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1970s Northern Ireland is more readily associated with conflict and sectarian tensions than with vibrant expressions of popular culture. And yet, between 1976 and 1983, a local punk scene thrived. Although it was a highly exclusive subculture, it treated all of its participants alike. Young people ignored their political, religious and class differences and met up in streets and record shops during the day, and at night crowded into the few bars that allowed punk bands to play, thus giving rise to one of the few spaces in Northern Irish society in which cross-community coexistence, cooperation and camaraderie was possible. Punk also gave a voice to the young people who chose to take part in it and allowed them to explore, through the medium of songs, a whole range of themes which, up until then, had seldom been addressed in popular music, from social and political issues to previously unexplored aspects of popular culture.

On associe davantage l'Irlande du Nord des années 1970 au conflit et aux tensions intercommunautaires qu'à l'effervescence de sa culture populaire. Pourtant, pendant les années 1976-1983, l'Irlande du Nord fut le berceau d'une scène punk foisonnante. Ce phénomène musical et culturel inédit n'encouragea pas seulement les jeunes protestants et catholiques à mettre de côté, temporairement, leurs différences politiques et religieuses, à une époque où les interactions intercommunautaires étaient peu fréquentes ; il donna une voix aux jeunes qui choisirent de participer à cette scène et leur permit d'explorer, à travers la chanson, une grande diversité de thématiques qui, jusque-là, avaient été rarement abordées dans la musique populaire.

There's nothing for us in Belfast
The Pound's old, and that's a pity
OK, so there's the Trident in Bangor[1]
And then you walk back to the city
We ain't got nothing but they don't really care
"Alternative Ulster," Stiff Little Fingers

1. The Pound and The Trident are two of the first bars in Northern Ireland that allowed punk rock groups to play concerts.

Timothy A. HERON, "Alternative Ulster": The First Wave of Punk in Northern Ireland (1976-1983), *ÉA* 71-1 (2018) : 67-84. © Klincksieck.

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1970s Northern Ireland is mostly associated with the violence of the "Troubles"; it is less readily seen as a place conducive to vibrant expressions of popular culture. And yet, in the midst of the conflict, it was home to a dynamic music scene, which not only enabled amicable cross-community interaction at a time of intense sectarian tensions, but also gave a voice to the young people who chose to take part in it: the punk scene.

The phase of the Northern Ireland conflict known as the "Troubles," which began in the mid- to late 1960s and ended in 1998 with the Good Friday Agreement, claimed almost 4,000 lives[2] and bitterly divided the Catholic and Protestant communities.[3] It also had a significant impact on the cultural life of the region. The outbreak of the conflict hit Northern Ireland's two cultural hubs, Belfast and Derry, disproportionately, and urban cultural life came to a standstill almost overnight. Neighbourhoods became increasingly segregated as Catholics and Protestants, who had often co-existed peacefully in the years before the conflict began, chose to or were forced to move and live among their co-religionists. The construction of "peace lines" materialised the division between the two communities. People seldom left their neighbourhoods at night, fearing for their safety, and, in Belfast, the few people willing to venture into the city were met with iron fences which were raised around the centre and locked at six o'clock. With a lot of pubs and cinemas now inaccessible, nightlife was mostly restricted to the balls and cabarets which were held in hotels outside of the city. Bus services stopped early, so these venues were out of bounds for people with no car at their disposal, and the type of entertainment that they provided was not geared towards young audiences hungry to experience the latest developments in pop music and for whom traditional or country music held little appeal. Thus teenagers were not only faced with the boredom and joblessness that they shared with their peers overseas, they also had to deal with sectarianism, violence, lack of opportunities, and one of its consequences: a severely underdeveloped cultural infrastructure. And yet in the 1960s Belfast had been Ireland's "rock

2. For a discussion of the estimates of the number of "Troubles"-related deaths, see Fay, Morrissey and Smyth (121-32).
3. With political and religious roots which reached far back in time, the "Troubles" involved paramilitaries, politicians, members of the British security forces and ordinary citizens. Society was divided into two opposing ethno-national groups, seemingly trapped in a deadlock because of their irreconcilable aspirations (McEvoy 8-10). The unionists-loyalists, most of whom identified as Protestant, wanted the region to remain a part of the United Kingdom, were attached to the British Crown and to a sense of Britishness, and had developed a siege mentality after centuries of living on the island as a privileged minority. The nationalists-republicans, most of whom identified as Catholic, wanted to put an end to the institutionalised discrimination they faced and wished for the establishment of an island-wide Irish republic. For further discussion of the Northern Ireland conflict, see Aughey; McKittrick and McVea; Miller; and Mullholland.

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capital" (McLaughlin and McLoone 43). A beat music scene had centred on the city's Maritime Hotel, featuring bands such as the Wheels, the Aztecs, the Alleycatz and most famously Them (144).[4] The Belfast Festival, launched at Queen's University in 1961, attracted international acts such as Joan Baez, Pete Seeger, John Lee Hooker, Ravi Shankar and Jimi Hendrix.[5] During this era, young people from both Catholic and Protestant communities could take part in a dynamic rock scene and attend concerts by local or international bands.

However, when the "Troubles" broke out at the end of the decade, Belfast's status as Irish rock capital abruptly came to an end. International bands were more and more reluctant to come to play. The Belfast Festival was interrupted for two years but when it started again in 1972, it had difficulty attracting performers from outside the region. That same year, Led Zeppelin was one of the last international rock acts to play a concert during the first half of the decade (Bailie 196); until 1977 Rory Gallagher and Horslips would be the only bands from outside the region to consistently include Belfast in their annual tours of the island. Moreover, the Northern rock scene was cut short before it had had the time to develop a proper music infrastructure. Consequently, most local rock musicians chose the path of exile.[6] Without any infrastructure, there was nothing to keep musicians in the region; and the absence of local groups in turn prevented the development of a regional rock scene. To make matters worse, in 1975 three members of the popular Miami Showband were gunned down by the loyalist Ulster Volunteer Force on their way back to Dublin. The incident shocked opinion north and south of the border. For the first time, a pop band from outside of Northern Ireland had been deliberately targeted. The killings not only further discouraged international acts from venturing into the north but also had an impact on local musicians, most of whom restricted themselves to their own communities.[7] Coupled with the fact that few if any local bands produced original material, this meant that the region had become a rock music wilderness. However, during the second half of the decade, the situation began to change. Indeed, the months stretching from August 1971 to December 1976 would prove to be the most violent phase of the conflict in terms of deaths (McKittrick and McVea 136). Thereafter the region

4. Them, whose lead singer was Van Morrison, had several UK Top Ten hits, notably "Baby, Please Don't Go" and "Here Comes the Night" (Decca, 1965). In 1967, Van Morrison emigrated to the US and embarked on a successful solo career, mingling soul and folk music.
5. Hendrix produced the album of local rock band Eire Apparent (*Sunrise*, Buddah Records, 1969).
6. For instance, Henry McCullough, the lead guitarist of Eire Apparent, went to London and played with Joe Cocker then with Paul McCartney's Wings. Guitarists Eric Bell and Gary Moore both moved to Dublin: Bell joined Thin Lizzy while Gary Moore started blues rock band Skid Row (and later took Bell's place as Thin Lizzy's lead guitarist).
7. *The Belfast Telegraph*, 3 December 1976.

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would never attain the level of violence of the early 1970s, and although killings would continue well into the 1990s, from 1977 onwards the streets of Northern Ireland became relatively safer. This allowed the development of a local version of a music scene which was creating a stir overseas: punk.

"Cross the Line": A Cross-Community Phenomenon

Musically speaking, punk was an aggressive, fast and minimalist subgenre of rock which appeared in the bars of Manhattan in the 1970s. Greatly indebted to 1960s American garage rock and early 1970s bands such as The Stooges, MC5 and The New York Dolls, punk was also influenced by 1960s British beat music, glam rock and pub rock. But it was more than a music genre: it was a cultural phenomenon which spanned several media—fashion, the visual arts, even literature—and, in the United Kingdom at least, emerged as the most visible youth subculture of the era. In London punk acquired a more working-class image than its American counterpart and the new subculture quickly spread to other regions of the country, often following local performances by the Sex Pistols and other early punk acts. The Sex Pistols never played in Northern Ireland, but thanks to word of mouth, to the music press (*NME, Sounds, Melody Maker*), television programmes (*Top of the Pops, The Old Grey Whistle Test*) and most importantly John Peel's late evening show on BBC Radio One, the youth of Northern Ireland was introduced to punk rock. Local rock bands RUDI (from Belfast) and The Undertones (from Derry) turned to punk after discovering The Ramones on Peel's show. They were soon followed by Stiff Little Fingers, formerly a rock covers band, and newly-formed bands such as The Outcasts, Ruefrex, Protex, Victim and scores of others. Bands and individual punks alike clustered around what in 1976 was Belfast's only independent record shop, Caroline Music. The first punk concerts were given at The Trident in the coastal town of Bangor in 1977, at The Casbah in Derry (where The Undertones soon became a fixture), and in the function rooms of hotels and community centres on the outskirts of Belfast. In 1977 Caroline Music's owner and manager, Kyle Leitch, helped open the doors of The Pound to pub rock, and, at the start of 1978, to punk. The Pound was a seedy bar close to Belfast city centre but it was one of the few to stay open at night, and, crucially, one of the only venues to allow bands to play original songs rather than covers. The Harp, a similarly disreputable bar, soon followed suit. Terri Hooley, the manager of Good Vibrations, an independent record shop which opened its doors in 1977, took several local bands under his wing and created what was to become the region's most influential independent label, which released singles by The Undertones, RUDI, The Outcasts and others. Both Leitch and Hooley helped promote local bands and provided material aid to aspiring musicians and so, unsurprisingly, their record shops, along with The Pound and the Harp, became the epicentre

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of the Northern Ireland punk scene.[8] Significantly, they became some of the few spaces in Northern Ireland where young people could meet and socialise without having to worry about their ethno-national identity, class, age, and to a certain extent, gender and sexual orientation.

While live music was the cornerstone of the punk subculture, cross-community interaction was not limited to concerts, which usually took place at night. During the day, in addition to meeting in the record shops, young punks would congregate in specific spots in their towns, such as the Corn Market in Belfast, and would drink cider in the city's subways, sniff glue in their towns' back alleys or parks, or stage parties in hideouts such as the World War Two air raid shelters in Ballyholme or an old sewage works in Antrim (O'Neill and Trelford 130-31). These temporarily requisitioned spaces can be assimilated to *heterotopias*, defined by Michel Foucault as "counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault 15).[9] Punk heterotopias rarely existed more than a couple of years, and sometimes only survived for a few months. They occupied a marginal position with regard to all the other sites of Northern society. Moreover, these sites were made difficult to access by the fact that not just anyone could claim to be a punk. The punk subculture was notorious for its rigid and complicated codes and etiquette, which not only decided what you could and could not wear or listen to, but also how you behaved and thought. The litmus test, which revolved around unspoken assumptions about the ambiguous notion of authenticity, was difficult to pass, and it meant that being truly accepted in the subculture could be hard work. But because punk heterotopias were limited in time and in space as well as by the fact that entry into them required considerable effort, they afforded punks a certain degree of autonomy. They encouraged those who were drawn to the subculture to leave their segregated neighbourhoods and meet up in spaces where they evaded the gaze of their peers, their parents and their respective communities.

It was not only within these "counter-sites" that the sectarian divide that cut through society was being contested and inverted. Band practises or after-parties in individuals' homes would lead young people to venture into neighbourhoods marked out as belonging to the "other side." One punk from the Shankill, a staunchly loyalist area, remembers how

8. Terri Hooley's life, and in particular his involvement with the Northern Ireland punk scene, is the subject of the 2013 film *Good Vibrations* (Lisa Barros D'Sa & Glenn Leyburn, 2013). Although the comedy drama overplays Hooley's role in fostering a local punk scene, it succeeds in bringing to life the vibrancy of Belfast punk, thus representing "Troubles"-era Northern Ireland in a new, more positive light.
9. Contrary to other themes in Foucault's work, the concept of heterotopia is not a fully-fledged theory but a conceptual tool to which he ascribed several broad characteristics, notably the tendency to juxtapose in a single site several elements which are incompatible or deemed so in the outside world.

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children from the neighbourhood had a close look at his friend from the nationalist Falls Road to see whether his eyes were set close together and checked his hair for horns, as they had been taught that Catholics displayed such grotesque features.[10] However, it is important to note that the Northern Ireland scene was not actively antisectarian; rather, it became a cross-community scene by accident. As one interviewee put it: "Look, to be honest, I don't think [religion] was important, if you liked the music you just turned up at the gig."[11] It's because young punks enjoyed the same music and they revolved around the few places that welcomed them or catered to their taste that cross-community interaction happened. Indeed, young punks continued the practise of "telling" (Burton)—the looking for signs in order to try to determine the other's ethno-national identity: "We stopped identifying ourselves through our faith heritage but didn't lose the habit of checking out what part of town people came from, or recognising from a name or school attended 'what people were.'"[12] This was done out of habit but it also betrayed a real need for reassurance in an unstable, potentially dangerous society. "Telling" was almost inescapable. Whether one wanted it or not, "in Belfast your name, your school, even how you pronounced 'H' labelled you immediately. The punk scene didn't take that away, it just set it way lower in your mindset."[13] Participation in the scene didn't necessarily mean that one no longer identified as a Catholic or a Protestant or that one gave up one's political beliefs. The rather apolitical nature of the first wave of punk—or, at least, its suspicion of established ideologies of any variety—enabled local politics to take a back seat. Moreover, if the punk scene's cross-community aspect had emerged by accident, there was a conscious desire among punks to maintain harmony: "People still had their opinions: people just didn't talk about them. They were consciously avoiding it. It was like, 'I do have these opinions, I do have these views, but I don't want to offend my friend from the other side who might have something different going on.'"[14]

The degree of harmony among punks must not be exaggerated, however. The participants themselves admit that not all punks were non-sectarian (Hooley and Sullivan 142), and several incidents revealed how fragile cross-sectarian unity could be. For instance, when The Clash's Joe Strummer started sporting an H-Block t-shirt in support of the Republican hunger strikers in the Maze prison, he offended a large part of his Protestant fans. Yet these incidents were few and far between—the fact remains that despite initiatives led by government bodies and religious

10. Lee. Personal interview. Bangor, 8 July 2014.
11. Mick. Personal interview. Derry, 25 April 2015.
12. Louanne. Unpublished survey, 2017.
13. Gerry. Unpublished survey, 2017
14. Tony. Personal interview. Belfast, 12 July 2014.

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organisations to improve community relations in Northern Ireland,[15] prolonged cross-community interaction was a rare occurrence in Northern Irish society. Together with boxing, greyhound racing, and the Belfast gay scene, punk was one of the few cultural phenomena which fostered amicable cross-community relationships. In the 1970s there were some ecumenical initiatives which aimed to encourage intercultural dialogue but they mostly concerned clergy or laymen from educated and middle-class backgrounds. Organisations such as the Corrymeela Community worked with young people from underprivileged areas by bringing them to their premises on the north coast, but it was not until the 1980s that religious organisations would establish themselves in interface areas in Belfast with the aim of bringing Catholics and Protestants together (Power 131-8). The Peace People, for a while, succeeded in getting people from both communities to march for peace alongside one another, until the organisation lost credibility because of its perceived lack of criticism of the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the British army (Adams 47), because of its middle-class image (Murphy 245) and because of internal fighting among the leadership (Buscher and Ling 93). Even projects which hoped to create “trans-sectarian harmony” by taking children from both sides of the divide on holidays abroad only had limited success (McDonald 53-55). Contrary to these initiatives, punk was not a coherent social movement but a youth subculture, with no set agenda and no strategy for addressing sectarianism in the wider society. Initially there was no conscious decision to cross the sectarian divide, but it happened because of a shared passion for punk rock. The type of interaction brought on by participation in the punk scene was spontaneous and, crucially, was started at the initiative of the young people themselves. And yet, punk did not only enable cross-community interaction—it also provided young people with the means to express themselves.

“True Confessions”: The Songs of Northern Ireland’s First Wave of Punk

One of the main attractions of punk was not only the raw, raucous music, but also the fact that it enabled the exploration of a whole new range of themes by anyone able and willing to start a band. Indeed, according to John Mullen, “punk seemed to open the gates to dealing with a much wider variety of themes in popular song, with a particular emphasis

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15. In her discussion of official Community Relations policies in Northern Ireland in the 1970s, Joana Etchart argues that after the reintroduction of Direct Rule in 1974, “the relationship between public bodies and the community at large became distant and centred on the needs of the administration” rather than engaging with actors within the community (Etchart 580). Likewise, as I have argued in my PhD thesis, the strategies carried out by religious organisations (such as the Corrymeela Community on the north coast and the Colombanus Community of Reconciliation, the Cornerstone Community, the Curragh Community and others in Belfast) generally failed to address the desires of individuals (and especially young people) living in working-class areas.

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on the gritty" (Mullen). This was due to punk's irreverent, iconoclastic nature, but also to its emphasis on what would become known as the "do it yourself" or DIY ethic: even people with little means and experience could create a fanzine or make music. For the first time in years, young people were able to voice their own views to an audience made of people their own age. So what did Northern Ireland punks choose to express? During the course of my research for my PhD thesis (Heron 2017a), I decided to classify songs from the first wave of Northern Ireland punk (1976-1983) in order to determine their main thematic concerns. After analysing over two hundred songs, I found that over a third of them tackle various social and political issues; a quarter deal with romantic and sexual relationships; and ten percent are concerned with aspects of teenage pop culture (see also Laing).

Perhaps surprisingly, among the songs dealing with social and political issues, only a fifth revolve around the "Troubles" (six percent of all songs). The band most associated with this stance is Belfast's Stiff Little Fingers. The group's very first single, "Suspect Device / Wasted Life," released in 1978, criticises sectarianism and paramilitary violence in no uncertain terms: "Inflammable material, planted in my head / It's a suspect device that's left two thousand dead"; "They make us feel indebted / For saving us from hell / And then they put us through it / It's time the bastards fell." In "Wasted Life," singer Jake Burns shouts "Stuff their fucking armies / Killing isn't my idea of fun" and, in the last verse, compares paramilitaries to Nazis:

> Still they come up to me
> With a different name but the same old face
> I can see the connection
> With another time and another place
> Now, they ain't blonde-haired or blue-eyed
> But they think that they're the master race.

These songs constitute some of the most explicit attacks on paramilitarism in the Northern Ireland popular music repertoire; however, after the release of that single, the band rarely again criticised paramilitaries in such an explicit manner. Most of the songs that followed, and especially those which appeared on their 1979 debut album *Inflammable Material,* made heavy use of conflict-related iconography, while actually dealing with unrelated issues. This reliance on "radical chic" was part of a conscious strategy to break into the overseas market—and it worked. Stiff Little Fingers' success came at a price: for a long time, the band was resented by punks in Northern Ireland who objected to the use of the "Troubles" as a marketing tool. However, while they were the most famous punk group to refer to the conflict, they were not the only one to do so. A few other bands from the era explicitly dealt with this thorny issue. For instance, in "The System is Here" by the Ex-Producers, the narrator laments the local tendency to vote along sectarian lines:

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> You're afraid to change or rearrange
> Just keep your permanent vote
> Your voting's done by colours
> Black and white
> Green and orange
> Left and right.

"Mixed Up World" by Victim expresses disappointment over the failure of all attempts to transcend sectarianism: "This is a mixed-up world that we're living in / We say we're going to change it now but we just can't win / We gotta sit together now, maybe this will end / But we know there's no chance of that." The Defects' "We Don't Care" constitutes an aggressive denunciation of the ruling élite: "You read your paper everyday / But don't listen to what the bastards say / They build you up then kick you down / Too much power for pathetic clowns"; "How much longer can they rule / Threatening the world like we're fools / Propaganda filled with hate / If you've got brains ignore their bait." However, the most clearly political and most actively antisectarian of all the first wave punk bands is probably Ruefrex, whose songs frequently depicted the realities of life amidst the "Troubles." While Stiff Little Fingers were accused of using the conflict for their own advancement, Ruefrex put into practice the antisectarianism they preached: they played not only in the "neutral" venues of Belfast town centre or in the safety of their own Protestant community, but all over the region, including republican neighbourhoods of Belfast such as Ardoyne, the Falls or Turf Lodge. Ruefrex's political commitment could get the band in trouble. In 1985, they released "Wild Colonial Boy," a biting indictment of the Irish Americans who funded the Provisional IRA. The song, which also accused Americans of perpetuating Irish stereotypes and of mistreating the African American population, can be summed up by its final lines: "It really gives me quite a thrill / To kill from far away." When the song received airplay on BBC Radio One, the band was wrongly accused by some of being pro-loyalist. This led them to be called "Orange Bastards" by Elvis Costello (McDonald 62-64) and to be dropped from the support slot of a planned US tour with The Pogues "for not being Irish enough."[16] However, Ruefrex's uncompromising stance was an exception: generally speaking, even the more political punk songs did not blame or name anyone in particular. Rather than a form of political analysis, most songs about the "Troubles" were an appeal to common sense; they expressed individual rather than collective discontent with the political deadlock and the sectarianism that pervaded Northern Irish society. What singer Jake Burns has said about Stiff Little Fingers can also be applied to most of the groups which sang about the "Troubles": "Considered overtly political by many, the band always held fast to the idea that they were only political in the sense of

16. Email interview with Paul Burgess, 28 June 2017.

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politics as everyday life, often described as politics with a small 'p' or 'street politics'" (Link 158).

Other songs from local bands did not address the violence or the sectarianism of the conflict so much as the effects of the "Troubles" on the everyday lives of teenagers. This is the subject of one of the most famous of Stiff Little Fingers' songs, "Alternative Ulster":

> What we need
> Is an Alternative Ulster
> Grab it and change it, it's yours
> Get an Alternative Ulster
> Ignore the bores and their laws.

Although the song has often been interpreted as a demand for radical political change, its main concern, as the first verse reveals, is the lack of opportunities for teenagers to have fun in 1970s Northern Ireland:

> There's nothing for us in Belfast
> The Pound's old, and that's a pity
> OK, so there's the Trident in Bangor
> And then you walk back to the city
> We ain't got nothing but they don't really care
> They don't even know you know
> They just want money, we can take it or leave it

The song is primarily "about being bored out of your skull in Belfast," as Jake Burns told *Melody Maker* in 1980 (Link 87). Boredom was one of the most prominent themes in early punk rock: The Buzzcocks sang about it ("Boredom"), as did The Clash ("London's Burning"). Although "Alternative Ulster" seems to attack the British armed forces and the police ("Take a look where you're living / You got the army on the street / And the RUC dog of repression / Is barking at your feet"), they are singled out mainly because they stand in the way of young people's desires, not because they embody an imperialist branch of the state, as later Northern Ireland anarcho-punk bands would contend.[17] Anything and anyone that got in the way of teenage leisure and pleasure could be the subject of punk abuse, whether the army, the RUC, or parents. For example, "P-Check" by The Ex-Producers deals with the frustration of being stopped by the RUC at checkpoints to be questioned:

> They wanna know, they wanna know
> My name, my address
> My DOB

17. Punk is often seen as being intensely political; in the early 1980s punk indeed would become politicized following its splintering into "micro-cultures," with on one side left-leaning anarcho-punk scenes (represented by groups such as Crass) and on the other the right-wing skinhead scene. However, for most of the 1970s punk claimed allegiance to no political ideology in particular.

The company I keep
Where I'm going.

More famously, RUDI expressed their frustration about the police's mistreatment of punks in "Cops." The song, which begins and ends with chants of "SS RUC, SS RUC," was written in reaction to the RUC's violent reaction following the "riot" which followed the last-minute cancellation of a concert by The Clash in October 1977.[18]

Yet the "Troubles" and its effects were far from the only social and political issue that punks sang about. In fact, as we said earlier, only a fifth of those songs addressed the conflict. Most songs were preoccupied with other concerns. For instance, "White Noise" by Stiff Little Fingers, "Suggestions" by Acme, and "Smash the Front" by Stalag 17 dealt with racism, particularly in the context of the increasing influence of the British National Front. "Mercenary" by the Co-ordinates, "Cause or Consequence" by Victim, "Capital Letters" by Ruefrex and "Tin Soldiers" by Stiff Little Fingers denounced militarism and war abroad rather than at home. "Hits and Misses" by Stiff Little Fingers and "Disco" by the Co-ordinates tackled the issue of violence against women. "Nine to five" by The Androids and "Live in Pain" by The Defects were "anti-work" songs ("Why must I suffer such a strain / I wasn't made for the factory / I don't need security / I just want to follow my rules," sing The Defects). The frustration of having to join the adult world was also reflected in songs like "Prelude" by The Co-Ordinates, "College Boys" by White Noise, "Future Plans" by Shock Treatment and "Don't Wanna Be No Adult" by The Outcasts. These songs reveal that for young punks in Northern Ireland, the "Troubles" and its effects were a fact of life; but so were unemployment, poverty, racism, the worrying rise of right-wing populism and the necessity to strike out on one's own in a frightening world. Far from being inward-looking, Northern Irish bands sang about issues which had resonance on an international rather than simply on a local level. This isn't surprising considering that punk was a transnational phenomenon: from Paris to Berlin, from Barcelona to Belfast punk bands sang about the social issues that affected young people everywhere. This shows that, despite the "Troubles," Northern Ireland could be more outward-looking than it is sometimes given credit for.

If punk, in Northern Ireland as elsewhere, enabled the expression of social and political concerns which usually were not addressed in popular music, it also delved into previously unexplored aspects of popular

18. Punks from all over the province had travelled to Belfast to see "The Only Band That Matters" on 20 October 1978. When the Belfast city council cancelled the concert at the last minute because of insurance problems, some disgruntled fans decided to block the road. This led to a scuffle with the RUC, which came to be known as the "Bedford street riot." The incident, which acted as a catalyser and gave increased media visibility to punks, quickly became one of the myths of the Northern Ireland scene.

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culture. Previous rock genres had shown interest in high fantasy and space opera—the members of Led Zeppelin were obsessed with J.R.R. Tolkien; Rick Wakeman created concept albums about the Legends of the Round Table and Jules Verne; Marc Bolan, in his pre-glam era, sang about unicorns and dragons. By contrast, punk bands were fascinated by more lurid, sensationalist forms of popular culture: crime fiction, B-movies, horror. In the US, The Ramones frequently referenced horror films: "Chain Saw" was inspired by Tobe Hooper's *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) while "Pinhead" is a nod to Todd Browning's *Freaks* (1932). The Cramps made camp B-movie iconography the hallmark of their style. In Britain, The Adverts imagined what it would be like to receive the transplant of a pair of eyes formerly belonging to a serial killer ("Gary Gilmore's Eyes"). To a certain extent, punk aesthetics in general were inspired by the world of pornography, horror and criminality (bondage trousers, fishnets, outrageous make-up, ransom note typography, etc.). Northern Irish punks were no different. Similar themes found their way into many local punk songs: "The Cops are Coming" by The Outcasts deals with a necrophiliac killer; "Lizzie Borden" by Stage B is about the eponymous 19th-century American murderer. In The Undertones' "There Goes Norman," the deranged character will, according to the narrator, "poke out your eyes." Perhaps some of these songs reflected anxiety about "Troubles"-related violence. After all, sectarian murders were still a reality; most of the members of the notorious Shankill Butchers[19] were being tried during the heyday of the first wave of Northern Irish punk. Whether consciously or not, this concern seems to appear in songs like "Victim" by Rabies: "Dead of night / When it's quiet on the streets / No one will protect you / In the dead of night." However, other punk songs which were inspired by the horror genre dealt not with human killers but with other-than-human monsters. For instance, The Outcasts sang about zombies ("Clinical Love") and cyborgs ("Cyborg"); "Bewerewolf!" by RUDI features a werewolf. On a psychoanalytical level, monsters are often associated with fear of the changing, mutating adolescent body and repressed sexual desire,[20] but they may also be read on another level as "transgressors of the social practice, beings that violate accepted cultural codes" (De Coning 165). Since the primary context of the reception of these songs, which often feature "unnatural" couplings, was the largely cross-community local punk subculture, they remind us that punks were "monsters" in the sense that they threatened to disrupt some of Northern Irish society's accepted cultural codes by revealing the arbitrary nature of the "us/them" binary and by disrupting the process of sectarian "othering." In "Cyborg," The Outcasts sang: "We are the new generation / We

19. The Shankill Butchers were a Belfast gang of loyalists who during the 1970s tortured and murdered over nineteen people, most of them Catholics.
20. For a discussion of the grotesque nature of punk bodies both in dress and in song, see Heron 2017.

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are the new scientific creation / Half-machine, half-boy and girl / Sent to overrun the rule of nature." It is interesting in this regard to note that the word *monstrum*—which in Latin means "portent"—derives from the etymon *monere*: "to warn." The Outcasts' hymn to hybridity contains such a warning: "You are the old days, we are the new ways / You are the old ways, we are the new days." According to the band, sectarianism's days were numbered.

More surprising for punk, perhaps, is the large number of songs which deal with romantic and sexual relationships. In *Sounds* magazine in 1977, rock journalist Vivien Goldman said about the punk scene that "No one's singing love songs any more, but that ain't conviction, that's fashion." And yet punk bears a more ambiguous relationship to romance and pop music than is often assumed. American bands like The Ramones and Blondie, and, arguably, English bands like The Damned, Generation X or The Buzzcocks were influenced by pop melodies and tropes. In Northern Ireland, a quarter of songs from the first wave of punk are about love or sex. Some of these are straightforward, heartfelt songs about romantic relationships. In "Sometimes" by RUDI, the narrator sings:

> The tears I cry
> At nights I lie
> And I could not sleep at all
> I dream of you
> I scream for you
> To the picture on my wall.

In a scene which evokes romantic comedies, the jilted lover who appears in The Tearjerkers' "Love Affair" is "Waiting in the rain at the stop / For the bus to show / My feet are getting wet and the drizzle is soaking through my coat." Even The Outcasts, despite their tough reputation, occasionally indulged in love songs:

> Well I see her every day on the bus
> And I dream of asking her out
> But I turn red
> Sweat dripping down my face
> And I'm feeling such a freak
> So what will I do?
> I'm self-conscious over you ("Self-Concious Over You").

Many other bands did the same: "She's 19" by The Moondogs, "Just Want Your Attention" by Protex, "Barbed Wire Love" by Stiff Little Fingers, etc. However, these punk "love songs" were counterbalanced by "hate songs" which expressed suspicion of romantic feelings or sometimes even outright misogyny: for example, "Bad News" by Acme, "Bitch" by The Defects, "Love You for Never" by The Outcasts, "A Place In Your Heart" by Protex, "Just Fade Away" by Stiff Little Fingers, "I'm Not Your Type" by The Tinopeners, to give just a few. Undoubtedly,

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the Northern Irish punk band most associated with "pop punk" and songs about "chocolate and girls" is The Undertones, whose "Teenage Kicks" has become the region's most famous punk—and, perhaps, pop music—anthem. No other band was able to capture the teenage experience with as much candour and humour as the boys from Derry. Full of irony, their songs depicted neither self-assured "cock rockers," nor love-struck teenyboppers, but a quintessentially punk figure: the *loser*. Indeed, in The Undertones' songs, the characters' love is almost always unrequited; often, the objects of their affection do not even seem to be aware fully of their existence. The Undertones narrator is often cast in the position of voyeur: he is in love with yet "another" girl who "walks down the street" ("Teenage Kicks"); he falls under the spell of a girl he watches dancing ("Hypnotised"); at the beach, he keeps "on looking for the girls with their faces all tanned / They're lying on the beaches all covered in sand / Stretching out their long legs lying in the sun" ("Here Comes the Summer"). For The Undertones, love and sex seem to be something that only ever happens to other people or from a safe distance. Even in "I Know a Girl," where the tone at first seems more triumphant, nothing indicates that the narrator has finally found love (or sex). He simply knows a girl, and she is (perhaps) aware of the fact that he likes her: "I know a girl / I know that she knows about me / She's not just a girl / I think she knows how I feel." By using pop tropes and melodies in punk songs, and by placing such hopeless "losers" within them, The Undertones sent up pop conventions; they both celebrated and parodied pop music.

Yet underlying this apparent frivolity, there was a more serious side to their songs. Some of the characters they depicted are "losers" in a more literal sense: they are left behind by life, stuck in seemingly inextricable situations. For instance, Jimmy is smothered by his mother ("Jimmy Jimmy") and the narrator of "My Perfect Cousin" by family expectations. The young woman who appears in the song "(She's a) Run-Around" "wants to leave home but she can't get away"; "she wishes she could live in a world of her own / Go someplace where she's not known." In "Gotta Getta," a young man seems to want to escape from home, but his car breaks down, preventing him from doing so: "He turns ignition on and it's ready to start / As the car begins to move he feels it falling apart." The narrator of "Boys Will Be Boys" is abandoned by a friend: "John's gone he's left on a bus / In a hurry he's forgotten about us." Life seems to pass these characters by. They are stuck in their hometown with no chance of escaping. To a certain extent, this may reflect the reality of 1970s Derry, where there were few prospects for most young people: at almost thirty-six percent, the unemployment rate for Catholic males was even higher than in Belfast (Cormack and Osborne 219). But Derry or Northern Ireland are never mentioned: the lack of geographical context gives these songs a certain timelessness. They could apply to teenagers or indeed anyone in any place and time. Moreover, despite the feeling of

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claustrophobia that the lyrics may elicit, the tone of the music is joyful rather than pathetic. The Undertones never indulge in pathos; they do not give the listener the time to feel sorry about themselves or about the characters they depict. Like The Ramones, the band they so admired, they make fun of their own inadequacy: "Punks, in the original sense of the word, were the sort of people who were such hopeless losers that they couldn't even be convincing as outlaws; far from romanticizing that status, the Ramones glorified their own inadequacy" (Carson 378). Punks knew how to laugh at themselves; The Undertones did it better than most.

The Undertones made a conscious decision not to sing about the "Troubles" (although there were a few exceptions, most famously "It's Going To Happen," which referenced the 1981 hunger strikes). In an interview given in 1978 in the fanzine *Alternative Ulster,* guitar player and main lyricist John O'Neill explained why: "We really have to make the best out of situations in Derry & N. Ireland to find something to write about that doesn't sound too contrived (e.g. straight politics). Our music has to [reflect] *our* everyday life or else it just isn't honest." O'Neill appeals to a core value of the punk subculture: authenticity. For The Undertones—and, indeed, for a lot of other bands from the first wave of Northern Ireland punk—singing about love, desire and teenage frustration was more authentic than talking about the "Troubles." Undoubtedly, it also provided them with an escape from an often difficult everyday life. And yet the significance of singing about love in a conflict-ridden society should not be underestimated. Despite their affiliation with a subculture which was reputed for its suspicion of romantic love and of commercial culture, many of the young people involved in the punk scene aspired for a "normal" adolescent life: a life of pleasure and carefree fun. They knew that this was made more difficult by the "Troubles" and Northern Ireland's high rate of unemployment—but it was not completely out of their reach. In fact, because punk placed an emphasis on local live music-making, it motivated young people to venture out of their neighbourhoods to attend or play concerts or to meet up with other punks. They invested spaces where, for a while at least, they could concentrate on being teenagers and deal with adolescent problems, such as crushes, sex and growing up—and more often than not, in cross-community settings. In a deeply divided society, where affiliation with one of the two rival groups was a prerequisite for social integration, where sectarian partisanship and social conformity were the norm, this was itself a bold, transgressive, empowering act. Punk not only enabled young people in Northern Ireland to express themselves through song—it allowed them to create and shape their own world.

In the early 1980s, changing trends in music, the break-up of many of the original bands, the closing of some of the earliest punk venues, the rise of sectarian skinheads and the climate of heightened intercommunity tension surrounding the republican hunger strikes all contributed

to the demise of the first wave of Northern Ireland punk. The original Northern Ireland punk scene did not change the world; but it showed that the world was changeable; at the very least, it gave a voice to those who took part in it. For that alone, punk's legacy in Northern Ireland is invaluable. It is a counter-narrative which comes as a breath of fresh air in what often seems like a bleak history of inter-community tension. The two aspects of Northern Ireland punk that we have briefly discussed—its cross-community nature and its role as a vehicle of popular expression—paved the way for the second wave of Northern Ireland punk, which centred on the Belfast Warzone Collective and, though a much smaller scene, was both actively antisectarian and resolutely political.

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