



I'm So Bored with the USA: Reflecting America in British Punk Memoirs of the 1970s

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Abstract

In recent years there have been an increasing number of biographies and autobiographies written by the leading figures of the British punk scene of the Seventies and Eighties. As we pass the 40th anniversary of 1977, it can be argued that the British punk scene has also 'come of age' in academia with a number of retrospectives that examine not only the contemporary impact of punk in the Seventies but also the legacy of the punk movement in shaping British culture.

With a focus on John Lydon's text *Rotten: No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs* (1993) and Viv Albertine's *Clothes, Clothes, Clothes. Music, Music, Music. Boys, Boys, Boys* (2014), this article will examine how these autobiographies draw attention to ways in which the British sub-cultural scene offered a platform through which British culture and identity could be reassessed as anti-American and anti-capitalist. This study will also highlight to what extent the self-reflexive framing of these personal narratives within the larger political, cultural and social landscape, can be read as a characteristic feature of the British punk memoir. Through these texts it is possible to uncover the pivotal role of the British punk scene in the development of a counter cultural identity that mirrored changes in the contemporary national identity. As such, punk memoirs, biographies and autobiographies not only give perspectives on a subversive youth cultural scene but, perhaps more importantly, can offer unique insights into the evolution of post-imperial British identity.

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According to Viv Albertine of the legendary all female punk band, The Slits, 'Anyone who writes an autobiography is either a twat or broke. I'm a bit of both' (1). This striking statement, typical of punk memoirs and autobiographies written by early British punk rock artists like John Lydon and Viv Albertine, signals a pervasive tension at the heart of punk memoir and autobiography. The self-effacing approach found in many of these personal narratives with their characteristically dismissive attitude and a 'take it or leave it' tone, belies the complex and difficult task of reflecting on one of the most creative, but controversial, rock sub-genres. Indeed, Lydon states that he has been obliged to write an account of his life in his 1993 autobiography *Rotten: No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs* in order to contradict 'malicious lies' about both himself and the Sex Pistols. He positions his celebrity memoir, less as self-aggrandisement or what critic Katja Lee describes as an 'integral component of image management strategies that seek to maintain and inflate the fame of celebrities' (267), and more as a necessary counterpoint text to balance media inaccuracies. He states, 'Much has been written about the Sex Pistols. Much of it has been sensationalism or journalistic psychobabble. The rest has been mere spite. This book is as close to the truth as one can get, looking back on the events from the inside' (*Rotten* ii).

However, Albertine's self-deprecating reason for writing her own memoir, and Lydon's seeming reluctance to do so, also highlight the underlying dilemma of being seen to 'sell-out' a subgenre that is still fraught with questions about legacy, nostalgia and definitions of the British punk scene of the 1970s. Front-and-centre of both accounts are forthright claims that these are both subjective versions of the British punk scene, written in order to prevent others from misrepresenting or 'selling off' inaccurate and 'definitive' accounts of the scene. As Helen Reddington has noted, this question of authenticity is a sensitive issue in writings about rock music because texts must counter the potential accusation of giving summary definition to rock scenes that were characterised by their freedom from 'labels'. Selling out, she notes 'has always been part of rock mythology; this was a double betrayal, given the political core within much punk music and within its subculture' (Reddington 422). Both memoirs by Lydon and Albertine assiduously and consciously try to avoid this criticism in their respective texts.

To some extent the recent publication of innumerable punk autobiographies, biographies and memoirs is a direct consequence of a growing academic interest in the neglected history of the subculture that continues to be identified with social and political protest and critical countercultural movements around the globe. As Andy Bennet suggests in *Punk's Not Dead* (2006) this research not only involves examining the legacy of the punk movement of the 1970s for those involved at the time and who

continue to identify as punk, but crucially involves a multi-generational approach as punk subculture continues to be adopted and adapted by new generations. Indeed, there is a growing trend to 'reflect on the importance of defining and understanding the legacy of punk and its importance in shaping our cultures and societies both in Europe and beyond' (Raghunath 5). This research crosses many disciplines. However, the analysis of contemporary celebrity punk memoirs produced by rock musicians from the 1970s offers critical insights on the scene and forms a unique body of texts. They give the personal story of 'what it was like to be in a punk band' but often foreground the political and cultural importance of punk at the time. It is this aspect, the self-conscious curation of the punk scene within these texts and this fusion of the personal and public narratives, that makes these punk memoirs noteworthy.

In fact what emerges from many early punk memoirs and autobiographies is a reflective engagement with the representation of a particular cultural and political moment that is linked to broader questions about a post-imperial British culture in the 1970s. Unlike most rock memoirs, such as Keith Richards *Life* (2010), that are focused on maintaining a public persona and simply giving more 'back-story' to the artist's life as a rock star, British punk memoirs cultivate a more nuanced approach. Far from repeating the common British 'rock-star' narrative that frequently includes a description of their first contact with US rock n roll music in purely personal terms, punk memoirs and texts often put this cultural contact into a political context. They describe the ways in which their musical awakenings also serve to highlight the paucity of relevant British culture in their lives and the growing power of American cultural dominance.

This can be seen in both Lydon and Albertine's memoirs as they chart the blurred boundary of the personal and the political that was part of the British punk music scene. They reflect a complex, ambiguous and oftentimes contradictory relationship with a dominant American culture. On one hand, rock n roll promised an alternative and escape from the depression of a post war Britain that was struggling to come to terms with its relegated importance in the world but on the other hand proved insufficient to reflect the political and social realities of a disaffected generation. What becomes clear through their narratives is that Lydon's and Albertine's lives were, like many members of this alternative scene, connected by this awareness and their experiences as young British working class rebels trying to forge meaningful identities. It is striking that their engagement with punk, a musical genre that was initially founded in an American underground art scene, often shows contradictory views of that US music scene. Whilst Lydon rejects it as almost an irrelevance for his growing political awareness, constructing and subsequently performing a new British

identity, the opposite is true for Albertine, for whom the Anglo-American exchange is useful in forging a feminist punk perspective.

Both memoirs are also highly original texts that, to a large extent, subvert our expectations of typical rock memoirs. They both self-consciously reflect what Paul Eakin describes as the 'performance of the autobiographical act' and both include elements of punk culture: bricolage, DIY and cut-n-paste, that challenge the usual linear narrative. Albertine's account does not, as one might anticipate, focus on the important legacy of The Slits as a game-changing female band that, according to Brian Cogan, was 'the band that challenged the prevalent attitudes towards gender (both inside and outside the punk scene) and redefined punk rock' (122). Instead, Albertine's autobiography is a sensitive portrait of a woman's personal journey through the male dominated transatlantic punk scene. It charts her individual experience through shifts in British culture from the 1950s up to the present, measured through a catalogue of musical, fashion and sexual experiences. Her 'version' of events is a fascinating socio-historical document, mapping a growing awareness of early feminist ideas. She contrasts and highlights the position of women artists in the US and the UK in order to create a personal, individual voice. John Lydon's *Rotten*, that opens with a description of the demise of the Sex Pistols on their first US tour, is also unusual in that it is a compilation of voices and texts (song lyrics, statements and even court affidavits) that construct a picture of his own views on a failing British culture- that is also often defined in contrast to American culture.

This paper therefore seeks to examine how these two leading figures of the British punk movement, Lydon and Albertine, produce memoirs that both describe their own personal experiences of the British punk scene that emerges from the backdrop of a dominant American culture. Although punk evolved as a transatlantic scene, an examination of John Lydon's and Viv Albertine's texts indicates that Punk in the UK became an important platform for a new counter cultural movement that specifically came to be focused on contemporary issues that were at the core of a fragmenting British culture such as class, race and gender. It is the ways in which their differing views of the US help shape their developing identities that this paper will address. I shall seek to examine to what extent Albertine and Lydon present their narrative reflections on America in this context, highlighting how they both self-consciously construct (and often perform) a new British punk identity.

Revisiting 'Blighty' in Transatlantic Punk

It is generally accepted that the transatlantic punk scene evolved from a cross-pollination of both American and British music scenes of the 1970s, what Pete Lentini describes as an emergent cultural and musical form formed 'through a process of cultural syncretism' (155). To a large extent this is true as, on both sides of the Atlantic, the countercultures have been read as a response to an Anglo-American postmodern crisis of representation that existed in the early 1970s. Punk was a complex youth movement that grew out of difficult economic and social situations in the US and UK. It gained ground through repeatedly, and with self-reflexive irony, subverting a range of established cultural norms and recycling 'cultural images for the purposes of parody and shocking juxtaposition' in an attempt to deconstruct and challenge power structures within the dominant cultural movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s (Moore 307).¹ However, there are a number of different perspectives that question the extent of the exchange between the two sites in Britain and America and thereby question the validity of claims of an oversimplified interconnection that are often presented in critical examinations of punk. It remains a controversial and perennially debated issue.²

Legs McNeil and Gillian McCain in their autobiography *Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk* (2016) ground the origin of punk in a New York context. They state that punk evolved from the original music of The Velvet Underground that broke taboos through song lyrics and gave licence for bands to then challenge cultural and social norms. For McNeil and McCain, The Stooges nihilism, the androgyny of the New York Dolls and the art school ethos of Talking Heads began to define the beginning of punk, a scene that soon included Patti Smith, Television and the Ramones and became centred around clubs such as CBGBs and Max's Kansas City. They are less inclined to acknowledge the influence of British artists such as Marc Bolan, David Bowie or even later the Sex Pistols, instead suggesting that the relationship between the punks in the UK and US was, less an exchange of ideas, and more of a one-way trajectory from New York to London.

Others critics are less parochial in their approach and view the transatlantic exchange as essential to the punk movement and, like Ross Hanfleur in *Punk Rock, Hardcore and Globalisation* (2015), see punk as emerging from a transatlantic sharing of ideas that mutually affected the evolution of the scene. Hanfleur discusses the influence of The Who, The Rolling Stones and The Kinks on the US punk music scene. He also draws particular attention to a pivotal moment in 1974 when Malcolm McClaren visited New York and is 'enchanted' by his encounter with the New York

Dolls, returning to London to form the Sex Pistols and, with designer Vivienne Westwood, reportedly invent the 'punk style' in their London's Kings Road boutique. Hanfleur emphasises the mutual influences that created punk music and the punk subculture:

Arguments over whether punk emerged in the US or the UK obscure the fact that what eventually became punk emerged from the musical and stylistic cross fertilisation across two continents, a back 'n' forth sharing between pub and garage rock and other underground cutting edge scenes. Regardless of who was most influential, even contemporary punks acknowledge the Sex Pistols and the Clash, the Ramones and the Stooges as vitally important to punk's history. (280)

What is clear from the memoirs of the contemporary artists from this scene, as well as the recent academic analysis of punk, is that the arguments and discussions about the authentic birthplace of punk are, to a large extent, subjective and remain open to interpretation. More relevant perhaps is an exploration of the ways in which British punk had an arguably far more invested and sometimes antagonistic relationship with America and the global capitalism (both cultural as well as material) of American music in general. This is a tension that was usually entirely absent in accounts of the American subcultural scene that, certainly in the 1970s, accepted its rock n roll roots and more often than not failed to question American cultural dominance. As Chrissie Hynde points out in her autobiography *Reckless* (2016) when describing her childhood in Ohio 'We had industry and abundant, rolling farmland for hundreds of miles to the south, east and west. (See how proud I am?). The Seneca Indian named it "Ohi-yo" meaning "it is beautiful, beautiful river" Yes, Ohio: so beautiful' (4). She also goes on to state:

The United States led the West, and the citizens of the world all wanted to be like us. We had Frank Sinatra and Elvis. We had Marilyn Monroe and James Dean. Everyone wanted to stand with us as we took our place in the sun. They all knew about us, but we didn't know about them. (5)

Hynde's uncritical view of the US contrasts with the view of her British punk contemporary, Viv Albertine, whose experience of the UK in her autobiography reflects quite differently on post-war British life as hostile, uncomfortable and claustrophobic. Her descriptions of UK suburban life are revealing, 'The house smells of mothballs and we have to be quiet all the time, I really identify with Anne Frank

tiptoeing around her loft' (*Clothes* 11) and later, 'I look up and down the street as if someone might pop out of a doorway and whisk me away, but all I can see is houses, houses, houses, stretching off into infinity. I feel sick. I hate them' (19). This threatening and oppressive context is a repeated theme in Albertine's memoir. Frequently, London is described as filthy and on the verge of collapse, 'Outside, Oxford Street looks Dickensian. Most of the shops are boarded up, there are mountains of rotting rubbish piled along the edge of pavements because of the dustmen's strike and half the lamps are off due to electricity rationing' (136). Albertine is also positively explicit that American rock n roll music had made a deeply positive impression on her as a child and she describes her first encounter with it and the profound effect it had on her, 'Until today I thought life was always going to be made up of sad, angry grown-ups, dreary music, stewed meat, boiled vegetables, church and school. Now everything's changed: I've found the meaning of life, hidden in the grooves of a flat plastic disc' (17).

In fact, Albertine's experience echoes that of many memoirs of earlier British rock musicians who identified the enormous importance of American music as the genesis of British rock which, certainly in the 1950s and 1960s, was emulating and inspired by American culture. It seemingly provided a lifeline in an otherwise colourless culture. Many of these memoirs, focussing as they do on the special relationship of the transatlantic rock scenes, also chart the gradual Americanisation of British culture as America replaced Britain as the global superpower. In his overview of the impact of American rock culture in Britain, Keith Gildart notes in his 2013 text *Images of England through Popular Music: Class, Youth and Rock 'n' roll, 1955-1976*:

American rock 'n' roll and 'rhythm and blues' had a more significant social, cultural and political impact on working-class youth than other forms of popular music, in terms of defining aspects of their culture and reflecting, shaping and sometimes challenging a particular sense of individual and collective identity. (1)

The attraction of American culture, and the prospect of an optimistic future that it offered, stood in contrast to the decline and decay in Britain and is a theme that is often repeated as a reason why many British musicians became involved in rock music scenes in the first place. As the reality of Britain's diminished and diminishing global position began to become apparent in the aftermath of WWII, America offered a brighter future and replaced Britain as the centre of western cultural life. David Bowie summarised this phenomenon neatly in an early BBC Omnibus interview where he

states, 'the imagination can dry up in England – it just supplied a need in me, America; it became a myth land for me' (quoted from Omnibus, 26 January 1975).

Autobiographical texts written by British rock musicians usually describe, in a similar manner to Albertine, how transformative early experiences of American music were for them and how it helped construct an alternative identity for British youth. The Who's Pete Townsend starts his autobiography *Pete Townsend: Who I Am* (2012) by writing 'Dad took us to the cinema to see a musical film. I asked Dad what he thought of the music. He said he thought it had some swing, and anything that had swing was OK. For me it was more than just OK. After seeing *Rock Around the Clock* with Bill Haley, nothing would ever be quite the same' (27). Eric Clapton also states that American rock was life changing and aspirational:

We used to watch *Sunday Night at the London Palladium*, which was the first TV show to have American performers on, who were so far ahead on every level. I had just won a prize at school, for of all things neatness and tidiness, of a book on America, so I was particularly obsessed with it. One night they had Buddy Holly on the show, and I thought I'd died and gone to heaven; that was when I saw my first Fender guitar. It was like seeing an instrument from outer space and I said to myself: 'That's the future – that's what I want.' Suddenly I realised I was in a village that was never going to change, yet there on TV was something out of the future. And I wanted to go there. (8)

This projection of America, as a place of almost unworldly promise in the 1950s and 1960s, is a ubiquitous theme in these reflections that were set against a growing sense of disillusion in the UK. However by the mid-1970s this sense of disillusionment in Britain, particularly in working class youth culture, had reached a crisis point. Economically, politically and socially Britain was experiencing a critical point in its history and British mainstream rock music, which had once offered an alternative, was certainly not speaking for this new generation. As Caroline Coon has stated, 'By the mid-seventies, we were disappointed with what the rock n roll cultural leaders were doing. They were shaking hands with the fucking royalty' (Coon quoted in *Rotten*, 196).

There was a growing youth movement on both sides of the Atlantic that was increasingly disinterested in rock gods and big stadium rock concerts that had become a multi-million dollar business. Rock music, once the preserve of the youth, had by the 1970s become mainstream and crucially lacked much of the rebellion of early rock. It is arguable that this is representative of what Gramsci called the 'moving

equilibrium' of culture and both positively marks the repositioning of rock music as a vital element of mainstream culture – but also signals its new found place in the dominant cultural hegemony that sadly, and to some degree, strips it of its meaning as alternative and/or underground. Rock, which had been the soundtrack to the first youth movement in the 1950s and 1960s had slowly become more anodyne and respectable in both the US and UK. Punk was the subcultural response to the shifting boundaries of what was permissible. This test of the limits of cultural hegemony was, of course, another manifestation of the subcultural resistance to authority and the authorised and marked a new stage in the development of youth culture. Punk in both the UK and US was a phenomenon that signalled to some extent a further breakdown in social uniformity. It came to occupy the edgy, marginal cultural position that had once been held by the formerly controversial rock artists such as Elvis Presley and Gene Vincent in the 1950s. As Stuart Hall suggested in his groundbreaking sociological study *Resistance through Ritual* all youth subcultures have a limited shelf-life:

Youth sub-cultures' form up on the terrain of social and cultural life...But some sub-cultures appear only at particular historical moments: they become visible, are identified and labelled (either by themselves or by others): they command the stage of public attention for a time: then they fade, disappear or are so widely diffused that they lose their distinctiveness. (14)

Arguably by the mid-1970s mainstream rock music had lost much of its marginal appeal and no longer represented youth culture – Elvis had most certainly 'left the building'. In addition, the mainstream British rock music exemplified by artists like The Stones and David Bowie that had also once offered some alternatives had also become more mainstream and irrelevant and the object of scathing criticism. As Lydon explains, 'They came out of the ever-so-generous-and-love-everyone sixties and soon turned into fucking greedy shifty little businessmen doing their utmost to stifle the opposition... The system! They became it' (*Rotten* 196).

A shared feature of many of the punk memoirs from both sides of the Atlantic is the viewpoint that rock music no longer represented the lives of a younger generation who were encountering different economic, social and political challenges in the mid-1970s. Punk signalled a major change in youth culture that had a lasting impact on styles in both the UK and US. Like the rockers, teddy boys and mods that had preceded the punks, the challenge to cultural hegemony was made through a new music and outwardly visible style that distinctively set Punk outside the boundary of

the acceptable. It was a visual counterculture that signified rebellion and disaffection. News media (on both sides of the Atlantic) were in no doubt that punks were a genuine threat to moral standards. In his text *Pop Music and the Press*, Steve Jones noted that the punk subculture 'set off the worst cases of press excess in the decade' (119), with the *Daily Mail* reporting that punks were 'the wreckers of civilisation'. In the US an NBC News report from 1977, quoted on CNN's 'The Seventies' went further in its outrage saying, 'This is punk rock and its purpose is to promote violence, sex and destruction, in that order' (quoted from CNN, 15 August 2015). The overblown and exaggerated responses to punk were disproportionate with the numbers of kids who participated in the subculture however as punk scholar Dick Hebdige has suggested, 'No subculture has sought with more grim determination than the punks to detach itself from the taken-for-granted landscape of normalised forms, nor to bring down upon itself such vehement disapproval' (19). Nonetheless it is precisely on the topic of the political impact of punk, that the differences between the punk cultures on either side of the Atlantic diverge. According to Roger Sabin in his text *Punk Rock, so What?: The Cultural Legacy of Punk*, punk in the UK was a cultural and political movement 'even representing a basic shift in the zeitgeist' (5). For the UK punk scene, rejecting establishment culture also brought with it a rejection of capitalist (transatlantic) culture and it is therefore unsurprising that the memoirs and autobiographies that are produced by British punk rock artists are generally more politically engaged and seem to offer a markedly different view on American culture than those from the US scene.³

This subtext of the dominance of American rock culture and its failure to provide the means to construct an identity that had arguably been the case a decade earlier, haunts a number of British punk memoirs and autobiographies and there is often a clear awareness that although American culture was important in forming the background to post-war British society that this failed to sufficiently reflect a nation struggling to come to terms with its own new subordinate role on the global stage. This need to find an alternative to the miseries of working class British life for the Generation X in the 1970s is summed up by Billy Idol who describes the central role rock 'n' roll would play in redefining British culture:

Music always pulled me through, voices laughing out a tale of their lives, musicians riding the waves. I didn't know that the cultural revolution fuelled by rock n roll was right round the corner to purge this land with sound. England's post war recovery would reveal a new kind of comedy: a kick was on its way, a new thrill to push away the traditional British blues. (17)

American culture, however thrilling, fell short of reflecting the reality of 1970s Britain and became increasingly irrelevant in the context of what Ryan Moore has described as a 'national collapse' from which a more politicised punk culture emerged. The exposure to an alternative culture for many in the early punk scene encouraged a spirit of questioning and initially provided a counterpoint to apathy and blind acceptance of authority and convention in far-reaching aspects of their lives. Examining early punk memoirs and autobiographies for evidence of this emergent political consciousness and activity, offers an interesting conceptual framework with which to analyse them. In fact John Lydon demonstrates his own awareness of the power of images of, for example, American gangsters in movies and the glamour of American life, but crucially notes that for him, growing up as an Irish immigrant in London, 'it was all devoid of reality' and, in contrast with other rock memoirs, highlights that not only did it not give aspirational hope – but underscored the negative hopelessness of life in 1970s Britain. It is therefore possible to read British punk culture as a clear response to the socio-economic crisis that Britain experienced in the 1970s. As Dick Hebdige has suggested, punk emerged as a direct consequence of this cultural historical milieu. According to Hebdige, punk 'appropriated the rhetoric of crisis which filled the airways, and editorials throughout the period and translated it into tangible and visible terms' (87). By examining the memoirs of Lydon and Albertine as case studies, it is possible to ascertain to what extent this tangible response to the socio-economic and cultural crisis both informs and shapes their texts.

Lydon and the Construction of Alternative Britishness

John Lydon's autobiography *Rotten No Irish, No Blacks No Dogs* is an outstanding example of this subtler dialogue between the US and UK cultures. His engagement with the question of Anglo-American culture in his autobiography gives more nuance to this relationship. In fact for Lydon, as well as others on the British punk scene, it is clear that the seemingly liberal ethos of American culture only served to highlight the negative politics of the deeply riven class divides and inequality of British society. Initially, Lydon's relationship with American culture, as he describes it in his text, shares similarities with Albertine's in that he is also initially aware of the value of rock as a regenerative musical form in his youth but, as his narrative progresses, it becomes clear that it is distinctly one that highlights the futility of life in 1970s Britain.

In *Rotten*, John Lydon predictably presents a version of the Sex Pistols story but of more significance is his description of life growing up in a fairly typical working class

environment and the ways in which he managed to 'self-consciously fashion' his own identity: one that is not only culturally unique but also based on an emergent sense of national identity. Throughout the autobiography, Lydon crafts a personal narrative reflecting a British underclass that has reached a tipping point by the 1970s. Life in the UK for the working classes and particularly immigrants, had hardly progressed from the Victorian era and his autobiography describes in detail a feral childhood that would not be out of place in a Dickensian novel:

The backdrop of desolate houses...I remember all the kids running round in rags. It was quite common for most kids to have no shoes. We thought shoes were uncomfortable, particularly for my other brothers because they had to wear what I finished with. (18)

He paints a picture of a desolate bombed out London where the poverty and inequality was almost inescapable: a world of ignorant racism, tin baths and vermin. In fact, the text is replete with anti-Romantic sentiment and often embellished with fictionalised representations that would not be out of place in a dystopian novel. Readers are instructed to 'Picture this. Dead-end ladies leaning out of windows with their hair in curlers' (12) and the 'enormous rats that would come up underneath the sink...Great big sewer rats' (13). Lydon often uses British literary references likening himself to Shakespeare's *Richard III*, or Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* and compares his environment to a scene from *A Clockwork Orange* or the British soap opera *Eastenders*. It is significant because in so doing his narrative utilises and reclaims British cultural texts to construct a persona for himself that is based on an insular British cultural experience that is scraped together in a 'cut-n-paste' bricolage manner. This Britishness becomes recognisably punk in the UK and is often set in direct contrast with the pervading American culture.

As Ruth Adams suggests in her text, *The Englishness of English Punk: Sex Pistols, Subcultures, and Nostalgia* (2008),

Punk, as a number of theorists, most conspicuously Dick Hebdige, have noted, was a subculture constructed through a process of collage, of *bricolage*. Bits and pieces of both officially sanctioned and popular English culture of politics and history were brought together in a chaotic, uneasy admixture to form a new culture—a culture that arguably spot lit the very institutions that it nominally sought to destroy. (469)

Lydon, typical of early exponents of British punk, looked to a range of British cultural references to forge his punk persona 'Johnny Rotten' and *performs* a specifically British punk identity that Hebdige describes as being like an, 'ensemble...a catalogue of beautifully broken codes' (26). However, it is the Britishness of this new identity that keeps this eclectic identity together and Lydon's biography is replete with references that highlight the culture gap and 'difference' between the US and UK that creates some defining pattern to British punk identity. Lydon often describes America and Americans as being quite unrecognisable, Other.

The otherness of America (a perennial theme in many British rock biographies) is a theme that runs through several other punk memoirs. For example, Celeste Bell writing in *Dayglo: The Poly Styrene Story* (2019), discusses the effect going to the US had on Poly, 'The shininess of American capitalism and the griminess of the city had a big impact on her' (109) and the biographies, autobiographies and memoirs of Steve Jones, Joe Strummer, Phil Lynott, etc., all echo the cultural difference. It is the otherness of America and Americans that is frequently foregrounded in a negative light. As Lydon states, 'What I remember most about our Lyceum gig – our biggest gig – was a famous groupie turned up from America. She came into the dressing room and announced "I must add you to my collection. I must have you" I said, "Oh really? Fuck right off." That was my impression of Americans at the time. They were like vultures' (108).

He is equally dismissive of the American punk scene that he distances himself from throughout the text. Of the Ramones he suggests that 'There was always this controversy about the Sex Pistols and the New York Ramones. Who came from whom? Yes, there was a Ramones album out at the time but they were all long-haired and were of no interest to me. I didn't like their image, what they stood for, or anything about them. They had absolutely nothing to do with life in Britain' (118). Again this serves to reinforce his focus on performing his self-consciously crafted British identity. Throughout the autobiography Lydon underscores the differences between his British identity and what he clearly and progressively sees as an unrelated American culture. When he finally goes to America on tour in 1978 he describes his surprise when touring in the South, 'I knew nothing about America' (242). Curiously, the reality of the country and his experiences among 'ordinary folk' outside of the punk scene are movingly described. It is also quite clear that Lydon is far from antagonistic about the ordinary people who he meets and 'likes' and he states 'I wanted to know everything about America'. He describes being overwhelmed and often impressed by the people, the size of the country and what he describes as the 'romance of it all' a picture of the country, particularly in the South that is often

contrasted with his clear antipathy of the punk 'poseurs' from New York and US rock music that he reads as unpolitical and therefore unprogressive.

So, it can be argued that whilst being initially inspired by American culture and being engaged by the alternative music culture of the New York scene of the 1970s, it is clear that, for Lydon and others, punk in the UK quickly became an anti-establishment youth culture that they used to find a way to vocalise a very particular British political and class rebellion. Clinton Heylin makes this point in the 2016 study, *From the Velvets to the Voidoids*, and suggests the distinction is to be found in ways in which American punk contextualised themselves in a rock tradition, whereas British punk saw itself as the antithesis of tradition and permanence:

Essential differences between British and American punk bands can be found in their respective views of rock & roll history. The British bands took a deliberately anti-intellectual stance, refuting any awareness of, or influence from, previous exponents of the form. The New York and Cleveland bands saw themselves as self-consciously drawing on and extending an existing tradition in American rock & roll. (Preface, xiii)

It is this awareness of the different political, social and economic reality that existed in the UK in contrast to that in the US – that did much to create a very different approach to punk on either side of the Atlantic. This questioning of the influence of American traditions and culture was also to be found in other punk texts. For example, the 'Two Cowboys' t-shirt, designed by Vivienne Westwood in 1975, was a visual reminder of the ways in which the UK punks were undercutting, parodying and questioning the ubiquity of the dominance of American culture.



'Two Cowboys' t-shirt designed by Vivienne Westwood for Seditious (1975)

Westwood, like many of her punk contemporaries, used her designs to undermine the macho images of American stereotype, whilst also challenging the heteronormativity of that history through her provocative design but the overt lampooning of the iconic American cowboy image could also be read as an open challenge to prevailing American cultural dominance.

As the UK punk scene developed, there was a growing need for the UK punk scene to try and emerge from under the shadow of American culture and represent the issues that were perceived to be specifically problematic in Britain. Steve Jones recognised this tension in his own autobiography *Lonely Boy: Tales from a Sex Pistol* (2016). He says, 'Americans claiming they started everything would get quite tedious as punk went on' (141). Jones, like many other British punks, were quite clear in their idea that British punk was a clarion call for change in the UK. When the Clash sang 'I am so bored with the USA' it signalled a much deeper anxiety that affected British society and culture than a fatigue with America – it signalled the growing fear of a culture that was aware of its own demise, impotence and struggle to change. Punk UK was far less intellectual and arty than its American counterpart but more politically engaged with a growing crisis of national identity. As the British punk movement gained velocity it therefore also sought to separate itself from American influence and focus on reflecting the realities of the UK in what became known as British punk's Year Zero and Scorched Earth policies. Joe Strummer and Mick Jones's song lyrics in 'I'm So Bored with the USA' are revealing but perhaps signal less of an antipathy for America per se than an attempt to raise questions about the possibility for punk to provide an alternative vision of Britain:

I'm so bored with the U.S.A.
I'm so bored with the U.S.A.
But what can I do? (Strummer/Jones 1977)

These lyrics suggest an appeal to come up with an alternative to the juggernaut progress of American culture and this theme became a definitive one in British punk subculture. In the 1970s the British punk movement self-consciously sought to problematize and create a distance from American culture as it sought to find a way to express the particular specificity in a crisis of identity not only felt by the punks of Generation X but other oppressed minority groups in the U.K. As Ruth Adams has suggested,

The Pistols (and others) then might be regarded as unlikely guardians of English heritage, albeit expressing a history which stressed the popular culture and the radical dissenting pamphleteering elements of that heritage rather than the more conventional (pro)monarchist and aristocratic aspects. (471)

These radical elements would also steer the UK punk scene to forge links with black British culture and this would be one of the positive results of this trajectory. Andy Medhurst, writing in *Punk Rock: So What?* is clear about the important legacy of punk in foregrounding issues of race and equality in the UK, 'Punk's most important and long lasting influence on white British culture was its alliance with reggae' (226). The political affiliations between the growing British black movement and punk turned the focus to specific issues within the country in the 1970s and, through events such as the RAR festivals held between 1978-82 (Rock against Racism) crossed race boundaries, often for the first time.

With songs such as 'Anarchy in the UK' and 'God Save the Queen', Lydon's autobiography also recounts how the Sex Pistols tapped into a number of underlying but specific political, economic and social problems that had been simmering for decades and were specific to a very British agenda. The song 'Anarchy in the UK', for example, contains reference to a post-war Britain that had little to do with America. Lydon reflects at length in his memoir about the lyrical content of these songs that he claims were written as 'verbal grenades' intended to have a real impact. A line from this song, for example, 'Is this the IRA? /Is this UDA?' refers to the paramilitary groups who were engaged in a bloody civil war in Northern Ireland that had recently spilled over to the mainland UK in a spate of bombings and terrorist attacks on the mainland. It was a culture shock to have this controversial political topic included as the theme of a lyric and it caused reverberations in the British media. As did the lyrics of another Sex Pistols song, 'God Save the Queen', which aimed to critique the Silver Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II in 1977. Lydon's lyrics are explicit: 'God save the queen/ And the fascist regime... There's no future/ England's dreaming. God save the queen.' (Virgin Records, 1976). They caused an intentional furore in the British press of all political colours. The Sex Pistols (and many other contemporary punk bands: Chelsea, UK Subs, The Clash, X-Ray Spex, The Slits) increasingly took on political issues in their songs that resonated with a young disaffected British generation and punk subculture was often seen as an anti-establishment youth cultural movement. British punk (in contrast to American punk in the mid-1970s) was intentionally anti-intellectual and extremely political; but as Viv Albertine's autobiography suggests, this political

platform was very different for women. Punk, for all its progressive political agendas, was far from a level playing field.

Viv Albertine and The Punk 'Theatre' of Female Power

Punk in the UK was also connected with a concurrent rise in feminism as is made explicit in reading Viv Albertine's memoir, *Clothes, Clothes, Clothes. Music, Music, Music. Boys, Boys, Boys*. Female punk bands often dealt with the politics of not only national identity but also feminist issues through no-holds-barred, direct and uncompromising lyrics. X-Ray Spex, The Slits, The Adverts (among others) confronted the prevailing British inability to engage with a reality of female sexuality and identity in the 1970s and challenged the objectification of women often through satiric and challenging lyrics. British female punk bands were intentionally anti-intellectual (much like their male peers) and often used taboo language, fashion, explicit sexual imagery and graphic humour to foreground a feminist message. Poly-Styrene, the frontwoman of X-Ray Spex, wrote a song entitled 'Oh Bondage, Up Yours' that directly challenged the patriarchy and promoted a strong feminist voice with lines such as, 'Some people think little girls should be seen and not heard/ But I say... /Oh Bondage! Up yours!/ 1, 2, 3, 4!' (X-Ray Spex, 1976). According to Viv Goldman, 'That sound cut through a sort of glass ceiling of what women singers could do with their voice' (61) and punk certainly challenged stereotypical images of women, particularly for a younger generation.

However, Albertine's memoir provides a more critical reflection on the extent to which the women in the British punk scene were marginalised, despite the perceived progressiveness of the political agenda of the subgenre. She often describes how difficult it was to break through gender barriers, the almost total lack of role models and the enormous obstacles women faced in becoming accepted. She is explicit: 'Every cell in my body was steeped in music, but it never occurred to me that I could be in a band, not in a million years – why would it? Who'd done it before me? There was no-one I could identify with. No girls played electric guitar. Especially ordinary girls like me' (49). Critically, Albertine's memoir also challenges the reader's expectation of the format of the autobiography with her text, *Clothes, Clothes, Clothes. Music, Music, Music. Boys, Boys, Boys* that completely subverts the genre with its compilation of accounts of various relationships and clothes, rather than the usual autobiography structure and in so doing, Albertine's autobiography references the DIY culture of punk. Her reliance on the stereotypical foci of young heterosexual women 'pop music, clothes and boys' and the lists of her own journey, charted through these themes, can

be read both as a reflection of her experience but also as an ironic statement about the restrictive parameter of female identity in the 1970s. However, whilst she describes in detail the drudgery of growing up in Britain in a similar way to many of her male contemporaries, her narrative explicitly depicts the marginalised position she had within a punk scene that to an extent contrasts with what Matt Worley describes as being 'recognized to have created a welcome opportunity for women to form bands an express their opinions' (338). This is still a notion that is very much open to scrutiny as Brian Cogan points out. He suggests that 'for all of its bravado, for all of the constant and insistent rhetoric on social change and political realignment, in the end, punk rock may have been as ultimately restrictive as the very systems that it had hoped to change' (122).

Albertine's memoir, she states, is her 'extremely subjective book, a scrapbook of memories' (1), often written in the present continuous tense that gives her narrative an immediacy and invites her reader to share a lot of the recollections of how she felt at pivotal moments of her life. It is also notable for subtle engagement with feminist discourse that arguably makes her matter of fact discussion of topics such as menstruation, sex, pregnancy, abortion and so forth even more powerful for their almost complete absence of emotive or polemic commentary. It quite crucially demonstrates that her focus was less connected with a class and nationalist discourse (although this is present) and was far more engaged with her attempt to find a real and representative voice as a working class woman and one that was not necessarily based on prevailing feminist politics. However Albertine's feminist identity is carefully constructed and she emphasizes the ways in which she, like many of her young female punk contemporaries, refused to be labelled in any way. Helen McCookerybook summarises this point, 'Feminism in the 1970s was really different to feminism now... there were an awful lot of rules that were associated with that type of feminism , things that you had to do ad not do and the whole spirit of punk was that it was anarchic, and you made up your own life , you made up your own rules...taking in more rules was not anything that anyone wanted to do' (quoted in *Dayglo* 84). Albertine's memoir therefore reveals this highly individualised growing awareness of the misogyny she, like most of her female peers, had been subject to and that had shaped her identity. She is particularly critical of the part that culture played in that process. In a rare moment of impassioned polemic within the memoir she states, 'In the past I listened to tracks as a whole, paying most attention to the lyrics... that's how girls listened to songs. Most of the songs I've been exposed to are about romantic love... I've been brainwashed' (208).

As such Albertine acknowledges the importance of American feminists working in music, like Patti Smith, whom she unequivocally states 'gives me the confidence to express myself in my own way' (79). In fact, far from the tension between the British and American scenes that are found in Lydon's narrative, Albertine's memoir celebrates the importance of discovering American female artist Patti Smith who she recognised as an important role model. In contrast with Lydon who considered Smith an 'old hippie', Albertine describes the transformative power of listening to Patti Smith's 1975 album *Horses*, 'I have never seen a girl who looks like this. She is my soul made visible' (79). As Albertine demonstrates through her text, women on both sides of the transatlantic punk scene were able to use the 'subversive moment' to explore their own ideas about liberation and did so in a far more connected way than their male contemporaries. She says, 'Listening to *Horses* unlocks an idea for me -girls' sexuality can be on their own terms, for their own pleasure or creative work, not just for exploitation or to get a man...It's emancipating' (80). For Albertine this new focus on accessible and meaningful women's liberation in the transatlantic punk scene inspired her to use punk as a means to create and be part of a wider female counterculture and one in which there would be a true alternative. She states 'No peddling clichés and lies for us. No lazy escapism. Words have to be true to your life, write what you know, and make people think' (208). It was subversive and as Lisa Medovoi argues in her critique of the masculinist politics in rock music, punk 'made room (for the first time ever) for female rock rebels. Patti Smith, the Slits, Joan Jett, Lisa Ford, Pretenders, and even Talking Heads all demonstrated that a modernist adversarial elite culture, using a masculinist discourse mass culture to consolidate itself, is being displaced by a postmodernist adversarial mass culture increasingly less committed to articulations' (182).

Whereas Lydon focuses on carving out a new British punk culture based on national and class lines and in the process moves away from the American punk scene, the opposite is true for Albertine who finds a liberation on the American scene through the punk scene that seemed more equal for women. She says, 'We aren't taken very seriously in England especially in the music industry' (*Clothes* 232) but the US scene is, for The Slits, far more liberating and aspirational. Although punk women like Albertine in the UK were finding a voice, her memoir clearly describes how the politics of the American feminist movement had a growing influence on Albertine and others. It is therefore clear that the view of the transatlantic community among women was useful within the punk scene. As Clara Juncker has suggested, the 'cross-fertilization of American and European feminist ideologies made a lasting imprint on women's lives and futures on both sides of the Atlantic' (6) and Albertine's narrative

clearly shows her evolution to become an independent woman is, in part, a result of this exchange. As Viv Goldman notes, in America 'There were a core of girls working in music in New York who would gladly speak about people laughing at them and not taking them seriously. And you know, most girl musicians say they had to be stronger than the men, just to be able to get through. They had to know how to knock it out of the park' (quoted in *Dayglo*, 108). However it was also clear that for women in punk, despite all the many claims of equality, women's lived experience did not support this idea. Nonetheless it is also true that for Albertine and other women, the transatlantic punk scene, whilst not without problems of machismo, rooted sexism and prejudice did at least offer some potential to be heard, an opportunity that was rare in the rock scene of the 1970s.

Conclusion

This paper's main objective has been to examine how two of the leading exponents of the early punk movement, Lydon and Albertine, negotiated their own experiences and engaged with influences of American culture as they forged the punk subculture in the UK. As Paul Eakin notes, 'any autobiography...is prompted by a desire to situate the individual life in what may be called the larger scheme of things' (124) and this self-reflexive framing of the personal narrative within a larger political, culture and social landscape is a characteristic theme of most British punk memoirs. For John Lydon, America serves as a cultural backdrop against which his own British culture is measured and found wanting. His text explores his own attempt to create a 'new' sense of British identity through the 'performance of Johnny Rotten' an identity that does away with what he clearly sees as the horror of class, greed and inequality that disenfranchised the working class in Britain. Albertine's reflections and, particularly her engagement with American culture, foreground a distinctly feminist approach. She identifies the importance of the collective Anglo-American experience for women in punk who came from the edge of the stage to form and front bands and who clearly gave punk a far greater political importance and impact than it would otherwise have had. Both texts are linked by the presentation of the early punk movement as a watershed moment, not only in their personal, subjective stories but also for British culture and national identity, far exceeding the usual remit of most celebrity rock texts. John Lydon uses his autobiography to produce a damning critique of British culture and politics and ends his memoir by underscoring the fictive nature of his punk persona, Johnny Rotten, in order to highlight his frustration with a lost opportunity to change the course of the nation. He discusses his stage persona Johnny Rotten as a

curious, but very punk, cut-n-paste version of his own blended identity. He states, 'Maybe people like Johnny Rotten have had their day. Maybe I am a prehistoric monster by being an individual. It's highly likely!' (318). Throughout his memoir, he becomes increasingly clear that it is the British inability to change, to rise up from a history of class oppression, rather than accept the Americanization of culture, that is the nexus of the problems with British identity and one that remains, for Lydon, as unresolved today as it was in the 1970s.

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Media

Poly-Styrene and X-Ray Spex, 'Oh Bondage Up Yours' published by Virgin Records (1977).

Strummer, Joe and Mick Jones, 'I'm so bored with the USA' from the album *The Clash* published by CBS (1977).

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Notes

¹ See: Sabin, Roger, *Punk Rock, so What?: The Cultural Legacy of Punk*, London: Routledge, 1999, for an overview of punk in the 1970s

² For an insight into the continued discussions and debates about the US and UK punk scene see: Kory Grow's article in *Rolling Stone* magazine 'Punk': Johnny Rotten, Marky Ramone Spar at "Off the F-king Rails" (March 7, 2019).

³ This is not to suggest that punk in the USA was not also politically engaged in the 1970s, but as Bob Gruen suggests, the political agenda was markedly different. Gruen argues that 'in America, it was sex, not politics that created controversy' (quoted in *Rotten* 192) and it would be later in the 1980s and 1990s, with the formation of bands such as Green Day and Black Flag, that a more politicised punk scene would emerge in the US.