

THE UNFINISHED REVOLUTION

from *Rip It Up and Start Again: Postpunk 1978-1984*, by Simon Reynolds

“THE SEX PISTOLS SANG ‘NO FUTURE,’ BUT THERE IS A FUTURE, AND WE’RE TRYING TO BUILD ONE.” — ALLEN RAVENSTINE, PERE UBU, 1978

BY THE SUMMER OF 1977, punk had become a parody of itself. Many of the movement’s original participants felt that something open-ended and full of possibilities had degenerated into a commercial formula. Worse, it had proved a rejuvenating shot in the arm to the established record industry that punks had hoped to overthrow.

It was at this point that the fragile unity that punk had forged between working-class kids and arty middle-class bohemians began to fracture. On one side were the populist “real punks” (later to evolve into the Oi! and hardcore movements) who believed that the music needed to stay accessible and unpretentious, to continue to fill its role as the angry voice of the streets. On the other side was the vanguard that came to be known as postpunk, who saw 1977 not as a return to raw rock ‘n’ roll but as a chance to make a break with tradition.

The postpunk vanguard—bands such as PiL, Joy Division, Talking Heads, Throbbing Gristle, Contortions, and Scritti Politti—defined punk as an imperative to constant change. They dedicated themselves to fulfilling punk’s uncompleted musical revolution, exploring new possibilities by embracing electronics, noise, jazz and the classical avant-garde, and the production techniques of dub reggae and disco.

Some accused these experimentalists of merely lapsing back into the art rock elitism that punk originally aimed to destroy. Certainly, it’s true that a high proportion of postpunk musicians had art school backgrounds. The No Wave scene in New York, for instance, was virtually wall-to-wall painters, filmmakers, poets, and performance artists. Gang of Four, Cabaret Voltaire, Wire, and the Raincoats are just a handful of the U.K. bands that were started by fine-art or design graduates. Especially in Britain, art schools have long functioned as a state-subsidized bohemia, where working-class youths too unruly for a life of labor mingle with slumming bourgeois kids too wayward for a middle-management career. After graduation, many turn to pop music as a way to sustain the experimental lifestyle they’d enjoyed at art college while maybe, just maybe, making a living.

Of course, not everyone in postpunk attended art school, or even college. Self-educated in a scattered, omnivorous fashion, figures like John Lydon or Mark E. Smith of the Fall fit the syndrome of the anti-intellectual intellectual, ravenously well read but scornful of academia and suspicious of art in its institutionalized forms. But really, what could be more arty than wanting to destroy art, to smash the boundaries that keep it sealed off from everyday life?

Those postpunk years from 1978 to 1984 saw the systematic ransacking of twentieth-century modernist art and literature. The entire postpunk period looks like an attempt to replay virtually every major modernist theme and technique via the medium of pop music. Cabaret Voltaire borrowed their name from Dada. Pere Ubu took theirs from Alfred Jarry. Talking Heads turned a Hugo Ball sound poem into a tribal-disco dance track. Gang of Four, inspired by Brecht and Godard’s alienation effects, tried to deconstruct rock even as they rocked hard. Lyricists absorbed the radical science fiction of William S. Burroughs, J. G. Ballard, and Philip K. Dick, and techniques of collage and cut-up were transplanted into the music. Duchamp, mediated by 1960s Fluxus, was the patron saint of No Wave. The record cover artwork of the period matched the neomodernist aspirations of the words and music, with graphic designers like Malcolm Garrett and Peter Saville and labels like Factory and Fast Product drawing from constructivism, De Stijl, Bauhaus, John Heartfield, and Die Neue Typographie. This frenzied looting of the archives of modernism

culminated with the founding of renegade pop label ZTT—short for Zang Tuum Tumb, a snatch of Italian futurist prose-poetry—and their conceptual group the Art of Noise, named in homage to Luigi Russolo’s manifesto for a futurist music.

Taking the word “modernist” in a less specific sense, the postpunk bands were firmly committed to the idea of making modern music. They were totally confident that there were still places to go with rock, a whole new future to invent. For the postpunk vanguard, punk had failed because it attempted to overthrow rock’s status quo using conventional music (fifties rock ’n’ roll, garage punk, mod) that actually predated dinosaur megabands like Pink Floyd and Led Zeppelin. The postpunks set forth with the belief that “radical content demands radical form.”

One curious by-product of this conviction that rock ’n’ roll had outlived its usefulness was the mountainous abuse heaped on Chuck Berry. A key source for punk rock via the guitar playing of Johnny Thunders and Steve Jones, Berry became a negative touchstone, endlessly name-checked as a must to avoid. Perhaps the first example of Berry-phobia occurs as early as the Sex Pistols demos exhumed on *The Great Rock ’n’ Roll Swindle*. The band begins jamming on “Johnny B. Goode.” Johnny Rotten—the group’s closet aesthete, who’d go on to form the archetypal postpunk outfit Public Image Ltd—halfheartedly jabbars the tune and then groans, “Oh fuck, it’s awful. Stop it, I fucking hate it. Aaarrgh.” Rotten’s howl of disgusted exhaustion—he sounds like he’s choking, suffocated by the staleness of the sound—was echoed by scores of postpunk groups. Cabaret Voltaire, for instance, complained that “rock ’n’ roll is not about regurgitating Chuck Berry riffs.”

Rather than rama-lama riffing or bluesy chords, the postpunk pantheon of guitar innovators favored angularity, a clean and brittle spikiness. They shunned solos, apart from brief bursts of lead integrated with more rhythm-oriented playing. Instead of a “fat” sound, players like Talking Heads’ David Byrne, the Fall’s Martin Bramah, and the Slits’ Viv Albertine preferred a “skinny” rhythm guitar style often inspired by reggae or funk. This more compact, scrawny style of guitar playing didn’t fill up every corner of the soundscape, and this allowed the bass to step forward from its usually inconspicuous, supportive role to become the lead instrumental voice, fulfilling a melodic function even as it pushed the groove. In this respect, postpunk bassists were playing catch-up with the innovations of Sly Stone and James Brown, and learning from contemporary roots reggae and dub. Pursuing a militant and aggressively monolithic sound, punk had mostly purged “blackness” from rock, severing the music’s links to R&B while simultaneously rejecting disco as escapist and vapid. By 1978, though, the concept of a dangerous dance music began to circulate in postpunk circles, expressed in terms like “perverted disco” and “avant-funk.”

Along with dance music’s sensuality and swing, punk had also rejected all those compound genres (jazz rock, country rock, folk rock, classical rock, etc.) that proliferated in the early seventies. To punks, this sort of thing smacked of virtuoso showing off, meandering jam sessions, and pious hippie platitudes like “it’s all music, man.” Defining itself against this limp, all-gates-open eclecticism, punk proposed a strident purism. In the late seventies, while “fusion” remained a discredited notion, postpunk ushered in a new phase of looking outside rock’s narrow parameters, to black America and Jamaica, obviously, but also to Africa and other zones of what would later be called world music.

Postpunk also rebuilt bridges with rock’s own past, vast swathes of which had been placed off-limits when punk declared 1976 to be Year Zero. Punk installed a myth that still persists to this day in some quarters, that the prepunk early seventies were a musical wasteland. In actuality, that period was one of the richest and most diverse in rock history. The postpunk groups, tentatively at first (after all, no one wanted to be accused of being a hippie or a progressive rocker in disguise), rediscovered those riches, drawing inspiration from the arty end of glam rock that included David Bowie and Roxy Music, from out-rock eccentrics such as Captain Beefheart, and in some cases the more acute end of prog such as Soft Machine,

King Crimson, and even Frank Zappa. In a sense, postpunk was progressive rock, but drastically streamlined and reinvigorated, and with a more austere sensibility (no ostentatious virtuosity), not to mention much better haircuts.

The truth is that some of the defining postpunk groups—Devo, Throbbing Gristle, Cabaret Voltaire, This Heat—were actually prepunk entities that existed in some form or another for several years before the Ramones' 1976 debut album. When punk arrived, it threw the record industry into confusion, making the major labels vulnerable to suggestion and fluxing up all the aesthetic rules so that anything abnormal or extreme suddenly had a chance. Through this breach in the wall of business as usual all sorts of obscure freaks broke through and grabbed at opportunities for a bigger audience.

But it was a particular kind of “art rock” that postpunk pledged allegiance to, not prog's attempt to merge amplified electric guitars with nineteenth-century classical instrumentation and extended compositions, but the minimal-is-maximal lineage that runs from the Velvet Underground through Krautrock and the more intellectual Bowie/Roxy end of glam. For a certain breed of hipster, the music that sustained them through the “wasteland” of the seventies was made by a cluster of kindred spirits—Lou Reed, John Cale, Nico, Iggy Pop, David Bowie, Brian Eno—who were united by their descent from or debt to the Velvet Underground, and who collaborated with one another throughout this period in various combinations.

David Bowie in particular had associations with almost all of these people at various points, through either producing their records or otherwise collaborating. He was the connector, rock's greatest dilettante, forever chasing the next edge, always moving on. More than anyone else, it was Bowie who was the touchstone inspiration for postpunk's ethos of perpetual change. Nineteen seventy-seven might have been the year of the Clash's debut and the Pistols' *Never Mind the Bollocks*, but the truth is that postpunk music was far more deeply affected by four Bowie-related albums released that year, his own *Low* and *Heroes*, and Iggy Pop's *The Idiot* and *Lust for Life*, both of which Bowie produced. Recorded in West Berlin, this astonishing series of LPs hugely impacted listeners who already suspected that punk rock was turning out to be just more of the same old same old. The Bowie and Iggy albums signaled a shift away from America and rock 'n' roll toward Europe and a cool, controlled sound modeled on the Teutonic “motorik” rhythms of Kraftwerk and Neu!—a sound in which synthesizers played as much of a role as guitars. In interviews, Bowie talked of his move to Berlin as an attempt to extricate himself from America, both musically (in terms of the soul and funk that informed *Young Americans*) and spiritually (an escape from the rock 'n' roll decadence of Los Angeles). Informed by this willed feat of dislocation and self-alienation, *Low* lived up to the album's original working title, *New Music Night and Day*, particularly on its astonishing second side, a suite of twilight-gloomy instrumental atmospheres and yearning wordless plainsong. *Low*, said Bowie, was a response to “seeing the East Bloc, how Berlin survives in the midst of it, which was something that I couldn't express in words. Rather it required textures.” Which is why he leaned on Brian Eno, the supreme texturologist, as his mentor and right-hand man during the making of *Low* and *Heroes*. Already influential because of his synth noise in Roxy Music and his proto-New Wave solo albums, Eno, after Bowie's Berlin albums, became one of the defining producers of the era, documenting the New York No Wave scene and working with Devo, Talking Heads, and U2. “Some bands went to art school,” quipped U2 singer Bono. “We went to Brian Eno.”

Bowie and Eno's new Europeanism chimed with the postpunk feeling that America—or at least white America—was politically and musically reactionary. When it came to contemporary inspiration, postpunk looked to places other than the rock 'n' roll heartland, among them urban black America, Jamaica, and Europe. For many of the postpunk persuasion, 1977's most significant singles weren't “White Riot” or “God Save the Queen,” but “Trans-Europe Express,” a metronomic, metal-on-metal threnody for the industrial era by the German band Kraftwerk, and Donna Summer's Eurodisco smash “I Feel Love,” made almost entirely from synthetic sounds by producer Giorgio Moroder, an Italian based in Munich.

Moroder's electronic disco and Kraftwerk's serene synthpop conjured glistening visions of the New Europa—modern, forward-looking, and pristinely postrock in the sense of having virtually no debts to American music.

Along with radicalizing rock form with doses of black rhythm and European electronics, postpunk artists were equally committed to radicalizing the content of the musical equation. Punk's approach to politics—raw rage or agitprop protest—seemed too blunt or too preachy to the postpunk vanguard, and they tried to develop more sophisticated and oblique techniques. Gang of Four and Scritti Politti abandoned tell-it-like-it-is denunciation for lyrics that exposed and dramatized the mechanisms of power in everyday life. “Question everything” was the catchphrase of the day. These bands demonstrated that “the personal is political” by dissecting consumerism, sexual relationships, commonsense notions of what's natural or obvious, and the ways in which what feel like spontaneous, innermost feelings are actually scripted by larger forces. At the same time, the most acute of these groups captured the way that the political is personal, illustrating the processes by which current events and the actions of government invade everyday life and haunt each individual's private dreams and nightmares.

When it came to politics in the commonly understood sense—the world of demonstrations, grassroots activism, and organized struggle—postpunk bands were more ambivalent. As bohemian nonconformists, they were usually made uncomfortable by calls to solidarity or toeing the party line. They saw the plainspoken demagoguery of overtly politicized musicians of the era (such as Crass and Tom Robinson) as far too literal and unaesthetic, and found their soapbox sermonizing both condescending to the listener and, most of the time, a pointless exercise in “preaching to the converted.” So while many British postpunk groups participated in the Rock Against Racism tours and festivals of the era, they remained wary of RAR and its sister organization, the Anti Nazi League, suspecting them of being fronts for the militant left-wing Socialist Workers Party, who valued music purely as an instrument for radicalizing and mobilizing youth. At the same time, postpunk inherited punk's dreams of resuscitating rock music as a force to change, if not the world, then the consciousness of individual listeners. But rather than the music serving as a mere neutral platform for agitprop, this radicalism was manifested equally in both words and sound. Furthermore, the subversive potential of the lyrics resided as much in their formal aesthetic properties (how innovative they were on the level of language or narrative) as in the message or critique they delivered.

Postpunk was a period of astonishing experimentation with lyrics and singing. The Fall's Mark E. Smith invented a kind of Northern English magic realism that mixed industrial grime with the unearthly and uncanny, voiced through a unique, one-note delivery somewhere between amphetamine-spiked rant and alcohol-addled yarn. David Byrne's flustered, neurotic mannerisms perfectly suited his wry, dry examination of nonrock subjects like animals, bureaucracy, “buildings and food.” The Pop Group's Mark Stewart yowled imagistic incantations like a cross between Artaud and James Brown. This was also a fertile period for idiosyncratic female expression, the hitherto unheard perspectives and dissonant tones of the Slits, Lydia Lunch, Ludus, and the Raincoats. Other singer-lyricists—Joy Division's Ian Curtis, Paul Haig of Josef K—were steeped in the shadowy unease and crippling anxiety of Dostoyevsky, Kafka, Conrad, and Beckett. Three-minute mininovels, their songs grappled with classic existentialist quandaries: the struggle and agony of having a “self”; love versus isolation; the absurdity of existence; the human capacity for perversity and spite; the perennial “suicide, why the hell not?”

Grappling with these timeless aspects of the human condition, postpunk also tapped into the political zeitgeist. Especially in the three years from 1978–80, the dislocations caused by economic change and geopolitical upheaval generated a tremendous sense of dread and tension. Britain saw a resurgence of far-Right and neofascist parties, both in electoral politics and in the bloody form of street violence. The cold war reached a renewed pitch of frigidity. Britain's leading music magazine, *New Musical Express*, ran a

regular column called “Plutonium Blondes” about the deployment of American cruise missiles in Britain. Singles like Kate Bush’s “Breathing” and UB40’s “The Earth Dies Screaming” brought nuclear anxiety into the Top 20, and countless postpunks, from This Heat on their concept album *Deceit* to Young Marble Giants with their classic single “Final Day,” sang about Armageddon as a real prospect, impending and imminent.

Part of the poignancy of this period of dissident music is its increasingly out-of-sync relationship with the broader culture, which was veering toward the Right. The postpunk period began with the paralysis of an embattled and thwarted Left-liberal politics under the center-left governments of Labour prime minister Jim Callaghan and Democratic president Jimmy Carter. Callaghan and Carter were then almost simultaneously displaced by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, populist (and popular) right-wing leaders who enforced monetarist economic policies that resulted in mass unemployment and widening social divisions.

Ushering in a long period of conservative politics that lasted twelve years in the United States and sixteen years in Britain, Thatcher and Reagan represented a massive backlash against both the countercultural sixties and the permissive seventies. In response, postpunk tried to build an alternative culture with its own independent infrastructure of labels, distribution, and record stores. The need for “complete control” (which the Clash could only sing about bitterly in the song of that name, having ceded it to CBS) led to the birth of pioneering independent labels such as Rough Trade, Mute, Factory, Subterranean, and SST. This do-it-yourself concept proliferated like a virus, spawning a pandemic of samizdat culture, with bands releasing their own records, local promoters organizing gigs, musicians’ collectives creating spaces for bands to play, and small magazines and fanzines taking on the role of an alternative media. Independent labels represented a sort of anticorporate microcapitalism based less on left-wing ideology than the conviction that the major labels were too sluggish, unimaginative, and commerce minded to nurture the most crucial music of the day.

Postpunk was concerned as much with the politics of music itself as with anything in the “real world.” It aimed to sabotage rock’s dream factory, a leisure industry that channeled youth’s energy and idealism into a cultural cul-de-sac while generating huge amounts of revenue for corporate capitalism. Coined by the Liverpool group Wah! Heat, the term “rockism” spread as a shorthand for a whole set of stale routines that restricted creativity and suppressed surprise. The established ways of doing things that postpunks refused to perpetuate ranged from conventions of production (like the use of reverb to give records a live, big-room sound) to the predictable rituals of touring and performing (some postpunk bands refused to do encores, while others experimented with multimedia and performance art). Aiming to break the trance of rock-business-as-normal and jolt the listener into awareness, postpunk teemed with metamusic critiques and mini-manifestos, songs such as the Television Personalities’ “Part Time Punks” and Subway Sect’s “A Different Story” that addressed punk’s failure or speculated about the future. Some of this acute self-consciousness came from the radically self-critical sensibility that surrounded 1970s conceptual art, in which the discourse around the work was as important as the art objects themselves.

The metamusical nature of much postpunk helps to explain the extraordinary power of the rock press during this period, with some critics actually playing a part in shaping and directing the culture. This expanded role for the music papers began with punk. Because radio and TV largely spurned punk, because the mainstream print media was generally hostile, and because for a while it was hard for punk bands to even get gigs, the U.K. weekly music papers—*New Musical Express (NME)*, *Sounds*, *Melody Maker*, and *Record Mirror*—took on a huge importance. From 1978 to 1981, the market leader *NME* had a circulation hovering between 200,000 and 270,000, and an actual readership three or four times that size. Punk mobilized a huge audience that was looking for the way forward and ready to be guided. The music press

had virtually no rivals for this function. Monthly general-interest magazines such as *Q* or style magazines such as *The Face* didn't exist yet, and pop coverage in the quality newspapers was meager.

As a result, the music press had enormous influence, and individual writers—the driven ones, those with a messianic complex—enjoyed prestige and power barely imaginable today. By identifying (and exaggerating) the connections between groups and articulating the unwritten manifestos of these fledgling movements and city-based scenes, the critics could actually intensify and accelerate the development of postpunk music. In *Sounds*, from late 1977 onward, Jon Savage championed “New Musick,” the industrial/dystopian science fiction side of postpunk. Paul Morley at *NME* progressed from mythologizing Manchester and Joy Division to dreaming up the concept of New Pop before going on to help invent the groups Frankie Goes to Hollywood and the Art of Noise. *Sounds*'s Garry Bushell was the demagogue/ideologue of Oi! This combination of activist critics and musicians whose work was a form of “active criticism” fueled a syndrome of runaway evolution. Trend competed with trend, and each new development was swiftly followed by a backlash or a swerve. All of this contributed to the surging-into-the-future feeling of the period, while simultaneously accelerating the disintegration of punk's unity into squabbling postpunk factions.

Musicians and journalists fraternized a lot during this period, a kinship related perhaps to a sense of solidarity as comrades in the culture war of postpunk versus Old Wave as well as in the era's political struggles. Roles shifted around. Some journalists played in bands or made records, and there were musicians who wrote criticism, such as Pere Ubu's David Thomas (under the pen name Crocus Behemoth), Joy Division's Steven Morris, and Manicured Noise's Steve Walsh. Because so many people involved in postpunk were nonmusicians initially or came from other artistic fields, the gap between those who “did” and those who commented wasn't nearly as wide as in the prepunk era. Throbbing Gristle's Genesis P-Orridge, for instance, described himself as a writer and thinker first and foremost and not really a musician at all. He even used the word “journalist” as a positive descriptive term for TG's documentarian approach to harsh postindustrial realities.

Changes in the style and methods of rock writing heightened the postpunk sensation of hurtling into a bold new era. Music journalists in the early seventies typically blended traditional critical qualities (objectivity, solid reporting, authoritative knowledge) with a New Journalism-influenced rock 'n' roll looseness and informality. This jammed-out, chatty style—juiced with “ain't”s, hep slang, and sly, winking references to drugs and chicks—didn't suit postpunk. The intellectual underpinnings of this older rock criticism— notions of male misbehavior as rebellion, madness as genius, the cult of street credibility and authenticity—were some of the very things being scrutinized and challenged by the antirockist vanguard. A new generation of music journalists took over whose writing seemed to be made of the same stuff as the music they championed. The stark urgency and clean lines of their prose mirrored the light-metal severity of groups like Wire, the Banshees, and Gang of Four, just as the record design aesthetic of the time emphasized a bold, bracing geometry of hard angles and primary-color blocks. The new school of music writing merged puritanism and playfulness in a way that simultaneously undercut the casual tone of the old rock journalism while puncturing its stodgy core of certainty, all those hidden assumptions and taken-for-granted notions about what rock was all about.

What bands and journalists actually talked about also contributed to the sense of entering a new era. An interview with a rock band today tends to become a laundry list of musical influences and reference points, such that the story of a band's life typically gets reduced to a journey through taste. This sort of “record collection rock” didn't exist in the postpunk era. Bands referred to their musical inspirations, of course, but they had so many other things—politics, cinema, art, books—on their minds, too. Some of the politically committed bands actually felt that it was self-indulgent or trivial to talk about music per se. They felt duty-bound to discuss serious issues, which nowadays sounds somewhat puritanical, but at the

time reinforced the sense that pop wasn't a segmented category insulated from the rest of reality. This lack of interest in discussing musical influences also created a sense of postpunk as an absolute break with tradition. It felt like the culture's eyes and ears were trained on the future, not the past, with bands engaged in a furious competition to reach the eighties a few years ahead of schedule.

On a mission and fully in the now, postpunk created a thrilling sense of urgency. The new records came thick and fast, classic after classic. Even the incomplete experiments and interesting failures carried a powerful utopian charge and contributed to an exhilarating collective conversation. Certain groups existed more on the level of an idea than a fully realized proposition, but nonetheless made a difference just by existing and talking a good game in the press.

Many groups born in the postpunk period went on to enjoy huge mainstream fame, including New Order, Depeche Mode, the Human League, U2, Talking Heads, Scritti Politti, and Simple Minds. Others who were minor or background figures at the time went on to achieve later success in a different guise, such as Bjork, the KLF, Beastie Boys, Jane's Addiction, and Sonic Youth. But the history of postpunk is definitely not written by the victors. There are dozens of bands who made landmark albums but never achieved more than an abiding cult status, earning the dubious consolation prize of being an influence and reference point for '90s alt-rock megabands (Gang of Four begot Red Hot Chili Peppers, Throbbing Gristle sired Nine Inch Nails, Talking Heads even supplied Radiohead with their name). Hundreds more made just one or two amazing singles, then disappeared with barely a trace.

Beyond the musicians, there was a whole cadre of catalysts and culture warriors, enablers and ideologues who started labels, managed bands, became innovative producers, published fanzines, ran hipster record stores, promoted gigs, and organized festivals. True, the prosaic work of creating and maintaining an alternative culture lacks the glamour of punk's public gestures of outrage and cultural terrorism. Destroying is always more dramatic than building. But postpunk was constructive and forward looking. The very prefix "post-" implied faith in a future that punk had said didn't exist.

Punk's simple stance of negation, of being against, briefly created unity. But as soon as the question shifted to "What are we actually for?" the movement disintegrated and dispersed. Each strand nurtured its own creation myth of what punk meant and pursued its own vision of the way forward. Yet underneath the fractious diaspora of the postpunk years there still remained a common inheritance from the punk moment, namely, a revived belief in the power of the music, along with the feeling of responsibility that came with this conviction, which in turn made the question "Where to now?" worth fighting over. The by-product of all this division and disagreement was diversity, a fabulous wealth of sounds and ideas that rivals the sixties as a golden age for music.