

'The beautiful people are ugly too'; The Clash as my 'true-fiction'

By Martin James

When, in late 1999, The Clash released their posthumous live album *From Here to Eternity* and previewed their documentary film *Westway to the World*, the media were invited to a launch party at a private members' club in West London¹ where music critics and record label personnel rubbed shoulders with celebrities, musicians, and supermodels. The event offered a clear indication of the huge gulf that existed between both the band's romantic mythology as the embodiment of punk authenticity and their status as revered leaders of a cool-London aristocracy. This chasm was brought into sharp focus when the band made a brief appearance at the party and pressed flesh with the capital city's self-proclaimed 'beautiful people'. Rumours quickly circulated that rather than spend too much time with the 'fake' celebrity friends, they'd spent most of their evening together in the fish and chip shop next door – authenticity performed and intact.

This scenario was nothing new, however. The tensions between the public perception of punk authenticity and the private reality of the privilege of stardom had long been linked to The Clash. From *Sniffin' Glue* editor Mark P.'s proclamation that the band had 'sold out' when they signed to CBS² to this launch party where they'd chosen to sit in a chippie rather than talk to the likes of Kate Moss, the history of The Clash presents a litany of contradictions each as complex as punk itself. Indeed, The Clash did embody UK punk's dilemmas of authenticity in so many unexpected ways. For fans of the band that may have been a part of their appeal.

Prior to that launch party, members of the audience at a special cinema screening of the band's *Westway to the World* documentary would inadvertently reveal just how strong that dichotomous relationship between mythology and reality remained in the hearts, minds, and memories of their fans. Halfway through the film, as Joe Strummer delivered one of his renowned sermons on 'the truths of punk and The Clash', *Sniffin' Glue* and *NME* writers Danny Baker and Danny Kelly stood up and stormed out proclaiming loudly that this was 'nothing to do with punk'; that the documentary bore no resemblance to their experience of either band or subculture.

It struck me at the time how important it seemed for both of these journalists to remain in the position of gate-keepers to the public notion of authentic punk.. I was also struck by the arrogance of this outburst, that they believed theirs were the definitive memories of what punk was; memories that they believed held more importance than the memories of the other hangers-on and the other media friends. More importantly, however, I recall thinking 'how the hell would they know what The Clash was really like? While the fans sweated it out at the front at the gigs, those self-styled punk-journalists stood side-stage, or at the bar, hanging out with the in-crowd and looking down on the band's following. How would they know what it was like to be a fan of The Clash?'. My memories are more important, you see.

It was an admittedly naïve reaction to their equally naïve outburst. But taken with the experiences of the launch party it raises a few questions about perceptions of the band's authenticity, the extent to which this was managed and mediated by external forces for whom notions of authenticity were brand values for their industries and how rarely the authenticating and often oppositional voices of the fan was heard.

The silence of the fans...

The silence of the fans is in large part due to the ways in which popular music histories are constructed. Sarah Thornton ³ notes that four criteria are generally used to assign historical importance to particular music-makers and genres. These are: sales figures, biographical interest, critical acclaim & media coverage. Each of these criteria has inherent problems, however. Sales figures form the basis of lists that claim to cover popular music's past but are based solely on recorded and released artefacts, thus excluding fan recordings or un-registered DIY products. Furthermore, they reduce the fan simply to levels of passive consumer or bystander. Biographical interest has the effect of personalising and simplifying complex historical processes. In this instance, punk is reduced to a narrative that prioritises the individual members of The Clash within the London punk scene. Critical acclaim tends to produce 'canons' of the 'best' music which are constructed through a range of biases that have little to do with fans. Finally,

media coverage often presents as 'windows on the past' rather than texts which construct events and values. Media reports are partial interpretations of events, rather than factual accounts. The fan voice all too often omitted in favour of the voice of the music journalist as 'enlightened fan'⁴ or the musician as biographical subject.

All four approaches to the construction of histories produce an emphasis on simple timelines of events with a selection of key moments and personalities deemed to drive change. In other words, they tend to lead to totalising histories. The inclusion of the fans' voice can create a rupture to this simple timeline where participants problematise facts as myth, or mythologise events as personal 'true fiction'⁵.

All the Young Punks (new boots and contracts)

Few popular music scenes or genres had experienced the high levels of investigation as endured by UK punk from late 1975 on. Where such rock subgenres as prog, glam or pub rock had been given space to grow towards a sense of maturity, from its emergence punk quickly came under the critical microscope of both the music media and the newly emergent popular music studies..

This interest can be viewed through authenticity discourses that had come to the fore in the rock music press from the late 1960s. The dominant ideologies of popular music criticism emerged in the specialist magazines of the US and the alternative underground press in the UK of the 1960s. Magazines such as *Crawdaddy* and *Rolling Stone* in the USA emerged through the need to locate the power of popular music as cultural signifier. Such critics took American history as the starting-point and employed the tropes of 'individualism and independence', the frontier spirit and revolution produced an 'objective' account of rock as the music of 'great men' of a 'great nation'⁶. This process prioritised rock music's masculine, authentic potential over pop's feminine, trivial disposability and was key to authenticating rock music in opposition to all other popular music forms. This was not an uncommon trope in the late 1960s and early 1970s where rock bands performing their own material live were

presented as being more authentic than pop bands who performed other people's songs and existed largely as a music industries concept.

In this era rock critics were mainly unpaid amateurs who in most cases were aware of the role they had in forging new ideas. Simon Frith has noted that 'the ideology of rock – the arguments about what records mean, what rock is for – has always been articulated more clearly by fans than by musicians (or businessmen)' ⁷. As non-professionals, these writers structured their craft through the interests and language of themselves as fans. By employing the ideology of the fan these writers 'valorized authenticity and originality, and developed a mythologized account of rock musicians that considered their work as art' ⁸. This aspect of the fan's immersion in the romantic notion of the artist as originating genius is key to understanding the underlying ideology of the popular music critic whose key tools for understanding music texts were the dual themes of authenticity and originality. Musicians were thus mediated through the discourses of the music press 'both as authentic spokespeople for their generation and as Romantic artists' ⁹.

With the emergence of the professionalised rock critic, ideologies of authenticity became a central focus for the new rock press. Thus rock became authenticated through the authentic and authenticating voices of the music critic as cultural intermediary. Little surprise then that when punk first emerged much of its oppositional stance was focussed on a rock press that was deemed to be out of touch. It no longer represented the youth. It was inauthentic. Or rather, it was still clinging to the performed rock-era authenticities of musicianship and spectacle.

Punk's authenticities may have given primacy to the 45rpm single over the long-player album, the self-taught non-musician over the educated 'muso' and the immediacy of the scene participant over the apparent distance between rock star and fan, but it also revolved around many similar concerns as those presented by rock. The primacy of live performance over the rhetorically live, the foregrounding of a perceived marginalised underground over a self-serving mainstream and the high focus on the musical and extra-musical activities as subcultural expression. Perhaps unsurprisingly then punk authenticity focused heavily on subcultural display.

Research on subcultural authenticity has focused primarily on style, which in turn fetishises material culture and its consumption as both inevitable and unavoidable dimensions of youth subculture. Perhaps the best-known work in this area is Hebdidge's *Subculture: the Meaning of Style*¹⁰, that presents punk primarily as a culture of display and in so doing reduces the subculture to its material qualities thus emphasising its inevitable descent into mass consumer culture. For Hebdidge, punk's moment of authenticity can only be located in those initial phases of subcultural formation prior to it becoming subsumed by consumer culture.

There are two problems with this position. Firstly, this over-emphasis on the materiality of style flies in the face of the original ethos of punk that emphasised individual choice over collective uniform. Secondly, the inevitability of the commercial market place subsuming subcultures denies the lasting activities and impacts of DIY cultures associated with punk.

In terms of collective subcultural style a brief look at the photos of the earliest UK punks reveals a range of 'looks' that encompassed the subverted city gent; the sadomasochist; the fetishist; the Ramones clone; and the leather clad spikey hair punk cliché. Indeed, first wave punks also deployed hair of varying length, colour and style. The earliest UK bands were equally versed in expressing the individual over the collective, with no two presenting the same uniformed style – The Damned, Sex Pistols, The Adverts etc. were distinctive from each other both as bands and as individuals within those bands. The Clash's adoption of the uniformly stencilled clothing offered recognition of the power of the collective image that could be argued to be a deliberate attempt to codify a collective punk style. It was through this they were able to present the image of 'the last gang in town'; a key narrative in their collective biography. However, these stylistic concerns were often presented through the illusion of, and allusion to, punk's DIY activities. The Clash's self-created DIY stencilled clothes were as much a part of their self-expression as their highly controlled earliest 'showcase' performances in their *Rehearsal Rehearsals* studios.

Fanzine editor Tony Moon's renowned illustration 'here's a chord, here's another, here's another, now form a band'¹¹ gave rise to the notion that the auto-didactic performer was itself evidence of DIY ideologies among the earliest punk bands. The reality however, was that these first bands were less interested in do-it-yourself record production and distribution, or even gig promotion than building an illusion of creative control through the portrayal of a rejection of mainstream, or parent cultures.

Hebdidge and his colleagues at the CCCS may have theorised subculture through an emphasis on class and resistance as homologous positions, thus noting 'rejection' to be located in the dismissal of an idealised mainstream society. However, they failed to note the dimensions of subcultural activity that punk's DIY ethic offered beyond rejection; namely reflexivity, and self-actualisation. Reflexivity represents the ways in which the individual lives a life that's true to their own ideals that sit in opposition to that rejected idealised mainstream. Self-actualisation can be viewed as 'being' as opposed to 'doing'. In order to remain true to personal ideals 'being' the subcultural participant through style alone is not enough. In order to gain subcultural authenticity, it is important to actually take part in the processes of subcultural production. Most notably this can be viewed through DIY activities.¹²

This position creates an important step in the understanding of subcultural authenticity in that it de-emphasizes the mass and focuses on the individual. In the process it gives voice to subcultural participants, including fans, in the construction of punk authenticity.

The emphasis on individual over collective creates space for a greater value on autobiographical experience as authentic voice. DIY becomes located in the 'doing' of an activity and the 'being' of personal expression of the experience of that activity. The very existence of autobiography is a DIY process.

By applying this lens to the construction of history, emphasis is removed from the fetishization of the collective defining the scene and instead relocated on to the individual active authenticating participant.

In recent years, this approach has seen an increase through the proliferation of punk autobiographies and oral histories. The former has lately seen a marked increase in numbers, with artists as disparate as John Lydon, Viv Albertine and

Chrissie Hynde producing confessional memoirs as colour to their versions of 'absolute truth'. Oral histories publications have provided space for previously overlooked individual participants to offer their hitherto undocumented subjective, personal perspectives on punk's key historical events¹³. Thus, bringing to light numerous contradictory stories of many of punk's early actors who had previously fallen outside of the canon; the suggested lack of authorial gate-keeping supplying the text with an added sense of authenticity. The same is also true of The Clash's posthumously produced, eponymously titled official book, which places the band in a position of both authority and authenticity, 'telling it like it was, in their own words...' ¹⁴ without the overt interjection or opinion from a journalist.

Books on The Clash have placed the band as the focal point of the punk subculture. Like other biographical books on punk's key figures, they are sensationalist texts either written from a fan's perspective but with fandom rarely foregrounded, or from a privileged 'insider' view that is defined against the fan masses¹⁵. In general, punk autobiographies have the egotistical drive of the need for immortality while 'official' histories are given eye-witness extensions that place the storyteller and their version of events at the centre. Oral histories find the critical focus squarely located in the words of key participants within the scene and its associated industries. They attempt to fill the gaps left by the selective retelling of 'official histories' but invariably, despite occasional dissenting voices, rarely question the grand narratives of punk. This is largely due to the silent voice of the compiling and editing author who is likely to adhere to a legitimised narrative for story telling simplicity.

These types of texts raise interesting questions as to the critical value of the colloquial and sensationalistic representations of personal experiences when compared to a 'scholarly' article. Are we able to learn more about the punk subculture through auto/biographical retellings of the story of The Clash by music critics or participating musicians? Can we learn more about the punk scene by analysing through a fan's observations and memories? Do my personal recollections of The Clash have any critical value? According to their own rhetoric, The Clash themselves would consider themselves and their fans to hold the only truly authentic stories¹⁶.

Helen Reddington argues that giving voice to the first-hand accounts of fans has potential to question the grand narratives of punk and relocate the hidden, or forgotten histories and write them into being¹⁷. The details omitted from official histories offer a rich source for investigation and are invariably to be found in the memories of those people who were involved at the time. But does this suggest the 'lost' voices of The Clash fans are in any way more 'authentic' than those of the legitimised cultural intermediaries of the time?

The Beautiful People are Ugly Too: my 'true-fiction'¹⁸

I was 14 when I first "left home" to follow The Clash. It was early 1977 and the impact of punk rock was just beginning to be felt in the nation's classrooms. Like so many kids of my generation, the cocktail of punk's apparent unbridled anger and my own hormones proved too potent to contain. In the course of what seemed like only a few weeks my voice broke, I gave my mum cheek, I cut my hair short, converted my flared jeans to drainpipes, acquired baseball boots and a ripped T-shirt, and got beaten up. This was for being "a punk", setting a pattern that was to define the next few years of my life.

My first Clash gig was at the Harlesden Coliseum in 1977. I told my parents I was staying at a friend's house. My friend did the same and we duly "left home". For two kids from the middle-class town of Marlow-on-Thames, it seemed like the punk-rock thing to do.

Harlesden Coliseum was decrepit. The fake alabaster decor was in an advanced state of decomposition, the flecked wallpaper peeling off in strips to reveal disintegrating walls. The carpet was sticky underfoot, the air dense with the smell of damp, stale cigarettes and body odour. It constituted the perfect setting for my first encounter with the London punk scene. It also seemed the perfect venue for The Clash, who took the stage to taunts about their newly signed deal with Sony Records. The band's reaction was to deliver a set of all-consuming ferocity.

The picture is still clear in my head: Joe Strummer screwing his face up to snarl at – rather than into – the microphone, his leg pumping uncontrollably like a piston; Mick Jones attacking his guitar and his amp as if he hated them (they kept packing up, as if they hated him); peroxide-blond bassist Paul Simonon swinging his

instrument low like a weapon, a slow-burning cigarette hung constantly from his bottom lip in defiance of the laws of physics. It doesn't go away, that kind of imagery, not when you encounter it for the first time.

After the gig I worked up the courage to approach Joe Strummer. He was holding court at a makeshift bar, enjoying a couple of beers and praise for the show. I waited until the crowd thinned, wandered over to him and said hello. He seemed to me to be the epitome of cool in his Clash uniform of heavily stencilled combat gear. But it was his teeth that really compelled my attention. They appeared to be decaying in front of my eyes, ravaged, presumably, by a combination of negligence, bad dentistry, and cheap speed. As he spoke a continuous stream of spittle flew from his mouth.

I attempted to make intelligent conversation. I asked him why he sang a song called 'White Riot' while the DJ played reggae all night – did it, I wondered, annoy him at all? The spittle turned to froth. Did I not understand that 'White Riot' was all about his respect for black people and their stand against oppression? Had I not listened to the lyrics, in which he sang that he wished white people would take the same positive position?

Well, no actually. First of all The Clash hadn't actually released the record at this point so there was no way I could have analysed his lyrics. Secondly, I hadn't grown up in multi-racial Notting Hill Gate. And, despite going to gigs in the multi-racial town High Wycombe, I had never previously been forced to face up to my own inherent racism. It was an attitude that had been born from the simple fact that there were no black people in Marlow. I was ten when I met my first black kid. Some nice white middle-class family had adopted him. I can still remember being told in the playground that if the black kid touched me his colour would rub off on me. Even as a 14-year-old, race riots – or indeed the very concept of 'racism' – meant little to me.

So Strummer forced my eyes open. And to confirm my new-found awareness I started drinking Red Stripe in High Wycombe's Rasta pub, The Red Cross Knight, and, when The Clash hit the road again in May 1977, I skanked enthusiastically to the band's version of Junior Murvin's roots-rocking classic 'Police and Thieves'. I became a vocal supporter of the Rock Against Racism movement. And when, in

April 1978, The Clash played the RAR Carnival at Victoria Park in Hackney, there I was handing out badges, unquestioningly.

Back in Harlesden, however, the tongue-lashing Strummer meted out went on and on and left me reeling. This was not what one expected of narcissistic rock stars. But he did stop eventually, at which point he put his arm round my shoulders and told me to "piss off 'ome". I stumbled into the Harlesden streets feeling like I'd just been pulled up by a teacher. It was while I reflected sombrely on this that I was knocked out cold by another punk and robbed of the £1.20 I had to get home. It wouldn't have happened, of course, if my attacker had realised that I was now a close friend of Joe Strummer's.

So how exactly did a middle-class kid from a middle-class town come to follow The Clash around? Well, as a young teenager it certainly wasn't their political stance that excited me. At that time, the dole meant nothing to me and, as I've already mentioned, I was completely ignorant of any concept of race politics.

In retrospect, I think I was drawn to the macho air that surrounded the band. It may not appeal much now, but as a teenage boy their tough-guy, outlaw image was something to aspire to. The Clash, far more than the Sex Pistols or the Damned, were a gang. And, more to the point, they made us – their hormonally challenged disciples – feel like we were also part of the same gang. They were, they argued, the same as us and everything about them portrayed an us-against-them attitude.

That gang vibe was a key component of the punk 'stance'. Kids like me were never hard enough to be skinheads. In fact, like most punks, I was happier to write poetry than fight. But like it or not, aggro attended punk wherever it went. The media waged a daily war on us; complete strangers adopted the blood sport of 'punk hunting'. We just took it on the chin, or wherever else the blows landed, because we had a cause. We were martyrs, the beatings a rite of passage. We would show our wounds to younger, aspiring punks. The cuts and bruises were much, much more meaningful than button badges. And we got great stories out of it: I remember bragging about being jumped on by a gang of Teds when in reality a single Elvis impersonator had punched me for spitting at him. We were only reducing ourselves to type. I was a punk: spitting is what we did. He was a Teddy Boy: hitting punks is what they did. He probably told his friends that he'd taken on a gang of us. The fact

that we sat next to each other in double English on a Tuesday afternoon would certainly have been left out of the narrative.

Punk offered the chance of reinvention. We were all keenly downwardly mobile, throwing away what we saw as the entrapments of middle-class life in favour of what we perceived to be working-class attributes. This meant swearing a lot, chewing imaginary gum and sneering at 'the straights'.

The mad rush to punk self-reinvention was especially notable in the generation about to head off for university. Virtually every 18-year-old went off as a hippy, only to return at Christmas quoting the first Ramones album, hair shortened (side bits still over ears though), styled by Oxfam.

My own three-strong gang comprised Nutty (the son of a toilet-roll salesman), Gerard (who later became briefly famous for finding an original painting by John Lennon in a skip) and myself. But by the summer of '77 our number had swelled considerably. Among the future DJs, movers and shakers of the late 20th century, Roald Dahl's grandson used to hang out with us. Can't remember his name. He was at Eton at the time. And one of the girls started to bring along her boyfriend. His name was Steve Redgrave, a huge, quiet fellow. He wore a torn school shirt with the names of his favourite punk bands written in ballpoint all over it. But that was as far as he went. He had other interests. He amiably put up with us giving him stick for not being punk enough and puffing up and down the Thames in a rowing boat when he could be going to gigs and changing society.

At the time, the most uncool thing you could be was a 'weekend punk'. It's what the London cognoscenti called us Thames Valley youngsters (despite the fact that many of this same self-style in-crowd were Thames Valley locals who would commute to the gigs). But 'weekend punks' is exactly what we were. Correspondingly, in time-honoured anthropological fashion, we would sneer 'weekend punk' at anyone who didn't measure up to our exacting standards: wearing the right clothes, buying the right records or being seen at the right gigs. Steve Redgrave was a full day short of qualifying as a weekend punk.

In May 1977 I "left home" on a number of occasions to follow the Clash's "White Rio" tour around the country. These adventures were funded by savings from odd jobs and, of course, Christmas, birthday and pocket money. I even started dealing in

second-hand records at school and later, in a particularly enterprising move, selling such bootleg classics as the Sex Pistols' Spunk.

We got to the gigs on a mix of naivety and bravado. We often hitched and relied heavily on punks in other places for food. We sometimes even managed to grab a sandwich from the band and their entourage. Obviously, there was also a degree of subterfuge involved. In fact, you could say that The Clash taught me to lie convincingly to my parents and, on occasion, to my friends. My entire family was oblivious to what I was up to.

But I was never gone long enough for them to become suspicious. I was, however, now spending enough time in the band's orbit to be on nodding terms with them. Joe, I'd come to see less as a pedagogical figure and more as a cool older brother. Paul was always the one I most wanted to be like – he seemed street-tough but indefatigably concerned with the welfare of other people. Mick, I was less sure of. His sneer was always unsettling. He had no inhibitions about showing his dislike for us juvenile 'weekend punks'. Topper seemed mildly disinterested in either us or the attention he received for being the newest addition to the band. A year later in June 1978 he and a few friends would attend Marlow Fair. It was barely a few days after the release of 'White Man in Hammersmith Palais' and he received more than a little attention from both the, by then swollen ranks of the Johnny-come-lately 'weekend punks' and the local teddy boys. Among the latter was Lurch, the supersized ted who had made our lives hell for the prior twelve months. When he tried to take on Topper and crew he found his match and was quickly sent away, quiff somewhat bedraggled and crepes muddied. Topper immediately became a hero to Marlow's young punks.

Back in 1977 though, I was having the time of my life. I'd been to Eric's Club in Liverpool and the Electric Circus in Manchester. I'd joined in with my fellows and ripped up chairs at The Rainbow in London (an act that we repeated a year later for Siouxsie and the Banshees) and talked my way backstage on numerous occasions, to chat with Clash iconographer, film-maker and Roxy Club DJ Don Letts. I even blagged my way, blind drunk, into sleeping on the floor of one of the band's hotel rooms in Leicester. To this day I've no idea whose.

In the year that followed I took in a few one-off dates around the country. Each time "leaving home" only to return early the next morning. It was in June, on the

1978 "Clash On Parole Tour", that I decided to bite the bullet and actually run away to follow the band on a permanent basis. The first date was at Aylesbury Friars. I was suitably adorned in The Clash's uniform, wearing white jeans, red military jacket (both embellished with home-sewn zips) and ripped Clash T-shirt. After the gig, one of the hangers-on (who I now realise was Ray Gange who starred in the Clash film *Rude Boy* – although I was studiously indifferent to the ever-present cameras at the time) handed me a button badge giving me backstage access. The dressing room was a whitewashed breezeblock box with mirrors on every wall. The floor was a rubble of beer cans, empty amphetamine wraps and comatose punks. I went straight up to Joe and told him I was coming on the road with the band. He told me to "piss off 'ome" again. Undaunted, I turned up the following night at Queen's Hall in Leeds. This time Joe told me I was an idiot. So I spent the night on the floor of Mick's room, along with a horde of stranded fans eking out their own space among the cans, wraps and guitar cases. This wasn't the greatest fun in the world and the following day I decided to go home. Paul rather sweetly did offer his floor on future dates if I decided to continue with the tour. However, by now I'd made the discovery that the romance was better than the reality. My bed at home in Marlow was preferable to Mick Jones's hotel-room floor in Leeds and the illusion of being a part of The Clash's extended family had somehow just dissolved. It had never figured in my fantasy that I'd actually have to share the experience with other fans. I was an individual you see. Other people's love affair with The Clash meant nothing to me. The band was the only gang I wanted to be a part of.¹⁹

The Last Gang in Town

The trustworthiness of my own recollections can easily be challenged through questions around accuracy. Furthermore, it could be suggested that, as some of this 'oral history' was originally written for *The Independent on Sunday* in 2004, some of the events I recall were further shaped for the newspaper's readership. However, the same could be said of all published or broadcast materials that draw on autobiographical materials. Certainly the official oral history account *The Clash* is as carefully mediated as any of the biographies of the band, whether written by professional fans or former roadies.

Perhaps the most revealing aspect of my work is evidence of The Clash's habit of offering their hotel room floors to fans. It is an act that has been alluded to over the years²⁰ but has yet to be explored from the perspective of those fans actually engaging with the band in this way. To accept the band's generosity as an aspect of their punk credentials would at this time have required the mediation of the last gang in town ideology to extend beyond the band to include fans too.

Although this would have authenticated the fan experience through punk's oft-claimed "us-versus-them" rejection of hierarchy, it would have created a rupture in the punk narrative presented by a media who needed stars to sell papers. The fan experience was less interesting than the object of fandom.

As a fan however the very rejection of the star system was a huge part of the appeal of the last gang in town. To me The Clash weren't stars but figureheads that represented an egalitarian movement. It was a naïve ideal that would almost inevitably become challenged.

My own account suggests an atmosphere of intimidating machismo with gangs of primarily young men performing punk's anti-social collective identity – not violent, but certainly aggressive and abrasive. Indeed, the fans as a collective seemed to represent the antithesis of my own personal romantic concept of punk. Despite punk's supposed embrace of the outsider, within this gang I felt like the wrong type of outsider. Despite being attracted to what I perceived as punk's egalitarianism, I was acutely aware of my own position in punk's social hierarchies. I was a middle-class kid from a middle-class town who possessed none of the social capital that I read about in the music press each week.

Like many of my contemporaries I was first generation middle class. My parents, from fiercely working class North East England stock, had moved south in an effort to better themselves and provide a brighter future for their family. I found myself caught between the ideologies associated with my family history and the new middle class views of my personal experience. In retrospect, The Clash captured this class collision. They embodied that dilemma that existed between the authentic 'real' and the authenticated myth.

In this piece I discuss the notion of 'weekend punks' in which participants assessed each other's claims to authenticity through the concept of subcultural commitment. As I have noted, the commitment was judged through a range of

means including style, class and, perhaps more significantly, geography. The whole story of punk had been told through bands associated with key industrial cities such as London, Manchester and Newcastle. With the exception of Bromley, the suburbs were omitted from the narrative.

Becoming close to The Clash and their fans seemed to accentuate this in my own mind and I became very aware of my home-counties origins. By not being a London punk I felt I could only be part-time in the eyes of other members of the fan entourage and within the broader narrative of punk. No matter how deep my dedication to The Clash. Ironically, I now realise most of these seemingly 'authentic' fans that followed the band or posed for cameras at London's Roxy club, were also suburban commuter-punks. It was in the suburbs that DIY ideologies were truly able to flourish. The earliest bands were less interested in do-it-yourself record production and distribution, or even gig promotion than building an illusion of creative control. Such DIY activities would emerge with suburban punks, denied the privileges of living in or near London with its host of record labels and promoters prepared to take a 'risk' on bands like The Clash, would be forced to put on their own gigs in village halls, press up their own records or sell cassettes of their demos. Indeed, with the obvious and short-lived exception of Buzzcocks' 'Spiral Scratch' E.P. and their self-promoted Manchester Lesser Free Trade Hall²¹ gigs, there is little evidence of that first wave of UK punk performers being particularly averse to the offers of 'new boots and contracts'. The acceptance of early punk's suburban life creates a rupture in the accepted capital city, year-zero narrative.

My hometown of Marlow is a satellite of High Wycombe, a place that is steeped in historical significance to punk and post-punk. It was here that Buzzcocks' Howard Devoto and Pete Shelley saw the Sex Pistols supporting Screaming Lord Sutch at the High Wycombe College of Higher Education union bar on Friday 20th February 1976 and booked them to play the now legendary Lesser Free Trade Hall dates in Manchester. Also present at the gig was promoter Ron Watts who booked the band to play his venues the Nag's Head in High Wycombe and London's 100 Club, site of the legendary *Punk Festival* held on September 20th and 21st, 1976.

Violence at the 100 Club punk gigs resulted in a punk ban after a glass thrown by Sid Vicious resulted in a young woman receiving severe eye injuries. Watts subsequently booked the punk bands to The Nag's Head's upstairs venue, known as the Blues Loft instead. On Thursday 18th November 1976, an unsigned Clash, replete with Joe Strummer in newly bleached hair, played a low-key gig to a half-full venue. It wasn't the first time they'd been there. Strummer had played the venue with his previous band the 101'ers earlier that year. Furthermore, a pre-Strummer Clash were taken to the Nag's Head by their drummer Billy Watts, a High Wycombe local.

Along with the A&R personnel who made up half of the crowd were *ZigZag* magazine editor Kris Needs (who reviewed the gig for *Sounds*); future *GQ* magazine editor Dylan Jones; Folk Devils frontman Kris Jozajtis who fronted a band called Death Wish that counted Dylan Jones as their roadie; soon-to-be Killing Joke drummer Paul Furgerson who played in 1976 art-punk band The Pink Parts at this time; Howard Jones' brothers Roy and Martin, who would later form Red Beat and sign to Killing Joke's label Malicious Damage; fashion student Stephen Jones who would become milliner to Royalty in the 80s; and Mark Riley, singer with 80s group Matt Bianco, who at this time played in a band called The Xtraverts with *Sex* employee Nigel Martin²².

Indeed, by the time I'd decided to follow The Clash, High Wycombe was a renowned site for punk activity. A site that, like much of punk's suburban life, is now largely written from history.

1. Notes

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¹ A special screening of the documentary film *The Clash: Westway to the World* took place at the Coronet cinema in Notting Hill, London on 21st September 1999. This was followed by a party for the launch of both the film and posthumous live album *From Here to Eternity* at London's exclusive Cobden Club, also in Notting Hill, London.

² It has often been claimed that Mark P.'s statement 'punk died the day The Clash signed to CBS', can be sourced to *Sniffin' Glue*. In fact this is an example of punk mythology. According to his quote in Robb's *Punk Rock – An Oral History* he actually said this 'on a TV show' (p328). Although it is not entirely clear which TV show and no recordings of the interview are known to be in existence.

³ Sarah Thornton, 'Strategies for Reconstructing the Popular Past', in *Popular Music*, Vol. 9, No.1 (Jan 1990), pp. 87-95

⁴ Ulf Lindberg, *et al.*, *Rock Criticism from the Beginning: Amusers, Bruisers, and Cool-Headed Cruisers*, (New York: Peter Lang Inc., International Academic Publishers, 2005).

⁵ In their book '*Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*' (1986), Clifford and Marcus explored the boundaries between ethnography and fiction, advocating a self-reflexive approach to writing that acknowledged its role in the creation of 'true fictions' (1986:7). The term 'true fictions' takes into account the fabricated nature of ethnography and acknowledges that the cultures being written about are subject to invention through a narrative that privileges (published) accounts of an event over another. 'True fictions' allows previously silenced participants with 'new angles of vision and depths of understanding' (1986:9) to write themselves and their experiences into the narrative.

⁶ Chris Atton, 'Writing about Listening: Alternative Discourses in Rock Journalism', *Popular Music* 28(1), 2009, pp. 53-67

⁷ Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock 'n' Roll*. (New York, Pantheon. 1983)

⁸ Chris Atton, 'Writing about Listening: Alternative Discourses in Rock Journalism', *Popular Music* 28(1), 2009, pp. 53-67

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Dick Hebdidge, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. (London: Taylor & Francis, 1979)

¹¹ Tony Moon's illustration 'here's a chord, here's another, here's another, now form a band' was first published in his fanzine *Sideburns* in 1976 and not in *Sniffin' Glue* as often wrongly attributed.

¹² This development of DIY is explored in depth in Alistair Gordon's, 2005 Doctoral Thesis, *The authentic punk: an ethnography of DIY music ethics*

¹³ Perhaps the most notable punk oral histories are John Robb's *Punk an Oral History* and Legs McNeil & Gillian McCain's *Please Kill Me: An Oral History of Punk*.

¹⁴ The Clash, *The Clash*. London: Atlantic Books (back cover matter, 2008).

¹⁵ Notable biographies about The Clash include Marcus Gray's *Return of the Last Gang in Town* (2001) and Pat Gilbert's *Passion is a Fashion: The Real Story of The Clash* (2004). Keith Topping's *The Complete Clash* (2003) offers a biography through the analysis of the band's song catalogue, while *A Riot if Our Own: Night & Day with The Clash and After* by former road crew member Johnny Green and long-time fan Garry Barker presents a privileged insider's view of the band.

¹⁶ The Clash (2008) *The Clash*. London: Atlantic Books (2008: 98)

¹⁷ Helen Reddington, *The Lost Women of Rock Music: Female Musicians of the Punk Era*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007)

¹⁸ 'The Beautiful People are Ugly Too' is an outtake from the band's *Combat Rock* sessions and was only available on the bootleg album *Rat Patrol from Fort Bragg* until it received an official release on the 2013 boxset *Sound System*.

¹⁹ A version of this piece originally ran in the *Independent on Sunday* newspaper, 26 September 2004, as part of an interview with Paul Simonon and Mick Jones in support of 25th anniversary reissue of *London Calling*.

²⁰ Caroline Coon's *1988 - The New Wave Punk Rock Explosion* is one of the very few publications to refer to the travelling fans.

²¹ Manchester's first Lesser Free Trade Hall gig with the Sex Pistols has been the subject of much debate in both the popular music press and academia. Notably, Albiez's 'Print the truth, not the legend The Sex Pistols: Lesser Free Trade Hall, Manchester, June 4, 1976' challenges the myths of the gig which is seen as one of Manchester punk's foundational events, becoming a cornerstone to the city's own narrative. As such the authenticity of legend is called into question.

²² As there is no documentary evidence of the people actually attending this gig I have created this list by contrasting personal interviews with High Wycombe's earliest punks and via a brief interview Nag's Head promoter Ron Watts who sadly passed away in 2016. He suggested that the audience was fifty per cent made up of A&R men but did concede that the rest were local punks many of whom, he claimed were as much a part of London's 100 Club scene.