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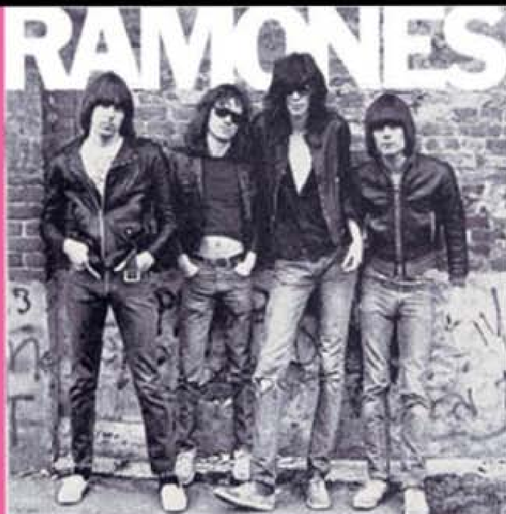

RAMONES

by Nicholas Rombes

You even shatter the sensations of time and space into split seconds and instant replays.

—Max, in Network

After hearing *[Ramones],* everything else sounded impossibly slow.

—Jon Savage, *England's Dreaming*
1

The Outsider is a man who has awakened to chaos.

—Colin Wilson, *The Outsider*
2

No subculture has sought with more grim determination than punks to detach itself from the taken-for-granted landscape of normalized forms, nor to bring down upon itself such vehement disapproval.

—Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*
3

Ramones is either the last great modern record, or the first great postmodern one. Fully aware of its status as pop culture, it nonetheless has unironic aspirations toward art. The Ramones themselves—maintaining an unchanging image for nearly thirty years in a culture that values nothing so much as change—were too serious and enduring to be dismissed as cartoonish, yet too fun to be embraced as "serious."

As other bands self-destructed, seduced by their own madness or by the trappings of fame, the Ramones remained troubadours of punk, and, for the better part of their career as a group, generated an unchanging sound in the face of rapidly evolving trends. They were
deeply aware of the Dark Side of longevity—the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and The Who all provided templates of the path not to be taken, as the early reckless power of their work gradually gave way to self-perpetuating indulgence and excess, signaled by long, dramatic concept songs and albums whose virtuosity practically demanded worship.

The quality that insured the Ramones' first album would become one of the most important records in modern rock was the same quality that guaranteed they would never have mainstream success in their time: a unified vision, the force of a single idea. There is a purity to *Ramones* that is almost overwhelming and frightening. Basically, the Ramones are the only punk group from the 1970s to have maintained their vision for so long, without compromise—a vision fully and completely expressed on their very first album. In America, there is a skepticism and wariness about any artistic or cultural form that doesn't evolve, that doesn't grow. There is no more damning critique than the charge of repeating

yourself. And yet punk was precisely about repetition; its art lay in the rejection of elaboration. And nowhere is this more evident than on the Ramones' first album, whose unforgiving and fearful symmetry announced the arrival of a sound so pure it did not require change.

It's one of those interesting twists of history that *Ramones* was released in 1976, America's bicentennial
year, the year of remembering Declarations of Independence. While punk—especially in its 1980s and 90s incarnations—is often associated with anarchist dissent and alienation from the mainstream, there is also a very homespun, nostalgic dimension to the original punk movement, especially its American version. After all, the do-it-yourself philosophy is part of the American tradition, stretching from the Revolutionary War era to Ralph Waldo Emerson's call for self-reliance. Of course, you don't need to know or even care about these things to like the music, and in a way it goes against the whole spirit of punk to read too much into its sources and traditions. But part of the appeal of punk as embodied by the Ramones arose from how it managed to tap into this American tradition of independence and resistance that pits the little fellow against the forces of the big, while at the same time rejecting tradition.

Details of the album's production have passed into legend: it was recorded in seventeen days in February 1976 for roughly $6,400. At first, the process sounds like the ultimate do-it-yourself, amateur, reckless ethic that is associated with punk. In truth, however, the Ramones approached the recording process with a high degree of preparedness and professionalism. They had already been playing together for roughly two years—including at least seventy live

shows—and had fully developed their defining sound. They had produced their
own demo, had written enough material for several albums, and had given much consideration to the sound they wanted to achieve on the first album.

Before considering the details of the album's production, its songs, and its eventual reception and influence, it is important to reconsider the context from which the Ramones, and punk itself, arose. For the term "punk" today carries a much different meaning than it did in the early to mid-1970s. If today the term has passed into a recognizable and perfectly acceptable commodity form, thirty years ago "punk" was wildly unstable; attached to it were all sorts of meanings and signs expressed in the magazines, newspapers, fanzines, and documentaries that covered what was then coming to be known as "punk rock."

Punk was a stance that embodied rejection. Where progressive rock, as a withered stepchild of the 1960s, was still deep down about affirmation and saying yes, punk offered negation and a resounding no. In *Punking Out* (1977), probably the best documentary of the 1970s CBGB scene (and among the few to use live sound as opposed to post-synch), a fan was asked: "What's a blank generation?" to which she replied: "I'm blank. There's nothing coming in. There's nothing going out." The Ramones imbued this nothingness and rejection with a fierce humor that transported nihilism into the realm of pop culture. The emergence of punk and its uneasy
mix of nihilism and humor, especially as embodied by the Ramones, cannot be separated from writing about punk in magazines, newspapers, and fanzines in America and the UK,

including *Crawdaddy, Soho Weekly News, New York Rocker, Trouser Press, Village Voice, Melody Maker, Creem, Hit Parader, Sounds, Zigzag, Punk,* and others. Indeed, punk emerged at precisely the moment when music writing and editing was at its most intelligent and experimental—especially in the hands of John Holmstrom, Lester Bangs, Richard Meltzer, Nick Kent, Alan Betrock, James Wolcott, Robert Christgau, Nick Tosches, Mary Harron, Greil Marcus, and others—a fact that is crucial to an understanding of punk's creation and subsequent mythical status. The Ramones, whose unified image and sound were central to the early articulation of punk aesthetics, were often singled out, especially in coverage of CBGB's 1975 summer festival of unsigned bands. In "Down and Out at the Bowery," *Melody Maker's* Steve Lake provided this early impression of the Ramones:

The Ramones, meanwhile, are being heavily touted by the rock columns of the local press as "potentially the greatest singles band since the Velvet Underground," and they recently made rock history with a phenomenally tight set at CBGB that crammed six songs into a 13-minute performance. Their image is pre-flower power Seeds with Sky Saxon/Early Byrds
pudding bowl haircuts and biker outfits of leather and denim. Determined punks all.
[4]

Indeed, the CBGB festival in 1975 provided an opportunity for writers to offer some sort of coherent vision of punk; the festival and the publicity it generated constituted both an opening up and a closing down of the disparate channels of what was beginning to be called "punk" in the press. James

Wolcott, writing in August 1975 about the CBGB festival, said that "there is original vision there, and what the place itself is doing is quite extraordinary: putting on bands as if the stage were a cable television station. Public access rock."
5 The festival also attracted the attention of national, larger-circulation magazines such as *Rolling Stone,* which, as Clinton Heylin notes, had heretofore largely ignored the emerging scene. In October 1975, Ed McCormack of *Rolling Stone* offered this assessment of the festival and the Ramones:

Right now the Ramones are where the New York Dolls were back in the early seventies, when they were playing at the Mercer Arts Center for practically nothing and using taxicabs as equipment vans. While a recording contract has thus far eluded the Ramones, their machine-gun paced, hot singles sound and their cutesy-poo Beaver-Badass image have made them cult favorites of groupies. They come on in patched jeans and Popeye T-shirts, plant themselves in place and
play nonstop. And while their cult followers liken them to a "hip new version of the Osmonds," one cannot help but wonder if they are bragging or complaining.
6

In the months surrounding their signing with Sire records in January 1976, although the Ramones were treated as harbingers of the new music scene that was developing in New York, they were more likely to be called underground than punk. In July 1975, *The Village Voice* noted that unlike "most of New York's underground groups, they're not neo-Velvets, so they're not coolly insulated from the fire they create" and that their songs were played "with a chopping freneticism."

[7] And in the *SoHo Weekly News* in 1975, Alan Betrock (founder of *New York Rocker)* wrote that "on stage the band emits a 1975 sound not unlike a streamlined, yet still vehemently compact, mixture of early Velvet Underground, Shadows of the Knight, and the Stooges. It's rock & roll the way it was meant to be played, not with boogie or pretense, but just straight freshness and intense energy. Sort of out of the garages and onto the stages again."
[8] Around the same time, in a blurb about CBGB buried in his column "The Pop Life," John Rockwell in the *New York Times* in September 1975 noted that the "efflorescence of the New York underground rock scene at the C.B.G.B. club will live on past the present moment. A group of SoHo video artists who call themselves Me
tropolis Video have been documenting the bands every weekend. The shows can be seen Saturday nights at midnight on Manhattan Cable's Channel D."
[9] The preferred term to describe the emerging scene in 1974 and 1975, in both the mainstream and underground press, was indeed "underground" rather than "punk."

While it's true that debates about the origins of the term "punk" to describe the scene can quickly devolve into triviality, the confusion surrounding the term is central to punk's anarchic spirit, a confusion that is important to maintain, rather than resolve. Originally, "punck" was used to describe a prostitute or harlot; in 1596—the first known appearance of the word in print—the writer Thomas Lodge used the word like this: "He hath a Punck (as the pleasant Singer cals her)."
[10] Over the centuries, the meaning of the word has evolved, variously used to describe something worthless or foolish,

empty talk, nonsense, a homosexual, or a person of no account.

More recently, in the decades prior to the emergence of the punk music scene, the word punk can be found scattered throughout novels and stories by the likes of Ernest Hemingway, William S. Burroughs, and others. In Hemingway's story "The Mother of a Queen" from his collection *Winner Take Nothing* (1933), the narrator says "this fellow was just a punk, you understand, a nobody he'd ever seen before... "
11 Dashiell Hammett's
novel *The Maltese Falcon* (1930) features a scene where Sam Spade tells Gutman "we've absolutely got to give them a victim. There's no way out of it. Let's give them the punk."
12 In Burroughs's first novel *Junky* (1953), the narrator observes as two "young punks got off a train carrying a lush between them."
13 And Thomas Pynchon uses the term in *V.* (1963) like this: "There was nothing so special about the gang, punks are punks."
14

The word punk in relation to music is both trickier and easier to trace; while pretty much everyone now knows punk when they hear it, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the term had not yet taken on the coded weight of meaning that it carries today. In his first nationally published work—for *Rolling Stone* in 1969—Lester Bangs reviewed the MC5's album *Kick out the Jams,* and wrote, "never mind that they came on like a bunch of sixteen-year-old punks on a meth power trip."
15 In May 1971 Dave Marsh, writing in *Creem,* used the phrase "punk rock," and the following month in the same

magazine in his essay "Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung," Bangs, writing about the influence of the Yardbirds, said that "then punk bands started cropping up who were writing their own songs but taking the Yardbirds' sound and reducing it to this kind of goony fuzztone clatter."
16 Punk, as associated with rock and roll, gradually gained currency, so that by 1974, the word could even be found in the rarefied
pages of none other than *The New Yorker.* Reviewing a New York Dolls concert at the Bottom Line in May 1974, Ellen Willis wrote, in reference to opening act Suzi Quatro, "I was getting a naive kick out of watching a woman play rock-and-roll punk."
17 And writing in the *Village Voice* in November 1975, just a little over a month after the Ramones had signed with Sire, Greil Marcus, in reviewing Patti Smith's debut album *Horses,* wrote that "the concepts that lie behind behind Smith's performance—her version of rock and roll fave raves, the New York avant-garde, surrealist imagery and aesthetic strategy, the beatnik hipster pose, the dark side of the street punk soul—emerge more clearly with each playing, until they turn into schtick."
18

Yet even this coupling of "punk" and "rock" didn't yet capture the meanings we associate with punk rock today. It wasn't until 1976, and the founding of the magazine *Punk* by John Holmstrom and Legs McNeil, that the term adapted once again to capture and give name to the emerging scene. As Legs McNeil tells it, "Holmstrom wanted the magazine to be a combination of everything we were into—television reruns, drinking beer, getting laid, cheeseburgers, comics, grade-B movies, and this weird rock & roll that nobody but us seemed

to like: the Velvets, the Stooges, the New York Dolls, and now the Dictators."
[19] In fact, the group The Dictators and their 1975 album *The Dictators Go Girl Crazy!*
were a direct inspiration for the magazine's title. Not only did they use the word punk in the song "Weekend" ("oh weekend / Bobby is a local punk / cutting school and getting drunk / eating at McDonalds for lunch"), but an inside sleeve picture of them dressed in black leather jackets eating at White Castle led McNeil to suggest *Punk* as the title: "The word 'punk' seemed to sum up the thread that connected everything we liked—drunk, obnoxious, smart but not pretentious, absurd, funny, ironic, and things that appealed to the darker side."
[20]

One of the best discussions of the punk ethos appeared in the very first issue of *Punk* in January 1976 in the essay "Marlon Brando: The Original Punk." Suggesting that punk is above all a sensibility, a way of carrying yourself in the world, the piece suggests that Brando's films *Streetcar Named Desire* (1951), *The Wild One* (1953), and *On the Waterfront* (1954) "provided media recognition for an inarticulate, rebellious character type, til then ignored by the popular media. ... Brando was cool without oppressing the audience with too much sharpness. He was powerful without having to be invulnerable. ... Vulnerability in a leather jacket. Brando prowled, not as a predator, but as a formidable victim."
[21] The Ramones, especially, embodied this cool style that reversed the governing codes of 1970s macho rock embodied by the figure of the swaggering lead
singer. Joey Ramone was the punk underdog, the impossibly skinny guy who hid beneath his hair and behind his sunglasses. In that same issue of *Punk,* in her two-page spread

on the Ramones, Mary Harron was hesitant to use the word punk to describe the band (preferring instead “punk-type”), and when she did use it, she did so to describe a visual style and attitude, not a sound: “OK,” Harron asked, “why do you affect leather jackets and kind of a punk-type attitude on stage?” Tommy replied: “It keeps us warm, y’know? And the black leather absorbs more heat.”

In fact, groups like Alice Cooper, Kiss, and even AC/DC were written about as part of the mix of the punk and new wave scene. If today not many people would consider AC/DC an element of the new wave that included art bands like Talking Heads, in the early-to-mid 1970s the categories of punk, new wave, hard rock, heavy metal, and pop were still blurred. As well see later, this was due in part to the fact that record companies, promoters, and radio stations, which depended upon the fairly strict maintenance of generic classifications, had not yet absorbed the “new wave” into a commodity form. Writing about AC/DC in *New York Rocker,* which was devoted almost exclusively to covering the punk and new wave scene, Howie Klein noted that “AC/DC doesn’t use safety pins, never went to art school, and they sure don’t limit themselves to 2 or 3 chords, but
if new wave is a reaffirmation of rock ‘n’ roll’s traditional values, this band is an important part of it.”
22 The Ramones themselves, although cautious of labels like punk, were variously touted as punk, new wave, hard rock, pop, pop-punk, and others. In a full-page 1977 ad in *New York Rocker* from their record company Sire, the Ramones were described as the “world’s foremost exponents of pure punk-rock and New York’s pioneer New Wave band.”

The Ramones, as was true of most bands of that moment, preferred to demonstrate the premise of their music rather than talk about it. When asked in 1977 about their feelings regarding the punk label, Johnny responded: “Whaddya gonna do? We don’t care if they wanna call us dat. It doesn’t matter one way or the other.”
23 But very often the bands and their fans either rejected or simply ignored the label “punk.” In the documentary *Punking Out,* one fan at CBGB in 1977 answers, when asked about punk, “[if] you want to talk about punk and underground it’s bullshit. You call ’em punk because you got nothing else to say about ’em, no other way to link ’em. But it’s like the heartbeat that links ’em.” In an interview with Mary Harron in *Punk,* when asked if he had a name to describe the music, Johnny Rotten said that “punk rock’s a silly thing to call it” and “it means, like—American sixties rip-off bands.”
24 And asked about whether he and the Ramones thought of the album that they were recording in 1976 as punk, Craig Leon, who produced *Ramones,* responded that “if my memory serves me well, we never used this term at all. Seymour Stein nicked the term ‘New Wave’ from the 50s French film guys to describe the music but no one used ‘punk’ other than the title of John Holmstrom and Legs McNeil’s magazine of lower NY at that time.”
25

One of the dimensions of punk that was nearly eclipsed as the more hardcore punk bands of the 80s and 90s gained ascendancy was the humor and the sense of sheer absurdity and fun that characterized the emerging scene. *Punk* magazine was very close to *Mad* in this regard, its pages filled with self-deprecating spoofs, such as “Lester Bangs versus Handsome Dick Manitoba,” a spread from issue #4 that

pictures Bangs and Manitoba (of The Dictators) fighting while spouting—in cartoon-like bubbles—highly theoretical sentiments such as "The fall of a culture puts us in the same archetypal cesspool" and "Violence is directly associated with threats to identity as occur in periods of rapid transition!" The Ramones, who were regularly featured in *Punk,* were central to punk's early identity as more fun than dangerous. In "The Rise of Punk Rock" from the *Village Voice* in 1976 James Wolcott wrote:

Punk humor, a healthy parody of rock machismo, can be found in the music of the Dictators (who sing:
"The best part of growing up/Is when I'm sick and throwing up/It's the dues you got to pay/For eating burgers every day....
") and the leather-jacketed Ramones, in the Daffy Duckery of Patti Smith, in magazines like *Punk* and *Creem,* and in television heroes like Fonzie and Eddie Haskell. It's a style of humor which reverses banality, thrives upon it, and enjoys juxtaposing it with high culture references in order to create a comically surreal effect.
26

The rise and fall of the Sex Pistols in England and the Dead Boys in the US in some ways put an end to punk's first, naive phase. It may seem strange to call early punk innocent—and a reading of *Please Kill Me* suggests just the opposite—yet despite the hedonism that is typical of any rock movement, the Ramones and other related groups offered a vision that rejected the excesses of the hippie counterculture and instead drew, often ironically, on the supposed innocence of the 1950s. While Tom Carson may have been exaggerating when he wrote in the *New York Rocker* that the Ramones' third album *Rocket to Russia* demonstrated "what some of us have

suspected for a long time—that these guys are really straight old-fashioned pop moralists under the skin,”
[27] there is an element of truth in his claim. If the Ramones were innocent, this innocence lay in their elevation of limitation to the level of art, and in their hop-scotching backward over the hippies directly to the promise of the early Beatles, kiln-fired down to a hardcore sound
at which previous bands could only hint. For in punk’s rejection and nihilism there was a larger violence that for the Ramones remained a path not taken, at least for their first several albums. The violence, outrage, and shock—what Clinton Heylin called “the more brutal aspects of the punk sound”
[28]—that groups like Dead Boys and Laughing Dogs brought to the scene were latent in punk from the beginning, and in some ways represent the logical conclusion of the punk movement. The Ramones remained ambivalent about this strain of punk. In a 2001 interview, Johnny noted, “when punk started getting this bad reputation here, we started getting lumped in with the stuff and being excluded.”
[29]

After the Sex Pistols said the F-word on British television, punk became even more associated with a level of violence and rebellion that, as the Ramones have suggested, worked against any possibility of widespread radio play in the US. As Keith Negus has noted, “[t]he formatted radio system decisively demarcates and defines the market for popular music in the United States.”
[30] The associations that were beginning to be attached to the word “punk” are evident in a press release by EMI in December 1976, two months after the Sex Pistols had signed with them and shortly after their notorious TV spot. Entitled

"Comment on Content of Records," by Sir John Read, Chairman of EMI, the press release read, in part:

Sex Pistols is a pop group devoted to a new form of music known as "punk rock."

It was contracted for recording purposes by EMI Records Limited in October 1976—an unknown group offering some promise, in the view of our recording executives, like many other pop groups of different kinds that we have signed. In this context, it must be remembered that the recording industry has signed many pop groups, initially controversial, who have in the fulness of time become wholly acceptable and contributed greatly to the development of modern music. ...

Sex Pistols is the only "punk rock" group that EMI Records currently has under direct recording contract and whether EMI does in fact release any more of their records will have to be very carefully considered. I need hardly add that we shall do everything we can to restrain their public behaviour, although this is a matter over which we have no real control. 31

The hope that the Sex Pistols would eventually become acceptable of course proved futile, as they were dropped by EMI early the following year. The strangeness of the language here, as Sir John Read carefully hopes that punk might soon become domesticated, shows how punk as a commodity simply could not happen, at least not in 1976. In this sense, punk's image created the very climate that introduced it to the mainstream and that simultaneously assured it would be frozen out of the mainstream. As Danny

Fields has suggested, the “whole thing [punk] just got out of control and whatever chance
the Ramones had to get on the radio based on the merit of the music was then wiped out by the Sex Pistols because it became too hot to handle. American radio, then as now, doesn’t like to participate in anything that is dangerous or revolutionary or radical.”
[32]

To be sure, there was an unmistakable violence, at least rhetorically, in the Sex Pistols, but there was also a deep sense of humor and recognition of the fundamental absurdity of life. In America, this punk humor was directly rooted in the rejection of what was perceived as hippie sincerity. Any attempt to account for the rise and appeal of punk must take into account its rejection of the progressive rock establishment and its unironic embrace of “feelings” and “relationships” and pseudo-macho posturing. By the mid-1970s the country was in recession, the promises of the Great Society were an increasingly unrealizable dream, the creative possibilities suggested by the counter-culture movement had withered into self-absorption and a sideshow of perpetual new age self-help movements, and the once-radical alternative lifestyle promises had transformed into cardboard sitcom scenarios (remember, *The Love Boat* had its debut in 1976). The tremendous idealism and promise of harmony of the 1960s had been steadily eroded by assassinations, burning cities, white flight, busing violence, a disgraced president, and a lost war.

If disco was in some ways a grotesque magnification of the latent hedonism of the 1960s, then punk, with its minimalism and its implicit violence, was an about-face on the 1960s that

constituted a symbolic rejection. In describing the emergence of punk, Mary Harron has noted that “punk, like Warhol, embraced everything that cultured people, and hippies, detested: plastic, junk-food, B-movies, advertising, making money—although no one ever did. You got so sick of people being so nice, mouthing an enforced attitude of goodness and health.”
33 In America, *Punk* magazine was instrumental in articulating a sensibility that mocked the grandiose social commentary that characterized flower-power music. Issue #1 included a “Do It Yourself Sixties Protest Song” that replaced “serious” lines with ones like “watching Adam 12” and “munch my Wheaties” and other references to everyday life. In issue #3 from April 1976, Dee Dee Ramone talked about how, when in school in the late 1960s, “they used to have those peace demonstrations and stuff. I used to heckle the demonstrators.” And in that same year, Lou Reed said, “Nixon was beautiful. If he had bombed Montana and gotten away with it, I would’ve loved him.”
34

Often, there is a savage kind of beauty in disintegration and in the articulation of that disintegration through art. And certainly mid-70s America presented
a moment of exhausted optimism and a great lowering of expectations. The Watergate fiasco began in 1972 with the apprehension of men breaking into and attempting to wiretap Democratic party offices. By 1973 televised congressional hearings dominated the airwaves, and in August 1974 Nixon resigned in disgrace (his Vice President, Spiro Agnew, had resigned the previous year in a non-Watergate related tax scandal). In October 1973 OPEC declared its oil embargo, driving high fuel prices ever higher. In a gesture symbolic of

what Jimmy Carter would later call the nation's "malaise," the national Christmas tree was not lit in December 1973. America's involvement in the Vietnam War officially ended in barely-controlled chaos atop the American embassy in Saigon in April 1975 with the last helicopter leaving as the North Vietnamese took the city.

At the center of this crisis of confidence, both literally and symbolically, was New York City, which was headed into bankruptcy in 1975. Against the backdrop of the looming 1976 presidential election, President Ford was "making hay of the New York crisis as a symbol of the bankruptcy of liberalism and of the Democratic Party."
35 The city's $1.5 billion deficit was brought under control through a series of measures that severely impacted the work force, as roughly 60,000 workers were laid off over a three-year period. This was the era of "planned
shrinkage," an idea famously articulated by Roger Starr (New York City Administrator of Housing and Urban Development from 1974–76) in a 1976 *New York Times* essay in which he declared "planned shrinkage is the recognition that the golden door to full participation in American life and the American economy is no longer to be found in New York." Planned shrinkage "called for the systematic withdrawal of basic services—including police, fire, health, sanitation, and transportation—from poor neighborhoods to make them unlivable and thus drive the poor out of the city."
36 During 1975, headlines in New York daily announced the city's crumbling economy. "[Mayor] Beame Submits New Cuts Requiring added Layoffs Running into Thousands," ran a frontpage headline in the *New York Times* in October 1975, followed by "Mayor is Bitter." The article is typical of the sort of news New Yorkers were reading every day: "The

exact layoff total will be decided in the next week, and unofficial estimates circulating among city administrators who coursed fretfully through City Hall was that the dismissals might total up to 8,000 beyond the 21,000 workers laid off thus far in the fiscal crisis. Police officials said up to 900 policemen would be laid off, and school officials predicted 'several thousand' teachers and school workers would have to be let go."
37

Despite the downbeat scene in America in the mid-1970s, American punk from that era did not resonate
with the same aggressive political edge that characterized British punk. England was in the throes of a deep recession, with unemployment reaching 6.4 percent in June 1976, the highest since 1940.
38 To make matters worse, the summer of 1976—a period when the emerging punk movement was beginning to attract press in publications such as *New Musical Express*—in England was characterized by a sweltering heat wave. By August a drought was declared (a Minister of Drought was appointed), and the Notting Hill Carnival, which in past years had been a peaceful celebration of Caribbean culture, was marred by violence and rioting that sent over 100 policemen to the hospital.
39 This isn't to suggest that the punk movement was simply a response to mid-1970s malaise, but that, rather, it embodied the very anxieties that characterized the era. As Hebdige has suggested, the "punks appropriated the rhetoric of crisis which had filled the airwaves and the editorials throughout the period and translated it into tangible (and visible) terms."
40

The fundamental difference between British and American punk was in the Americans' basic optimism. While it's true that both British and American punk traded in nihilism and destruction, in American punk this tendency was fractured and less pronounced than in the British version. As Legs McNeil recounts, punk "was about real freedom, personal freedom. ... I remember
my favorite nights were just getting drunk and walking around the East Village kicking over garbage cans. Just the night. Just the night. Just that it would be the night again. And you could go out, you know? It just seemed glorious. And you'd be humming these great songs and anything could happen, and it was usually pretty good."
[41] Punk music's great strength—especially the music of the Ramones—was its ability to convey this sense of explosive joy while at the same time hinting at some larger idea that you could never really be sure was there.

If details and stories like this are important to remember, it is because punk responded with its own stories and its own stance, the stance of the underdog. On March 30, 1974, the Ramones played their debut gig (as a trio) at the Performance Studio in Manhattan. That same night, New York City's WPIX-TV played the 1958 American International Pictures cult horror film *How to Make a Monster* as part of their "Chiller Theatre" series. To those who might perchance have seen both the performance and the movie, it would have been a natural double feature. A little over two years later, in the spring of the bicentennial year, the Ramones' first album debuted, without even one song approaching the three-minute mark.

How do you define a band without a tradition? Rejecting the blues-oriented inflection that had for twenty-five years characterized both American and British rock, the Ramones didn’t plug into any recognizable past. Of course there were influences, which many rock historians and writers over the years have noted, including the Detroit pre-punk scene of the MC5 and Iggy and the Stooges, the glam-rock scene of T. Rex, David Bowie, and the New York Dolls, the glam-metal scene of Alice Cooper, and of course the early Beatles and The Who. But these exist only as fragments in the Ramones, only as sonic glimpses, barely even enough to be counted as influences. Now is probably a good a time as any to directly address the question: *Who was the first punk band?* Or, more narrowly: *Were the Ramones the first punk band?* The problem with this question is that it assumes a total break with the past and with influence that no band—no matter how original—can achieve. Also, in the end it comes down to individual taste and interpretation: if you hear punk in the Stooges, then you hear punk in the Stooges. If you don’t, you don’t. On the other hand, if such questions prompt a deeper appreciation of important bands that might otherwise be neglected, then it’s not such a bad idea to ask them. While many people have written about punk’s prehistory, the most sustained discussion is found in Clinton Heylin’s book *From the Velvets to the Voidoids: A Pre-Punk History for a Post-Punk World.* At the risk of simplifying his argument, he divides American punk into the following categories:

Precursors:

The Velvet Underground

The Stooges

MC5

Alice Cooper

The Modern Lovers

The New York Dolls

The First Wave:

Television

Patti Smith

Blondie

The Ramones

The Second Wave:

Talking Heads

The Dead Boys

The Heartbreakers

Richard Hell and the Voidoids

The Dictators

Suicide

[61]I think this is what he was getting at: punk is as much a theory of music as it is music.

It has become commonplace to suggest that punk music was authentic and pure and somehow directly opposed to the tainted sellout status that widespread acceptance brings. In his excellent book *Subculture,* Dick Hebdige, writing about punk, notes, “as soon as the original innovations which signify ‘subculture’ are translated into commodities and made generally available, they become ‘frozen.’ Once removed from their private contexts by the small entrepreneurs and big fashion interests who produce them on a mass scale, they become codified, made comprehensible, rendered at once public property and profitable merchandise.”
[62] More recently, Stacy Thompson has suggested that one of punk’s fundamental desires is “the desire to resist the commercial realm, and especially commercial music.”
[63] Yet what does it really mean to claim this about punk, especially in its mid-1970s incarnation? The Ramones were not rebelling against popular music, but rather against how popular music had come to be defined and experienced. If today we tend to think in terms of selling out versus not selling out, we need to be careful not to project these concerns backwards to the 1970s. For there was less worry about “selling out” to the mainstream than there was desire to replace mainstream music with something better, something more alive, something unexpected. The Ramones, in particular, desired a hit; after all, they believed in and were passionate about
their music, and they wanted to share it with others beyond the cramped space of CBGB. As Seymour Stein, the co-founder of Sire records who signed Ramones to Sire in 1975, has said, “their melodies were very catchy and stayed

with me, dancing around in my head, and it was absolutely clear that for better or worse, underneath it all was a pop-band mentality."
64 Others, such as Craig Leon, who produced *Ramones,* share this view: "Quite honestly, we thought we were creating a hit pop record. The Bay City Rollers, Herman's Hermits, and the Beatles were our competition in our minds. But do bear in mind we were laughing all the way through it."
65

Casting the Ramones and other bands as anti-corporate and anti-mainstream means that you have to ignore the tremendous amount of care and energy that went into promoting themselves. The Ramones, in particular, were very much aware of the press and publicity they were generating, and were active participants in shaping their image and generating further press interest, as this 1977 interview from the *New York Rocker* suggests:

What was the turning point?
Dee Dee: That festival [the 1975 summer Rock Festival at CBGB].
Tommy: The turning point was ... when Lisa Robinson came down... actually we got some nice writeups from some people and we sent them out to the people in the trades, with a little picture of us.

Johnny: I think we had a list of 100 people and we hit everybody.
Did you lick the envelopes yourselves?
Tommy: Yeah, addressed them and everything.
66

This form of do-it-yourself publicity, while much different in scale than the massive promotional engines that sustained supergroups like Led Zeppelin and the Eagles, was nonetheless driven by a desire to reach a broad audience. Rather than look at their success as something to be ashamed of, or as some sort of sellout, the Ramones remained keenly aware that, as one of the earliest punk bands to sign to a label, they were in many ways responsible for the potential success and viability of the emerging punk scene. "We were the first CBGB-punk-type group to get signed," Tommy noted, "and that was important because I think we opened up the doors." 67 While punk in the 80s and 90s very much cast itself in opposition to mainstream, corporate interests, and while recent writing on punk (often by academics) casts punk as a sort of Marxist music for the people and by the people, it's instructive to remember that in its early days, many punk bands desired and actively courted mainstream success.

And yet, despite the melodic, pop-oriented sensibility that characterized early punk and the Ramones' first album in particular, there is something—other than the obviously raw sound—that assured punk's marginality.

Please, dear reader, don't cast down this book when I remind you of the ironic dimension to the Ramones. Irony is a notoriously slippery word, often used as shorthand for insincerity, or intellectual aloofness, or postmodern cynicism. Rest assured, I use it in none of these senses. Instead, I'm using irony in a broader sense to suggest that one of the defining features of punk was its awareness of itself as punk. This does not mean it was insincere, any more than I would suggest you were insincere for dressing a little nicer than usual to meet someone you liked. Now, the Ramones have been called ironic before, but often in a dismissive way, as

when Greil Marcus writes that “much has been made of punk’s antecedents in ... the arty, ironic New York scene that emerged in 1974—especially as exemplified by the Ramones. ‘Beat on the brat / with a baseball bat’—what could be more punk than that?”
68

I think Marcus gives the band too much credit, and not enough. Certainly the Ramones did emerge from the New York scene that included Andy Warhol, Lou Reed, Patti Smith, and others whose work could be characterized as highly self-conscious. As Craig Leon notes, “the Ramones were much more part of the NY underground ‘art’ scene of The Velvets and Warhol & co. They had much more in common with bands like Television and Patti Smith’s group than the Sex Pistols and other so-called punk bands.”
69 And yet the immediacy
and rawness in their performance and recorded music discredits the claim that they were more self-consciously artistic. Watching an early video of the band tearing, with determined fury, through a twenty-minute set in a television studio with no audience, it’s hard to see the irony anywhere. And yet... can punk—and its glam-rock predecessors—be completely separated from the sort of camp sensibility that Susan Sontag described as “camp.” “Camp is the consistently aesthetic experience of the world. It incarnates a victory of ‘style’ over ‘content,’ ‘aesthetics’ over ‘morality,’ of irony over tragedy.”
70 Camp combats “the threat of boredom. The relation between boredom and Camp taste cannot be overestimated. Camp taste is by its nature possible only in affluent societies, in societies or circles capable of experiencing the psychopathology of affluence.”

71 In a discussion with Sontag in 1978, Richard Hell told her, "the generation I belong to has more in common among its members than any other generation that ever existed because of television and public school systems."
72 An album like *Ramones* is both an acknowledgment and a fierce rejection of this sentiment: saturated in pop culture, the album nonetheless rejects again and again easy connections to its influences and sources, which remain locked tightly in its self-contained songs.

Questions about whether or not punk was ironic are not merely academic questions put to punk thirty years later, but in fact constituted the tension and contradictions typical of the scene. Early accounts of the Ramones and other underground or punk bands raised the same questions. A 1976 issue of *New York Rocker* noted that the "Ramones hit hard, but when all the smoke and fury have subsided, one may recognize that despite the overwhelming amplification, the group is operating through the most basic devices of irony and understatement."
73 In that same issue, in the essay "The Clothes Nose: Sniffing Out NY Rock Dress Sense," Robert Swift says this of the Ramones: "Pretty calculated, but they'll probably say they have no money. Rounded haircuts—Beatles / Standells / kid's cereal commercials, and a singer with a kink in neck. Clothes are worn out levis, tee shirts, scuffed shoes or sneakers, sneers, and shades. A sort of Momma's boy punk. All in all done to perfection, and ultimately it looks unforced."
74 If not ironic, this hyper-awareness of style, as both legitimate and as camp, is one of the major differences between punk and progressive rock, for whom style was, even at its most theatrically excessive, unreflective. In this sense,

punk's indebtedness to glam rock is crucial, for while the Ramones are remembered as being almost anti-style in their unchanging uniform, they were heavily
influenced by glam rock. According to Dee Dee Ramone:

Joey had a band called Sniper [prior to the Ramones]. He was trying to break into the New York "glam" circuit that was happening around then. ...

The glitter took a lot of upkeep and the gear was expensive. We would get custom-made snakeskin boots sent from England via Granny Takes a Trip in New York. Johnny Thunders and Tommy Ramone both went to London to get the right stuff to be the top flashmen about town. Johnny Ramone had an exact replica of the James Williamson outfit with the leopard collar that James wore in the Stooges' *Raw Power* stage. John also had silver lame pants from Granny Takes a Trip that he wore for the first few Ramones gigs.
75

If the Ramones rejected the continual reinvention of style in their own formulation of style (just as their music rejected updating and modification), then this was not out of an ignorance or rejection of style, but rather out of an understanding that minimalism (no make-up, no costume changes, no glitter, etc.) could quite possibly form the basis of a new style.

The album does make you wonder, though, how seriously you should be taking this. The punk generation grew up not only with TV, but with cable, and with all the repetition ("reruns"), irony, and camp that the medium engendered. As Robert Ray has noted, the "new

self-consciousness also flourished on television, where 'Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In' (1968–73), 'The Carol Burnett Show' (1967–1978), and NBC's 'Saturday Night Live' (1975-) all featured irreverent media parodies, particularly of movies and TV news. Other regular series could not be taken straight: 'All in the Family' (1971–79), 'The Rockford Files' (1974–1979), 'Happy Days' (1974–1984), 'Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman' (1976), and 'Soap' (1977–1981) all traded on obviously ironic uses of standard television formulas."

76 The beautifully complicating thing here is not that *Ramones* offered itself as an ironic rock album, but that it might be received that way by an audience raised in a TV culture that always questioned the codes of sincerity. Or, looked at another way, punk irony was gradually evolving into the new norm, replacing the macho sincerity and you-better-take-this-concept-album-seriously of progressive rock, which would help explain punk's delayed acceptance into the mainstream and its late-blossoming stature: it came at the very beginning of a decades-long process of incorporating irony into the mainstream, in which a show like "Late Night with David Letterman" was key. In 1976, *Ramones* sounded both very wrong and very right. Today it just sounds very right, not because the music on the album has changed but because the conditions into which that music enters have. Listeners coming to *Ramones* for the
first time today are conditioned to accept it because they have heard it before—perhaps without knowing it—in the very music that the Ramones helped to create. In this sense, the Ramones' career is about creating the conditions under which their music would be retrospectively accepted. As Jon Savage has suggested in his study of British punk: "In the mid-1960s, pop had been modernistic: reveling in an everlasting present,

without reflection or theory. In the late 1960s, pop became 'progressive,' an idea implying some forward, unitary motion. Early seventies stars like David Bowie and Roxy Music broke up this linear motion with a plethora of references taken from high art, literature and Hollywood kitsch. As the new generation, the Sex Pistols were a finely tuned mixture of the authentic and the constructed."
77

Besides, isn't all performance, whether writing, acting, singing, dancing, or whatever, self-conscious by its very nature? Perhaps, but punk was predicated on a deliberate assault on the elaborate, over-produced, self-serious music of the era, and it is this reactionary nature that imbued punk with a complicated ironic stance. In short, unlike the music of its day, which sought to extend a tradition (i.e., Led Zeppelin or Eric Clapton "extending" the blues), punk sought to reject tradition. For even though it's true the music of the Ramones points back to an earlier time, as Craig Leon and others have noted, this earlier music is referenced not so much for its sound or style, but rather for its energy. While it's pretty easy to hear the blues in Zeppelin's "Dazed and Confused," it's not so easy to hear Herman's Hermits in "Loudmouth." It's harder to think of another rock album that, upon is initial appearance, sounded so little like anything that had come before it.