagan) in the GDR by staging their own punk movement. In East Germany, punk came to be known as an embodiment of the uncertainty of the future, a feeling that was associated with the distorted guitars and wailing singers of bands such as Namenlos and Wutenfall. Ospunks steeled the resolve of other people living under the dictatorship by embracing the opposite of the GDR standard and, through forging Western ideas to fit their unique circumstances, ultimately resisted oppression.

National Wake: a Multiracial Punk Band’s Existence under Apartheid

Though lawful racial segregation was practiced in South Africa for some time before apartheid was established, the National Party took office and officially instituted the policy in 1948. Apartheid, Afrikaans for “apartness”, promoted racial segregation to benefit South Africa’s white minority population at the expense of the Black, Asian, and Colored majority population. Racially specified business and residential areas were established under 1950’s Group Areas Act, which forbade South Africans of one race from residing in, owning land in, or operating businesses in sections that were reserved for another race. Large numbers of Black Africans were also forcefully removed from their previous homes, relocated into Bantustans, and renounced as citizens of South Africa following the Bantu Authorities Act of 1951, the Promotion of Bantu Self-Government Act of 1959, and the Bantu Homelands Citizenship Act of 1970 (Augustyn et al.). Enter National Wake.

The group was comprised of four members: Ivan Kadey, on guitar and vocals, Steve Moni, on guitar, Punka Khoza, on drums, and Gary Khoza, on bass guitar. The Khoza brothers were Black Africans forced to live in Soweto township, and their affiliation with White Africans Kadey and Moni promptly set the band under government scrutiny. The band grew out of a Johannesburg commune and was formed after the Soweto uprising of 1976 as a way to rebel against apartheid and other forms of discrimination in South Africa at the time (Petridis). National Wake's musical style was similarly diverse in comparison to the racial identities of its members; while the band was primarily punk, National Wake would frequently incorporate and combine other musical styles and influences such as "Stooges-esque garage, the repurposed disco structures and acerbic political analysis of bands like the Pop Group and Gang of Four, two-tone ska, reggae, and African polyrhythms" (Skolnik). National Wake's unique sound would garner the group popularity in South Africa, but increase the pressure exerted on them by the government.

For the sake of writing and performing music while simultaneously opposing the South African government and spreading awareness of injustice in the country, National Wake straddled what Moni would describe as "a thin grey area between what was legal and what wasn't", a tendency that would intensify the band's notoriety and thereby lead to their eventual breakup. South African authorities were nearly always surveilling the group, and they were unable to perform live in more conservative areas. "The indignity of performing in front of segregated audiences was the final straw for bass player Gary Khoza... He quit and the band fell apart" (Petridis).

Though the band was eventually forced to separate, their courage to openly defy apartheid as a racially diverse band did not go unnoticed – a fact that, despite Kadey's belief that not many outside of South Africa were interested in the band's story (Petridis), was made unmistakably evident when a widely celebrated compilation of National Wake's music was re-released in 2013. National Wake is remembered today as one of the most significant punk bands of the South African apartheid era.

Critique of the Punk Genre and Doubts of its Significance

Despite its recognition as a seminal genre, punk rock has garnered its fair share of negative publicity, though this is to be expected for any subject that has gained a comparable level of notoriety. The genre has been chastised by both onlookers and punks themselves.

An issue that many take up with the genre is the political ideologies of those involved with it. As previously stated, a characteristic of punk is an intense aversion to establishment and the occasional encouragement of anarchy. Many consider these beliefs to be bordering on naiveté and derivative of a lack of understanding of society, as well as corruptive to listeners: "In retrospect, it's hilarious to try to tie the stoned, self-absorbed incomprehension of the world that characterized the dawn of punk to some larger narrative of a self-aware political art movement with an objective and a plan" (Roderick). Another prevalent argument that challenges the public perception of punk rock's significance is that the popularity of the movement, genre, and subculture – especially in Britain – is retrospectively overestimated and that they did not leave any significant, long-standing effects: "Sure, it might have got record companies to finally wake up to a few grotty upstarts doing it for themselves with glue sticks and badge makers, but nothing in the grown-up world changed. The Tories still got elected in 1979, the baby boomers still got

rich and fat, and there were still three million unemployed in the 80s, even if some of them were singing 'no future'" (Allen).

While these claims are reasonable and certainly hold a place in discussion, they are able to be disputed through a more thorough consideration of punk rock. Firstly, though punk politics may appear juvenile and uninformed from a cursory glance, a more careful viewing of the genre reveals a spectrum of political ideologies that are carefully contemplated through songwriting, or at least as carefully as songwriting can allow a subject to be explored. As such, while many times within the genre these political stances may be, at the very least, drastic, it is unfair to assume that they are produced by a lack of understanding on behalf of the musicians. Furthermore, it is highly unlikely for an individual or group of individuals to completely advocate the entirety of punk rock ethos, excluding the ostpunks, who aspired to be as abrasive as possible to oppose and endure oppression. Second, punk rock's societal influence is undeniable, regardless of its popularity at any given point in time. According to activist, writer, and co-founder of Crass Penny Rimbaud, the first wave of punk was admittedly "little but an extension of Tin Pan Alley culture, but what followed was a radical and often life-changing movement that changed many lives and had deep effects within mainstream culture" (Allen). The effects of punk rock in the music and subculture of the GDR and South Africa testify to the validity of this statement.

Conclusion

The GDR formally dissolved on October 3, 1990, the Berlin Wall fell in November 1991, and the period of Apartheid officially ended on April 27, 1994. Though the punk movement cannot be said to have directly caused these events, it played a large role in allowing an outlet for people to express their opposition to their respective governments in East Germany and South

Africa. In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as written in his renowned Letter from Birmingham Jail, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." If the oppression and segregation experienced by those living under the German Democratic Republic and apartheid-era South Africa are to be considered injustices, and they most definitely should be, then punk rock should be considered a form of direct action in protest of these injustices. In this way, punk rock has successfully encouraged actions to be taken in attempts to resolve widespread issues.

Works Cited

- Allen, Jeremy. "Punk Was Rubbish and It Didn't Change Anything: An Investigation." Noisey, VICE, 22 Mar. 2016, [noisey.vice.com/en_us/article/6vg8qy/punk-was-Rubbish-and-it-didnt-change-anything-an-investigation](https://noisey.vice.com/en_us/article/6vg8qy/punk-was-rubbish-and-it-didnt-change-anything-an-investigation).
- Augustyn, Adam, et al. "Berlin Wall." Encyclopædia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 4 Feb. 2019, www.britannica.com/topic/Berlin-Wall.
- Augustyn, Adam, et al. "Apartheid." Encyclopædia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 3 Dec. 2018, www.britannica.com/topic/apartheid.
- Bayley, Charles Calvert, and John Michael Wallace-Hadrill. "Germany - The Era of Partition." Encyclopædia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 27 Mar. 2019, www.britannica.com/place/Germany/The-era-of-partition#ref58214.
- Brauer, Juliane. "Clashes of Emotions: Punk Music, Youth Subculture, and Authority in the GDR (1978-1983)." *Social Justice*, vol. 38, no. 4 (126), 2012, pp. 53–70. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/41940958.
- Daniel, Tony. "How Punk Rock Helped Topple The Berlin Wall." *The Federalist*, 30 Nov. 2018, thefederalist.com/2018/11/30/how-punk-rock-helped-topple-the-berlin-wall/.

Dylan, Bob. "Blowin' in the Wind." *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, John H. Hammond, Columbia Recording Studios, New York, 9 July 1962.

Flanagan, Andrew. "Punks, Up Against The Wall." *NPR*, NPR, 29 Sept. 2018, www.npr.org/2018/09/29/652567677/punks-up-against-the-wall.

King, Martin Luther. "Letter from Birmingham Jail." Received by Alabama clergymen, 16 Apr. 1963.

Mohr, Tim. *Burning down the Haus: Punk Rock, Revolution, and the Fall of the Berlin Wall*. Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2018.

Petridis, Alexis. "National Wake: the South African Punk Band Who Defied Apartheid." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 3 Oct. 2013, www.theguardian.com/music/2013/oct/03/national-wake-south-africa-punk-apartheid.

Roderick, John. "Punk Rock Is Bullshit." *Seattle Weekly*, Seattle Weekly, 6 Mar. 2013, www.seattleweekly.com/2013-03-06/music/punk-rock-is-bullshit/.

Skolnik, Jes. "A History of Anti-Fascist Punk Around the World in 9 Songs." *Pitchfork*, Pitchfork, 6 Mar. 2017, pitchfork.com/thepitch/1460-a-history-of-anti-fascist-punk-around-the-world-in-9-songs/.

The Independent, Independent Digital News and Media, 25 Apr. 2008,
www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/features/rock-against-racism-remembering-that-gig-that-started-it-all-815054.html.

Portwood, Jerry. "How East German Punks Helped Destroy the Berlin Wall." *Rolling Stone*, 17 Sept. 2018, www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/how-east-german-punks-helped-destroy-the-berlin-wall-722926/.

Sabin, Roger. *Punk Rock: So What?: The Cultural Legacy of Punk*. Routledge, 1999.

Turinni, Joseph M. "'Well I Don't Care about History': Oral History and the Making of Collective Memory in Punk Rock." *Notes*, vol. 70, no. 1, Sept. 2013, pp. 59–77.
EBSCOhost, doi:10.1353/not.2013.0129.