

DAMNED to be FREE

THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF ED COLVER



That photographs can have a tremendous impact on people's lives is a modern shibboleth. They "touch" and "affect" human beings. There is certainly some truth in this assertion. Emotions are triggered by the photographic image, and their influence can go beyond that. Photographs of war and famine have spurred charity and influenced public opinion. Two regularly cited examples are Malcolm Browne's 1963 photo of the self-immolating monk Thich Quang Duc and Eddie Adams' 1968 shot of Colonel Loan's execution of a Vietcong prisoner, both of which are credited for changing American attitudes towards the war in Vietnam. These are explicit, immediate cases, ones in the mainstream of mass imagery and history.

On a subtler and less exposed level, photographs can affect people in a much more personal way, and also later come to define social movements that have become known, but that at the height of their existence defined esoterica. These photos can have an intimate secret meaning and influence on people who don't have physical proximity to the subject matter represented. They can impart vital encouragement and affirmation, prototypes to a removed population in the dark. They can teach them how others like them are living and vividly

illustrate that life.

Punk rock started in either America or England, depending on who you believe and which progenitors you credit. In the late 1970s the Sex Pistols and other bands gained world media coverage, and when the Sex Pistols came to America in 1979 there was condescending and sensationalistic mainstream reporting, titillated and amused. Then the magazines and television shows forgot about it. By 1980 the novelty had worn off, and attention to this subcultural rebellion died out. If you didn't live in London, New York or California, you could easily believe the whole movement had become extinct.

In Los Angeles, the impetus of punk rock had spawned something modeled on the original British outbreak but very different. Punk had splintered into various forms—death rock, power pop, surf punk and other mixtures and combinations. By 1979 a style later termed hardcore was

developing—faster, harder, and less implicitly political, with a unique Southern Californian aspect amidst the sprawl of the city of angels.

The audience was mostly young, bored and restless, subversive in an unselfconscious way. Outcasts against what they perceived as the existing order, whether it be the political or entertainment establishment. The scene was small, big shows might have a crowd of 1500, and records sold 5000 copies at most. If you lived in LA you could go to shows and hear the music and experience these creative and social experiments. If you didn't, it might as well have been happening on another planet. It wasn't

on the radar of accepted and promoted cultural production, which was one of the things that made it so alluring. It was



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seriously and authentically underground. It was a long way from the situation fifteen years later, wherein punk rock is just another type of popular music, neutered and redundant, lacking in any originality.

For someone interested in this fomentation who didn't live in one of the main cities, information could be extremely hard to come by. In small towns across the country, the dedicated few longed to be involved and were passionate about something they couldn't get any news of. If punk rock had entered their lives, it could have turned from curiosity to obsession, a reason for hope and a huge influence on their ideas and politics and their relationship to the world. It probably led to an outsider existence, which literally put them in danger of physical attack for their beliefs, tastes and the way they dressed. Their only connection to the excitement and vibrancy thousands of miles away were self-published fanzines and records

that had to be ordered through the mail. And through these mediums is how Ed Colver's photographs probably, perhaps unknowingly, started to touch them in a profound sense, as a lifeline to a world outside that they fervently wanted to be in.

Slightly removed from the happenings in Los Angeles in the far suburbs of Covina, Ed Colver had a passion for art and was especially inspired by surrealism and dada. A chance encounter with photography led to the theft of a camera from a warehouse he worked in. Around 1978 he saw the LA club Madame Wong's on a local TV news segment and started driving up to shows. Early on he made a crucial distinction between the safer new wave bands that played Madame Wong's and the more hard-edged punk bands that were starting to flourish. Preferring the rougher and more dangerous punk bands, he began to photograph them, getting the film processed at Thrifty's drugstore. Shortly thereafter, his interest in collecting Stickley furniture

brought him into contact with two editors from *BAM* magazine. This led to his first published pictures of the performance/noise artist Johanna Went in *BAM* in 1978.

Soon he was processing and printing himself and getting published in *Flipside* and *NO* magazines, and later in *Re/Search* Book's "Industrial

AN ALTERNATE REALITY—
MORBID, SEXY, UNSETTLING
AND GENUINELY STRANGE.

Culture Handbook" and the seminal survey "Hardcore California." From 1978 to 1983 he attended 1000 shows and his photographs appeared on at least 80 album covers including Black Flag's *Damaged* LP and the Circle Jerks' *Group Sex* album. His documentation pervaded the scene. Stickley furniture remained important and its oaken, simple, honest style provided an exotic balance and analogy to punk.



a dollar bill on fire in a crowded club while the bass player stares out from behind him, zombielike. Roger Rogerson of the Circle Jerks leaps into the air, his face hidden, the coded talismans evident—jeans tucked into boots, a bandanna around his wrist, duct tape on his guitar. A shirtless Jello Biafra of the Dead Kennedys crawls from the audience with an authentic expression of fear at his imperilment. In the longer shots of whole bands, TSOL (The True Sounds of Liberty) whose singer Jack looks like an evil puppet, theatrically pointing as his hair defies gravity, the bass and guitar players hunched over, hair obscuring their faces. Social Distortion dramatically lit on a film set, the lead singer with heavy mascara around his eyes and blood on his shirt, the incongruous pretty blond woman with dark glasses to the right of the stage. And the archetypal Hollywood punk rock run amok situation, the premiere of *The Decline of Western Civilization*, the 1981 documentary that featured X, Fear, Black Flag, Alice Bag and others. The hated cops meeting the punks on Hollywood Boulevard. The clash, fun and excitement of something really happening, of lives really being lived. All together, these photographs were stills from an unmade underground film, a movie that has come and gone but one that at the time some lonely secluded people would have given anything to be in.

The spirit of Ed Colver's photographs of this time reaches an iconic apotheosis in the full bleed image on the back of



Both forms also shared the fate of eventually being co-opted and spawning countless pale imitations. Nevertheless, the chairs and tables are simple and straightforward, and so was punk. The magnetism of dichotomy and dissonance.

Coming across an issue of *NO* magazine in the middle of the middle American nowhere in 1981 could be a

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TO THE ESTABLISHMENT
IN A YOUTHFUL, NATURAL,
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lost soul's first encounter with Ed Colver's photographs. The cover was a picture of a woman's hands, a molested baby doll and a faux tribal mask extending a rigid tongue. Underneath, the words "Sex—Music—Death—Garbage." Inside was an alternate reality—morbid, sexy, unsettling and genuinely strange. There were graphic spreads of spiders and syphilitic lips, purloined mug shots coupled with their owner's fictive sexual proclivities that ranged from body shaving to intercourse with extraterrestrials, bondage photos, an interview with antagonistic machine maker Mark Pauline of Survival Research

Laboratories, and lots of photos of LA bands. It also had a sometimes wicked, sometimes corny sense of humor. The main article was a long history of LA punk rock by Black Flag's bassist Charles Dukowski, the accompanying full page photographs all by Ed Colver. The pictures made the thriving scene in Los Angeles come alive; they were reports from the epicenter of a secret world and they showed it in all its chaotic anarchic glory, right there on the stage and in the pit. Experiences that could only be hoped for and were happening far away could be seen and felt through these documents. Boschian to the uninitiated but to the neophyte a comforting array of freaks who represented instant friendship and a shared vision of life and how to cope with it. They inspired a yearning—to be there, to be one of the participants, revolting against everything. To say fuck you to the establishment in a youthful, natural, instinctual way. To be there at ground zero with the exceedingly hard and fast music, the shouted lyrics, a scream against injustice, placidity, and conformity. The phantasmagoric blur of movement, the band and audience almost interchangeable, the sweaty pit with people running, slamming and flying off the stage, getting kicked and knocked and exalting in it.

In his photographs Paul Cutler from 45 Grave shrieks into the camera with a bloody stigmata on his hand, alarming in his intensity. Lee Ving of Fear lights



Wasted Youth's 1981 LP *Reagan's In*. With song titles like "Fuck Authority," "Born Deprived," and "Problem Child," the album typifies Southern California thrash, not the best of it but exceptionally fast, angry and energized. Gazing into the photo, one could (and can, with bitter-sweet nostalgia) imagine one-

self in it, lost in its world. Immersing oneself, becoming one of the crowd. The headless raised fist, the girl with the cropped hair and misty eyes, the central teenager looking scared and excited, the bleached blond kid in the plaid shirt appearing serene and intent on something unknown,

the boy in front of him with his head down, unawares. To the far right, a kid with bared teeth and lit up expectant eyes, behind him a girl, askance and seemingly disgusted. Almost all of them are looking up at the airborne youth flying upside down ten feet above—centered in the photograph and inverted in perfect gymnastic form, an inadvertent, strategically placed Wasted Youth sticker on his pants. A direct violation of boundaries—physical, societal, and commonsensical. Nonconformity via an ironic parody of outmoded normalcy, plain jeans and white T-shirt, crew cut and lack of adornment. Only the Vans skateboard shoes and the sticker contradicting the façade. Simple and direct with grace of movement, arms and fingers stretched out elegantly. Like an Olympic high diver except above concrete and bodies. An alter ego, a sought-for brother in flight over the promised land.

Photographs that served as a lifeline and blueprint, a consolation and as important in a way as the basic necessities of life. Now they are important documents of something extraordinary that no longer exists. The pictures prove that it did and at the time were life-affirming, a powerful salve against isolation and boredom.

