

Cameron M. Weber

168 21<sup>st</sup> St. #1C  
Brooklyn, NY 11232  
(202) 531-1281

Email: [cameron\\_weber@hotmail.com](mailto:cameron_weber@hotmail.com)

Blog: [www.cameronweber.blogspot.com](http://www.cameronweber.blogspot.com)

Economics site (includes vita and bio): [www.cameroneconomics.com](http://www.cameroneconomics.com)

“Cameron Weber is an economics student living in Brooklyn, NY”

## **Punk Rock and Liberty**

**Review of Film/DVD, *Punk: Attitude*, directed by Don Letts. Fremantle Home Entertainment, 2005, 89 minutes.**

Many of us who grew up in the 1970s and 1980s (the post-Baby Boom, pre-Generation X generation) became politically aware through the music of punk rock. Most famously I guess would be the Sex Pistol’s song “Anarchy in the UK”, but many Americans of my generation became aware prior to the Pistols arrival, and disintegration, on our shores.

*Punk: Attitude* is the latest film by Don Letts, a black British DJ and filmmaker whose London flat was a hang-out space for the group of UK kids who would later form politically-aware bands, influenced by the reggae music Letts would spin, and is a well-made history of punk rock music. Libertarianism (which is after all no more than being politically and economically aware) and punk music go hand-in-hand.

Punk was a rebellion. In the U.S. it was a musical and artistic rebellion against a staid and monopolistic music industry and a decimated (overtaxed and urban-decayed) ‘downtown scene’ in New York City in the mid-1970s. When punk was picked-up in the UK a year or so after New York, it continued the New York do-it-yourself (entrepreneurial) aesthetic, but combined this attitude with its own rebellion against life on the dole in the English cities. The kids wanted to make something of themselves and for themselves, and grouping together around energetic, fun, and lyrically-challenging music was a way to escape a growing welfare state.

The film follows punk from its precursors through today, which is basically this chronological lineage in its most understood version: 1960s garage rock bands in the US, the Velvet Underground, the New York Dolls, the Ramones (and Blondie, Television and the Talking Heads), over to England and the Sex Pistols and the Clash; this was the first generation. Then the second generation continued in the US in Los Angeles with the

band X (strangely absent from the Letts' film even though X have proved to be the US's most popular group of this generation), the Germs and Black Flag and in San Francisco, the Avengers (also absent from Letts' film even though they were the best American political punk band, singing, "ask not what you can do for your country, but what your country is doing to you.") and the Dead Kennedys. Washington, DC had the all-black Bad Brains who came from the ultra-poor Southeast DC, and the straight-edge (no drugs or drinking) Minor Threat, from the ultra-wealthy Northwest DC. Then came the third generation (grunge and Nirvana and avant-punk like Sonic Youth), the now-popular Green Day being of the 4th or 5<sup>th</sup> generation, depending on how you count it.

The film is basically documentary in style, interspersing interviews of musicians, photographers, filmmakers and journalists with live footage of music and still photography, all in a chronological narrative. *Punk: Attitude* takes the viewer through 35 years of the "punk" subculture with its various twists and turns and offshoots, setbacks and small victories.

What I like, and I think what other libertarians would like, about punk is that it is inclusive. There were women who formed and played in bands; Chrissie Hynde of the Pretenders (who is featured in *Attitude's* many interviews), Siouxsie of Siouxsie and the Banshees (also interviewed), the all-girl Slits (Ari Up of the Slits is one of the most engaging interviewees) and Kim Gordon of Sonic Youth. Gay people were punks and punks were gay; Jayne (Wayne) County and the Electric Chairs and the Tom Robinson Band the most renowned. One of punk's offshoots, the mixed-race British ska of the late 1970s (unfortunately also missing from the film), explicitly embraced black and white people living together in the 'urban jungle' and asked that people put aside their prejudices for the purpose of harmony.

Other interviewees of note are Paul Simonon and Mick Jones of the Clash, generally acknowledged to be the best punk band ever (the film is dedicated to Joe Strummer, the leader of the Clash who died a couple of years ago) and David Johansen and Sylvain Sylvain of the precursor New York Dolls (who are currently undergoing a comeback after being mostly missed the first-time around) and Henry Rollins, a popular subculture and alternative music figure and onetime singer for Black Flag. Especially good is Steve Jones, the under-rated guitarist of the Sex Pistols who now has a radio show in Los Angeles (immigration: good).

Somewhere along the line the movement became diluted and formulaic (and fragmented; some subgenres are unfortunately exclusionary, pessimistic and/or self-righteous) as these things are wont to do, but the story of punk's beginning is a good story. Just as free-market economics has its schools (monetarism, Austrian, Chicago, Supply-side) so does punk have a history, an evolution. Like I said it's a good story.

The DVD is a two disc set which includes the full Henry Rollins interview, a section on 'The US Versus the UK', discussion of record companies, and a 'where are they now section,' among other things.