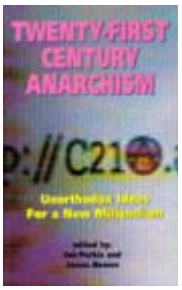

"It was easy, it was cheap, go and do it!" Technology and Anarchy in the UK Music Industry
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'It was easy, it was cheap, go and do it!' Technology and anarchy in the UK music industry[i][1]

Paul Rosen

Abstract

This paper argues that the independent record scene that developed out of punk rock in the late 1970s and early 1980s embodied anarchist principles, even though few of those involved would have called themselves anarchists. Advocates of independent records resisted the control of the mainstream music industry and in some cases actively sought to subvert it. They allied punk's 'access aesthetic', which challenged elitist conceptions of the 'artist' and aimed to break down the barrier between producers and consumers of music, with a do-it-yourself ethic that challenged the relations of production in the music industry.

The paper argues that change in the music industry is closely linked to technological change. Technology must therefore be a crucial element of anarchist cultural intervention. The paper highlights the limitations of existing anarchist approaches to technology, and suggests that anarchists need to treat technology as integrated with culture, rather than automatically equating it with hierarchical social structures.

Introduction

'Let me try and define what I mean by anarchist. I mean, someone who doesn't believe in governments. Someone who believes in self-expression, self rule.'

> Kate, the singer, in the film 'Breaking Glass'[ii][2], talking to the boss of her record label just after signing a contract with him.

This paper is something of a hybrid. Firstly, it's a personal excursion into my past, delving into the debris of my youth, much of which I spent listening to music by unknown bands[iii][3], going to their gigs, buying their records, playing in my own unknown bands and making our own records, as well as

reading and writing about all this in various fanzines. Secondly, though, this paper is an attempt to account for what I and others were doing then in terms that I've only come to understand later. Whilst a lot of people bandied the word 'anarchy' around in those days, especially followers of the band Crass and their associates, I certainly never recognised what I was doing at the time as anarchism in practice. In this paper I'm going to attempt to make that link, and to draw in some aspects of social theory that I'd probably have cringed at fifteen years ago but that now occupy my time as much as music did then[iv] [4].

My focus for the most part is going to be the flourishing independent record and cassette scenes that quickly followed the appearance of punk rock in the late 1970s, and survived into the early 1980s before dissipating. I also want to talk, though, about technology, as I feel this topic is central in bringing together independent music production with anarchism. Briefly, my argument is that anarchist writings tend to have a limited and often simplistic perception of technology. To achieve an anarchist society will require more than either eliminating technology, as some desire, or putting technology 'into the service of' anarchism, as might seem a better solution. It will, rather, require a transformation of the relations between technology and culture, something that I see as a major achievement of the musical cultures I'll be discussing.

Computers, the state and social interaction

To begin by looking at anarchist accounts of technology, a few years ago I spent an afternoon or two trawling through back issues of *Freedom* for references to technology. Predictably enough, I found a lack of consensus about the subject, or even about what 'technology' means. The various perspectives I found tended, though, to take a negative view, and most focused on *information* technology. Computers in particular are, with good grounds, regarded by many anarchists as a symbol of the power of the state, facilitating the state's requirements in helping gather and retrieve information about its citizens, who can then be regulated with the help of this information[v] [5].

As well as facilitating the erosion of civil liberties by the state, information technology more broadly is mistrusted by anarchists because of the way it is perceived to undermine human social contact, something that can also be applied to technology in general. Denis Pym, for example, argues that microwave ovens 'undermine the conviviality of household meals and the sacredness of food'[vi] [6]. Andrew Hedgecock similarly regards the rise of video and computer games as contributing to children's growing inability to socialise[vii] [7], whilst for Gregg Easterbrook this is an example of the way people in our culture are increasingly turning to computers rather than to other people for companionship[viii] [8]. These are important issues from an anarchist perspective because those who opt for the 'cosy myopia of manufactured fantasy will be unable to carry out an informed critique of the way we live'[ix] [9]. Technology is implicated, for these writers, both in the maintenance of a society which is antithetical to freedom and autonomy, and also in the construction of a psychology that is least conducive to these crucial elements of anarchism.

Technology in Utopia

This outlook on technology isn't the only one open to anarchists, though. Murray Bookchin takes an almost completely opposite view to these writers, and to those who oppose technology outright on ecological grounds (see Edward Abbey's inspiring novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang,* for example[x] [10]). Bookchin roots his approach in an understanding of ecology as something broader than simply 'the environment', and whilst he recognises the role played by technology in the rise of industrial capitalism, he sees in certain new technological developments - such as automation, roboticisation and flexibilisation - a means of moving beyond such oppressive technology. Most specifically, he sees technological change as a potential means of alleviating the want and toil that characterise industrial capitalism for its workers. New machinery can in his view free people to pursue their own creativity[xi] [11].

This view seems a little naive given the nature of who controls the kinds of technology Bookchin discusses, and the way the development of this technology has been embedded in established economic practices - as Winner argues regarding computer technology[xii] [12]. Nevertheless, for Bookchin, ending the exploitation of people is crucial to ending the exploitation of 'nature', making technology of prime importance. This perception gives rise to the notion of a 'liberatory technology', centring around three questions:

> What is the liberatory potential of modern technology, both materially and spiritually? What tendencies, if any, are reshaping the machine for use in an organic, human-oriented society? And finally, how can the new technology and resources be used in an ecological manner - that is, to promote the balance of nature, the full development of natural regions, and the creation of organic, humanistic communities?[xiii][13]

This approach clearly draws on the work of Lewis Mumford, especially on Mumford's distinction between

> two technologies [that] have recurrently existed side by side: one authoritarian, the other democratic, the first system-centred, immensely powerful, but inherently unstable, the other man-centred, relatively weak, but resourceful and durable.[xiv] [14]

In these terms, anarchist studies of technology have tended to focus their attention on the authoritarian side of technology rather than on its democratic potential. This has consequently shaped the anarchist conception of 'technology' as something inherently authoritarian - rather than something which can also be democratic, or, in Bookchin's words, liberatory. The term 'technology' tends to be applied, and not just by anarchists, mainly to large-scale technologies. Eugene Schwartz, for example, refers specifically to '[t]he steel mill, the atomic reactor, . . . an orbiting satellite . . . roads, communications and factories'.[xv] [15] He doesn't refer to any of the far more mundane artifacts of the kind that recent work in social studies of technology has focused on - for example, bicycles, light bulbs, stoves and fridges.[xvi][16] Such studies aim to explore the ways in which technology is interwoven with our everyday lives, rather than its more common portrayal as a rather sinister shadow that threatens us from a distance.

This difference between how we conceive large- and small-scale technologies is underlined in a paper by Ron Sakolsky, who tells the story of WTRA/Zoom Black Magic Liberation Radio, a decentralised, open access, community-based radio station located in a black housing estate in Springfield, Illinois.[xvii][17] Sakolsky sees this station as an example of 'anarchy on the airwaves', addressing in particular the way radio broadcasting regulations in America discriminate against community-based local radio. The station's transmitter is less than 10 watts, powerful enough to reach 70% of its target audience in the local African-American community, and cheap enough for a poor community to afford. It is, however, illegal, since it falls short of the specified minimum transmitter capacity of 100 watts, which would be beyond the community's resources as well as unnecessary. Sakolsky treats this as a political issue, but not also as a technological issue, even though the relationship between politics and technology in this case raises important questions for anarchists: about the regulation of technology by the state, about the autonomy of local communities to organise themselves, and consequently about the scale and viability of community-centred technology.

Punk rock, DIY music, and the 'access aesthetic'

For the rest of this paper I want to look at another example that I regard as a democratic or liberatory use of technology. I'm going to narrate a story about the development of independent records and cassettes within the music culture that grew out of punk rock in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and to trace how this culture articulated concerns about autonomy and about breaking down boundaries between production and consumption - concerns that align it in my view with anarchism, although few of those involved explicitly called themselves anarchists. Technology has a central role in this story - in the production, reproduction and distribution of music - making it an exemplary illustration of how technological change and cultural change together can help further anarchist objectives and attempt to influence society more broadly.

I'm very conscious that this is a partial story, covering only a specific aspect of independent record production, and only my own particular version of this; others might remember it differently, or have stories of very different situations to tell. It is also only one example of independent record production in the history of the music industry, although more sustained than most and probably more influential.[xviii][18] Partial as it is, the story begins with punk rock, in particular the punk ethos of autonomy and individualism, of refusing to compromise with the establishment - of doing it yourself rather than accepting what's been offered to you by others. Many accounts now exist of the waves of people inspired by seeing the first punk bands - the Sex Pistols, the Clash, the Damned, etc. - to reject established rock music and form their own bands.[xix][19] Hot on the heels of the bands came the fanzines, pioneered in Britain by Mark Perry (or Mark P. as he originally called himself to avoid being

found out by the dole office) with *Sniffin' Glue* in the summer of 1976. *Sniffin' Glue* and other fanzines called on their readers to start their own fanzines and form their own bands, establishing what Jon Savage calls the 'access aesthetic'[xx][20] - the notion that making and writing about music should be open to anyone (see Figure 7.1).

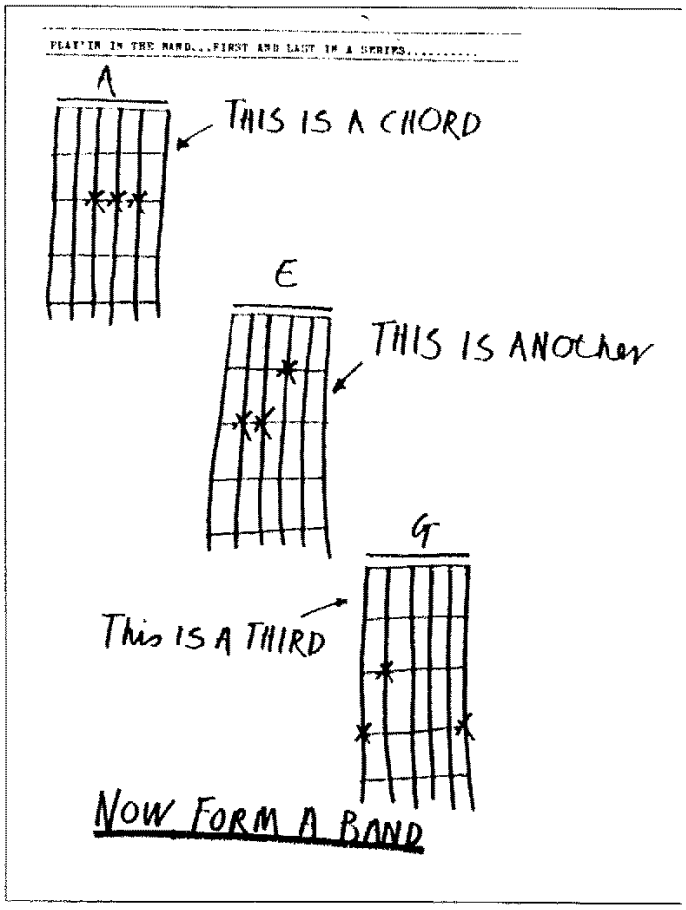

Fig 7.1 The rallying cry of punk's 'access aesthetic'. Whether it originated in the *Sideburns* fanzine or *Sniffin' Glue* is a matter of debate.

This period also saw the emergence of independent record labels such as Stiff and Chiswick that were initially linked to the pub rock scene which spawned forerunners and early stars of punk such as Elvis Costello, Nick Lowe, Dr. Feelgood, and the bands that later became the Damned, the Clash and others. The major labels that controlled most of the music industry began scurrying for a piece of the punk action (and market share) following the Sex Pistols' high media profile from December 1976 onwards, and signed up almost all the most prominent punk bands during 1977, beginning with the Clash. At the same time, though, the number of independent labels was also beginning to grow. The Buzzcocks issued their 'Spiral Scatch' EP in February 1977 on their own New Hormones label, helping them sign with United Artists that summer. Between then and late 1978, dozens more independent labels began to release their first records, and the tide continued into the early 1980s.

The most prominent labels were set up by entrepreneurs of various kinds: Illegal, Deptford Fun City and Step Forward were all linked via Miles Copeland's Faulty Products umbrella; labels such as Rough Trade, Beggar's Banquet, Small Wonder and Good Vibrations were offshoots of independent record shops; Fast Products was set up specifically as a stepping stone for bands wanting to sign to the major labels; whilst others including Cherry Red, had become key players in the independent scene by the early 1980s, as had Mute, originally the vehicle for proprietor Daniel Miller's own single as The Normal . . . and the list goes on.

From the bands' perspectives, independent labels served a variety of purposes, some contrasting sharply with the perspective of the entrepreneurial outfits. A few bands maintained a long

career signed to an independent - the Fall (Step Forward, Rough Trade, Kamera, Beggar's Banquet) were a notable example for some time. Many others consciously used the larger independents as a stepping stone to a deal with the majors, for example, Stiff Little Fingers (from Rough Trade to Chrysalis), the Adverts (from Stiff to Anchor), Squeeze and the Police (from Deptford Fun City and Illegal, both to A&M), and the bands who signed initially to Fast: the Gang of Four (to EMI), the Mekons and the Human League (both to Virgin).

A further trend that developed, though, which I'm more interested in, saw many bands putting out records themselves, on labels which often released no other artist, or perhaps released only records by the proprietor's friends, or by bands from the local area. For many of these labels, this was an extension of the 'access aesthethic' promoted in fanzines - the idea that you didn't have to stop at forming your own band and writing your own fanzine, but could start your own record label as well.[xxi][21] The earliest example of this, as an explicit intention at least (and certainly in the independents' folklore), were the Desperate Bicycles, who stated on the sleeve of their second single, 'The Medium Was Tedium'/'Don't Back The Front' (Refill Records, 1977), that they 'formed in March 1977 specifically for the purpose of recording and releasing a single on their own label'. The sleevenotes go on: 'They'd really like to know why you haven't made your single yet. . . . So if you can understand, go and join a band. Now it's your turn . . .' Backing up a point made by fanzine writers, the Desperate Bicycles adopted as their slogan the phrase 'It was easy, it was cheap, go and do it'. Producing the first single, 'Smokescreen'/'Handlebars' (Refill Records, 1977) cost a total of £153 - in BBC Radio 1 DJ John Peel's words, an amount any band could afford if the bass player sold their motorbike and the rest of the band robbed a few telephone boxes.[xxii][22]

The example set by the Buzzcocks with 'Spiral Scratch' and the Desperate Bicycles with 'Smokescreen' was quickly taken up by other bands keen to put their own records out. *Zigzag* magazine's 1978 'Small Labels Catalogue'[xxiii][23] listed 231 independent labels, including both the larger and the smaller ones, the specialist labels catering to specific tastes such as rock'n'roll and reggae as well as the newer labels inspired by punk. But it was this last category that caused the huge jump to over 800 labels by 1980,[xxiv][24] although that figure had settled back down to a still high 322 by 1981.[xxv][25] It is the records from among this category, closely following the approach promoted by the Desperate Bicycles, that are the most interesting from an anarchist perspective. I want to look more closely at this approach as an example of anarchism in practice.

Rock contradictions: politics, autonomy and authenticity

My own perception of the development of 'do-it-yourself' (DIY) records centres around a few key players. First and foremost of these was Rough Trade, founded as a record shop in 1976, before expanding into distribution of independent records and setting up its own label in early 1978. Rough Trade was renowned as the most radical of the small labels - it was run as a workers' co-op, paying all shop and office workers equally. The rock commentator Greil Marcus pointed out in 1980 that the label was wondering how to bring musicians into this structure as well: 'as yet no one has figured out how to put musicians on that sort of payroll - something that had to be done soon, the Raincoats said with no little vehemence'.[xxvi][26]

Nevertheless, Rough Trade was unique in even questioning the contradictory place of musicians in the record industry. This contradiction centres around the fact that the relations of production here, as in the culture industries more broadly,[xxvii][27] are far more complex than elsewhere. The personnel of the music industry cannot be described straightforwardly as comprising simply the owners of capital plus the sellers of labour. In between record company management and the workforce on a pressing plant floor are the 'artists', people who are contracted to produce intellectual goods for record manufacturers and publishing houses, but who don't receive a wage. Rather, they receive an advance against future royalties, which must pay for musical equipment, recording costs and living expenses, and often for promotional activities too, such as touring expenses (not to mention drugs). If the artist's royalties don't match the value of the advance, they in effect owe the record company money; in any case, they only begin to earn money on record sales once their royalties have 'paid back' the advance.[xxviii][28] As Frith shows,[xxix][29] the history of the music industry is marked by continual conflicts between record companies and artists over this relationship, notably concerning the question of artistic control, and this raises an issue that has strong resonances with the ethos of punk - the autonomy of musicians to control their own output.

This is also an issue close to anarchist concerns, and it raises further questions around anarchism and technology in relation to music. Debates from the 1920s and 1930s among members of the Frankfurt School of 'critical theory'[xxx][30] seem highly pertinent in this respect, especially those between Walter Benjamin and Theodore Adorno. Influenced by the playwright Bertolt Brecht, Benjamin broke away from the elite 'high culture' perspective of Adorno, his mentor in the Frankfurt School, who watched the rise of that era's popular music with despair. In contrast, Benjamin embraced the emergence of popular culture, in particular the shift brought about by new technology from a world of unique works of 'auratic' art to one where mechanical reproduction made copies of a work available to all. For Benjamin this opened up the possibility of art becoming 'a vehicle of mass political communication',[xxxi][31] and it contrasted with the aestheticisation of politics that he saw happening under fascism. For Benjamin it was crucial that '[c]ommunism responds by politicizing art'.[xxxii][32]

Rock music's place in these debates around high and mass culture is contradictory, as Frith shows.[xxxiii][33] Rock musicians tend to claim the 'authenticity' that's integral to high art, yet work within a mass culture medium. In many ways punk extended this contradiction, even though its claim to authenticity was pointed in a different direction to the one it aimed to supersede: it replaced the authentic artist with the authentic 'punk'. In terms of technology, punk's authenticity was also tied to a rejection of the growing sophistication of equipment used in rock. An authentic punk didn't need a 16-track studio or a thousand pound synthesiser to make the music of the streets. The access aesthetic aimed to break down that 'high art' elitist side of rock, with the emphasis on basic instruments - guitar, bass and drums - and recording equipment.

The small labels I've been discussing took this side of punk further, rejecting the sophistication of the whole industry 'package' as well as the sophistication of the equipment. By setting up an independent distribution network, labels like Rough Trade aimed to show that the glossy marketing-led approach of the major labels (with record packaging exemplified by the mid-70s records of Pink Floyd, Yes and Led Zeppelin, and promotion that relied on record pluggers to woo radio stations and retailers) was unnecessary. With the support of a network of like-minded record shops, airplay from John Peel and coverage in the weekly music press and fanzines, it was possible to release a record with little capital, recorded cheaply by ordinary people. In this way the artistic control of musicians over their music was preserved (albeit at the expense of wider sales).

As a key promoter of this approach, Rough Trade became known, at the end of the 1970s and during the early 1980s, as an organisation that supported bands wanting to maintain this kind of autonomy outside the mainstream record industry. If a band had released their own record, Rough Trade would probably help get it distributed. The company frequently made deals with bands to release subsequent records (for example Swell Maps, following their first record on Rather Records, or Stiff Little Fingers, following their debut on Rigid Digits). They also developed an approach to contracts that avoided exploitation of the kind experienced elsewhere in the industry. Contracts were signed on a record by record basis rather than tying bands to a commitment based on either time or output, whilst all profits were divided 50/50 between the label and the band.

A crucial element of the independent scene at this time, then, was a concern to radically transform the relations of production: in particular, the relations between musicians and record companies, but also involving distributors, publishers, retailers and promoters. This fed back into the concern expressed in the access aesthetic to challenge the relation between producers (artists) and consumers (audience), a common theme in rock ideology.[xxxiv][34] It also exemplified Benjamin's argument about mechanical reproduction providing a means of politicising art. Taking control of the means of production provided a platform for political expression - Crass are the obvious example of this, but others also existed, such as the anti-racist label People Unite, set up by reggae band Misty in Roots.

For many independent record makers, though, controlling their own output was a political end in itself, even if their music wasn't overtly political. In that sense, independent record production was intrinsically anarchistic in its approach to authority and control, whilst its approach to technology was close to Mumford's notion of democratic technics - people-centred, relatively weak but resourceful. In contrast, the major record companies operate more in line with authoritarian technics: whilst immensely powerful, they have repeatedly showed their inherent instability in the face of crises such as the oil shortages and falling record sales in the 1970s, or in the face of the punk explosion that followed. To counter such threats, the industry has had to develop predatory business strategies such as the horizontal integration of investment in the wider entertainments industry, and ruthless

exploitation of innovations, both musical (eg. punk itself) and technological (most notably with compact discs).

Independents, majors, and the DIY ethic

Given this wider industrial context, the more radical of the independent labels were constantly battling against more mainstream interests, which often included other small labels and punk bands. As I mentioned above, the main objective of many bands was simply to get a record deal, no matter which company it was with, and several labels actively encouraged this, such as Fast. It has been argued that Rough Trade's record-by-record approach in fact made it vulnerable to being used as a stepping stone to the bigger labels. There was no contractual obligation to prevent Stiff Little Fingers from signing to Chrysalis, despite their chart success on Rough Trade (with the album 'Inflammable Material' in 1979), and the smaller label was thus deprived of the chance to benefit further from the band's success, which it had helped nurture. A commitment to autonomy can thus sometimes undermine itself.

These points are highlighted by the activities of another key figure in this scene who I've already mentioned, Mark Perry of *Sniffin' Glue* fanzine. As well as producing *Sniffin' Glue*, Perry also fronted a band, Alternative TV, and was involved as A&R man (i.e. talent scout) for the Step Forward label. Perry was an important advocate of the DIY ethic, haranguing his readers and then his audience to get actively involved rather than remain just consumers. In 1977 he handed the fanzine over to Danny Baker (later of TV chat shows, washing powder advertisements and daytime pop radio) so he could concentrate more on his music. He was never satisfied with this, though, and deliberately challenged his mainstream punk following by producing more experimental music, both with ATV and subsequent bands.

Perry's support of independent record labels had a number of elements. At one level, there was a pragmatic sense that joining the rock'n'roll treadmill of signing with a major label was not good for a band's music. Perry has been famously quoted as saying that punk died when the Clash signed to CBS early in 1977:

> I feel that there's no way that you can handle yourself properly in a big record company like CBS. I think it's still going on - bands are bringing out albums, and they're dissappointing [sic], they're just rubbish; big record companies don't do anything for the music really, they just sort of dampen it.[xxxv][35]

Also, though, Perry articulated a common suspicion of the music industry as a business, following personal experience of 'Polydor being all nice, and then turning round and saying "we hate your stuff really"'.[xxxvi][36] A similar view, typical of many small bands and independent record makers, is expressed in a fanzine interview with the band Take It:

> C.N.: Nic, you seem disgusted by the music business?
>
> Nic: I hate music, I don't think it should be a business, it should just be for
>
> liesure [sic]. There's not such a thing as a professional musician.
>
> Igor: Well, I think that the music business is the most back-stabbing opportunist part of present economic society. Too much of the big fish eats little fish.[xxxvii][37]

From such a perspective, the initial wave of punk bands proved a disappointment by signing to major labels with barely a second thought. Had the Clash and others signed to an independent label, Perry and others felt the strength of the majors might have been diminished, influencing more of the bands that followed to stick with independents too. For Perry, the independent record scene

> got waylaid by people like the Clash, people as strong as that, people with a strong following just bloody selling themselves short. . . . and like the Buzzcocks, one record and that's your lot, what would have happened if they'd kept that going, you'd have the bands that have been influenced by the Buzzcocks like The Gang of Four perhaps not signing to EMI. I think it would have affected everything if The Clash hadn't signed to CBS.[xxxviii][38]

As the first wave of punk became more established, then, there developed a strong tendency among some of those that followed to see independence as an end in itself, and not simply as a means to the end of getting a deal. This perspective certainly seemed to me at the time to predominate in the world I myself inhabited - a world of obscure bands, obscure fanzines, obscure

gigs and regular trips to Rough Trade. By 1980 it had become something of a standing joke that every fanzine interview would include the question "would you ever sign to a major label?". The following is a typical reply:

> Biggles: No - full stop. No more questions.
>
> Nik: We're not interested. Well we just don't like the attitudes of the majors.[xxxix][39]

The logical conclusion of this perspective is expressed in a piece about Z Block Records, formed, like the Desperate Bicycles and their Refill label, with the aim of showing

> by example how easy it is to release your own music on your own terms. . . . Our maxim was 'one band one label' as we believed, and still do, that the concept of decentralisation is of the utmost importance to the continuation and support of the spirit and survival of independence. . . . [although now releasing records by other bands as well, w]e will only release music we personally find interesting by bands who we think won't use Z Block as a quick route to a contract with a major label . . .
>
> We believe that the control of the production should always be in the hands of the producer. Bands have total control over their product.[xl][40]

The above-quoted article is accompanied by a detailed breakdown of costs of the various processes involved in producing Z Block's 'Is the War Over?' compilation LP (1979), along with addresses for the various companies used for recording, mastering (ie. transferring the tape to a master disc), pressing, printing of labels and sleeves, and distribution of the final product. Such sharing of information was a key feature of both fanzines and independent record labels, with details provided on many a record sleeve (or in most cases on the folded A4 sheet that worked out far cheaper than a properly printed sleeve). If punk had begun with the aim of demystifying the process of performance and the distinction between artist and audience, these independent labels aimed to demystify the process of production: 'it was easy, it was cheap, go and do it'.

Records, cassettes and CDs

Within a few years, as with punk's access aesthetic, the coherence of the independence/autonomy/'do-it-yourself' ethic began to fragment. Many felt that the advances of punk had been reversed. In particular, 'the relationships between artists and consumers, the most important thing that punk actually managed to alter, have regressed to the exploitative, dictatorial state of the early seventies'.[xli][41] The same decline occurred with the d-i-y scene, with record shops becoming flooded with independent records of below-average quality (notwithstanding Mark Perry's view that 'anybody doing anything on their own is good, whether the product is good or not').[xlii][42] By 1981, it was already no longer guaranteed that a run of 1000 singles would sell out, as it had been a year or so earlier. Partly as a consequence of this, the most radical edge of the independent scene shifted, to a large extent, to producing independent cassettes. This bypassed the problem with records of laying out money on uncertain sales, and benefited from the immediacy and personal contact that a shift to mainly mail order sales provided. An added bonus with cassettes was that whilst they made it easier to distribute dross, this could be easily wiped over and the tape reused.

The subculture that developed around both the remaining ideological independent record labels (as opposed to the more pragmatic or business-oriented ones) and the burgeoning cassette labels (*Zigzag*'s 1981 'Cassette Book', an offshoot of its independent label catalogues, listed over 500 tapes) maintained the punk ethic of breaking down barriers and refusing to compromise. As with punk, though, the industry and the mainstream music press were quick to jump on the bandwagon - to 'sink their teeth in and begin to suck the idealism, ideas and vitality out', as *Zigzag* put it.[xliii][43] Around this time the most respected music papers - *Sounds* and *NME* - were running columns ('Cassette Pets' and 'Garageland', respectively) to help publicise small labels' products. *Sounds* even published an 'Obscurist' chart of cassettes and less well-known independent records. NME, though, disillusioned many of the more radical independent producers with its 1981 'C81' compilation cassette, produced in collaboration with Rough Trade. This release drew on the growing enthusiasm for cassettes being generated not just by the independent cassette labels but also by the appearance of the personal stereo. 'C81' gave no acknowledgement of the former, though, and was seen as being directed more at the consumer lifestyle market of the latter.

The same was true of Bow Wow Wow's first single, 'C30 C60 C90 Go', which along with the follow up 'Flip Pack Pop' mini-album, available on cassette only, played with the topical issue of cassette piracy. Island Records tried to address the piracy issue also, by launching a series called '1+1", featuring an LP on one side, but leaving the other side blank for the buyer to record an album of their choice (illegally by implication). Despite their playfulness, these ventures helped re-establish the distance between producer and consumer, aiming to embed the *active* consumption of blank tapes (which allow consumers to choose what music they want to hear, and how and where they want to hear it) within a more *passive* consumption of deliberately marketed products. In this respect, the cassette innovation was only partial, since cassettes were an old format repackaged to support new playback technology, and consumers were assumed to be buying both records and cassettes. This trend towards passivising music consumption was made more complete with the advent of compact discs. For CDs to be a complete success, consumers must upgrade their record collections rather than supplement them. It could be argued also that they must then slot themselves within one or more of the many musical taste identities being established through the re-releasing of huge amounts of the industry's back catalogue - of which early punk and independent records are just a small part - although the proliferation of (often independent) reissue labels could be regarded as meeting the demands of a more active style of selective music consumption.

Leaving this issue aside, the decline of the early independent scene is perhaps symbolised by the return to recording of Scritti Politti in 1981/2, after a long absence following three singles that had epitomised the DIY ethic. Their first record, 'Skank Bloc Bologna', was released in November 1978 on the band's own St. Pancras label, and featured the ubiquitous folded-over A4 sheet detailing production costs. The second single, in 1979, consisting of a BBC session from the John Peel programme, was released jointly between St. Pancras and Rough Trade. The sleeve bemoaned the fact that their BBC contract prevented them from providing recording costs alongside manufacturing costs.

By 1982, though, the band - or rather their leader, Green Gartside - had revised their view of the value of independent records. Following a break caused by illness, the band contributed 'The Sweetest Girl' to the 'C81' tape, and then released the 'Songs to Remember' album on Rough Trade, to critical acclaim. The new Scritti Politti's less positive stance towards self-produced records was not welcomed by those still committed to the DIY ethic. In the words of one fanzine writer,

> Now I'm not going to knock the newfound white man's soul of Scritti and there's no denying that 'Faithless' was a good single, but reading between the lines it becomes almost like a confession, revealing Green to have betrayed all his old principles of independance [sic]. All the sweet music he can cram into three and a half minutes can't compensate for his disgusting attitude and the last I heard he was advising bands to sign for an established label rather than put out their own single. Is this the same person who wrote the sleeve note to 'Skank Bloc Bologna' encouraging people to put out their own records and advising on costs and facilities?[xliv] [44]

From my own perspective too, this was a major downturn for DIY records and cassettes, marking the beginning of the end, although it didn't affect my activities at the time. I didn't begin to feel things were over for another year or so. If punk had died for Mark Perry when the Clash signed to CBS, for me the moment that killed the spirit of independence didn't come until I heard David Bowie's song 'Let's Dance' in 1983. Hearing Bowie sing the line 'put on your red shoes and dance the blues'[xlv] [45] seemed to me to symbolise the fact that we were once again being told to take our place in the audience; the fans could dance, but only professional musicians could *sing* the blues. As for making your own records, well, from Bowie's perspective that wasn't even an issue - something your manager would organise for you. Things were finally back where they'd been in the mid-70s.

Moving forward: technology and resistance in the 1990s music industry

As I've already pointed out, my perspective here is very partial. I dropped out of the independent scene in 1984. For others, I'm sure, things seemed to be only just beginning. This was, after all, the period when the Creation label was releasing its first records, when New Order and the Smiths were just beginning to bring 'indie' music into the charts on independent labels, when the stars of 1990s 'Britpop' were beginning to form their first bands. It seems pertinent to ask whether what I've described here has had any bearing on the pop music culture of the 1990s, or whether musicians have now abandoned the latent anarchist tendencies of their forebears.

To begin with, these anarchist tendencies weren't unique to 'indie' music. In other popular music genres, too, there have been similar creative urges towards autonomy that I haven't discussed at much length. Most obviously, there was the explicitly anarchist strand of 'hardcore' punk centred around the band Crass, who supported others through their Crass record label. The legacy of this tendency is the continued presence in British pop music of artists such as Björk (formerly of the Sugarcubes) and Chumbawamba, both helped out by Crass early on in their careers. Whilst Björk's solo music tends towards a politics of the personal, Chumbawamba carry a blatantly anarchist (black) flag in all their work. Both artists are signed to the label One Little Indian, a spin-off from another band - Flux of Pink Indians - formerly involved with Crass.

The underground activities of the rave scene which emerged in the late 1980s also bear some resemblance to the ethos of the earlier independents, having baffled the mainstream music industry as much as punk had done ten years previously. Similarly, the soul band Soul II Soul is worth considering from an anarchist perspective, having begun as a workers' co-operative aiming to establish black-run businesses within 'a musical empire embracing a record company, a successful band, a string of uninspiring clothes shops, and a share in Britain's first dance radio station Kiss FM'.[xlvi][46]

Notwithstanding these more recent examples of a concern with autonomy in the music business, controlling the means of production has fallen away somewhat as an issue in the politics of 'indie' music. A number of factors have probably contributed to this. The music industry has consolidated itself since the early 1980s, being now a $30 billion industry carved up among just six multinational giants, which leaves little room for independents[xlvii][47]. These six companies (Sony, Polygram, Time Warner, EMI, Matsushita and BMG) all have interests which span both hardware and 'software' in music reproduction, not to mention links with other elements of the entertainment industry and elsewhere, such as the military. Against this background, what defines a label as independent has become less clearcut than in the fanzine rhetoric of the early 1980s, and also more pragmatic. Truly independent labels still exist, many catering to the burgeoning CD re-issue market[xlviii][48]. At the level of high volume sales, though, it is difficult to be successful without capital from the majors. Creation, perhaps the most visible independent label of the 1990s, is part owned by Sony, yet retains control over its own output and has independent distribution. Other apparently independent labels might in fact be wholly owned by a major, a case of the majors protecting their market share by ensuring themselves a presence in any new 'scene' - as they did with both punk and 'progressive rock' beforehand.[xlix][49] I've even been told that BMG is independent; given that BMG is one of the big six majors, the important question becomes no longer 'independents or majors?' but 'independent from what?'.

If independence as an end in itself is no longer the crucial issue, it nevertheless remains valid to look for signs of the independent ethic, or access aesthetic, within what is still identified as 'indie' music. Indie and rave bands have, for example, been closely linked to campaigns against roadbuilding and against the Criminal Justice Act of 1994, both of which challenge increasing state control over people's lives and environment (in the broadest sense of that word). This has hopefully led to a re-politicisation of pop music that extends beyond merely fighting for the right to pa-a-a-rty.

Enthusiasts for the internet will also be heartened by the growing numbers of bands setting up World Wide Web pages and using electronic mail (e-mail) to communicate directly with fans. Whilst at one level this represents merely a new opportunity to perpetuate the star/fan divide, many artists have made their music available for downloading free of charge on the internet, a development which could potentially realise the independent ethic that each band issues its own music unmediated by record labels, although the music industry too is looking at how it can exploit this medium. In addition, at least a few artists (notably Chumbawamba) use their web pages to put across their political views. It is important not to lose touch here with the irony that the increased access afforded by the internet is itself severely limited; despite the utopianism of much writing about the potential for computers to make information available to all, this 'all' includes only a small fraction of people in the West outside of goverment, academia and business, and a much tinier fraction in the developing world. Nevertheless, there are parallels here with the earlier activities I've been discussing.

The politics of music production have clearly changed in the decade and a half since independent records first began to flourish, reflecting in part the changing structure of the music industry itself. Whilst it's unclear whether or not contemporary musicians are as committed as their predecessors were to breaking down the boundaries between producer and consumer, it remains the case that change in the music industry continues to be closely connected to technological change,

whether in computerised communications or in the opportunities offered by re-releasing back catalogues on new formats.

The lesson from this case study is that anarchists need to address technology and culture simultaneously in our attempts to transform society. Furthermore, it shows that anarchist tendencies in culture can have lasting, if subtle, effects, which should be cause for (minor) optimism. The influence of the most radical early independents, like that of punk itself, is still visible in the pop music culture of the 1990s, even though it's little recognised. These bands and labels can claim responsibility for establishing the now instantly recognisable 'indie' style of music, and for giving an initial motivation to the major labels to develop strategies towards innovation, both musical and technological. As nostalgia comes to dominate the contemporary 'CD era' (this article being yet one more example), the kinds of records I've been discussing have in fact become eminently collectable in their original vinyl format (especially those with a wraparound A4 sheet for a sleeve). Hopefully the memories they trigger among collectors will allow the anarchist principles embodied in their production to irrupt alongside the music.

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