
Putting the Punk in DIY: An Interview with John Holmstrom

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All fans of Blondie, Patti Smith, the Ramones, or any of the bands of New York's '70s punk scene have doubtless heard that CBGB, the Bowery club that launched (and continues to feature) the major groups of the age, is threatened with closure. Rising rents in the once derelict neighborhood in which CBGB has been a fixture for over 30 years may take their toll. So Voice is paying respect to both the club, and the movement it spawned, by interviewing John Holmstrom, cofounder of Punk magazine, and major contributor to the sensibility that influenced music, art and graphic design.

Heller: The long reign of Hilly Kristal's CBGB could be coming to end as a Mecca for alternative music in New York. Its been quite a ride, and before I ask you about your part in it, do you know who designed the CBGB logo, which, in its quirky way, has become an emblem of an era? (By the way, I actually worked with the owner Hilly Kristal before he started the club, designing the Hilly's Gazette).

Holmstrom: That's such a great question! I really don't know. That would be a great question for Hilly.

On a side note, someone recently sent me a flyer from the Grand Opening of Hilly's "On The Bowery," which is what CBGB's was called before the name change. (I think it was "Palace Bar" before that.) They used that old Cooper Black typeface for the club's logo, and the flyer was advertising "Jazz. Rock. Blues." I noticed that Eric Emerson and the Magic Tramps, a punk rock band in the style of the New York Dolls, were on the bill. I mentioned this to Hilly the other night, but he refused to believe that any punk bands played CBGB's before the Ramones.

Heller: CBGB, which stands for "Country, Blue Grass, Blues," didn't start out to be such a wellspring of punk. In fact, you and Legs McNeil popularized the term with your magazine Punk. How did the scene emerge and at what point did the umbrella of punk take over?

Holmstrom: We didn't create the term "punk rock;" the late Greg Shaw of Creem was the first person to use the term. We reinvented punk by starting the "punk movement." Greg was first using it in 1971 to describe mid-1960s U.S. bands such as the Count Five, Standells, Shadows of Night, Electric Prunes, etc. that are now called "garage rock." Lester Bangs started using "punk rock" in Creem to describe the harder-edged glam-rock bands like the

Stooges, the MC5, Alice Cooper, Sweet, and the New York Dolls (as opposed to the campier/softer bands like Rod Stewart, Elton John, Jobriath, David Bowie). Alice Cooper was even named “Punk of the Year” in Creem’s 1974 readers’ poll.

By 1975, the word punk was used in England to describe bands like Eddie and the Hot Rods and even the Bay City Rollers. Here in the U.S., Patti Smith and Bruce Springsteen were “street punk poets.” The music scene at CBGB’s was being described as “alternative street rock” and even “punk rock” in a 1975 cover story published in New Jersey’s Aquarian newspaper. (However, the band appearing on the cover was anything but punk—as usual the mainstream media were getting it all wrong.) So it was obvious that what the media wanted to promote was stuff about the streets and punk and trash and shock.

In late 1975, the CBGB’s scene was yet to be defined. The club was receiving a lot of publicity, mostly for Patti Smith (who had just been signed to Arista Records) and Television (who were expected to be the “Next Big Thing”). A music newspaper called New York Rocker was about to be published in early 1976 by some music industry veterans, and it was expected that this paper would define the New York City music scene. They preferred the safer and more commercial bands like the Mumps, Television, Tuff Darts and the Miamis.

Heller: I presume you’re about to introduce Punk?

Holmstrom: Yes. Then the first issue of Punk was published (by Ged Dunn Jr., Legs McNeil and me) in the first few days of 1976. We didn’t know anyone on the scene; they didn’t know us. We insisted that the Ramones and the Dictators were the most important bands, since they were heralding the new punk rock movement. (Most NYC scenesters considered both bands novelty acts, horrible musicians and destined for anonymity). Punk magazine was going to change the world. We’d be the visual equivalent to their brand of loud, fast music. Legs, who had aspirations to become a “PR guy,” insisted that the magazine would never be popular unless we started a youth movement to go along with it, so he started calling himself a “punk” (as opposed to the hippie), dressing in leather jacket and turning his lazy-ass tendencies of eating hamburgers and sleeping with the TV on into a lifestyle. I began writing manifestos and Ged started sticking little pins into a map of the world, anticipating our impending conquest.

Our first problem was that most NYC bands tiptoed around the whole “punk rock” image or rejected it completely. It wasn’t until a whole generation of English kids adopted and embraced the punk movement that it took off, which (ironically) left us in the dust. From then on, punk was something that started in England.

Heller: Okay. So, now how would you define the punk (or DIY) aesthetic?

Holmstrom: It’s something that has constantly been evolving. For instance, I think today’s lowbrow art movement [i.e., Juxtapoz magazine <http://www.juxtapoz.com/>] has been influenced by punk in a big way. (Robert Williams, its founder, agrees with me.) On the other hand, the East Village art scene was also punk-inspired. One common element to these movements as well as Punk magazine is an appropriation and appreciation of popular culture—usually the more shocking and bizarre images. Also common is an approach to illustration that’s representational, but not

necessarily realistic. It's not careful, it's casual. We're not trying to capture reality; we're trying to create a new one. There's also an element of humor (which is usually alien to "art").

Heller: And what were the influences on punk?

Holmstrom: I guess Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol were the biggest fine art influences on the punk thing, but one cultural influence that's been forgotten is 1970s minimalism. There was a concerted effort by bands like Suicide, the Ramones and Talking Heads to follow the aesthetic that "less is more" and to strip music down to its core. Blow it up and start all over again! After all, most of the bands at CBGB's had gone to art school or were aware of the art scene of the time. Most of the people in the NYC scene were literate and somewhat intelligent.

We were also going for minimalism and simplicity at Punk magazine. Lou Reed totally understood what we were going for when I first met with him after he appeared on the cover of the first issue. He complimented us on our use of grainy, high-contrast photos, the attention to layout and visual attraction, the hand-lettering, the black and white printing and encouraged me to stick with it. (Unfortunately it wasn't always easy to capture this every issue, but Punk paid more attention to the visuals—rock magazines are usually started by writers so that the layouts are secondary to the text-heavy page layout.)

I think we, and other bands/artists at any time, succeeded when we did the best with what we had. We couldn't afford four-color printing or expensive typesetting, so we didn't mind if a page looked handmade, or if the lettering looked like a demented criminal had scrawled on a page. What I always tried to do was express a concept. If we couldn't get around budget limitations, we'd throw it out and think of something else.

Patti Smith was the first person I read about who encouraged the Do-It-Yourself movement in rock 'n' roll. I bought a copy of her first single "Piss Factory" and was totally blown away—this song was better than anything on the radio, and this encouraged me to look for underground music the way I sought out underground comic books. I was also encouraged to publish my own artwork by Bill Griffith (Zippy the Pinhead), who corresponded with me after he and Art Spiegelman talked to us in 1974 during a guest lecture at Harvey Kurtzman's cartoon class at the School of Visual Arts.

Heller: Legend has it the Richard Hell launched the grungy safety-pin look. How did Punk magazine influence the prevailing sensibility?

Holmstrom: Richard couldn't afford to buy new clothes and his were falling apart, so he wore safety pins onstage. The Ramones similarly wore ripped jeans, T-shirts and old sneakers. At Punk, we weren't fashion types, so we wore similar clothes—blue jeans, shirts that were often ripped or worn out.

Blondie had a great fashion sense—Debbie [Harry] always dressed great, one of her best friends was Anya Phillips, who worked as a professional dominatrix and who helped create the fashion look. The guys in the band specifically wore clothing from the mid-1960s and started the new wave "skinny tie" look. But we were mostly anti-fashion. CBGB's was not about what you were seen in. It was about the music, not the image.

Heller: How did Malcolm McLaren play a role? He’s credited as the impresario of punk?

Holmstrom: When Malcolm McLaren imported the NYC punk concept over to England, he ran a clothing shop and made money from promoting fashion trends, so he’d encourage kids to create their own look, incorporating ideas from the U.S. Sid Vicious, who worked for Malcolm, would carefully rip his clothes and then add hundreds of safety pins to the torn parts. Then they began sticking safety pins into their noses, cheeks or ears. It wasn’t the first time people pierced themselves for fashion, but it was much more extreme. Then a band like The Clash splattered paint on their clothing in the Jackson Pollock style.

The English punk scene was created with a budget, but they’d all whine about how they were “on the dole” (in between gold records and successful tours). Here in the states, we were living through poverty, crime, strikes and all the things the English punks complained about. But youth must be served.

The only way we really promoted the idea of punk fashion was by publishing photos of these musicians, along with advertisements from clothing shops like Trash and Vaudeville—which eventually began importing a lot of punk fashion from England. I guess they were like the model for Hot Topic.

Heller: You’ve often said that punk was anti-hippie. And yet comics, DIY and flea market sensibilities were decidedly hippie and also punk. What was the major difference?

Holmstrom: It’s been argued that Elvis Presley, Marlon Brando, James Cagney or Alfred Jarry were the first “punks.” So it’s difficult to figure out whether it was a product of the 1970s, the 1950s, the 1930s or the late 1800s.

Punk rock was born out of the hippie movement, thanks to the Stooges and the MC5. These two bands inspired the rest. Although the garage rock bands were equally influential—and those bands created the hippie movement.

Heller: So what’s the primary difference?

Holmstrom: There is a world of difference between the “smoke dope and fuck-in-the-streets” activism of the White Panthers and the music of the Grateful Dead. There was a schizophrenic philosophical battle during the 1960s between the radicals and the hedonists, the protesters and the potheads, the Yippies and the hippies. By 1974-1975, the battle was long over with. The outrageous stars of the hippie movement such as Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison and Brian Jones were dead. The protest movement had fallen apart. “Hippie” became “alternative,” which soon became another word for “politically correct.” The rebellious aspects to the hippie thing were gone. Oddly enough, even though the whole “communal living” peace and love dream was becoming an obvious fraud (in part, thanks to Charles Manson who has embarrassingly become a punk icon) and the hippie aesthetic had devolved into granola bars and pre-washed bellbottoms, no one was rocking the boat.

All early punk rockers were ex-hippies who got sick and tired of following their stupid rules. We wanted to wipe out all music made after 1966. We wanted to bring back cool-looking clothes and never see another pair of bell-bottoms. We wanted to destroy disco music and turn everyone onto the Ramones.

Heller: Its amazing that CBGB has lasted this long. At what point, in your opinion, did punk lose its alternative originality and become a marketable style?

Holmstrom: I'm not sure that punk is a marketable style, even now. However, if there's a moment where it was redefined as something "aimed at the teen market" that would have started with Green Day and the subsequent "pop-punk" phenomenon in the mid-1990s (and furthered by the Vans Warped Tour, Hot Topic and Epitaph Records). Thing is, there's still a lot of debate about whether punk is dead, and how punk has to stay this rebellious, anti-establishment movement. Since a lot of punks are involved in unpopular, anti-government protest, and most punk bands never sell a lot of records I don't think you can say that punk has sold out. The real thing still means a lot.

Heller: If there is one key element of the DIY aesthetic, what is it?

Holmstrom: Do what you wanna do and don't let anyone or anything stop you.

Heller: Back to CBGB: There has been a call for its preservation, but why after all these years should it be preserved? Is it just nostalgia?

Holmstrom: It's not just nostalgia. CBGB's is the Yankee Stadium of rock 'n' roll, but it's not the Monument Park of punk. In other words, games are still played there, and stars are still created there. It's still contributing to the culture.

The best reason to keep it open is that it is a tourist attraction, like Liverpool's The Cavern or the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville. If Mayor Bloomberg truly ran New York like a business, he'd be insane to allow a place like this to close. The negative publicity the entire music scene—and New York cultural scene in general—will be felt for decades to come.

I would like to see CBGB's stay open because it's still an important club to NYC punk rock bands. I've seen some great shows there over the last few years and hope to see many more.

Heller: Odd but I guess predictable that the Bowery, the center of dereliction in NYC, is now so chic.

Holmstrom: The battle over CBGB's is really—the astronomical rents, the elimination of crime in our beloved city and the suburbanization of our street culture, block by block—having the unintended effect of wiping out all the art and culture that made New York City an "interesting" (although frightening) place to live. New York was the center of world culture for most of the 20th century. It's now becoming a gated community for the rich—ironically, the opposite of John Carpenter's vision in the film *Escape From New York*, where it was an out-of-control crime zone. Most of the reasons so many of us moved here in the 1970s, '80s and even the '90s was to be near the nightlife and the art scene and the culture. Now that culture is disappearing, and CBGB's has become the icon for this lost scene.

Heller: What is the influence that punk has left behind, and what would you say is the closest descendant today?

Holmstrom: I feel like our culture has been sterilized. Nothing interesting is being allowed to develop. It's not an accident that "culture" refers to both the growth of bacteria in a petri dish, as well as art and music. The world is becoming so sterile; it's difficult to see how true "culture" can evolve. Maybe overseas, in Iraq or someplace. But I hear the same complaint from punk rock fans from almost all western countries.

The influence punk has had on film, art, fashion and everything else in our culture—good and bad—is beyond my ability to comprehend. Although I hoped, as a teenager, to create this kind of thing, I never expected that something I contributed to would become this pervasive—especially years after I left it. (Punk magazine folded in 1979.) At this point I am concerned that it's some kind of "last word." I was always hoping I'd see the next art or music movement that would wipe out "punk" the way we destroyed hippie culture. I wanted to see something more interesting and outrageous than punk rock take over the world and introduce new ideas and make punk seem like an outdated concept. But it hasn't happened yet.

The ability of the punk scene to remain alive and well has been a source of constant amazement to me. When I was a kid, there was a 1950s "rock-n-roll-revival" scene, but it was sort of campy. Sha Na Na was poking fun at how ancient the old 1950s rock scene seemed to us in the modern 1970s. On the other hand, bands like the Ramones were able to use that revival to create something new. The CBGB's bands drew from many influences to forge a new music scene.

To me, "punk rock" is what we had to start calling real rock 'n' roll—the stuff that pisses off your parents—because bands like Simon and Garfunkel, Linda Ronstadt and Billy Joel were suddenly being lumped in with real rock 'n' roll such as Jimi Hendrix, The Who, and the Stooges. In the 1950s, rock 'n' roll defined teen rebellion, juvenile delinquency, drugs, sleazy comic books and forbidden sex. In the 1970s, rock 'n' roll had to be redefined. And that's my proudest accomplishment—that we helped keep the true spirit alive for a new generation. CBGB's has done the same, providing a venue for bands like the Beastie Boys, White Zombie, They Might Be Giants, Living Colour and many others.

Sadly, the world is too big for a new movement like the original punk movement, and kids are too smart to take the stupid chances we took back then. Also, the economy isn't bad enough for people to risk everything by doing nothing, or trying something completely new.

So the current punk movement (as defined by the Warped Tour, the independent punk rock labels, Hot Topic chain stores, and another generation of pissed-off teenagers who hate public school and make friends with classmates because they listen to the same music) might be all we have, but that's plenty good enough for me.

About the Author. Steven Heller, co-chair of MFA "Designer As Author" at School of Visual Arts, is the author of *Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press), *The Education of a Comics Artist* co-edited with Michael Dooley (Allworth Press), *The Education of a Graphic Designer, Second Edition* and *The Education of an Art Director* (with Veronique Vienne) (Allworth Press).