

# CADERNOS AA

## DESIGN IT YOURSELF? PUNK'S DIVISION OF LABOUR

Dr Russ Bestley<sup>1</sup>  
London College of Communication, United Kingdom

*Punk's do-it-yourself call to arms led to a widespread adoption of the rhetoric, if not always the practice, of independence from traditional means of production. During the early period of punk's development in the United Kingdom, a distinct division of labour can be seen in the impact of an 'anyone can do it' DIY ethos on a range of activities.<sup>2</sup> These range from live performance to the creation and manufacture of punk artifacts (clothes, posters, flyers, fanzines, records). While some of these areas offered new opportunities for amateur producers, within more technical areas of manufacturing, including the physical production of records, do-it-yourself could only have a nominal impact. Many punk groups did not have access to sound recording technologies, and even if they did, they would have to hand over the cutting and pressing of vinyl to a professional outfit. There was certainly a widespread and outspoken desire to take artistic control away from mainstream sources, but in reality the ownership of the means of production was at best a naïve ambition. Similarly, sleeve artwork could be created by untrained designers, but print reproduction was often left to the services of a professional print studio – doing-it-yourself had obvious limitations when it came to large-scale production and distribution.*

Keywords: Punk, design, DIY, independent, production

---

1 Contact email: [r.bestley@lcc.arts.ac.uk](mailto:r.bestley@lcc.arts.ac.uk).

2 It should be acknowledged that *do-it-yourself* ideals go back a lot further than the punk explosion of the 1970s, from traditional folk music through to the bottleneck rural blues players of the 1930s and 40s, the 1950s UK skiffle boom and early 1960s US garage bands. As Elborough (2008), Barfe (2005) and Milner (2010) note, popular music traditionally centred far more on performance, and songwriting and publishing remain at the heart of the industry. Thus, ownership of the *creation* of original music was essentially always central to the medium, with the additional layers of recording and reproduction (records, CDs) a secondary, though lucrative, consideration. The punks may have articulated the *do-it-yourself* vision most clearly, turning it into a mantra, but they were inheriting a tradition that was established many years earlier.

## INTRODUCTION

By the time The Clash recorded *Garageland*, their self-mythologising tribute to the raw power of impassioned, street-level, *untrained* rock 'n' roll, punk's 'anyone can do it' call to arms was in full swing. Ironically, the group had, by this time, honed their craft through months of intensive practicing and live gigs. Thus, the resulting album track was a relatively polished and professional piece of work. The 'entry level' for budding punk performers was set quite high, and it was not until other groups and individuals took the baton and ran with it that a more 'authentic' form of DIY punk was to emerge. The Mekons, Spizztil, Television Personalities, Swell Maps, the Slits, Siouxsie & the Banshees and others were at the vanguard of this development, turning a rhetorical position into a literal reading of punk's promise. In many cases having no formal training or background in music, these groups took up the challenge, sharing an enthusiasm and self-confidence that outweighed any disadvantages stemming from inexperience. The move from DIY punk performance to the production of punk recordings, however, was to prove more problematic. Rehearsals, songwriting and live gigs could be managed, as long as the musicians involved had access to some rudimentary instruments and a space in which to perform, but the step up to creating punk records would involve more professional resources beyond the immediate scope of many involved.

The impact of home made, DIY activity on the record manufacturing process mirrors that of the marketing and distribution aspects of the subculture. Groups could set up their own label, selling direct to customers at gigs or by mail order, but they were largely at the mercy of a national distribution system, together with long-established procedures for music publishing, promotion and marketing, in order to reach a wider audience. This process changed incrementally over the following decade, with the success (and subsequent collapse) of the Cartel independent distribution network, but the rhetoric of empowerment linked to punk's *do-it-yourself* message does require some critical interrogation, and a number of stereotypes deserve unpacking. Some early UK punk groups made notable attempts to open up the process and practicalities of production to others – including the Desperate Bicycles, Scritti Politti and Television Personalities. More generally, the sense of enabling a subcultural take-over of the means of production was limited to areas such as fanzines or flyers, or was simply a stylistic gesture that has become a fairly lazy received trope.<sup>3</sup> This paper problematises the relationship between an outspoken *do-it-yourself* ideology within the early punk scene, and the restrictions afforded by production processes in the design and manufacture of physical artefacts.

---

3 It should also be noted, however, that even the production of fanzines and flyers required access to often elusive technical processes. Early issues of groundbreaking *Sniffin' Glue* fanzine were photocopied at the office of Mark Perry's girlfriend's father. Longer print runs of flyers and fanzines were often cheaper to litho-print via local a print bureau than to reproduce on a photocopier, at least until the latter technology became more widespread in colleges, offices and community centres.

## THIS IS A CHORD...

*All you kids out there who read 'SG', don't be satisfied with what we write. Go out and start your own fanzines or send reviews to the established papers. Let's really get on their nerves, flood the market with punk-writing!*

Mark P, Sniffin' Glue no.5, November 1976

During the early period of punk's formation as a subculture, a number of themes emerged that were to become central to what might be called a punk ideology. These included a break with the past, particularly in relation to the music industry and what was seen as the increasing elitism and complexity of rock music as a form, along with notions of honesty and authenticity (both of which are problematic, of course), a rejection of authority and the empowerment of individuals. The twin phrases 'anyone can do it' and 'do-it-yourself' were to become something of a punk mantra, tied to a vision of *independence* from the mainstream music industry.<sup>4</sup> As Pete Dale suggests:

The slogan, 'anyone can do it', is a vital one in punk, commonly voiced in the mid- to late 1970s but widely adhered to within the punk underground in the decades since. Early UK punk was supposed to have made this possible by offering an alternative to the high levels of musical dexterity and relative structural complexity found in progressive rock which had then been dominant for many years. (Dale 2012: 2)

It should also be noted that the punk *do-it-yourself* concept also applied to a range of creative practices, from fashion to photography and film, though widespread DIY efforts in dress have been largely unacknowledged in relation to the expensive punk high fashion items designed by Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren. Museums and cultural institutions collect the latter and hold them in high esteem, despite the fact that they were well beyond the reach of most participants in the punk subculture. DIY fashion assemblages – what Hebdige describes as *bricolage* – formed the mainstay of punk dress styles, along with cheaper imitations of punk 'high fashion' styles, and much like the music, debates about authenticity and the commercialisation of punk are longstanding.

Tony Moon's classic three-chord diagram entitled *Play'in in the Band*, published in *Sideburns* fanzine no.1, December 1976, has become something of a visual cliché in relation to DIY and punk. While Mark Perry was encouraging others to write about the new scene in the pages of *Sniffin' Glue*, Moon set out to promote a new generation of active participants and musicians under the punk banner. But this sense of empowerment in punk's call to take up arms (or instruments, in this case), throw off our shackles (lack of skill, training or expertise) and become a performer (or artist, writer, film maker, journalist, photographer or whatever) has become, in retrospect, over-inflated and hyperbolic. A rigid and stylised narrative has taken hold, offering 'authentic' attributes to punk's early pioneers through their re-assertion of personal agency and control over their art, and their rejection of mainstream, capitalist models of production. This

---

4 None of this was new, of course – the hippie era had seen the growth of *do-it-yourself* publishing throughout Europe and the US, with musicians taking up the challenge to record, produce and release their own material, with varying degrees of direct, hands-on involvement. In the US, the Grateful Dead and the Sun Ra Arkestra recorded and released literally hundreds of albums, many on their own labels, while in the UK the Deviants self-released their debut album, *Ptooff!* in 1968 and distributed it through 'underground music' retailers, as well as via mail-order ads in *OZ* and *International Times*. Other late hippie groups including Here and Now and the Edgar Broughton Band were renowned for their approach to direct action and attitude toward independent production.

is a rather disingenuous argument, and closer scrutiny of the actual output of a wide range of punk musicians may help us to unpack some of the truths behind the rhetoric.

Kevin Dunn's recent book *Global Punk* offers an overview of a punk historical narrative through 40 or more years around the world. It is an ambitious project, not without merit, but it rests on a number of assertions that do require a more thorough and critical interrogation. Alongside a reproduction of Moon's diagram, Dunn makes an impassioned case for punk's original *do-it-yourself* ideal; "...early UK punk bands like the Buzzcocks and Scritti Politti printed instructions on how to make a record on the handmade covers of their own albums. Fanzines carried similar messages, informing readers how to play chords, make a record, distribute that record, and book their own shows." (Dunn 2016: 14). He later goes on to re-state the same assumptions in regard to Buzzcocks' first release, *Spiral Scratch*, suggesting that; "...the EP literally showed how one could make a record, with the details of the recording process (e.g., number of takes and over-dubs) and pressing costs printed right on the record cover." (Ibid: 130)

The problem here is that the facts don't fit the assertion. Buzzcocks signed to major label United Artists soon after the release of their debut (self-financed) *Spiral Scratch* EP, and their subsequent album sleeves, designed by Malcolm Garrett and professionally litho-printed in full colour, did not feature any "instructions on how to make a record" at all. The cover designs were sophisticated and polished, featuring photographs of the group set within a series of formal grids that paid homage to the Bauhaus (square, circle and triangle) over the sequence of three album releases between 1978 and 1980. Meanwhile, Scritti Politti didn't record an album until 1982, by which time they had abandoned any kind of *do-it-yourself* post-punk leaning and adopted a soul-inflected 1980s pop template. Again, their album covers were not "handmade", nor did they feature printed instructions on how to make a record.

Some of Dunn's confusion is understandable, however, and perhaps if we accept that he has committed the widely-made mistake of conflating album releases with seven-inch EP and singles, then other records by the groups in question might offer a better comparison. The debut EP by Buzzcocks, *Spiral Scratch*, was released at the end of January 1977. The record was funded by the group themselves from a number of loans, including £250 from guitarist Pete Shelley's father, and a deal was arranged by manager Richard Boon for the pressing of the record at Phonogram. *Spiral Scratch* was noted as the first UK independent punk record, and the widespread critical acclaim that it afforded (along with a high degree of subsequent free publicity) ensured both the record's success and the broader circulation of a *do-it-yourself* idea. *Spiral Scratch* quickly sold out its initial pressing of 1,000 copies and went on to eventually sell 16,000 before being officially deleted when the band signed to United Artists in August 1977. The record's back cover, designed by manager Richard Boon, also featured an unusual level of information relating to its recording, listing which particular studio take of each song was featured, along with brief details of any overdubs (Figure 01). Again, however, it is hard to discern how this information was particularly useful as a kind of 'route map' for others to follow in the realization of their own DIY record ambitions.



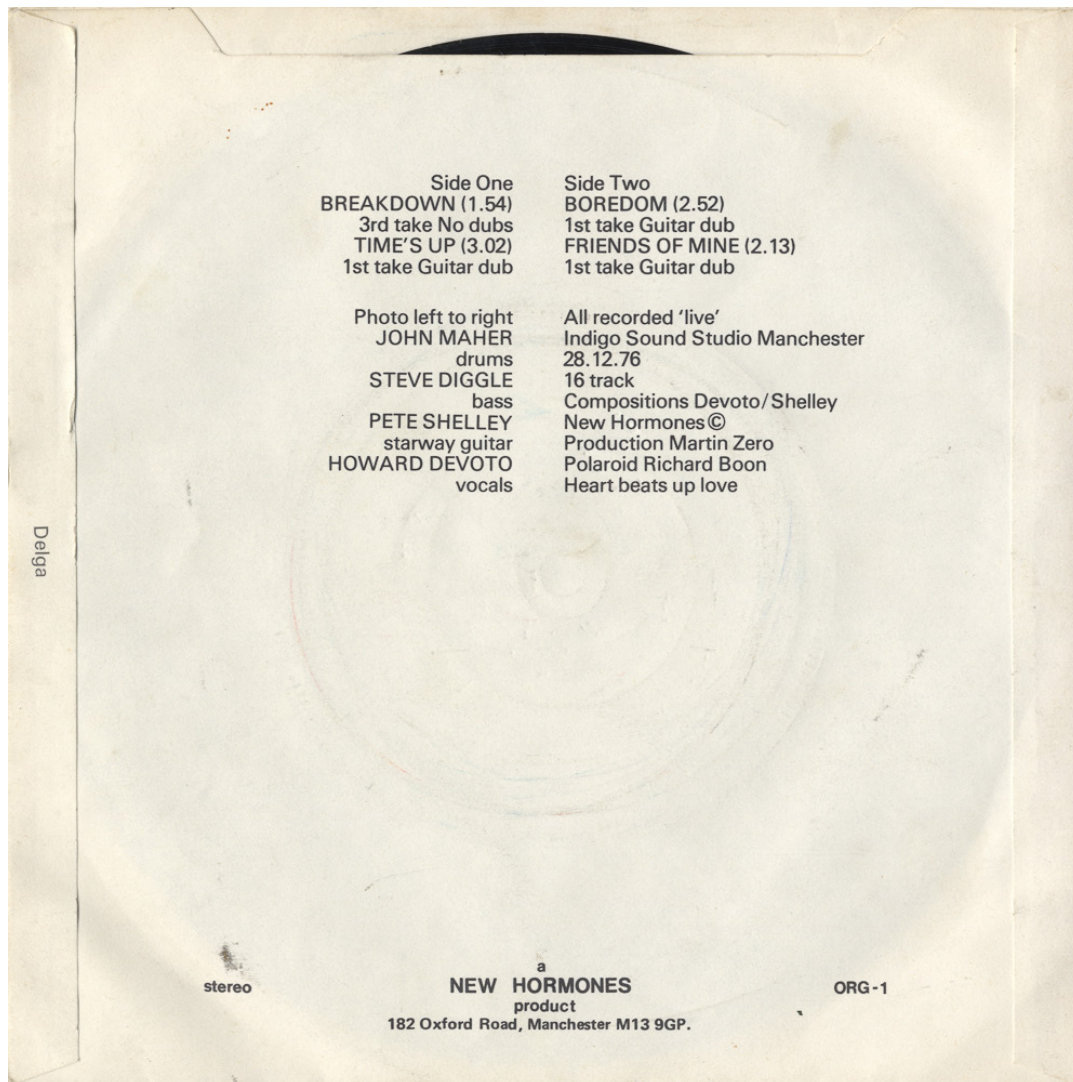


Fig.01 Buzzcocks *Spiral Scratch* EP (New Hormones 1977) (back cover). Design by Richard Boon.

Even Sex Pistols designer Jamie Reid makes the mistake of associating the Buzzcocks EP with the newly evolving punk philosophy, and the associated agit-prop graphic style surrounding his own work. Reid's assertion that punk sleeves need not feature a photograph of the group is directly contradicted in this instance (since the Buzzcocks cover featured exactly that on the front), and few, if any, parallels could be drawn with the artwork of the Sex Pistols; "...one thing that became very clear was that there wasn't any need to have pictures of the band on any of the graphics... The idea was that everything should be accessible, including the music, and I was happy to see the Sex Pistols' music and the graphics being imitated. Obviously there are good imitations and bad imitations, but there were some especially strong emulations that we felt were part of what we were trying to articulate. Buzzcocks' *Spiral Scratch* was a very good example" (Reid & Savage 1987: 57). It is possible that Reid is confusing it with the group's second single, *Orgasm Addict*, their first release on the major label United Artists in October 1977, which featured a sleeve designed by two students from Manchester Polytechnic, Linder Sterling and Malcolm Garrett. However, while this later example may have demonstrated the punk DIY 'look', based around photomontage and Letraset typography, it is perhaps ironic that the printing process, pressing, marketing and distribution, as well as recording and production costs, were covered by a major label. Overall, the commercial (batch) production of punk records right across the span of early

UK punk, from DIY to major label releases, was largely handled by professionals – from cutting studios and pressing plants, to printers and sleeve manufacturers – although some aspects of the graphic design and packaging process were taken in-house by groups themselves.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, the debut Scritti Politti release, the *Skank Bloc Bologna* EP (2,500 copies, released November 1978) *did*, in fact, list some details of costs of production and service providers utilised by the group for record pressing and packaging, as follows:

RECORDING £98.00; Spaceward Studios, 19, Victoria St., Cambridge (0223)64263.; 14hrs. Cost includes master tape.

MASTERING £40.00; Pye London Studios, 17, Gt.Cumberland Place, W1. 01.262 5502. or IBC., (George)Sound Recording Studios, 35, Portland Place, W1.01.637 2111. Cutting of lacquer from Master tape.

PRESSING £369.36; PYE Records(sales)Ltd., Western Road, Mitcham, Surrey., 01.648 7000. 2,500 copies @ 13p & processing (electro plating of lacquer £27.00).

LABELS £8.00; Rubber stamp on white labels (labels included in cost of pressing.) E.G.Rubber Stamps, 28, Bridge St. Hitchin, Herts. (0462) 51677.

Interestingly, the costs of sleeve printing are not included in the listed information. The cover was litho-printed in two colours (black and red) on the front and one colour (black) on the back.

Scritti's follow-up seven-inch release, the *Work in Progress 2<sup>nd</sup> Peel Session* EP (December 1979), also included a list of production costs – this time with the folded, Xeroxed sleeve cryptically summarised as “*INSERTS – printed cheap by Beattie*”. This EP also provided a helpful song title that would come to describe a wider field of self-supported, DIY recordings in the ensuing years: *Messthetics* – a term that was to become synonymous with the more genuinely *do-it-yourself* and avant-garde fringes of independent post-punk music. The band also produced a booklet with instructions on how to make a record, based on their experience to date, in order to inspire others to do the same.

So, the confusion is understandable, but, as always, the devil is in the detail. While Buzzcocks provided something of an inspirational *idea* for others to seek to emulate (provided they could gather together the money to do so), it was still largely just that – an idea. The group were early beneficiaries of the surge in major label interest in punk, and once signed to United Artists they provided perhaps musical inspiration, but little or nothing in terms of practical, hands-on, *do-it-yourself* guidance. Scritti Politti took a more proactive approach to punk DIY, openly sharing information on the costs of production for their first two seven-inch vinyl releases. However, again the extent of any ‘handmade’ processes employed were limited to folding, assembling and stapling ready-printed covers, and rubber stamping labels, with all major manufacturing elements (recording, cutting, mastering, pressing, printing etc) commissioned from professional service providers.

---

5 To add to the confusion, many professional designers deliberately gave their artwork a *do-it-yourself* look and feel, in keeping with the evolving punk ethos. Notable examples include the work by Jamie Reid for the Sex Pistols, George ‘God’ Snow for Nine Nine Nine and Nick Egan for The Clash.



This isn't to deny the impact, or the significance, of such an approach – but to seek to unpack some of the catch-all rhetoric and myth-making that has come to be widely accepted as fact in relation to the *do-it-yourself* maxim. While Buzzcocks certainly communicated DIY principles, through the background and context to their debut release (and associated media commentary), others such as the Desperate Bicycles went one stage further, taking a similar approach to Tony Moon in specifically encouraging others to action via the content and the medium itself, through song lyrics and graphic design strategies. 500 copies of the Desperate Bicycles debut single, *Smokescreen/Handlebars*, were released on their own Refill label in April 1977, with both songs pressed on each side of the record, apparently due to the proscriptive cost of cutting a master for two separate sides (Figure 02). The run-out for record at the end of *Handlebars* features a sole shouted voice – “*it was easy, it was cheap, go and do it!*”

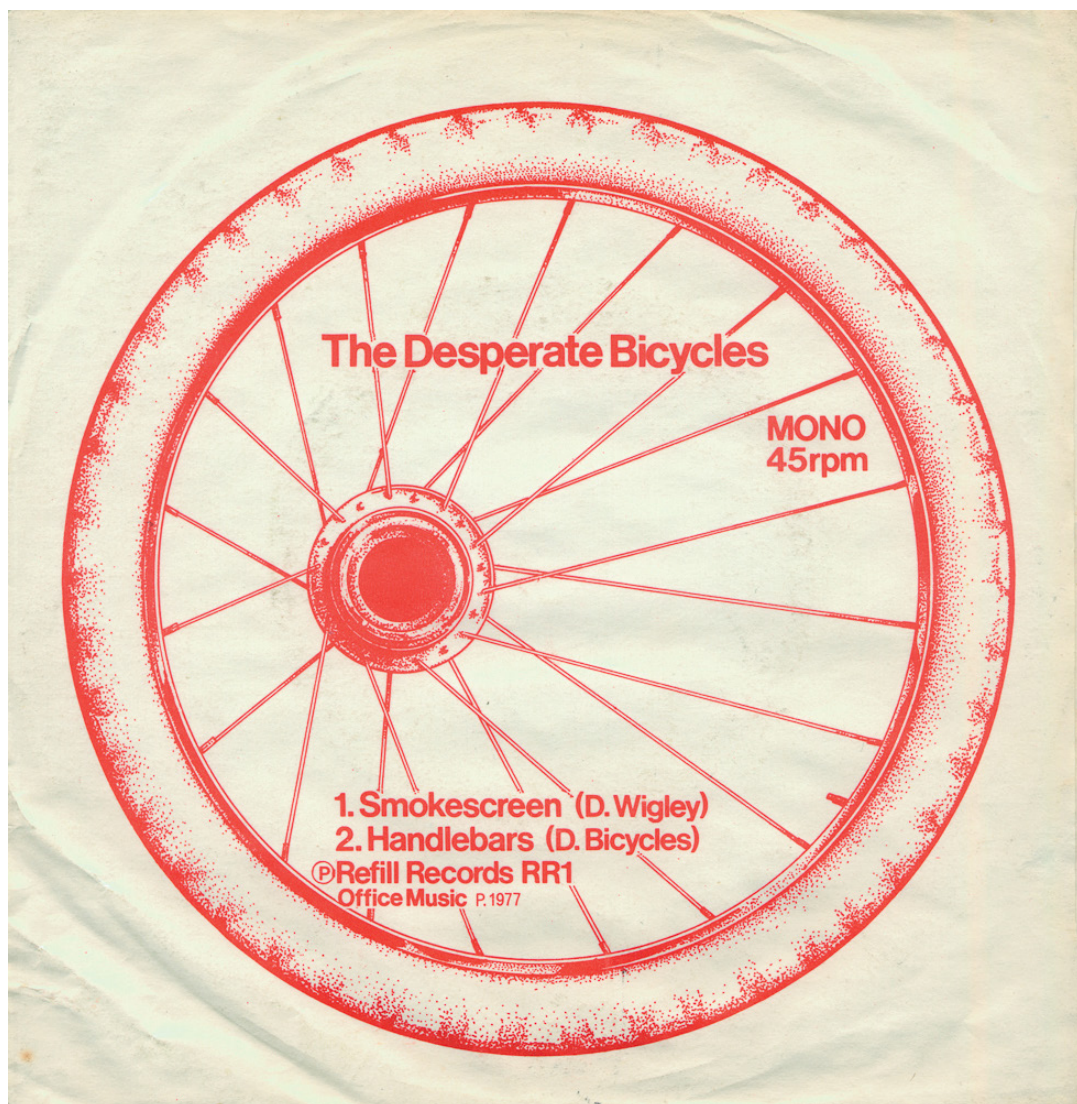


Fig.02 Desperate Bicycles *Smokescreen/Handlebars* (Refill Records 1977). Design by Diana Fawcett.

Interviewed by Graham Lock in the *New Musical Express*, 14 October 1978, vocalist Danny Wigley summed up the Desperate Bicycles' independent stance: “...*the biggest hurdle is just believing you've still got some control over your life, that you can go out and do it.*” The first pressing sold out within four months, resulting in a profit of £210. Using this money, a second

pressing of 1,000 was made, which sold out in a fortnight. The profit from that was used to finance the pressing of their second release, *The Medium Was Tedium/Don't Back The Front* in July 1977 (Figure 03). Again, both tracks were pressed on each side of the record, and it featured a lyrical continuation from their debut – the words “*it was easy, it was cheap, go and do it!*” formed the chorus of the first song. During the final verse, Wigley voices his frustration with the hesitance of others to get involved, and to form their own bands: “*I'm sick of telling people that they're capable too / They don't want to believe me and there ain't just a few...*” The song goes on to make Wigley's ambitions to inform, educate and spur others to action clear, communicated now more as a form of instruction to the listener, rather than a self-reflective narrative; “*So if you can understand / Go and join a band. It was easy, it was cheap, go and do it!*”



Fig.03 Desperate Bicycles *The Medium Was Tedium/Don't Back The Front* (Refill Records 1977). Design by Diana Fawcett.

The second track *Don't Back the Front* features the chorus refrain “*No more time for spectating / Tune it, count it, let it blast / Cut it, press it, distribute it / Xerox music's here at last!*”. As the notes on the back sleeve of the single suggest, “*They'd really like to know why you haven't made your single yet... So if you can understand, go and join a band. Now it's your turn...*” (Figure 04).



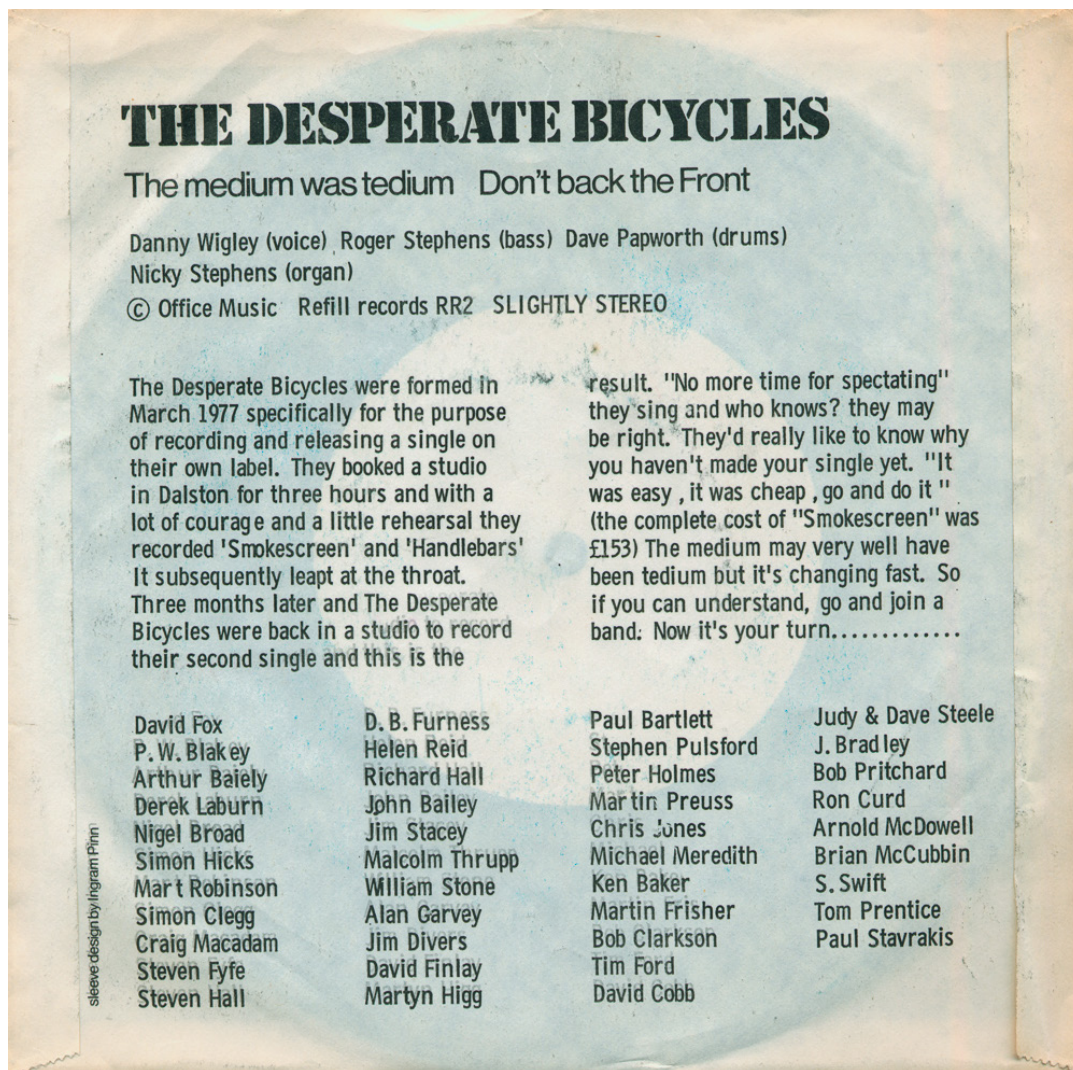


Fig.04 Desperate Bicycles *The Medium Was Tedium/Don't Back The Front* (Refill Records 1977) (back cover). Design by Diana Fawcett.

In turn, Desperate Bicycles provided an open invitation and a stimulus for others thinking along similar lines, including Scritti Politti; "It was the Desperate Bicycles that gave us the incentive. If you're thinking of making a tape why not go the whole way and make a record?" they said.<sup>6</sup>

The Television Personalities released their debut *Where's Bill Grundy Now?* EP the same month as Scritti's first release, with a folded sleeve also detailing costs and methods of production on the reverse:

Recorded at i.p.s studio's shepherds Bush London. Total cost £22:50 ... four hours recording. Thanks for your help Pete.

Mastered at John Martin of Reading. Total cost of £34.00. London Road, Binfield, Bracknell, Berks. Telephone 0344 54935.

Records pressed at Lyntone, Prices now increased, approx. 14p per disc, plus; £25 per side for metal parts VAT extra. Metal parts can also be made at John Martin which would probably save time.

6 Green Gartside, *Sounds* January 1979 interview.

First 2,000 sleeves by DELGA PRESS of Raglan Road, Bromley Kent. £45 for plate ... £65 for sleeves. IF you have the patience you can save time and Money by getting cheaply produced printing. Adresses in Yellow pages etc.

Blank Record labels no more than £10 thousand PPrinted labels £40-£50 per thousand.

Records distributed by ROUGH TRADE(HI GEOFF). SMALL WONDER(HELLO PETER AND MARI) (HIPPIES). BONAPARTE, VIRGIN, LIGHTNING. BYE BYE.

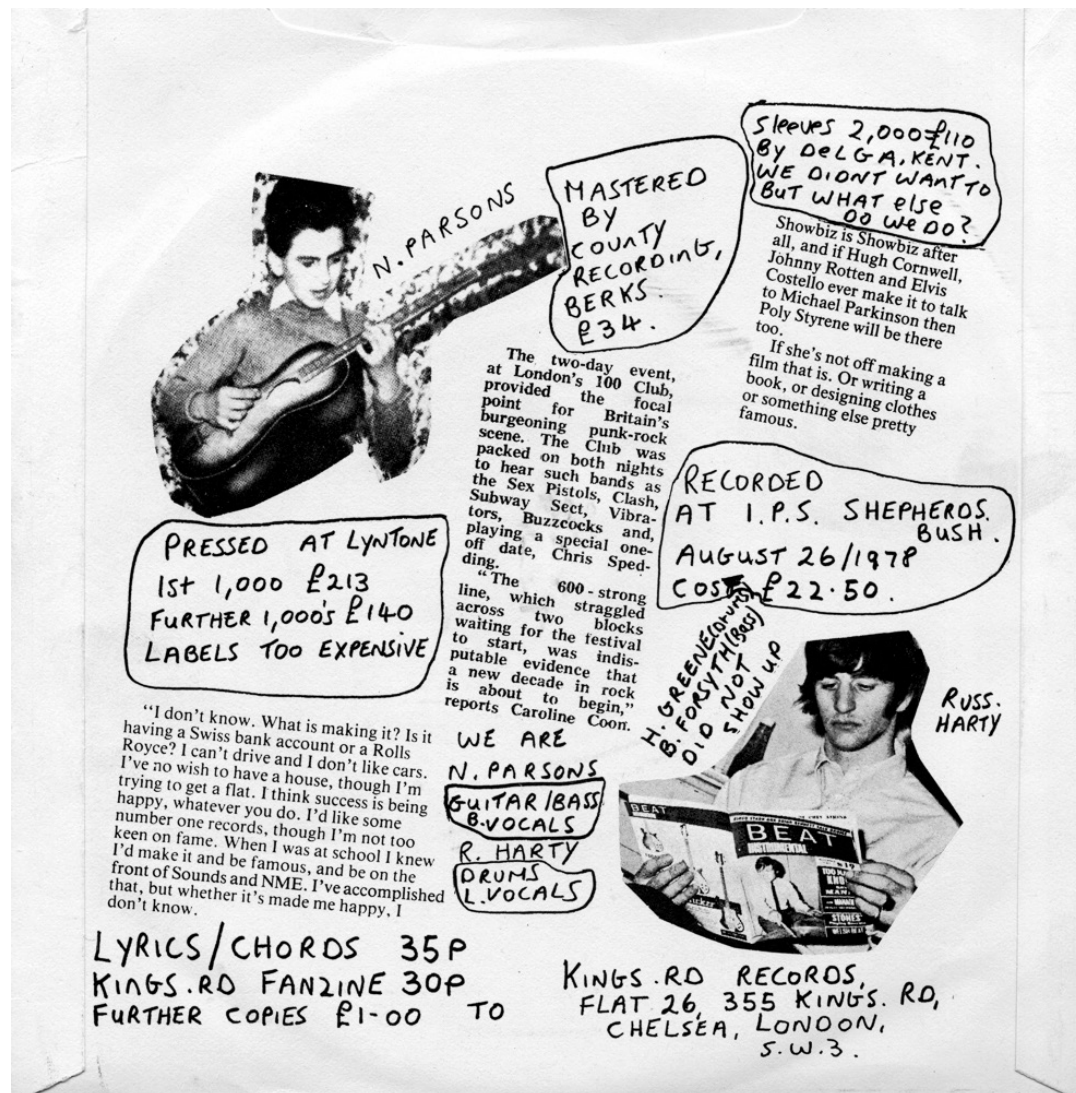


Fig.05 Television Personalities *Where's Bill Grundy Now?* EP (second pressing) (Kings Road Records/Rough Trade 1979) (back cover). Design by Television Personalities.

The record was reissued in conjunction with independent label Rough Trade in 1979, again with production details on the back of the sleeve. This second pressing updated the technical information and costs (Figure 05):

PRESSED AT LYNTONE. 1<sup>ST</sup> 1,000 £213. FURTHER 1,000'S £140. LABELS TOO EXPENSIVE.

MASTERED BY COUNTY RECORDING, BERKS. £34.

RECORDED AT I.P.S. SHEPHERDS BUSH. AUGUST 26/1978. COST £22.50.



Sleeves 2,000 £110. BY DELGA, KENT. WE DIDN'T WANT TO BUT WHAT ELSE DO WE DO?

The paradox of having to produce picture sleeves for the EP is very apparent here. The independent punk record market was booming, and since the earliest days of the movement, groups and labels recognised the demand for both picture sleeves and limited edition records (notably coloured vinyl editions, short production runs in picture covers, or low-price first batches of a release). Since the Television Personalities' own approach was deeply critical of developing punk conventions (or clichés), the 'double bind' of having to produce a picture sleeve is especially ironic. On top of that, the cost of manufacturing picture sleeves far outweighed the cost of recording or mastering the record, and almost paralleled the cost of pressing.

### **THIS IS ANOTHER...**

The independent sector grew strongly between 1978 and 1984, in particular benefiting from the widening market for punk and avant-garde post-punk records in the late 1970s. Independent labels successfully captured the early 1980s punk market, while the major labels turned to the promotion of new styles and a broader audience. Low overheads, and the ability to produce short runs of records that were both cost effective and audience specific, allowed the smaller independents to operate in this specialist market much more easily than the majors, who relied on mass production and distribution, and a high turnover of their product. The new independent labels were, however, limited in terms of access to manufacturing processes, and reliant in many cases on established music industry models. In this regard, Kevin Dunn makes another factual error in narrating the growth of independent UK punk and post-punk record labels and their relationship to recording and record manufacturing;

Prior to the emergence of punk, American and British record companies began investing heavily in new recording technologies, which meant that older studio equipment and studios suddenly became available for independent music producers and companies to either buy or rent at affordable costs (Laing 1985: 29-30). Enterprising individuals, such as Miles Copeland, Bob Last, and Tony Wilson, were able to obtain old recording studios and equipment and create their own independent record labels: Copeland's Step Forward, Last's Fast Product, and Wilson's Factory Records. Thus, pioneering punk bands benefitted from changes in the established record industry that were unrelated to a promotion of a DIY ethos. (Dunn 2016: 129-130)

Certainly it might be argued that the advent of new technology within the recording sector had a knock-on effect for older, smaller studios, and that this may have facilitated easier access (in terms of time and cost) for the emerging independent labels. Digital recording and production was just around the corner, and new technologies such as the SSL console (a major influence on what was to become the 'sound of the 80s') did lead to a proliferation of redundant 'kit'.<sup>7</sup> However, it seems a little too much of a stretch from there to extrapolate that new independent labels could "obtain" or purchase their own recording studios, certainly prior to the bigger independent music boom of the mid-1980s. Indeed, Laing makes no such assertion in the original citation provided by Dunn, and it is unclear where this suggestion comes from. Retrospectively, it is perhaps too easy to imagine that more recent developments in small studio technology, and the success of alternative and independent labels (in the US in particular) that enabled some closer ties with actual record production and manufacture, go back much further

---

7 See Milner 2010 for a detailed history of this period in relation to professional recording technologies and techniques, and Ogg 2009 for a critical overview of UK independent labels including Step Forward, Fast Product and Factory.



to encompass the early punk DIY boom. However, there is little if any empirical evidence that that may have been the case. Equally, digital technology was still in its infancy in the late 1970s, and in the contemporary era of desktop publishing, the internet, smart phones and widespread access to creative software tools (for the construction and dissemination of audio and visual material) it can be hard to fully comprehend that virtually all early punk records were recorded using analogue technology, and employed graphic design strategies that were intrinsically physical, hands-on and craft-based.

Changes in sound recording technology were in part mirrored within the field of design and visual communication. The role of the graphic designer, particularly in relation to the preparation of artwork for print production, changed radically between the mid 1960s and late 1970s. A shift towards photolithography in the UK and Europe after World War II had led to the widespread adoption of photographic techniques in engraving and platemaking. As Henry C Latimer noted in his guide to contemporary design procedures and techniques in 1977,

the unusual feature of this change in the use of printing processes requires the printing user to transfer much of production planning to the creative planning stage in order to take advantage of the extra capabilities of the photomechanical processes. Time and cost factors are now controlled in the creative planning stage... the user or the user's advertising agency or art studio prepares camera-ready art and copy in the form of paste-up mechanicals (Latimer 1977: vii).

The relationship between the designer, printer and pre-press artworkers was therefore key to the design and construction of printed material, including record sleeves. What Latimer describes as the "creative planning stage" centres around the notion of graphic design as a process of detailed planning and specification. In the contemporary digital world of creative practice, it can be easy to overlook this critical aspect, since many technical processes formerly undertaken by specialists have become part of the graphic designer's own remit.

The process of professional graphic design in this period could be described as in some ways collaborative. The designer's activities would be based on a process of specification, whereby other skilled professionals in what was termed 'art production' (such as phototypesetters, metal type compositors, illustrators, photoengravers and platemakers, printers and print finishers) would be given detailed instructions in order to achieve the desired results. The crucial stage of the pre-press process involved the making of film separations for platemaking: this was the point where a prototype one-off was converted to a mass produced artefact. Such pre-press operations were usually, though not always, owned by printers as a front end to their activities, and were much more advanced technologically than artwork production houses, using a combination of photographic processes and very precise manual procedures. Technicians would use parallel motion light box drawing boards to 'comp together' film negative separations of various types (halftone images, line work, halftone mechanical tint screens), which could then be produced as plates for the various colour separations on the printing press. The designer would supply the pre-press departments with a variety of origination (line work and continuous tone work), usually with line work (type, line illustration, brush work and rules) in situ, and with only keyline indications of colour areas and images to be placed by the artwork department.

A significant aspect of the translation of the artwork to film separations, and hence to printed proof, was in communicating to the individuals involved exactly how to assemble the various parts supplied by the designer. These instructions were usually written and drawn onto

tracing paper overlays to the artwork, which were registered and held in place with pins or tape.<sup>8</sup> The graphic designer's role was to plan, predict and specify required outcomes, rather than to originate them in their entirety by craft at the drawing board stage. While some skilled designers could make use of the flexibility offered by such pre-press tools as the PMT camera, most design studios were more limited in terms of the technology available, and economy of scale meant that such facilities were more often than not reserved for major artwork departments, rather than acting as a design 'tool' for production. One key distinction between the professional designer and amateur and DIY producers was in their detailed knowledge of the range of pre-press artworking processes and specification techniques available. Punk sleeve design was in part technologically driven, with artwork often reflecting the availability of materials, together with the skills and training (or lack of such) of the designer.

### THIS IS A THIRD...

So, what are the visual and graphic conventions of DIY punk and post-punk? Are they performative and formally designed, displaying the lo-tech or handmade nature of their construction, or are they a rhetorical call-to-arms, with a sense of shared participation for the viewer or user? Is *do-it-yourself* simply a background context for the record (important though that may be), or is it the key element of the message itself? What is key here is the notion of making explicit the means of production – allowing the form and content of the message to be self-reflexive, *the medium is the message* in a very literal sense.

This distinction between professional and amateur design extends beyond the production of camera-ready paste-up artwork for professional reproduction. Some DIY sleeve designers chose to print, as well as design, their sleeves, thus taking the entire production process in-house. This strategy led to the creation of some extremely simple sleeves, as in the basic, black and white, one-sided Xerox copies produced for the single *Hypocrite* by the Newtown Neurotics (No Wonder 1979), *Last Bus to Debden* EP by the Epileptics (Spiderleg 1981), *God's Got Religion* by the Fifty Fantastics (Dining Out 1980) and the *Don't Feed Us Shit* EP by Icon A.D. (Radical Change 1982). In comparison, the silkscreen printed coloured stripes on the Manchester Mekon single *Not Forgetting* (Newmarket Records 1979) required access to more technical equipment (a silkscreen print facility), but the sleeve was even simpler in its design. Three stripes were screen-printed directly onto standard white, plain paper record bags, which were already factory folded and glued, with the reverse printed in one colour. The omission of any text or image on the sleeve itself means that factors such as registration or tone and contrast (and hence readability) are unimportant – textual information (such as titles and catalogue number) is included on the professionally-printed centre labels, and on a separate photocopied insert.

The silkscreen printing process is quite labour-intensive, and large batches of prints in more than one colour, particularly where accurate registration is required, demand a great deal of time. This tends to make anything more than a very short run not economically viable, or in the case of home-made sleeves, something of a labour of love. Simple silkscreen printed sleeves include the Adicts *Lunch With The Adicts* EP (Dining Out 1979), *Disco Zombies Here Come*

---

8 See Latimer 1977 and Cherry 1976.

*The Buts* (Dining Out 1980) and Blank Students *We Are Natives* (Dexter Records 1980), which were all printed in one colour on a folded piece of card. Access to silkscreen print technology could lead to more elaborate and sophisticated sleeve designs, although the mechanical problems of cutting, folding and glueing sleeves meant that many DIY producers chose to print on a 14" x 7" flat piece of card, folded and wrapped around the record – which was usually housed in a separate white inner bag. The record and sleeve would normally then be inserted in a plastic cover: without this there was nothing to stop them becoming detached. This form of simple packaging was to be widely imitated, and still continues across the range of DIY releases to this day.

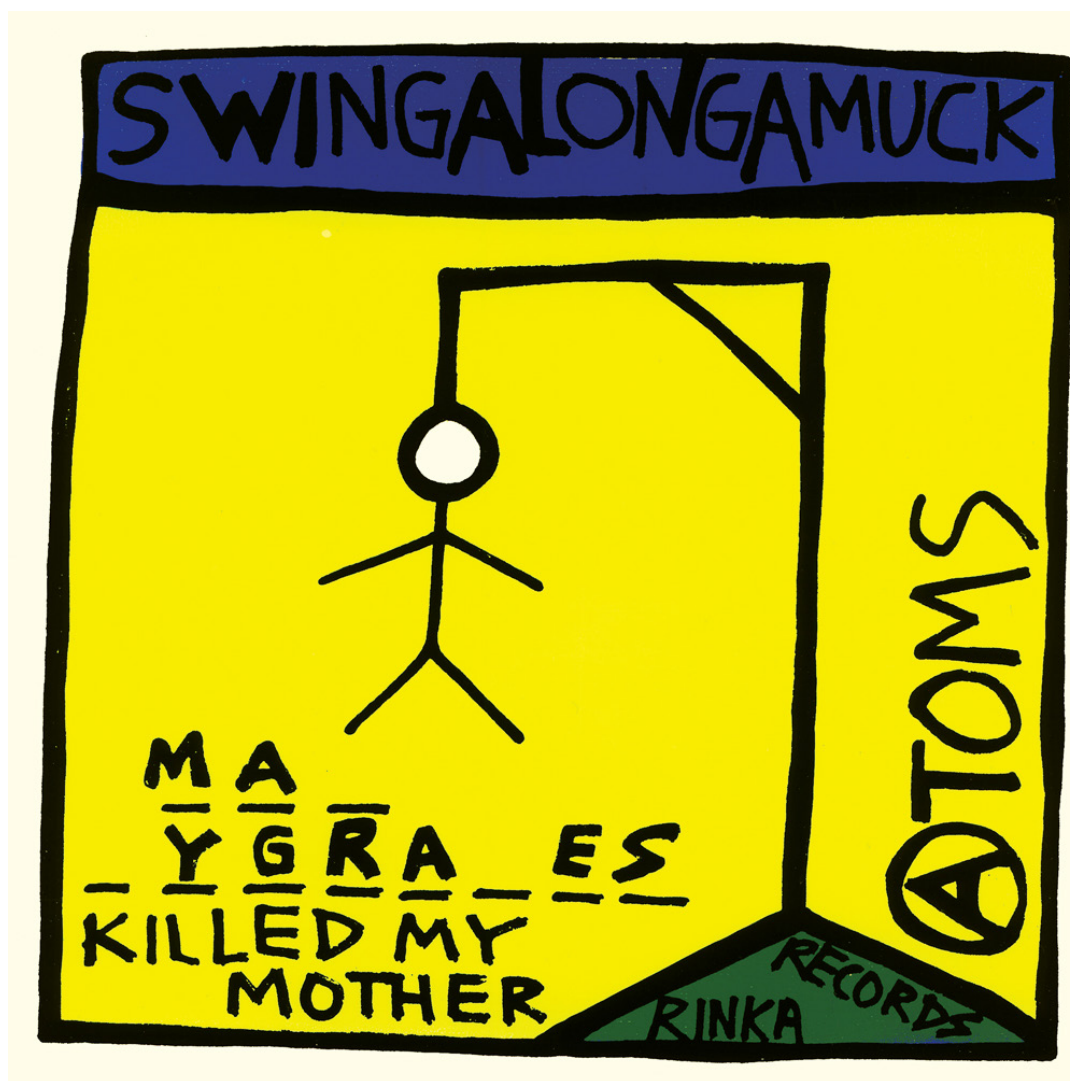


Fig.06 The Atoms *Max Bygraves Killed My Mother* (Rinka Records 1979). Design by Keith Allen.

One highly elaborate DIY production, a package for the single *Max Bygraves Killed My Mother* by the Atoms (Rinka Records 1979), included two separate seven inch square, silkscreen printed front and back cards, together with screen-printed sticky centre labels to glue to the record, and a number of printed, photocopied and handwritten postcards and inserts – all contained in a PVC sleeve (Figure 06). This level of detail and hand-made material would be very difficult, and uneconomical, to achieve with a large-scale release, and such excesses were generally limited to small-scale independent labels.



The fact that many DIY sleeves were produced by amateur designers does not mean that they were uninventive. The debut single by ...and the Native Hipsters, *There Goes Concorde Again* (Heater Volume 1980) used a number of hand-crafted materials, though in this case the coloured pattern on the sleeve was created by cutting out 14" x 7" folded sections from large sheets of printed billboard material. Each sleeve was unique – the group rubber-stamped the record centre labels and added a small photocopied name label to the front of the sleeve, together with a photocopied insert. Once again, this 'wraparound' sleeve was housed in a PVC record sleeve, in order to keep the individual elements together. This use of found or pre-used material was mirrored in other designs, such as the debut album by Warsaw Pakt (itself something of a critically-acclaimed publicity stunt, having been recorded, mixed, cut to vinyl, packaged and distributed within 24 hours), which used a cardboard record mailing envelope as a sleeve, decorated with stickers and rubber stamps. An even simpler lo-tech approach was adopted by two other groups: East London New Wave group Secret Affair's debut, *Time For Action* (I-Spy 1979), featured sleeves constructed from brown paper bag material, printed with titles on the reverse, while Novelty Punk group Heavy Cochran simply used folded brown paper bags, hand-writing the title of their single, *I've Got Big Balls* (Psycho1978) on the front.

The impact of *do-it-yourself* activity on the record manufacturing process was mirrored in the marketing and distribution aspects of the subculture: groups could set up their own label, and could sell direct to customers either locally (at gigs or via local outlets) or by mail order, but they were largely at the mercy of a national distribution system, together with long-established procedures for music publishing, promotion and marketing, in order to reach a wider audience. There is, therefore, a distinct division of labour in the production of punk records, and the 'any-one can do it' DIY ethos of punk could only have a nominal impact on this range of activities.

Similarly, while the design of the sleeve could be taken on by untrained members or friends of the group, the actual printing, folding and glueing was often left to the services of a professional print studio. The fact that such a high proportion of punk sleeves were professionally printed, together with the widespread adoption of record industry 'norms' such as the inclusion of a group photograph on the front cover, locates punk within the music industry once more. Although innovations did occur, and the punk avant-garde found new directions in both musical and visual aesthetics, links to other earlier, and contemporary, popular music genres were still very much in evidence. Whether these links were self-regulated, in that punk groups wished to emulate their own rock music heroes, or imposed, in that the industry itself adopted punk as simply another new music development to profit from, it is clear that punk's 'year zero' approach was not to overturn the entire music business, and the famous punk call-to-arms by The Clash; "...no Elvis, Beatles or Rolling Stones in 1977" was ultimately to prove empty rhetoric.

Interestingly, some of the limitations of *do-it-yourself* and low tech production within the burgeoning independent scene were a source of critical self-reflection (or even embarrassment), as well as assertive positioning on the part of producers. While he denies his group wanting to sound or look like the Sex Pistols or The Clash, preferring to forge their own individual punk identity, Kev Lycett of Leeds group the Mekons, who released their debut single, *Never Been In A Riot* on the Fast Product label in February 1978, recalls a sense of naivety with regard to the recording process; "...back in those days no-one knew anything about recording and we thought that just the fact of making a record would result in a record that sounded like a 'proper' record. It was a profound shock to hear such a 'crap' sounding thing and we were all too embarrassed to play it to any

*one for a long time. We wanted it to sound like a 'real' record!"*<sup>9</sup> In retrospect, the record is widely recognised as something of a punk 'classic' because of its simplicity and the impression of a group struggling with their instruments, but the distinction between group or individual aspirations and the reality of recording and manufacturing a record is crucial to an understanding of the genre. Interestingly, the initial sense of disappointment was also reflected in the group's impression of the single sleeve when it was finally released; "...at the time I thought it was the crappiest single cover I had ever seen and was bitterly disappointed to see such an ugly, inept thing wrapping my first single!"

## **NOW FORM A BAND...**

The notion of a revolutionary core at the centre of early UK punk, which is later defused by recuperation into the music business and popular culture, was central to the position adopted by Dick Hebdige in his study of punk subculture (Hebdige 1979), and in much writing within cultural studies since – whether to simply continue Hebdige's argument, or to extend a critique that draws upon his original premise for its foundations. Stacy Thompson, for instance, offers a summary of *"the punk project"* as by definition *"...opposed to capitalism... In truth, capitalism is neither natural nor necessary, and punks have not forgotten this fact"* (Thompson 2004: 4).

This does lead us to something of a conundrum. Punk's *do-it-yourself* philosophy certainly did open up the market to new and innovative ideas, new labels and business practices, and a new generation of entrepreneurs – some of whom invested their time, money and effort in a participatory and democratic fashion, not in the pursuit of profit but simply as a self-sustaining contribution to the scene. While the demystification of the process of production can be seen as spreading the word and embodying a punk DIY ideology, it can be argued that in some ways these examples do little more than pay lip service to the notion of 'doing-it-yourself', and are rather more clearly examples of simply 'buying-it-yourself'. Similar issues arise in the notion of 'independence', as Barry Lazell's working definition on the establishment of an Indie Chart within the trade journal *Record Business* in January 1980 suggests – in order to be classed as independent, records had to be *"independently distributed: produced, manufactured, marketed and put into the shops without recourse to the major record companies..."* (Lazell 1997: II).

However, at least until new technologies evolved for recording, reproducing and distributing music, the early pioneers of *do-it-yourself* punk were to be forever hampered by access to, and ownership of, the means of production. Technological change was around the corner, bringing firstly access to cheap and fairly simple home recording and duplication equipment (the cassette recorder, followed by the multi-track tape recorder in the mid-80s), and subsequently digital technologies that took music distribution away from physical formats altogether. Perhaps the time-lag between the ambition of *doing-it-yourself* and the widespread availability of technologies that allow full artistic control, from the initial idea to final communication and reception, has softened the pioneering spirit of the early DIY punk artists. The manifestos, messages of empowerment and calls-to-arms of Mark P, Tony Moon, Desperate Bicycles, Scritti Politti, Television Personalities et al were perhaps embodied in the struggle to communicate within the restrictions of the medium, and the technologies of the time. Certainly it would be

---

9 Interview with the author, 4th February 2000.

good to see a contemporary take on the same theme – it's now even easier and cheaper to go and do it, though the explicit call to do so is rarely, if ever, heard.

## REFERENCES

- Barfe, Louis. 2005. *Where Have All The Good Times Gone? The Rise and Fall of the Record Industry*. London: Atlantic Books.
- Bestley, Russ & Ogg, Alex. 2012. *The Art of Punk*. London: Omnibus Press.
- Cherry, David. 1976. *Preparing Artwork for Reproduction*. London: BT Batsford.
- Dale, Pete. 2012. *Anyone Can Do it: Empowerment, Tradition and the Punk Underground*. London: Routledge.
- Dunn, Kevin. 2016. *Global Punk*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Elborough, Travis. 2008. *The Long-player Goodbye: The album from vinyl to iPod and back again*. London: Sceptre.
- Hebdige, Dick. 1979. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London: Routledge.
- Latimer, Henry C. 1977. *Preparing Art and Camera Copy for Printing: Contemporary Procedures and Techniques for Mechanicals and Related Copy*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Lazell, Barry. 1997. *Indie Hits: The Complete UK Independent Charts 1980–1989*. London: Cherry Red Books.
- Milner, Greg. 2010. *Perfecting Sound Forever: The Story of Recorded Music*. London: Granta.
- Ogg, Alex. 2009. *Independence Days: The Story of UK Independent Record Labels*. London: Cherry Red Books.
- Perry, Mark. 2000. *Sniffin' Glue: The Essential Punk Accessory*. London: Sanctuary.
- Poynor, Rick. 2003. *No More Rules: Graphic Design and Postmodernism*. London: Laurence King.
- Reid, Jamie and Savage, Jon. 1987. *Up They Rise – The Incomplete Works of Jamie Reid*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Reynolds, Simon. 2005. *Rip It Up And Start Again: Post Punk 1978–84*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Thompson, Stacy. 2004. *Punk Productions: Unfinished Business*. New York: State University of New York Press.

Date received: 2016-06-14

Date accepted: 2016-10-25