

# PUNK FUNK

It was the dawn of the 1980s and I was 14 years old. Back then it wasn't fashionable to care about apartheid or the Khmer Rouge. But when I heard the Circle Jerks, the Dead Kennedys, or one of the other great hardcore bands, my perspective shifted.

The music and agitprop lyrics came from mavericks who were literally shunned by society. Looking different, ranting about unpleasant realities and creating horrible noise that parents thought was bad for you, these gnarly iconoclasts went against all prevailing notions of decency and musical propriety and dared to speak out and infuriate people by exposing the cruel side of our existence. And though it might be hard to believe in today's jaded times, they really did scare and unsettle normal citizens.

The first British wave of punk, with bands like The Clash, was politically inclined but things became much more pointed and topical after punk "died" as a trend in the late '70s. Hardcore bands started playing chaotic shows to small crowds and distributing records through tiny homemade labels. The Dead Kennedys' absurdist tactics took on the killing fields with "Holiday in Cambodia," Black Flag's "Police Story" viscerally attacked police oppression, and Rudimentary Peni attacked the subjugation of women with "She is such a pretty girl/ Her shape fits well into a mold/ Her mind removed/ Her body sold."

These subjects weren't talked about, making the hardcore movement an electrifying and educational alternative. By incorporating these secret (or avoided) themes, hardcore was both artistically and politically radical – and a big part of its appeal was that everybody hated it except for a few thousand outcasts, a small minority that fostered intense camaraderie. The bands sang about these themes out of genuine anger and frustration, instead of using them as a pose to sell more records and get on MTV.

I was politicized by hardcore but besides going to a couple of Revolutionary Communist Party meetings out of curiosity I didn't protest or really try to change the world. It was the critique of the lies and devious machinations behind the façade of civilization that was important. That unmasking made me see things for what they really were and at 14 or 15 that was a life-changing, heady proposition.

When hardcore was vital it took those unpleasant truths and shoved them in your face and made you feel a part and committed to fighting all the bad things on this messed up planet, even if you were actually just going skateboarding or slamming at a DOA show.

Now everyone is covered in tattoos, most current "punk" is dreck that makes me pine for *Frampton Comes Alive*, and all that high-minded righteousness has become old hat and, frankly, boring. The critique is no longer a cry in the wilderness – it's all very ho-hum and predictable and mainstream. You're told to "Rock the vote" and "Get Involved!" and there's an eco-hut at the Mountain Dew-sponsored alternative music festival. All those once refreshing political positions are agreed upon in advance, and every Tom, Dick and Harriet can try them on for size as another accessory while rock stars wear their supposedly progressive ideals on their sleeves while signing multi-million dollar record deals.

It's just not as radical or subversive as when you went out on a limb to just bring up these subjects. That's sad. On some level hardcore succeeded beyond its wildest dreams and infiltrated the general populace with its anger. A lot of people are "aware." But with everybody paying lip service to change, and "against" being the *de rigueur* stance, it's just become another tired self-congratulatory reflex that doesn't accomplish much. At least then those concerns were esoteric and hadn't become empty platitudes. You could really believe in those scrappy groups with offensive names who backed up their rhetoric with lives lived differently and didn't capitulate to Mammon at the drop of a hat. And you could launch yourself into another exhilarating stage dive as they banged out their never-before-heard noise, with its diatribes and denunciations that belonged only to you.