

Featured story:

PUNK, SOME HISTORY, AND ME

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I'm a bit older now, which means I have seen and experienced times which are not so present in our current ways of doing things. Like many (most?) of the people walking down the street, it's not always easily apparent what one's experiences and tastes are and were like if you make your evaluations based on their clothes and how they carry themselves. Sitting around with others at work or some social gathering, I doubt if any would suspect that I felt a fairly strong affinity for the world of punk music in my younger days.

Speaking of music, I believe there isn't a style I don't like, although some of them I appreciate better when I'm in the mood for them. Others, though, I like pretty well any time. Like mainstream pop rock and the songs you hear on FM radio. I've never thought poorly of commercial successes. Those putting it together know how to package it so it works well and has its greatest appeal. But the appeal comes from more than just the packaging. When a lot of people like it, it means that it reaches them in some way. Some of the classic rock songs are inspired masterpieces and just because a lot of people can appreciate it in some manner shouldn't take away from it.

But I also like to explore other, more fringe forms. Punk was one of them before it entered mainstream. At its peak of popularity it influenced many neighbouring styles and many bars & clubs opened their redecorated doors, catering to the public seeking this music and its sub-cultural lifestyle. I was one of this public and enjoyed it almost as much as I did the blues, and more than I did bluegrass.

I was right in there with the weekend punk scene, at least those Saturday nights when I was in the mood for it. It wasn't my lifestyle but I didn't feel I had to be a 100% 24/7 purist to recognize the music reached me. I played the songs at home and went to places that offered live performances. Some of them were a little more intense than others but before I describe them I'd like to add a little perspective here. I think it's kind of exciting in a way.

Years ago, eons ago, long before inventions, we walked about without any clothes on and without our cellphones. (Actually, I still don't have one.) Then things started coming along, fire, the wheel, various discoveries that helped and shaped our way and increased our chances of survival or simply living a better life. Tools, for example, and the consequences of them became inseparable from our being and way of being.

Agriculture was a big turning point as well as more ambitious tool-making, like learning to forge. With growing populations and less dependency on a nomadic lifestyle, people sought sturdy homes and better security, even from each other. New religion and laws and customs evolved, explaining how the world worked and how we are placed in it. Technology and art also progressed and they too had their tendencies, traditions and rules. Exploration and development became more regulated and specialized, including one's apprenticeship into it all. Scientific theories were tested and fine-tuned and the all-encompassing power of the church started being questioned.

Then, around a hundred or so years ago, some fundamental truths in the world of science began to be questioned as well. (Actually, this had been happening for a much longer time before that, maybe always. But now it had a little more room and cause to grow.) Many faithfully followed the scientific path, stoutly, even religiously regarding it to be the one true way to the new world opening before us. Yet a lot of inexplicable anomalies started to appear and wouldn't go away. Like light. Is it matter, composed of particles and thus sentenced to act in certain ways? If so, then why is it damnably acting up and defying those expectations by taking on some characteristics which define energy? After some time the slight crack in the strong foundation of science widened and spread which led to future heated debates and the like. This was more than simply arguing why some orbiting bodies follow slightly unaccountable patterns. This was questioning limits and categories and ways of thinking.

Cracks in other institutions started to appear around the same time in our history, like in the arts and music. Music was supposed to follow certain almost geometric progressions established centuries earlier, but some musicians were beginning to defy these canons. Other icons and systems previously regarded as almost untouchable began to be challenged. Painting is one of the most well-known of these, becoming abstract, surreal, disengaging itself from realistic portrayals.

There was a movement gaining momentum but as yet far from the mainstream. A name came to be placed on it, the Da Da movement and it attracted more disciplines. They would take a sonnet from Shakespeare, for example, cut it up into words and stick those papers into a hat. Then they would irreverently draw those papers out to read those very same words in random fashion. The meaning and the metre of the verse was now hopelessly lost. To what ends did this anarchistic gesture serve?

Anarchy and cracks and defiance and rebellion started showing up in many places. More and more reality was interpreted in a light that seemed to head slightly towards subjective inclinations. Scientists had to increasingly content themselves with 'possible' predictions quoting statistical estimates. In many situations they could no longer hope to cite hard and fast rules that guaranteed 100% results. This may not seem like much but it was more than a crack. It was putting a big dent in how scientists and later non-specialized people viewed and interacted with the world. Maybe the unknown was still out there waiting to be discovered (and potentially conquered), but no more could one say with absolute certainty that such and such would act in this and only this way. That great unknown could be immensely more unfathomable than we had previously guessed.

Countless compromises had to be made to maintain some kind of integrity. Yes, we know how fast that particle is going but I can't tell you exactly where it is. Or vice versa. Some of them just disappear and others suddenly arrive into the scene. We can't effectively predict what any particular one will do, although we can give you a fairly good account of what most of them will do when they stay relatively together.

By the fifties, while most respectable men in the western world wore white shirts, black suits and dark ties (Men In Black), there was a fairly strong subculture of beatniks who came to be regarded by some as fashionably cool. They broke new ground and disregarded or distorted acceptable standards. The institutions of tradition and the power of authority lost even more ground but nothing like what happened in the mid-sixties and slightly thereafter.

By the late fifties and early sixties the vast wave of postwar babies were in their teens. Some may have started with Elvis Presley and later flower power, but they evolved and graduated to encompass more. Millions of young people openly questioned and defied the government, challenging them with their appearance and attitude but they didn't stop there. There's safety in numbers and many began to act too, burning their draft cards on TV, participating in marches and sit-ins which presented the possibilities of being beaten by police. They got organized and demanded certain issues be brought into the open so something could be done about them. They wanted a greater say in education, in many things. Equality and a voice for all were empty words repeated by uninterested politicians but it was the youth that started to insist that the leaders stand behind those slogans. The women's movement, gay liberation and the black panthers (and later grey panthers) all gained important ground in that era, enough to survive and continue pushing forward through the changing and alternating times ahead.

I was just a kid then. I first became aware of the issues through the music and near the end of my eleventh year I was greatly attracted to it all. Woodstock was a real eye-opener for me. Of course my understanding of the situations was little more than superficial, but from those beginnings I came to learn of more things.

In my twenties the music of the sixties continued to be influential to me but new fashions entered the scene. Swinging like a pendulum on a big social grand clock, a lot of people, and the new generation coming into the scene, were getting tired of fighting the establishment and sought more entertaining and less-threatening lifestyles. Disco flourished and later the yuppies replaced the hippies, many of whom seemed to be ex-hippies themselves.

And so it was with issues and with music. I took in a lot, dabbled here, dabbled there, got a better feel for things. I didn't usually go for the hardcore but I interacted with some who did. On the issue side I listened to what they had to say and got involved in interactive discussions to explore it a little further. On the music side I'd listen to the

music & go to the occasional concert. Like one time I went with my nephew and his girlfriend to check out Slipknot live. It wasn't something that inspired me or left me feeling that it would make a good companion for me. (Much of the music I listen to on a regular basis has that effect on me.) The music was good, though. The intensity and the stage presence was impressive and that was all part of the package. I was glad I went, but I also knew that it didn't appeal enough to me or to who I was to make me want to become more familiar with their music.

When punk arrived on the scene, way back in the 70s, it was hard core too, but to me it was taking that rebellion, especially of the youth, a step or so further than much of what the mainstream rock did. It was recognizable as a style and as a movement and it had something to say. It was defying and provoking authority and established ways and that was something I could relate to. But a group of men involved in hate, well, I think their statement is severely limited. It's true there are other themes involved, looking at uncomfortable ideas, for example. And that, by itself, especially in the world of art, is not necessarily a bad thing. Perhaps I am missing something and can't appreciate some finer points, but like I said, bands of that sort don't move me all that much.

Punk, though, while not being a big part of my life or my music choices, did capture a little of me. I went to a few clubs where the 'dancing' was more a form of pushing each other around. I grew up in a somewhat hard town and I didn't feel overly threatened by being there or with those people. Sometimes people spat at each other which I found more curious than anything, but it was part of the scene.

And over time there were concerts, punk groups on tour. It was interesting to consider how they were when not on stage. They had managers and lawyers and schedules and contracts to meet. I wondered how the more successful groups managed being spontaneously angry and defiant every concert. Were they furious at those supplying them with money, comfortable beds and recognition?

I didn't worry about it too much. Maybe they stepped in and out of their roles like everyone does. And their defiance may only have been symbolic at times, but it wasn't all that unhealthy to recognize it was there or to release it in relatively non-destructive ways. We could all let the music and the group energy fill us and take us along with it for a while. Maybe on the occasional Saturday. And let off some steam.

AFTERWORD:

Of course I'm not a scholarly historian and you may find fault with my oversimplified views stated here. But Punk arrived on the scene at a very good time, in history, and in my life. It filled a gap and provided a much-needed model to provoke us into feeling and challenging certain lines of thinking.