Fashion NON-Victims

by Rotten Jello

The realm of fashion is extremely visual. People are deeply drawn by what they see, and various emotions spring forth when we see something that we like ranging from a "that's ok" to a "I just gotta have that." Leafing through fashion magazines on which the latest trends are splashed usually leaves our mouths agape. We all want to look good, not only to ourselves but more so to other people. This whole preoccupation with looking good is the cornerstone of the entire fashion industry. We abide by certain norms on how we look or ought to look.

However, once in a while, or probably out of sheer boredom, certain movements emerge that make us realise we are looking a wee bit too good for our own good. Picture this:

It's the mid-1970s and people donned the glitziest costumes to be seen in the hip dives—dancing the night away to the mind-numbing disco music. As for the rock scene, bands like Led Zeppelin and Aerosmith, dressed in designer wear, played to sold-out arenas and consuming horrific amounts of drugs and alcohol. The skin exchange also reached its peak, thanks to the female groupies more than eager to mount their rock star trophies. It was the time for living life to the fullest. Fat was a-plenty. This attitude prevailed among the youth of that era.

From this slop of hedonism, escapism, and machismo emerged a movement so strong you could not but notice. No matter how hard you ignored it, it grabbed your attention

simply by offending the standards of decency. This was P-U-N-K. Given the overindulgent 1970s, punk couldn't have come at a better time. Although not inherently violent, punk was a violent reaction to the excesses of a once youthful hippie community that had regressed into the banal world of disco and rock star posturing. It was mainly borne out of discontent and the alienation that hounded certain sectors of the youth at that time. They were discontented and alienated because they could no longer relate to what they were seeing and hearing, fashion- and music-wise. They were disgusted.

Mainly Attitude

Although more closely associated with music and fashion, punk was more actually an attitude, a lifestyle, or a way of looking at things with a critical eye. It was downright subversive. It was rooted in a sort of "ordered chaos." Through rebellious content and form, punk sought to undermine every known aesthetic, cultural, social and political norm. To achieve this, punk had to have a particular way of subverting—a so-called punk ethic or an ordered free-for-all whose main aim was to be critical. This brewing chaos eventually seeped into music and fashion that has since set society ablaze.

It is impossible to discuss the punk ethic without focusing on the music and fashion it espoused. In basic semiotics, the music and fashion can be seen as the signifiers of this punk ethic because fashion and music have the power to fuel punk's youthful spirit, aside from the fact that both are identified as youthful passions. Through semiotics, everything a person wears, does, or says can be viewed as a sign, and together, all those signs can be analysed to obtain an accurate representation of who a person is and why one chooses to portray herself/himself the punk way. In other words, we can recognise these signs and evaluate what they mean. For going punk is a very conscious choice of dissension.

But before we can understand that choice of dissension, we must first examine and define society's norms or what it is punk is spitting on. It is said that society's norms are relatively invisible, appropriate and natural. Society's norms are what we fail to notice everyday because of their invisibility and acceptability. Take fashion standards for instance. Because of their appropriateness and their naturalness, when we are surrounded by the poster children of Gap and Armani, we dismiss them without so much as a second glance. Society's norms are represented in those poster children, and punk consciously chose *not* to be a part of that stereotype. Stereotypes make us feel comfortable, but punk makes you feel as cumbersome as hell.

Dissenting Opinion

Punk's fashion sense emphasised this dissension through ordered chaos. When it came to fashion (as well as music), the punk ethic was embodied by a so-called "do-it-yourself" (DIY) approach. The seeds of punk germinated a bountiful harvest when these were sown among the disenfranchised youth of London. But punk's roots were actually the streets of New York in the late 1960s to the early 1970s. Like their British counterparts, the New Yorkers also felt the same alienation brought about by the excesses of 1970s culture. They were pushed against a wall and they just had to do something. They then started their own cultural movement—a movement deeply entrenched in an ideology of independence, as typified by the punk ethic of "do-it-yourself." They formed their own bands, played and wrote their own songs, published their own magazines, and developed their own fashion. One might call it an "explosion of expression." For instance, a typical London youth like Johnny Rotten would walk down the streets sporting a ripped-up Pink Floyd T-shirt with the words "I hate" written on top.

Punk became a journey into the unknown, and what people don't understand, they almost always fear. The general public suddenly became aware of this brewing threat among the youth. And, faced with a threat, society tends to retreat into conservatism—the familiar. Punk was seen as deviant and defiant, and was branded a scourge. However, it was only viewed as such because of its diversity and the diverseness of its forms of expression. This diversity came from punk's ideology of independence that encouraged openness, free thinking and individuality. Such unsuppressed expression eventually led to the "messenger's" being ostracised. If you were a punk, you were an outcast. In spite of this, punks were proud of their outcast status. Feeling proud about themselves as outcasts was their way of mocking the conservative public for being total wusses.

From London with Hate

Due to its abrasive style, the punk boots fit more comfortably on the feet of the British working class youth, most of whom were children of Irish immigrants. A lot of them were also disgruntled with Queen Elizabeth's ultra-

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conservative monarchy. One such youth was the Catholic school-bred John Joseph Lydon who re-christened himself "Johnny Rotten" and fronted the British punk band Sex Pistols. Taking punk's general philosophy of rebellion through unsuppressed expression, Rotten himself described the Pistols as "gaudiness incarnate, musical vaudeville, and evil burlesque." A similar philosophy was applied to the way they dressed.

Rotten would walk the streets of London sporting a tattered coat held together by safety pins, unevenly cut and cropped green hair, and a threatening sneer that seemed to say, "Who the hell do you think you are?" It was his way of telling the upper class, "This is what your crass conservatism has done. I am but the mere product of your social follies."

The lexicon defines "punk" as a hoodlum, hooligan, or a ruffian. British journalist Caroline Coon was the first to coin the term to describe the cultural upsurge happening both in New York and London. However, the New York punks, although endowed with the same street-smart attitude, were too weird to fit the definition of "punk" as "hoodlum." The New Yorkers were either flamboyant and campy or overtly intellectualised and dreamy.

American bands like the Velvet Underground and the New York Dolls maintained a sharp street edge, but their versions of the rock and street aesthetic never became as popular as British punk. Fashion-wise, the New York style was more laidback. The Velvets would usually dress in all black. Although black meant dissension, the style was not as upfront and blatant as its British offspring. The New York Dolls experimented with shock tactics by dressing in glamorous drag outfits. However, this garb became more of a novelty than a threat. The Londoners made each and every hard-hitting message of the New Yorkers even more obvious.

Although New York was fertile ground for expression and experimentation, London's social milieu proved to be more conducive for punk to really explode. Much of this is because the New York punk pioneers were mostly middle-class kids who went to college but dropped out because they felt constricted. Although the "torn and messed-up" look (ripped-up shirt and morning hair) was first sported by Richard Hell of the New York band Voidoids, when Johnny Rotten picked up the style and started walking the streets of London looking, he wreaked his own hell. British punk took the most obvious of New York City punk—fashion, simplicity and rebellion—and built its own monster.

However, the New Yorkers were not really dressing to shock. Their aesthetic was strictly come-as-you-are, which for all of Manhattan's glamour was in itself a statement. New York City punk laid the groundwork for punk fashion and musical style.

Punk grabbed on to what society deemed to be void of meaning and filled that void with chaos. They empowered themselves with a certain feeling of control by taking what was not theirs and turning it into something of their own. They replaced emptiness of value with their twisted anger. They flaunted them by covering their bodies with their creations and parading them in a living protest of society's norms. Who would've thought a chain link joined together by a padlock would become a necklace (a fashion statement popularised by Sex Pistols bassist Sid Vicious)?

Punk fashion took the skeletons out of society's closet and shoved these in its face. They forced society to rethink and re-evaluate its ultra-conservative moral stances by forcing people to feel awkward and uneasy. Punks were dangerous, chaotic, and out of sync with society's standards. When society said, "less is more," punk said, "no, more is more." Punk fashion allows the wearer to break boundaries and become the antithesis of accepted values and norms. It is the ultimate revolt from society's conformist poster children wrapped in Gap and Armani.

No (Token) Women Allowed

Punk also broke gender barriers. Owing to its ideology of independence and DIY approach, women, for the first time, played an equal role as partners in a subcultural group. Before punk, most, if not all subcultural groups were male-dominated or male-oriented. The rock scene flowed with testosterone and everything centered on the male phallus. For instance, songs and guitar solos started to get longer and longer—the longer, the better. Rock stars would wear very tight pants to show off bulging johnsons to adoring fans.

Punk threw all these out the window. It didn't matter whether you were female, male, gay, lesbian, or bisexual, as

long as you had ideas and were willing to express them without fear, be they on fashion, music, politics, art or what not. Before punk, women in rock were always portrayed as objects—mere male accessories. Women in rock's past, while powerful performers, were almost always chained—if not to a man, then to the manly vices of rock 'n' roll. For instance, Janis Joplin was a slave to her bottle and sexual dependency, while Tina Turner's career was made the T&A ("tits and ass") visual of Ike Turner's sideshow.

The advent of punk also saw the advent of liberated women artists and performers. Most notable was the so-called "godmother of punk" Patti Smith. She was one of the few women to succeed in rock music without becoming a sex symbol. Smith was the first female rock performer to make gender irrelevant in her songwriting and performances, combining the brashness of punk with her aggressive pose. Smith allowed women to imagine themselves in rock music as a participant, not just observer.

Through Smith, women became rock stars, adored by male and female fans alike. She tore down the wall for every woman who looked up on the stage and didn't imagine herself down on her knees blowing the rock god. She further squeezed rock's balls with her fashion sense, or the lack of any. Smith didn't dress up to market herself. In fact, she dressed like a man. Garbed in an unkempt shirt with a loosened tie and baggy trousers, she looked androgynous. It was Smith's way of saying that women need not show any tits and ass to be appreciated.

I Left my Liver in San Francisco

A decade older, punk lumbered into the 1980s with an Achilles' heel. Many a punk's worst fear had become reality. The music and fashion industry saw punk's easy marketability, especially among the youth. Punk deteriorated into a fashion commodity. From a once dangerous drug being hawked on the streets, it became an over-the-counter laxative. Anyone could be punk, as long as they had the proper attire and look. Punk was divorced from its true essence—that of an attitude for change and critique.

Many bands claiming to be punk sprouted, just because they sported the boots, mohawks, safety pins, torn jackets, chains and whatever else was in punk-vogue. It was as if the circus had come to town. Despite the deluge of dressed-up punks, there were those to whom punk's essence remained clear. San Francisco band Dead Kennedys criticised punk's deterioration with their fierce commentaries played at break-neck speed—a punk musical style that came to be known as "hardcore." Dubbed "the worst band in San Francisco," lead singer Jello Biafra spewed out: *Punk ain't no religious cult/ Punk means thinking for yourself/ You ain't hardcore cuz you spike your hair/ When a jock still lives inside your head* ("Nazi Punks Fuck Off!!!").

"Nazi Punks" was for the clowns claiming to be punk. Biafra mocked them with still another song, "Anarchy For Sale": *Step right up folks, anarchy for sale!/ T-shirts only US$12! Badges only US$3.50!/ I nicked the design, I never asked the band/ I never listened to them either!/ Buy, buy, buy encircled A! Like hula hoops, it's a disposable craze/ No one here cares what that all means/ It's anarchy—for sale!* The band members themselves didn't even dress the part. Biafra and his mates were in jeans and sneakers.

While Biafra lamented punk, he was also hopeful people would realise their folly. A song in the band's last album, "Bedtime for Democracy," expresses this: *Punk's not dead/ It just deserves to die when it becomes another stale cartoon/ A close-minded, self-centred social club/ Ideas don't matter it's who you know* ("Chickenshit Conformist").

Though punk's future seems bleak, it's something we have to accept. Yes, the future *is* bleak, but what are we going to do about it? Given the cul-de-sac punk finds itself in, should we just ignore this and accept whatever comes our way? They say persistence is the mother of all ideas. To keep punk's spirit and essence alive, we must continually question the norms and figure out how we can subvert them. The music and fashion have passed. They are but signifiers of the core of punk.

To take punk forward, we only have to learn from the lessons history has left us. Reliving the punk experience twenty or so years ago cancels out all meaning. A revival will only lead to an escapism that eventually breeds apathy. And, becoming apathetic is the worst thing to befall a punk: How can one question the norm if one couldn't care less? ⟩

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