

Punkeros Para Siempre:

Explaining the Cultural Intersections of Punk Rock and Chicanos

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From punk rock's birth in the mid-'70s to today, rebellious youth have been eschewing traditional values and embracing a culture of "authenticity," one in which they are free to do what they want, how they want, without the intervention of authority figures. Bands such as the Sex Pistols, the Circle Jerks, Black Flag, and the Descendents (just to name a few) penned lyrics denouncing the government, suburban life, and many of the injustices they perceived happening around them. Punk is not just a musical genre, but a lifestyle and its influences can be seen in both literature and film around the world, including in the works by Chicano authors and filmmakers.

As soon as we are introduced to La Molly in Jim Mendiola's film *Pretty Vacant* or meet radio DJ's Daniel "Farmer Dan" and La Bet-T in Santiago Vaquera-Vásquez's collection of short stories *One Day I'll Tell You the Things I've Seen*, we quickly come to a realization that punk rock holds a special place in the heart of the Chicano movement. As a result of this realization, this paper will attempt to further flesh out the importance of punk to the Chicano movement and how it has helped shaped the values of many of those who are a part of it. I will begin by discussing a number of the characteristics that comprise punk rock, namely skater punk and hardcore punk, before diving into the topic of Mexican-American specific Chicano punk, its unique traits, and most importantly, an influence that it has had on Chicanos. After all, it is just as the great Chicano author Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales said, "there are no revolutions without poets" (1).

In his book *Grinding California: Culture and Corporeality in American Skate Punk*, Konstantin Butz quotes the following from Marc Bayard:

The major problem with trying to explain punk is that it is not something that fits neatly into a box or categories. Not surprising as punk had made the explicit aim of trying to destroy all boxes and labels. With that as a major hurdle, any project that tries to define punk or explain it must do so with very broad brush strokes. Punk and punk music cannot be pigeonholed to some spiked-haired white male wearing a leather jacket with a thousand metal spikes listening to music real loud. (76)

With that being said, punk must be examined carefully—just as with anything pertaining to culture—so as not to over-generalize or stereotype it. However, in general, punk can be defined as "a rock music style . . . described as 'really fast, more aggressive and abrasive than rhythmic'" (Zavella 29). Punk culture will often express views that are nihilistic in nature, anti-authority, anti-conformity, or anti-materialistic, just to name a few. This is readily apparent in the satirical lyrics of the song "Suburban Home" by the Descendents:

I want to be stereotyped
I want to be classified I
want to be a clone
I want a suburban home

Suburban home (x3)
 I want to be a masochistic
 I want to be statistic
 I want to be a clone
 I want a suburban home
 (Chorus)
 I don't want no hippie pad
 I want a house just
 Like mom and dad

As demonstrated in the lyrics above, punk culture is not about embracing what is considered to be acceptable, but rather deviating from the norm. There is a strong desire to live an “authentic” lifestyle that is free from the burden of expectation and one in which each punk will be able to pursue his or her desires without consequence, and in order to live authentically, punks choose to live a deviant lifestyle—far from the “suburban home.”

A great example of such deviance is a story shared by Butz about the 1978 Skateboarder of the Year winner, Steve Olson. When asked to give a speech after winning the award, Olson recalls that he “picked [his] nose and [he] flipped boogers at them and spit at them” and was proud that he was one of the “leader dudes” who was against what they stood for (100). Olson was a clear representative of punk ideals in this situation because rather than pretending to be something that he was not, he made it very clear that he was not part of the establishment and that he was living in his own, authentic way. And Olson was clearly not alone. In Southern California, skate punks figuratively took to arms by grabbing their skateboards, hitting the streets and “distancing themselves from the passive normality ... enforced by ‘bitchy neighbors and police’” and leaving their mark on what they referred to as a suburban “Babylon,” defined by the American dream, malls, and middle-class values (112; 122)

As social deviants, punks perceive themselves as a minority. Despite the fact that many American punks come from white, middle-class, suburban backgrounds, they determine that they do not belong and as such assume a new identity as a dissenting other. In the Black Flag song “White Minority” the lyrics, oozing nihilism, exclaim: “We’re gonna be a white minority / We won’t listen to the majority / We’re gonna feel inferiority,” further cementing the idea of punk’s position of social lonerism. For many punks, “whiteness represents consumerism, institutional authority, suburbia, boredom, and meaninglessness—exactly those attributes which hardcore punk culture set out to fight against,” which explains why they do everything they can to set themselves apart from it (Butz 90). Unlike the actual minorities punks are intent upon becoming, they willingly choose to place targets upon their backs as a means to achieve, as Butz puts it, a status of “ultimate ‘rebel credibility’” (91). Despite the fact that a large number of punks cannot classify themselves as a racial minority, they are proud of the fact that they have been able to influence a change in society. When Black Flag bassist Chuck Dukowski was asked why the police were against his band following a number of scuffles between the police and their teenage fans he said: “I think that it’s probably because they’re scared that it represents change. Change scares anybody who is part of the existing structure” (Butz 125). And it is because of this change that we see a large number of Chicanos attracted to punk rock—as a legitimate minority they are attracted to the values it espouses and its resistance to simply being swallowed up into the mainstream.

With this being said, one must take into consideration the fact that punk culture for the most part is not as heterogeneous as it might seem. Butz poignantly states:

Because of their self-imposed looks and appearance they may have felt like a minority in their neighborhoods, high schools, and colleges but the examination of hardcore punks' own ranks reveals that they were anything but a 'white minority.'... Nevertheless, during concerts and skate sessions a teenage skate or hardcore punk merely had to take a look to the left or right to realize that he still belonged to a majority: a majority of white men. (129)

Despite this glaring fact, it is still very easy to understand how the feelings and sentiments of punk could translate over to a real minority, Mexican-Americans, and help them vent the frustrations they have with their surroundings and the injustices that plague them on a daily basis. Though the attraction of Chicanos to punk culture can be explained in a number of different ways, a complete and exhaustive list of these ways may be impossible to fully detail, so I will only be focusing on the few which are the most representative.

First, as was previously explored, punk deals extensively with minority identity despite coming from a predominantly middle-class white background. As noted by a veteran Chicano musician, Ruben Guevara:

Most of these kids playing locally aren't punks. That's a joke. If you want to talk about punks, you've got to talk about East L.A. Because the real, true punks, ... the real outcasts, the people with something to bitch about aren't middle-class white kids. They're the cholos man. You want to talk about injustice? Hey, it's been going on here for the last 50 years—not in Hollywood. And if rock'n'roll is supposed to be the real social reflector then I'm putting the mirror right here in East L.A. (Lipsitz 85)

In a sense, Chicanos are ironically able to get a more complete picture of punk culture than those who initially conceived of it due to their racial status and the experiences that accompany it. Just as Guevara bluntly states, they are the "real outcasts." In his book *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism and the Poetics of Place*, George Lipsitz echoes a similar sentiment by explaining that Chicanos are able to more clearly flesh out their own opinions and views "by emphasizing their families of resemblance to the alienations aired by punk" (85). Punk presents a conduit for Chicano youth to express themselves and air their grievances that would otherwise be repressed by the society within which they find themselves.

Another force that draws Chicanos to punk is the ability to be an individual with unique thoughts, emotions, and experiences, as well as the ability to pertain to a community that is comprised of equally unique individuals who share similar sentiments in relation to the world around them. This said, I am not attempting to detract from the sense of community that already exists among Chicanos as a whole. Rather, I propose that these Chicano punk communities can be considered offshoots of the mother Chicano movement, which are both moving towards the same goal. The majority of Chicanos have already been marginalized by those of the cultural majority and as such, are looking for a place where they can fight against these labels and make their voices heard—those who join with the punk movement are just doing so in a further individualized way. In his essay "We Are All Individuals, But We've All Got the Same Boots On: Traces of Individualism within a Subcultural Community" Paul Hodkinson also touches on this idea: "By combining a degree of individual autonomy with the close-knit sense of belonging and collective passion of a substantive community, [punks are], to a degree, able to enjoy 'the best of both worlds'" as they express themselves in their own way while still being aligned with the Chicano community (331). United with their brothers and sisters who also pertain to other subcultural groups, Chicano punks can, just as Black Flag sings in "Rise above": "find satisfaction in what [their detractors] lack" and "rise above" it all (17).

A third attractor of Chicanos to punk can be found at any show or gathering of punks. From a jean vest covered in patches, to a demo found at the merch table, to the handcrafted zine being handed out, the ethic of do-it-yourself (DIY) is right at the heart of punk culture. Punks are known for creating their own clothing, producing and distributing their own music, and making do with what they have. In her article “Beyond the Screams: Latino Punkeros Contest Nativist Discourses,” Patricia Zavella explains that punks embrace the DIY ethic because it “disavows materialism and consumerism and the individualist fame of rock stars” (29). She continues to explain that the DIY approach appeals to Chicanos because it often “reflects the fact that Latino punks are marginalized economically and have limited access to production and distribution facilities” (29). The character Daniel exhibits this attitude and aesthetic in the short story, “One Day I’ll Tell You the Things I’ve Seen.” Vaquera-Vasquez depicts him playing whatever music he feels like for his radio show. Whether it be classic rock, punk, *norteño*, or even opera, Daniel does not limit himself to a genre, which “made for some crazy playlists, but those ... who tuned in could not help but feel impressed at the dude’s mixes” (19). Though a slightly negligible example, it is not difficult to see how this ingenuity and creativity is very reflective of the punk DIY process.

Interestingly enough, the punk DIY aesthetic goes hand in hand with a Chicano art form and life practice known as *rasquachismo*. Tomás Ybarra-Frausto defines it as “a sensibility that is not elevated and serious but playful and elemental. It finds delight and refinement in what many consider banal and projects an alternative aesthetic—a sort of good taste of bad taste. It is witty and ironic but not meanspirited (there is sincerity in its artifice)” (8). Rasquache art and lifestyles deal with the old saying of “making something out of nothing” or “one man’s junk is another man’s treasure.” Those following this practice will utilize their limited resources to make something that will be of use to them or with which they can enhance their life. In other words, *rasquachismo* involves taking what might be seen as useless and transforming it into something that can be perceived as valuable. Just as with *rasquachismo*, punks using DIY practices are essentially elevating themselves—or the underdog—to a new level and refusing to let their limitations define them. Knowing that this core value of punk and punk culture is intrinsically Chicano in nature, it is not hard to understand the draw that it would have on the Mexican-Americans who join the punk movement.

Another reason for the allure of punk in Chicano culture is the connection between punk culture and Chicano myth and story. From the time Mexican-American authors, poets, and filmmakers first began crafting their respective arts, they have been conjuring up images of the mythical homeland of their ancestors, Aztlán. Said to have been located in what is now the southwestern United States, Chicanos long for Aztlán to return to its former glory as a home and place of refuge for all those who have Aztec blood flowing through their veins. This longing can be seen in a number of Chicano works of art, literature, and film, and surprisingly, can also tie into the post-punk movement that came about as a result of punk. More subdued, and darker in nature, post-punk saw the creation of bands such as The Cure, Siouxsie and The Banshees, and The Smiths. Joy Division, another of these bands, embodies a Freudian concept known as melancholia, which became prevalent in a number of their songs. As it is explained by Michael Bibby:

Melancholia, unlike mourning, is an endless longing for an object that can’t be named. Mourning involves a process of grieving for the identifiable and real loss of a distinct object of affection. Melancholia, on the contrary, is a grief that knows no object. Freud suggests that, while mourning eventually overcomes grief over a loss by substituting some other object in the position of the lost, in melancholia grief is never overcome because the ego has incorporated loss into itself. As Freud describes it, the melancholic, in a sense, stages loss itself as the focus of its affection, making absence its object of longing. (234-35)

With the longing for Aztlán, it is clear that this sense of melancholia is also present in Chicano culture as well. Aztlán is a place that no one who writes or speaks of it has ever been to, and in a sense, its absence is the focus, not the place itself. Just as Joy Division front man Ian Curtis sings of his longing for the unknown, Chicanos yearn for an unknown place. It is perhaps this mutual longing that serves as another draw for Mexican-Americans to punk and post-punk culture.

With this general understanding of punk rock and Chicano culture we can more fully understand what sets Chicano punk and its accompanying culture apart from the main branch of punk rock. Although at its base it shares nearly all of same characteristics that were discussed earlier, Chicano punk is just as its name implies: punk culture and music for Chicanos by Chicanos. As mentioned before, this list of characteristics is not meant to be comprehensive, but rather focus on its most salient traits.

While Chicano punk inverts social norms like its punk predecessors, it manages to go one step further. As previously discussed, despite the fact that many punks view themselves as a minority, it is clear that the majority of them are white, middle-class males. In his article “Screaming Our Thoughts: Latinos and Punk Rock,” Jose Palafox relates that recent Chicano and Latino punks make a point of addressing the current state of punk and the racism that exists within it by using their shows as a way to “critique white liberal notions of a ‘colorblind’ punk subculture” (37). Despite the fact that it has made white punks defensive, and ironically, causes them to accuse the Chicanos of attempting to disrupt the “unity within the scene,” Chicano punks continue to press the matter of racism and the need for change to occur in their music (37). For them, punk must and should allow for a “safe space” where they can freely discuss racism with their fellow Chicanos and other punks of color without fear of backlash. In Palafox’s article, Josh Sanchez, a punk who was able to experience such a meeting had the following to say of the event: “The safe spaces aren’t there to keep you out. They’re there so we punks of color can be together and learn from one another.... What happens with my Mexican family is something you can’t understand. [And] yesterday for the first time ever since I’ve been involved in punk, I sat in a room full of people who did” (38). Just as with any community, the sense of belonging and mutual understanding is important for those involved, and Chicano punks are no exception—something they will not soon let people forget. After all: “Realizing the diversity within punk can only help punk and hardcore as more than just music, but as a political movement” (Palafox 39).

Another unique trait of Chicano punk and the punkeros engrained within its culture is the ability to code-switch. In contrast to more prevalent punk many Chicanos are not limited to English. They are able to utilize both English and Spanish to share the messages that they want to get across. Spanish is not merely used as a second language in these instances, but rather as a powerful, bold statement. Rock music, and by extension punk, is typically associated with whiteness and the English language, which is why the use of Spanish makes such a powerful statement. As Josh Kun explains in his piece “Rock’s Reconquista”:

Except for a few notable examples, rock discourse has traditionally been deployed within the outmoded racial binary of black and white, with the vast majority of discussions of rock’s relationship to race never going far beyond the more familiar and ready made vocabularies of U.S. blackness and whiteness. Rock en español ... destabilizes rock’s whiteness and rock’s blackness. It begs for new grammars and lexicons that understand the importance of the transnational flow of documented and undocumented Latino/a culture to contemporary discussions of inter-Ameri-can racial formation and Latino/a cultural citizenship. (257-58)

Just as hardcore punks living in the suburbs of Southern California saw suburbia as “subject to attack from within,” Chicano punks view punk culture in the same light (Butz 88). However, unlike their suburban dwelling skate punks, Chic-

anos are not intent on tearing the system down, but rather changing it and making their voices heard from within and more accessible.

In her article, Zavella discusses Chicano punks' efforts to make their messages shared through punk easier to access not only for other punks, but for all those in the community who might be listening. She quotes Joe Carreño as saying: "When you do it in Spanish you're pricking up some ears that wouldn't have been tuning in before . . . Latinos and Spanish-speaking people are used to being targeted in other ways [i.e. violence, exploitation, etc.]. But when you target them ... to have a conversation ... it lets them know 'You are not alone'" (37). On the flip side, sharing their message in English is also important to Chicano punks. As Martín Sorrondeguy of Los Crudos points out: "It's *really* important that these gringos understand what we're about" (36). This dual use of language is indicative of the dual identities that Chicanos have—belonging to a Spanish speaking heritage while living in an English speaking country. This bilingual use of language in their songs allows both the Spanish-speaking community and the English-speaking community to hear what they have to say and possibly bring about change on both fronts.

The last unique characteristic of Chicano punk I would like to discuss ties directly to the difficult challenges and prejudices faced by Mexican-Americans on a daily basis. Regardless of whether we want to admit it or not, we live in a country that has historically been xenophobic and unwilling to accept ethnic and racial minorities. One only needs to look as far as California's 1994 proposition 187 which denied public services such as health care or public education to undocumented immigrants or most recently, Arizona's controversial SB 1070 which has been touted as one of the broadest and most strict anti-illegal immigration laws to have been passed in the United States. Unsurprisingly, Mexican-American punks have been taking these issues head on in a unique way characteristic of all punks. As a means of mocking the idea of an illegal invasion of the country, punkeros make sure that they make their music, message, and appearance as visible as possible:

The idea of a Latino musical 'invasion' of U.S. rock spaces and terrains operates as a clever double play on the nativist antiimmigrant rhetoric of California's xenophobic Proposition 187 that transforms Californians' fear of a Mexican 'alien' invasion of California into a bold musical statement of identity empowerment and territorial and cultural reclamation. (Kun 257)

By taking the negative connotations that have historically been associated with them and their people and embracing them in a constructive and positive way, Chicano punks have been able to empower themselves and make a "bold musical statement." Just as La Molly in *Pretty Vacant* proudly exclaims: "Soy punk rocker. ¿Y que?", so too are punkeros proclaiming: "¿Illegal y que?" as a means of pointing out the foolishness of the stereotypes leveled against them and the pride they have in their heritage (Zavella 32). Chicanos punks have been able to reveal the truth through their craft and culture. As stated by Lipsitz: "The appropriation of punk music by young Chicanos as a means of making visible aspects of their lives and culture that would otherwise be ignored reveals much about what it means to be Mexican American" (85). After being exploited, mislabeled, and enduring a number of other injustices, punk provides an outlet for Chicanos to shine light on the truth and destroy the preconceptions that have been leveled against them.

Chicano punk has influenced the greater Chicano movement in many different ways. One way in which it has done this is its search for an authentic lifestyle. The idea of living an authentic lifestyle is a prevalent part of punk culture that has translated over to the main Chicano movement and which has had a hand in helping Chicanos everywhere develop their own identities without limiting themselves to a certain group or way of expressing themselves. Although being

Mexican-American is very important to them, punks and other Chicanos will not let their ethnicity define them exclusively, but rather let their lives and actions define them. Lipsitz points out that:

In their insistence on being [Chicanos] in their own way, [artists] grapple with the historical invisibility of their community in the mass media as well as with their determination to avoid being reduced to their race to the point of erasing their experiences as [men and] women, as workers, and as citizens. Chicano artists have long grappled with these problems, and they have often found solutions by taking on unexpected identities in order to make visible the hybridity and heterogeneity of their own community. (90)

Being a Chicano does not mean that one must allow their life experiences to be swallowed up for the greater good of the movement. Rather, one allows his or her experiences to shine through as a means to further the movement and build it up. Just as Alicia Armendariz of Goddess 13 and the Bags fame states: “You do [represent your ethnic group], but you represent it in your own way. You don’t have to represent it the way they want you to represent it” (Lipsitz 90). That is perhaps the most important message punk has transmitted to the whole of Chicanoismo and one that is practiced by young Chicanos each and every day as they strive to be the people they want to be without limiting themselves to one thing.

In closing, I would like to reflect on how punk rock, a culture largely composed of white, middle-class males, has brought so many Chicanos together and helped them on their march towards equality. What could be perceived as a border not to be crossed or barrier not to be tampered with, punk is largely responsible for creating unity and inspiring people to do what they want. Kun smartly states: “[Punk] rock ... becomes one of the many ‘mysterious underground railroads’ ... connecting the transnational performance coordinates of the ‘new world border,’ where hybridity is the dominant culture—an audio circuit of exchange and communication between dispersed listeners and the shifting national geographies they inhabit” (265). It is interesting to consider the idea of “hybridity” being “the dominant culture” because it makes us realize that in the grand scheme of things we are not so different from one another after all. Just as punk culture “[breaks] down barriers between artists and audiences by encouraging an aesthetic of amateurism and emotion above all . . . [and] assert[s] that everyone [is] an artist” it also presents a parable in demonstrating that appearance is only skin deep and asserts that in the end, we are all human beings (Lipsitz 89). Though Chicano punk songs will likely never reach the top of the charts and their ideas might never become mainstream thought, it does demonstrate the true heterogeneity of the United States and the people who make it up. However, the sooner that the white majority is able to look beyond their “suburban homes” the sooner Mexican-Americans everywhere will be able to find another sense of community and belonging while proudly embracing their Mexican heritage and the American aspect of their cultural identity.

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