Popular Culture

Roy Lichtenstein: Fine Art Meets Mass Culture

"Roy Lichtenstein 1970-1980." An exhibition organized by the St. Louis Art Museum. At the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Sept. 22,-Nov. 29, 1981.

Roy Lichtenstein, who gained notoriety in the 1960s for such comic-strip paintings as "Blang," "Whaam," "Varoom," and "Vicki! I—I Thought I Heard Your Voice," keeps producing new and interesting work. His paintings present an ongoing commentary on art and popular perception. And he remains one of the more accessible and humorous of today's American visual artists, with an influence that goes beyond his immediate audience. By building a bridge between "fine" art and popular culture, Lichtenstein has helped to create an opening that a people's art movement could use.

Roy Lichtenstein emerged as one of the founders of the Pop Art movement in the early '60s. As late as the end of the '50s, however, Lichtenstein was still emulating the Abstract Expressionists. These were painters like Jackson Pollock, who tried to make an intensely personal statement using extreme abstraction—swirls, drips of paint, and so on. But Lichtenstein broke with the personalism of the Expressionists, and began incorporating images from mass culture into his work. At first, he used folk heros like cowboys or George Washington. Then he moved on to a more contemporary set of heros—Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, and characters drawn from romance and adventure comics.

Lichtenstein's blow-ups of comic-book scenes translate human emotions and interactions into a meaningless formality. His images are torn out of context and visually simplified even from the original comic strip forms. Perhaps the most extreme example is his famous painting looking down the barrel of a revolver, which reduced the threat of imminent death to a harmless, abstract design. Like Andy Warhol with his paintings of rows and rows of Campbell's soup cans, Lichtenstein won critical recognition by exploiting the contradiction between the bourgeois ideal of individual artistic expression, and a cultural environment dominated by simplified, repeated images serving commercial purposes.

At the same time, Lichtenstein conveyed a more compassionate message than many of the Pop artists. Warhol's repeated images of an electric chair (or of Marilyn Monroe) can shock or titillate, but not much more. But Lichtenstein's paintings urge you to laugh at the larger-than-life comic-book stereotypes. They leave open the possibility of moving beyond the stereotypes to a more human way of relating.

Lichtenstein's current exhibition reviews more recent work, from 1970 to 1981. In this period, he has kept some of the elements from his comic-book period: a matrix of dots for shading, heavy black outlines, a palette of a small numbers of basic colors used in blocks, and a blown-up scale. But he has moved on from the comics to interpret many of the trends in 20th century fine art—from Cubism, to Surrealism, and German Expressionism (among others). Although he began this theme in the '60s with his "Picassos" and "Monets," Lichtenstein's recent efforts are more far-ranging and systematic.

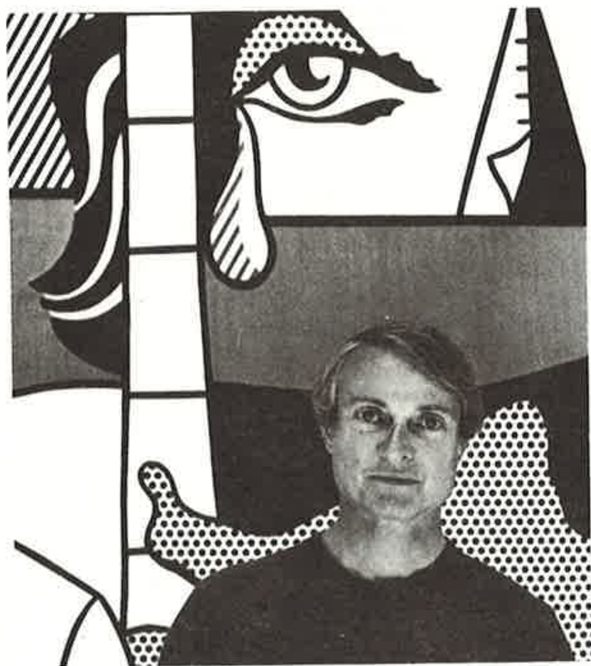
Lichtenstein's treatment of modern art restates each "movement" as a set of particular formal rules, which he translates into his own deadpan idiom. The effect is to present art history as a succession of cliches, not that different from the comic-book cliches he perfected earlier. He's not making fun of modern art; rather he's *demystifying* its conventions and modes of expression. This effect is most striking in his "triptychs." In these paintings, the first panel is a comic-book representation of a cow, a woman's head, or whatever. The second panel is an abstract, more or less Cubist rendition of the same subject. The third panel reduced the image to an unrecognizable abstraction of lines, curves, and planes of color. As exhibition director Jack Cowart points out,[1] the joke is that *each* of the panels is equally abstract relative to the visual image of an actual cow. They simply correspond to different conventions in visual communication.

In the midst of all this commentary on form, Lichtenstein's vision of *people* is seriously deficient. Where people appear in his recent work, they are doubly formalized—with the elements of the art movement he is parodying, and with his own comic-strip conventions (almost every woman is blond, blue-eyed, and long-lashed). More often, people are absent altogether. His "office scenes" show empty, strangely static offices. And his "mirrors" face the viewer with only rays and shadows.

But if Lichtenstein's content lacks humanity, his form is not so impoverished. His break with Abstract Expressionism meant moving away from total "self-expression" to a new respect for his audience, a willingness to communicate through familiar images. He also rejected (and parodied) the heroic "realism" which characterized both Socialist Realism and much of the bourgeois mural art of the '30s—a reductionist realism which "talks down" to the viewer. His art *engages* the viewer, using visual and symbolic intensity with a large dose of humor.

Lichtenstein's stance as an artist is an avowedly apolitical one. "The social consequences of a society are important to me, but I don't think my art deals with this," he told an interviewer in 1966. "...I don't really think I'm interested in making a social comment."[2] Referring to his war comic scenes, Lichtenstein noted in 1971 that "A minor purpose of

Blam, 1962



Roy Lichtenstein and *Landscape with Figures*, 1977 (detail)

my war paintings is to put military aggressiveness in an absurd light. My personal opinion is that much of our foreign policy has been unbelievably terrifying, but this is not what my work is about." Instead, he said, "My work is more about our American definitions of images and visual communications."[3] When Lichtenstein's show was in New York, this political indifference stood in sharp contrast to the spirit of a show of Russian avant-garde artists of the early 20th century, on display at the same time. Many of those artists supported the Bolsheviks, and the show includes designs for propaganda posters, loudspeaker stands, and pamphlet covers (all in an avant-garde style using juxtaposed lines and geometric figures!)

Lichtenstein's influence extends beyond the people who go to his shows. He's had a ripple effect in graphic design for print media, as commercial artists have imitated or drawn from his style. There is a broad public awareness that comic-book images and techniques have become part of "art." And this is Lichtenstein's most important contribution. He has broken down part of the division between art and popular culture. In the process, he has demystified fine art, and has pointed out the importance of viewing the comics and other commercial art as a source of artistic inspiration.

In itself, this is not progressive. Popular culture in the US is saturated with racism, sexism, class bias, and consumerism. It remains a task for revolutionary artists to help build a movement of people's art—popular in terms of participation and consumption as well as content. Lichtenstein has at least given us some tools to overcome the "fine art" elitism that renders most people helpless or cynical in the face of art that is declared "superior" to what they can understand and appreciate.

Chris Audino

[1] Jack Cowart, "Bending the Rules," in exhibition program to "Roy Lichtenstein 1970-1980" (1981).

[2] Alan Solomon, "Conversation with Lichtenstein," in A. Boatto and G. Falzoni, eds. *Lichtenstein* (Fantazaria, Rome, 1966), p. 36.

[3] Diane Waldman, *Roy Lichtenstein* (Abrams, New York, 1971), p. 27.

Chris Audino is a labor and communitv activist (and sometime artist) who recently moved from Boston to San Francisco.

"American Music": The Blasters

> If we want a revolution to happen in this country, we've got to find a way to make Elvis Presley become Che Guevara.
>
> —Phil Ochs, "Gunfight at Carnegie Hall"[1]

It's too bad Phil isn't with us anymore to enjoy the Blasters. On a cultural plane, their unique blend of musical patriotism and political radicalism just might be the union of opposites he hoped for.

So who are the Blasters? Maybe just the best thing to happen to American rock'n roll since Bruce Springsteen. What do they play? They call it "American Music," which is the title of one of the songs on their new Slash LP. Dave Alvin (lead guitarist and songwriter): "When a lot of people first heard that, they thought we were real right-wing. Just cause it was 'American', that sounded like flag-waving. And in a way it is." Phil Alvin (rhythm guitarist, harmonica player and lead singer, Dave's brother): "But see, if you actually went and listened to all the things that song talks about—'the Louisiana boogie and the Delta blues, country swing and rockabilly too'—the real politics of that music are revolutionary. It could tear the kingdom down!" Gene Taylor (piano player): "If we play a song that invokes a music of the past and you go back and listen to that music, you'll hear so much struggle, so much of people that never had a voice in government."[2]

Pretty heady stuff, for a group of guys who play "rockabilly," that particular combination of rhythm and blues and country-western music created in the '50s that was to become rock 'n roll. But the Blasters are decidedly *not* just another "rockabilly" band—indeed, they reject the term itself as having racist overtones![3] Basically, they're a young, contemporary blues-rock band, in the same league as the Thunderbirds, George Thorogood and the Destroyers, and the Nighthawks. What makes them unique, however—aside from the political overtones in their approach—is their ability to reach out to other regional musical genres—New Orleans R&B, country-western, black "doo-wop" vocal music, you name it—and incorporate them all into the repertoire of a blues quintet. Indeed, perhaps only the Thunderbirds approach their level of versatility and eclecticism.[4]

The Slash LP reflects all these influences in the treatment given to both their original numbers (including the aforementioned "American Music" and also "Marie Marie," a big hit last year in England when covered by Shakin' Stevens) and their cover versions (including Sunnyland Slim's class "Highway 61" and Jimmy Rogers' masterpiece from 1928, "Never No More Blues"). They previously recorded an album two years ago on the Rolling Rock label, which is now out of print and is a much-sought-after collectors' item. Despite its production deficiences as compared to the Slash LP, for this writer their Rolling Rock album captures a little more of the raw excitement, and a little more of the Blasters' political perspective, than does the new Slash album. Take the lyrics to "I Don't Want To":

They say I shouldn't waste my life anymore by runnin' around,
I should find some nice white girl and settle down.
They tell me that's what I should do, but I don't want to.
They try to tell me to shut my mouth and watch every move I make,
By tellin' me I was gonna regret every stand I take.
They tell me that's what I should do, but I don't want to.[5]

The Blasters cover much more interesting territory in their songs than the usual "cars and girls and let's go to the hop" subject matter that characterizes the music of most of their contemporaries (i.e., the Straycats, the King Bees, Dave Edmunds, etc.). "Barn Burning," on their Rolling Rock LP, is a driving blues number with a jagged lead guitar line that describes a mysterious event in a small town, which no one quite understands but which nonetheless has everyone paralyzed with fear; in a way the song recalls the haunting intensity of the early, pre-Jesus freak Dylan of "Highway 61 Revisited." "Border Radio," on the Slash album, briefly describes the lives of several unrelated, working-class people, who are bound together by the rock 'n roll music broadcasted by an insurgent DJ across the border. Even the songs which are about "love," broadly defined, are filled with references to working-class life, containing imagery that can only be described as—well, poetic:

Marie Marie, the sun is down in the cornfields,
The evening is dark, and you sing so sad, Marie, Marie.[6]

As musicians, the Blasters are second to none. Dave Alvin's economical yet emotional guitar leads put him in a class with players like George Thorogood and Billy Zoom of X, while brother Phil's voice can handle country yodels and Kansas City shouting with equal ease (he also plays a *mean* blues harp). The pumping boogie piano of Gene Taylor (the newest member of the band, having joined after the Rolling Rock LP was produced) is a valuable addition to the group's sound, and the rhythm section of John Bazz (bass) and Bill Bateman (drums) must surely rank among rock's tightest formations. On a couple of tunes the Blasters utilize the twin tenor saxophones of Steve Berlin and Lee Allen (the latter a veteran New Orleans player in his '50s who recorded with Professor Longhair and Fats Domino).

In the recent interview cited above, the Alvin brothers talk about growing up in Downey California, a working-class suburb of L.A. While still in their teens they played with and learned from the many R&B luminaries who had settled in L.A. during the '50s and '60s (Big Joe Turner and sax man Lee Allen, to name a few), and the training they received shows in their sensitive treatment of material from that era. They also talk about their father, who was a union organizer in the '40s and '50s and who is now an AFL-CIO official in Southern California: "We grew up watching him work in these little mining towns that are now ski resorts. He'd be standing on a car hood on some Indian reservation saying, 'you copper miners have got to friggin' organize!' That's what *we* grew up around."

Having appeared recently on the *Fridays* TV show and on *Entertainment Tonite,* the Blasters seem to be getting the recognition they deserve. One can only hope that fame and fortune will not lure them away from their roots, musically and politically; it is, of course, a dilemma that has confronted rock musicians many times before.[7] In the meantime, check out their new LP on Slash records and listen to some *real* "American Music"—and I don't mean Francis Scott Key.

Lea Perrins

[1] In 1970 Phil played Carnegie Hall wearing a Presley-style gold lame' suit and performing tunes by Buddy Holly and Carl Perkins with a rockabilly band, in addition to his own "protest" songs. The effect was comparable to Dylan's famous appearance at the '65 Newport Folk Festival, and Och's record company, apparently fearing a similarly adverse reaction by Och's fans, released the LP of the event—complete with angry statements from the audience, followed by Och's defensive yet bemused responses—only in Canada. It is still available as an import LP on Canadian A&M Records.

[2] These excerpts are taken from an interview with the band in the February issue of *New York Rocker,* which is highly recommended.

[3] I'm not sure, but I believe the argument runs like this: Some music critics and historians (Greil Marcus, in his *Mystery Train,* for example) argue that what Elvis Presley and his young, white, rural contemporaries in the early fifties created was a revolutionary new sound ("rockabilly") which surpassed both the rhythm-and-blues and traditional country music from which it ultimately was derived. Others, like Arnold Shaw in *Honkers and Shouters,* have emphasized that R&B and C&W had been influencing each other long before the fifties, and that Presley's dynamic style differed little from what R&B singers like Wynonie Harris and Roy Brown had been doing in the late 40s. The Blasters, one suspects, are probably in agreement with Shaw's view.

[4] Joe Ely deserves mention here, as well. Although his roots are closer to the country and western tradition of Hank Williams and Jimmie Rogers, his "neo-rockabilly" songs have also drawn on the music of other American sub-cultures, including Tex-Mex music and the blues. See, for example, Ely's newest album *Live Shots,* recorded live in England while he was on tour with the Clash in 1980 (MCA Records/South Coast Records).

[5] "I Don't Want To," by Dave Alvin; Ronnie Weiser Publishers, Twin Duck Music (BMI), 1980.

[6] "Marie Marie," by Dave Alvin, ditto as above.

[7] See Neil Eriksen's excellent article in *Theoretical Review* No. 21, March-April, 1981, "Bruce Springsteen: Reading Rock and Roll."

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The Dead Kennedys and US Punk Subculture

The Dead Kennedys, unlike many of the better known punk musicians who have been reviewed in these pages, are a "hard core" punk rock band, loyal to the original style of loud, fast, abrasive music which marked the emergence of punk. Lyrically, their recorded music spans a variety of themes, from sharp political satire to extreme nihilism; such a wide variety, that it can be examined as a microcosm of the contradictory tendencies in punk music as a whole. [This is especially true since there has been an increase in the number of progressive US punks in the past year, such as the Red Rockers and Really Red, ed.]

The Dead Kennedys (or DK's) have been a part of the San Francisco new music scene from its beginning around 1977; and they remain very popular today, drawing a few thousand people to their Bay Area concerts. In the recent past they've toured nationally and in Europe, and their first album, "Fresh Fruit For Rotting Vegetables" (IRS, 1981) has sold quite well in England.

I first listened to this album over a year ago; coincidentally, it was the week of Reagan's election. This music, most

of it from 1980 and earlier, seemed to catch the drift of events perfectly:

> Efficiency and progress is ours once more
> Now that we have the Neutron bomb
> It's nice and quick and clean and gets things done. . .
> Away with excess enemy, but no less value to property,
> No Sense in war but perfect sense at home. . .
>
> The sun beams down on a brand new day
> No more welfare tax to pay
> Unsightly slums go up in a flashing light. . .
> Jobless millions whisked away
> At last we have more room to play
> All systems go to kill the poor too-oonight. . .
> Gonna Kill Kill Kill Kill Kill the poor . . .
>
> "Kill the Poor"©IRS 1981

The DK's music possesses not only a razor-sharp critical cynicism—they also have a special San Francisco touch. Their first album is in part a reflection of San Francisco from the period of the People's Temple murder-suicides, and the assassination of Mayor Moscone and gay Supervisor Harvey Milk. The album cover, for example, is a famous photo of a police car in flames following the manslaughter conviction of right-wing Supervisor Dan White, who committed the assassinations.[1]

The heart of the DK's music is terrifying parody; something between late '60s Mick Jagger, Sally Bowles (the main character of the movie "Cabaret" set in pre-fascist Germany), and the Wicked Witch of the West. The key to this parody is the lead singer, Jello Biafra, who alternately takes up the roles of:

(a) fiendish ruling class manipulator
(b) anti-authoritarian rebel
(c) ultra-alienated youth
(d) murderer/madman

The first album is interesting in how it contains all these verging themes of punk into one. The only thing that holds these themes together, though, is a genuine sense of horror toward the modern world. What are the effects of these different parody roles? My guess is this: (a) the ruling class manipulator songs ("Kill the Poor," "When You Get Drafted," etc.) are acid commentaries on the hypocrisy, and degenerate values of the bourgeoisie, dripping with lies and brutality. Yet what is missing is any sense of hope, change or mass action. (b) The rebel role is the answer to the first role and consists of violent attacks on everyday oppressors ("Let's Lynch the Landlord"), or sometimes a symbolic attack on the self-satisfied middle class ("Chemical Warfare") with a nihilist tinge. As for (c), the ultra-alienated youth, it is somewhat contradictory. One song title, "Looking Forward to Death," speaks for itself, but another one, "Drug Me," is a very critical song. It has one "youth" verse: "I don't want to think/Don't make me care/I wanna melt in with the group, I need balls/To leap out of my shell & let go with my friends." And a more "proletarian" verse: "Finally off of work/Unwind and watch the ball game at the bar/Another potato chip weekend is here at last/Go away Go away. . ./Leave me alone, I can't see myself." (©IRS, 1981).

The murderer/madman role tends to dominate the second side of "Fresh Fruit." We are given the story of the sabotage of a roller coaster ride, a gang of crazies who steal people's mail and read it for kicks, the transplantation of a spoiled hippie into Pol Pot's Cambodia, a person gone totally insane (reads like poetry), and lastly, the story of a child murderer, sung in the first person. The song makes a slight attempt to critique the mentality of a psychopathic murderer:

> I don't want to see people anymore
> Make me see them for the shit they are
> Take as many of them as I can away with me
> Anyone can be king for a day. . .
>
> "I Kill Children" (©IRS, 1981)

Yet the overall effect is to ape the murderer and blur the line between his actions and violence directed against the oppressors. The effect is to justify all of the anti-human violence denounced in other songs such as "Police Truck" and "Kill the Poor." After listening closely to these songs a number of times in the course of writing this review, the effect was numbing, actually—not shocking—after a certain point, which is the problem with a lot of "hard core" music—an acceptance of violence and stupidity is encouraged, and critical attitudes dead-end into contemptuous apathy and drugged mindlessness. The contradiction of the music on this album is that it starts with a horror at the modern world, but often ends up submerged in that horror, drowned in it. But then that is the contradiction with American punk rock as a whole, isn't it?

However, the fact remains that their musical characterizations are true to life. It takes a *live* performance by the DK's to fill out this description. Not only is Biafra's singing evocative, but he also creates a total mood through gestures and theatrics which can drive the audience into a frenzy. But it's not only Biafra's performance that creates this heady brew; musically the band is excellent. At first hearing, the album may sound like typical punk machine-gun rhythm. But listen closely and you can hear a riveting bass line, on-rushing drumming, and soaring rhythmic guitar riffs. They all combine to produce a feeling of menace and dread, with crescendos of sound reminiscent of Jimi Hendrix. They have an excellent sense of timing, using abrupt changes in rhythmic/musical pace and building-up/releasing musical tension. A "mood music" is created, giving an awesome power to lyrics, such as in "Police Truck."

The Dead Kennedy's new album, "In God We Trust," is strangely uneven in quality. It is first and foremost a *political* album, with none of the "I kill children/I want to die"-type lyrics.[2] Instead, it focuses on a savage attack on the Moral Majority/Reagan regime. The song "Moral Majority" begins with a mock-evangelist sermon and recitation of the Mickey Mouse Club song and ends with a beautiful denunciation: "God must be dead if you're alive!!" The cover graphics are excellent political art by Winston Smith (see his occasional fanzine *Fallout*) and most of the lyrics are on the back. Although LP-size, it is not LP play-length. My guess, admittedly ignorant, is that it was produced quickly out of a sense of political urgency; a more cynical view would be that a popular punk band can make a profit by selling a 7 or 8 song record for $5.95.

The major shortfall of the album is that there is little musical growth from the first album; in fact, there is some backsliding. On side one especially, the super-fast "thrash" music is too monotonous (at least on a record) compared to the varied moods and rhythms of the first. Despite the less progressive political content of "Fresh Fruit," I liked its musical inventiveness in simulating the helter-skelter mind of mental illness ("Ill in the Head"), of a wild-spending "redneck"-tourist-gambler ("Viva Las Vegas"), police terrorism ("Police Truck") etc. The music on the new album is too jumbled/blurred, without the creative release of tension or careening guitar solos of the first album. "All Religions Suck" is the best example of this problem, but it also emerges to a lesser extent on "Hyperactive Child,"

"Kepone Factory" and "Nazi Punks Fuck Off" (however on the latter song, I think the "thrash" style is just right).

In "Kepone Factory" we find the DK's first explicit attack on alienated wage labor:

> I finally found a job in the paper
> Movin' barrells at a chemical plant
> There's shiny looking dust on my fjngers
> Going up my nose and into my lungs
> It's the Kepone poisoning
> Minamata Kepone poisoning . . .
> Turning people into bonzai trees

But no vision of collective action here:

> Gonna go to your big metal building
> Gonna slam right through your bright metal door
> Gonna grab your sta-prest collar
> And ram some kepone down your throat.

While this form of struggle is definitely a mode of workers struggle, a mode that may become more important in the coming period of Reaganized desperation, it is not a form of struggle that points to a new world, as the DK's realize when the song ends by describing a rotten legal deal with the company that allows for no human dignity. Now *that's* typical!

While overall, the album stays within the bounds of the punk aesthetic (avoiding anything like love/sex, giddiness, inward self-criticism, tenderness, or femininity) there are some important *breaks* with that tradition. In their attack on the new right, they express some real *hope* (important for everybody these days):

> You call yourselves the moral majority
> We call ourselves the people in the real world
> Trying to wipe us out but we're going to survive
> God must be dead if you're alive!

Also there is the self-criticism of the punk scene expressed in "Nazi Punks" ending with a warning:

> You'll be the first to go
> Unless you think!

In a live concert late last year, Biafra paced the stage repeatedly between songs stressing this theme, berating the crowd for its drug induced apathy, encouraging people to think about the coming conflicts (in somewhat apocalyptic terms), referring to recent events in local city politics, and at one point, poking fun at the crowd's faddishness by chiding that he knew they were going to go home and listen to their Joni Mitchell records. Not exactly your normal between-songs rap. This is very important, given that normal concert-goers can usually dicipher very little of the lyrics, and are often in such a frenzy of slam-dancing or drug-induced stupor, that very little of a discerning process is possible.

Also, there is a song which makes the new album worth buying in itself, an updated version of "California Uber Alles" entitled "We've Got a Bigger Problem Now." Originally a devilish satire on California's favorite liberal demagogue (Jerry Brown) and a commentary on the repressive direction of the US ("You will jog for the master race/and always wear a happy face/Close your eyes, can't happen here/Big Bro on white horse is near/The hippies won't come back you say/Mellow out or you will pay..."), the song is updated to Reagan's ascendency. The real genius of this song is that it alternates between the rapid/hyp-notic/forboding style of the old version, with other verses sung in "cocktail jazz" style, a type of muzak designed to lull the listener to sleep, complete with Holiday Inn-between song chit-chat:

> Last call—drink up . . . Last call for your freedom of speech...
> Drink up . . . Happy hour is not enforced by law . . .

And later on:

> Ah yes . . . That's it . . . just relax . . . have another drink . . .
> a few more pretzels . . . little more MSG. . .
> Turn on those Dallas Cowboys on your TV . . .
> Lock your doors . . . close your mind . . .[3]

The song not only warns of how fascism rides in (not on apocalyptic wings but on blind apathy), but also the very structure of the song is designed to promote critical reflection, because the high speed thrash music stops abruptly, going into the cocktail riff. This has quite a jarring effect on several hundred slam dancing young people.

As for the common complaint about the narrowness of the hard-core style represented by the DK's, I would say, (a) this music is definitely not for everyone, (b) that there are indeed a fair number of hard core bands who are unimaginative and techically sloppy subsisting in a milieu which emphasizes amateur performance, but (c) I think there is a real basis for this "awful, weird, abrasive music" gaining a wider following, at least among white youth (middle and working class) because it reflects, more accurately than most contemporary music, elements of the real conditions of urban life. An abrasive/rebellious style is not necessarily a "petty bourgeois" deviation, as the punk sub-culture in England shows.[4] (The "autonomy" movement of the late '70s in Italy had significant, if not decisive, participation by working class youth, and was aptly labeled by one Italian Marxist as "Italian punk rock"; that movement is today largely in ruins due to the "anti-terrorist" repression and internal splits in the movement.) Yet after a point, the style is too confining, as it can reflect only a narrow range of thought and emotion and rejects the quieter modes of musical expression. The music may just dead-end into boredom if it cannot finally break the bounds of the punk aesthetic, the same bounds which originally demarcated it from disco.

This is not to say that the hard-core/underground scene is without growth: rock-a-billy (see the Blasters review in this issue), new psychedelic, and women's bands with unique styles—all continue to develop. The Dils, an early SF hard-core punk/leftist band, has reformed as *Rank 'n File* (in Austin Texas), and play energetic Texas country/rock music now, with slightly toned-down politics. The boundaries of the style are being explored. Still, a narrowness is evident, not only in some punks' musical tastes, but also in the cliquish attitude toward non-hard core punks, total rejection of other musical styles, thrash dancing too rough for non-football players to engage in, extreme sexism and plain stupidity.

I wonder if part of this narrowness is purist reaction to the commodification of punk. Many progressive punks seem to see broadening the range of musical and lyrical expression as synonymous with the co-optation efforts of capital:[5] signing with big record companies, playing in big halls run by big promoters, censoring politics and "unmarketable" styles, and generally pushing aside the efforts of progressive punks to build their own institutions. Dropping the roots-music hard-core orientations, a-la-Clash, appears to be interpreted by many punks as a sellout to corporate capital. Yet a pure hard core orientation doesn't seem to me to provide any answers to these problems either. The direction of the scene is definitely unclear.

What is the political character of the music? I hesitate to answer this question, since it is so often used to close debate on cultural questions by attempting to impose a simplistic

definition of the "class character" ot art.[6] Having said that, I'd answer that the music tends to uphold a middle-class drop-out, anarchism (as differentiated from worker-rooted syndicalism) with the general direction being toward the political/collective and away from the individualist/nihilistic. Biafra describes himself as a sort of anarchist. This brand of politics is mainly based in a cross-class rebel tradition in US youth culture, as well as reflecting righteous disgust with foreign models of "socialism," and the semi-religious bent of the local dogmatists as well. Marxists are wrong to sneer at these politics, which are often instinctive and not really dogmatic and fixed, and dismiss the possibility of working with (and even learning from!) these folks.

The DK's cannot be expected to simply transcend their origins in a country which has spawned very little in the way of *class* cultures or institutions (as opposed to ethnic/racial). A music and culture that are a direct expression of a working class standpoint can only really emerge with the emergence of an autonomous/revolutionary working class dependent on larger factors than the political line of a miniscule number of Marxists. While Marxist cultural workers can at best link their perspective to the living elements of class consciousness among people today, in the absence of mass class consciousness and struggle such attempts will naturally be ambiguous and strained.

Where the DK's are heading is not quite clear; but the fact that they've survived the past few years and have retained the best of their creative and critical approach is a hopeful sign. Most importantly, they have maintained a dynamic relation with their audience; firing them up, responding to the audience's initiatives, and carrying on a positive dialogue with people, rather than "giving the (dumb) public what it wants."

Jeff Goldthorpe

[1] Lead singer Jello Biafra ran for Mayor of SF following the assassinations, when two "moderates" vied for votes. Biafra ended up finishing third ahead of the SWP and all the other oppositional candidates.

[2] Recently there was also a separate release of a record by Biafra and other musicians (anonymously) called "Witch Trails." While Biafra seems to be the overriding influence, it's not quite in the DK formula. The LP-sized 45 is full of grim and ghoulish electronic music, hypnotic percussion, chanted lyrics, etc. There is one sort of sado-masochist sex song with a disco beat ("Beat the Meat") and two science fiction style songs, one of which is a tale of the revenge metted out to politicians/business by post-holocaust mutants ("We're trapped in a playground, where you play your war games, We are the mutations, of your Agent Orange, Our ancestors died off..."). This connection to science fiction arises in other music as well and would be interesting to study, as an example of the convoluted influence of mass culture.

[3] This is an example, common with the DK's of a somewhat elitist and one-sided view of mass culture as merely a tool of the ruling class to control a passive mass, which was a popular view in the '60s youth culture, and is, I believe, partly due to the influence of Marcuse's view of culture.

[4] This complex issue of aesthetics, sub-cultures and class is beyond the scope of this article. For starters see Paul Thompson's "Youth Culture and Youth Politics in Britain," and accompanying book reviews in *Radical America* Vol. 13, No. 2, March-April, 1979.

[5] See for example the interesting punk fanzine *Ripper* No. 5 (available for $1.00 from Ripper, 1494 Teresita Dr., San Jose, Ca. 95129).

[6] See Elaine Zeskind's article on punk in *Urgent Tasks* No. 5, where she quotes Engels writing to a English novelist about her depressing portrait of a passive English working class.

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[19]Dobb (1928), p. 324.

[20]See Erlich, op. cit., pp. 20-22.

[21]Larin, *Na Agrarnom Fronte (NAF),* 1927, No. 4, p. 43; and Rykov, *Bolshevik,* 1929, No. 2, p. 74; both cited in Moshe Lewin, *Russian Peasants and Soviet Power: A Study of Collectivization,* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1968), pp. 21-22. In the estimates referred to by Rykov, "regularly" is defined as more than fifty days a year.

[22]Kritsman, *NAF,* 1928, No. 4, p. 116; in Lewin, op. cit., p. 75.

[23]Rykov, *Bolshevik,* 1929, No. 4, p. 74; in Lewin, op. cit., p. 22. Whether peasants renting out tools should be classified as kulaks was a subject of heated debate. Those against inclusion argued that employment of wage-labor is the decisive feature of agrarian capitalism. But to distinguish between labor-hiring and implement-renting (often at extortionist rates) peasants on these grounds is to make more of the labor-hirers than they were. Only a small fraction of peasant families who hired wage-labor accumulated wealth mainly through these means. See Dobb (1928), p. 375: "The village kulak is usually less wealthy than a small English farmer or village grocer." Although this comparison tends to downplay the kulak position (since the kulak's authority rests not so much on his absolute prosperity as on the gap between him and his neighbors), it does not point to the necessity of distinguishing between the great majority of kulaks and, say, full-blown industrial capitalists.

[24]Gaister, *NAF,* 1927, No. 11-12, p. 20; in Lewin, op. cit., p. 50.

[25]Lewin, op. cit., p. 68.

[26]See Lewin, op. cit., pp. 50, 55. The figure of "up to a third less" is my estimate, not Lewin's. Data for 1925 is vert scanty. In arriving at this estimate, I assumed that the number of batraks did not grow more from 1925 to 1927 than from 1927 to 1929, and that the number of kulaks increased less rapidly than the number of batraks. It may seem that the relaxation of labor-hire restrictions in 1925 would have caused a greater growth in use of wage-labor than this. However, the use of wage-labor can rise substantially without affecting numbers employed if those employed work more days. We know that from 1927 to 1929 there was a shift from regular to day labor-hire; I am assuming that the reverse occurred between 1925 and 1927.

[27]Paul Roy Ewell, *Contract Farming and Vertical Integration,* (Danville, Ill.: Interstate, 1972), pp. 115-35; Jim Hightower, *Eat Your Heart Out: Food Profiteering in America,* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1975), pp. 168-69.

[28]Charles Bettelheim, *Class Struggles in the USSR; Second Period: 1923-30, trans. by Brian Pierce, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978), pp. 105-7.*

[29]"It has now become fairly clear that Stalin himself was responsible both for shortening the time-table of 'mass collectivization' and, in part at least, for the measures of 'pressure from above', including violent and arbitrary police measures, at this time." Dobb (1966), p. 247. To this comment he appends a note: "In discussion of a report by a special commission presided over by Y. A. Takovlev in the Politburo on 22 Dec. 1929 amendments had been pressed by Stalin and Riskulov which, inter alias, removed the report's emphasis on adhering to the principle of 'voluntariness' (cf. Voprosi Istrorii KPSS, 1964, No. 1, pp. 32-43)."
[30]Dobb (1948), p. 28.

[31]Ibid.

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