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# Do-or-DIY: Punk Rock 'Zines and the Countercultural Rebellion of 1974-1984

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## Abstract

*This article examines the do-it-yourself (DIY) punk movement from 1974-1984 through the context of 'zines. During this decade, punk countered mainstream culture by utilizing the DIY method of production. In practice, this meant that punk bands avoided record labels, concerts were cheaply self-organized, and most forms of art lacked a profit-incentive. In an era of growing censorship and corporate overreach, evading conventional publication allowed for a widespread rebellion of the status quo with little barrier to entry. 'Zines are amateur, self-made magazines that served as the backbone of the DIY ethos within the punk movement. I argue that 'zines had a unique ability to build community as they allowed anyone, regardless of musical ability or connections, to contribute to the dialogue of both local and international punk scene. Furthermore, I argue that the DIY punk movement can be best understood by analyzing 'zines as a primary source and their exclusion from academia and pop-culture has led to an unrealistic portrayal of punk counterculture.*

## Introduction

In November of 1977, *Billboard* called the Sex Pistols "punk rock at its best" and said that "nobody does it better." A few months later, the magazine defined punk itself as "musical anar-

chists such as the Sex Pistols."<sup>1</sup> During their brief run from 1975 to 1978, the most popular mainstream music magazines like *Billboard* and *Rolling Stone* reported heavily on the Pistols and their unmatched lyrical obscenities and inclination toward physical violence. Conventional journalism hailed the Pistols as the fathers of punk rock and the remnants of this notion exist within the band's longstanding cultural legacy. However, amateur publications written by punks themselves offered a different understanding of the band. In April of 1977, underground punk 'zine *Slash* aired an exclusive interview with founding punk band the Damned which explained that the Sex Pistols were "just models" planted by a businessman to "sell clothes" for his shop. The interview goes on to explain the façade of the Pistols as they masquerade as a grassroots project, profiting off the punk label without actually engaging with its ethos.<sup>2</sup>

The differing perspective of the Sex Pistols between mainstream media and sources from within the punk scene has led to a wildly distorted remembrance of their legacy and by extension, the legacy of punk itself. As both a musical genre and a historic counterculture, punk has long been

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<sup>1</sup>"Billboard's Album Top Picks," *Billboard*, November 19, 1977, 96; Roman Kozak, "Anarchy At The Labels: Does This Mean I'm Out?," *Billboard*, January 14, 1978, 57.

<sup>2</sup>Steven Samiof and Melanie Nissen, "EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW: THE DAMNED," *Slash*, volume one, (Los Angeles, 1977), 10-13.

plagued with decades of misrepresentation as conventional sources dominate the narrative of an unconventional movement. The focus on these sources has led to a popular understanding of punk that focuses on style and attitude, with the prevailing image of rowdy teens sporting a mohawk and skull-and-crossbones patched jackets as the face of the scene. Academically, scholars like Raymond Patton define punk by its aesthetics, citing the sound and lyrical content of punk music and the style of its fashion as the center of the movement.<sup>3</sup> Perry Grossman similarly argued that punk artists took “rudimentary versions of rock songs and sped them up” and that “mohawk haircuts, dyed hair, or extremely short, cropped haircuts distinguished punks from the typically long-haired rockers.”<sup>4</sup> This colloquial and scholarly understanding comes from both the use of misrepresentative sources and the exclusion of legitimate ones.

In reality, “punk” as a concept existed on two planes. On one side, punk was a genre of music. Defining the musical sound of “punk” is nearly impossible. Sonically, punk falls under the “rock” umbrella, which is generally classified by its focus on the electric guitar, heavy drum beats, powerful vocals, and fast tempo.<sup>5</sup> Critics, historians, and even musicians themselves struggle to classify “punk” as a distinct genre from rock. Some argue that attitude and lyrical content separated punk from its predecessors. Songs centered around anti-establishment ideology, incited rebellion, and tested the boundaries of vulgarity. Others pointed to the simplicity of punk music, with repetitive lyrics and chord progressions, short

songs, and unrefined instrumentals.<sup>6</sup> However, none of these definitions provide justification for punk as a standalone genre. Plenty of straightforward rock songs question authority and deliver obscenities. In the same vein, plenty of punk songs are nonsensical and without agenda. Sonically simple rock music exists, and sonically complex punk music exists. It is simply not possible to define punk based on sound alone.

The second plane of punk was its countercultural movement. Much like the hippies of the 1960s, punks of the 1970s and 1980s had a lifestyle that actively challenged mainstream beliefs and social norms. The common notion of this practice typically involves groups of rowdy young people who lived to offend their elders, but punk as a counterculture relied on real values associated with the rejection of corporatism. Ideologically, the counterculture was diagnosed with beliefs from all over the spectrum. Depending on who was asked, punk’s belief system ranged from communist to fascist, from all-inclusive to bigoted. Punks and their music lacked any uniformity, which was both integral to their ethos and the reason they were so difficult to categorize. However, the opposition to corporate involvement was a unifying force.

Despite popular constructions of the genre and the movement, punk’s defining factor had nothing to do with its product outcome and everything to do with its production methods. Within the core of the punk counterculture was the do-it-yourself, or DIY, movement. DIY was self-explanatory: instead of buying or outsourcing, do it by yourself. Self-production extended to all areas of the scene, from bands publishing their own music to punks organizing their own political rallies. For punks, the best way to counter a culture was to bypass the institutions holding it together entirely. Self-production allowed for the most genuine growth of uncensored oppositional principles.

<sup>3</sup>Raymond A. Patton, *Punk Crisis: The Global Punk Rock Revolution* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 19-22.

<sup>4</sup>Perry Grossman, “Identity Crisis: The Dialectics of Rock, Punk, and Grunge,” *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 41 (1996): 21.

<sup>5</sup>James M. Curtis and Jim Curtis, *Rock Eras: Interpretations of Music and Society, 1954-1984* (Popular Press, 1987), 68-73.

<sup>6</sup>Dave Laing, *One Chord Wonders: Power and Meaning in Punk Rock*, Popular Music in Britain (Milton Keynes, England: Open University Press, 1985), 20-24.

The DIY ethos of punk can best be understood by examining 'zines. Short for "fanzine," 'zines were amateur self-produced publications made by punks and directed toward a punk audience. Due to their DIY method of production, 'zines allowed *anyone* to become involved in the scene, regardless of musical ability, funding, or connections. Like self-produced music, 'zines were uncensored, allowing average people the ability to express oneself without reservation and contribute to the counterculture. Unlike standard magazines, 'zines were often disorganized in production and preservation. Most 'zines, aside from a few that gained traction, operated on little-to-no funding and served a hyper-localized audience. Because of this, publications were short-lived, documentation is inconsistent, and the content can be extremely subjective. Despite the struggles associated with sourcing and fact-checking, 'zines are still the most reliable source for understanding punk history. The exclusion of this essential primary source from both academic work and public knowledge is why the perception of punk has either been warped or lost to history.

In this paper, I will examine 'zines to argue that the punk movement from 1974 to 1984, from the birth of the Ramones to the reelection of Ronald Reagan, was a significant countercultural movement deserving of cultural and scholarly recognition, with the DIY ethos as the defining characteristic of punk. Furthermore, I will analyze the unique community-building ability of 'zines, allowing everyday people to be proactive in the development of the punk scene and how the inclusion of this source is necessary in understanding punk history.

## **PART I: THE 1970S**

### **The Birth of Punk**

Following the rock revolution of the 1960s, the 1970s saw cultural shifts within the popular music scene. The psychedelic, folksy, antiwar rock of the hippie era gave way to a musical culture

that bolstered elaborate costumes and artistic personas. Quickly, theatrics and popular music began to blend. For some popular artists, this manifested in the sound itself. Bands like Queen combined elements of opera and classical into their rock, creating intensive six minute ballads layered with vocal harmonies and genre-defying instrumentals. Other bands blended theatrics into their image and performance, like Kiss who wore heavy face paint, cartoonish outfits, and utilized pyrotechnics on stage to aid in their performances. These artists ranging across a wide variety of genres came to be known as "glam rock," which was characterized by elaborate, often shocking outfits, theatrical make-up, flashy hairdos, and lots of glitter and feathers. Glam rock artists, often inventing their own personal brand like David Bowie's onstage character Ziggy Stardust, "blurr[ed] the lines between art and product."<sup>7</sup> In other words, glam rock embodied the culture of consumption. Musicians themselves were the product to be consumed.

In 1974, a revolutionary group called the Ramones entered the New York City music scene with a 15-song demo self-produced for under a thousand dollars. The Ramones were the antithesis of the mainstream glam-rock trend. The Ramones stripped rock music down to its core elements, utilizing the same four chords, fast-tempos, and forceful lyricism.<sup>8</sup> Their self-titled breakout album 1976 *Ramones* featured songs about inciting violence, doing drugs, and commentary on the Cold War. The music was shocking and alienated the majority of the population with its themes. In an interview with *Rolling Stone*, guitarist Johnny Ramone said, "Our music is an answer to the early Seventies when artsy people with big egos would

<sup>7</sup>Mark Dery and Bruce Sterling, "Stardust Memories: How David Bowie Killed the '60s, Ushered in the '70s, and, for One Brief Shining Moment, Made the Mullet Hip," in *I Must Not Think Bad Thoughts, Drive-by Essays on American Dread, American Dreams* (University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 67.

<sup>8</sup>Donna Gaines, *Why the Ramones Matter*, (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2018), 4-5.

do vocal harmonies and play long guitar, solos and get called geniuses. That was bullshit. We play rock & roll. We don't do solos. Our only harmonics are in the overtones from the guitar chords."<sup>9</sup> Speaking for the whole band, Johnny Ramone directly denounced the direction of mainstream rock music and the entire culture of 70s glam rock. The members sported regular denim jeans and worn-out leather jackets. No costume, no persona, no product, just music.

The Ramones marked a shift in rock music. Initially, they rejected the label "punk" and maintained that they were "rock n' roll." However, it quickly became apparent that the band needed to distinguish from their predecessors.<sup>10</sup> From a musical standpoint, The Ramones were hardly defying the rock genre. Their lyrical vulgarity was not unheard of in typical rock- drugs and violence had been integral to songwriting for decades. From a sonic standpoint, the Ramones were merely a simplified version of their rock counterparts. However, their refusal to buy in to the consumerist culture of the music scene was more than a statement. The band mustered up \$6,400 to book 4 days in a recording studio to record as many short, under practiced songs as possible.<sup>11</sup> This became the prototype of DIY music and would come to define punk. The underdog origin story of the Ramones set a precedent of accessibility. The new genre and culture surrounding punk left few barriers to entry as it required little technical skill, had low expenses, and no industry connections were needed. The Ramones' influence cannot be overstated- from here, a movement was born that transcended music and created a counterculture

<sup>9</sup>Charles M. Young, "The Ramones Are Punks and Will Beat You Up," *Rolling Stone* (blog), August 12, 1976, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/the-ramones-are-punks-and-will-beat-you-up-96800/>.

<sup>10</sup>Gaines, *Why the Ramones Matter*, 3-5.

<sup>11</sup>Ben Sisario, "'Ramones': The Story Behind a Debut Album From Punk Pioneers," *The New York Times*, March 18, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/19/arts/music/ramones-the-story-behind-a-debut-album-from-punk-pioneers.html>.

founded on the same anti-corporate, DIY ideals. was an awakening for young rock fans who suddenly had an accessible "in" to the music scene. This was the difference between the new musical genre of punk and its predecessor rock. Punk required no skill and just enough of a budget to access equipment.

### Sniffin' Glue and Makin' 'Zines

The rejection of mainstream consumerism trickled into the culture of punk listeners as well. Self-published, unofficial magazine style prints called "fanzines" had long been popular in literary spaces, particularly in the sci-fi genre. Amateur producers and writers gathered reviews, community discourse, and analysis of sci-fi media to be published for other fans to engage with.<sup>12</sup> No such thing existed in the music industry. Genre specific music magazines were professionally published with the intention of longevity. General magazines like *Billboard* literally defined consumer culture, deciding which songs and artists were popular.<sup>13</sup> In 1976, the underground publication *Sniffin' Glue* brought the idea of a punk fanzine, called "'zines," to popularity. At 19 years old, Mark Perry published the first issue in London, England, titled after the Ramones song "Now I Wanna Sniff Some Glue." The first issue had no photographs and mainly featured a review of the Ramones. Visually, the 'zine bore no resemblance to a mainstream magazine. Articles were typed on a children's typewriter with mistakes crossed out in pen. Headlines were drawn in on felt-tip markers.<sup>14</sup> Simply, Perry used whatever resources were made available to him to construct his primitive publication. Perry initially sold his 'zine at

<sup>12</sup>"Sci-Fi Fanzine Archives," *Monroe County Public Library* (blog), September 16, 2020, <https://mcpl.info/blogs/zines/sci-fi-fanzine-archives>.

<sup>13</sup>Will Straw, "Mediality and the Music Chart," *SubStance* 44, no. 3 (2015): 131-34.

<sup>14</sup>Mark Perry, "Sniffin' Glue No. 1," in *Sniffin' glue : the essential punk accessory* ed. Mark Perry and Terry Rawlings (London: Sanctuary, 2000), 145-150.

local record shops and used their distributors to reach shops across the country. As the demand for punk music grew, the demand for the 'zine grew. Record shops paid upfront for thousands of copies of the hand-drawn, unrefined pages of *Sniffin' Glue*, pressing and stapling each issue individually.<sup>15</sup> Though *Sniffin' Glue* was predated by the New York 'zine *Punk* by 6 months, Perry's was the first to gain significant traction and would become the prototype for all future 'zines.

The revolutionary 'zine *Sniffin' Glue* ran for a total of 12 issues. Gradually, the 'zine grew slightly more sophisticated and covered more than just album reviews. By the fifth issue, released in November of 1976, the 'zine was promoting local shows, offering free memberships to live music clubs, taking reader polls via written forms, and giving underground bands coverage. This type of reader involvement and local coverage was unheard of in mainstream media.<sup>16</sup> In the following publications, entire pages would be dedicated to advertising new album releases, shows (often free), and eventually meta commentary on the scene itself. Sandwiched in between pages of music reviews, issue 8 contained a short first-person rant addressed by writer Mark Perry himself. He claimed that he was "really fed up with the punters on the 'scene' at the moment" due to childish behavior at a The Clash gig he'd attended. The overly-enthusiastic crowd resorted to random acts of violence in the name of self-expression. Perry worried that this behavior would contribute to the death of punk and claimed they "had to stick together" to preserve their subculture.<sup>17</sup> This ability for Perry and the readers of

his 'zine to directly influence the punk scene separated the counterculture from the dominant. The culture surrounding the music was not controlled by the bands and their management or corporate publications. 'Zines allowed the culture of punk to grow and change by the influence of average people.



Figure 1. Cover of First Issue of *Sniffin' Glue*, 1976

After only 12 issues, *Sniffin' Glue* ceased publication in 1977. The final issue sold over 20,000 copies and included CD giveaways to loyal readers. Perry decided to end on a high while they were still popular. His reasoning for this decision was simple: punk band The Clash signed to a major record label. Therefore, punk was dead.<sup>18</sup> However, the 'zine explosion was just beginning. In issue 5 of *Sniffin' Glue*, Perry wrote, "All you kids out there who read *Sniffin' Glue*, don't be satisfied with what *we* write. Go out and start your own fanzines."<sup>19</sup> The message was clear: punk and self-publishing were for everyone. Shortly after, punk 'zines made their way overseas to America, popping up across major cities. California saw the greatest rise in DIY punk publication.

(London: Sanctuary, 2000), 247.

<sup>18</sup>Wray, "How We Made Punk Fanzine *Sniffin' Glue*."

<sup>19</sup>Mark Perry, "Sniffin' Glue No. 5," 201.

<sup>15</sup>Daniel Dylan Wray, "How We Made Punk Fanzine *Sniffin' Glue*," *The Guardian*, December 10, 2019, sec. Music, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2019/dec/10/how-we-made-sniffin-glue-punk-fanzine>.

<sup>16</sup>Mark Perry, "Sniffin' Glue No. 5," in *Sniffin' glue : the essential punk accessory* ed. Mark Perry and Terry Rawlings (London: Sanctuary, 2000), 195-211.

<sup>17</sup>Mark Perry, "Sniffin' Glue No. 8," in *Sniffin' glue : the essential punk accessory* ed. Mark Perry and Terry Rawlings

The 'zine *Slash* notably helped popularize punk as a subculture in Los Angeles and later, broader America. Aside from the Ramones, the majority of punk artists were active in the United Kingdom. The Clash, Discharge, the Damned and the Buzzcocks were among the most popular punk bands worldwide, all based out of the UK.<sup>20</sup> American 'zines brought their popularity overseas which gave British bands international listeners and encouraged Americans to join in on punk music. On the first issue of *Slash*, Dave Vanian of English punk band the Damned was featured on the front cover while also promoting bands local to California like the Screamers and the Skulls.<sup>21</sup> *Slash*, like other early American 'zines, was effective in spreading DIY punk as they platformed and legitimized local garage bands alongside already popular foreign bands. The growth of punk music and 'zines were simultaneous in America. As a band gained more traction, more people turned to the community offered by 'zines. As more people read 'zines, more people were inspired to support local bands and form their own.

The messaging behind 'zines was incredibly adamant at recruiting passive punks into the active scene. While most music-based cultures had a separation between artists and fans, with the former as the creators and the latter as enjoyers, punk 'zines broke the barrier between celebrities and common listeners. Instead of watching from afar, punk listeners and 'zine readers were encouraged to participate creatively. As started by *Sniffin' Glue*, most 'zines emphasized reader input, with submission columns dominating each issue. The inclusion of this meant that even those not inclined to listen to Perry and create their own 'zine could easily have their voices heard within the pages of someone else's. With such diversity of ideology and style within the movement, every individual

<sup>20</sup>Kevin Dunn, *Global Punk: Resistance and Rebellion in Everyday Life*, (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 169.

<sup>21</sup>Steven Samiof and Melanie Nissen, *Slash*, volume one, (Los Angeles, 1977), 10-13.

participant had the ability to bring something new to the punk dialogue. Reader submissions often drew attention to concerns within the scene, contained creative art and writing, and organized local gigs and meetups. Punks without connections or resources were empowered to bring tangible influence to the culture, from their local hometown 'zines to international publications.

Mainstream media would view Mark Perry encouraging others to create their own 'zines as a self-inflicted competition against his own product. However, this is what separated punk from popular culture. With an aim to combat consumerism, 'zines usually lacked a profit incentive. This made it easy for authors to trade competition for community and embrace the spread of new punk bands and publications. Famously, *Sideburns* 'zine released an issue in 1977 containing a drawing mapping out an "A," "E," and "G" guitar chord with the caption "This is a chord. This is another. This is a third. Now form a band."<sup>22</sup> This call to action could not be more explicit. By inspiring the growth of new punk music and publications, welcoming contributions from readers, and eliminating barriers to entry, 'zines became punk counterculture. The growth of 'zines created a strong community of young people founded on authenticity, uncensored creativity, and a DIY ethos all set to a punk-rock soundtrack.

### The Late 70s and the First Death of Punk

Just as punk music and 'zines grew in tandem, the two mediums also splintered alongside each other. Around the end of the decade, punk bands began to lose their DIY ethos by signing to major labels and exchanging low-budget basement shows for professional concerts in pricey venues. By the end of the 1970s, what the punk scene would call "selling out" became increasingly common. Founding punk bands that promoted DIY production like the Clash, the Buz-

<sup>22</sup>Tony Moon, *Sideburns*, issue one, (London, 1977), 2.

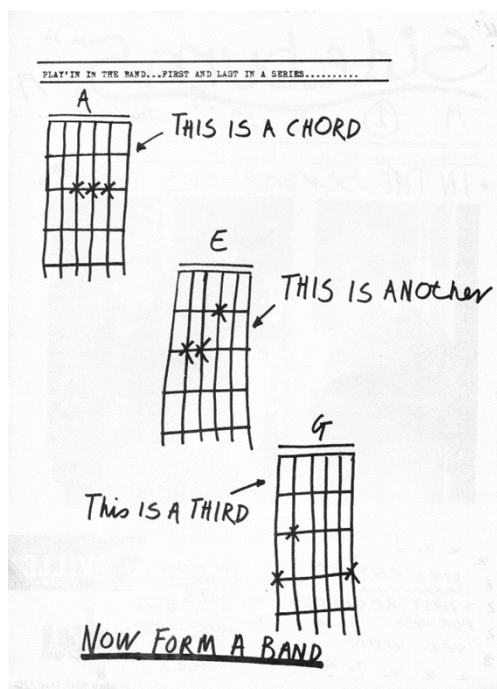


Figure 2. *Sideburn #1*, 1977

zcocks, and the Ramones had all signed to major labels by 1979. Other bands like Blondie, Siouxsie and the Banshees, and the Damned had stepped away from the rock-adjacent sound of punk in favor of more accessible genres like new wave, alternative rock, or indie pop. In turn, 'zine production and many popular publications discontinued. As previously mentioned, *Sniffin' Glue* ceased in direct retaliation to the Clash signing to a major label. Legs McNeil, creator of *Punk*, the 'zine credited with the name punk itself, ended his publication in 1979 when the previously authentic DIY scene gained enough public recognition to be commodified into nothing more than a style of "safety pins and spiked hair."<sup>23</sup> Steve Samiof of *Slash* explained that the growing "record business" that used to be "everything [they] were railing against" was a large contributor to the 'zine's

<sup>23</sup>Legs McNeil and Gillian McCain, *Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk*, (New York: Grove Press, 1996), 329.

shutdown in 1980.<sup>24</sup>

The DIY, anti-consumerism of punk did not allow for a particularly long half-life. Punk bands were frequently trapped between the dichotomy of the need to maintain DIY roots and the need to grow as an artist. Major labels, though limiting and expensive, came with the distribution power that self-production could not replicate. In a way, the fear of collapse was not irrational. The end of the 1970s concluded the first leg of the punk movement, but the culture would soon be revived with a new generation of participants and shared ideals.

## Part II: THE 1980s

### Hardcore Punk Rock

Hardcore punk emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a reactionary to both the political climate of America and to the shifting dynamics of "regular" punk. As the initial wave of punk declined due to the loss of DIY, a new generation was necessary to harbor the ethos. Furthermore, the beginning of the Reagan Revolution that swept the 1980s was a source of unrest and controversy for a growing portion of young people. Though punk remained ideologically neutral, the impact of anti-Reagan ideology on the American scene was undeniable. The reborn scene erupted around Southern California, Washington, D.C., Boston, and New York with the next generation of young punks aiming to radically return to the DIY ethos that had seemingly been lost with each record label signing. The hardcore scene had similar influences to its 70s predecessors with the Ramones and their anti-glam persona as a driving influence for the scene. However, as hardcore punk journalist and historian Steven Blush plainly states: "Reagan-era kids demanded something even more

<sup>24</sup>Jordan Riefe, "Slash: the LA punk fanzine that was too snotty to live," *The Guardian*, September 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/sep/23/slash-los-angeles-punk-fanzine>.



primal and immediate.”<sup>25</sup>

The 80s hardcore scene saw a flood of politicized music. Music became a source of protest with the vocal majority of the punks fighting against the dominant conservative ideology and sometimes Reagan himself. Founding hardcore band T.S.O.L., standing for True Sounds of Liberty, boldly filled their opening discography with overtly leftist ideology. The song “Abolish Government/Silent Majority” boasts the lyrics:

Presidents a name, presidents a label/  
Highest man on the government table  
America, land of the free/ Free to the power of  
the people in uniform  
People are so blind they just can't see/  
Send your son to boot-camp, send him off to war/  
If he comes back he'll be dead and nothing more/  
Struggle for a land, for a country, for a freedom/  
All you mindless people looking for someone to  
lead them  
Wake up to the same old shit/ Live your life to  
suit their fit/ Some people, they don't like your  
hair/ Police, they just don't care  
Snipers that want to be/ Rifle sights are aimed at  
me/ Wake up silent majority.<sup>26</sup>

The band openly questions the authority of the president, criticizes the neo-conservative militarism of the American government, and comments on the police-state during the Reagan era. Another song on the EP, “Superficial Love,” swiftly ends with the line “President Reagan can shove it.”<sup>27</sup> This was not an uncommon source of inspiration for the hardcore scene- President Reagan ignited America’s young people. Arguably the most direct example of this was the band Reagan Youth whose name is a play on the Nazi organization Hitler Youth. The band’s own biography

<sup>25</sup>Steven Blush and George Petros, *American Hardcore: A Tribal History*, (Los Angeles, CA: Feral House, 2010), 15.

<sup>26</sup>T.S.O.L., “Abolish Government/ Silent Majority,” track #4 *T.S.O.L.- EP*, Posh Boy Records, 1981.

<sup>27</sup>T. S. O. L., “Superficial Love,” track #1 *T.S.O.L.- EP*, Posh Boy Records, 1981.

states that “Reagan Youth, a band that started back in 1980 when Ronald Reagan was elected president, wanted to expose Reagan and his republican party’s fascist tendencies, the evils of society and the hypocrisy of the religious right with music that rocked the urgency of their message.”<sup>28</sup>

Hardcore punks, with a return to DIY and a unifying enemy, brought the practice of ‘zines back to full scale. *Flipside*, which was one of the founding punk ‘zines in 1977, became the quintessential hardcore publication in the 80s. Though the ‘zine did go up in production value, trading cardstock for glossy covers and finding distribution in national chains, *Flipside* continued to allow the general punk community to work as the primary voice behind the pages. The “letter board” section of each issue featured unfiltered write-in submissions about anything and everything from average punks.<sup>29</sup> By the 80s, this was a common trade-off in ‘zines. Though local pen and paper printed ‘zines still existed in local scenes, popular national issues traded genuine DIY manufacturing for larger outreach. This, however, was not a complete loss of DIY. Despite the use of more resources, ‘zines were still grassroots projects that promoted community involvement and chose outreach over profit. Some ‘zines were especially cognizant of the issue of profiting and chose to be transparent about it to their readers. *Maximum Rocknroll* famously included a fiscal report in each issue, disclosing the cost of production compared to their sales to remain accountable to the scene” and “demystify the economic aspect of such operations.”<sup>30</sup> New ‘zines to gain popularity with the hardcore scene like *Ripper* and *Capitol Crisis* followed in a similar fashion of larger-scale DIY, with a countless number of traditional pen-and-paper ‘zines emerging locally.

<sup>28</sup>“Reformation Years,” *REAGAN YOUTH*, <https://www.reagan-youth.com>.

<sup>29</sup>Dunn, *Global Punk*, 182-184.

<sup>30</sup>“Fiscal Financial Report,” *Maximum Rocknroll*, issue 6, (Berkeley, May-June 1983), 2.

The rebirth of DIY was both a reaction and resistance to Reaganism. On its sixth issue, the editor of *Ripper* Tim Tonooka directly stated his purpose for creating the 'zine,

The more you see how Reagan's administration and the Moral Majority are pulling subtle maneuvers behind your back to reduce your freedom, the more obvious it becomes that you're gonna have to fight for the freedom to control your own life. Now that Reagan's in office, it's become painfully obvious to a lot of people that the government is only interested in the military and the corporations. Every day more people get fucked over and realize that they're nothing but disposable pawns in the eyes of the government. But you don't have to wait till you get fucked over to put your rebellion into action.<sup>31</sup>

By stating that the 'zine existed to turn rebellion into action, the origin story of *Ripper* explains how DIY became an act of resistance in itself. Just as punk was a protest to consumerism, the hardcore scene directly resisted the conformity and conservatism of the militant Reagan administration. Later in the piece, Tonooka explained that even supporting a publication that defied the traditional values of Reagan and the Religious Right was an act of resistance. From the outset of his presidential campaign, the concern of free-speech limitations was palpable for Americans that built a community and lifestyle around authentic self-expression. By contributing to journalism designed to evade censorship, the punk community actively challenged conservatism, including the moral panic surrounding the "satanism" of rock music.<sup>32</sup> The resurgence of DIY was in part a re-

sult of the fear surrounding the suppression of alternative values and the potential power of religion and further corporatism in the Reagan administration.

Aside from bold and explicit concerns about the president, it was common to satirize or mock Reagan through imagery. 'Zines frequently returned to the cut-and-paste, marker-drawn aesthetic by marking up pictures of Reagan. Bands like Dead Kennedys and Butthole Surfers took out pages in 'zines to publish edited photos of Reagan wearing their merchandise as a comical advertisement. Some artists overlaid images of graphic violence over the president to express anger, while others used art to make genuine political statements. Reagan could frequently be seen around the mushroom-cloud of a nuclear bomb, socializing with Ku Klux Klan members, and wearing a Nazi uniform with a Hitler-style mustache.<sup>33</sup> The statements varied from expressing fear in his policies, like the threat of nuclear war, and comparing his likeness to fascist dictators. Punk graphic artist Winston Smith, whose pseudonym is in reference to dystopian novel *1984*, stated that "music and art changed radically from 1981 to 1986- when Reagan was in his prime. People who were asleep until then suddenly had their eyes opened. The attitude was, 'go down fighting if we had to lose, but don't let them get away with it.' That had a lot to do with the music- the utter rage against what was going on in the world."<sup>34</sup> Reagan was an endless muse of hatred for the scene and became a symbol of "the establishment" that punk had always fought against. Explicit, controversial art had no place in conventional media but became a source of political catharsis in the pages of 'zines. 1980s 'zines reopened a community that found solace in expressing their fears and frustrations to one an-

<sup>31</sup>Tim Tonooka, "RIP THE SYSTEM APART," *Ripper*, issue 6, (San Jose, 1981), 2.

<sup>32</sup>John Brackett, "Satan, Subliminals, and Suicide: The Formation and Development of an Antirock Discourse in the United States during the 1980s," *American Music* 36, no. 3 (2018): 273.

<sup>33</sup>Meghan MacRae, "The Future of Politicians... Ronald Reagan as a Punk Rock Icon," *Cvlt Nation*, February 1, 2022, <https://cvltnation.com/future-trump-ronald-regan-punk-rock-icon/>.

<sup>34</sup>Blush, *American Hardcore*, 22.

other.

### Rock Against Reagan

'Zines in the 1980s commonly promoted protests on various social and political causes. The Selective Service act became a core issue to stand against, with calls to action spreading across 'zines. *Ripper* became known for the cause and garnered attention for two DIY benefit shows in its fourth issue, both taking place at public community centers.<sup>35</sup> This type of grassroots musical protest had become common in the turn of the decade, often with cost of admission going toward a donation to a respective cause. 'Zines and bands themselves also encouraged fans to attend established protests. In 1981, punks mobilized to attend a protest against interventionism in Central America and again for a nuclear freeze demonstration in 1982.<sup>36</sup> While common, this type of political activism usually only caught the attention of those local to the event.

In 1983, the hardcore scene organized their first national, widespread protest tour entitled "Rock Against Reagan." The tour, founded by hardcore punk band M.D.C. (Millions of Dead Cops) aimed to prevent a Reagan reelection. To kickstart the event, M.D.C. allied with the left-wing countercultural activist group Youth International Party.<sup>37</sup> Promotion of the tour was done al-

<sup>35</sup>Mattsen, *We're Not Here to Entertain*, 42.

<sup>36</sup>Bradford D. Martin, *The Other Eighties: A Secret History of America in the Age of Reagan* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2011), 80.

<sup>37</sup>The Youth International Party, also known as Yippies, grew to prominence in the 1960s and 1970s as anti-Vietnam War protesters. The group was highly countercultural and took to unconventional performance-style methods to garner attention for the movement. Yippies also actively protested capitalism, racism, and conservative and promoted non-traditional values like free expression and "free love." The group was seen as incredibly radical and failed to gain widespread public support as they induced a moral panic against the fracturing of American values. This context and place in American countercultural history makes them a significant and fitting ally for the cause. Read more about the Yippies and the Vietnam antiwar movement in Christopher

most exclusively through pages in 'zines. Leading up to the first show of the tour, M.D.C. took out a half-page long slot in 'zine *Maximum Rocknroll* to state that the "Reagan Administration's policies are unacceptable on a domestic as well as foreign policy level." Within the proceeding text the band, speaking collectively, cites specific criticisms of Reagan ranging to his poor handling of poverty to his use of CIA meddling in foreign governments. The band then goes on to announce their four-month long national tour that will infuse political activism and punk rock music, co-headlined by the punk groups Dead Kennedys, The Dicks, D.R.I., Reagan Youth, and Crucifucks.<sup>38</sup> Each show in the tour was free to enter and held in public spaces, often in politically significant locations like state capitol steps and in front of monuments.

Rock Against Reagan even in its conception was the ultimate expression of DIY resistance. M.D.C. had only formed 3 years prior playing only in their own home and the occasional local garage party before they began self-producing records. M.D.C.'s lyrics were angry political expressions coming straight from the genuine frustrations of frontman Dave Dictor.<sup>39</sup> Their breakout singles were shockingly named "John Wayne was a Nazi" and "Born to Die" with the refrains "John Wayne slaughtered our Indian brothers... he was a Nazi but not anymore" and "No war, no KKK, no fascist USA," respectively.<sup>40</sup><sup>41</sup> Unlike mainstream concert tours, Rock Against Reagan had no professional manager or established venues- the entire tour was organized independently by a DIY band with support from a

Gair, *The American Counterculture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 126-131.

<sup>38</sup>M.D.C., "Rock Against Reagan," *Maximum Rocknroll*, issue 6, (Berkely, 1983), 17.

<sup>39</sup>David A. Ensminger, *The Politics of Punk: Protest and Revolt from the Streets* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2016), 130-137.

<sup>40</sup>MDC, "John Wayne was a Nazi," track #7, *Millions of Dead Cops*, R Radical Records, 1982.

<sup>41</sup>MDC, "Born to Die," track #3, *Millions of Dead Cops*, R Radical Records, 1982.

loosely-run anarchist youth group. ‘Zines, flyers, and word-of-mouth communication served as the only promotion, which all required little to no funding. This culmination was the magnum opus of the DIY ethos.



**Figure 3. Flier for Rock Against Reagan, 1983**

Admittedly, minimal evidence of the tour survives due to the DIY structure. The sheer amount of shows in rapid succession made it difficult for monthly 'zine publications to report on individual shows and the amateur management left little documentation of the productions. By examining different advertisements for the tour, it's also apparent that dates and locations were constantly shifting, leaving a frustratingly inconsistent paper trail. However, some fan submissions in 'zines offer insight into the operations of shows. *Boston Rock* reported that the show ran smoothly with minimal police intervention despite starting hours late. Surprisingly, the report also states that "of the performing groups only MDC spoke out on the political and sociological issues of the day" despite the entire lineup featuring politically-charged bands.<sup>42</sup> This event, despite its significance in the punk community, has no mainstream representation. Even the most prominent punk

<sup>42</sup>Shred, "Hardcore on the Common," *Boston Rock*, issue 40, (Boston, 1983), 7.

secondary sources make only a fleeting reference to the existence of these tours. This, like other disparities between punk history and perception, is because of the underuse of 'zines as evidence.

Unlike the majority of the tour, the last Rock Against Reagan date was carefully organized. In April of 1983, Interior Secretary James Watt issued a statement banning rock music at the Fourth of July celebration at the National Mall. Leaning into the moral panic surrounding the scene, the administration booked purely "patriotic, family-based entertainment" provided by the U.S. Army Blues Band and jazz-pop singer Wayne Newson.<sup>43</sup> In retaliation, the last stop of the Rock Against Reagan tour was strategically set on July Fourth in Washington D.C. at the same time as Newson's performance. Though the other dates on the tour were shifty and inconsistently documented, the Independence Day dates were persistently marketed. In their May-June issue, *Maximum Rocknroll* released an interview with M.D.C. that, after reiterating all of the reasons to be angry at Reagan, said that "on the last day of the Rock Against Reagan tour July 4 where we play across from the White House James Watt-Wayne Newsom party" they would hold their own "Dead Kennedys, M.D.C., Dicks, and Crucifucks holiday bash."<sup>44</sup> With uncensored journalistic abilities and a community of other angry young people to preach to, the Rock Against Reagan organizers successfully mobilize the punk crowd.

According to *Maximum Rocknroll*, the crew arrived on July 3<sup>rd</sup> in front of the Lincoln Memorial with bands Toxic Reasons and C.F.A. opening, followed by the headliners. In between performers, political activists for varying causes spoke to the crowd, which was estimated to be 2000-2500

<sup>43</sup>Phil McCombs, Richard Harrington, and Washington Post Staff Writers, "Watt Sets Off Uproar With Music Ban," *Washington Post*, April 7, 1983, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1983/04/07/watt-sets-off-uproar-with-music-ban/ddf51d7c-7161-46a9-a774-869fa71b6601/>.

<sup>44</sup>M.D.C., "Rock Against Reagan,"30.

people. Notably, in the middle of their set, Jello Biafra of the Dead Kennedys pointed out that the Washington Monument looked like a KKK hood, symbolizing the looming presence of bigotry in America.<sup>45</sup> Washington D.C. armed guards made clear threats of violent confrontation if Secretary Watt's decree was violated, so the show was held at the Lincoln Memorial again rather than in front of the White House as initially planned. The rainy day temporarily halted Newson's performance, but the punks carried on shouting "rain on Wayne!"<sup>46</sup> Left-wing tables handed out anti-Reagan informational pamphlets and "US OUT OF CENTRAL AMERICA" bumper stickers as performers reminded the crowd to vote against Reagan in the next election. As a form of musical protest, the Dead Kennedys shouted "Wayne, this is for you!" before closing their set with a cover of Elvis Presley's "Viva Las Vegas."<sup>47</sup> The cover, which was featured on their debut album *Fresh Fruit for Rotting Vegetables*, is sung in a mocking southern twang with altered obscene lyrics.<sup>48</sup> Dead Kennedys transforming a classic rockabilly track into a profane, satirical rendition clearly parodies the idea of traditional "American dream" ideals and figureheads. This performance draws parallels to Jimi Hendrix's notorious electric guitar rendition of the "Star Spangled Banner" at the 1969 Woodstock Music Festival, which was widely viewed as an anti-Vietnam war protest when he altered the classic patriotic melody into an explosive instrumental.<sup>49</sup>

The July Fourth show was met with chaos and violence between attendees and law enforcement. It's unclear how many, but Tammy C. of M.D.C.

<sup>45</sup>Tammy C., "ROCK AGAINST REAGAN TOUR 83," *Maximum Rockroll*, issue 7, (Berkeley, July-Aug 1983), 46.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup>Martin, *The Other Eighties*, 105.

<sup>48</sup>Dead Kennedys, "Viva Las Vegas", track #14, *Fresh Fruit for Rotting Vegetables*, Cherry Red Records.

<sup>49</sup>Jimi Hendrix, "Star Spangled Banner," live at Woodstock Music Festival in Bethel, NY, August 18, 1969, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sjzZh6-h9fM>.

reported to *Maximum Rockroll* that he was one of many to be physically harassed by Park Police. He reported a police officer threw him against his van, stripped searched him, and "whacked [his] neck repeatedly with the edge of her hand." When the officers found their stash of badges that read "2000 Millions of Dead Cops," the band was met with threats of serious harm if they did not evacuate.<sup>50</sup> Dave Grohl, frontman of Foo Fighters and drummer of Nirvana, recounted his experience as an attendee of the gig in a 2021 interview: "Hundreds of thousands of people from the suburbs would come to watch the national firework display. And right smack in the f\*\*\*ing middle of it was a punk concert with bands like the Dead Kennedys and the Bad Brains. There were police on horses with f\*\*\*ing batons. It was nuts. I'd get beaten by police and rednecks. But it was the right place and the right time for that, under Reagan's suffocating conservative administration."<sup>51</sup> The show, like the rest of the tour, was chaotic and passionate. It's admittedly difficult to track the effects or the aftermath of the show. *The Washington Post*, D.C.'s most widely circulated newspaper, makes no mention of the event or its catastrophes in any of the issues following July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1983. Despite attracting crowds of over two thousand people over the span of two days, disrupting a nationally organized patriotic event, and a countless number of violent arrests, evidence in mainstream sources is practically nonexistent. All known information of the tour and its events are from documentation in 'zines. Though *Maximum Rockroll* holds the most well-preserved and thorough timeline of events, reader submissions across a number of publications corroborate claims. *Overthrow* 'zine released a "Rock Against Reagan tour diary"

<sup>50</sup>Tammy C., "ROCK AGAINST REAGAN TOUR 83, 46.

<sup>51</sup>"Foo Fighters Interview: 'I'd Get Beaten by Police and Rednecks,'" *The Independent*, February 2, 2021, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/features/foo-fighters-interview-dave-grohl-album-b1794777.html>.

in their November-December 1983 issue which confirms the accounts of *Maximum Rocknroll*.<sup>52</sup> Firsthand accounts of attendees from individual shows sprung up across a countless number of localized 'zine publications, most of which were lost to history. However, archives of 'zines like *Blow It Off* and *Tidewater ARSE* tell the stories of average punks who attended the tour with no insider connections and experienced the energy, excitement, chaos, and controversy firsthand.<sup>53</sup> Without turning to these sources, it is impossible to understand the 1983 Rock Against Reagan tour.

The tour had a brief revival the following year as the election day grew closer, this time culminating with a protest even larger and more impactful. The 1984 Rock Against Reagan tour was more urgent than its predecessor- the prospect of Reagan's reelection was growing more imminent as the year progressed. The tour would have 13 dates beginning with another July Fourth demonstration on Washington and ending with shows outside the Republican National Convention in Dallas, Texas on August 23<sup>rd</sup>. The climax of Rock Against Reagan occurred during this span on July 19, 1984 outside of the Democratic National Convention in San Francisco, California. Management for this stretch was still entirely DIY, but was handled with greater organization this time around. One standard date list could be found in almost every prominent 'zine of the time, each featuring the same recognizable logo- a caricature of Ronald Reagan covering his ears from loud music. As advertisements spread and hype built up, it was not uncommon for punks to organize with each other via 'zine column. In the June, 1984 edition of *Maximum Rocknroll*, one punk wrote out: "if you are interested in politics at all, and would like to come to San Francisco this summer during the Democratic convention, you can

stay with me if you like," and attached his home address.<sup>54</sup> This community outreach was not uncommon. Not only were 'zines the primary source of direct advertisement, the punk community had grown so strong through this sort of hands-on involvement that the organizing of events became self-sufficient.

Before the show even began, 89 people were arrested for obstruction and "conspiracy to trespass" during a protest organized independently of Rock Against Reagan. Of the 200 involved and the 89 arrested, some were also affiliated with the punk movement.<sup>55</sup> The diverse crowd was generalized as "a bunch of punk rockers" which, according to a submission in *Maximum Rocknroll* led to even more angst in the punk crowd.<sup>56</sup> The show itself had around 5,000 attendees and was headlined by M.D.C., Reagan Youth, the Dicks, and Dead Kennedys. Throughout the event, independent organizations handed out pamphlets, registered people to vote, and chanted their objections to Reagan.<sup>57</sup> The empty lot between the makeshift stage and the Convention Hall was packed with pits of slam-dancing, stage-diving, disorderly punks set to the soundtrack of lyrical aggression. After the Dead Kennedys performed, speakers informed the crowd of the prior arrests and urged them to protest outside of the Hall of Justice. About 1000-1500 complied and marched to the police station shouting lyrics to T.S.O.L.'s "Abolish Government/Silent Majority:" "America/ Land of the Free/ Free to the power of people in uniforms." Officers quickly blocked the swarm. Some officers charged toward the crowd, some employed brutal force on any punk they could grab.<sup>58</sup> Interestingly, mainstream documentation exists of the unrelated protests dur-

<sup>52</sup>"Rock Against Reagan Tour Diary," *Overthrow*, issue 5.3, (New York, 1983), 7-8.

<sup>53</sup>Scott Colburn, *Blow it Off*, issue 2, (Columbus, 1983), 8-9; Jeff Clites, *Tidewater ARSE*, issue 2, (Portsmouth, 1983), 17.

<sup>54</sup>*Maximum Rocknroll*, issue 14, (Berkeley, June 1984), 6.

<sup>55</sup>"Democratic Convention Crackdown 1984," *Found SF*, [https://www.foundsf.org/index.php?title=Democratic\\_Convention\\_Crackdown\\_1984](https://www.foundsf.org/index.php?title=Democratic_Convention_Crackdown_1984).

<sup>56</sup>*Maximum Rocknroll*, issue 16, (Berkeley, Aug 1984), 44.

<sup>57</sup>Mattson, *We're Not Here to Entertain*, 206.

<sup>58</sup>*Maximum Rocknroll*, issue 16, 44.

ing the Democratic National Convention. Following the event, *Washington Post* reported on the peaceful demonstrations surrounding gay rights and workers' rights, but no mention of the anti-Reagan punk concert and protest.<sup>59</sup> Like the 1983 tour, the 1984 dates are also heavily corroborated across countless firsthand 'zine entries, oral histories of both punk bands and fans, and even photographic evidence can be found across personal blogs. The reach of the tours were undeniable, but their legacy seems to exist almost exclusively in the archives of 'zines.

Though this section has heavily stressed the leftist, anti-Reaganist values of the 80s punk community, it's important to remember that DIY punk was not ideologically homogeneous. Left-wing values certainly were the norm in the hardcore scene, but the apolitical nature of the 70s was still abundant. While many bands chose to simply disengage from the growing political agenda of the punk scene, others voiced explicit disapproval of the factionalism of punk. In a 1983 interview in *Flipside*, bassist Winston of hardcore band Anti-Nowhere League stated that the band doesn't "give a toss about politics at all" and made fun of bands like the Clash for taking leftist stances claiming that "people in a band are not going to make a difference."<sup>60</sup> *Maximum Rockroll* became a target itself for its promotion of Rock Against Reagan and attempts to conflate punk with leftism. Dave Smalley of hardcore bands DYS and Dag Nasty complained that the 'zine was "fascists of the Left" that turned a "unifying factor" into a "horrible, hate-mongering, isolationist, Left-Wing fascist magazine" that in turn, propagandized the scene as a whole.<sup>61</sup> A large portion of the scene staunchly defended the roots of punk as an apolitical movement. To many, cen-

sorship and consumerism- which was a cultural phenomenon on all ends of the political spectrum- were still the true enemy and adhering to the DIY ethos was protest in itself. It's true that Reaganism was a mobilizing factor for a large portion of punks, but left-leaning 'zines like *Maximum Rockroll* certainly helped shape this narrative.

### Nazi Punks F\*\*k Off

1980-1984 punk, particularly hardcore, had a fascinating relationship with far-right Nazi skinheads. Throughout the Rock Against Reagan years, "Nazi punks" were seen as the ultimate infiltrating threat to the scene when really, they were almost non-existent until Reagan's second term. In part, the moral panic began when white supremacist groups like the National Front entered the British punk scene. Overseas, documented accounts of hate-crimes and acts of terror by Nazi punk groups called "skinheads" spread rampantly in both 'zines and standard news sources.<sup>62</sup> While this organized sector of Nazi rock has been thoroughly documented in the UK and other parts of Europe during 1980-1984, this did not gain traction in America until after Reagan's first term. Despite this, primary sources and secondary literature all place heavy emphasis on Nazis in the early 80s punk scene.

The threat of hate groups infiltrating the American punk scene became somewhat of an internal moral panic. Arguably, this all stemmed from one 1981 song, "Nazi Punks F\*\*k Off" by Dead Kennedys, which became an anti-skinhead anthem and kickstarted the movement. The song lyrics aimed to incite rage at the state of the scene:

Punk ain't no religious cult,/ Punk means thinking for yourself./ You ain't hardcore 'cause/ you spike your hair,/ When a jock still lives inside your head.../Nazi punks, Fuck off!/ Ten guys

<sup>59</sup>Eleanor Rolph and Cynthia Gorney, "250,000 Rally Peacefully for Causes In San Francisco Streets," *Washington Post*, (Washington, D.C.), July 16, 1984.

<sup>60</sup>Winston and Frank, "ANTI-NOWHERE LEAGUE," *Flipside*, issue 39, (Los Angeles, 1983), 31.

<sup>61</sup>Blush, *American Hardcore*, 35.

<sup>62</sup>Ryan Shaffer, "The Soundtrack of Neo-Fascism: Youth and Music in the National Front," *Patterns of Prejudice* 47, no. 4/5 (September 2013): 462-465.

jump one, what a man !/You fight each other, the police state wins./Stab your backs when you trash our halls./Trash a bank if you've got real balls./You still think swastikas look cool./The real nazis run your schools./They're coaches, businessmen and cops./In the real fourth reich, you'll be the first to go.../Nazi punks, Fuck off!<sup>63</sup>

After this song was released, the idea of “Nazi punks” was everywhere. Songs condemning skinheads had become commonplace, like The Dicks’ “No Nazi’s Friend” which sang “I ain’t no Nazi’s friend/ Could if I wanted to/ Just stop your racist slurs/ Or your friends might find you dead.”<sup>64</sup> Though anti-racism in the hardcore scene was always common within the hardcore scene, as noted within *Rock Against Reagan*, the specific genre of taking violent action against real-life fascist punks cropped up in masses. It became common for punks to wear patches with crossed out swastikas to distinguish themselves from Nazis at shows.

Though prompted by the words of a band, ’zines were ultimately responsible for the spread of this outrage. According to available archives, it seems that *Maximum Rocknroll* was the leader in this outcry. The openly leftist ’zine featured an image of Ronald Reagan portrayed as a Ku Klux Klan member on the outside on its very first issue, making clear the leanings and intentions of the publication. One of the first reader submitted entries begins with “About Nazi Punks (whom I don’t consider punks at all), go SOAK YOUR HEAD! Or f\*\*k off, as Jello says.”<sup>65</sup> Reader submissions show how influenced the broader punk community was by the song, but *Maximum Rocknroll*’s decision to fill their submission pages with these accounts is also telling of their own bias. By 1983, the ’zine had declared that “real hardcore groups

are threatened by fascist and Nazi gangs”.<sup>66</sup> The ’zine began attributing any violence at shows to Nazi skinheads, even if it was nothing more than the usual aggression that had always existed at punk shows.

Within most prominent punk literature, these accusations are taken at face value and the infiltration of Nazism in the scene is disproportionately reported on. Kevin Mattson’s “We’re Not Here To Entertain: Punk Rock, Ronald Reagan, and the Real Culture War of 1980s America” is widely regarded as one of the most influential works on the subject and has been cited several times throughout this paper. Mattson speaks on Nazism by addressing the vast presence of Nazi punks “by the end of 1984.” He dotes on the prominence of skinhead violence at shows as a form of “vigilante patriotism” that countered the anti-Reaganism of the punk scene. Mattson even mentions skinhead Marc Dagger by name, who he claims became a notorious skinhead punk by 1984.<sup>67</sup> However, other than the one name mentioned, even the most prominent literature fails to provide any direct evidence of this phenomenon. The UK’s skinhead scene could directly be attributed to the established organization National Front, with tangible proof of shows held, white-supremacist ’zines, and several bands that fit the bill. Primary and secondary source literature fails to provide a single skinhead band, organization, or event on America during these years. Even Mattson’s only citation of Marc Dagger provides no insight- he and the rest of the “Bay Area Skinheads (BASH)” didn’t display any racist tendencies until at least 1987. Prior to that, even corroborated in a 1984 issue of *Maximum Rocknroll*, Dagger individually attended shows to “take aggression out” and even draws on times that skinheads had gotten seriously injured protecting a woman from being raped stat-

<sup>63</sup>Dead Kennedys, “Nazi Punks Fuck Off”, track #2 *In God We Trust*, Inc., Alternative Tentacles, 1981.

<sup>64</sup>The Dicks, “No Nazi’s Friend”, track #3 *Kill From The Heart*, Spot, 1983.

<sup>65</sup>*Maximum Rocknroll*, issue 1, (Berkeley, 1982), 4.

<sup>66</sup>*Maximum Rocknroll*, issue 9, (Berkeley, Oct-Nov 1983), 55.

<sup>67</sup>Mattson, *We’re Not Here To Entertain*, 236-237.



ing that “skins support anybody.”<sup>68</sup> What all of this points to is that the Nazi skinhead problem was nonexistent in the early 80s. Individual acts of aggression occurred, skinheads as a style group existed, but all evidence given to support the notion of the infiltration of Nazi punks in America prior to Reagan’s second term are unsubstantiated.

In fact, there is not a single news reporting of Nazi punk activity until 1987 in America. The White Aryan Resistance, which is known as the first and most prominent Nazi skinhead group, was founded in 1983 but wouldn’t gain significant membership until early 1987. According to FBI investigations and the Anti-Defamation League, they wouldn’t have acts of violence attributed to them, nor be considered a hate group until the end of that year.<sup>69</sup> The truth is, there is simply no evidence of Nazism in American punk during Reagan’s first term. Despite later making claims of white-supremacy in punk, Jello Biafra of Dead Kennedys even said in an interview, that he wrote the “Nazi Punks F\*\*k Off” about “compar[ing] goony surf punks to Nazis.”<sup>70</sup>

The longstanding association between punk and white supremacy is indicative of both the power and pitfalls of ’zines as a primary source. ’Zine coverage had the ability to turn one misinterpreted song into a moral panic so widespread that it altered the historical understanding of punk itself. This clearly proves the influence of ’zines and the unique ways its DIY production allowed regular people to contribute to the scene. If it weren’t for the community participation and lack of censorship promoted by ’zines, the band of Nazi fear and resistance would not have formed

<sup>68</sup>Tim Tonooka and Marc Dagger, “SF SKINS RESPOND,” *Maximum Rocknroll*, issue 18, (Berkeley, Oct 1984), 52-55.

<sup>69</sup>Anti-Defamation League, “Young and Violent: The Growing Menace of America’s Neo-Nazi Skinheads,” *U.S. Department of Justice National Institute of Justice*, 1988.; “White Aryan Resistance”, *FBI Records: The Vault*, 1987, <https://vault.fbi.gov/white-aryan-resistance/white-aryan-resistance-part-1-of-1/view>

<sup>70</sup>Blush, *American Hardcore*, 33.

so strongly. However, this instance also highlights the difficulties that come with the DIY method of production. Giving average people access to unrestricted journalism may have promoted creativity and free thought, but it also allowed for wildly subjective and inaccurate information to spread. These concerns may beg the question of the legitimacy of ’zines as a source, but these false reports still paint an accurate picture of the internal dialogue within the punk community. As with any primary source, ’zines should still be scrutinized and compared to other historical data to gain a complete picture without discounting their validity.

### The 1984 Election and the Legacy of Punk

The re-election of Ronald Reagan in 1984 was at least an indirect cause of DIY punk’s widespread decline. Firstly, the tight-knit community that had spent years ensuring a single-term presidency for Reagan experienced a surge of nihilism. In the January 1985 edition of *Maximum Rocknroll*, the first issue written since his election in November of 1984, an article titled “What We Have Here is a Failure to Communicate” expressed the views of much of the scene. The commentary stated that “last night, Election night, 18-24 year olds gave Ronald Reagan the biggest landslide victory in U.S. history” and that “once the college protestors, now are college yes-men to the radical right, corporations and sponsors of America’s plastic dream.”<sup>71</sup> The article to follow, as well as several others in the issue, detailed the existential dread faced by himself and others at the prospect of another generation of conservatism. On a legislative level, policies under the second term of the Reagan administration actively threatened the existence of punk. One year into his second term, the Parental Music Resources Center (PMRC) formed as an independent organization that worked with congress to end the “obscenities

<sup>71</sup>“What We Have Here Is a Failure to Communicate,” *Maximum Rocknroll*, issue 21 (Berkeley, Jan 1985), 22.

and violence in rock music” by enforcing stricter guidelines regarding the sale and promotion of potentially explicit music. That same year, the organization arranged a senate hearing investigating “pornographic content” in rock music, which led to a direct attack on Jello Biafra of the Dead Kennedys over album art in 1986.<sup>72</sup> The conservatism solidified by another Reagan term paved the way for the punk rock witch-hunt, resulting in an increase of censorship and fear of legal persecution for the entire scene.

Another cause for decline came from the introduction of actual Nazis into the scene following 1984. After years of misplaced panic, real and documented reports of skinheads in America became a real and documented concern. Skinhead groups like the White Aryan Resistance and American Front became active in the punk scene and became a national concern by 1987. As hate groups began infiltrating shows, spreading real world terror, and generally adding far-right violence to punk rock, the pages of ’zines became flooded with horrific encounters with these groups, creating a culture of necessary self-preservation against the threat. Ironically enough, it can be theorized that the significant false reporting allowed for the rise of this epidemic as real Nazis discovered the potential space for them in the community.

By 1986, the entire lineup of Rock Against Reagan had broken up or gone inactive, with the exception of M.D.C. who completely rebranded. This was a common trend post-1984. As the country grew more conservative, censorship became a legal battle, and real white supremacists invaded the scene, the most prominent punk bands began to phase out of existence. Another common fate was seen as much more egregious than just breaking up which was losing the DIY ethos and crossing into more technical and profitable genres, with a 1986 edition of *Flipside* even predicting

that heavy metal would overtake punk as they DIY bands became “out of touch with their own business.”<sup>73</sup> This proved true as the widespread DIY punk scene dwindled into oblivion. Some ’zines ran into the late 1980s with professional non-DIY versions of ’zines persisting into the 1990s, but the culture of community spread through ’zines had mainly ended with the decline of punk overall.

Though the widespread countercultural punk scene had lapsed and the DIY ethos fell out of popular favor, punk scenes still persisted in localized scenes. In the early 1990s, feminist punk movement “Riot Grrrl” arose to bring women into a scene they had long been excluded from. Bands like Bikini Kill, Huggy Bear, and Bratmobile maintained DIY musical production and utilized ’zines to spread feminist messaging.<sup>74</sup> DIY scenes also still exist locally. It’s not uncommon for community scenes to spring up with local bands performing for free or for a cheap door fee in garages or public spaces. In fact, my hometown had an incredibly active DIY punk scene that I participated in when I was in high school. Bands made up of members in their early teens and into their twenties gathered together to perform original rock music on communal equipment in basements. We hung fliers promoting the free shows, distributed homemade stickers, and allowed anyone to participate. With current technology, cheaply recorded CDs were often replaced by recordings to be mixed and uploaded online for free. Physical flyers were often replaced by social media posts and ’zines became online publications. I didn’t know it at the time, but I had done my part in keeping a local DIY punk scene alive.

Despite its rich history as an oppositional force, punk continues to be misunderstood and undervalued. The mainstream perception of punk continues to rely on the same publications that crowned the Sex Pistols of the founders of the movement, boiling the entire movement down to

<sup>72</sup>Claude Chastagner, “The Parents’ Music Resource Center: From Information to Censorship,” *Popular Music* 18, no. 2 (1999), 183-186.

<sup>73</sup>*Flipside*, issue 48, (Los Angeles, 1986), 3.

<sup>74</sup>Stevie Feliciano, “The Riot Grrrl Movement” *Hudson Park Library* (2013).

spiked hair and a crude demeanor. By examining the primary sources that have been lost to history, punk becomes much less about style and attitude. The disorganized, chaotic archives of 'zines uncover the reality of punk as a widespread, interconnected countercultural rebellion.

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