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What if Keith Levene had never left the Clash?: Punk and the Politics of Novelty

The purpose of this chapter is partly to query the 'year zero' mythology of 1977 era punk, partly to question the idea that a discrete 'post-punk' music can be understood separately from 'original' punk and partly to explore more general questions around music, novelty and tradition. The latter concern is something I have been exploring in theoretical work for some years now. The Clash are here used largely as a case study with which to test certain theories I have been developing. Those theories should become clear as the chapter progresses (see the end of this introduction for some key theoretical questions, for example). In the conclusion, I focus closely on the question which has been at the heart of my work for many years: will radical innovation produce radical politics or can radical/leftist politics be better served by artistic products which are more 'traditional' (i.e. less ostentatiously novel) in character?

Punk is a long tradition within which 'the first wave' represents only one episode. Indeed, 1970s UK punk was not even the first music to be described as 'punk rock': Dave Marsh used these two words in 1971 to describe ? and the Mysterians, the US 'garage' group, in the US magazine *Creem*.¹ It is well known that the word 'punk' was circulating in a range of music-related contexts prior to its usage in the UK from 1976 onwards, such as the magazine/fanzine published by Legs McNeil and John Holmstrom between 1975 and 1979. The UK punk rock scene of 1976-8 is not even necessarily the most influential era within the overall punk tradition. The relatively recent flowering of punk in the Eastern hemisphere, for example, arguably relates more strongly to the various strands of 1980s-derived US punk: Minor Threat, Black Flag, Nirvana, Green Day and so forth.

Consider, on this point, Kevin Dunn's revelation in his detailed monograph *Global Punk* that Indonesia currently has 'the largest punk community in all of Asia, if not the world'.² Emma Baulch, meanwhile, has demonstrated that Bali in particular 'was awash with Green Day' from at least 1996 onwards.³ Baulch suggests that the influence of Green Day may have been overstated by the Indonesian bands themselves, interestingly enough, but she is clear nevertheless that Green Day and Nirvana cover versions, rather than Sex Pistols or Clash cover versions, were being performed by Indonesian bands as the punk scene emerged in that country.⁴ She also states that 'Green Day's music echoed throughout the province' of Bali in the mid-1990s.⁵ That said, by 1998 UK punk bands such as the Exploited were beginning to influence a separate set of more 'underground' bands.⁶ However, the Exploited were not a first wave UK punk band and, in any case, Baulch's account suggests that US groups such as NOFX, Bad Religion and Green Day provided the initial impetus for the Indonesian punk scene which would eventually become, if Dunn is to be believed, the biggest in the world.

Of course, one can argue that without the likes of the Clash and Stiff Little Fingers (SLF) one would not get a group such as Green Day. One can equally say, however, that you could not have had the Clash and SLF without, say, the Kinks and the Who. After all, popular music scenes do not come from nowhere and the lineage which produced most of the UK's first wave punk in 1976-8 is transparently obvious: the average listener should not need to struggle to recognise the similarity between, say, the opening bars of the Sex Pistols' 'God Save the Queen' and the trademark openings of numerous Eddie Cochrane hits. Where certain bands did achieve a less obvious debt to the rock tradition (Alternative TV, for example), a debt to the past is nevertheless readily identifiable (ATV's more avant-garde work came after the first wave of punk, for one thing, whilst their early material is quite

musically conventional⁷). Nothing comes from a vacuum, after all, despite the ‘year zero’ pretensions of the UK punk rock movement around 1977.⁸

Nevertheless, first wave UK punk retains a certain fascination: it *was* a shockingly novel movement and did excite many individuals. As everyone knows, the Sex Pistols were of pivotal importance in this regard but the Clash, as I have shown elsewhere, were also highly influential upon individuals as significant as Steve Ignorant (Crass) and Billy Bragg.⁹ I have also argued, in my work on the traditions of punk, that the facile idea of a chain of influence with some ‘original’ agent deserving priority over all that follows (the Pistols begat the Clash who begat Crass who begat countless ‘anarcho-punk’ groups, and so forth) is highly problematic in political and philosophical terms.¹⁰ However, punk has repeatedly provided tinder for left-leaning sentiments and socially progressive ideals, and hence is certainly worth talking about, from a left perspective. First wave UK punk should (and, indeed, does) remain of interest for both academic and non-scholarly discourse, then; but we should resist the temptation to grant it some unique and rather magical power. The Sex Pistols and the Clash were far from the ‘be-all-and-end-all’ of punk; but they certainly combine with other first wave punk bands to form an interesting case within UK popular music history as well as British socio-cultural history more broadly.

However, it is the music-specific aspect of the Clash that I wish to focus here. More specifically, I want to look in detail at the harmonic character of the Clash’s eponymous first album wherein they restrict themselves, in the main, to predictable diatonic progressions. The strongest exception to this harmonic conservatism is ‘What’s My Name’, which was co-composed with Keith Levene – an outstanding guitarist amongst the punk generation who was originally a member of the Clash (before they made any recordings) and who would go on to play a crucial role within John Lydon’s post-Pistols group Public Image Limited (usually abbreviated to ‘PiL’).

What is the ‘political’ significance of the Clash’s musical conservatism? Does music require novelty in order to kindle political engagement or, conversely, do the innumerable ‘epiphanies’ experienced by young people at Clash gigs outweigh any aesthetic reservations one might hold? By the end of the chapter, I hope to offer some tentative answers to these two questions. I begin, however, with some discussion of the musical content of the album *The Clash* in general, followed by some detailed discussion of the harmonic character of ‘What’s My Name’. I then enquire, in the third section of the chapter, whether the elements of harmonic interest unearthed in ‘What’s My Name’ suggest that Levene’s relatively ‘advanced’ musical instincts mean that, in some ‘alternative reality’, the Clash could have been a more avant-garde group. Is the common assumption of greater musical complexity in ‘post-punk’ (relative to the ‘original’ punk) necessarily well-founded? And even if post-punk is more complex – even if Keith Levene had not left the Clash such that the latter group had retained a greater level of musical interest – why assume that a greater complexity will be more valuable as, say, propaganda for the left? This, in short, is the core question of the chapter.

The Eponymous Debut Album

The Clash by the Clash was not the most musically ground breaking album of its era by any means. Take the opening track, ‘Janie Jones’: a drum kit beats out crotchets and quavers without syncopation, a guitar strikes a straight E major bar chord and a voice descends the ‘do-re-mi’ of the first three steps of the major scale (the opening notes of ‘Three Blind Mice’, that is). We eventually move up to the dominant chord, B major, thus following the most standardised element within

European music – the core harmonic detail, for example, of pretty much every hymn that lead vocalist John ‘Joe Strummer’ Mellor will have sung at the private schools he attended. As we move back to the tonic chord (E), bassist Paul Simonon offers a D natural as he descends through E-D-C#-B. This D natural does not belong to E major (where we would find D#) but does belong to A major: the bassline, in other words, has prepared our ears for a modulation to A major by flattening the seventh degree of the E chord which the guitarist is playing. The move, which is typical of the kind of rock’n’roll ‘boogie’ bass one finds in countless 1950 hits, is highly clichéd as harmonic patterning (preparation for modulation to the sub-dominant position being created through addition of the dominant seventh note to the tonic chord, that is).

It is no coincidence, furthermore, that the lyrics focus upon being ‘in love with rock’n’roll’, ‘getting stoned’ and sex (Janie Jones, born Marion Mitchell, was notorious in the 1970s as a host of sex parties): this is supposed to be a good, upbeat rock’n’roll song. Or is it? The question hinges, I would suggest, partly upon a decision as to whether the Clash intend some irony or sarcasm with the lyrical turns just mentioned. If one listens a little further in to ‘Janie Jones’, it turns out that there is good reason to suspect the Clash are rather sceptical about the adequacy of the escapism undertaken by the office worker about whom they are singing. Consider, for example, the mention of ‘payola’: our office worker should ‘send for the government, man!’ given that he lacks this monetary benefit. The clear implication, here, is that the system is corrupt at the top whilst the office worker receives little or no benefit from that corruption; indeed, ‘the boss at the firm always thinks he shirks’ and, therefore, we might not be surprised that the worker seeks solace in rock’n’roll, drugs and sex. Is such escapism an adequate solution to the problems the character in the song faces? The song isn’t exactly a sociological diagnosis or Marxist analysis of the difficulties facing the working man, but it would be hard to deny that we are encouraged to at least view the described situation critically. Indeed, there is good reason to perceive ‘Janie Jones’ as a critique not only of drugs and sex (which, of course, the hippies had tended to prioritise as central facets of their ‘freedom’) but also of rock’n’roll itself.

Musically, however, this *is* a fairly straightforward rock’n’roll song: as mentioned above, it ‘rocks’ steadily (i.e. without syncopation), uses the familiar chords of the ‘three chord trick’ and offers guitar work and a vocal melody which are simple and entirely congruous to the patterns established since the 1950s. Postponing for now the question as to how problematic this mismatch is, we can note that the bulk of the remainder of *The Clash* conforms to similarly established musical patterns – and, like ‘Janie Jones’, combines them with socially-conscious lyrics. The album’s second track ‘Remote Control’, for example, begins with an emphatically conventional I-V-IV-I sequence in C major. There is some interest (unusualness, that is) in the I-iii-IV-VI-II verse sequence, to the extent that the major form of the submediant chord is employed (VI, which is A major in this key) followed by the major supertonic chord (D major, chord II in C major). The step down from II to I as the verse is repeated is not a dominant to tonic set-up but, that said, it is not so extraordinary even within the context of rock/pop’s typically restricted harmonic palette. The development section where the vocalist sings ‘Don’t make no noise...’ (not really a chorus, in the sense that there is less of a hook here than one finds in the verse) uses a fairly predictable IV-V repeated switch with the VI-II closure from the verse being employed again. The breakdown section at 1.40 is a rather unimpressive reiteration of a mixolydian trick frequently used by the Who whilst the ensuing guitar solo, though reasonably pleasing for a rock fan such as this author, is far from being unusual – indeed, the opening ‘trick’, which extends through two thirds of the twelve bar break, is taken directly from

Chuck Berry. The last four bars of this guitar break are rather well played and are in advance of the capabilities of, for example, Steve Jones of the Sex Pistols, it is fair to say; but the guitar break and the musicality of the song overall are not surprising and are not unusual in a rock or pop context.

Again, though, the lyrics are politically provocative and sociologically interesting. 'Who needs the parliament?', the singer asks; after all, 'they're all fat and old [and] queueing for the House of Lords'. In the end 'repression', which we hear chanted four times, is what we are experiencing: parliament and 'big business', the song seems to say, provide 'remote control' of our options and, in the last analysis, 'you gotta work' whether you want to or not. Not quite a full-blown exposition of Gramsci's theory of hegemony, the lyric nevertheless pushes in the same general direction – but it does so without offering many if any musical surprises.

This general pattern proceeds almost all the way through the album. Track three, 'I'm So Bored With the U.S.A.', follows the hymnal I-IV harmonic structure throughout with the sole exception of a modal bVI chord (C major, that is, given the E major context of the rest of the song) in the choruses; but the lyric implies a critique of the cultural imperialism of US foreign policy. 'White Riot', which follows 'I'm So Bored...', has provoked great discussion for its lyrical focus upon racial tension; but musically it is fairly predictable, again following the hymnal I-IV switch for the bulk of the song.¹¹ Actually 'White Riot' does surprise a little by modulating down a whole tone from A to G for the verses, whilst the use of a C major to A major change in the pre-chorus ('Everybody's doing just what they're told ~~to~~do...') is also reasonably inventive; but, like 'I'm So Bored...', this modality is kept to very minimal levels. 'Hate and War' is a lyrically provocative song which focuses on two of punk's favourite themes; but the harmony is based entirely around the three chord trick, that most conservative of harmonic configurations.

At this point on *The Clash* (or, at least, on the UK version of the album¹²) we receive 'What's My Name'. The song stands out, for reasons which I explain below. 'What's My Name' is followed by 'Deny' and the latter apes a little of the harmonic interest from the former; for example, the use of the C chord in the verse (a bIII chord, given the clear set up of A major as 'home'). We can also note a decorative and arpeggiated high guitar figure at one point which adds a rich ninth to a B minor chord and a jazzy major seventh to the G major. Despite these elements of intrigue, 'What's My Name' is significantly less harmonically stable than 'Deny', as we will see. In lyrical terms, that said, the attack on a 'liar' in 'Deny' suggests a classic punk call for simple truths and, therefore, we can see at least a little political impetus of some stripe here.

'London's Burning', the last song on the A-side of *The Clash*, begins with a V-I fall: vocalist Joe Strummer cries the song's title on a D natural (V) and then the band 'reply', as it were, with G major (I). This 'perfect fifth' is the heart of musical tradition in Europe and, although one can reasonably claim that it remains perfectly satisfying as a musical effect, it is about the most conventional musical element a rock or pop band could possibly prioritise in a song. Having given us this musical germ (the interval which introduces 'Baa Baa Black Sheep' and 'Twinkle Twinkle Little Star', amongst other nursery rhymes), the group settle into a I-bVII-IV-V sequence which they stick with for the rest of the song. (Perhaps aware that they risk listener boredom through repetition, the sequence is moved up from G to A for the last part of the song, but this 'truck-driver' modulation is one of the oldest tricks in the book, as Dai Griffiths has shown.¹³) One can actually sing the titular melody of 'London's Bridge is Falling Down...' quite consonantly over this chord sequence and, in more than

one respect, it is fair to say that the song is somewhat childlike in its simplicity as music. The lyrics, that said, provoke the listener by suggesting that 'watching television' is 'the new religion' and hinting at the squatter mentality (the singer is 'looking for a home' amongst 'the empty blocks').

The second side of *The Clash* follows the same kind of harmonic and lyrical patterns which had been offered on the A-side: primarily major key and/or three chord trick-based harmonic sequences with occasional modal usages of bVII and/or bIII chords. Modulations can be found in songs such as 'Cheat' (moves from A major to C major and then, eventually, E major), 'Protex Blue' (opens with a D-rooted modal sequence then modulates to an unusual C-rooted modal harmony) and '48 Thrills' (vacillates between E major and G major). However, once the modulation has taken place, the new key is always fairly stable. Lyrics about work ('Career Opportunities'), drugs ('Cheat', '48 Thrills') and contraception ('Protex Blue') are on offer whilst 'Garageland' seems to sum up something of a Clash ideology in just three verses (and using a three chord trick in the verses with a IV-iii-ii-I rundown in the pre-chorus and chorus). 'Police and Thieves' is anomalous within the album both stylistically and by dint of not involving the 'Strummer/Jones' writing team (the song is a cover of a Junior Murvin number).

As an album, then, *The Clash* consistently blends fairly (and quite often very) harmonically conservative music with fairly politically-minded lyrics. The combination proved to be very popular, it is fair to say, with a significantly-sized audience: there can be little argument that they were second only to the Sex Pistols within the first wave UK punk milieu, in terms of popularity. However, there is good reason to wonder what might have happened if the group had adopted a less musically conservative approach. Could they have been more popular still? Alternatively, might a more musically radical sound have better complimented the group's lyrical tendency towards socio-political critique? I begin to approach these questions by considering the more musically challenging character of 'What's My Name', relative to the rest of *The Clash*.

What's My Name

According to Levene, 'What's My Name' was something 'I totally wrote on my own'.¹⁴ The record sleeve of *The Clash*, however, claims the song to have been jointly composed with Strummer and Jones, attributing only one third of the composition to (erroneously and, given the song title, rather ironically) 'K. Levine'. To some extent, we can leave such forensic arguments to the lawyers but, for the record, my analyses would suggest that Levene's claim that 'I wrote on all the tunes, not just one-third of one tune' may have some legitimacy.¹⁵ Some of the best-remembered songs on *The Clash* fit well, harmonically speaking, with the songwriting style of subsequent Clash albums and are thus more credible as outright Strummer/Jones compositions: 'Garageland', 'Career Opportunities', 'Janie Jones', 'White Riot' and 'London's Burning'. Other songs discussed above, however, such as 'Deny', 'Cheat', 'Protex Blue' and '48 Hours' in particular (and, more narrowly, the first chord of each chorus in 'I'm So Bored With the U.S.A.' with which, one could argue, American culture is symbolically rejected through dissonant harmony) might well be claimed to have Keith Levene's 'fingerprints' upon them, as it were.

What those just-mentioned songs have in common with 'What's My Name' is a certain tonal/harmonic ambiguity. For example, as noted above, 'Protex Blue' uses two modal (and thus non-standard) structures, the second of which is more especially unusual by dint of a surprising (given the C-rooted context) B chord followed by F major. Which of the song's two modal roots (D

and C) has overall priority in terms of key? It is not quite clear and as a result the decision to end on C feels somewhat arbitrary; particularly given the opening guitar riff on F major which audibly offers Bb (and thus implies F as 'home' as well as rendering the D, which arrives at the outset of the first verse, as quite a surprise).

'What's My Name' is more ambiguous still. Take the opening bars: the rhythm guitar strums on B but the lead guitar starts out on E natural, thus creating a Bsus4 harmony; the rhythm guitar then seems to move up to E and down to A. The latter two chords are odd given that, as the drums enter, the bassist plays the more obvious F# down to D. The obviousness of these notes derives from the fact that the backing vocalists sing 'woah-oh' across the same interval. Interestingly, lead vocalist Joe Strummer does not really follow this pattern: he drones on the B root for his first line ('What the hell is wrong with me?') and then rises to C# and D for his second ('I'm not who I'm s'posed to be...'). We can also note that live clips of the band performing 'What's My Name' currently available on Youtube (such as the Manchester Belle Vue performance filmed by Granada TV for the *So It Goes* programme in November 1977) show Strummer offering only vocals, as opposed to playing rhythm guitar as he more typically would on stage and on recordings.¹⁶ Additionally, we can observe that the studio rendition of 'What's My Name' seems to have the rhythm guitar buried in the mix after the opening bars, with a decorative lead guitar dropping in intermittently but the overall mix sounds rather 'empty' relative to the rest of the album.

Was Strummer confused by the ambiguity of the B-F#-D sequence and struggling to work around it as both vocalist and guitarist? Perhaps; we can note that he reduces the vocal melody to a rap on B natural in the Belle Vue footage and other live performances, even handing over vocal duties to bassist Paul Simonon at a 1985 Roskilde Festival performance. (The YouTube footage of the latter performance is also interesting because the lead guitarist – a replacement for Mick Jones, who had left in 1983 – accidentally plays the major third of the opening B chord at the outset of the song. The guitarist corrects himself by playing the minor third the second time he performs the phrase, but his evident confusion supports my argument that the tonality of the song is highly ambiguous, I would contend.¹⁷) The reason B-F#-D is confusing is that the B feels like home (by dint of its positioning in the sequence and the prioritisation of B by the vocalist). Meanwhile the D chord implies B minor, and yet (as the on-stage error by the guitarist in the 1985 Roskilde performance just mentioned indicates) the thrust of the first chord brings B major to mind. (It is hard to tell, but my ear suggests that Strummer is playing a B major chord on the rhythm guitar in the version on *The Clash*; we can note that he is reduced to standing in the background playing root notes on the bass in the Roskilde performance.) In short, I would argue that we hear the D chord as a surprising harmonic twist.

This harmonic uncertainty is only compounded when the chords rise across E-F#-G-A for the song's chorus, all in major chord position. The D# within the F# major chord would indicate B major as the key, which would then mean that the E and F# chords at the outset of this sequence were IV and V of the tonic key. This would mean that the D major chord in the verses is bIII of the tonic key, and such modality is certainly at play in 'What's My Name'. The crucial question for present purposes, however, is whether B major really is our tonic key. The G and A major chords suggest otherwise: they imply, to at least some extent, D major as the home key (thus G and A would be IV and V of the D major whilst the E and F# would simply be the major form of the ii and iii chords one should expect in D major).

The middle eight ('Dad got pissed so I got clocked...') somewhat adds to the impression of D major as possible tonic: the harmony switches from D to A in what feels like a possible I-V movement. However, if A major were the tonic key, the full sequence of the middle eight (D-A-D-E) would be a classic subdominant-orientated bridge consisting of IV-I-IV-V. We need to also observe that the band resolves on to E major at the close of the song, and this *does* 'work' as a resolution (by which I mean, few listeners would perceive this as a markedly interrupted cadence and most, indeed, will hear it as reasonably good 'sense').

So far, then, I have proposed that B major, B minor, D major, A major and E major can all be 'felt' as the tonic key in this particular song. This is not a puzzle that we can simply unlock with some 'correct' answer: indeed, some of these ambiguities (such as the question as to whether we are in D major or A major during the middle eight, or whether we are in B major or E major during the chorus) occur fairly simultaneously rather than, as it were, sectionally. Tonal ambiguity, then, is knitted into the song and, I would say, is highlighted by the decorative lead guitar which falls across F# and F natural (both major and minor third of D major, that is) on its descent to D natural during the verses. This is done as the rhythm guitar and the bass guitar play D and the effect somewhat recalls the ragtime of Scott Joplin, to my ears. 'What's My Name', in short, is harmonically richer and more peculiar than anything else on *The Clash*. It seems fairly certain that Keith Levene's harmonic skills brought this richness into play. What, then, if the Clash had retained Levene as their guitarist instead of ejecting him in 1976?

The contrast between Mick and Keith

It is reasonable, I would argue, to characterise Mick Jones and Keith Levene as polar opposites in musical terms. Perhaps this is to overstate the case, but even then the overstatement might allow us to broadly illuminate two differing poles of musicality – even, I think, if the characterisation is a little caricatured.

For some insight into the musical instincts of the former, an interview in Daniel Rachel's *Isle of Noises* is probably as good a source as any.¹⁸ Regarding songwriting, Jones asserts to Rachel that 'there's a natural law to it somehow... the natural tune is already there telling you what the natural tune is'.¹⁹ Tautological though this statement clearly is, it shows us that Jones is happy to operate within a given musical system: 'I'm just trying to receive... get in touch with all the stuff that's going on out there in some way, or let it come to me so that other people can enjoy'.²⁰ Jones is no avant-gardist; rather, he wants to engage listeners with broadly familiar musicality: 'You've got to have a tune otherwise you're going to bore everybody'.²¹ He is aware, it seems, that the early Clash (probably, I believe, due to a combination of neophyte experimentation and the influence of Levene) were more modal, harmonically unconventional and (subtly) dissonant. This element was dropped by the time they were writing *London Calling* (circa 1979), Jones hints: 'in the music it was a bit more chunky before and I made it smooth'.²²

The 'chunky' element, I would suggest, is the modal tendency and/or the tendency to modulate without preparation which one can sometimes find on *The Clash*. By *London Calling*, chunks (as it were) of harmony were not so awkwardly juxtaposed, it is fair to say. Jones had/has some awareness of harmonic principles and practices: 'It's like a puzzle... the E chord is the same up here after twelve frets. Plus in the A position [the bar-chord which apes the open A, as opposed to the bar-chord which apes open E, he seems to mean] it's here on the eight fret or something'.²³

Although Jones actually means the seventh fret, it is clear that he has thought about harmonic relations: 'On the same fret you can do the A again in the D position. So it's like a graph.'²⁴ The graph he has just described, however, provides options for E, A and D chords: a rather restricted palette which is expanded on some songs on *The Clash* but more heavily relied upon by the time of *London Calling*. The latter album has significant stylistic diversity, of course, and it should be noted that harmonic experimentation is only one form of potential adventure in music. Nonetheless, it is certainly the case that *The Clash* offers more harmonic surprises than *London Calling*.

Levene, judged by the music of PiL (in which he was a founding and musically crucial member), also has a working knowledge of traditional harmony. We can note on 'Poptones', for example, that he creates a nimble pattern around A major which descends delicately through the major seventh and sixth on its way down to the fifth degree of the scale. This is one sign of a working facility with conventional harmony, but there are many within the PiL repertoire. Levene once commented that 'people thought I was classically trained' with good reason, I would suggest, even if he really only 'knew the E chord, and ventured into E minor'.²⁵

Levene, however, chose to 'play outside of the chord', as jazz musicians will put it: to expand his harmonic palette with extra-triadic notes that are dissonant to some ears but are heard as a consonance (of sorts; an interesting sound, at least) by enthusiasts. Examples of such pleasing (to some ears, at least) dissonance amongst the PiL repertoire are innumerable: 'Albatross' (opening track from *Metal Box*), to select a song almost at random, is full of harsh 'off' notes although the initial E minor-based guitar figure is consonant enough. The question, moreover, is *why*: if you are capable of making music which is easy to listen to, then why make it difficult? Why go 'out there' when you can stay inside the conventions and, many will presume, thus have a wider appeal?

Part of the answer to these questions could be a commercial one: as I have noted elsewhere, 'noise' can have a special appeal and if the audience for avant-garde music is often a smaller one, it is nonetheless the case that dissonant music can draw a crowd.²⁶ In some cases – PiL perhaps being a case in point, given the commercial need (or arguable need) for Lydon to mark out a difference from the Sex Pistols – noisy music can be more commercially successful than something which, at face, seems more consonant. (Clearly the words consonant and dissonant are to some extent in the eye/ear of the beholder – some people will complain that be-bop jazz, for example, sounds 'out of tune' – but this is a problem which I shall leave to one side for present purposes.)

Some enthusiasts of dissonant and noise-based music appear to believe that such music can somehow escape both the logic of the market and the (perceived to be contrary to true artistry) desire to engage audiences. We can note, for example, Jacques Attali's prioritisation in his celebrated *Noise: the Political Economy of Music* of 'the production, by the consumer himself, of the final object, the movie made from virgin film'. According to Attali, this Barthesian consumer 'will thus become a producer and will derive at least as much of his satisfaction from the manufacturing process itself as from the object he produces'; indeed, he 'will institute the spectacle of himself as the supreme usage'.²⁷ Such self-facing production-consumption leads nowhere, we might reasonably object; the productive-consumer's supreme spectacle of himself has no exterior value, and the movie made from virgin film can be seen by no-one else, one can fear. Paul Hegarty, in a more recent and (for this author, at least) more nuanced consideration of the *Noise/Music* relation, has

acknowledged that the idea of noise as an easy escape from capitalism should be challenged by a Marxist.²⁸

I am inclined to hesitate, that given, before declaring that Keith Levene's more musically 'adventurous' (if this is the right word, and I am inclined to think it may not be, given its pejorative implications) playing is more 'progressive' or 'radical' than that of Mick Jones. The two musicians were clearly pushing in differing directions. Brian Cogan has reported that 'Levene was forced out' of the Clash.²⁹ Levene himself claims that he jumped rather than being pushed: because the Clash 'weren't complicated enough [musically]... I thought "they're going to do it whether I'm there or not" so I'm gonna go off and do something else'.³⁰ Either way, the fit between the ambitions of the Clash, on the one hand, and Keith Levene's musical instincts, on the other hand, seems to have been a poor one. We have seen something of Jones' populist instincts in the quotations offered above. For Levene, by contrast, 'What happened to me was once I got good enough to know the rules, I didn't want to be like any other guitarist.' He clarifies that he 'didn't go out of my way to be different' but 'just had an ear for what was wrong. So if I did something that was wrong, i.e. made a mistake or did something that wasn't in key, I was open-minded enough to listen to it again'.³¹

The difference between the two approaches should be clear, by now. The question which provides the title to this chapter remains to be answered, however. I attempt a provisional answer in conclusion, with a special focus on the political implications of the choice between musical experimentation and musical traditionalism/conservatism.

Conclusion

What if Keith Levene had remained a member of the Clash? Perhaps, in short, they might have been more musically unusual (more 'interesting') and yet perhaps for this reason they might have grabbed the interest of fewer listeners. Perhaps, however, their 'legend' could have loomed larger still, in the annals of popular music history, than it actually did. To speculate in this way is arguably a waste of time. Levene left, and thus we had two separate bands who are somewhat emblematic of two distinct trajectories: the Clash, who seem to embody much of the 'old school punk' tendency, on the one hand, and PiL, who are certainly one of the main 'post-punk' bands, on the other hand.

I would be reluctant to insist upon these emblematic trajectories as a stark choice between 'punk' and 'post-punk', in the way that Simon Reynolds has tended to do.³² As I have emphasised above, a group like the (early) Clash actually had a not-inconsiderable level of musical experimentation within their sound, at least at the harmonic level (partly courtesy of Keith Levene, granted, but similar harmonic instability can also be noted in, to give just one example, 'New Rose' by the Damned³³). Not all post-punk bands were especially avant-garde, furthermore: for example, the actual song 'Rip It Up and Start Again' by Orange Juice (which gave Reynolds' book on post-punk its title) is a fairly lightweight piece of funky pop, musically speaking. Post-punk, in any case, should not be limited to 1984: as David Wilkinson has recently shown, the question of novelty, politics and avant-gardism remains an important one about which we still need to think carefully in the 21st century.³⁴ In a sense, indeed, we are still very much in a post-punk moment.

That being the case, the emblematic choice between avant-gardism and traditionalism remains an important one. If a musician, today, would aspire to promoting the cause(s) of the left, should she follow the example of the (post-debut) Clash or of Keith Levene's band PiL? Should she, in other

words, seek to use experimental musical aesthetics as a component of her radicalism (as PiL and many other groups like them did) or, alternatively, should she seek to engage her listeners with familiar-sounding music (as the Clash and other 'old school' punk bands tended to do)? In the latter case, after all, she could promote the values of the left through lyrical content (as the Clash quite often did) or through the mode of production (the DiY mode which the Clash did not undertake but which innumerable punk and post-punk bands of course did). In the former case, meanwhile, perhaps the most important element of left-radicalism – what you *say* and, more important still, what you *do* – can get confused with aesthetic considerations to the point where the 'message' gets lost, arguably. How many people say they were inspired to take an interest in (or take an active involvement in) politics because of PiL? Fewer, I am sure, than were inspired by the Clash in the manner which, as noted above, the likes of Steve Ignorant (Crass), Billy Bragg and countless others were.

I am not calling, that said, for the kind of 'socialist realism' which was prioritised by Lukács at the expense of the actually highly valuable aesthetic experimentation of, for example, Brecht.³⁵ It would be a huge mistake for the left to return to such fundamentalism if it were to once again to consider the tension between aesthetics and politics which so preoccupied key left theorists of the 1920s and 1930s. Heaven forbid that the work of PiL, or of comparable musical experimenters of the current era, should be criticised for the 'formalism' which key modernists were once tarred with by (typically) Soviet-based critics. I think, nevertheless, that the disambiguation of aesthetic judgment from political action is important if we would seek to re-invigorate the left such that, in the distant or immediate future, it could revive its fortunes and perhaps even supersede its greatest successes. We should not assume that such an effort would be 'pie in the sky': what has been achieved can be achieved again. More importantly still, we must learn not only from the successes but also from the failures of the past.

A crucial element within this is the aesthetic decision involved in the effort to engage or challenge audiences. Facile aesthetic engagement can risk the appearance of revolution but without the kind of critical 'electricity', if I can put it like that, which a truly revolutionary moment probably requires. How many Clash fans were up for much more than a good night out by, say, 1981? Doubtless the populist instincts which guided Mick Jones in his aesthetic decision-making (see above) risked building a fan-base at the expense of building a movement. On the other hand, though, the 'oblique techniques' which Simon Reynolds associates with post-punk bands such as PiL surely risk being so oblique as to inspire almost nobody and ultimately say little or nothing.³⁶ After all, even Reynolds (surely one of the greatest advocates of the experimentalism of the immediate aftermath of first wave punk) acknowledges that so-called post-punk music became 'dry' after a few years, demanding a return to a 'loose' and 'intuitive' musicianship which I take to be emblematic terms for the musical traditionalism of the likes of Mick Jones.³⁷

Perhaps if Keith Levene had never left the Clash, their music could have been a lot more interesting and their message a lot more politically effective, but there is no point in wishing for a different past. There is every reason, however, to assume that we – we, in the broadest possible sense – can control our future. As we move forwards, questions around innovation and tradition will be worth considering carefully for those of us who still believe that art – again, taking the term in its broadest possible sense – can contribute valuably to social change.

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- ¹ Paul Gorman, *In Their Own Write: Adventures in the Music Press* (London: MPG, 2001), p.66.
- ² Kevin Dunn, *Global Punk: Resistance and Rebellion in Everyday Life* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), p.25.
- ³ Emma Baulch, *Making Scenes: Reggae, Punk, and Death Metal in 1990s Bali* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), p.92.
- ⁴ Ibid, p.95.
- ⁵ Ibid, p.27.
- ⁶ Ibid, p.126.
- ⁷ The avant-gardism of the later ATV owes a clear debt to the likes of Art Ensemble of Chicago and Sun Ra in any case, as Perry has himself admitted, Simon Reynolds, *Rip it Up and Start Again: Postpunk 1978-1984* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), p.79.
- ⁸ As Simon Reynolds puts it (to give just one example), 'punk declared 1976 to be Year Zero', *Rip it Up*, p.xx.
- ⁹ Pete Dale, *Popular Music and the Politics of Novelty* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), p.64.
- ¹⁰ Pete Dale, *Anyone Can Do It: Empowerment, Tradition and the Punk Underground* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2012).
- ¹¹ For discussion of race and punk, with a significant focus upon the Clash and the particular song in question (which gave the book its title), see Stephen Duncombe and Maxwell Tremblay, *White Riot: Punk Rock and the Politics of Race* (London: Verso, 2011).
- ¹² *The Clash* was issued in the US, belatedly in 1979, with a radically different running order and some songs omitted as well as others added.
- ¹³ Dai Griffiths, 'Elevating form and elevating modulation', *Popular Music* 34 (1) (2015), pp. 22-44: for Griffiths, the 'truck driver shift' involves, essentially, a basic modulatory upwards shift of melodic and harmonic material, typically by a semi-tone or whole-tone.
- ¹⁴ Jason Gross, 'Keith Levene interview', *Perfect Sound Forever*, February 2001. Available at <http://www.furious.com/perfect/keithlevene.html> Consulted September 12 2016.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iNE8Ebklesc>
- ¹⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f0tbrXp4IxM>
- ¹⁸ Daniel Rachel, *Isle of Noises: Conversations With Great British Songwriters* (London: Picador, 2013).
- ¹⁹ Ibid, p.158.
- ²⁰ Ibid, p.159.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ Ibid, p.154.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Interview by Dave Simpson, 'How we made: Jah Wobble and Keith Levene on Public Image Ltd's Metal Box', *The Guardian*, 13 February 2012. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2012/feb/13/jah-wobble-keith-levene-metal-box>. Consulted 13 September 2016. I would suggest that Levene is a little disingenuous here, given the evidence of his playing and his claim to have spent eight hours practising on guitar each day during his teens, Gross, 'Keith', 2001.
- ²⁶ Dale, *Anyone Can Do It*, p.28.
- ²⁷ Jacques Attali, *Noise: the Political Economy of Music* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p.144.
- ²⁸ Paul Hegarty, *Noise/Music: A History* (London: Continuum, 2007), pp.51-2.
- ²⁹ Brian Cogan, *Encyclopedia of Punk Music and Culture* (London: Greenwood Press), p.38.
- ³⁰ Ivor Levene, 'The Clash, PIL Founder Keith Levene Sets The Record Straight', *California Rocker*, 2016. Available at <http://www.californiarocker.com/2016/06/09/exclusive-interview-clash-founder-keith-levene-sets-record-straight/>. Consulted 13 September 2016.
- ³¹ Gross, 'Keith', 2001.
- ³² For example, Reynolds argues that 'Punk's approach to politics – raw rage or agit-prop protest – seemed too blunt or preachy to the post-punk vanguard', *Rip It Up*, p.xxii. Whilst Reynolds is entitled to claim this view for himself, it does not tally well with my innumerable conversations with music fans who were collecting records during the era Reynolds focuses upon (1978-1984), as well as many musicians of that era. One could listen to Crass, the Clash, the Fire Engines and Scritti Politti without feeling misaligned, in fact; and many musicians to whom Reynolds ascribes the status of 'post-punk' actually viewed themselves as punks, in fact. I would dispute the idea of a hard distinction between punk and post-punk, therefore.
- ³³ For discussion of the harmonic interest in 'New Rose', see Dale, *Popular Music and the Politics of Novelty*, pp.80-82. Oddly, Allan F. Moore argues that there is limited harmonic interest in 'New Rose', *Rock: The*

Primary Text: Developing a Musicology of Rock (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), p.131. My analysis shows that this conclusion was hasty on Moore's part.

³⁴ David Wilkinson, *Post-Punk, Politics and Pleasure in Britain* (London: Palgrave, 2016), see chapter seven in particular.

³⁵ Adorno, Theodor et al, *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 2007).

³⁶ Reynolds, *Rip It Up*, p.xxii.

³⁷ *Ibid*, p.520.