A Blank Generation: Richard Hell and American Punk Rock

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I. Introduction

"I belong to the Blank Generation, and I can take it or leave it each time," sang Richard Hell. Those words would quickly galvanize the nihilism and rejection of the mainstream that defined punk rock. Richard Hell is an American musician and writer, known for his involvement with the early punk movement in New York City in the 1970s. Punk was a musical and sub-cultural phenomenon driven by reaction against the idealism of the sixties counterculture that manifested itself in minimalist, confrontational, and often nihilistic music. It would eventually prompt a paradigm change in American rock 'n' roll music and culture. "A 'Blank Generation'" uses Richard Hell to show that "punk" is both derivative of and a reaction to literary and musical precedents. In doing so, it shows that Hell's musical and cultural contributions have been influential in their own right.

Richard Hell Biography

Richard Hell was born Richard Meyers on October 2, 1949, and was raised in Lexington, Kentucky. After an attempt to run away to Florida and live on the beach with friend Tom Miller (later Verlaine), he dropped out of his Delaware boarding school in 1966. He made his way to New York. There he hoped he would be able start a career as a poet and immerse himself in the rich art community of the city. In his career as a poet he managed to get some of his works published in places like *Rolling Stone* and the *New Directions' Annual*s. He also started his own publishing imprints, Genesis: Grasp and then later Dot Books. He had little success as a poet, his imprints ultimately couldn't be sustained and he ultimately cooled on his poetic aspirations. He and friend Tom Verlaine, who had also come to New York with poetic ambitions, decided to try their hand at rock and roll.

Their first group was The Neon Boys. It was a short lived group that produced only two four-track studio recordings. The project was eventually revived and became the group Television. Television received a good deal of hype in the New York music scene, with good write-ups in the *Soho Weekly News*, by Patti Smith, who was then sometimes working as a rock journalist, among others. Television was the first group on the New York scene to play at the Bowery club CBGB, which quickly became the epicenter of the emerging punk rock. Hell left, or was fired, depending on who tells the story, in 1975 before the group recorded their first album, due to conflicts between Hell and Verlaine over songwriting, singing, and stage presence. There is both audio and video of the band while Hell remained, but nothing was officially released.

It was during his time with Television that Hell began to cultivate his unique look. He wore his hair spiky and his clothes torn. He often used safety pins both as a functional means of holding his clothes together but also as a fashion accessory. His stage presence was wild and energetic. He would often hop around and dance, getting caught up in the music, and his demeanor on the microphone was sarcastic and sometimes antagonistic. Although his style reflected his lifestyle in the slums of New York's Lower East Side, it was carefully constructed. He would go on to influence many later punk performers with both his look and attitude.

After leaving Television, Hell joined Johnny Thunders and Jerry Nolan (both ex-members of the New York Dolls) in the Heartbreakers (they have nothing to do with Tom Petty's backing group of the same name). They were a super-group of sorts on the New York scene. Expectations for the new group were high and initial performances were met with criticism. In the group Hell faced many of the same issues of songwriting and singing that he had with Television, and the heroin problems of Hell, Thunders, and Nolan were mutually destructive. Hell eventually quit the Heartbreakers after a year, again before the group got into the studio to

record an album. Live material featuring Hell exists, but was not officially released until years later.

In 1976 he founded his own group, the Voidoids. With his group, he was in control and would finally be allowed the creative freedom that he had wanted but couldn't get in his earlier groups. The band consisted Ivan Julian on Guitar, Bob Quine, a fixture of the New York scene and preeminent chronicler of the Velvet Underground as a live group, on lead guitar, and Mark Bell, later Marky Ramone of the Ramones, on drums. His group along with others on the scene, including Television, the Heartbreakers, the Patti Smith Group, and the Ramones originated the punk movement. Hell is best known within the rock community for his 1977 album *Blank Generation,* credited to "Richard Hell and the Voidoids." The album was and is highly regarded by critics as one the finest examples of early punk rock, and as the source of many of the themes and ideas that would come to define punk. The track "Blank Generation" is the standout, and it engages openly in a nihilistic and ironic take on the detachment of the post-counterculture generation. A play on the "Beat Generation," the track is one of the defining songs of the early punk era.

After doing the press and touring for Blank Generation, coupled with his ongoing heroin addiction, Hell took time off from music. It would be four years until Hell's second album, *Destiny Street*. In the time between his two albums, punk exploded, first in England, and then in America. The troubled rise and quick burnout of the Sex Pistols left a bad impression of the sustainability of punk with many people, though other groups on both sides of the Atlantic used the early exposure to build highly acclaimed careers including the Clash, from London, and Blondie and the Talking Heads, from the New York scene. However, Hell kept himself largely out of the fold, and didn't tour or build up an audience. When *Destiny Street* came out, punk was

no longer in the headlines, supplanted by "New Wave," and the album did not receive as much attention as its predecessor. It got good notices within the New York area, with Robert Christgau from the *Village Voice* giving it a very good review, and the *New York Times* naming it one of the ten best of 1982.

Since that time, Hell has largely remained out music. Other releases include *R.I.P.*, released in 1984, a collection of B-sides, outtakes and previously unreleased tunes from the span of his career that also included some new songs that had been recorded in New Orleans. Hell made a minor comeback, without intent of a full blown return to music, in 1992 with Dim Stars, another punk super-group of sorts. The band included Thurston Moore and Steve Shelley of Sonic Youth and Don Fleming of Gumball. They recorded one album, *Dim Stars*, which was released that same year, and received a four star review in *Rolling Stone*.

Since quitting music, Hell has done a significant amount of poetry and prose writing, Hell's poetry includes *Wanna Go Out?*, credited to Theresa Stern but really a collaboration between Hell and Tom Verlaine, published in 1973, *I Was A Spiral On The Floor*, 1988, and *Across the Years*, published in 1992. He wrote a short novel, *The Voidoid* in 1973 that wasn't published until 1996. He has been widely anthologized in such anthologies as: *Out of This World* (fiction, Crown Publishers, 1992), *Am Lit* (fiction, Editions Druckhaus Galrev, Berlin, 1992), *The Penguin Book of Rock Criticism* (essays, Penguin, 1992), *Jungles D'Ameriques* (fiction, AAC Editions, Paris, 1993), *Low Rent* (fiction, Grove Press, 1994), *The Rolling Stone Book of the Beats* (essay, Hyperion, 1999), *Beat Punks* (essay, Da Capo, 2000), *Aroused* (introductory essay, poems, and fiction, Thunder's Mouth Press, 2001), and *Martin Scorsese Presents The Blues* (essay, Amistad, 2003).

Go Now is Hell's first novel and it was published in 1996. It is somewhat autobiographical, set in 1980, and following a junky punk burn-out driving across America with a former girlfriend. In 1998, Hell wrote a small book, *Weather*, as well as new short collection of a miscellaneous writings and drawings entitled *Hot and Cold* in 2001. His most recent book, *Godlike*, was published in 2005 and is a fictional account dealing with the poetry world of New York in the early 70s. Hell has also acted in Susan Seidelman's *Smithereens* (Seidelman is famous for *Desperately Seeking Susan*, in which Hell also made a cameo), notable as the first American independent movie to be invited to compete at the Cannes Film Festival. He has acted in multiple other smaller movies as well, including *Blank Generation* in 1978, and which features live performances by Hell and the Voidoids at CBGB.

Purpose

This thesis situates Richard Hell as both an heir to forms like rock 'n' roll music and as an innovator of the form and original artist. This is achieved through archival research, particularly focusing on Hell's own music, lyrics and journals, as well as pieces from his contemporaries, those he influenced, and contemporary and subsequent rock criticism. By framing him in terms of his influences and acolytes, it becomes easy to see how innovative Hell really was. Punk rock was not just an isolated musical phenomenon in 1970s New York, but quickly crossed the Atlantic. In the United States punk formed the backbone of the creative and commercial forces of "Alternative" and "Indie" rock, which continue to both sustain subcultures and sell records. Thus, understanding punk's place in the constant development of American music and culture is crucial. Through Hell, that place is better understood.

An attempt to show Richard Hell as a link, a type of model to understand the cultural context of American punk has not yet been done, though the concept of using a figure in this way

is well trodden ground with regard to Bob Dylan, most recently apparent in Chapter 2 of Sean Wilentz's book *Bob Dylan in America*. That chapter begins with an examination of the Beat generation and the folk scene's leftist connections and then places Dylan as a successor to each of those movements, assessing the cultural context in which he became relevant. This is similar to what this thesis aims to achieve with Richard Hell.

Important works on the history of punk music are Legs McNeil's *Please Kill Me: An Uncensored Oral History of Punk* and Clinton Heylin's *From the Velvets to the Voidoids: The Birth of American Punk Rock* as well as his *Babylon's Burning: From Punk to Grunge.* All these books provide good overviews of the rock and roll history and development that shifted and molded over time. McNeil's book, comprised entirely of interviews, gives special attention to the New York art and literary scenes that were major influences on punk, and out of which Hell came. It also provides crucial background information from firsthand accounts. Heylin's books also include interviews, though they are not entirely composed of them. They are meticulously researched and serve to illuminate the musical roots of punk, especially in American garage rock, and describe in great detail the emergence of a cohesive musical movement and its subsequent development.

The paper draws from those works but primarily is based on the items in the Richard Hell archive in Fales Special Collections at New York University. The archive consists of journals, lyrics, press clippings, and other assorted writings, mostly by Hell, though the archive does include a good portion of material written about Hell. Of these, the most important to this thesis are Hell's early journals and music notebooks, which provide unique insight into his thoughts and ideas as he was transitioning from poet to musician. The various clippings of critical reviews and background pieces help place Hell's career in a broader rock and roll context and

provide a more objective view of Hell's music and career than his own writings can. These selections from the archive form the basis of the research and are supplemented by other sources.

This thesis aims to show that Richard Hell is the direct link between previous American subversive traditions, like the Beat Movement, Bob Dylan and Garage Rock, and the underground and confrontational movement that punk became, all the way through to alternative and indie rock. It first examines Hell's interaction with his influences. In Chapter I, Hell's relation to the Beats is examined. First his youthful idealism and identification with the more transcendent Beats is illustrated, and then his phase of personal transition to music, associated with his failure as a poet and his embrace of William S. Burroughs, is explored. These literary, and broadly philosophical, changes are then related to his own personal musical journey. Beginning with his interest in Bob Dylan, the Beatles, and the Rolling Stones, his musical development is traced through to his discovery of garage rock and his increasing awareness of the Velvet Underground on the New York scene. Understanding these influences helps to inform the next chapter on his particular innovations.

Chapter II first delves into the lyrical themes associated with his music, particularly his most famous song "Blank Generation." Examining the development of the song as well as its immediate impact from a critical perspective helps highlight Hell's importance. His articulation of nihilism is explained and the impact of that nihilism is addressed. Then his distinct style of hair and clothing are explored, showing that he, in fact, invented the look most associated with punk rock. The final part of the chapter describes how Hell's look, themes and attitude were co-opted and sharply politicized by British punks. It is through them, with their inflammatory nature and high media visibility, that Hell's look begins to spread across America.

Chapter III then explores Hell's influence in America. It first traces the wake of new punks left by British punk groups touring the U.S. for the first time. These nascent punk communities are then followed as they develop into city and regional scenes, with independent record labels that keep punk alive in the American underground for nearly ten years. Hell's influence broadly as the originator of many of punk's characteristics and specifically on some of the most important bands of the era is then addressed. The indie scene is followed to the early 1990s, when Nirvana broke alternative rock into mainstream. This represents the commercial peak of punk's main arc, though the damage to the indie community and subsequent sanitization of punk into pop-punk are addressed.

II. From Beat Generation to Blank Generation

"I'm certain Burroughs' thought will have an impact on the next century comparable to Marx's and Nietzsche's on this," wrote Richard Hell in his late 60s diary.[1] This quote illuminates several things. First is that Richard Hell was reading and grappling with Beat literature, especially but not limited to William Burroughs. Secondly, Hell is identifying with something in Burroughs writing that reflects not just literary merit, but a worldview. Hell's response to Burroughs' ideas is such that he thinks they will have legitimate socio-political influence and change modes of thinking in the way Marx's or Nietzsche's were able to.

This is a bold claim, but speaks to the power that Burroughs' writing had over Hell and other early punks. Keeping this in mind, it becomes clear that punks were in some ways the last gasp of breath of the Beat movement, which had largely picked up and lost steam with the late 1960s counterculture. That Hell and other punks gravitated towards Burroughs is important. It clearly differentiates them from the hippies of the counterculture. It is somewhat paradoxical that two movements so opposed to each other, hippie and punk, have the same roots, the Beats. That fact necessitates looking back at the Beats themselves to see how these two sets of acolytes developed.

While they are often referred to as the Beat Generation, such a small collection of people can hardly be called a generation. The heart of the Beats lies with its three biggest writing members, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William Burroughs. The three met at Columbia University in the 1940s, where Ginsberg and Kerouac were students. They were brought together by Lucien Carr, who subsequently also introduced them to the work of Rimbaud, and together they explored an interest in writing as well as a mutual fascination with and exploration of New

York's seedier underbelly. They went to bars and jazz clubs, associated with drug addicts and dealers, and generally absorbed the grimier feel of the city. It was in one of these same grimy places, the Lower East Side of New York City, where punk would begin nearly thirty years later.

The Beats' subsequent writings were defined by their shared sense of the Other. Their affinity for the maligned and life at the fringes was a common thread that Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs all shared. Beyond that, however, they were quite different. Kerouac was primarily a novelist. While he started off very conventionally with *The Town and City*, his writing soon took on a newer sensibility. He became much more experimental with his invention of spontaneous prose, an attempt to capture in prose writing the cadence and rhythm of bop jazz. Kerouac also wrote a great deal of poetry, including many haikus, but the novel is where he found his greatest success and his most lasting legacy with works like *On the Road, Dharma Bums,* and the more spontaneous and experimental *Dr. Sax, Visions of Cody,* and *The Subterraneans* .

Ginsberg on the other hand was primarily a poet. He was very literate and well versed in many styles of poetry. He didn't limit himself to any particular form, and he wrote many long poems. Ginsberg experimented both with stylistic elements, including copying Kerouac's attempts to capture bop cadence, and with thematic elements, including drug use and homosexuality, which led him into legal trouble in the late 50s. He wrote poetry his entire life and is most famous for *Howl,* which is a prime example of his subversive content and bop stylistic poetry.

Burroughs was the odd man out of the big three Beat writers and form was only part of it. He wrote both novels and poetry. His books range from the more stylistically straightforward and ethnographic *Queer* and *Junkie* to the highly experimental and surrealistic *Naked Lunch*. He

experimented with various forms of poetry over the years as well. One of his most well known techniques is the cut-ups method, in which random words cut from previous pieces of writing were strung together to make new ideas. He carried this technique into recorded sound as well. Aside from his early work, nearly everything Burroughs wrote was stylistically experimental, being dismissed by critics as incomprehensible, and was thematically quite dark, dealing with drugs, homosexuality and violence quite explicitly.

The darker nature of Burroughs' work is the biggest divide between him and Ginsberg and Kerouac. Both of those two dealt with sex, drugs and violence as well, and they were subversive in their own right, but they represented a qualitatively different outlook on the world. Ginsberg and Kerouac both were highly focused on the idea of personal transcendence, and held a Romantic worldview. Thus their view of the sex and drugs represented a connection with something real and uninhibited, what Kerouac called "IT" in *On the Road,* that brought them closer to the true meaning of life. Both incorporated Buddhist ideas and philosophy in their work, and each was also highly influenced by the religion he was raised in, Judaism for Ginsberg and Catholicism for Kerouac. They believed in some kind of ecstatic higher state of being that transcended conscious thought and was achievable on a very personal level. This point of view was subversive to the 1950s mainstream, but was hopeful and affirmative.

This emphasis on personal transcendence and experimentation directly influenced the counter-culture of the 1960s. There are some direct corollaries. The use of drugs as a gateway to mental enlightenment and fulfillment has distinct origins in both Ginsberg and Kerouac's writing, and the use of marijuana and psychedelics like LSD and Mescaline are direct offshoots of their views on drugs. The frankness, openness, and non-judgmental view of sex present in their novels informed the free-love mentality of the era. The emphasis on love and peace through

personal enlightenment has origins in the Beat quest for transcendence that was the subject of so many works, especially Kerouac's. While Kerouac didn't embrace the counterculture because of its more radical political leanings (he grew conservative politically and religiously as he got older), Ginsberg became a generational spokesman, hanging out with Bob Dylan and making appearances at the Human Be-In, the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago and other countercultural rallies.

The countercultural mindset undoubtedly influenced Richard Hell. He was 17 when he ran away from his boarding school to go to New York and be a poet. The simplicity and youthful idealism of his plan is similar to those of many kids who abandoned their homes to go to San Francisco. He realized New York City had a freethinking art world and was eager to join it. Politically he was very leftist, in line with most countercultural individuals; writing in 1969, he "would sooner swear allegiance to Eldridge Cleaver before I could summon the energy to spit on R. Nixon."[2] This is an incredibly bold statement because Cleaver was the Minister of Information for the Black Panthers, and Richard Nixon was the leader of "Silent Majority" who didn't like the nature of the counterculture or its vision of the country. This personal alignment with the radical left far predates yet adds context to the radical political turn punk music would take in the 70s, the Sex Pistol's "Anarchy in the UK" being the culmination of those politics. In his diaries he is quite explicit about his reading at this time, Cleaver being just one person he absorbed, which reinforces the idea that he had certain countercultural tendencies.

In one journal he lists many of those who he considers great writers. Burroughs is not on the list, but William Blake, Allen Ginsberg, and Arthur Rimbaud each appear, and Hell says of the latter, that he is "on a special pinnacle, really belonging with Blake and Co."[3] The regard with which he holds Rimbaud sacred leads this writer to believe his chosen surname, Hell, is in

fact a reference to Rimbaud's collection of poems *A Season in* Hell. Given that friend Tom Miller changed his name to Tom Verlaine, in honor of Paul Verlaine, another French symbolist and the mentor of Rimbaud in his youth, this seems highly likely. Neither is it surprising that Hell holds Blake and Rimbaud in especially high regard; they are generally accepted to be great. But it is worth noting that they were in fact two of Ginsberg's most highly regarded writers. Ginsberg had a vision of William Blake that greatly inspired him, and he pressed his writings on members of a younger generation. Rimbaud was a poet whose work brought many of the Beats together in the early stages, and his symbolist poetry was a hallmark of counterculture reading.

Just a few days later, Hell again mentions his admiration for Blake, Rimbaud, Ginsberg and Beat associates McClure and Corso. He lavishes special praise for Ginsberg, saying, "In the moments of deepest illumination I know each poet has seen that ALL poets are brothers, but Allen Ginsberg seems to be the only one who can live it – Why can't we all?"[4] It is clear from this quotation that Hell admires not only Ginsberg's work, but the fashion in which he lived his life, bringing together artistic people and leading a generation influenced heavily by his ideas. Further example of Hell's complicity in the counterculture is his observation that "there is an unprecedented number of good poets, mostly due to psychedelic drugs, creating free association and the like."

It is also interesting in this same Journal entry that Hell mentions rock and roll. After his discussion of poets he goes further into his idea of free people, and mentions Bob Dylan (whose album *Bringing It All Back Home* was one of Hell's favorites according to an early 1974 Television bio release)[5] and the individual Beatles. These are perhaps the two most important musical artists of the counterculture, and Hell's admiration for them shows an engagement with that culture. Ginsberg himself introduced Bob Dylan to the work of Rimbaud; Dylan's use of

Rimbaud's symbolist techniques in his electric trilogy proved highly influential among the generation for whom he was presumably spokesman. Bob Dylan introduced the Beatles to drugs, which encouraged their sonic experimentation and lyrical expansion. Hell seems to recognize and admire this interconnected web of free thinking, and he makes it quite explicit that these are his influences at this point in his life.

In his journal a day earlier, though, Hell wrote about his appreciation for the Rolling Stones and the film *Gimme Shelter*.[6] The Stones cultivated a much darker, more cynical vision, and that film documents the Altamont music festival, the violence of which has been seen as a symbolic end to the counterculture. This capacity for appreciating something darker and anti-countercultural definitely existed within Hell, and it foreshadows his change of perspective, as he grew more appreciative of the worldview that Burroughs espoused.

In comparison to Ginsberg, Kerouac, and the other Beats, beatniks, and later hippies, Burroughs was much more pessimistic, cynical, and ironic. Exploring some of the same terrain as his contemporaries, Burroughs came to much darker conclusions. His writing was bereft of the hopefulness of Ginsberg and Kerouac, and was not spiritual at all. Rather he explored the grim surrealistic side of violence, drug abuse, and decadent sex and their degenerative effects. In works like *Naked Lunch* he often exploits the cruel irony of physical satisfaction in sex and drugs by highlighting the paranoia and destruction of a person who seeks such pleasure. His experimentation with randomness both as a stylistic form and as a thematic element in his writing betrayed a pessimistic view of the world, that it is all random and punctuated by dark irony. He had an alien view of the tendency towards chaos that continually worked against human attempts to create order. In other words, he was very nihilistic. This outlook was in sharp contrast to his Beat contemporaries, and explains why his work took much longer to catch on.

Needless to say, Burroughs pessimistic, ironic take on things did not resound quite as well with hippies as the writing of Ginsberg, Kerouac, McClure and Snyder. Initially, neither did he resonate with Hell. There is a noticeable gap in his diaries from 1971 to 1974, when he picks up writing regularly again. Over this period Hell tried very hard to realize his dream of being a poet, and generally failed. Neither he nor his friend Tom Verlaine got very much published during this time, even though they wrote a great deal. A few of Hell's poems appeared in publications like *Rolling Stone* and *New Directions Annuals*, but he did not meet much acclaim. He and Verlaine even tried writing together under the pseudonym Theresa Stern, but failed to gain traction.[7] Hell started his own poetry imprints: Genesis: Grasp, which put out its last publication in 1971, and then Dot Books, which put out its last publication, the Theresa Stern collaborations, in 1973.[8] That more or less signaled the end of his dream.

Hell had risked a great deal by dropping out of high school and going to New York in 1966. He had come with grand visions of fitting into a progressive and hip art world, but upon arriving found the poetry world very exclusive. Anne Waldman, somewhat of a Beat writer in her own right, but more attuned with Kerouac and Ginsberg, ran the St. Mark's Poetry readings, and Hell found it difficult to break into the poetry world. Age may have played a part, but attitude almost certainly did, and Hell and contemporaries like Tom Verlaine, and to a lesser extent Patti Smith and Jim Carroll, found themselves at the outskirts of the established guard of New York poetry. Hell was understandably disillusioned with the entire scene, and by extension the naiveté fostered by the counterculture. Even hipsters were exclusionary. As Bill Laswell insightfully observed later about Hell's music, it was "not seedy cynical, but tender bruised, a teen poetry nerd's Romantic ideals dashed by one night with the Real."[9] Hell himself wrote of his early experiences with poetry and subsequent disillusionment:

> At the time I wanted to make beautiful moving pages, and have happy drunken bohemian times in the off hours. Five years of the facts made my writing more vicious and my ambitions less mystic. I never made a wage from my work, which went from an inarticulate self-pitying idealism, through a slightly more articulate self-pitying sentimentality (which got the most economic acclaim), with sidelines in promising fuck-it conceptualism, to finally become extremely articulate but slightly obscure, diatribes were true to life and my soul(ful dissolution) with beautiful accuracy that I knew I'd arrived for myself. But no one met me at the station. One of the truths I'd discovered and beautifully expressed was that I hated nearly everybody.[10]

In 1974, Hell received a journal from Patti Smith. It was mostly unused except a little bit written in at the beginning about Burroughs. She claims to "have no morals about Burroughs," and describes an elaborate dream she had about rescuing Burroughs from the cops.[11] The writing is filled with allusions to Rimbaud, Baudelaire, and Keats. It is easy to see why Smith and Hell were friends; and of her portion at the beginning, Hell wrote merely that it was "magnificent." He then picks up writing about his life as a rock and roller. It is fitting then that the record of Hell's career change from poet to rocker is preceded by a meditation of sorts about Burroughs, because it is the more nihilistic sensibility of William Burroughs that Hell, and by extension many later punks, would bring to rock and roll. Given the circumstances of his life at the time, failure in his profession, making a great change, and casually falling into heroin use and subsequently addiction, the common ground between Hell and Burroughs is apparent and the transition in his outlook explainable.

Patti Smith, in her own right, was highly influenced by Burroughs. In the documentary film about the latter, *William S. Burroughs: A Man Within*, she speaks frankly about the personal time she spent with Burroughs, as well as his influence on her. She regarded him very highly, even saying she had a crush of sorts on him. Smith, who came to New York in 1967, was not just literary-minded like Hell was, but also was involved with the Warhol crowd at Max's Kansas

City. She sometimes spent hours sitting on the curb out front until she was admitted in, and soon became involved in the whole scene, which included bands like the Velvet Underground and the New York Dolls.[12] Smith also admired and spent time with a number of rock and roll musicians, including Bruce Springsteen and the Blue Oyster Cult, neither very punk.[13] That she and Hell and Verlaine were moving in the same circles, discussing Burroughs amongst rockers, likely helped Hell and Verlaine realize their ambitions in rock music, as she was beginning to play with Lenny Kaye, working with musicians, and writing reviews for publications like *Rolling Stone* and *Creem*.

In his later diaries, Hell writes about Burroughs, and the latter replaces the likes of Ginsberg and Blake on Hell's author lists.[14] Hell writes about the idea of Burroughs-as-junky as an influence on his own heroin habit.[15] But perhaps his greatest consideration of Burroughs comes from 2000's *Rolling Stone Book of Beats,* compiled by Holly George-Warren, to which Hell contributed an essay called "My Burroughs." Hell begins, "Burroughs was the real Rimbaud, or at least the one who stayed the course."[16] It is a significant way of tying Burroughs to a tradition, both high literary and countercultural, associated with Rimbaud. But it is crucial that Hell thinks Burroughs does it better. This draws a clear line in the sand between Hell's own early influences and ideas about literature, and where he came to stand. Hell draws that line and goes so far as to align himself with Burroughs.

He continues, "Rimbaud's program to banish the ego and undo the classifying of the mind was self-evidently the purpose to Burroughs." By this he explains that Burroughs had a mission against all forms of control, believing them unnatural and abhorrent. It is evident that Hell's own philosophy is greatly influenced by the abolishment of control, and through Hell this would become one of the most dominant themes in punk rock. What strikes Hell is Burroughs'

"fearless unattachment," his complete lack of vested interest, and his "complete unsentimentality, detachment from his own humanness." This sense of detachment is one of Burroughs' key contributions to Hell, and punk rock. The alienation, and not just ability but inevitability of viewing things in a detached and emotionally distant way, would go on to inform Hell, especially during his heroin addiction, and much of punk rock's perspective. Where counterculture was about community, punk became about the outsider.

Hell concludes with a thoughtful rumination about Burroughs' outlook, writing, and lifelong drug habit:

> His writing is beautiful and of course hilarious: meticulously seen, sawn, and nailed; deadpan and fearless. A matchless ear. He's among the most select (Joyce, Beckett, Borges, Nabokov) in having a style so refined that you can generally recognize him in a sentence. But just as great is that freedom from ties, from debts to, from vested interest in virtually anything. When you're coming from no assumptions, not even of the virtue of human existence, what you see here on earth could well make pain-killing, dream-inducing drugs a preferred option, no matter what the sacrifices. Think about it, or as Bill'd say, "Wouldn't you?"[17]

Hell's admiration for Burroughs shines through. First is the praise of style, and to say that Burroughs can be recognized by a sentence is a testament to Burroughs' stylistic refinement. But most interesting is Hell's admiration of Burroughs' attitude. He again returns to the value of a profound sense of detachment that Hell retools as a kind of "freedom." The idea of coming from a place of no assumptions, including human existence, is incredibly nihilistic. It undercuts the idea and quest for meaning and fulfillment that people found in the transcendent works of the other Beats like Ginsberg and Kerouac. Hell glorifies that nihilistic worldview, and no doubt Hell's music would most frequently be described as the origins of nihilism in punk.

Hell evoked similar sentiments in his liner notes to the DVD version of the film *William S. Burroughs: A Man Within*. In the notes he again marvels at Burroughs' detachment and

romanticizes Burroughs' nihilism.[18] The film itself features many interviews from punk rockers talking about his influence on them. The film, while a good enough look at Burroughs' life, is really a look at the man through the lens of punk rock. Perhaps most important of the interviewees is Patti Smith, who like Richard Hell had poetic aspirations that later turned into rock and roll. She cites him as important influence for both the beauty of his language, which she tried to mimic, and for his worldview that was informed by a more streetwise and realistic sensibility. Others support this view, and Thurston Moore, from Sonic Youth and with whom Hell played in Dim Stars, also cites Burroughs' radical politics, and his early support of the Sex Pistols. Moore, echoes Hell's observations about Burroughs abhorrence of all forms of control, and points to the English monarchy as a specific form of control which Burroughs targeted in his poem, "Bugger the Queen." Other important punk rockers like Iggy Pop and Jello Biafra make appearances as well.

Burroughs himself was dubious about the role that punk played and the role he played within punk. In a 1978 interview for *Search and Destroy* magazine, reprinted in Victor Brockis' comprehensive *Beat Punks*, Burroughs grappled with the punk issue first hand. When asked if he believed punk was putting a dent in the establishment, Burroughs dismissed the questions, saying, "The establishment is full of dents! I don't think there is an establishment anymore."[19] The statement is a pretty broad dismissal of his acolytes and what they hoped to accomplish with their own artistic endeavors. He goes on to say, "I think the so-called punk movement is indeed a media creation." This is perhaps the most point blank dismissal of the movement he could have offered.

When pressed further about the issue, and asked if he believed he was the "Godfather of Punk," Burroughs rejected the notion:

> "I am not a punk and I don't know why anyone would consider me the Godfather of punk. How do you define punk? The only definition of the word is that it might refer to a young person who is simply called a punk because he is young, or some kind of petty criminal. In that sense some of my characters may be considered punks, but the word simply did not exist in the Fifties. I suppose you could say James Dean epitomized it in *Rebel Without a Cause*, but still what is it?" [20]

It is a strong statement, but true. Burroughs was of a different era and his ideas were not encompassed by punk. But it is easy to see why he was such a big influence, even from that short segment. He rejects labels, questions definitions, and refuses to accept anything as a given. He comes to the table assuming that punk itself is not real. Like Hell points out in *My Burroughs*, he attacks language as a form of control and a form of limitation. Coupled with his writing that is darkly cynical, ironic and surrealistic, it is easy to see why Burroughs appealed to Hell, and why he was an influence on many in the punk community.

Garage Rock to Punk Rock

In an interview in the February 1976 edition of *Rock News,* Richard Hell described his influences as the Rolling Stones' *Rolling Stones Now* and Bob Dylan's *Bringing it All Back Home:* "Those two records are fixed in my subconscious."[21] These two albums form the pillars of his rock and roll worldview, though his musical background is much more complex than that. Aside from Hell's own admission in interviews that Bob Dylan, and specifically *Bringing It All Back Home,* was a big influence, the connection between the two is quite strong. In his 1971 Journal, Hell lists a number of poets and artists whom he considers "writhing in the senses." Among those names is Bob Dylan, who along with the Beatles, Hell describes as the "free people." [22]

Additionally, many of his contemporary reviewers found something distinctly Dylan-esque in Hell's style and performance. In a June 1974 review of Television, Patti Smith describes Hell as "totally Highway 61… The way he moves is so insane like a spastic Chuck Berry like as if … doing the splits on Desolation Row."[23] In an undated review from the archive, Los Angeles music critic Dmitri Papadopoulos noted, "It's important to have a style, and Hell has a keen one – something like a cross cloning of Rimbaud, Bob Dylan, and Albert Camus if that seems at all possible."[24] *Sounds* writer Giovanni Dadomo went so far as to describe Hell as "overly redolent of Dylan in his Highway 61 period."[25] Looking back from 1982, *San Francisco Chronicle and Examiner* critic Michael Goldberg observed that Hell sang "in a tortured voice, that sounded like an out of tune Bob Dylan."[26]

The emphasis on the Dylan-esque aspects of Richard Hell is not surprising, but the contrast of Hell's emphasis on *Bringing It All Back Home* with the distinctly *Highway 61 Revisited* sensibility that many critics saw in him is important. Whether Hell sees his own music as distinct

and genre changing, in the same way *Bringing It…* was for Dylan in terms of embracing electric rock and roll at the expense of folk purist fans, or if he simply enjoys the album for its musical craftsmanship is inconsequential; what he bring to the table in his own music is nihilism, which appears to others as reminiscent of *Highway 61.*

Many observers have noted the nihilistic sensibility of *Highway 61* (Dreyfuss, McNeil).[27] While Dylan's view is a more Romantic nihilism, in songs like "Highway 61" his juxtaposition of God and Abraham, a travelling shoestring salesman, and a gambler looking for World War III serves to undercut the meaning of each of those characters' experiences, and broadly, meaning in general. Similarly on a song like "Desolation Row," Dylan takes the fairy tale figures, literary heroes, and pop icons of the Western canon, gives them distinctly human flaws, and places them in a surreal town that is as sad as it is utterly hopeless for the redemption of its characters. Hell would take up Dylan's nihilistic manner, but through the lens of William Burroughs, who while surrealistic, is decidedly less romantic in his outlook. Hell would shun Dylan's penchant for Romantic imagery in favor of surreal but unrelentingly bleak imagery.

While Dylan produced some of the most high-minded and thoughtful rock and roll of the 60s, another form of American rock, garage rock, was raw, youthful and decidedly less intellectual. The legacy of garage rock in punk is very strong; garage rock of the 1960s was an American phenomenon, where many younger people formed bands in the wake of the British Invasion. They were often less adept at their instruments but energetic and hard-edged none the less. This ethos would be very inspirational to the punk movement. For Hell, garage rock was very important, even though Dylan and the Stones formed the backbone of his musical identity. Television as a group drew on this music, and Patti Smith observed of a live performance that the group's sound "eats through the Chez Vous Ballroom, 13 Floor Elevators, Love, Velvet

Underground and the Yardbirds live." The 13th Floor Elevators and Love were two important pre-psychedelic garage groups and in the same show, Television covered "Psychotic Reaction," a song by another American garage group, the Count Five.[28]

In the 1976 *Rock News* interview, Hell said, "I listen to the Seeds, the *Nuggets* album, the Stooges. I love *Raw Power*."[29] In this remark, Hell mentions yet another garage group, the Seeds, as well as *Nuggets*, which is very important for several reasons. The album is a 1972 compilation of American garage rock spanning 1965, just after the British Invasion, to 1968. The tracks cover minor national hits as well as regional favorites, and the album includes tracks by the Count Five, Seeds, Electric Prunes, among others. Even more importantly, this collection was assembled by Lenny Kaye, who at the time was a musician playing on college circuits and later became Patti Smith's guitarist.[30] In other words, the compilation was put together by someone who was more or less "on the scene" in New York City. It can be inferred that there would be a familiarity with the compilation and garage rock in general amongst those involved with the burgeoning punk scene. From the time it came out, the compilation was lauded by critics, and Jon Savage in *England's Dreaming*, observed that it, along with the Stooges' *Raw Power,* which Hell also mentioned in the above quote, were the two greatest influences on the eventual sound of punk rock.[31]

The Stooges, along with the Velvet Underground, were Hell's most important musical forerunners. As Eric Weisbard wrote in Spin in 2001, "Richard Hell and the Voidoids, were creating something fresh out of the remnants of glitter glam, and pub rock, with the arty din of the Velvet Underground and the white noise stomp of Iggy Pop's Stooges still ringing in their ears."[32] Formed in 1967 in Ann Arbor Michigan, after seeing a Doors concert, Iggy and the Stooges set out to do their interpretation of the blues. Borrowing the antagonism of Doors front

man Jim Morrison, Iggy cultivated a truly unique stage persona which was wild and unpredictable, mirroring his real life behavior.[33] His backing group was relatively untrained and the music they produced was raw and intense. The group fell in with the MC5 out of Detroit and their manager John Sinclair, founder of the White Panther Party and drug advocate, had ties to the Black Panthers and the support of well known musicians like John Lennon.[34] This early alignment of proto-punk with radical politics set a precedent for the later political leanings of punk rockers. Because Sinclair was media adept, he was able to capitalize on some of his own fame in securing record deals for the two groups with Elektra Records. The backing of a major label allowed the Stooges more access to advanced recording equipment, and thus they sound fuller and more intense on record than many garage bands, while musically they were very similar.

The Velvet Underground was arguably the first punk group and was certainly the first on the New York scene that would become the punk rock scene. Formed in 1964 by Lou Reed and John Cale, the group explored many dark lyrical themes, including heroin use, bondage, and gay sex which were unique to pop music, but owed a great deal to the writings of William Burroughs. It was the Velvets with whom Hell's early musical endeavors garnered the most comparisons. Hell himself wrote about his group Television: "Costumed in rags and funeral suits. Parts defined. They're the most peculiarly successful melding of the Velvets, the Beatles, the Everly Brothers, and Kurt Weill. Television can't play, and they can't sing."[35] In 1975, Andy Warhol wrote about the group: "They are dubbed the new Velvet Underground. But what Television and the late but so great Velvets have in common is a certain description defying INTENSITY…. Tom Verlaine and Richard Hell are the two group stylists….They are controversial and their material, such as 'Blank Generation' and 'Into the Arms of Venus,' is

really really classic, classic in the sense that it is pure originality and POWER."[36] And, summarizing the New York punk scene in 1976, now including Hell's new group the Voidoids, for English readers of *New Musical Express*, Nick Kent wrote: "Out of this current plethora of new NY groups, at least five are capable of exceptional contributions to rock. It should be dutifully noted that at least four of these bands bear obvious heavy debts inspiration-wise to Lou Reed's work specifically within the framework of the Velvets."[37]

That Hell would be influenced by the Velvet Underground is unsurprising. First the group's rise within the New York scene took place just as Hell was coming to the city, and any musicians following in their wake would inevitably owe them something. Secondly, given Hell's change in worldview to one that prizes Burroughs-esque themes, the Velvets play directly into his interests, including drug use. Thirdly, the Velvet's alignment with the art world, especially through Andy Warhol, shows a cultural engagement and artistic ambition that in some ways mirrors Hell's own attempts to join the New York poetry world. The Velvet Underground set the stage for arty, thematically challenging bands in New York, and that Hell found himself moving in that direction once he decided on rock and roll is unsurprising.

Richard Hell's music and style are in many ways products of his influences. Taking note from Dylan and especially Burroughs, Hell would go on to forge a uniquely nihilistic view that he communicated in song. Though he started with countercultural aspirations, his failure as a poet would help shape his cynical bite. This bleak and cutting quality of lyrics would indelibly shape punk rock. Drawing on the various musical influences, from the arty Velvets to the raw Stooges, Hell and his bands would produce music that had a hard edge to match their biting lyrical takes. As a reflection of both his own living circumstances in the Lower East Side, and

with attention to the individual looks that stars like Dylan and the Beatles cultivated, Hell would form a unique sense of style that would define punk.

III. Inventing the Blank Generation

Punk Poetics: Hell's Musical Nihilism

In 1982, in the *San Francisco Examiner and Chronicle*, Michael Goldberg related an earlier 1978 conversation with Richard Hell. "I can very dispassionately and confidently imagine myself sticking a pistol in my mouth and pulling the trigger," said Hell. Asked what would stop him from doing just that, he replied, "Habit. Just Habit. You're so used to staying alive."[38] This statement encapsulates what is perhaps the defining quality of Hell's personal and especially musical outlook in the 1970s, stark nihilism. Taking note from William Burroughs, Hell engaged in a cynicism and penchant for irony that seemed detached from Romanticism or optimism, an outlook that undercut all sense of meaning. Hell was, as he said, "blank."

Hell most famously articulated his brand of nihilism through his music, in the song "Blank Generation," from the album of the same name. Though the album was released in 1977, the time of punk's meteoric rise in England, the song well predated the release of the album. Hell began writing the song during his time with Television. Reviews from the summer of 1974 when Television were forging the CBGB scene make no mention of the song, but by spring of 1975, the song is described by Andy Warhol as one of the band's defining numbers.[39] After Hell left that group, he played the song with the Heartbreakers, and kept refining the lyrics until they reached the form taken on the 1976 Ork EP, *Blank Generation.* Nihilism runs throughout Hell's output, from the more straightforward "You Gotta Lose" to the humorous but still nihilistic "Love Comes in Spurts." But "Blank Generation" is the song that most seems to capture the spirit of the times, and is the most important for illuminating the spread of Hell's influence.

Hell's music notebook from the early 70s, largely a collection of lyrics, though there is some music, gives insight into the composition of "Blank Generation." It appears that he more

or less had the first verse, and the third went through very few rewrites. However, on the second verse he struggles a great deal. He wrote:

> The doctor was the brother of a famous cartoon character,
> they'd erased his eyes
> and I'm God's consolation prize
> the night that it was mowing dots and lines,
> I was born

Then:

> Triangles were falling on the night that I was born
> The doctor was the brother of a famous cartoon character
> ~~He turned his eyes to mom and said in awe and scorn~~
> I think you're home is poor
> God's consolation prize

Then again:

> He said sadly to my mother with much contempt and scorn
> This boy here is going to be God's consolation prize

And further:

> Triangles were falling on the night that I was born
> The doctor was a famous cartoon character
> He looked and me and muttered like his thought was torn
> Well well well if it ain't God's consolation prize[40]

Before finally arriving at:

> Triangles were fallin at the window as the doctor cursed,
> He was a cartoon long forsaken by the public eye,
> The nurse adjusted her garters as I breathed my first,
> The doctor grabbed my throat and yelled, "God's consolation prize![41]

The revisions in lyrics show Hell sharply focusing the message of his song. The key elements that he finds essential to the verse are that Hell is being born, the Doctor is cartoonish, and that Hell is "God's Consolation prize." Hell moves from the notion that the doctor is the brother of a cartoon to the more critical observation that the doctor is himself a cartoon, "long

forsaken by the public eye." Here Hell narrowly refines a criticism of authority by making the doctor someone who has fallen from grace, and holds no esteem with the public. Hell adds the words about the nurse adjusting her garters, a more sexual and thus risqué image, before moving on to his concluding point. As Hell takes his first breath, the cartoonish doctor attempts to kill him, grabbing his throat, with the idea that Hell is God's consolation prize.

A consolation prize is the award that gives recognition for someone who didn't win; the doctor's insinuation that a newborn child breathing his first shows that God didn't win is rather disturbing. The image further undermines the authority of the doctor by making him crazy while also implying the imperfection of God, as evidenced by the child to the doctor and the doctor to the listener. Hell's ultimate goal seems to be to undermine the role of God. An imperfect God, one who gets a consolation prize and let's a crazy doctor grab an infant's throat in his insanity, might just as well not exist. A God who might well not exist undercuts or even implies the absence of morality or meaning to life, which is Hell's nihilism shining through.

To look at the development of this verse is to flesh out the careful and precise nature of all of Hell's lyrics. They are thoughtfully composed and revised. Through the rewriting process it is easy to see Hell refining his ideas and messages and searching for the most truly effective delivery. The final version of the verse sees the disparate elements Hell wanted to include from the beginning finally united in a way that maximizes the cynicism, irony, and ultimately nihilism. That nihilism would characterize the emerging punk rock scene.

Almost from the beginning, the song was recognized as one of the most important tunes to the fledgling punk rock scene in New York. "Blank Generation" became more than song, and served as a label that helped galvanize the fans of punk. It provided an identity and affiliation with a generation. It was an apt descriptor of the movement; blank could mean any number of

things, from literally devoid of unifying characteristics to the more nuanced interpretation of disillusionment with life and rock 'n' roll at that time. Hell himself told Lester Bangs in 1978, "To me, blank was a line where you can fill in anything…. It's the idea that you have the option of making yourself anything you want, filling in the blank. And that's something that provides a uniquely powerful sense to this generation. It's saying 'I entirely reject your standards for judging my behavior.'"[42] For Hell, blank is important, because it gives listeners the power to define themselves and not be labeled, a priority that comes from Burroughs' rejection of labels as a form of control. Hell is grouping together a generation that is defined more by attitude - as anti-authoritarian, cynical and self-motivated - than any single defining characteristic.

There was recognition that somehow Hell had hit upon something very real and the song only grew in stature. Michael Goldberg related the following: "'Blank Generation' became a punk anthem, the signature song for the new subculture that had sprung up first in New York then England, and was spreading like crab grass across America. 'Blank Generation' was taken as a nihilist manifesto, a rejection of life itself…. Hell was describing this generation as bankrupt; blank." Goldberg interestingly captures the rapid way in which "Blank," and by extension punk, caught on and its influence spread, first in New York, then in London, and then back across the Atlantic to America. Goldberg highlights that anthemic quality that made the song so unifying, and pinpoints the attitude that attracted so many punks, the nihilism. Even more than the empowering sensibility with which Hell claims to have written the song, Goldberg captures the impression of bankruptcy and rejection with which the song imprints listeners.

In February of 1977, *High Times* magazine did a special feature called *"Punk" Inside the Issue* in which part of the issue was written and illustrated by the folks at *Punk* magazine, in the

same style. A particularly telling interview with *Punk's* John Holstrom and "Resident Punk" Legs McNeil, highlights Hell's nihilism:

> Legs: "I think the Richard Hell band is really great. He plays amazing fucking music but I think if you called it punk rock he'd be offended. My favorite song that he does is "Blank Generation". His stuff is like sorta avant-garde. Well, he's like an intellectual but you know he doesn't pose as an intellectual."
>
> John: "He's existential. His music is very nihilistic."
>
> Legs: "Fuck you, nihilistic. It's just good rock and roll."[43]

This quote captures several important points. McNeil fears that Hell would be offended by the term punk rock. While it is hyperbole, the statement lends credence to Hell's assertion that the point of his music to allow people to shun labels and fill in their own blank. Hell's implied uneasiness with the term punk also foreshadows the withdrawal from music that he would eventually make. McNeil further highlights the significance of "Blank" as Hell's key song by naming it specifically as his favorite. Holstrom's attempt to characterize Hell's music as nihilistic receives an immediate response from McNeil that is quite telling. McNeil, like any good punk, is quick to reject the label of nihilistic, but his delivery of "Fuck you" betrays the rebellious and subversive attitude that makes Hell's nihilism such a good a fit. Perhaps the most important reason for Hell's success, though, is that, as McNeil says, "It's just good rock and roll."

Of the anthemic qualities of the song, on March 27, 1976, Nick Kent wrote for *New Musical Express* that "'Blank Generation' alone [is] as potent an all purpose rock anthem for the media-gutted youth of the mid-70s as you'll find anywhere – warrants his inclusion in the grand scheme of things while his latest contributions show him getting better all the time."[44] Kent recognizes the power of the song, both musically as an anthem, and for its subject matter. He

sees the song's power for unifying the "media-gutted" kids, implying a cynicism and burnout on their part that makes Hell and his song so attractive. For *The Village Gate,* Jimi LaLumia wrote that "Hell's best known work is the unofficial anthem of the new wave, '(I Belong to the) Blank Generation,' a tune which has since become a classic, a unifying lifeline for a scene that has been divided and disrupted much too often."[45]

With similar praise, an undated Velvet Lanier review of Hell's album placed his work in upper echelon of rock music:

> Right up there with "Like a Rolling Stone" and "Mother" as one of the greatest records ever cut. I'm not kidding. Hell has created an erratic masterpiece, with a power only rarely seen since Dylan's 66 heyday, Hendrix had it, Lennon had it for a while, Bowie comes close, but Hell hits it right there. With "Blank Generation" Hell has created the all time rock and roll classic song – the one to replace "Roll Over Beethoven," "Satisfaction," and "Anarchy in the UK" as a barren tour de force.[46]

Record World, in October of 1977, called Hell "the Future of American rock. His chilling "Blank Generation" serves as the anthem of new wave on both sides of the Atlantic."[47] It is clear from these reviews, among others, that Hell made a big impression with "Blank Generation." Many note his influence in America and England and nearly everyone recognizes the song's importance to the emerging punk movement.

The importance of "Blank Generation" and Hell's nihilism is perhaps best articulated in an article for *Creem* magazine by Joe Fernbacher entitled "Talking Voidoid Blues":

> Blank generation … is a primer for the intellectuality of the new punk…. No longer can The English vision of the ennui-wars be tolerated. Punk as an attitude, as a force, is American, so essentially American that its definition has been sublimated to such a point that we had to look to the land of fish and chips for a definition to begin with, and the definition given us by the British is false and profit oriented.[48]
>
> .

Fernbacher is quite astute in noting the intellectual qualities of Hell's music. He recognizes that there is a cogent and discernible philosophy here, and that philosophy, he argues, will define punk. He makes an interesting point to differentiate between British and American punk, implying that Hell has a greater degree intellectual value, and that Hell remains truer to the spirit of anti-authoritarianism and rebellion than the British, whose scene is inauthentic. Fernbacher continues:

> Punk (American Style) is born out of affluence, not poverty, because affluence breeds the attitudes of fear and cowardice that couple with the spirit of affordable boredom, which in turn creates the mulch outta which true "punk" philosophy and living is given sentience.
>
> That is why Blank Generation is important, because this record is smart, a lot smarter than everyone wants it to be, a lot smarter perhaps than it was intended to be, but nevertheless smart as hell. Hell is a poet executioner of street cling and lamplight n' gutter jive. His images abound with the dandruff of the new white nigger and the insolence of early rock and roll. Yet he doesn't fall into the beatnik trap like Patti Smith does, simply because he's younger than Patti, and more attuned to the realities of youth. Like Max Frost in Wild in the Streets if you're over 25, who cares, you simply don't matter anymore.[49]

In Hell, Fernbacher sees what punk is really made of in Hell. He speaks of the "mulch" of true punk philosophy and living, and hits upon the important point that Hell is essentially providing the raw materials for punk. Hell is able to capture, in an intelligent way, the disaffection of youth and the raw energy of rock and roll that make punk truly unique, and he lives and breathes the punk lifestyle in a way that contemporaries like Patti Smith, and certainly the British punks, don't. Fernbacher concludes:

> This album is just off the wall enough to let it cross over into the realms of true punkoid pursang. The hit should be "Blank Generation," and the favorite will probably be "Love Comes in Spurts." Richard Hell and the Voidoids are the only real punk band to hit the scene since the demise of the Electric Prunes. Buy

the album for your children today. It will prepare them for tomorrow.[50]

Safety Pins and Spikes: The Invention of Punk Fashion

> In striving to build an aesthetic that they felt was meaningful to their lives, punks used many of the same revolutionary tactics employed by earlier members of avant-garde movements – unusual fashions, the blurring of boundaries between art and everyday life, juxtapositions of seemingly disparate objects and behaviors, intentional provocation of the audience, use of untrained performers, and drastic reorganization (or disorganization) of accepted performative styles.[51]

The above quote from Tricia Henry places punk fashion in perspective. It is not decidedly different from the ways in which other avant-garde movements (for example Russian Futurists) employed similar tactics. For Henry, "the punk scene in England was the real core of the punk movement – that is where the style first crystallized and became popular."[52] Henry provides a fairly succinct image of punk style. She says, "In order to protest their situation, punks presented themselves as society's garbage…. Punk fashion drew heavily on cultural sore points such as sadomasochism, Bondage wear, chains, heavy leathers…were popular." She went on to say, "Punk fashion was anti-fashion – anything was ugly or offensive to the general public; anything unnatural: multicolored hair spiked up with Vaseline, the ragged haircut."[53]

Henry argues that "punk used fashion as a revolutionary tool" and notes that punk in England sported "chains, dog collars, multicolored hair, and horror movie style make-up."[54] These are fairly accurate summations of punk style. Henry does a comprehensive job of rounding up the disparate parts of punk fashion, and analyzes them in their context, which for her is 1970s England. Henry shows an awareness of Richard Hell, acknowledging that his torn t-shirt look "anticipated" punk proper, but she fails to give him adequate credit for the invention of most aspects of the punk look.[55] As with many others who write on the style of punk, she focuses on

England, but fails to properly address the stylistic aspects of punk that have clear origins in American punk rock.

The reasons for giving such careful consideration to fashion are numerous. Fashion and styles are the markers of subcultures that set them apart, identify them, and in some ways encapsulate the meaning behind the subculture. As Dick Hebdige described in his seminal work, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*: "The challenge to hegemony which subcultures represent is not issued directly by them. Rather it is expressed obliquely in style. The objections are lodged, the contradictions displayed, at the profoundly superficial level of appearances: that is at the level of signs."[56] Subcultural fashion is not by any means a random collection of stylistic choices. Each aspect has a certain meaning that is accepted for a particular purpose – the articulation of a certain priority held by the members of the subculture.

The meanings of style for any subculture could be varied but tend to have a certain cohesiveness. Hebdige wrote, "The punk subculture, then, signified chaos at every level, but this was only possible because the style was so ordered. The chaos cohered as a meaningful whole."[57] The torn clothes, chains, and wild hair may seem random, or at least not directly related to each other. However, the consistent use of those stylistic aspects together by certain people cause the outward symbols of their subculture to take on meaning to the broader culture. The styles become symbols for ideas that were understandable to the mainstream:

> The punks were not only directly responding to increasing joblessness, changing moral standards, the rediscovery of poverty, etc., they were dramatizing what was to be called "Britain's decline." … The various stylistic ensembles adopted by the punks were undoubtedly expressive of genuine aggression frustration and anxiety. But these statements, no matter how strangely constructed, were cast in a language which was generally available - language which was current.[58]

According to Hebdige, subcultures "manifest culture in the broadest sense, as systems of communication, forms of expression and representation."[59] In other words, subcultures exist as microcosms, modeled on the culture at large, that apply to a particular group. For the punks, Hebdige thinks that this holds true, but thinks that certain aspects of punk style make it more antithetical to the society at large. While their subculture works internally like other cultures, the punks place themselves well outside the mainstream. Punk serves as a model for self-alienation. "It is this alienation from the deceptive 'innocence' of appearances which gives… the punk and no doubt future groups…impetus to move from man's second false nature to a genuinely expressive artifice; a truly subterranean style. As a symbolic violation of the social order, such a movement attracts and will continue to attract attention, to provoke censure and to act…as the fundamental bearer of significance in subculture."[60]

Style then serves an important function for the subculture. It sets the members apart from the broader culture; it provides styles as symbols which others can understand and recognize as linked to a particular ideology or set of stances that define the subculture. It becomes a short hand for membership in the group and in the case of the punks also serves a barrier from the mainstream. These assessments of punk style come from the British punks, but the way style works for a subculture doesn't change. Rather the context for the meaning, joblessness, poverty, etc., that Hebdige expounds, changes slightly. It is important to understand that the torn t-shirt, safety pins, and spiked hair, have cohesive meaning, but they didn't develop organically in Britain as a response to social condition, but in America, with Richard Hell.

In the March 27, 1976, issue of *New Musical Express*¸ Nick Kent described Richard Hell's style. Not only did he hit upon the elements of that style, but he described its conception, saying, "Hell, see, had the vision one day – on stage – a stage with all these old televisions sets –

black and white all going at the same time and a band dressed in ragged ripped clothes, playing. No Flash. No New York Dolls lipstick and gash. Just real stark."[61] This quote hits upon several important points. First the idea of the band playing in ripped clothes goes back to the group Television, given the screens on the stage, and secondly, that the vision was Hell's. Hell was the person who more than anyone else forged punk fashion. He came up with an idea that was a self-conscious rejection of the look of the time, particularly as the quote highlights, the glam stylings of the New York Dolls, and he made it his own.

As much as with his music, Hell shaped punk rock by giving the genre its distinctive look. Punk, as a subculture, existed not just within the music, but within the looks and attitudes of all its fans, those who self-identify as punk, and in this regard Hell was an innovator. He gave punk both its attitude and attire. It was through his desire to set himself apart and do something unique that he created a look that would in time go on to be bigger than him. When the look started, it was very much Hell's. The torn ragged clothes and spiked hair were distinctive, and individuals knew it came from Hell, even though fans had already started to imitate the style. In the April 1976 issue of *Punk* magazine, its third issue, writer Legs McNeil even goes so far as to tease Hell, who McNeil describes as his "favorite comedian," about the look, asking, "Why do you wear ripped clothes? Do you rip them yourself?"[62]

Hell's interest in clothing and forging his own unique style goes back a ways. As early as October of 1970, Hell wrote in his journal that "expensive clothes are a symptom of senility."[63] The observation is characteristic of Hell's sharp eye and tendency to undercut the meaning in what he might consider trivial. At the time, Hell was living in poverty in the Lower East Side, so it follows that expensive clothes weren't really an option for him. The highly done up, fashion-centric views of the established art world, particularly Andy Warhol's and the emerging glam

styles, likely seemed over-the-top and too involved for Hell. Interestingly, on November 19, 1976, Hell, in his journal, describes himself as "vain and self-conscious," saying he invented his "weird hair-do,"[64] implying that while he tries to avoid the games that that people make of expensive clothes, ultimately, he is aware and cares enough to give serious thought to his self-presentation. It's not that Hell despised fashion or is completely apathetic, but something about flaunting wealth through clothing didn't seem right to him, and he would seek to convey the opposite in the style that he forged for himself.

As Nick Kent described, it was in the group Television that Hell came into his own with regards to style. Many early reviews make note of his distinctive look. A 1974 article in the archive that is attributed to Tom Verlaine, but seems to be written by someone else, entitled "My First Television Set," describes the band as, "all skinny and hair as short and as dirty and ragged as their shirts. Pants didn't fit but were very tight, except for Hell in baggy suitpants and jacket." It goes on to describe Hell: "Dark hair short on the sides but sticking out three inches on the top like anticipating the electric chair. He'd stand there head lolling off the shoulder while he fingered the bass until a little drool rolled out the side of his mouth and then suddenly make some sort of connection and his feet would start James Brown-ing, and he'd jump up in the air half splits and land hopping around utterly nuts with his lips pointing straight at you."[65]

This early review gets at the fundamental look of Television. All the members wear one of the defining punk styles, the dirty, ragged and torn shirt. It also is special in noting Hell's spiked hair style this early on, and gives a fantastic description of Hell's stage performance. Hell brought a wild energy to his performance that contrasted with Verlaine, who the article describes as standing "at a slight angle from the mike with his eyes half closed…he looked totally concentrated…moving with the slightest exaggeration as if by mechanical means."[66] Hell's

unique look coupled with his dynamic stage performance sets him apart from the rest of the band early on, and in this would prove to be influential in the punk community.

Other reviews get at some of the same points about Hell's style. Patti Smith's *SOHO Weekly News* review describes Hell saying, "Hell raises it. He's real neat, totally Highway 61. Tufted hair, perfect shades and a blue grey gabardine suit reputed to have graced the frame of Raymond Chandler."[67] Dmitri Papadopoulos noted that "Hell also has a lot to do with ripped shirts and spiked hair becoming a fashion."[68] In the 1976 biographical notes for the Voidoids, from their record company Sire, Hell is described: "Started publishing imprint, acquired press, but got fed up with poverty. First gig in 1974. Raised on Stones, Dylan, Beatles. Created new hair (short and ragged) and clothing (tight pants and ripped oversize shirts pinned etc.)"[69] The common thread through all these reviews is the acknowledgement that there is a punk look, and Hell invented it.

In his "Notes on Junk," Hell described his style: "Torn shirts with any redesigning accomplished with safety pins, outsized 50s suits with belt below the loops, policeman's leather jacket for cheap utility, resoled and heeled plain dancing shoes on same principle."[70] This gets at the very basic components of the punk look. He accounts for the torn clothes, the safety pins, and the leather, the most basic features of punk attire. Some aspects, like the 50s suits, didn't really catch on, but most of what he describes remains characteristically punk. It is apparent that he understood that he had executed a distinctive style, but the reasoning behind the style is perhaps the most interesting feature of Hell's wardrobe self-assessment.

When Hell describes his look, it becomes apparent how thoughtful he was about his stylistic choices and how the different aspects of the look had certain meanings to Hell, who self-

consciously amalgamated them for a desired goal. In his "Notes on Junk," Hell describes the motivation for his look:

> Working on the premise that truth is beauty (in the case of clothing styles that's me trying to look cool. And with further ambitions relying on my faithful formula that when they hear and see what they're really thinking they'll support it). I got honest by carefully calculating the way I would look, though it was a pretty slight exaggeration of my existing appearance. It was a great feeling just to stand for something just by walking down the street. I stood for poverty, apathy, and (aggressive) honesty.[71]

Here, Hell makes clear the purpose of his choice of attire. It is to flaunt his lifestyle, which was decidedly unglamorous and disengaged. He seems to be making the point that punk is not equivalent to the counterculture. It is not defined by flowers, bright colors, Indian attire or any of the excess that came with the hippies, but he instead flaunts the dirty, lived, beat sense of punk existence.

The clothes are torn, the hair is short. It's not exactly real, as he says, but it's a heightened reality, a "slight exaggeration" of how he really looks and lives in an effort to make that public. He is poor and this is how he dresses. He doesn't care what you think. It is, as Hell says, aggressive and in a way confrontational. Despite his assertion that his look stands for apathy, and undoubtedly that's the impression torn and dirty clothes might give, he is actually not apathetic at all. Rather he cares very much about perception, but with a different set of priorities and an honesty that sets him apart. His goal is to make that difference known, to contrast himself with conventional and countercultural types, and the effort he puts into that goal betrays a sense of engagement that is counter to his suggested apathy narrative.

He elaborates on his stylistic choices even further:

> Though I suppose clothes and hairstyle can't bear the weight of too much meaning, I believe that the message of honesty was successfully conveyed by exaggerating the poor condition of my wardrobe, as if to say to a

> passerby, " I am unique, great, and flaunt the poverty you would rather I disguised."
>
> I wanted a short anti-glamour haircut to replace both hippies and glitterboys which I came up with by analyzing the success of the Beatles hair suggesting the little boy of their generation. I cut my hair accordingly with Jean-Pierre Leaud in "400 Blows" as a reminder, plus the additional models of Rimbaud and Artaud to ice the cake precariously balanced on top of my neck.[72]

In this particular passage, Hell further explains his motivations and reasoning behind his look, highlighting several important points. Again, he still tries to register apathy as his outlook. In the first few lines, he tries to make it appear as though clothes aren't that important, or that he doesn't care that much, but he again undermines himself by proceeding to show that he did in fact give his look a great deal of thought.

Hell once again stresses the importance of poverty to his look. He makes a self-conscious choice to present himself as ragged for the honesty of it. Yet Hell admits that the style is an exaggerated view of poverty, a sort of dishonesty for the sake of honesty. Perhaps it might be best described, as he alludes to, as a confrontational honesty. As Hell says, he "flaunts" the state of his wardrobe to those who prefer that it remain hidden. This confrontational aspect of this sort of honesty, familiarity with the real as opposed to the ideal, would not only persist in punk style, but grow to be the central feature of it, as the Mohawk, liberty spikes, and bondage wear became increasingly prominent amongst punks.

In terms of his hair cut, he notes that he endeavored to "replace" the conventional hairstyles of the time, which included the long unkempt hair associated with hippies, as well as the long but highly done-up hair. He didn't seem to merely choose a haircut that worked for him, but instead gave the issue thought and decided on an intended message for his hair. He emphasized that he is poor and decidedly not a hippie or glam rocker but something new

entirely. It is important that he considered the role of hair in Beatlemania. The fab four's mop-top haircut became talked about and imitated because it was different from popular short haircuts. Hell recognized that the Beatles' unique *look,* in addition to sound, was important to codifying the Beatlemania movement. It was with this awareness of how image plays into culture change, that Hell made the self conscious move towards short, spiky hair. That he drew from Artaud, Rimbaud, and a Truffaut character shows his level of engagement with the arts, but the style he chose is not as important as the fact that he chose *a* style, with the thought that it could translate into something bigger in cultural terms.

Hell's look would become bigger culturally, but it had to arrive by way of England. Though Henry and Hebdige would suggest that punk style came from England, it is clear that it, in fact, originates in America. Since American punk did not have the same politically radical take as British punk in the 70s, the music and subculture garnered mainstream media attention much faster in England. Therefore, it becomes necessary then to show that the American punk style is the source of British punk style.

Across the Atlantic: Hell and British Punk

Despite the overwhelming response to and impact of "Blank Generation," and its articulation of nihilism, it is still necessary to draw the connection between Hell and his British acolytes. The key figure in the story of punk's migration across the Atlantic is Malcolm McLaren. McClaren was and is a British fashion designer and rock and roll manager. He came into the punk story late in the New York Doll's life. The band was falling apart, having already lost one member to overdose and straining under the heroin habit of its guitarist Johnny Thunders. McClaren stepped in as the band's manager and did not do well. In a move that foreshadowed the political angle he would take as manager of the Sex Pistols, he tried to play up the political interest by having the Dolls dress in red and play in front of a Communist flag. Needless to say this did not go over well on the band's tour of the American South, and continuing issues brought the band to its breaking point.[73]

McLaren went back to England not long after the Dolls' demise, but he had enough time in New York to catch wind of the nascent punk scene, which he seemed to find fascinating. The figure he was most drawn to was perhaps Richard Hell. By all accounts McLaren was quite taken with Hell's personality. In *Please Kill* Me, Syl Sylvain of the New York Dolls described how fascinated McLaren was with Hell: "The person he loved most was Richard Hell. I mean right before Malcolm left for England, he gave me a suit to give to Richard. He kept saying, 'You won't forget to give that suit to Richard. I love Richard. I think Richard has a lot of talent.' Malcolm's inspiration from Richard seemed less about ripped clothes and more about poetry and politics."[74] Hell was flattered by the attention, responding, "I liked Malcolm because he seemed to be really interested in me. There weren't that many people who gave us any respect you

know?"[75] Respect may not have been the right word, though. McLaren went back to England with a head full of ideas most of which came from Richard Hell.

Despite Sylvain's observation that it wasn't really about ripped shirts or spiked hair, those are the things that McLaren most latched onto. In the interviews for *Please Kill Me,* McClaren admitted:

> "I just thought Richard Hell was incredible. Again I was sold another fashion victim's idea.... Here was guy looking like he'd just grown out of a drain hole, looking like he was covered with slime, and looking like nobody gave a fuck about him. And looking like he didn't really give a fuck about you! He was this wonderful bored drained scarred dirty guy with a torn t-shirt. And this look of spiky hair, everything about it – there was no question that I'd take it back to London. I was going to transform it into something more English…. I came back to England determined. I had these images that I came back with…the image of this distressed strange thing called Richard Hell. And this phrase Blank Generation."[76]

And thus McLaren went to England, where he orchestrated the rise of punk through his boutique *SEX* and new group the Sex Pistols. He took the look and attitude from Hell, and in doing so changed the course of rock and roll. The Sex Pistols, and many other British groups like the Clash, would go on to much more financial success and recognizability than Hell, popularizing his look and take on life, even across America, where kids had hardly heard of the New York scene, but were taken with the torn and nihilistic vision they got from the Pistols.

Perhaps the greatest indicator of the extent to which British bands looked to Hell as a source of musical inspiration, and to which his nihilistic viewpoint shaped punk, is in the lyrics. A song like the Sex Pistols' "Anarchy in the UK" has very clear nihilistic overtones. Johnny Rotten declares himself both anarchist and Antichrist, a threat to the status quo. Rotten made his radical politics central to the punk movement in England with his exclamation, "I wanna destroy!"[77] He does not seem to embrace anarchy as a legitimate political standpoint but rather

uses it as a threat of destruction. Anarchy works because its implication is the dismantling of the government as a form of control. This sense of destruction and inevitability of chaos permeates early British punk from the Pistols to the Clash's "London's Burning" to Generation X's "Your Generation."

Amongst the Sex Pistol's relatively small output (bands rooted in nihilistic sensibility tend not to last long), is a song, one of their earliest, making it one of the earliest British punk songs, called "Pretty Vacant." The song is anthemic and is a reflection on the punk generation in England. It is self-reflective and concerns the community to much greater degree than songs like "Anarchy in the UK" and "God Save the Queen," which were bigger hits, but were more directed political commentary. To understand the sensibilities of the punks in England, "Pretty Vacant" is significantly more helpful.

"Pretty Vacant" is more or less a rewrite of "Blank Generation." Of the song, manager Malcolm McLaren remembers, "Richard Hell was a definite, 100% inspiration, and, in fact, I remember telling the Sex Pistols, 'Write a song like 'Blank Generation' but write your own bloody version, and their version was 'Pretty Vacant.'"[78] McLaren is very straightforward about Hell's role in the formation of the song, and knowing that he encouraged the Pistols to write a song in the same vein as "Blank" explains the extreme similarity.

The two songs are first and foremost structurally almost identical. They each consist of three verses, followed by the chorus. Each verse is composed of 3-4 observations or descriptions, ending on a final nihilistic note, before entering into the chorus. Compare the following first verses:

> I was sayin let me out of here before I was even born
> It's such a gamble when you get a face
> It's fascinating to observe what the mirror does
> But when I dine it's for the wall that I set a place[79]

(Blank Generation)

There's no point in asking, You'll get no reply
Oh just remember I don't decide
I got no reason it's all too much
You'll always find us out to lunch[80]

(Pretty Vacant)

It is important to note that the Pistols' third verse is actually a repeat of their first, but within the overall structure, it functions as a verse, not a second chorus. Both songs end on repeats of the chorus, though the Pistols repeat their chorus three times to Hell's two. The structural similarity between the two songs is not entirely unexpected. Most rock songs use a verse-chorus form of some sort, but the comparison of structures with the knowledge that Pistol's were intentionally trying to imitate "Blank" makes the similarity much more important.

In terms of lyrical content and attitude, the greater comparison can be made. The Sex Pistols wrote, "There's no point in asking, you'll get no reply." This is broadly nihilistic, in that there is no point, and it shows a sense of alienation on the part of Johnny Rotten from whoever he is addressing. This alienation plays into Hell's song as well when he sings, "When I dine, it's for the wall that I set a place." They both highlight a sense of disconnection as well as a lack of desire to connect. The implication is that the signers would find no company, fulfillment or meaning in interaction with another human being, an incredibly blank and vacant idea.

"Pretty Vacant" continues: "Oh just remember I don't decide, I got no reason it's all too much, you'll always find us out to lunch." These lines reinforce the sense of disconnection, through the observation that they're "out to lunch," but they also reveal a lack of purpose. Johnny Rotten doesn't "decide," that is make any choice, because he has no reason to. Furthermore nobody else has reason to either. This echoes the fact that Hell can "take it or leave

it each time" but makes no choice either. They each exemplify a profound passivity. The idea that the punks are "out to lunch" or just out of sync mimics the passive disengagement of Hell's "to lose my train of thought and fall into your arms' tracks, and watch beneath the eyelids every passing dot." Though Hell's line is a more obvious heroin reference, both lines point to the idea that this generation is in some ways in its own world, more concerned with the nothingness one sees with closed eyes than with playing anybody else's game.

The second verse of "Pretty Vacant" contains the lines, "Oh don't pretend because I don't care, I don't believe illusions because too much is real." First Rotten makes it abundantly clear that he's not invested in anything. Like Hell, Rotten can "take it or leave it each time." This profound sense of detachment is the prerequisite for nihilism. Attachment to the world is the refusal to accept that everything is devoid of meaning and headed towards chaos. Rotten doesn't believe "illusions because too much is real." This is the observation that something about reality is so hyper-real and so harsh that it negates a false consciousness. The sense of the real is easily seen in Hell's assertion that he was "saying let me out of here, before I was even born, it's such a gamble when you get a face." Hell recognizes the world for what it is before his birth, and wants out. Even something like a face, the plainest marker of identity, is so random and chaotic, that he would rather avoid it. The burden of being anything at all seems to be too much. In reality, the unpredictable and often random nature of something even so superficial as a face is too much of gamble to handle in a real way. Hell can "take it or leave it each time."

Rotten writes "so stop your cheap comments, cause we know what we feel." This seems to be addressed to critics of the band, and the media might be seen as a target. He needs no cheap commentary. The idea of cheapness of the media is important and refers back to Hell's " I held the TV to my lips, the air so packed with cash, then carry it up the flight of stairs and drop it in

the vacant lot." Hell associates the television with money, so much so that the air is packed with cash. It is cheap to him, and in an act of destruction, he destroys the TV.

The most obvious point of comparison comes from the songs' titles and choruses. The difference between being "Blank" and being "Vacant" is negligible. The Sex Pistols recycled the notion with merely a new word, hardly a well thought out or even creative difference. Hell asserts that he belongs "to the blank generation" and the Sex Pistols follow suit by saying they're "Oh so pretty, We're vacant!" And just as Richard Hell can "take it or leave it each time," as he makes no choices and has no discernible strong feeling either way, the Sex Pistols simply end their chorus by saying "We don't care."

Of the strong similarity between "Pretty Vacant" and "Blank Generation," Hell was angry at first but then fairly forgiving. He said, "I was pretty pissed off when I first heard the Sex Pistols' 'Pretty Vacant.' Malcolm had stolen that whole attitude from 'Blank Generation.' But ideas are free property. I've stolen shit too."[81] Surprisingly, he doesn't hold the band, who actually composed the song and lyrics, accountable. He recognizes that it was Malcolm McLaren who was largely responsible for taking his look and attitude wholesale and making something happen with it in England.

Hell has even praised McLaren and Johnny Rotten. In an article he penned for *Spin* in December of 1986, Hell wrote:

> Malcolm wasn't the sort of cynical character the movie makes him out to be. Malcolm was having fun. He was shaking things up and making art. The mass media was his art form and he was the master of its properties…. His collaborators in the Sex Pistols were eager volunteers, not captive victims.
>
> Rotten was heroic for his absolutely scrupulous refusal to promote anything but chaos. It was just his nature. He was like some mythological imp, the imp of the perverse, who just liked to rub you the wrong way…. All those bands from the Clash to Generation X (Billy Idol) to even Duran

> Duran freely, publicly, admit that he – or the Sex Pistols – was directly responsible for inspiring them. This kind of acknowledgment is very unusual among members of essentially the same generation in such a competitive and egoistical business as rock music.[82]

Hell sees what happened with British punk as something much larger, a sort of media artwork masterminded by McLaren. Surprisingly, Hell praises Johnny Rotten for essentially channeling Hell's own personality. As can be seen, Hell pioneered the nihilistic and rebellious attitude that characterized punk, yet he still singles out praise for Rotten being able to channel complete chaos in a way that Hell seems to be admitting that he couldn't do. Indeed, Michael Goldberg quotes Hell as saying this about his nihilistic attitude: "If you get out of your twenties and see that you've continued for that long, you reach the point where, just outta self-respect, you can't continue to think along those lines."[83] This is important in that Hell recognizes he was responsible for a great deal of what became British punk, but he was able to see and respect the differences between the London and New York scenes.

The debt of the Sex Pistols and other British punk groups to Richard Hell is also seen elsewhere. On his 1977 tour of England, Hell played with the Clash and interacted with the who's who of London's punk scene. At one particularly memorable show, Johnny Rotten came out and excited the crowd before Hell and the Voidoids played an encore. The incident was caught on tape and eventually put out as part of Hell's compilation album *Time*. Reviewing that compilation, Paul Fontana wrote of the incident:

> The sound of Johnny Rotten haranguing an audience for nearly three minutes to demand an encore at a 1977 Richard Hell and the Voidoids show in London is significant for capturing the anarchist in a rare moment of rock and roll reverence and for serving quite nicely as exhibit No. 179 in the case against punk rock mythically sprouting from that city's gutters earlier in the year.[84]

Fontana highlights two very important things. First, there was an understanding on the part of British punks that Hell was important, and Johnny Rotten, as irreverent a punk as was on the scene, felt indebted and obligated to help out Hell. Secondly, Fontana makes the very important observation that, despite what British punks may think, this is a clear indication that the seeds of punk were sown by Hell. As Dave Thompson wrote in the preface to his 1995 interview with Hell, "If punk rock hadn't been invented, he would have invented it anyway."[85]

Many sources figure punk as merely a British phenomena and discount Hell. This goes back to the groups themselves maintaining a certain detachment from the American scene and often outright denial that there was influence. The Sex Pistols, for instance, despite their obvious indebtedness to Hell and the rest of the New York scene, went so far as to release a song called "New York" which vitriolicly trashes the scene as postured and dying. An *Alternative Press* interview features Hell at his most candid about his relationship to British punk:

> " I kind of blame British working-class punk chauvinism for the general prejudice against us, which of course was fed by bands like the Clash doing 'I'm So Bored with the USA.' They were really friendly to us but it was kind of the pose for all those British bands to trash anything American, including the New York bands, and that was just them protecting themselves because they knew they'd taken all their ideas from New York. It was a way of keeping that British pride in having originated something as exciting as punk when everything around them was so depressed.
>
> It was purified and there was a political element added but all the inspiration came from America. Between what Malcolm McLaren took from me and what the Dolls and Ramones brought over to England, you cover everything the Clash and Pistols were doing. The first time I met Sid Vicious, he came up and apologized immediately for the Sex Pistols having stolen everything from me."[86]

Hell gives us a great deal to consider. He really hits upon the economic factor of punk's rise and rapid spread in England. Economic conditions were such that England had a population

of disaffected youth, for whom the rage and rebellion of punk rock made a great deal of sense. Hell highlights the "political element" that differentiates British and American punk. Out of the troubled economic conditions, the raw material (the nihilism and energy) that Hell and other groups, like the Ramones, provided British punks became sharply politically focused. It's interesting that Hell doesn't seem to feel any resentment. He doesn't outright accuse McLaren of having stolen anything from him, merely taken, and Hell is very forgiving of British bands' attitudes towards him and his New York counterparts. He recognizes the economic and political stake punks had in their movement that demanded an enthusiasm and defensiveness to keep going.

Between his praise of Johnny Rotten and his recognition that England's particular circumstances were well suited to punk, Hell narrows down exactly what British punk was made of. The Pistols and other groups had an economic context for their highly political message. Rotten channeled chaos, an idea that came from Hell, but also a way of thinking about life that Hell eventually moved beyond. This combination of elements caused the media explosion that was British punk. Though evidence shows that much of what was unique about punk came from its first American incarnation, and Hell most particularly, it would largely be by way of British punk that Hell would impact American alternative music.

IV. Hell in America

While the punk scene in New York remained very local, the British punk scene exploded. Because of its inflammatory combination of politics, nihilism and style, deriving from and expanding upon the innovations made by Richard Hell, British punk attracted a great deal of media attention. Malcolm McLaren, whom Hell called a mass media artist, used this to his advantage and before long not just the British press but the American press caught on to this new punk movement, the name and implications of which were perfect fodder for reactionary news stories. When British punk bands began to come to America, the media was ready for a firestorm.

One band, the Damned, managed to sneak into America before that firestorm happened. The Damned have an unusual legacy in that they were one of the first handful of British punk bands, the first to put out a record, 1976's "New Rose" single, and the first to tour America in 1977, but they are not considered as essential as their contemporaries.[87] They were less political than the Sex Pistols and the Clash, less melodic than the Buzzcocks and less musically experimental than Wire. In other words, their music was hard to classify, and many critics simply didn't give them much thought. But they played a brand of punk rock that was loud, fast, and angry. The experience of seeing the Damned play live would be a major catalyst in the spread of punk rock across America.

The Damned kicked off their first American tour with a three day engagement at CBGB's in New York City, the home of America's still-underground punk scene. The group played with the Dead Boys, a Ramones-like band out of Cleveland; in New York, the Damned failed to make a big impression. There were a number of factors, not least of which was the fact that the Damned regularly got drunk before performing. Additionally there was an obvious disconnect

between the more artistically inclined New York scene and the raging British. Damned drummer Rat Scabies explained:

> "We were incredibly disappointed by [CBGB's] and the audience. We went in expecting a fight [with the Dead Boys]. [Then there was] the thing with the tables and chairs in front of the stage. We were used to mayhem, and the thought of arming the audience with tables and chairs [worried us], and they were so lackadaisical about the whole thing, ordering a pizza while the Damned were playing. So we drank way too much and turned it into a comedy event … But after a couple days we kinda [thought] 'Now it's time to do it right,' and we kicked it into gear.… We found that American audiences really had no real idea of the English working-class mentality – that driven hunger and boredom. I guess we weren't used to that American attitude, 'A band is only a band.' To us it was a matter of life and death."[88]

While the Damned would go on to have a bigger impact elsewhere in America, their debut in New York was important. The slow reception of the British bands by the New York scene was one of a number of insulating factors that kept New York closer to the original more literary wing of punk rock music. The proximity of the New York punk scene to everything from hip-hop to the art of Jean-Michel Basquiat to the St. Marks Poetry Project kept the bands on the scene very artistically inclined and more experimental musically than many British groups. The continuation of New York scene lead to the development of what was called "No Wave" music, which in name was a jab at the New Wave groups like Blondie and the Talking Heads who had "sold out," and which was sonically and lyrically highly experimental.[89] As an interconnected and independent scene emerged in America, New York produced some of its most original and unconventional performers, including Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, Lydia Lunch and the eventual kings of indie, Sonic Youth, who will be discussed later.

The Damned moved towards the West Coast, tightening their performances and impressing audiences across the country, many of whom experienced punk rock for the first time. By the time the group reached the West Coast, they were playing very tightly, with short

furiously fast songs that distilled the energy of punk rock into a minute and a half or less. The group's reception in L.A. was huge, and they immediately had an impact. The bohemians from as far away as San Francisco came to see the group's debut at the Starwood and Brendan Mullen, later the owner of L.A, punk club The Masque, credits the Damned's shows in L.A. as the source of most West Coast punk, especially hardcore, which took the Damned's cue for short, super-fast and very aggressive playing.[90] The difference was that these new American bands would not limit that aesthetic to the stage but would put it on record. The shows by The Damned drew in maybe thirty people per night, but were of such impact that as the L.A. punk scene grew most people would claim to have been at the shows, despite the obvious impossibility that everyone could have attended.[91]

Chris Ashford, manager of L.A. group the Germs, observed, "The Ramones or the CBGB scene in New York weren't factors on the formation of the Germs…. It was all about the Sex Pistols and The Damned."[92] This isn't of course exactly true; the quote highlights the unique way in which the influence of the original New York scene was in fact spreading around America, but by way of the English groups who had themselves borrowed so much from New York. In much the same way, the L.A. punks would go on to immediately 'borrow" from the new bands. Mick Farren, reporting for *New Musical Express* in November of 1977, wrote the following: "The new wave in Los Angeles is hardly more than a ripple. The smart joke is that there are just seventy punks in the whole city, but they move so fast they look like more. This may be snide but it's also, unfortunately, close to the truth … They seem to spend a lot of time poring over the pages of London and New York rock papers to cop the turn of the trends."[93]

While the scene started off small and included a number of copycats, it rapidly grew into its own. Two punk fanzines, *Slash* and *Search and Destroy,* popped up to document the

emerging scene. Slash editor Claude Bessy said, "For the first two or three issues we pretended there was an L.A. scene, when there was really nothing. But before we knew it … some bands started forming because of the paper and before we knew it, we had a scene to report on."[94] The rapid expansion of the L.A. scene mimicked others across the country, everywhere from Minneapolis to Washington D.C., where new bands were springing up almost overnight. The continued spread of punk rock across America was guaranteed by the next British group to tour America, the Sex Pistols.

The Pistols' 1978 American tour was a media circus. The tour was a product of Malcolm McLaren's ability to generate conflict; he didn't start the band in New York, where they likely would have gotten the best reception, but repeated the tactic he had employed with the New York Dolls to generate buzz: tour the American South, including Memphis and Houston, and play up the controversy from doing so. The Sex Pistols began their American tour in Atlanta, Georgia, where photographer Bob Gruen estimates that the audience was about 60 to 70 percent press.[95] The hype was building but it wasn't necessarily for the best. Atlanta's Channel 2 accused the band of vomiting and engaging in sexual acts on stage (though a *Village Voice* review of the Atlanta show makes the band out to be rather tame), and in Memphis Johnny Rotten goaded the crowd by making inflammatory statements about hometown hero Elvis Presley and country singer Dolly Parton.[96]

Danny Fields, manager of the Ramones, realized the negative impression of punk that the American media was generating could hurt his band. He observed:

> "Malcolm's strategy for the Sex Pistols was the theory of chaos. It was out of control and it had nothing to do with anything musical. It had to do with this phenomenon of terror coming over from England. They put safety pins in the queen's nose and they would vomit and curse and say it's the end of the world. I always say

> when music moves from the music section to the front page of the paper, you're in trouble."[97]

The Sex Pistols' negative media hype was detrimental to the commercial prospects of other punk artists. When the band, so rooted in nihilism, finally descended into chaos themselves and broke up in San Francisco (where Johnny Rotten famously asked the question, "Ever get the feeling you've been cheated?" before walking out), the message seemed clear: Punk rock couldn't last.[98]

The lack of commercial viability of punk was coupled with the explosion of punk scenes across the country, and often with a lack of understanding as to what punk meant or where it came from. Legs McNeil explained:

> "I was in Los Angeles, staying at the Tropicana and hanging out with the Ramones and Alice Cooper, when the Sex Pistols landed in Atlanta. It was very bizarre, because as the Pistols made their way across America, and the hysteria was broadcast on the news every night, kids in Los Angeles, and I imagine the rest of the country, were suddenly transforming themselves with safety pins, spiked haircuts, and ugliness.
>
> I was like 'Hey wait a minute! This isn't punk – a spiked, haircut and a safety pin. What is this shit?'
>
> I mean after all we were *Punk* magazine. We had come up with the name and had defined punk as this underground American rock & roll culture that had existed for almost fifteen years, with the Velvet Underground, the Stooges, the MC5, etc. etc.…
>
> But the answer that came back was, 'Oh, you wouldn't understand. Punk started in England. You know everyone is on the dole there, they really have something to complain about. Punk is really about class warfare and economic blah, blah, blah.'
>
> So I'd say, 'Yeah, well, what the fuck was Malcolm McLaren doing hanging out, managing the New York Dolls, and watching Richard Hell at CBGB's?'" [99]

This quote highlights a couple very important points. First is that, as the Sex Pistols made their way across America, they left a wake of new punk rockers. Those novice punk rockers lacked the context for the movement, believing it to be British, and ignoring the contributions of

American artists, especially, as McNeil points out, Richard Hell. It is also very important that McNeil picks up on the attraction to the safety pins and spikes, which were not actually from British punk at all, but from Hell. The fashion and subversive attitude that made the Sex Pistols so appealing, and made punks out of many kids in America, was actually the spread of Hell's influence by way of the British groups.

With the tours of the Damned and Sex Pistols, the seeds of punk rock were sown across America. In towns across the country, bands formed and further refined punk rock into hardcore punk and alternative rock. However, because the Sex Pistols had almost single-handedly tanked the commercial prospects of punk, the groups needed outlets that operated outside the mainstream music industry. This need would give rise to the system of independent labels and tour circuits that formed, and to some extent still comprise the basis of what is known as the indie scene. Regional or city labels would spring up and work in coordination with other small labels, clubs, and mom-and-pop record stores to distribute the new underground American punk rock. In Los Angeles, Gregg Ginn from Black Flag formed "SST," one of the most important labels not just for hardcore, but for alternative rock like the psychedelic country rock of the Meat Puppets, and the funky progressive sounds of the Minutemen. SST put out albums by a whole crop of the most important indie artists like Sonic Youth, Dinosaur Jr. and Husker Du. In San Francisco, Jello Biafra from the Dead Kennedys formed "Alternative Tentacles," and in D.C. Ian MacKaye from Minor Threat formed "Dischord". These labels thrived in the 1980s because they were an innovative approach to the business side of music, putting the artist first.[100]

Lee Renaldo, one of Sonic Youth's guitarists, who was a bit older than many of the kids starting labels, observed, "The way these kids worked was a marvel to us. You had these little pockets in all these cities, and all of the sudden you were hearing about – it wasn't just Boston

and L.A. and New York and San Francisco – it was Louisville and Athens, all these weird little towns that you'd never heard of before."[101] He captures the essence of indie: kids making music. Importantly this indie response was the next big shift in punk. Michael Azerad observed, "Hardcore was the latest volley in a transatlantic tennis game, with punk rock as the ball. The British had received the first wave of American punk bands- Richard Hell and the Voidoids, Television, Talking Heads, Blondie, the Ramones, et al. – and fired back with the Sex Pistols, the Damned, Buzzcocks, and countless others."[102] Hardcore and alternative rock were America's offering in the back and forth across the Atlantic and were the biggest development in punk until Nirvana broke open the alternative scene.

To think that Richard Hell's influence on the emerging indie scene was merely by way of the British groups who co-opted his innovations would be inaccurate. In fact, many American groups did their homework and learned about the origins of punk rock, and important groups in the new indie scene gave Hell nods. In New York in the 1980s, Sonic Youth was the premier alternative group. They put out quality music that drew on both the artistic wing of New York punk and No Wave as well as the new hardcore styles - music that was interesting and experimental but driving and aggressive at the same time. In the *New York Times* on May 11, 1995, Thurston Moore, Sonic Youth's singer/guitarist/de facto leader, talked about some of his favorite bands, artists and albums who personally inspired him. At number six on his list was Richard Hell and the Voidoids' *Blank Generation*.

Moore said, "I saw the Voidoids a lot early on; they were always really really good."[103] This is important because it provides a sense of continuity with early punk rock. The inventions of Richard Hell and his contemporaries didn't merely get subsumed by British punk and have their influence in a secondary way. Hell himself remained a vital inspiration for younger groups

in New York City. He paved the way for others like Lydia Lunch and Jim Carroll, who began his career as a poet, only to later join rock groups and make music. Hell's highly literate and experimental style set the bar for subsequent New York groups.

In early 1985, when Sonic Youth played their first L.A. show, Thurston Moore introduced himself to the Minutemen's Mike Watt. "He knew about Richard Hell and the New York Dolls and Johnny Thunders and I just listened to him," said Watt.[104] Here Richard Hell serves as a connection or bridge between alternative scenes on the coasts. Through the mutual recognition of influences, the groups formed a bond that lasted; Sonic Youth released an album on the SST label that the Minutemen were on, and after the death of band mate D. Boon, Mike Watt spent time in New York living with Thurston Moore and Kim Gordon.[105] Richard Hell's influence is not merely in terms of music or style, but the appreciation and recognition of his music and style fostered a sense of community between bands and scenes. These connections are what constituted a national indie scene, connecting cities, regions and bands into an expansive but definite whole.

The Minutemen, who Joe Strummer of the Clash called the fourth best punk band of all time,[106] was the product of two childhood friends who had grown up in San Pedro, California. Watt and Boon were metal-heads before discovering punk rock in their late teens through music magazines. Mike Watt related an early experience of punk rock to Michael Azzerad:

> "For the Minutemen, punk was a fluid concept – it was things like noticing an ad in *Creem* for a record by Richard Hell and Voidoids on the tiny New York indie label Ork Records and calling the number listed. "I called him," says Watt. "I said 'Is this Hell?' and he said 'Yeah.' And I got scared and I hung up…. That to me was punk."[107]

The group, especially Watt, the bassist, took an interest in Hell's interesting untrained take on bass guitar and, impressed by the fact that Hell himself had his own number listed in *Creem* for

the promotion of an album, the group committed itself to a do-it-yourself ethic that involved self-promotion and recording on the cheap. The group called their way of life and their brand of punk "jamming econo."[108] The broader indie system expanded on this idea and was one where the bands were in control; they pressed their own albums, did their own promotion, set up their own tours and even set their own ticket prices. In embracing the anti-establishment leanings of punk as a movement and playing up the do-it-yourself attitude that lead every untrained person from Richard Hell to Sid Vicious to pick up an instrument, the American indie rockers didn't just play punk, they lived it.

The connections between and Hell and the Minutemen go even further. "I was E. Bloom, Richard Hell, Joe Strummer and John Doe," sang D. Boon in the group's song "History Lesson pt. 2."[109] The song was an origin story of sorts, explaining how the group members Mike Watt and D. Boon grew up together and experienced punk rock. In the song they recount their early journeys to Hollywood to see punk rock shows and they give a shout out to those artists who influenced them the most. For the group, who came out of hardcore but whose musical expansion put them at the forefront of alternative rock, Richard Hell was a key influence.

This indie scene would eventually lead to the commercial and cultural influence that was alternative rock, and more specifically grunge, in the 1990s. Seattle was like many other cities in the U.S., with a strong local scene and indie label. "Sub-Pop" began its life not as a record label, but as a fanzine called *Subterranean Pop,* and then as a newspaper column in the alternative weekly, *The Seattle Rocket,* in the early 1980s.[110] In the column, Bruce Pavitt wrote about hardcore and alternative music. The transition to record label happened in 1986, when Pavitt decided to release the compilation album *Sub-Pop 100*, which became a series of compilations as the label grew. Because it was very difficult to come by the punk records he wrote about in his

columns, Pavitt decided to compile some of the best music and put it out so that music fans could check out the new bands. The first *Sub-Pop 100* featured Sonic Youth, Naked Raygun, and Steve Albini, a musician from Chicago's Big Black and luminary producer in the indie world with credits on Pixies, Breeders, and Nirvana albums.[111]

Local punk band Green River saw the label as an opportunity to get their music out and spent a year trying to raise the money to put out their *Dry as a Bone EP*. This is the first original release on an indie by a Seattle band, and an important step in the formation of the grunge sound, drawing on punk's speed and aggression as well as the low-end heaviness of metal music. From here the label grew; in 1987, Jonathon Poneman bought into the label with $20,000 in order to put out the first record by his friends in Soundgarden, a group heavily inspired by Texas psychedelic punk group known as the Butthole Surfers.[112] Green River would dissolve into two bands, Mudhoney, a more straightforward punk band, and Mother Love Bone, a more commercially-oriented rock group that would become Pearl Jam after the death of lead singer Andrew Wood. So with the first two original releases on the label, the seeds of the Seattle grunge explosion were sown.

In Aberdeen, Washington, Kurt Cobain grew up listening to the Beatles and commercial seventies rock like Aerosmith and Led Zeppelin. As a teenager, however, he was told about punk rock, a new rebellious style that he had never heard, but the idea of which he found immensely appealing. The only person he knew who had punk rock records were the members of new Aberdeen band, The Melvins.[113] He became a fixture at their shows and practice spaces, where he met Krist Noveselic, with whom he had attended high school but never really connected. Kurt gave Krist a demo of punk songs he had been writing and the two agreed to form a band, with Krist taking up the bass and Dale Crover from The Melvins playing drums. They went through a

variety of band names before settling on Nirvana and then moved to Olympia, Washington, the home of another indie label, K Records.[114]

They hoped to get on that label, but the band was an inconsistent presence in Olympia because of troubles securing a steady drummer. After getting Chad Channing on the drums, the group signed with Sub-Pop and in 1988 released their first single, a cover of Shocking Blue's "Love Buzz," an obscure song which was likely chosen because Sonic Youth had talked it up in a 1985 *Forced Exposure* interview.[115] They began recording their debut album *Bleach*, which was released in 1989. The album unexpectedly became a college rock favorite, particularly the odd cut on the album "About a Girl," which was less heavy and showed Cobain's sense of pop dynamics. The group's popularity resulted in a national tour, and for the West Coast leg, they played and made friends with Sonic Youth. After more drummer troubles, old friend Buzz Osbourne from the Melvins recommended Dave Grohl, a drummer from the recently broken up D.C. hardcore band Scream. Grohl fit right in.[116]

Dissatisfied with Sub-Pop's financial troubles, which would indefinitely delay the release of their second album, Nirvana followed friends Sonic Youth, who had acted on the advice of Minneapolis band Husker Du, to the major David Geffen Company, which was quietly investing in alternative artists, betting against the continued reign of 1980s commercial pop like Michael Jackson and Madonna and the glam-metal such as Poison and Motley Crue.[117] Exercising artistic control, the band held out for producer Butch Vig, who they had worked with before, and set about recording their second album and major label debut. Cobain came to the table with a slew of more pop-oriented songs that Vig noted Cobain was a little embarrassed about, because he wanted to do justice to his punk background. Vig made the album hard edged, while persuading Cobain to use pop tricks like double tracking the vocals (which Cobain only ceded to because

John Lennon had done the same), and using string accompaniment. The result was 1991's *Nevermind.*[118]

DGC hoped to sell maybe 250,000 copies of Nirvana's *Nevermind,* a bar set by Sonic Youth's *Goo,* one of the biggest releases out of the alternative rock world, rivaled only by REM. What DGC got was an explosion. The lead single "Smells Like Teen Spirit" was a hard rocking number that topped the charts, knocking Michael Jackson off the top of the *pop* charts.[119] The symbolism of that feat cannot be overplayed. The world of indie rock, the legacy of punk music, had exploded into the mainstream with a vengeance, and because it happened unexpectedly to a rather obscure band, it was not at the cost of artistic integrity. *Nevermind* topped the Village Voice "Pazz and Jop" critics poll by an overwhelming margin (1699 points to 723 for the second place album, Public Enemy's *Fear of a Black Planet).*[120] In his article accompanying the poll results, critic Robert Christgau wrote, "The Nirvana phenomenon is Amerindie's pop culmination."[121]

Michael Azerad accurately described how Nirvana was the ultimate result of the punk movement, and likened it to the 1960s counterculture, to which punk had formed in opposition:

> It was bound to happen. The records out of the indie subculture were now selling in sufficient numbers to merit more than just token acknowledgement of the music industry; the underground had grown into a sophisticated, well organized network that reached into virtually every pocket of America. And the baby boomer regime that had long dominated the music industry could no longer afford to ignore the new music consumer demographic welling up behind it.
>
> Something like this had happened before. Hippies were once a bona fide counterculture too, but then somebody figured out how to mass market the phenomenon, and before you could say Jefferson Airplane, a sanitized version of hippie rock was all over the airwaves and peace signs were used to sell everything from jewelry to beach towels.
>
> But this time the process took a lot longer. In the mid-seventies, the Ramones, the Sex Pistols, and their peers had also made a credible effort

> to foment a youth movement. Although a denatured punk style did make it to the malls and MTV, it never stood a chance of dominating popular culture the way the hippies did. That's because the arithmetic was against them: the plain and simple fact was there were far more hippies in the Sixties than there were punks in the Seventies and Eighties…
>
> If baby boomer cultural dominance was like a dam holding back the generation after it, that dam finally burst the day of *Nevermind*'s release in September, 1991.[122]

Azerad hit the nail on the head. Nirvana represented the mainstreaming of punk, the ultimate commercialization of a form of music that had been around for years. He gives credit to both American and British punk bands, but highlights the important fact that punk remained largely underground. The numbers were never on the punks' side. Importantly, he describes the breakthrough of punk in business terms. Punk only had a shot at breaking through once the music establishment saw that it was in fact commercially viable, despite the chaos of early groups like the Sex Pistols. The work to make the music commercially viable was done by the indie labels and bands themselves through relentless self-promotion, touring, and ten years of musical innovation. And, in an instant, one obscure band from Seattle was able to turn that indie scene on its head, with major labels picking and choosing bands as they pleased, without regard for the people and business who had worked so hard to make the music viable.

In the aftermath of Nirvana, the indie scene was gutted by majors. Small labels became weary of investing too much time and effort in bands because a major label would most likely lure them away with lucrative deals. While some indies, like Sub-Pop, made millions off the back catalogues of acts that went on to huge success, others, like SST, folded because they simply could not retain and develop artists the way they used to, or because large acts sued for unpaid royalties. It was a fundamentally different ballgame. Guy Piccioto said, "After '91 the

conversation changed. Before, people talked about ideas and music. And then after that, people talked about money and deals."[123]

The rebellious and subversive spirit that had kept punk alive seemed to die with the indie scene. A new wave of "post-grunge" bands appeared, like Stone Temple Pilots or Candlebox, who hadn't come out of the indie scene at all, but merely capitalized on the sound of alternative rock. Much of the music was bland and unoriginal, but the familiarity made it sell, to the dismay and expense of more original groups out of the indie scene like Mudhoney and Dinosaur Jr. Ironically, alternative rock was no longer an alternative to anything at all, but had become the mainstream.

In 1994, Kurt Cobain killed himself and the meteoric rise of alternative rock ended with his death. It is fitting, then, that 1994 saw the debut of Green Day, who would usher in a genre known as "pop-punk." With plenty of hooks, but none of the bite of punk as it had been, pop-punk commercialized on the Gen-X youth who didn't understand the history of the music or culture, but were attracted to punk as flashy fashion. The spikes and safety pins that Richard Hell had invented, as a symbol of his poverty, of his refusal to play the showy rock game, were now marketed at shopping malls to tweens and the subversive chaotic edge of the music that had come out of Hell's nihilism was reduced to nothing more than cheeky sarcasm set to sing-along hooks. As with counterculture rock, punk, a music and culture inherently rebellious and underground, had been sanitized and sold.

V. Conclusion

Richard Hell was truly the innovator of the punk rock form. He carved out a legacy that went beyond song, to truly help shape a subculture through and through. As an innovator of a subversive cultural style, it is important that he had a strong connection to the Beats. Though he initially identified with the more transcendent-minded Beats like Ginsberg or Snyder, it is in Burroughs that he found his strongest connection. Though they are all Beats, the extreme difference in sensibility between Burroughs and nearly all the rest is remarkable. This is important because, in rejecting the former in favor of the latter, Hell was symbolically making the jump from countercultural hippie to punk.

Given Burroughs' dark sense of humor and penchant for irony and cynicism, it is not difficult to see the roots of Hell's own nihilism, which formatively molded punk's outlook. The rejection of the hippie idealism and culture that had grown bloated, and was co-opted by the mainstream, was an important step for Hell because it went a long way towards defining what punk was not. Hell's Beat connection is important furthermore because it allows one to see punk not as a random phenomenon from the Lower East Side, but as having context in relation to other 20th century American subversive forms of expression, including the counterculture of which it was a self-conscious rejection.

Hell's musical development is important too. His early interest in the Rolling Stones and, most especially, Bob Dylan became the basis for his understanding of the rock and roll artist. His interest in garage rock bands allowed him to think less about musical perfection and more about getting out and simply writing and performing music. This do-it-yourself ethic would persist in punk rock. Hell's interest in the *Nuggets* collection shows not just that he was expanding his musical horizons, but also that he was becoming more involved in the New York scene, where

Nuggets compiler Lenny Kaye began playing out with Patti Smith. The Velvet Underground helped carve out space for rock and roll music with an arty edge and streetwise sensibilities that appealed to Hell, and helped him to craft a highly literate yet gritty and real style of music. All these musical factors combined with his literary interests to allow him to create his uniquely energetic but biting punk style.

In appearance as well, Hell was an innovator. His manner of dress was, despite his assertions of apathy, highly crafted and with a purpose. His look was not merely for stylistic posturing, but to communicate to those who saw him a sense of apathy, poverty, and danger. He not only reflected his own poverty, but put it at the forefront, almost as a challenge to whoever might take offense or expect him to be dressed otherwise. This confrontational manner would go on to define punk just as much as the look itself – torn t-shirts, safety pins, and spiked hair. These grew in stature beyond fashion accessories, as symbols of both community and rebellion.

These hallmarks of punk style would have to first cross the Atlantic and come back by way of British bands to catch on in the U.S., but there is no doubt that they originate with Hell. The British punks borrowed liberally from Hell, by their own admission. Though they gave punk a radical political context that the American version lacked, the basis of their attitude and look was simply lifted from Hell. As British bands began to get media exposure and tour America, they spread the music and idea of punk, and thus the influence of Richard Hell. By way of the British punk groups, many American scenes began to develop.

Because punk had no real commercial prospects, people interested in the music needed another way to get the music out. In cities across America, even unexpected ones like Athens or Louisville, punk groups formed and small independent labels arose to get the music out. This indie scene was very much based on a do-it-yourself ethic. They put out their own records, set up

their own tours, and really by sheer force of will, forged an underground music scene rooted in punk rock. In this scene, Richard Hell was both direct and indirect inspiration to many groups.

When Nirvana broke through to the mainstream in 1991, the commercial arc of punk seemed to run its course. The music and culture which had been driven underground, was suddenly profitable, and record companies exploited it to no end. This was detrimental to many of the small independent labels, who simply could not keep up with the budgets of major labels, and many folded. Meanwhile, America was introduced to "pop-punk." This music was catchy, sarcastic, and a pale shadow of the art and lifestyle that punk had once been. Richard Hell's lyrical subversion was gone, and his safety pins and spikes, once a sign of poverty, were now merely another style of dress that could be bought and sold.

The trajectory of punk rock, from underground subculture to "pop-punk" was not unexpected. Once punk was in the mainstream, it was almost inevitable that it would be exploited for all it was worth. Commercialization is in many ways the nature of rock and roll. In its origins rock and roll was rhythm and blues, and the color line more than anything else is what distinguished the two; the only way to maximize the commercial value of rhythm and blues was to make it appealing to a white audience, which meant white performers. By aiming the music at white teens, who had money to spend in the economic boom of the postwar era, record companies made millions.

The same thing happened to countercultural rock music as well. The counterculture became a marketing tool, and psychedelia a generic sound. Peace signs sold clothing and sitars sold singles. It was this same mass-marketing and watered down message that helped birth punk in the first place, and ultimately punk suffered the same fate. Though the exploitation was inevitable once punk was in the mainstream, it raises the question whether it was inevitable that

punk would reach the mainstream. Given the history of subversive forms of expression going back to at least to the Beats, the answer seems to be a resounding yes. The underground always seems to surface.

In the novel *Great Jones Street*, Don Delillo takes on the idea of the artist as even being part of the true underground:

> Bucky, you have no power. You have the illusion of power. I know this firsthand. I learned this in lesson after lesson and city after city. Nothing truly moves to your sound. Nothing is shaken or bent. You're a bloody artist you are. Less than four ounces on the meat scale. You're soft, not hard. You're above ground, not under. The true underground is the place where power flows. That's the best-kept secret of our time. You're not the underground. Your people aren't underground people. The presidents and prime ministers are the ones who make the underground deals and speak the true underground idiom. The corporations. The military. The banks. This is the underground network. This is where it happens. Power flows under the surface, far beneath the level you and I live on. This is where the laws are broken, way down under, far beneath the speed freaks and cutters of smack. You're not insulated or unaccountable the way a corporate force is. Your audience is not the relevant audience. It doesn't make anything. It doesn't sell to others. Your life consumes itself.[124]

This passage has a number of extremely interesting points. First, artists have an illusion of power. Because they inspire cultural rebellion, and hold sway with those who concern themselves with the art, there is a false sense of power. But as cultural rebellion, it is distinctly disconnected from the real power in the world: political, economic, and social. DeLillo subverts the idea of the underground by implying that the real underground is so far beneath the surface, it's truly hidden. Art and rebellious expression can never make the difference that power and wealth can, and it's the secret interactions of power and wealth that drive everything without anyone's knowledge. Only in affecting this deep system of power is anyone truly underground, and because artists don't have that power, their forms of cultural rebellion are not doomed to fail so much as they are irrelevant.

This is an incredibly pessimistic view, but gets at a very real point: cultural rebellion more often than not simply lacks the engagement with real forms of power to make a difference. Social change is rooted in action. Art often simply doesn't have the power to get people into action in the way that money does. Personal satisfaction that people can derive from art, even if it's very subversive art, is hardly equitable to the large scale social engagement and movement necessary to take on the mammoth systems of political and economic power.

Punk, like the counterculture and the Beats, was a form of cultural radicalism that never really had the weight of social change behind it. Though punk could be highly political, and no doubt some punks did try to cause social change, the subculture was largely expressive. It was about personal rebellion and the meaning that punks could get out of living a certain lifestyle with certain beliefs. The problem with personal rebellion is that it's always marketable to someone. Punks attacked the mainstream verbally and musically, but not with great numbers and, more often than not, they simply ignored or rejected the mainstream rather than tried to change it. Even though punks professed a nihilistic worldview, few took it upon themselves to truly be agents of chaos in a way that would have social or political impact. If they destroyed anything, it was usually themselves.

Punk was a form of music through which people could express and find radical ideas, and align themselves with like-minded people. Though as an art form and as a lifestyle, it could be very meaningful for its participants, it was never the kind of meaning that had broad appeal or incited people to truly mobilize for any kind of social change. At best it incited people to get involved in the culture, a sort of replicating process. At worst it excited certain people's exclusive side and fostered a sense of alienation. These qualities, though essential to some

people's lived experience and artistic expression, are hardly the kinds of feelings that produce substantive action for social change or the engagement to tackle real forms of corrupt power.

Punk's greatest success in mobilization was the indie music scene of the 1980s. Here people got involved and became dedicated to a certain way of life with its own unique cultural characteristics, and sought to bypass the major labels by doing everything themselves. While they could bypass the big businesses, they couldn't bypass capitalism. They had to form businesses to put out records and book tours. While the mainstream paid no attention, this was fine, but once the punks proved they could start their own label, do it themselves, and make money, they were as good as done. All it took was some research to figure out which punk "essentials" could be most easily marketed, and small labels simply could not compete with big businesses with plenty of capital trying to appease the desire for novelty of a fickle consumer culture. Because punk could be stripped down largely to certain visual aesthetics, it posed no real threat to the mainstream if it were mass marketed. The underground, if it can truly be called that, was always going to surface, forced up by the hidden pressures from way underneath.

Notes

[1] "October, 2 1969-October 2, 1970 Journal "; The Richard Hell Papers; Series 1, Sub. A; Box 1; Folder 1; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries.

[2] "October 2, 1969-October 2, 1970 Journal "; The Richard Hell Papers; Series 1, Sub. A; Box 1; Folder 1.

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[4] January 21, 1971 "Notes October 2, 1970-March 1971" The Richard Hell Papers; Series 1, Sub. A; Box 1; Folder 2.

[5] "Band Biographical Notes"; The Richard Hell Papers; Series 3, Sub. D; Box 9; Folder 622.

[6] January 20, 1971, "Notes October 2, 1970-March 1971"; The Richard Hell Papers; Series 1, Sub. A; Box 1; Folder 2.

[7] "Rejection Letters"; The Richard Hell Papers; Series 3, Sub. C; Box 9; Folder 603.

[8] "Business Records" 1968-72; The Richard Hell Papers; Series 3, Sub. A ; Box 8; Folder 574.

[9] Bill Laswell, "Blank Generation" *Wire* #193, 2000; The Richard Hell Papers; Series 3, Sub. F; Box 10; Folder 687.

[10] "Notes on Junk/Rock"; The Richard Hell Papers; Series 3 , Sub. N; Box 10; Folder 753.

[11] "Patti Smith Journal" pgs. 4, 6. 1974-1979; Richard Hell Papers; Series 1 , Sub. A; Box 1; Folder 3.

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[14] "Theresa Stern and Voidoid Notes" ca. 1978; The Richard Hell Papers; Series 1, Sub. A ; Box 1; Folder 5.

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[41] "Blank Generation" lyrics – *Blank Generation* (1977 Sire Records)

I was sayin let me out of here before I was
even born--it's such a gamble when you get a face
It's fascinatin to observe what the mirror does
but when I dine it's for the wall that I set a place

I belong to the blank generation and
I can take it or leave it each time

I belong to the _____ generation but
I can take it or leave it each time

Triangles were fallin at the window as the doctor cursed
He was a cartoon long forsaken by the public eye
The nurse adjusted her garters as I breathed my first
The doctor grabbed my throat and yelled, "God's consolation prize!"

I belong to the blank generation and
I can take it or leave it each time
I belong to the _____ generation but
I can take it or leave it each time

To hold the t.v. to my lips, the air so packed with cash
then carry it up flights of stairs and drop it in the vacant lot
To lose my train of thought and fall into your arms' tracks
and watch beneath the eyelids every passing dot

I belong to the blank generation and
I can take it or leave it each time
I belong to the _____ generation but
I can take it or leave it each time

I belong to the blank generation and
I can take it or leave it each time
I belong to the _____ generation but
I can take it or leave it each time top

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[73] McNeil *Please Kill Me.* p. 189-194.

[74] McNeil *Please Kill Me.* p. 198.

[75] Ibid.

[76] Ibid.

[77] "Anarchy in the UK" Lyrics *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols* (Virgin 1977)

I am an antichrist
I am an anarchist
Don't know what I want
But I know how to get it
I wanna destroy passerby

'Cause I wanna be Anarchy
No dogsbody

Anarchy for the UK
It's coming sometime and maybe
I give a wrong time stop at traffic line
Your future dream is a sharpie's scheme

'Cause I wanna be Anarchy
In the city

How many ways to get what you want
I use the best
I use the rest
I use the N.M.E
I use Anarchy

'Cause I wanna be Anarchy
It's the only way to be

Is this the M.P.L.A or
Is this the U.D.A or
Is this the I.R.A
I thought it was the UK
Or just another country
Another council tenancy

I wanna be Anarchy
And I wanna be Anarchy
(Oh what a name)
And I wanna be anarchist
I get pissed, destroy!

[78] McNeil, *Please Kill Me*, p.199.

[79] See Note 4.

[80] "Pretty Vacant" Lyrics Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols (Virgin 1977)
There's no point in asking, you'll get no reply
Oh just remember I don't decide
I got no reason it's all too much
You'll always find us out to lunch

Oh we're so pretty
Oh so pretty
we're vacant
Oh we're so pretty
Oh so pretty
A vacant

Don't ask us to attend 'cos we're not all there
Oh don't pretend 'cos I don't care
I don't believe illusions 'cos too much is real
So stop you're cheap comment 'cos we know what we feel

Oh we're so pretty
Oh so pretty
we're vacant
Oh we're so pretty
Oh so pretty
we're vacant ah
But now and we don't care

There's no point in asking you'll get no reply
Oh just remember a don't decide
I got no reason it's all too much
You'll always find me out to lunch
We're out on lunch

Oh we're so pretty
Oh so pretty
we're vacant
Oh we're so pretty
Oh so pretty
we're vacant
Oh we're so pretty
Oh so pretty ah
But now and we don't care

We're pretty
A pretty vacant
We're pretty
A pretty vacant
We're pretty
A pretty vacant
We're pretty
A pretty vacant

And we don't care

[81] McNeil, *Please Kill Me*, p. 199.

[82] Hell, Richard. "Sweet Excess" p.21, 24. *Spin* 2.9. December 1986. The Richard Hell Papers; Series 4, Sub. B; Box 20; Folder 1443.

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[97] McNeil, *Please Kill Me,* p. 327.

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[107] Azerad, *Our Band Could Be Your Life,* p.77.

[108] Azerad, *Our Band Could Be Your Life,* p.74.

[109] "History Lesson pt. 2" Lyrics *Double Nickels on the Dime* (SST 1984)

Our band could be your life
Real names'd be proof
Me and Mike Watt, we played for years

Punk rock changed our lives.

We learned punk rock in Hollywood
Drove up from Pedro
We were fucking corndogs
We'd go drink and pogo

Mr. Narrator,
This is Bob Dylan to me
My story could be his songs
I'm his soldier child

Our band is scientist rock
But I was E. Bloom, Richard Hell,
Joe Strummer and John Doe
Me and Mike Watt, playing guitar

[110] Azerad, *Our Band Could Be Your Life,* p. 146.

[111] Henderson, Justin, *Grunge: Seattle* (Berkeley: Roaring Forties Press 2010), p. 33.

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[114] Cross, *Heavier than Heaven,* p. 93.

[115] Azerad, *Our Band Could Be your Life*, p 256.

[116] Cross, *Heavier than Heaven,* p. 164.

[117] Azerad, *Our Band Could Be Your Life,* Pp. 271, 451.

[118] Berkenstadt, Jim, *Nirvana: Nevermind* (New York: Schirmer 2003), p. 63.

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Observations on Punk's Musical Qualities

Punk music has no simple definition; part of punk's staying power is rooted in its continual ability to adapt and incorporate different sonic ideas and textures. This has been true since the beginning of punk music. Punk began as the vanguard of musical experimentation in the late sixties, emerging from both the radically politicized wings of psychedelic blues groups from the Detroit area and the preciously hip pop art world in New York City. From there it morphed even more. Nobody listening to the intricate double lead guitar work of Television would quickly choose the Ramones' single guitar onslaught of chords as its musical analogue. The dub reggae of the Slits stands in stark contrast to coarse jagged politi-pub rock of the Stiff Little Fingers. The soaring loud quiet dynamics of group like Nirvana are unquestionably punk, but that group benefits from ten years of experimentation and growth since the original thrust of punk rock in the late seventies. As varied as punk rock is, however, its musical qualities can be broken down and assessed in very general ways.

What qualifies as proto-punk and early punk has some distinct qualities that made it easily differentiable from the psychedelic and folk pop music worlds at large. Punk is typically minimalist in nature. The sound might be described as "stripped down" to the barest elements of a rock band - guitar, bass, drums and vocals. This means a number of things. First of all, keyboards, of almost any form, are mostly, though not entirely, absent in punk music. Pianos had been an integral part of rock and roll since the beginning with piano stars like Jerry Lee Lewis and Little Richard. Though many punk groups took inspiration from early rock and roll, the boogie woogie piano was no more. The soaring piano sound of the Beatles hits like Hey Jude

was gone as was the droning or gospel organ that backed many psychedelic groups, from the Doors to the Dead.

The reasons for the lack of piano are difficult to pinpoint, but a great deal of it stems from the fact that punks are very rarely trained musicians. Punk groups were and are often started by kids, with little to no formal musical training. In contrast to a guitar, where chords are fairly simple to learn, the expertise needed to play piano requires time and practice, and neither of those fit in the ethos or music of punk which is energetic, immediate and rooted in do-it-yourself ideology.

For this same reason, other instruments, like horns, which had been present in rock and roll, were absent in punk music. The saxophone was an integral part of rockabilly and more commercial doo-wop and vocal groups. Horns were an integral part of soul music, from Motown pop to funky Memphis blues, and were certainly a part of mainstream rock at the time that punk emerged. They, like many other instruments, also carried the connotations of psychedelic excess. Musicians were increasingly spending great deals of time in the studio creating impressive sonic textures that included organ, horns, xylophones, flutes, sitars and other interesting instruments that sounded unique, but which many punks felt distracted listeners from the energy of the music and created distance between audience and performer; punks typically lessened this space.

What was left was what we think of as the bare bones of a rock band: a guitar or two, bass, and drums. Punk instrumentation is fairly simple. The music is typically in a 4/4 time signature, like most popular music, and the drums are played up-tempo. Speed is a crucial part punk music. Though punk has its share of quite talented drummers, the focus of the music rarely veered towards the drums or drum solos, unlike popular groups like Led Zeppelin or Rush.

Drummers often relied on simple classic rock and roll beats, with minimal flourishes to adapt to the increased speed at which they were played.

The guitars are relatively simple. Guitarists typically favored chords over lead guitar parts, and when lead was used, it was simple licks played in the minor pentatonic scale, the root of most rock guitar solos. Interestingly, punk guitarists typically avoided blue notes, which add bluesy sonic texture, in favor major flourishes, something that goes back to Chuck Berry's style of playing, and what was early on an important distinguishment of rock from Rhythm and Blues. Chords are the preferred guitar foundation of punk music, and a great deal of the music fits the stereotype of only having three chords, the I, IV, V major chords, though this wasn't particularly unique to rock and roll. What was unique was the lack of other instrumentation that had traditionally built walls of sound that hid most rock songs' simple 32 bar, 3 chords structures. Punk shifted the emphasis to the driving rhythms created by playing chords at fast tempos and typically with plenty of distortion. Punk guitarists avoided psychedelic excess by rarely using more abstract effects like wah-wah pedals in favor of simple fuzz, compression, and occasionally reverb.

Bass guitar in punk is one of the more highly variable forms of instrumentation in the genre. The bass can range from a simple driving rhythm maker, locked in time with the guitar and drums, playing eighths or sixteenths of the root note of the chord the guitarist is playing, to more hyperactive and angular bass, seen in both early punk like Richard Hell's music, and later British punk like Wire. Some punk bass playing is incredibly melodic, at times even more so than the vocals, and draws on the work of soul bassists and the work of more mainstream musicians like Paul McCartney. The bass playing can make all the difference between a driving

anthem and the atmospheric music, and the tendency toward the latter was what created goth music proper.

Glossary

Beat: The timing of a piece of music or the percussive sounds that keep time and enhance the music.

Blue Note: A note that is not in the scale being played but the slight dissonance of which gives texture to the music. Name derives from its use in the blues, in which a pentatonic scale is played with two distinct blue notes.

Blues: A musical genre that originated in the Mississippi Delta of the 1920s and derived from slave songs and gospel music. It popularized the guitar and traveled north over the next thirty years, following black migration after the sharecropping era.

Boogie Woogie: A type of rhythm and blues meant for dancing and usually including strong piano and horn arrangements.

Chord: Series of three notes played simultaneously.

Folk Music: Traditional songs played on acoustic instruments that experienced a revival in the 1960s. (Often tied to labor ad civil rights issues).

Garage Rock: A movement in the wake of the Beatlemania in which many teenagers formed bands with unprofessional equipment and very little musical training. Garage groups are mostly one-hit wonders, but groups whose do-it-yourself spirit, and sloppy but earnest brand of rock and roll was influential to punk rock.

Key: The harmonic set of notes that can be divided into either major (sounding brighter and happier) or minor (sorrowful) depending on which note a musical phrase is completed upon.

Lead/Melody: The series of notes played in a song's key that are less repetitive and more expressive, usually with greater octave range and greater variance in timing.

Octave: The same harmonic pitch with seven higher or lower notes between it.

Pentatonic Scale: Series of five notes that is sparser in sound but more economical when playing.

Psychedelic Rock: Late sixties rock music informed by the counterculture and marked by experimentation in the recording studio and extended musical improvisations called jams.

Punk Rock: A form of music that arose in the early 1970s in New York that emphasized simpler more meaningful rock and roll. It had a distinctly arty and literary edge, and remained largely underground until the end of the decade.

Rhythm and Blues: A Derivative of blues music, but with stronger faster percussion, major key rhythms and a greater range of (less sorrowful) topics.

Rhythm: The repetitious and driving series of notes or chords that alludes to or enhances the beat.

Rock and Roll: A musical genre originating in the United States in the 1950s that combined elements of Rhythm and Blues and country music. It was aimed at teenagers and was tied to rebellion in the emerging youth culture.

Rockabilly: A continuation of the sound of early rock and roll that ignored the sonic expansions of rock and roll in the early part of the 1960s.

Scale: Series of individual notes, usually eight counting the octave, that achieve harmonic completion (sound like they fit together).

Soul: A form of Rhythm and Blues informed by the melody and energy of popular rock that included strong horn arrangements and technically precise musicianship.

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