Oliver Double

Punk Rock as Popular Theatre

Punk rock performance consciously draws on popular theatre forms such as music hall and stand-up comedy – as was exemplified on the occasion when Max Wall appeared with Ian Dury at the Hammersmith Odeon. Oliver Double traces the historical and stylistic connections between punk, music hall and stand-up, and argues that punk shows can be considered a form of popular theatre in their own right. He examines a wide range of punk bands and performers – including The Sex Pistols, Iggy Pop, Devo, Spizz, The Ramones, The Clash, and Dead Kennedys – to consider how they use costume, staging, personae, characterization, and audience–performer relationships, arguing that these are as important and carefully considered as the music they play. Art movements such as Dada and Futurism were important influences on the early punk scene, and Double shows how, as with early twentieth-century cabaret, punk performance manages to include avant-garde elements within popular theatre forms. Oliver Double started his career performing a comedy act alongside anarchist punk bands in Exeter, going on to spend ten years on the alternative comedy circuit. Currently, he lectures in Drama at the University of Kent, and he is the author of *Stand-Up! On Being a Comedian* (Methuen, 1997) and *Getting the Joke: the Inner Workings of Stand-Up Comedy* (Methuen, 2005).

ON 13 MAY 1978, Max Wall made a surprise guest appearance in Ian Dury and the Blockheads' big show at the Hammersmith Odeon. Dury's music was enjoying great success partly because of his association with punk. Although his origins were actually in the earlier pub rock scene, his audience was undoubtedly swollen by a large contingent of punk rockers. In this context, his support acts were somewhat surprising. Matumbi played reggae rather than punk, and Whirlwind had emerged from the pub scene playing 1950s-style rockabilly – but undoubtedly the great music-hall comic Max Wall was the most eccentric choice of all.

Accounts of how he was received vary. According to one contemporary review, the audience tried to 'scream him off' and greeted him with 'howls of derision', with only his funny walks getting 'some encouragement'.[1] Other reviews suggest he got a fairer hearing. Apparently, he was only heckled by 'a tiny but mindless section',[2] so decided to cut his losses, did his trademark funny walk, and got off. Dury was incensed by the way the audience had treated him, and went out to chastise them, yelling, 'You bastards – that's the best fucking geezer at wot 'e does in the world, and you've upset 'im!'[3] This allowed Wall to come back on and sing the song he had planned to perform and he 'won out' with the audience.[4]

On the face of it, it's not surprising that Dury's crowd gave him such a bumpy ride. The Blockheads' keyboard player Mick Gallagher remembers the show well and argues that 'it was maybe a bit adventurous to put him on in front of that punk audience who didn't really have a clue who he was'.[5] It might appear that a form of chaotic, sometimes violent rock music had nothing in common with a popular theatre tradition like music hall, which had vanished decades beforehand.

In fact, bringing in Max Wall as a support act was entirely in keeping with Ian Dury's approach. In spite of being connected with punk, Dury's affinity with music hall has been widely acknowledged – by journalists, reviewers, and by Dury himself, who has admitted, 'There's a little bit of music hall in there in the music.'[6] A *Sunday Times* article from 1978 directly compared him with Max Wall (along with Gene Vincent and Norman Wisdom).[7] Before the Hammersmith show, Wall had recorded Dury's song 'England's

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Glory' for Stiff Records, a song which lists popular entertainers such as Frankie Howerd, Max Miller, and Little Tich among other icons of Englishness.

As this would suggest, Dury had a keen awareness of popular theatre. As a child, his mother had taken him to see pantomimes and the British premiere of *West Side Story*, as well as Shakespeare at the Old Vic.[8] According to his biographer Richard Balls, 'He saw himself, not as a singer or "pop star", but as an all-round entertainer.'[9] This was an image he cultivated throughout his career, from the late 1970s, when he had a policy of letting old-age pensioners and children into his shows for half price, to his final appearance at the London Palladium on 6 February 2000, when he told the audience, 'Danny Kaye is listening, Bing is listening.'[10]

Dury frequently included bits of comic business in his act which were consciously influenced by music hall, and the Hammersmith show was no exception. He juggled with a plastic budgie, produced scarves from his blazer sleeves, and used the microphone as a prop, caressing and kissing it. He even put on a Tommy Cooper-style fez and for a moment became a quick-sketch artist, drawing a picture of a blockhead.[11]

Perhaps Dury's popular theatre sensibilities created a sympathetic enough atmosphere to allow Wall eventually to win over a hostile audience, or perhaps Wall's victory reveals a deeper truth: that punk rock performance is very much in the music-hall tradition and should be taken seriously as a form of popular theatre in its own right.

Music-Hall Roots of the Pop Concert

Although the comic song was central to music-hall entertainment, it is rightly thought of as a form of theatre rather than simply the performance of music. In his obituary of Dan Leno, Max Beerbohm described him not as a singer but as 'a brilliant actor', and argued that, 'The technique for acting in a music hall is of a harder, perhaps finer, kind than is needed for acting in a theatre. . . . '[12]

In Britain, the pop concert grew out of the music hall. The first performances by rock and roll singers took place in variety theatres. When Philip Hindin booked Cliff Richard to play at the Met on Edgware Road in the late 1950s, he put twelve other acts on the bill with him, 'in case he didn't succeed'.[13] In his celebrated 1963 performance at Peter Cook's venue, the Establishment, Frankie Howerd joked that this sophisticated satire audience was very different from what he was used to, doing Granada tours with Billy Fury.[14] In 1958, Buddy Holly toured Britain with a full supporting variety bill that included the comedian Des O'Connor, who remembers: 'He'd ask me for jokes to tell between his songs, and I'd give him a few of my less good ones. But in that accent of his, they went down a storm.'[15]

As with Wall and Dury, rock and rollers proved to be uneasy bedfellows with the more traditional acts, and O'Connor has recalled being pelted with eggs, bottles, and other missiles after making fun of a leather-clad heckler whilst appearing on the bill with Cliff Richard at the Chiswick Empire.[16] However, some acts managed to bridge the apparent gap between variety and rock, most notably the skiffle singer Lonnie Donegan. Many of his records for the Pye label were recorded during live performances in variety theatres, and included not only his singing but also the jokes and patter he included between the songs.[17]

Some of the last recordings the great variety comedian Max Miller ever made were duets with Donegan recorded live in 1962. One of them, 'Tit Bits', features spoken gags performed as a double act over the music, and Miller shows his instincts for playing an audience were still intact as he builds a laugh and crows: 'Nah, look at that, look at that! A round of applause! That'll be the best joke of the evening!'[18]

In spite of the historical connections between rock and roll and variety theatre, by the time the pop concert had evolved into an event in its own right the idea that the performers were actors as much as singers had disappeared. Buddy Holly may have told jokes as well as singing, but nobody praised his brilliant acting as they had Dan Leno's. There may well be more obviously theatrical

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examples of pop music shows – Pink Floyd's live show *The Wall* (1980–81), Madonna's *The Girlie Show* (1993), or Ben Elton's recent Queen musical, *We Will Rock You*, for example – but it is punk rock that has the most obvious and immediate links with popular theatre.

Punk Rock: Performance over Music

Punk's origins can be traced to the late 1960s, with the emergence of bands such as The Velvet Underground and The Stooges, whose music was more energetic than complex and whose lyrics delved into uneasy or unpleasant subject matter. In mid-1970s New York, a series of like-minded bands such as The New York Dolls, Television, and The Ramones developed this kind of approach into an identifiable scene. By 1976, punk had emerged in Britain with the formation of The Sex Pistols, The Clash, and many others. The punk scene has continued to exist in one form or another ever since, with bands such as Green Day and The Offspring enjoying considerable commercial success in the last fifteen years.

Central to punk is the idea that musical virtuosity is less important than energy, excitement, and self-expression. As The Sex Pistols memorably declared in February 1976, 'We're not into music . . . We're into chaos.'[19] In fact, most of the Pistols were musically competent enough to play energetic rock and roll very well, although guitarist Steve Jones has acknowledged that Sid Vicious, who replaced Glen Matlock on bass, 'couldn't play a fucking note'.[20] However, their preference for non-musical aspects of pop performance is borne out by their approach.

When the manager of the Sex Pistols, Malcolm McLaren, auditioned Johnny Rotten (a.k.a. John Lydon) for the role of lead singer, he asked him to mime to an Alice Cooper song on the jukebox in the corner of his clothes shop.[21] Crucially, Rotten was asked to mime, not sing. Steve Jones has admitted being influenced by New York Dolls guitarist Johnny Thunders – not by his style of playing but by 'his stances and his looks, and, you know, his moves on stage'.[22]

The Sex Pistols first achieved major recognition not through their music but through an interview on a local TV show, *Today*, presented by Bill Grundy. The group swore, and Grundy goaded them into more swearing. Steve Jones obliged, calling Grundy a 'dirty bastard' and a 'fucking rotter'. Although the show was only broadcast to the London area, the subsequent furore in the press gave the band instant national notoriety, with the *Daily Telegraph* being particularly appalled that such language had been aired at 6.25 p.m. in the middle of 'happy family viewing'.[23] John Lydon looks back on this non-musical performance with pride, arguing, 'It was perfect stand-up comedy!'[24]

There are myriad examples of punk bands, both before and after The Sex Pistols, whose work has moved beyond the boundaries of music into more theatrical modes of performance. In The Stooges' first performances, which John Sinclair compared to the work of Laurie Anderson, they played invented instruments made out of food blenders, oil drums, and even toilets, and on one occasion lead singer Iggy Pop appeared in a suit made of tinfoil, which he proceeded to slowly rip until it was in shreds.[25]

Devo, a band which emerged from Akron, Ohio, in the mid-1970s, have been described by founder member Gerald V. Casale as 'a self-contained conceptual unit, where the visuals and the theatrics and the ideas and the staging were as important as the music'.[26] In keeping with this idea, their first output was not a record but a film, *In the Beginning Was the End: the Truth about De-evolution*, which featured spoken dialogue and surreal visual imagery as well as music. The film was shown at the beginning of their early live shows.

Spizz, who has fronted a series of bands from the late 1970s onwards, has enjoyed considerable cult success in the UK. 'Where's Captain Kirk?' by Spizzenergi, for example, spent over two months at the top of the Independent Singles Chart in 1980. Spizz made his debut at a punk festival in Birmingham, when he borrowed a guitar from an art college friend and persuaded the promoter to give him a slot on the bill. Apart from the

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fact that he was 'still struggling with the E-chord,' there was also another problem: 'I had no material, I had to improvise it as soon as he said yeah.' With no material or musical skill to carry him, Spizz had to survive purely on his connection with the audience. He recently got hold of a recording of the show, and comments:

> In one way it's toe-curlingly embarrassing, but in another way it's outrageously brave. . . . It went down well because it had a core of people just cheering it because it was their mate onstage, but that spread. And I had a rapport with the audience. I thought, 'This is it! This is it! This is art!'[27]

Punk and Theatre

Given this kind of emphasis on performance over music, it is not surprising that punk has been described as theatre since its earliest days. In July 1972, Iggy Pop and David Bowie held a press conference in the Dorchester Hotel, London, following a Stooges show at the Scala cinema the night before. Bowie told journalists,

> Iggy has natural theatre. It's very interesting because it doesn't conform to any standards or rules or structures of theatre. It's his own and it's just a Detroit theatre that he's brought with him. It's straight from the street.[28]

Similarly, Jon Savage's review of The Sex Pistols' show at the Screen on the Green in April 1977 started by acknowledging that 'Malcolm McLaren has a first-class media brain with a perfect instinct for theatre,' and went on to argue that, 'It isn't quite as simple as a band playing. . . . A fine set notwithstanding, theatre ruled.'[29]

More specifically, punk has also frequently been compared to various forms of popular theatre. Savage's review goes on to describe Johnny Rotten as 'a spastic pantomime villain, with evil for real'. It is a description Lydon would probably approve of, having made similar comments himself. In his autobiography, he describes The Sex Pistols as, 'Musical vaudeville. Evil burlesque.'[30] More recently, he has complained that, 'What England didn't understand about The Sex Pistols is that we are music hall!'[31]

Indeed, Lydon names actors and comedians among the most important influences on his alter ego, Johnny Rotten. He has admitted that, 'I die of nerves before I go onstage 'cos I don't know what I'm gonna do. And because of that, I'd have to just pull things out from deep down inside.' He names Arthur Askey, Ken Dodd, and Norman Wisdom among the 'things' he pulls out while performing.[32] Perhaps more surprisingly, he also names Laurence Olivier's Richard III as an important influence:

> When I started, I didn't have much really to use as a source of inspiration. I didn't wanna sound like anybody else out there, or come up with versions of things that had already been done. . . . So my sources were film, theatre, and *Richard III* really fitted into that brilliantly . . . Because Olivier's performance was outrageously over the top.[33]

An influence he doesn't acknowledge is Ian Dury, to whose shows McLaren frequently took the Pistols. Looking back, Dury remembered Rotten 'leaning forwards and growling and holding the microphone just like I did'.[34] Dury, of course, was another key punk figure who acknowledged his debt to popular theatre. Yet another was Iggy Pop, who named his band after the vaudeville and film comedy troupe The Three Stooges, whose violent comedy he loved.[35]

Punk had even more direct connections with theatre, though. In the early 1970s, the Playhouse of the Theater of the Ridiculous put on plays featuring key figures in the New York punk scene such as Wayne County, Cherry Vanilla, and Patti Smith.[36] Smith also had an affair with Sam Shepard while appearing with him in *Cowboy Mouth*, a two-hander play they wrote together.[37]

Given punk's influences, its actual links with theatre, and its obvious theatricality, it seems high time to acknowledge it as a bona fide form of popular theatre and examine it accordingly.

The Ramones Parody the Rock Show

The Ramones were formed in 1974, and quickly made a name for themselves on the New York scene. In many ways they were

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The Ramones.

the archetypal punk band, with the heavily distorted three-chord, guitar-based style that would be emulated by so many of the groups that followed. The original drummer, Tommy Ramone, recalls their innovative approach:

> What we had was an idea that it's not the virtuosity that counts, it's the ideas themselves that are important, which was revolutionary at that time. . . . We were the first band to intellectually grasp the notion that virtuosity is not only not necessary, but might get in the way.[38]

Jon Savage has described their sound as 'a *reductio ad absurdum* of the story of pop music so far: the Beatles, the Girl Groups, the Beach Boys, the Stooges, Herman's Hermits, pulped down into songs so brief that they reflected the fragmented attention span of the first TV generation'.[39]

However, it was not just the music which The Ramones purified, simplified, and exaggerated into a glorious parody. They also did the same for the theatre of the rock show. John Holstrom, co-founder of the seminal *Punk* magazine and the cartoonist who provided illustrations for The Ramones' record sleeves, has provided a telling description of the band's stage show:

> I liked a stage show and to me The Ramones were very theatrical because they *didn't* move. You had all these guys doing theatrical stuff that was so excessive, yet The Ramones were getting more out of Joey moving his leg. They would just stand still. Joey would move his leg, Johnny would jump once or twice and they would just make the right moves. It was minimal, the whole approach. It was the way they dressed, the way they moved.[40]

When I saw The Ramones at the Octagon in Sheffield in 1987, I found this minimalist approach hilarious. Many of the classic features of rock stagecraft were there, but simplified to the point of absurdity. At the beginning of their set, the stage was filled with dry ice, allowing the band to enter without being seen. Then, as their figures started to emerge from the mist, Dee Dee Ramone's trademark shout of '1–2–3–4' (almost a catchphrase) rang out from the PA, and the music began, incredibly loud and fast. It continued like

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that for about an hour, each song very similar, with hardly a break in between them. The band struck exaggerated versions of classic rock poses, legs akimbo, guitars low-slung, and played hard. This was only varied by moments when, for no apparent reason, both guitarists took a couple of steps forward and stood up on a little riser-step, then both stepped back again.[41] This kind of staging was not accidental, and just as the band had created their sound by pulping down the pop music that preceded them, they built their live show in much the same way. Guitarist Johnny Ramone put much thought into it:

> I would just go to shows and see everything that the band did and go, 'Wow, they didn't walk on stage very well,' you know. Or, 'That band, wow, that band walked on stage great.' Make all these mental notes of the stuff. And then every little piece . . . would be so important – just how we stood on the stage, how you walked on the stage, the way I had the PA set up. . . . Don't look at the drummer, don't be looking across at me, you know, look forward, the audience is forward. . . . So everything became very important, every little detail.[42]

Johnny was very strict in enforcing these details. When CJ Ramone replaced Dee Dee on bass, Johnny told him: 'Look at yourself in the mirror when we're playing. When you see me go forward, you go forward. When I go back, you go back. When you're at home, watch videotapes of Dee Dee.' CJ remembered that when he broke out of the strict Ramones stage conventions by taking his shirt off, after the show Johnny shouted at him: 'What the fuck's wrong with you? You see us taking our shirts off? Why'd ya take your shirt off?'[43]

Costume

One of the most important theatrical elements of the live show is costume, as The Clash's Joe Strummer acknowledged:

> Some people think, 'Well it doesn't matter what you wear,' but at the bottom of it, it's all show business in the best sense of the word. Like if you wanna get to someone's head, you've got to put on a show, and that means everything's got to be right.[44]

The Ramones wore their hair long and dressed in torn jeans, black leather jackets, and T-shirts. This may seem unremarkable, nothing more than traditional rock and roll attire, but like every other aspect of their show, the costume was consciously chosen, and the tears in their trousers were crucial, as John Holstrom has suggested: 'I was at Arturo [Vega]'s loft before one of their biggest shows at CBGB and Johnny's got super-ripped pants and he says, "Well, I was gonna save these for when we played the Garden, but I guess I'll break them out for this show."'[45] The image was rigidly enforced, and photographer Roberta Bayley has described how difficult this could be:

> Dee Dee . . . always expressed all this frustration about having been locked into the bowl haircut . . . He wanted to dress differently and, you know, have punk rock hair. . . . Instead he had to have the uniform. You know, it was like this regimented, 'Here's your uniform – put that on.'[46]

The long-hair-leather-torn-jeans look gave the band a tough, streetwise image, but as Bayley's comments suggest, it also gave them a visual unity. It was important for them to share a common identity, hence the pretence that they were brothers and the uniform adoption of the 'Ramone' surname. All of this belied the tensions that existed between the long-term band members, who were bitterly divided both over politics and personal matters.

A more extreme example of uniform costume is Devo. They have worn a series of uniform outfits in their stage shows: shorts and black T-shirts printed with the band's name; futuristic yellow boiler suits; and, perhaps most extreme, black plastic trousers and jackets with circular, red plastic hats known as 'energy domes'.[47] All of these costumes relate to the band's stated belief that in the age of consumerism, the human race is de-evolving and that individuality is becoming irrelevant.

The Clash took a lead from The Ramones when they realized that, as bassist Paul Simonon put it, they 'needed to cut a unified look onstage'. For this reason, at their second ever performance, for an invited audience of

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Spizz during the hard-hats and T-shirts year.

journalists, they sprayed their clothes and equipment with car paint. As lead singer Joe Strummer reflected, 'We came out and we must have looked fairly striking, if not somewhat ridiculous.'[48]

Ridiculous or not, this example reveals another important aspect of punk stagecraft: the use of cheap, accessible materials and the idea that performers (or fans) could make or adapt their own clothes. Paul Simonon was particularly adept at this, drawing on his art school training:

> I got some gloss paint, and got my shoes, and just sort of splashed a bit here and there and it looked pretty good, and I took it a stage further and got this black shirt, did a bit on that with sort of a different paint. It was all being aware of your textures and, you know, all that sort of arty stuff! . . . There were sort of brass stencils and you could clip them together and we used those to sort of spray on sort of lettering, whatever. And it sort of became sort of a Rauschenberg thing . . . [49]

Just as the musical approach stressed passion over technique, the idea was that clothing could look exciting even if it was covered in rips and stains. Simonon extended this idea by making his instrument look as ruined as his clothing: 'I mean, the moment I got a new bass, I'd start getting a hammer, start smashing it around, digging bits out.'[50]

One of the unique things about Spizz was that he would change the name of his band every year, and this was reflected in the costumes he made. In 1978, the band was a two-piece called Spizz Oil, and they wore hard hats and black T-shirts. These had the word 'OIL' repeatedly stencilled on in white paint, forming a diagonal line, which went in opposite directions on each member's shirt. The hard hats were supposed to make the band look like oil-rig workers, but also had a practical function, as they discovered when someone threw a beer glass at guitarist Pete Petrol's head.

Spizz describes the stencilled T-shirts as 'an art thing'. In 1979, when the band became a five-piece called Spizzenergi, Spizz changed the spelling of the word 'energy' because 'the Y was ugly at the end'. Clearly, the look of the name on T-shirts had to be right even if

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they were home made. Ironically, Spizz's DIY approach was so effective that it led to criticism, because, 'People thought it was engineered by some clever manager.'[51]

Staging

For The Clash, staging was as crucial as costume, and this started with the choice of venue. Their road manager, Johnny Green remembers:

> The room was important. They liked old. They liked seedy decay. That was kind of quite important to them. The trouble is, choice was quite difficult. So a lot of provincial bigger towns, or smaller cities, we worked off the Top Rank circuit, which was pretty horrible, really cheesy – we're into Jimmy Tarbuck territory here.[52]

They created staging to suit the venues, as a contemporary review of a 1977 show at the Rainbow Theatre, London, acknowledges:

> To conquer the Rainbow, you can't just amble on – some elements of a show are needed. One of these is staging: at the back of the stage is a 25-foot backdrop, a blow-up of the back cover of the album or a similar shot. Next, lights flash – burning pink and orange, as well as the more conventional colours.

Lighting was used with precision to create carefully timed dramatic moments in particular songs. The reviewer picks out one such moment: ' "1977", with Strummer framed for an instant in ice-blue for the last word – "1984".'[53] The backdrop was one of a series that the band used. Others included images of Second World War aircraft, one sewn together from flags of the world bought from Edgington and Black, and another painted by hip hop graffiti artists in New York.[54]

The Ramones' backdrops were painted by their artistic director Arturo Vega, who would make two versions, one for small clubs and one for larger venues.[55] Vega also designed their lighting, a job over which he took considerable pains: 'We wanted a Ramones show to look different, so I insisted we carry some lights so the kids would walk in and go, "Wow! I've never seen this before." We wanted the show to look unique.' The very fact that the band appointed an artistic director indicates that however raw and instinctive their performance seemed to be, it was actually rigorously controlled. This applied to the lighting as much as any other element, as Johnny Ramone acknowledged: 'Any time there was a light change that was off cue, I would tell him after the show. I was always watching the light changes play in with everything else.'[56]

Stage Personae

As John Lydon's comment about the Grundy interview suggests, there is much in common between punk rock shows and stand-up comedy, and this goes beyond Ian Dury's comic stage business with scarves and plastic budgies. Both forms rely heavily on the mysterious quality of charisma. In a review of Dury's performance in the 1977 Bunch of Stiffs tour, Annie Nightingale wrote that he had 'that intangible thing called stage presence' and 'infinite star quality'.[57] Patti Smith acknowledged the importance of charisma in her own work:

> Physical presence in performing is more important than what you're saying. Quality comes through of course, but if your quality of intellect is high, and your love of the audience is evident, and you have a strong physical presence, you can get away with anything.[58]

Charisma is important because both stand-up and punk emphasize the personality of the performers, and in both cases the boundary between life and art is blurred. The person on stage is not an actor playing a fictional character, but an expression of the performer's self with varying degrees of authenticity. This is reflected in the fact that, unlike conventional theatre, costume is not simply worn for the duration of the show. As Johnny Green points out: The Clash 'didn't change out of their stage clothes into other clothes, they wore those clothes all day long. So if you like, the performance was from when they got up to when they went to bed.' Green, who knew the band intimately, describes how the lead singer's stage persona related to his offstage identity:

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It's a stylized persona based on an aspect of personality in the person. So it's not invented. . . . But it's an aspect of that person. You know, Joe Strummer is a quiet sensitive man, who likes to read a book of a night. But he's also a loudmouthed, ranting, violent man. And he's acknowledging that. He's not saying, 'I'm only presenting those socially acceptable parts of my personality to the general public.' He's going, 'I'm as fucked up and twisted as you are. And I'm not ashamed of it.'[59]

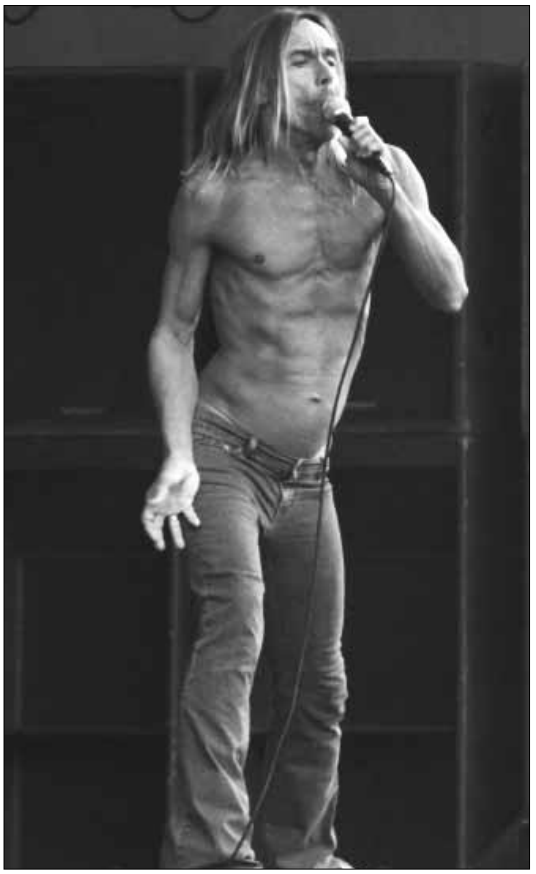
This kind of warts-and-all approach was shared by The Ramones, who blurred the boundary between life and art still further by engaging in real arguments onstage. Grainy black and white footage of one of their early New York performances shows lead singer Joey announcing the song 'I Don't Wanna Go Down to the Basement', which sparks off a short but bitter row:

tommy: Wait a minute, let's do 'Loudmouth', alright?
johnny: Fuck it. Fuck it.
dee dee: I wanna do 'I Don't Wanna Go Down to the Basement' too.
johnny: Yeah . . . it's two against one!
dee dee: I really do!
tommy: Fuck you all![60]

In other cases, the difference between onstage and offstage behaviour was much greater. Photographer and filmmaker Bob Gruen has described the transformation Iggy Pop underwent before going onstage, using his real name (Jim) and stage name (Iggy) to distinguish between person and persona:

You're talking to Jim one minute and the next thing he goes to get ready for the show and is just kind of standing in the corner. It's sort of like the Incredible Hulk. His body gets bigger and the muscles get hard, and he just turns into this other identity. Iggy comes charging out from nowhere and hits the stage running. Look out! Don't be in his way. . . . Then, when he came off the stage after doing that show . . . that persona kind of leaves him in waves as he prances towards the dressing room. . . . Within three or four minutes you find yourself in the company of Jim again. . . .[61]

This account highlights another important point: like actors and comedians, punk performers would warm up, both physically and mentally, before the show. John Holstrom



Iggy Pop.

was impressed by the fact that The Ramones warmed up 'like athletes' before a show.[62] Johnny Green remembers each member of The Clash warming up in a different way, some doing 'little boxing moves', some sitting quietly to gain 'inner focus'. Part of his job as road manager was 'to make sure that that was all brought together into a bond the moment before the dressing-room door opened and we ran . . . for the stage.'[63]

Characterization

Sometimes punk performers go beyond a stage persona and veer into characterization. Even in his pub rock band Kilburn and the High Roads, Ian Dury included moments like this. For example, in the song 'Billy Bentley' he would wear a yellow satin boxer's robe with the name on the back, thus taking on the role of the character in the song.[64]

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Another song, 'I Made Mary Cry', told the story of a knife attack at a bus shelter. It was sung in the first person, from the point of view of the psychopath. During the song, Dury would slip a knife out from under his jacket to build the sinister atmosphere.[65] The song was supposed to be darkly humorous, but it had to be performed straightfaced, and Dury would strictly prevent his band from laughing while they played it, threatening to take 'immediate action' if any of them did.[66]

The idea of singing in character, with costumes and props to heighten the effect, reflects the influence of music hall on Dury's work. This kind of characterization can also be seen in the work of Californian punk band Dead Kennedys' lead singer Jello Biafra, although here the music-hall influence is probably unconscious. Many of Dead Kennedys' songs were sung in character, usually portraying people the singer found morally obnoxious: the Democrat politician Jerry Brown, portrayed as a hippy trying to impose flower-power-tinged fascism on the population in 'California über Alles'; corrupt policemen in 'Police Truck'; and vacuous television presenters in 'MTV – Get off the Air!'

Biafra had undertaken and enjoyed some drama training, praising the 'really good instructors and directors' who had taught him, and acknowledging their influence on his live shows: 'Method acting comes into play with our performance, and sometimes it really sinks in and we're totally demonic and possessed.'[67] Given his training, it is not surprising that in live shows Biafra acted out the characters in the songs.

In a 1979 show, he portrayed the pathetic junkie in the song 'Drug Me' by pulling wild, distressed facial expressions and frantically rubbing his head. To the rhythm of a guitar riff, he used the microphone to mime violently shaking a bottle of pills into his hand and tipping his head back to swallow them.[68] The performance of 'Moral Majority' at a 1984 show in San Francisco was even more theatrical. The song starts with the band slowly playing 'Rock of Ages' as Biafra adopts the guise of a televangelist. He lays his hands on the heads of people in the front row, shouting, 'Let me touch ya!' Before moving into the lyrics of the song, he improvises a speech as the preacher:

> You know what I am? I am a hope-dope pusher. Give me your money and it'll be just like shooting junk! You'll be able to live with your pathetic self! And avoid looking in the mirror! But just like junk, man, the price of being addicted to the Lord goes up! If you wanna shoot up with God, you've got to buy more and more of it to shoot up, or it just ain't gonna be the same!

To emphasize the point, he wraps the microphone lead around his arm and pretends to shoot up, then sends up San Francisco's hippy heritage by adopting a crazed-but-happy face and a spaced-out voice, saying, 'Oh God!! I feel so good now!! I want it to last forever! Oh God, now I'm a part of San Francisco, hwoooarghh!' The sequence ends with a musical joke: 'Rock of Ages' morphs into the theme tune from *The Mickey Mouse Club*, and Biafra and the band sing: 'M–I–C / K–E–Y / M-O-U-S-E.'

The characterization is suddenly dropped as the final section of the song bursts out, loud and fast, and the stage fills with members of the audience dancing wildly and diving back into the audience. Biafra continues to sing, now in his own voice, but he has become practically invisible among the flailing limbs and bodies.[69]

The Audience

What this highlights is that, as in stand-up comedy, there is only a thin line between performer and audience, stage and auditorium. By heckling (in stand-up) or stage diving (in punk), members of the audience can become part of the show. Unlike in straight theatre, stand-up and punk both reject a fictional narrative frame and emphasize the here-and-now. As Joe Strummer puts it, 'Everything coming off that stage you manufactured in that moment, and it was really fast and really hard and very loud.'[70]

Like most other elements of punk shows, the performer–audience relationship is often carefully considered. In their early days, The Clash experimented with the idea of distancing themselves from their audience, which

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Dead Kennedys in performance.

nearly proved disastrous, as Strummer has recalled: '[We] were in the middle of this ludicrous Stalinist vibe where we decided it was uncool to talk to the audience.' A string snapped, and he had to fill the time while it was being changed by holding up his radio to the microphone. As luck would have it, it was picking up a discussion programme about IRA bombs, and the quick-thinking sound engineer put a delay effect on it to heighten the moment.[71]

Nonetheless, the incident made the group realize that they needed to start talking to the audience again, and forge a closer relationship. This was probably wise, as other bands were criticized for being aloof. In *Sounds* magazine, Jon Savage chided The Jam for being 'unreachable' and 'hardly bothering to really communicate with the audience'.[72]

By contrast, Savage praised Strummer for a particular moment in a Clash show:

> During the first encore, 'Garage Land', he reaches out into the audience, shakes hands and swaps his shirt for some guy's T-shirt. Look: the audience–performer barrier has been smashed in a rare moment of tenderness and solidarity.[73]

One of Johnny Green's duties with the band involved a similar kind of sharing, which, as he explains, helped to break down the formality of the audience in a different way: 'One of my jobs was to get a few boxes of badges, and just throw them into the audience, and the audience were fighting for them, it was great.'[74]

Like stand-up comedians, punk bands try to adapt to the local area they are playing in. Green recalls, 'Strummer always went for a walk . . . around whatever town we were playing in . . . And he would bump into people, people would come up to him, he used to carry a little notebook and he'd write people's names down and put them on the guest list.'[75] Ian Dury would use the old stand-up trick of finding out about the town he was playing in, so as to throw in some local references. His minder Fred Rowe has recalled:

> He used to send me out to find the name of the local nut house, the chief of police, a famous man there and a famous criminal, and he'd bring all this up in the gig and say, 'Hang on, hang on, don't go nutty or you'll wind up in Park View,'

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and they'd all go, 'Cor, he knows about Park View,' and the people used to like him because he went to the trouble of finding out about their little town.[76]

In other cases, the relationship with the audience is less cosy, with the possibility of confrontation or violence breaking out. And Punk audiences can be volatile: when The Clash played at venues like the Rainbow and the Manchester Apollo, the fans expressed their frustration at the fixed seating by tearing the front rows out.[77] The band, who hated seated venues, would do nothing to stop them, but would intervene in shows where fights broke out in the audience.[78]

The Sex Pistols' Johnny Rotten was more openly confrontational, feigning boredom, verbally abusing the audience, and even getting involved in fights with them. An article published in 1976 describes him telling an unresponsive audience, 'Clap, you fuckers!' Photographer Ray Stevenson remembers how he singled out groups or individuals and 'stared straight at them and provoked and needled them beyond belief'.[79] Famously, The Sex Pistols' final show at the San Francisco Winterland ended with Rotten asking the audience, 'Ever get the feeling you've been cheated?'[80]

Iggy Pop's Psychodrama

This abusive approach to the audience goes back to the origins of punk, and is probably at its most extreme in the work of Iggy Pop. Like Rotten, he would single people out for verbal or physical abuse, but he might also try sexual flirtation. He often leapt down from the stage. At the end of the 1968 show at the University of Michigan (which won The Stooges their record deal with Elektra), he remembers wandering among the audience: 'I had this maternity dress on and a white face and I was doing unattractive things, spitting on people, things like that.'[81]

Footage of a televised 1970 concert shows him cavorting around the stage in silver gloves and a bare torso. The announcer tries to sound enthusiastic, but there is a note of panic in his voice as he brightly declares, 'There goes Iggy, right into the crowd! We've lost audio on him.' Iggy reappears climbing up onto somebody's shoulders, putting him among the crowd but also above them. He produces a jar of something, dips his hand in, and throws lumps of it randomly into the audience. 'That's peanut butter!' shouts the announcer.[82]

In a 1981 show at the 80,000-capacity Pontiac Silverdome near Detroit, Pop wore a miniskirt and provoked the audience to the point where they threw things at the stage, showering him with hairbrushes, combs, lighters, shoes, and other objects. As an encore, he walked out with a box full of the stuff and said, 'I want to thank you all for being so generous tonight,' before listing every item in the box.[83]

Pop has explained how he approaches his audience: 'I can't say I really care . . . what the audience does – it's their business what they do and really none of mine. . . . I just want to meet them and do things – I just want to see what develops. . . .'[84] This attitude gave his shows an unpredictability which made them exciting, as John Sinclair pointed out: 'Iggy had gone beyond performance – to the point where it really was some kind of psychodrama. It exceeded conventional theatre. He might do anything. That was his act.'[85]

The anything that he might do included turning on himself as well as the audience. He regularly cut himself, clawing at his chest with his fingernails or drumsticks or broken glass, and smearing himself and other band members with his blood.[86] This was not the only example of bloodletting in punk performance. For Tina Weymouth, bassist with the more genteel Talking Heads, it was a by-product of struggling with her instrument:

> The biggest thrill was to kinda be all thumbs. Not to be capable or technically proficient, but to be a bit all thumbs. So I was playing to the point where my fingers were bleeding, and I remember that people would get very excited when the blood would start running down my pick guard.[87]

The key difference with Iggy Pop was that it was deliberate, part of a carefully considered aesthetic approach, influenced by 'people in religious dancing or rituals, the trance-like

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thing'.[88] If there were echoes of Artaud here, this did not go unnoticed. A 1973 article described a Stooges show as 'the theatre of cruelty come alive'.[89]

The Popular Meets the Avant Garde

Looking in detail at punk rock shows, it becomes clear that the theatrical elements of staging, lighting, and costume are as carefully thought out as the music, with a common aesthetic approach based on passion, energy, and the idea that something which is crude or damaged can be exciting for the eye and the ear. The influence of actors, comedians, and popular theatre on punk is obvious in the qualities it shares with forms such as stand-up comedy and music hall. All of them emphasize the personality of the performer, situate the performance firmly in the here-and-now, and make the audience play a very active role in the show. Punk also shares with music hall the tendency to sing songs in character as a way of critiquing social types, in some cases using costume and props to heighten the effect.

However, as we have seen, punk was also influenced by more 'highbrow' forms of theatre, with allusions to 'method acting' and 'theatre of cruelty' by both performers and critics. What makes punk so exciting is that, like early twentieth-century cabaret, it brings together high and low art, putting ideas from the avant garde into a popular theatrical form. As punk poet John Cooper Clarke put it in 1978, it is 'the nearest thing that there's ever been to the working classes going into areas like surrealism and Dada'.[90] Many key figures in punk had an art school training, including Malcolm McLaren, Johnny Rotten, and various members of The Clash. Devo's Gerald V. Casale has spoken of his band's 'knowledge of early twentieth-century movements such as surrealism and Dada and German Expressionism', and describes their song 'Jocko Homo' as their 'manifesto, much like a futurist manifesto'.[91]

A very good example of elements of popular theatre combining with the avant-garde influence is provided by Spizz. Before he started his first band, he did a foundation course in fine art at Solihull Tech. Declaring that, 'from the Impressionists onwards it got exciting as far as I'm concerned,' he lists Bauhaus, Picasso, Warhol, and Joseph Beuys among his influences. The appeal of his work is that such influences sit side by side with a kind of comic silliness, so that in live shows, as well as singing songs full of Futurist-influenced industrial imagery, he makes jokey comments and sprays silly string into the audience.

The song 'Clocks Are Big' encapsulates this contrast perfectly. It lasts about thirty seconds, and the lyric consists of one surreal line, repeated three times: 'Clocks are big, machines are heavy.' When Spizz dreamed this up whilst drunk at a party, it seemed to be full of the kind of imagery found in the art movements he admired, particularly Futurism: 'It just . . . had such gravitas. And I came out to tell my mates, and they all fell about laughing! On the floor. And I thought, "If it does that *as well*, I'll do that!"' With this in mind, he got the band to set it to a 'cartoon-type tune' and turned it into a call-and-response piece in which he shouts 'Clocks are big!' and the audience replies, 'Machines are heavy!' Thus an idea inspired by the avant garde was turned into that mainstay of popular theatre, audience participation.

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