

Green Day: Rock Discourse and Dwindling Authenticities

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“Be childish. Be irresponsible. Be disrespectful. Be everything this society hates”

(Malcolm McLaren in Savage, 1991, p.44)

Discourses between prominent rock bands and their audiences are amongst the most fundamental and distinguishing marks of modern American history. Yet the multifarious origins of such dialogues, debates and disputes have remained somewhat under-researched by popular music historians. Perhaps within the extensive continuum of post-WWII American cultural contexts, the transformation of youth cultures via rock ‘n’ roll and (later) hard rock, progressive rock and punk rock music was so affective (and historically rapid) that the rock past and the historiography of that past both appear almost self-explanatory (despite the distinction being that the latter is not something that *was*, but something that popular music historians actually *do*). Sound, and sound media, now marginalised in relation with the visual, was for many a synergy of vast proportions. One would not wish to overstate the significance attached to particular musical “movements”, for those involved are seldom aware of the contemporary cultural status of their activities, while others who consider themselves to be out-with a coterie are often considered by others to be willingly within. Nevertheless the cultural resonances of popular (in our case particularly rock) music in the late-1960s and early-1970s, in the US were substantial. Such reverberations present the popular music historian with useful illustrations of particular aspects of identity formed in the United States through popular music, in relation to the significance and mapping of the self. They help us to consider how a re-articulated “self” compares with the rites and rituals of US “habitus” (the dispositions which generated practices and perceptions through which American-ness was conventionally expressed) and how music is placed at the heart of such articulations. In the case of this work one might be able to see how punk rock group Green Day can be seen to have reflected, refracted but then been rejected by such articulations.

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Popular music in a variety of styles was undoubtedly an important contributor to such enquiries in the US during the late sixties. There are myriad examples of popular musicians contributing to a consideration of the cost of urban expansionism and environmental destruction in material and cultural terms, concerned that the natural world was being pushed to its limits by post-war economic growth (one might cite Randy Newman's "Cowboy", here as a good example of this strain of thought). Popular music not only drew attention to the USA's immersion in an unwinnable Vietnam conflict (e.g. Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On"), but also rebelled against US concepts of resource exploitation (e.g. Dino Valenti's "What About Me") and championed the indigenous North American population (e.g. Neil Young's "Broken Arrow"). The Band even concerned themselves with issues from American history, as if to remind the US nation of its once humble, yet pioneering origins. Such artists expressed several different musical idioms, rather than simply "rock". Neil Young, for example, was obsessed with what he described as "modal D" for his compositions (a "folksy" influence, to be sure), whereas Arthur Lee of Love much later confessed to this writer to arranging his music to sound like a "paranoid Burt Bacharach" – but a rock aesthetic, which perhaps might loosely describe a challenging of concrete musical and social certainties, undoubtedly underpinned these contrasting works.

In addition to a variety of compositional stimulations such discourses were drawn from a multiplicity of complex critical fonts: from the imaginative "other America" work of Kerouac, Burroughs, and Ginsberg to the critical media analysis of Marshall McLuhan; from Timothy Leary's *Politics of Ecstasy* to Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, and even seventeen-year-old novelist S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* (later filmed by Coppola), where the alienations of teenage suburbia in Middle America were illuminated. A broad (but perhaps minority) church of anti-Great Society critiques came from such artists and expressed a gamut of diverse yet encapsulating influences creating what might be described as an alternative "world view" – rather than a counter culture, as such. Braunstein and Doyle correctly state that "the term counter culture falsely reifies what should never properly be construed as a social movement. It was an inherently unstable collection of attitudes, tendencies, postures, gestures, 'lifestyles', ideals, visions, hedonistic pleasures, moralisms, negations, and affirmations" (BRAUNSTEIN & DOYLE, 2002, p.11). In such a mood as existed in the United States in that post-WWII era (affluent yet uncaring, "multicultural" yet pluralistic, politically powerful yet paranoid) it took a lot of courage to present the values of

one's choice as binding – but by at least the turn of the decade, many young Americans had indeed done so.

This “world view” by 1967 had developed into a quasi-utopian pattern of belief systems, containing many paradoxes. For example, communalism, “a venerable part of the American past” (MILLER, 2002, p. 327), contributed towards a reclamation of American cultural history via many thousands of young Americans turning their attention towards group cohesiveness rather than the systems created by 20th century advanced capitalism. But this communalism was also formed within an era of bourgeois (white) prosperity which promoted expectations of post-scarcity and abundance for all. Furthermore, it was also considered by some that the distinction between childhood and adulthood would be effaced, endowing youth with almost heroic heterogeneous attributes along the way. This point is perhaps of greatest enduring significance for the popular music historian, for with it developed less a heroic-ism and more an increased youth-based alienated sensibility. We can recognise such scepticisms as something that was also later embraced by punk, post-punk and the emerging pop punk of the mid-late 1990s – despite's punk's P.R., then and now, concerning its existence out-with the rock canon, it was (as suggested by Laing) at all times within the musical, social and cultural confines placed upon it by rock's meta-narrative as a so-called counter-cultural representation.

It did not take long before a few commentators observed that such idealisms contained within not only paradoxes, but also self-indulgences. By the closing stages of the 1960s the British artist and writer Jeff Nuttall was labelling the “counter culture” somewhat infantile. He wrote that “naivety was equated with honesty, ineptitude was equated with sincerity, and merit was gauged in terms of proximity to the animal and vegetable” (NUTTALL, 1968, p. 37-8). Gene Feldman and Max Gartenberg (1973) also recognized that a desire to repudiate the control of nature also encapsulated an argument of indulgence: while abstinence from social responsibility was a critique on the Great Society it was also an extravagance and a detachment from reality. Another US critic Robert MacIver suggested that the restlessness associated with this Beat “otherness” was all about running away: “They try to escape but they run from themselves. They try to forget, but their only recourse is an excitation of the senses” (MacIVER *apud* CALCUTT, 1998, p. 67) – a fleeting sense of liberation, perhaps, but also escapist and immobilizing. No matter how reactionary the “counter culture” appeared to be, it was still umbilical to the thought patterns of the “straight” world – even via derision. By the 1970s various levels of gloom and pessimism were added

quantities of the organic discourse, as a loss of faith in the benefits of reason, science and technology and doubts over the entire thrust of progressive thinking (via the relativist discourses emerging from post-structuralism) deeply affected “counter culturally-apprised” ideas in a variety of different ways. For example, Derrida (1972) exposed the West’s tendencies to legitimise itself. He viewed that the West appeared reasonable because it merely affirmed that it was so and, since the West was the bearer and the definer of such reason, it was universally reasonable to accede to this proposal. This, as Derrida argued, was a phony and unsettling logic.

Perhaps forever condemned to act out disturbed estrangement, songwriter and guitarist Richard Hell in 1967 “never felt comfortable” with “the tail end of the flower children”. Instead, he considered himself to be “very much an outsider, and as a teenage is likely to, I also felt like I was neglected – that I wasn’t getting enough attention [...] everybody else was pretending that things were running smoothly when they really weren’t” (HELL *apud* HEYLIN, 1993, p. 94-95). Hell evidently realised that when any “we” is posited – even from within the ranks of “the flower children” – one certain by-product is that of outsider-ship. As Catherine Belsey states “it is language which provides the possibility of subjectivity because it is language which enables the speaker to posit himself or herself as “I”: (...) “ ‘I’ cannot be conceived without the conception ‘non-I’, ‘you’” (BELSEY, 1980, p. 59) – even within a rock discourse, it appears. “Punk poet” Patti Smith bestowed upon Television their first write-up in the October 1974 edition of *Rock Scene*; according to Smith we were all victims, especially of excessive media penetration. But Television (the band) had “(...) begun an attack. Starting from the bottom with completely **naked** [my emphasis] necks (...) The picture they transmit is shockingly honest” (SMITH *apud* HEYLIN, 1993, p. 126). Richard Hell later remarked to the producers of BBC’s *Dancing in the Streets* (1994) that young people were drawn to the nihilism of the band, “so thirsty were they for reality”. The New York scene in which Hell was involved was, for him, honesty without pretentious hypersensitivity, which might be construed by some as “political”.

However Andrew Calcutt successfully argued that throughout the 1990s both politics and pop culture were governed by the twin themes of the victim and the child. These motifs could be quite easily traced back to at the very least the late-1960s and Calcutt concluded, were far from liberating discourses, actually providing a ready-made verbal and visual language for victim culture, authoritarian politics, and childlike, backwards-looking yearnings. Certainly, by the 1990s there existed evidence of a petulant generation obsessed

with walking away from its problems, in a state of petty ironisation. One might suggest that the absurdity that exists somewhere between aspiration-driven society and a childlike nihilism can manifest itself in a deeply ironic, perhaps “postmodern” condition. There was certainly, by the 1990s, one ironic musical revival after another, with incongruous twists being placed upon music that previously existed in different states to their re-presentations. The emergence of 1990s punk, the mega-success of the dance deejay, Britpop’s so-called authenticity, and the ironic revival of easy listening music as “loungecore”, all suggested that popular music had been perhaps forever relativized.

Punk Rock in California

Dick Hebdige had long ago remarked that for him, UK punk rhetoric “was steeped in irony (...) an addendum designed to puncture glam rock’s extravagantly ornate style” (HEBDIGE, 1979, p. 63). Californian punk, in its variety of subsets, was typical of the rock discourse continuum in that it was both processually and diachronically organic, but also synchronically steeped in ironic and provisional forms of rock expression. As one consequence of continuing the childlike ironic failed seriousness, punk rock group Green Day (with their interesting “hippie-style” moniker, rumour has it drawn from their smoking of marijuana), alongside fellow Californian bands Rancid and the Offspring, were credited with creating, perhaps for the first time, a genuine mainstream interest in punk rock in the United States in the 1990s. But it is true to state that the roots and shared ideals of the punk movement in California stretch much further back in time than the 1990s. Indeed one should acknowledge that this particular variation on the punk aesthetic was an authentic link into the aforementioned “alternative world view” discourse – much of which gestated on the US West Coast. In California, Punk’s sense of social reality, its accrued disenchantment, and its lack of intellectual self-confidence verified significances that had been visibly accumulating since the late-1960s. If ever discourses concerning social, cultural, and ecological dissatisfaction could be brought to the fore it was in the Golden State: mythological Neverland of the American Dream and the corporeal representation of the Myth of the West.

Several punk groups, influenced by both New York and UK punk movements (but also very eclectic, musically) were formed in both southern and northern California in 1977. Bands such the Dickies and the Zeros in Los Angeles and Negative Trend and the Avengers in the San Francisco area came to be at this time. However, between 1978 and 1979 in southern California the first few *hardcore* punk groups emerged; these included the likes of

Middle Class, Black Flag, and the Circle Jerks. In northern California bands such as the Tools and the Dead Kennedys made similar musical and cultural incursions. The sound of hardcore was thicker with over-driven guitars, heavier with more power chords, and faster with lightning quick tempos, than earlier forms of punk rock. The songs were often extremely short, fast, and loud, covering a wide variety of “political” topics from personal freedom to conservation to vegetarianism, and, of course, internalised narratives concerning the vagaries of the hardcore subculture, itself. In southern California, hardcore punk bands and fans tended to materialize in the main from (perhaps typically) the suburban parts of Los Angeles and San Diego, such as the South Bay, Orange County and San Diego, itself. One outcome of this was a rather posturing rivalry between the older “Hollywood” and the up-to-the-minute hardcore “suburban”, “surf punk”, or “beach punk” worlds. Apparently, those from the Hollywood “scene” often disliked what they saw as the musical narrowness of hardcore and the self-indulgent victim-hood associated with suburban punks (the Orange County and San Diego punk scenes also revelled in a reputation for violence), while the suburban hardcore punks tended to dismiss what they perceived as a rather “poppy” sound and the superficial shallowness of fashion-conscious Hollywood punks.

Black Flag; Operation Ivy

One highly significant group to emerge from this “So-Cal” new wave was Black Flag. Formed in Hermosa Beach, Los Angeles County in 1977, this group was established as the brainchild of Greg Ginn – the guitarist, primary songwriter and sole continuous member through myriad personnel changes. Black Flag is widely considered to be one of the first hardcore punk bands and certainly gave a Californian punk “voice” to the continuation of the variegated anti-authoritarian, non-conformist discourses promulgated in the 1960s’ defence of the organic. The group’s songs discuss isolation, neurosis, paranoia, and poverty and such themes were further explored when aspiring poet Henry Rollins joined the group as lead singer in 1981. Black Flag was a highly respected group of activists tirelessly promoting a self-regulating, politicised DIY aesthetic which, aside from expressing collective musicianship, was not only a trailblazer of the underground do-it-yourself record label culture, so prevalent among the 1980s California punk rock bands, but also (perhaps unwittingly) for the Ayn Rand-style eco-politics of Silicone Valley.

But throughout the 1980s, Black Flag’s sound, in addition to its notoriety, evolved in ways that tended to alienate much of its original punk-inspired audience. Alongside being

among the earliest punk rock groups to incorporate elements of heavy metal melodies, riffs, and rhythms (not unlike like the [Southern Death] Cult in the UK), there grew an overt mixing and matching of genres in Black Flag's sound: for example, elements of free jazz, the inclusion of break beats and even avant-garde atonality were at times forged into Black Flag's ever-evolving sound quotients. Black Flag came to play longer, slower, and more complex songs at a time when many bands in this apparent milieu adhered to the raw, fast, two minute three-chord format. Even a cursory look at the resultant Black Flag and Henry Rollins discographies reveals far more musical variety than one might at first assume – certainly divergent from many of their punk rock contemporaries (as tracks on the 1985 album *Loose Nut* perhaps testify). As such, younger audiences were not consistently drawn to this increasingly diverse, complex and perhaps even musically “in-authentic” collective. Once Ginn and Rollins had attempted – and to some extent succeeded in – removing the glue from musical relationships by resorting to random articulations of myriad sounds, supporters and budding contemporary composers were typically split: either feeling inspired to freely explore or, conversely, desiring to limit their sounds and reinforce previous authentic “punk” relationships. For this latter group therefore, simplicity became an absolute; it was a constant, rather than an intrinsic element of compositional exploration. Childlike simplicity became political sincerity and by doing so, reinforced cemented values with specific textures, stylised musical syntax, and dramaturgical structures. In contradistinction to Black Flag, by the late-1980s most northern and southern hardcore Californian Punk proceeded along very exact, unambiguous generic pathways.

Oakland band Operation Ivy were one such group who were influenced less by the increasing experimentation of Ginn and Rollins and more by the algorithmic certainties of hardcore, ska, UK punk, and reggae (by 1981, hardcore had become the dominant punk expression in both northern and southern Californian punk scenes). However Operation Ivy's singer Jesse Michaels also continued to express the organic rock self-consciousness of previous generations of young Californians. Michaels was, according to Ben Myers, “a sensitive young man with a strong social conscience who was writing songs full of youthful idealism” (MYERS, 2006m p. 35), the image of which (the punk singer/songwriter) Myers connects with both Black Flag's sense of isolation, and pre-existing discourses concerning the conjoined discourses of alienation and self-expression amongst American (or should that be Californian?) youth.

It was from this sound ratio that both the Sweet Children/Green Day and Rancid collectives emerged into the northern Californian do-it-yourself punk environment of 1987. Lookout! Records, founded by Larry Livermore and David Hayes that same year, came to be Green Day's first label. A seemingly "classic" example of a "classic" US independent record label (defined as such via its archetypal hand-to-mouth existence), Lookout! came to be at the epicentre of much Berkeley punk rock activity in the early-1990s and became **the** label with which to be signed in the Bay area. Green Day's second independent album *Kerplunk*, was recorded for Lookout! and sold over 50,000 copies in 1992, in the process attracting the attention of major labels. Partly as a consequence, upon the group's signing with Reprise in 1993 the first accusations of sell-out from their somewhat fundamental, perhaps neo-hardcore fans emerged. Paradoxically (or perhaps not, given punk's unrelenting anti-popular music industry diatribes), these calls amplified alongside the bands' increasing popularity following their successful appearance (and mud fight) at the Woodstock Festival during August 1994. Billie Joe Armstrong of the band much later informed *Spin* magazine that he acknowledged these responses as elemental issues concerning punk ideology and authenticity and his own seemingly increasingly inauthentic visage; he reluctantly admitted that (perhaps as he aged) he "couldn't go back to the punk scene [that he had previously known], whether we were the biggest success in the world or the biggest failure [...] The only thing I could do was get on my bike and go forward." (Armstrong to R.J. Smith, *Spin*, August, 1999): perhaps a sad indictment of any hardcore fundamentalist movement that bases itself on literal interpretations of, rather than adaptations to, a doctrine.

Reception

Any "sell-out" response from Green Day's early fan-base is, therefore, one inevitable interpretive dimension (amongst many) embedded within popular music discourses past and present. Such proclamations of assuredness remain of considerable historical value for the popular music historian, for they are typical of practically every rock-based "crossover" into the realms of "the popular" from within the singularity of the enduring politicised discourse of rock (from Free in 1970 to the Fleet Foxes in 2009). But, of course, they also remain very problematic. While the real world of popular music fluctuates between survival and decay, redundant and obsolete discourses concerning rock's fundamental authenticity flourish (e.g. consider in 2010 the very term "classic rock" and its associated value systems and networks). The popular music past, in the hands of such discourses, effectively becomes a museum to

safe-keep such discourses. Time might have eroded their function (as it should), but such deeply entrenched (in this case punk) paradigms have become more real than the reality they seek to recall and reveal. And although there may be several diachronic methods and approaches to help us discover “what happened” in the event of such “sell-outs”, there are thus far few areas of investigation that assist us in a consideration of historically how such “authenticist” listeners contribute via cultural practices and discourses to the **making** of a musical text in the first place, and how such cultural practices come to exist within the musical sound itself, continuing to play a part not only in the identity of the listener, but also in the **attributed** identity of the performer. All music is very slippery to locate but one thing we can be certain of is that the end-product: the music, the recording, the score, is most certainly not the final word on its own meaning. Cultural practices leave their mark not only in the music, but also in value judgements concerning that music.

Of course, in popular music studies we have always been interested in listeners’ contributions, and have long since ceased to be surprised by disagreement and/or plurality of text reception interpretations. This has often been written about as an issue concerning authenticity – which it is. But given the credentials of punk in California arguably as a discourse with roots in defence of the organic, we should consider how Green Day’s music came to be “pre-composed” within the cultural practices that connoted this albeit vague and ill-defined critical resistance, this unfocused adversarial stance – one which included the organic world view and a partial refuting of commodity aesthetics. For, when the group achieved its primary ambition of mass popularity, such pre-compositional “politicised” paradigms of authenticity (and the very milieu that gave them shape) were challenged by the inherent popularity of the sound ratio and/or genre that the music later came to connote – there was, in effect, a pragmatic updating of the sound ratio, which left behind the continuum that gave it shape. Throughout the later-1990s and the early years of the 21st century Green Day became increasingly more popular (and, seemingly, more and more overtly “*p*olitical” to their “new” perhaps younger, audience), but the group’s initial community-based cultural capital duly sank diametrically, as their populist identity emerged.

Individual identity of both performer and receiver in the contemporary world is perpetually re-negotiable as it is re-defined and reconstructed “on the hoof” via such products as music and media in time and space. While punk communities are by no means Paul Gilroy’s prime areas of interest, he (1997) suggests that not only “in the market and consumer economies, individual identity is worked upon by the culture industries [but also] in localized

institutions and settings like schools, neighbourhood and workplaces” (GILROY, 1997, p. 311). Gilroy views any collective identities (we might cite here those created through the Californian punk and pre-punk aesthetic continuum) as “fundamental and immutable, represent[ing] a turning away, a retreat inwards, from the difficult political and moral questions which the issue of identity poses” and suggests that “If identity is indeed fixed, primordial and immutable, then politics is irrelevant in the face of deeper more fundamental forces” (*ibid*, p. 310). Gilroy proposes that a singularity of collective identities ultimately endows those involved with seemingly immutable, inflexible concepts. It is somewhat paradoxical therefore, that fundamentalism and inflexibility can easily emerge from an organic gamut of libertarianism, especially when in-built optimism comes under pressure from the ascetic harshness of contemporary society and the continued presence of what were projected by that optimism to be redundant reactionary discourses. Indeed, one might argue that the rhetoric of the former can become ever more desperate and fantastical as a need for co-ordinated responses to the randomness of the reactionary grows. For some, a need exists for some kind of musical authenticity to be representative of a past that can substitute for the present – hence, one might suggest the endless need for a similarly unfocused yet ubiquitous folk revival.

But, while some artists will always criticise the present in very practical ways, others can enclose time in a bell jar in which no ideas can enter and, crucially, none can escape. So, perhaps this is why, at least from a fundamentalist punk aesthetic point of view, the *political* popularism of Green Day via the *American Idiot* (2004) concept could be seen as something of a fallacy. One British middle-aged punk-inspired social worker who was studying for a degree at Liverpool John Moores University informed this writer in 2005 that as far as this album was concerned, he “never believed in it for a minute”. It is perhaps difficult for a long-standing punk aficionado to take at all seriously a political statement from a group of musicians who previously perpetuated the alternate binary US function myth dichotomy of nature and culture, of insiders and outsiders (consider Green Day’s use of the Ramones’ song “Outsider”). For this Liverpool-based student, Green Day had subscribed previously to firmly fixed boundaries and seemingly unambiguous statements. For the punk, the outsider status as the significant “other” in a fixed, static representation is a totally unmasked message, stripped of conventional social codes and unambiguous in meaning. As popular music historians it is significant that we distinguish carefully between ideas created in what might be described as a closed tradition and ideas from a tradition that involves continual renewal. Punk rock

historicity is a distillation of a gamut of counter-culturally appraised “truths”, therefore it endorses a singular, linear storyline that appears to accommodate few divergences, few changes, little flexibility or differently inflected moments. The social world in which a work is [pre]conceived, produced, and received evidently has a significant formative effect on sound production and interpretation. One irony is that ideas concerning punk-endorsed alienated sensibilities and arrested development were merely a sector of the liberalist cultural practices that gave such ideas shape in the first place. One might argue, however, that within this inflexible domain “sell-out” calls are perfectly legitimate discourses.

Prior to Green Day’s 1994 *Dookie* album (their first major label release) the group’s recorded works existed as one collective interpretation of successive generations of subscribers to the aforementioned discourses, both culturally and musically, Green Day thus represented a unremitting raft of (post-WWII?) social neoteny (the retention of juvenile characteristics in adults) **and** mimesis (the means of perceiving the emotions of the visible or audible characters). Jeff Nuttall (1968) had already noted that one of the attractions of the late-‘60s alternative world view was that it protected the impression of vulnerability, suggesting this latter image was something to be congratulated, developed, cultivated. Nuttall stated that people “flew to this culture [...] it provided a formalised mode of behaviour to compensate for our own directional poverty” (Nuttall, 1968:21). One might argue that by the 1990s, fundamentalist punk responses to any organised and even naively articulated *political* messages were (fundamentally) disapproving, as the direction of the artists making these noises were evidently altered, ceasing to be “other” and, in the “Levinas” sense, faced with the inevitability of invisible death “beneath [those] expressions which cover over and protect with an immediately adopted face or countenance, [...] the nakedness and destitution of the expression as such, that is to say extreme exposure, defencelessness, vulnerability itself” (LEVINAS, 1989, p. 82).

Every listener responds to a musical work through the lenses of a particular scope of anticipations (sets of conventions and/or rules). None of us can escape the historical nature of the human condition and we are tied to our sense of past and present. Listening in the present, we still cannot escape the preconceptions of our culture (although we can try to attempt an understanding which may bring new light on an old concept). Therefore listening “a-new” does not really take place, as such and our horizons of expectation around which we do our thinking fuse with the horizons of past thoughts and listening. The reception, therefore, of any (say) Green Day musical text requires analysis, not simply from the moment of its

inception and reception, but actually from both its pre-composed – the situation, if you will, from which it emerges as a discussion of ideas placed into song – and decomposed states (when it, effectively, ceases to “be” what it once was). Whether they liked it or not, the hardcore punk rock group Green Day was intrinsic with a historical-cum-mythological rock aesthetic compact based upon two basic (rock) myths: one, that affirmative, ironic, child-like outsider-ship should be maintained at all costs in antipathy to the organised world; secondly that the organic unity of the (in this case northern) Californian-rooted “counter cultural” world view was part of the very foundation of the group and (as with the group’s songs) this codification processually linked backwards as it moved forwards through time. Any move into direct *political* statements, mixed on a palette of pop and punk sound quotients rendered a collapse of this myth of foundation surrounding Green Day, depriving the group of any generative meaning – by the time of *American Idiot*, Green Day had inaugurated a sonic paradigm shift, thus, in the process, becoming groundless.

For many Green Day fans in 1993, (before *Dookie* was even recorded, never mind released) the group had already sold-out and, despite their increasing popularity up until and including *American Idiot*, the organic, perhaps suburban cod-identities created and endorsed initially by the group became increasingly unstable. The works of Green Day were actually appropriated within the legitimising hegemonic discourse of pop-punk popularity. Johnny Loftus of *pitchfork.com* declared: “Green Day were always innately suburban [...] They didn’t have any answers – they just wanted weed and entitlement” (LOFTUS, *pitchfork.com*). Green Day’s politicised stance, therefore, was at best highly questionable. *Dookie* was “supra-realistic” punk in that it contained an overwhelming market appeal through its combining of both the authenticity of the sound of punk together with the mimetic exemplifications of punk’s discourse. But it was pastiche and, whether sonic or visual, this is speech in a dead language: a neutral practice without any ulterior motives, amputated of its initial organic impulse, stylistic in the extreme and devoid of humour. So, while on the one hand, *Dookie*’s almost “flashy” verisimilitude appealed to the traditional prejudices and preferences inherent in a punk discourse: that art should be questioned via back-to-basics in sounds; on the other hand (because it sounded so much like a copy), it still resonated as vaguely odd – outrageous even – thus feeding on the 1990s demand for fashionable ironic novelty and predictable horizons of genre expectations; an oxymoron, it was only what it appeared to be. In an age which looked increasingly towards rather naïve anti-heroes, neo-punk vulnerability came to be a key component in the cultural personality of the times, not

simply a feature of the alternative world view from which Green Day emerged. In a sense (and as predicted by late-‘60s hippies) the world was waking-up to and abstracting many of the conservationist, alternative ideals that reached back to the high sixties, but by doing so it became more difficult to locate Green Day’s (or in the UK Oasis’ or Blur’s) music within the canonic history of rock. Were they copies? Were they authentic? parody? surreal? Or was it all “classic” in the rock sense? Perhaps all of the above – yet, for some, none: such dislocational events forever changed the profile of not only this northern Californian trio, but rock music in general.

At the same time, Green Day became increasingly ambitious. Fitting the punk mythos by being recorded in three weeks, *Dookie* eventually sold over 10 million copies in the USA and 15 million worldwide. UK music graduate and “massive” Green Day fan (at least until *American Idiot*), Lucy Cockayne recalls first hearing this seminal album when she was “maybe 15/16. My best friend had the album and we sat in her bedroom and listened to the whole thing all the way through. I was a massive fan from that point on really and between us we worked our way through their whole back catalogue”. *Dookie* was an enormous success and was assisted by extensive MTV airplay for the videos of the songs “Longview”, “Basket Case” and “When I Come Around”. All three songs reached the number one position on the Modern Rock Tracks charts. Perhaps ironically, in 1995 *Dookie* won the Grammy Award for Best Alternative Album and the band was nominated for nine MTV Video Music Awards including Video of the Year. Further albums *Insomniac* (1995), *Nimrod* (1996), and *Warning* (2000) followed. Critical reviews of the last of these three titles were mixed. *Allmusic* stated “*Warning* may not be an innovative record *per se*, but it’s tremendously satisfying” whereas *Rolling Stone* was far more critical stating “*Warning* [...] invites the question: who wants to listen to songs of faith, hope and social commentary from what used to be snot-core’s biggest-selling band?”. This latter comment questions whether such didactic political statements could be taken seriously or should even emanate from within the milieu that supported the alienated sensibilities and eroded adulthoods of Californian punk. Two compilations albums *International Superhits!* and *Shenanigans* followed, as if to cement the group’s international status, but Green Day’s authenticity paradigms were wearing thin. Lucy further informed me “For me, original Green Day finished with *International Superhits!* I think that releasing a greatest hits album was a sign that they wouldn’t or shouldn’t write any more music.”

My daughter Stephanie also told me of how she tired of what she considered to be Green Day's endless arrested development:

If we argue that a degree of childishness permeates Green Day, then we only need look at the musical descendents of Green Day in the punk and pop/punk scene. Who cites Greed [*sic*] Day as a big influence in inspiring them to become musicians? The ultimate in arrested development – **perpetually** teenage pop punk: Blink 182, who then in turn pave the way for Sum 41, New Found Glory etc, etc...

When we listen, we process texts in terms of themes and we use the musical works to symbolize and replicate ourselves. All musical knowledge is “made” by people rather than “found” because the objects of our enquiries are changed by the acts of listening. All musical sounds are also communal sounds, so we must ask what are exactly or approximately the individual and communal occasions for symbolic renderings of experience? These come through to us in our recall of discourses both musical and social, and if certain sounds do not comply with our social horizons, they are negated. Steph continued: “As a listener to *Warning* when it came out, it wasn't the lyrics or content that struck me concerning lyric inferiority, but that it was actually becoming musically bland”. We might agree or disagree, but this subjective criticism is very significant as an interpretive strategy for digesting, understanding, and relating to musical representations, for our main motivation in listening is to understand ourselves, as well as Green Day. If sonically an artist moves away from a listener's personal response, growth, development, that listener is left “high and dry” – as many who spoke to this writer concerning the song “American Idiot”, confessed. Green Day were eventually in a sound-sense dealing in a syntax that had turned values into attributes of commodities – perhaps rendering them irrelevant. While that is not a judgement with which this writer would agree, if we look closely enough sonic in-authenticity, like its dependable converse, it **can** be located. Let us now briefly consider such signs and meanings *within* a musical text.

‘American Idiot’

We have suggested that the punk aesthetic reaction against complexity is a diachronic development of music history, rock mythology, and complex social, cultural, and artistic practices. Therefore, as Richard Middleton in Longhurst (2007) suggests, the music text is generative, syntactic, paradigmatic, and processual. It is schematic (all popular music works within some convention or another – even when artistes claim not so to do) and therefore

contains elements that relate the listener to other texts with reception-based “significance”. Listening is split between the stock of discourses one brings to the text and the reinforcement of these images by the musical texts, themselves. When the latter does not occur sufficiently the listener is then impelled towards certain ideas, suggestions and indeed solutions – this is a continuous adjustment of viewpoints perhaps reinforced by repeated listening. We hold in our minds certain expectations of sound, based on our memory of approved sonic and cultural discourses and these memories are upheld and also continually modified as the music passes through time, space, and our heads. Recorded sound has never been simply about reproduction, but increasingly production and the reinforcement of supportive cultures. If we are impelled to grasp new viewpoints via these audio cultures, such viewpoints can agree or disagree with our perspectives. Thus one importance of recorded sound through the modern era has been the potential for co-composition by receptive communities.

The song “American Idiot” is not difficult to take apart, structurally, for it implements several conventions of the popular song. It moves along a fairly predictable A/B/A/B – bridge – A/B – outro form, which some might construe as perhaps an even simpler AABA form with the bridge acting as B and the chorus “welcome...” being the hook of each A verse. The guitars are predictably overdriven and an episodic marker of a guitar sound as if emanating from a transistor radio acts as a social as well as musical intro – thus provoking images of a critique of the media as presented by the likes of the “punkish” Elvis Costello in the song “Radio, Radio”. The explosive crash of a tom brings in the rest of the band with typically punk military precision and the guitar riff is then repeated by the whole ensemble. It sounds live (but isn’t) and this is the first stage of Green Day’s paeon to rock mythology in that it awards us a mental image of the band “going on the red light” – a classic myth stretching back to the days of Elvis.

Furthermore, despite several tracks probably being given over to one instrument or one vocal track, the song “American Idiot” appears to be recorded *in situ*, demonstrating how close Green Day managed to get to an “organic” live recording, redolent of the mythologies of the high sixties and groups such as the MC5 (perhaps even the Band) and their later-1970s punk counterparts. There is the aural illusion of little-no overdubbing with the entire instrumental track, perhaps without the vocals, appearing to happen in “real” time and space. Moreover, the UK Punk aesthetic is also amplified as Armstrong’s voice, as in all other Green Day songs, sounds English. Armstrong’s vowel sounds are “round” rather than clipped or drawled. They express entire words, rather than the “classic” rock vocalising of indistinct

and incomplete words – *a la* Robert Plant, Brian Johnson, etc. Armstrong’s diction is technically good, and he even uses London parlance inflections such as in the phonetics ‘stereow’ ‘propageanda’, sounding not a little unlike John Lydon in his Sex Pistols and PiL days (and in the process reaffirming the appropriate mythology around this seminal artist).

The song hinges on juxtaposition between vox and guitar, as Armstrong sings a line and the guitar duly responds with a catchy but heavy power chord riff; the kick drum – which may have been given its own track – also adds further clarity of purpose. The overdriven guitar is played by the chording of fifths: “power chords” that rely upon only one basic fretted shape and the moving of this shape along the lowest four strings of the guitar: open E, A, D, and G. The fingering of either two or three notes, a first and a fifth, or two firsts an octave apart plus a fifth, creates the “power chord” – a loud, tense, brash and undiluted chord which brings to mind the rock mythology in different ways, according to the appropriate sub-genre. For example, in grunge the power chord slides up and down the fret-board in an almost lackadaisical manner; when used in heavy metal, the chords often contribute to an overall dark sound by their “chugged” or [over]driven pace; in contrast, for punk, the mixture of four or five chords played at breakneck speed is *de rigueur*. The sonic implication is that Green Day were (still) relatively inexperienced and untutored musicians (they were not) playing live on their record, as they would at rehearsal or gig. The celebrated myth of back-to-basics recordings is thus sustained: keeping it simple, these musicians appear to show a limited degree of virtuosity, but the band’s innate enthusiasm displays an unwavering integrity: this recording is, therefore, utterly “honest”.

In the case of “American Idiot” we hear six chord-shapes linked together in one riff, although our ears do not always detect the sixth of these forming, being the 7th of the octave, a hinge for the riff to be repeated. This device performs a similar function to the seventh as a “turnaround” chord in a blues progression (B7 in E, for example). But despite these six shapes, Green Day still play the mythologized “classic” three chord motif, so integral is it to the punk aesthetic. The guitar plays A5, D5, G5, D5, A5, G5 power chords in rapid succession, and it is the last of these that is somewhat lost in the “fuzz”. Nevertheless, the mood conforms to musicologist Philip Tagg’s concept of semiotic “style indication” (to paraphrase Tagg: any musical structure or set of musical structures that sounds constant or is regarded as typical of the “home” musical style by persons in a culture sporting at least two different musical styles). Thus the musical works of other significant groups (in this case the early Clash and their 1977 song “White Riot”) are ably so indicated.

In the Clash's "White Riot" two guitars are featured: one part, played by Mick Jones, uses a part-fifth in the middle of the fret-board (on fret seven), approximating an A5, while the other, played by Joe Strummer, simultaneously reinforces and expands the sound by the use of first position major triads A, and D during the vocals. While it is true to say that guitar first position majors can "popify" a tune in a similar manner to the way a minor chord can lighten a blues progression (e.g. by adding a minor sixth to a I, IV, V), this usually only occurs when such chords stand alone. When rhythmically supporting a run of power chords, triads add bulk while also, if (as in this case) being played by the vocalist, assist with a singer's pitch by locating an approximation of the melody through the guitar's treble strings. A consideration of the live work of the Clash during their early years (for example at Victoria Park London, 1978) displays the group's lead singer Joe Strummer only playing power chords on his Telecaster when singing the chorus; for the refrain he uses these first position shapes.

Structurally, "White Riot" is not dissimilar from "American Idiot". It is in the same key (A) and uses similar but not identical chord shapes, therefore older listeners can be easily drawn into Green Day's masterful piece of style indication. Linked together with the "English"-style vocals of Billie Joe Armstrong, we have, here, a model example of punk semiotics: authentic for many (although others might understandably find the riffs derivative and perhaps even the vocals lacking in originality). The drumming however is exceptional: highly generative and musical during this first minute of the song, as the snares are hit with great force and the bass drum keeps machine-gun regularity with four-to-the-floor beats. In the second "A" segment of the song, tension is built as all guitar chords are withheld while Armstrong sings; drummer Tre Cool continues to keep perfect time in a drum sound not dissimilar to that of the Damned's first single "New Rose" (1976). Only when Armstrong concludes does the guitar respond as if "vocally" in an equally classic punk riff call-and-response manner. So far, this stripped-down sound presses all of the style indication buttons as the "less is more" authenticity motifs are quite clearly audible. This also corresponds to the lyrics as Armstrong in his cod-English accent, spits-out a simplistic but affective sound-bite diatribe against "mind fuck America". Everything is working in harmony – vocals, guitar, drums, and the driving bass which merely repeats the tonic notes of the repeating riff. All of these energies reflect such an authenticity paradigm, that those of us old enough can imagine the group playing the Roxy or Eric's in 1977. We are then treated to another crisp repeat of this excellent riff; but what happens next?

Bubblegum

For some, the *Banana Splits* happen! In the chorus (or “B”) the guitar chords revert to the first position as fifths are replaced by triads. By doing so, this “B” section (or second half of “A1” – take your pick) then moves the group into another musical territory altogether – one reminiscent of refracted 1960s bubblegum. As Armstrong intones cod-cheerfully “Welcome to a new kind...” one is reminded of the Super K productions of Kasenetz & Katz (in particular the Ohio Express song “Yummy, Yummy, Yummy”). The chief characteristics of bubblegum were that it was conventional pop music contrived and marketed to appeal to pre-teens and teenagers. The songs typically have sing-along choruses, seemingly childlike themes, together with a contrived innocence. While the simplicity of bubblegum can (and does) appeal to a contemporaneous ironised post-1990s punk aesthetic (and apparently “steeped in irony”, the Sex Pistols had reportedly “got their chops together” on the Monkees’ “I’m Not Your Stepping Stone”), even the sardonic use of childishness cannot disguise inappropriateness. It is at this very point that some UK fans identified to this writer the closing stages of their discursive relationship with Green Day; for example, Lucy Cockayne elucidated: “The initial reaction I had to the song for the first time I heard it was ‘this is NOT Green Day! It doesn’t sound right’. It was hard for me to put my finger on why I reacted like this”.

I was also directed by a group of Y3 music undergraduates at Liverpool Hope University in May 2009 to a specific paradigm: “That’s it! There! That’s the bit! It’s all wrong. It’s a nursery rhyme” and “what were they playing at?” “Great beginning but what’s that jingle-jangle melody all about?” “It sounds like the Monkees” and “are they taking the piss?” While all conventional popular songs require juxtapositions, and even two and three-minute songs need variation, the manner in which “American Idiot” works between one sound and another is so striking that it appears to have the potential to throw some listeners “out of kilter” and into an examination of not only the song’s syntax and its processual *modus operandi*, but also to question their own accumulated sub-cultural capital. One’s embodiment in this genre appears at once objectified and institutionalized in a few musemes. Perhaps the structural syntax of this retro “bubblegum” sound is an excellent example of what Philip Tagg describes as codal interference. Although some might also argue that, historically, this pop-based chorus/hook stems from Buzzcocks (and/or early 1980s “new wave”) territories, Peter Shelley, chief songwriter of the Buzzcocks, tended to run his

melodies **over** punk riffs – he did not effectively write two song styles and staple them together. Shelley songs such as: “Fast Cars” and “Ever Fallen in Love” were crisscrossed with layers and currents of sound. We have here a prime example of the popular music genre synecdoche.

In “Welcome to a new kind...” a D major-added 4th (aka ‘sus4’), a feature of all sorts of bubblegum, folk-rock, and singer/songwriter material of the “high 60s”, is utilised as the main provider of melody. The sus4 extended chord allows a guitarist to play a major chord but also add-in and pull-off a 4th note (in the case of D, a G). Many popular songs including in the 1960s those formed from a folk or folk-rock sensibility (“Norwegian Wood”, “Alone Again Or”, etc) use this stock-in-trade I to IV “rise” as a way of controlling and/or developing a “pop”-inclined melody line over a basic triad. However, at least for this listener, the immediate connecting point would be less to do with the Beatles and more the Banana Splits’ “Banana Splits (Tra La La Song)”. This bubblegum song can also be easily played in A with the nursery rhyme melody bringing the important IV and V chords of D and E into play. The Dickies, as Californian punks who covered this song in 1979, and the Banana Splits – a piece of “high sixties” TV bubblegum fantasia – both link us back into the sunshine of the Californian “organic discourse”. But this is not the “organic discourse” of a Joe Strummer, a John Lydon, or a Greg Graffin. By the release of *American Idiot* Joe Strummer was sadly already deceased (2002), but Lydon was to remark in 2006 in his perhaps usual sardonic tone: “Don't try and tell me Green Day are punk. They're not, they're plonk and they're band-wagoning on something they didn't come up with themselves. I think they are phony.” (Lydon, 9th Feb, 2006 in Melia, *Gigwise.com*) As for Graffin, one need only read his punk manifesto (www.badreligion.com) to recognize that, for the fundamentalist punk aficionado, connected through time to the rock myth continuum, “American Idiot” constituted a sonic “sell-out”.

A storming guitar break follows – a fine example of simple, linear double-stopped punk guitar playing; totally without flash and excellent in its accomplishment, but the punk element of the song, in returning to the final diatribe, is lost. A small repeat verse, once again as if broadcast, is followed by the chorus and although the song ends in its wonderful Clash episodic marker (“I thank you”!) one is forever left with the sound of bubblegum in one’s ears. Perhaps this is what they wanted, perhaps this is where the pop-punk sound truly coalesces as one but, for many, it showed two distinct sections of Green Day’s withering image – a Janus-style referential piece of sonic syntax that reveals elements of authenticity

sitting next to, not criss-crossing – which would be another matter entirely – each other: “White Riot” or “Magnolia Riot”?

The song is no longer held together by a common punk consciousness, or a sub-structure. There are no crisscrossing sonic threads redolent of the discursive practices that brought the song to this stage – no single strand running through the song as a receptive anchor. There are, in fact, no musical genre intersections and the syntax of the song is too divided, too pluralistic with, one element competing at a time, with the other in a processual movement through time and space of generic referrals. No matter how much a nod to the bubblegum of the 1960s can be interpreted as a product of Green Day’s pop punk sardonic wit and sensibility, the complex and heterogeneous social identities that contributed to placing this group cannot be veneered in song by an alternating chain-link arrangement of inescapability, nor can they be reinforced or indeed the song welded together via an inappropriately cited lyrical diatribe. “American Idiot”, the song, thus contains no organic discourse and, for better or worse (this is not a criticism), the auxiliary ironisation of the Foxboro’ Hot Tubs (Green Day’s ‘60s spin-off project – see *Stop Drop and Roll! Jingle Town* 9362-49864-7) evidently beckoned.

Concluding remarks

Rock ‘n’ roll, rock, punk rock and all of the associated sub-sets have been key musical and social signifiers concerning authenticity and the myth of the organic community. In the United States, the associated sense of an “other” future, which asserted itself so powerfully in the 1960s, is still alive, but its breathing space is shrinking – it has become novel, rather than organic, a miasma of nostalgia. Indeed, while the real economy, as perhaps predicted by counter cultural thought, lurches from crisis-to-crisis, a new force is indeed taking over. But it is not apprised from what might have been described as the counter culture continuum. Instead we have a post-ironic, honey and aspic culture of arrested development. It would be incorrect to utterly believe that when Green Day sat down to compose the song “American Idiot” they had anything more in mind than the material itself, and the most suitable musical processes for articulating this small fragment of sound with the widest possible reach. But it is also erroneous to ignore the fact that Green Day were once part of a pre-existing organic discourse – that their very existence was tied (for better or worse) to an aesthetic that was anti-corporate, anti-political, anti-racism, and even (it seems) anti-rock star.

But an analysis of the syntax of the song “American Idiot” reveals to us a great deal about the later trajectory of this group. The song is exposed by a somewhat half-baked musical principle of positing moments (arguments?) against each other so that authenticity paradigms can be decoded line by line. But when punk ideology in sound is juxtaposed against pop moments stringent authenticities are sonically challenged. An aesthetic built upon failed seriousness together with a forum for incompatible messages cannot be veneered by pop punk sonic quotients claiming one thing lyrically, but sounding like another, musically. While semiotic analysis of Green Day’s “American Idiot” is, by nature, somewhat incomplete, we can learn a great deal about how sounds come to represent different emotional, political, and even economic strands of cognition. Semiotics can tell us that the changing social uncertainty of musical genres requires continual exploration. Analysis of the sound of music cannot be anything other than some kind of mid-term report. Propositions have to be very tentative, for the music both changes and remains the same at one and the same time. This changing affective social location, hence the role, of popular music is therefore forever of interest. The aforementioned consideration of “pre-composed” and “decomposed” states, together with self-reflexive, anti-hagiographical investigations can then locate variable, but entwining, discourses. It appears that for some Green Day moved from the metaphor of legislators to the role perhaps best captured by the metaphor of interpreters. Lucy Cockayne suggested just how disappointingly **real** such dwindling punk community discourses were for her when she “found that people my age who had never been fans of the band were suddenly claiming that it was the best album Green Day had ever written, and I couldn’t help but think ‘what do you know? You don’t even get it!’” The news (March 2009) that *American Idiot* is to become a musical (it was initially claimed to be a punk rock opera, of course) is a sure indicator that Green Day have found variable ways to keep their material “viable” in the most testing of popular music times.

The face-to-face logic of popular music responses is by necessity one of social interactivity – therefore we simply must (historically and semiotically) study discourses of authenticity. There is no escape from the act of judging in any specific case and our authenticities are all as valid as the next. Indeed it is a prerequisite, an ethical demand that, as Levinas states, we search for “the face of the Other [...] separated, in some way, from any whole”(LEVINAS, 1989, p. 82). Levinas’ “Other” is in itself always other than itself – perhaps more akin to the probing and ambiguity of Black Flag than the confidence and conviction of Green Day. The demand, here, is actually for some kind of recognition of the

possibilities of musical and social authenticity within community-based discourses concerning our lived environment. Whether we turn the music up or down to help build a sense of community, we should always acknowledge the validity of judgemental values as an intrinsic part of communal aesthetics – whether we agree with them or not. Should we even search for a “just politics” (whatever that is) in popular music or should we “just” accept a perhaps transitory but well-founded politic of the Other?

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