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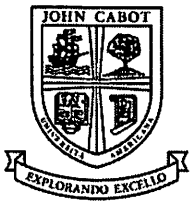

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Bachelor of Arts in History
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I Woke Up Dreaming: Cultural And Musical Responses To Urban Space

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Abstract

Drawing from the fields of Urban Sociology and Popular Music Studies, the aim of the thesis is to analyze the dynamics between artists and an urban environment, by taking into consideration the economic, social, political and cultural context in which musical texts grow. The methodological framework guides the argument towards an understanding of the city as a complex environment in which the physical structuring and cultural dimension of urban spaces are able to influence artists. The interaction of multiple and diverse conditions of the city shapes the ways in which local-based scenes develop, the ways in which artists and audience think about music and the ways subcultural identity are constructed. The ultimate goal of the thesis is to reflect on the relationship between artistic expression, identity and the opportunities offered by the city.

The first case study focuses on Downtown New York City during the seventies and early eighties and explores how the conditions of the city influenced the 'underground' scene around CBGB and the later 'No Wave' movement. The second case study draws attention to the influence of the social and economic circumstances of Coventry, during the same period, to understand the aesthetics and politics of the ska revival.

"Like A Fish In The Water,
Like A Bird In The Air"

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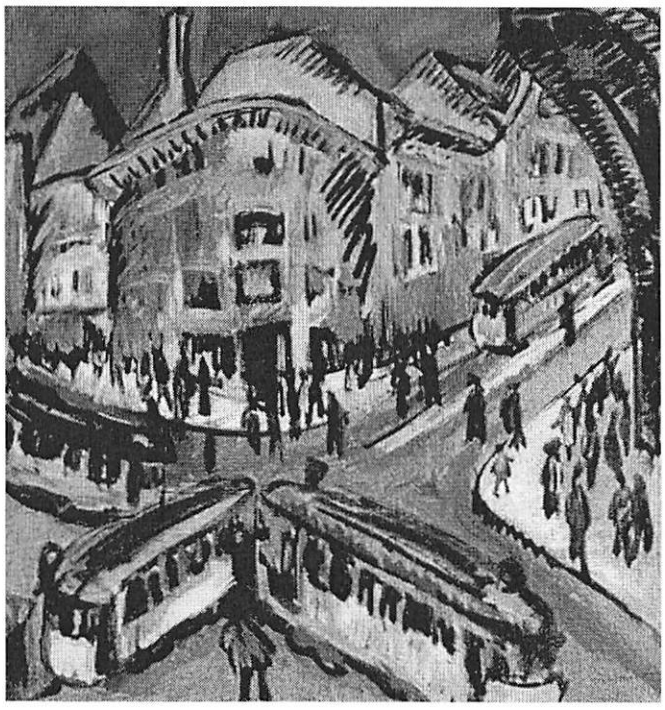
"I rumori della città che le notti d'estate entrano dalle finestre aperte nelle stanze di chi non può dormire per il caldo, i rumori veri della città notturna, si fanno udire quando a una cert'ora l'anonimo frastuono dei motori dirada e tace, e dal silenzio vengono fuori discreti, nitidi, graduati secondo la distanza, un passo di nottambulo, il fruscìo della bici d'una guardia notturna, uno smorzato lontano schiamazzo, ed un russare dai piani di sopra, il gemito di un malato, un vecchio pendolo che continua ogni ora a battere le ore. Finché comincia all'alba l'orchestra delle sveglie nelle case operaie, e sulle rotaie passa un tram."

Calvino, *Marcovaldo ovvero Le Stagioni In Città*

1 Introduction



Kirchner, *Nollendorfplatz,* 1912

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner And The Modern Metropolis

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's *Nollendorfplatz,* painted in 1912, portrays a chaotic and disturbed image of a crossroads in a famous neighborhood in Berlin. The changes that modernity brought to the architecture of the city and to the life of its citizens are here conveyed with a series of compositional elements, including distorted perspective and captivating colors, yellow, gray, blue and green, and the strange direction of the main lines. These pictorial devices serve to emphasize the physical and mental conditions of the city and its citizens, the claustrophobic setting of the buildings and the energy and velocity of people's feet and trams' wheels, whose main objective seems to be to go back and forth in all directions. The dwellers are simple, almost sketched, lines who have neither specific characteristics nor singular traits and whose only distinctiveness is their connection with the indefinite, absorbing crowd. This modern city is thus described as a busy, unconscious wilderness where buildings, trams and individuals converge and lose their identities. The landscape becomes anonymous, the citizens alienated.

Nollendorfplatz provides a clear visual example of the wider historical and cultural shift during the late 19th and early 20th century, when rapid urbanization changed the whole experience of living the city, its neighborhoods and streets and the ways in which citizens perceived their inner selves, their relation with others, and with the private and public space. Internal migration and increased population brought a huge number of people, differing in age, class and status, to live in restricted urban areas and to experience the complexities of the emerging urban environment and of the consumer culture of the mass *spectacle.* An increased need to differentiate oneself from others, from 'the crowd,' rested upon the relation between social norms and individual

behaviors, in which artistic expression, eccentric lifestyles and fashion played a central role. The intentional construction of a self "was based on publicity, on being the object of seeing," and was deeply involved in the "sensory experiences and observations" that the urban environment provided. This construction, moreover, was best embodied in the 'artistic' figure of the nineteenth century Parisian *flaneur,* the well-dressed, alienated urban dweller who wanders through the ephemeral, unconscious components of the city and while merging himself into the anonymous crowd, attempts to let his personality stand out.[1] This novel way of looking at oneself and constructing a unique urban identity was influenced not only by these ideological and artistic circumstances, but also by the economic and political dimensions of the city itself, where the impact of the organization of urban planning, public services, transportation, employment and local cultural and political institutions is crucial.

Space, Mental Life And Images

The connection between individual sensibilities and the urban environment is at the core of more recent theories in the field of urban sociology, for they discuss the meanings connected to the relation between the image of the city, its architectural and cultural dimension and its citizens. Urban planning, the actual arrangements of public space and its continuous reshaping, based on political, social and economic circumstances, constitute the vital element whereby people's lives develop and through which the notion of a 'self' is articulated. "How a city looks," certainly, "and how its spaces are organized forms a material base upon which a range of possible sensations and

[1] Hannu Salmi, *Nineteenth Century Europe: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 89-91.

social practices can be thought about, evaluated, and achieved." The architecture of the city should be considered as a 'communicative' tool whose messages and language are able to construct not only the creative 'soul' and identity of the city, but able also to shape the consciousness of its citizens. [2]

The construction of the creative 'soul' and identity of the city must be analyzed in the historical framework in which economic and sociopolitical circumstances operate. Issues such as population size, distribution and migration, ethnic differences, industrial growth, economic activities, class and social inequalities, gender and religion are, in fact, essential for a sociopolitical reading of the city. To give an example, political decisions are able to structure the social connotations of the city through the organization of a neighborhood. Often notions of community and feeling of belonging tend to be associated with those groups of people who share the same social status or cultural background and live in the same area, contributing in turn to the expansion of the cultural and artistic identity of their neighborhood.[3] The interaction of all these sociopolitical factors pushes towards the understanding of the city as a 'symbolic world' where buildings, streets, bridges, neon lights, restaurants, shops, subway stations and corners, convey a particular sign and value. The skyline, for instance, is habitually considered a symbol of modernity and technology that characterizes the city as a center of development and advancement. These spaces, objects and signs of the city influence people's actions, thoughts and behaviors, whose meanings are essential to draw attention

[2] David Harvey, *The Condition* of *Postmodernity* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990), 66-67.
[3] Kevin Lynch, *L'Immagine Della Città* (Venezia: Marsilio Editori, 2006), 1-3.

to the cultural and ideological complexities of modern life, from both an individual and collective viewpoint, within the boundaries of urban spaces. [4]

In his essay "The Metropolis and Mental Life," German sociologist Georg Simmel, discussed how such social, economic and political dimensions interact with each other shaping attitudes and behaviors. "With every crossing of the street, with the tempo and multiplicity of economic, occupational and social life," the city creates the 'psychological conditions' and the 'sensory foundations' of mental life, which are clearly in "deep contrast with the slower, more habitual, more smoothly flowing rhythm of the sensory-mental phase of small town and rural existence." With regard to the economic circumstances, money organizes modern life, it calculates the social patterns, governs the nature of personal needs and determines the freedom of individual expression. Simmel, also, underlines a *blasé* mindset, born from the endless stimuli, commodities, and images that provokes overstimulation and makes the individual less reactive and more indifferent to the dynamics of urban life. [5] However, a recent analysis of the essay, pointed out how despite the *blasé* mindset, modernity was for Simmel a symbol of cultural freedom and creativity that provided opportunities for the creation of an individual self. Simmel's emphasis towards the intellect as a tool in the struggle against the constrains of the modern metropolis, has been conceived as the key element in the pursuit of individuality and identity, and in the cultivation of oneself through cultural activities, art, novels, music and clothes.[6]

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[4] Marl Gottdiener, *The New Urban Sociology* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2006), 16-17.
[5] Richard Sennett, editor, *Classic Essays on the Culture of Cities* (New York : Appleton-Century Crofts, 1969), 47-60.
[6] Gottdiener, *The New Urban Sociology*, 47-48.

The significance of the intellect, furthermore, highlights the relation between individuals and space with regard to the possible, contrasting ways of perceiving the city. In his 1960 book, *The Image of The City*, urban planner and scholar Kevin Lynch, wrote that "there seems to be a public image of any given city which is the overlap of many individual images" and that as a consequence, "each individual picture is unique." Individuals create their own images of the city in a unique, fragmented and partial way, based on their perceptions of their surroundings and on the 'structuring' and 'identification' of the urban environment, of the geographical space and of the physical setting, through the help of a variety of sensory elements and qualities, such as color, light, shape, motion, smell and sound.[7] The arrangement of urban space is, in conclusion, a key element in the social organization of the city because it stimulates people's thoughts and imagery. The way people use and relate to space contributes to the promotion of collective feelings and individual values, affects and constructs behaviors, ways of thinking and movements, changes attitudes and lifestyles.

Meanings Beyond The Music: Youth Subcultures And Local Scenes

Urban lifestyles, behaviors, feelings and attitudes are indispensable in the analysis of musical responses. The opportunities that the city allows, in terms of musical experiences and qualities, are not limited to the artistic inspirations for artists and their songs and records; they also include the spaces for the growth of specific scenes and subcultural expressions. Subcultures, in particular, provide a clear example of how the urban milieu shapes and encourages a series of attitudes in relation to social, political and historical happenings. 'Spectacular subcultures,' through style, music and dance, express

[7] Lynch, *L'Immagine Della Città*, 1-3.

their own contrasting, unusual and confrontational set of codes and meanings within the constraints imposed by financial opportunities, class and status as well as personal taste. The attention given to style, specifically, underlines the significance of a radical aesthetic, in which the combination of clothes through the juxtaposition of not compatible elements and symbols plays an essential role in the ideological dimension of subcultures. People are conscious constructors of their own public identity in the ways they embrace or disregard a certain fashion and in the way they mix basic commodities. Through the re-adaptation, re-contextualization or complete rejection of commodities, subculture further promote their exaggerate and distinctive commentary on social norms and political belief. The public identity and self-image of subcultures, accordingly, come from the constant and meticulous display of a collective sensibility and shared mood, whose main aim is to intentionally communicate the subcultural opposition to the prevailing, commercialized values of society and metropolitan culture.[8]

The urban-based character of subculture could also be important in determining the identity of musical scene and the 'subcultural sociality' of both audience and musicians through the notion of locality. The development of a scene and how it is perceived are normally tied to the concepts of 'local' and 'global' which are, in turn, connected to questions of authenticity and inauthenticity. As an example, while alternative rock and rap local scenes are in general considered authentic and attached to the idea of "street credibility," disco music has typically been considered commodified and empty because of its connection with a wider geographical space. The geographical positioning of a music scene affects not only how the audience relate themselves to the music, but is often a crucial element as the scene is taken into consideration in its wider

[8] Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1979), 101 – 123.

historical framing.[9] In "Communities and Scenes in Popular Music," the Canadian popular music critic Will Straw argues that the significance of a music scene derives from the metropolitan environment, as a cultural space, in which it develops. In that specific environment, "a range of musical practices coexist, interacting with each other within a variety of process of differentiation, and according to widely varying trajectories of change and cross-fertilization." The cultural and artistic relevance of any given scene, the author writes, can be found in its connection to historical processes and changes on an international and local level. The international political, economic networks and music cultures, along with small-scale production and local dissemination of music, play an incisive role in determining the identity, the 'cosmopolitan character' and the legacy of a scene.[10] Ultimately, the ways in which scenes, and music texts more broadly, gain meanings are shaped by the wider context of production, consumption, exposition and distribution, in which the actual spaces of the city, the opportunities presented by neighborhoods, nightclubs, music venues, local record companies and newspapers are as essential as the values and public uses of those texts by audience and musicians.

The City, Identity And Art

Taking inspiration from Kirchner's *Nollendorfplatz* and drawing upon these theories, methodologies and thoughts about modern life and the ways the metropolis affects and stimulates cultural, social and artistic experiences, the thesis investigates how historical, social, political and economic issues, contribute and shape the construction, dissemination and reception of musical texts in urban spaces.

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[9] Ken Gelder, editor. *The Subcultures Reader* (London: Routledge, 2005), 433-437.

[10] Gelder, *The Subcultures Reader*, 469-471.

The first and second chapters provide an analysis of Downtown New York to explain the aesthetic of the music emerging in the period between 1973 and 1985. The theoretical framework concerned with the structuring of urban space is here essential to shed light on how the wider economic and political stagnation of the city molded the identity of the Lower East Side, its artistic and cultural identity, its connection with other neighborhoods, in economic and cultural terms, the development of an 'underground' music scene and the importance of music venues. Focusing the analysis on the CBGB music club, the first chapter underlines how the physical setting of the club and of the neighborhood helped the scene unfold, shaped the clothing style and established its authenticity as alternative, local culture. The second chapter, subsequently, takes into consideration the role of the music press and record companies to explain how they contributed to the evolving identity of downtown scene. When in 1977 all major bands got signed and started to leave the restricted area of the Lower East Side, the CBGB began to attract a wider audience, the scene lost its local-based authenticity and downtown became the place for a new generation of visual artists and musicians, later known as 'No Wave.' To fully contextualize the short-lived 'No Wave' movement, it is essential to highlight the cultural and artistic relation with the CBGB bands and different, more radical and extreme, artistic reaction to the economic and political circumstances of the Lower East Side. Finally, the last chapter, connects the Downtown New York punk/rock scene to the UK, reflecting once again on the role of the music press, and analyzes the Two Tone Movement in Coventry, between 1977 and 1981. The argument highlights the influences of the industrial, political dimension of Coventry as well as population migration and race issues, to stress the importance of the exchange between

Jamaican and British musical cultures, the innovative combination of these different styles and the elements of an urban-based aesthetic used to react against the inner city social and political unrest.

2 New York City: 'Love Goes To Buildings On Fire'

Before opening it, the cover from music journalist Will Hermes' *Love Goes to Buildings on Fire,* says it all: an urban and musical environment in which artists and buildings interact with each other, creating the chaotic and cultural richness of New York City during the seventies. In the cartoon by Mark Alan Stamaty nothing is left aside, from music to politics and city life. At the center of the picture, it portrays the Ramones playing on the CBGB club, Debbie Harry with a punk magazine t-shirt just upon them, The New York Dolls underneath, near Max's Kansas City, Patti Smith, Iggy Pop and Talking Heads on the right, and Laurie Anderson is playing her violin on a skyscraper on the distant left. All around, amid the busy streets and traffic lines, African and Latin American rhythms, disco, jazz, salsa, are alive with Diana Ross, Grandmaster Flash and Willie Colón. What eventually emerges from Hermes' words is a sense of excitement for this period, in which different types of artists, from painters to musicians to intellectuals, gathered together in public and private spaces to perform their arts and ending up influencing each other. Moreover, the excitement, and the originality of thoughts and attitudes in the artistic, cultural life of New York, developed despite – or perhaps thanks to – a growing crisis in the economic and political spheres. Certainly, as Hermes writes, "the worst situations produce[d] the deepest beauty, and the most profound change."[11]

[11] Will Hermes, *Love Goes to Buildings on Fire* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2011), Preface.

Living New York: The Creative Danger

Following the years of economic prosperity, that began at the end of World War II, New York began to be characterized by an economic stagnation that in the seventies reached its peak. The "global property-market bubble" in 1973 and the city's subsequent fiscal bankruptcy in 1975 – 1977, provided a new set of directions for the organization of the urban environment. In order to promote growth and development in the economic system, the local government had to reshape the regulations regarding to the use of public and private land: that is to say the ways in which neighborhoods, local population and the urban environment, from a wider perspective, are organized. The economy of the city influenced therefore the functioning of local infrastructures as well as communications, legal and financial services. [12] The limited economic budget that the government had at its disposal proved catastrophic for the effective operation of city services and was accompanied by unemployment, reaching a 7.1 percent in 1975.[13] As a result of such economic conditions, the Lower East Side, and Downtown New York more generally appeared poor, 'disgusting' and 'depressing.' An ongoing bankruptcy crisis, workers' strikes and the resulting interruption of civic services marked the mid and late seventies as a period in which neighborhoods were dirty, mostly abandoned to themselves and marked by poor living conditions and social opportunities.

From a cultural perspective, nonetheless, each neighborhood had a unique artistic identity. In the more ethnically mixed areas of the city, such as East Harlem and the South Bronx, already 'global centers' characterized by a wider feeling of internationalism, Latinos and Blacks took their traditions and added something new. The

[12] Bruce Berg, *New York City Politics Governing Gotham* (New Brunswick, N.J. : Rutgers University Press, 2007), 22-24.

[13] Hermes, *Love Goes to Buildings on Fire*, 107.

street parties of artists such as Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaataa, Grand Masterflash and DJ Hollywood, for instance, attracted African-American, West Indian and Puerto Rican kids, who came from rival street gangs but who, as the rhythms went on, became part of a single community devoted to music and fun.[14] The East Village, or just Downtown more broadly, saw the emergence of punk and body art, with live music and nightlife events developing around Max's Kansas City and the CBGB club. In addition, while a few "blocks away, Philip Glass and Steve Reich were imagining a new sort of classical music" incorporating a vast array of non-Western, African and Indian musical sources, David Mancuso and Nicky Siano were reshaping disco music.[15] New York therefore was as 'creative' as it was 'dangerous.' It was a city characterized by bankruptcy, crime, drugs, but it was also a city where artists created new spaces, or reshaped them, to express themselves, especially downtown.

As the sixties ended, downtown rock music scenes were mostly located around the Broadway Central Hotel, building of the Mercer Arts Center, two small places Mother's and Coventry, the bar Max's Kansas City, CBGB and the Mudd Club. The building of the Mercer Arts Center became in 1971 a key venue in the New York rock scene and when on August 3, 1973 it collapsed, it "caused the scene to scatter and proliferate" and pushed musicians towards Max's and the CBGB.[16] Opened in 1965 by Mickey Ruskin, Max's Kansas City had been one of the major Downtown bars for art and artists of all kinds. Sculptors, painters and dancers, such as Donald Judd, Joseph Kosuth, Robert Smithson and Andy Warhol, along with well-known celebrities as Cary Grant,

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[14] Ibid., 106.
[15] Ibid., Preface.
[16] Roman Kozak, *This Ain't No Disco: The Story of CBGB* (Winchester, MA: Faber and Faber, 1988), 9.

Mel Brooks, Janis Joplin and Bob Dylan, constituted the daily crowd at Max's, at least until the early seventies, when Max's began to be also characterized by live music performances. By 1973, national musicians were playing there, including Alice Cooper, Iggy Pop, Willie Nelson, Tom Waits, Tim Buckley, Captain Beefheart, Bachman-Turner Overdrive, Hall & Oates and Bob Marley and The Wailers who opened for Bruce Springsteen, establishing Max's as the "Manhattan's premiere club venue."[17] However, in the meantime on the Bowery, an exclusively music club opened, the CBGB. "A constant flow of energy between Max's and CBGB" and bitterness between bands associated with those clubs, characterized the following years and reached its peak in 1976 when both clubs released their live compilation albums and when Tommy Dean, the new Max's owner, began to re-establish the success the Max's previously enjoyed.[18] The CBGB, indeed, in the mid-seventies stole Max's thunder, becoming the place for an 'underground' rock scene, where emerging, unknown musicians could go and play.

1973: 315 Bowery, Manhattan. CBGB.

"...And we realized that we needed a place to call our home, a place to play once a week."[19]

(Richard Lloyd)

In the winter of 1973, the "CBGB and OMFUG – the acronym standing for Country, Bluegrass, Blues, and Other Music for Uplifting Gourmandisers ("voracious

[17] Steven Kasher, *Max's Kansas City: Art, Glamour, Rock and Roll* (New York: Abrams Image, 2010), 90.
[18] Hermes, *Love Goes*, 184-185.
[19] Kozak, *This Ain't No Disco*, 13.

eaters of music," as the proprietor explained) - opened its doors in an appalling space under the Palace Hotel, a flophouse at 315 Bowery, where Bleecker ends."[20] The club, a former derelict bar, was bought by Hilly Kristal, club owner and musician, who did not change its spatial organization and did not renovate it that much. The 'dark' and 'seedy' atmosphere remained the same and the introduction of a 'rudimentary stage' was the only renovation. The actual space of the club was not particularly large and could hold about 350 people. At the beginning, CBGB was mostly composed by the stage, Kristal's office and the stairs to the basement where the bathrooms were. The stage was eventually expanded and the office from which Kristal organized and managed the club started also to serve as the box office of the club during live shows. Over the years, moreover, the walls were filled with posters from live concerts collected by Kristal himself, "graffiti [was] covered by more graffiti, platforms [were] constructed, and seating arrangements [were] changed."[21]

In a description of his first-hand experience with the club, musician David Byrne points out how the CBGB as a physical space played a significant role, consciously or not, in the construction of the music scene and all the consequent cultural and musical circumstances that the club and the scene developed. The club made it possible to bands and musicians to come and go, playing and listening in a "fairly intimate, but not quiet" social setting. As a small music venue, the club could not provide the space and the technological elements to build elaborate, sophisticated live shows, which remained, in Byrne's words, "naked and confrontational." Musically speaking, Byrne underlines the importance of the room itself, whose small size and shape made the qualities of the sound

[20] Hermes, *Love Goes*, 49.
[21] Kozak, *This Ain't*, 19-21.

"remarkably good" for the kind of music that was been played there and gestures and expressions visible during live shows.[22]

The Squalid Neighboorhood and The Artistic Escape

Apart from the physical characteristics of the club, artists and their music were shaped by the economic conditions that affected the environment around the club and by the social effects produced by those conditions. The urban atmosphere of the Lower East Side and of the area around Bowery recalled, certainly, the disgusting and depressing identity of the downtown area more generally. Abandoned buildings, muggers, dead bodies, prostitution and heroin use constituted the daily reality of the streets in the area. However, what proved especially influential for the CBGB's scene was the fact that rents of nearby houses, were very low, allowing "artists, musicians and writers to live without much income during their formative years" and helping create a 'sense of community' amid the artists living in the same place. For instance, The Talking Heads payed 150$ per month for a loft with "no toilet, shower, or even heat," Blondie also shared a loft to save money and Arturo Vega, an influential figure within the scene in terms of style, lived just around the corner.[23]

This sense of community, born out of shared squalid living conditions in relation with the environment, was strengthened by a common dissatisfaction with the musical culture of the moment. While the rock 'dinosaurs' did not represent the Downtown generation, these 'frustrated,' young musicians sought escape in the other artistic scenes that surrounded them, from pop art to expressionism, minimalism and conceptual art. As

[22] David Byrne, *How Music Works* (Edinburgh: Canogate Books Ltd., 2012), 16-17.
[23] Ibid., 276-277.

Byrne writes, artists "would all occasionally look for inspiration elsewhere – in other mediums like fine art, poetry, art actions, drag performances, and circus sideshows. All served as points of reference for us. Being forced to look outside of music was a good thing. It may have been done out of desperation, but it pushed everyone to make something new." Playing at CBGB became for those musicians a way to play the nastiness of the reality they were experiencing, in a period when radios were playing songs like "Hotel California" or some other hits by Fleetwood Mac. [24] Although it smelled "like and ethnic perfume joke," the CBGB succeeded in attracting musicians and listeners "to see the process of rock and roll being made" and to see the "element of risk and reward [that was] missing from concerts by more polished and predictable artists uptown."[25] Moreover, the open-minded attitude of Hilly Kristal made it possible for CBGB's emerging bands to play their own material, developing creative and original musical expressions. [26]

The Emergence of The Scene: The CBGB Is On The Map

"The CBGB was, from a structural point of view, a perfect, self-actuating, self-organizing system. A biological system, in a way: a coral reef, a root system, a termite colony, a rhizome, a neutral network. An emergent entity governed by a few simple rules that Hilly established at the start, rules that made it possible for the whole scene to emerge, and, subsequently, to flow and flourish with a life all its own."

(David Byrne)

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[24] Byrne, *How Music Works*, 269-287.
[25] Wayne Robins, "Punk Rock: Its Day Will Come," *Newsday*, 1976.
[26] Byrne, *How Music Works*, 269-287.

In 1973, after the opening of the club, Hilly Kristal booked one of his first bands, Television, whose manager was Terry Ork, a well-known figure in the New York artistic scene and a regular at Max's. With Richard Lloyd and Tom Verlaine on guitar, Richard Hell on bass and Billy Ficca on drums, the band played songs from their previous repertoire as the Neon Boys and new ones, including "Love Comes In Spurts," "Venus" and "Blank Generation." In the meantime, at Max's Kansas City, the waitress Deborah Herry and Elda Gentile, partner of musician Eric Emerson, met and formed The Stilletoes, a girl group. Over the following months, the band's lineup and name changed frequently, guitarist Chris Stein joined them and, invited by Ork, they played CBGB opening for Television. After that show, only Harry and Stein remained, Clem Burke became the drummer and they soon became known as Blondie.[27]

In 1975, attracted by Television's "lyrical ambitions" and by the figure of Tom Verlaine, Patty Smith decided to go to see them playing and positively wrote about them in the *Soho News*.[28] Having played at Max's together with guitarist Lenny Kaye and pianist Richard Sohl, Smith was already famous in the underground artistic scene. When she started to go and to play regularly at CBGB she began to attract more and more people into the club and helped put it "into New York consciousness."[29] Nonetheless, it was particularly thanks to a seven-week show collaboration that started on March 20, between Television and the Patti Smith Group, that the club was "put on the map."[30] Their gigs, four nights a week, were 'new' and 'aggressive' both in the music and in the lyrics. They presented a diffident, dark, almost 'psychedelic' approach and their songs

[27] Hermes, *Love Goes*, 110.
[28] Hermes, *Love Goes*, 67-69.
[29] Kozak, *This Ain't*, 39.
[30] Hermes, *Love Goes*, 115.

normally lasted longer than usual, involving sometimes improvisatory sections. "As if making an extended piece of performance art," Hermes writes, "night after night that spring, the two groups hung out and played, '60s boundlessness and '70s nihilism ravishing each other in a dark and dingy room." A few months after the seven-week collaboration between Smith and Television, on June 5, Talking Heads followed them in a 'magnetic' and 'electric' gig. The band opened for the Ramones, just before the Mumps, and played "The Girl Want to Be with the Girls."[31]

Soon many other musicians started to play CBGB and it became to be known as the place where emerging, local bands could come and play what they wanted to play. It established itself, according to Kristal, as the place "for new rock" [32] and, gradually, concert after concert, the scene acquired its own aesthetic and stylistic features, leaving aside the mixture of "country, jazz, bluegrass, folk, poetry, and rock and roll," that defined its early days.[33] While the general aesthetic of the club was founded on the idea that the club did not serve as an escape to "the nastiness of the city," but as a place where artists could 'reveal' and 'amp' it "to a cinematic scale," [34] the stylistic features concerned the musicians themselves, who started to create their attitudes and look as they were playing. The CBGB "punk" look could have been described as a combination of artistic influences, such as the Rimbaud-look adopted by Hell, with practical choices connected to the 'roughness' of the physical environment of both the club and the neighborhood more in general. For instance, Debbie Harry from Blondie, wore a wedding dress on stage once, and the black leather jacket was adopted mostly by everyone.

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[31] Ibid., 114-117.
[32] Kozak, *This Ain't*, 58.
[33] Ibid., 14.
[34] Hermes, *Love Goes*, 67-69.

The 'Blank Generation' Look and The Eclecticism of Sound

The 'Blank Generation' look took its name and attitude from the self-titled song, which was written by Hell during his early days as a member of both Television and The Heartbreakers, often played live at CBGB and was eventually released as a demo in 1976 and in 1977 as the title track for the self-titled Voidoids' debut. Hell took the lines of a 1959 single, "Beat Generation" by Rod McKuen, and rewrote them as a mocking expression of the identity of a new generation emerging right after the New York Beats' counterculture. The main elements of the "Blank Generation" look – or better, attitude – included ripped up clothes, a do-it-yourself attitude and a widespread rejection of the hippy aesthetic.[35] Commenting on the torn t-shirts initially adopted by Richard Hell and the Ramones, Kristal said that "the dress even typified how they were progressing musically. It's as if they rolled out of bed, came in, and played. That's how their music was."[36]

What should be also emphasized, with regard to the 'Blank Generation' attitude, is the fact that artists main interest was that to be closer to the audience, in terms of music and clothing style, and to tell them that they were not about stardom or glamour but that the whole scene was just about playing and about the music itself. After all, what the audience wanted, in Richard Hell's words, was "to see someone they could identify with." The audience in fact was at the very beginning composed mostly of other musicians and friends of the bands playing. As the scene grew, however, the crowd did too, and local youth and well-known musicians, such as Frank Zappa, Paul Simon, Peter Gabriel and Lou Reed, along with A&R people and music journalists, including Robert

[35] Kozak, *This Ain't*, 58.
[36] Ibid., 14-15.

Christgau and Lester Bangs, went to Bowery to be active participants in the unfolding of the scene.[37] 'Blank Generation,' Hell later said to Bangs, who became a CBGB habitué and Hell's friend, contained the positive overall message of the 'New Wave.' The fact that the generation was blank and that the void could have been filled with any kind of creative elements contributed therefore to the fact that anybody was able to create their own image, from the clothing style to the haircut. This, from Hell's perspective, provided a 'unique' and 'powerful' character, rooted in the rock and roll ethos, to the artists involved with the scene, who were encouraged to adopt an 'outrageous' look, to create their artistic identity and to distance themselves from anything they did not like in society.[38]

In the long run, nonetheless, the outrageous look that provided the initial identity of the scene was challenged by the fact that the bands who came to play brought often different and contrasting styles, in terms of music and clothes. Each band indeed was as an idea on itself, a little art project.[39] Despite some common elements, such as their young age, their casual look, wearing on stage what they normally wore on the streets, and the nature of their musical influences, including the Velvet Underground, Led Zeppelin and the Who to name a few, these bands showed different identities and attitudes. The music being played represented an 'eclecticism of sound' that made the CBGB the "shrine to the New York music."[40] There were in fact, apart from the poetic lyrics of Patti Smith and the 'cerebral rock' of Television, the pop-rock sound of Blondie and the electronic one of Suicide, the punk side of The Dead Boys and the aggressive,

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[37] Hermes, *Love Goes*, 229; Kozak, *This Ain't No Disco*, 56.

[38] Lester Bangs, *Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1996), 262-266.

[39] Kozak, *This Ain't*, 63.

[40] Wayne, Robins, *Newsday*, 1976.

silly Rock and Roll of The Tuff Darts, the soulful music night with Willy DeVille, the 'artsy rock' of Talking Heads and the energy of the Ramones.[41] "While there was plenty of style-mixing, aesthetic lines were being drawn," writes Hermes.[42]

Live at CBGB: A Musical Melting Pot

A few months before booking Television and Patti Smith, Kristal booked two bands, Suicide and Queen Elizabeth, both already famous in the Downtown artistic scene, together with jazz drummer Rashied Ali. Among the three acts, Suicide proved to be the most influential source for later musicians in a variety of musical genres, including most importantly, the No Wave scene that started to develop during the late seventies.[43] Suicide was a duo, composed by musician and visual artist Alan Vega and Martin Rev, who sought in their live shows a blending of intense performance art and music. As musician Glenn Branca recalls, their gigs seemed theatrically staged, powerful and irreverent, and Vega "just stood there looking directly into the audience without moving for the entire set."[44] Moreover, while their sound came out of microphone feedback and from a low-fi electronic keyboard, their style was characterized by studded leather and dark sunglasses.[45] Then, as mentioned earlier, Television, Blondie and Patti Smith came in and with them Talking Heads and The Shirts began to be regular players.

Certainly, amid all the 'punk-rock' bands playing, The Talking Heads provided a much more artistic, intellectual approach to their music. Their aesthetic features and

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[41] Kozak, *This Ain't*, 63-64.
[42] Hermes, *Love Goes*, 112.
[43] *Punk Attitude*, DVD, directed by Don Letts (2005; Burbank, CA: Capital Entertainment, 2005).
[44] Thruston Moore, *No Wave. Post-Punk. Underground New York* (New York: Abrams Image, 2008), 52.
[45] Hermes, *Love Goes*, 50.

music qualities were surely not as the conventional look that people were seeing at the club, in 1975 and 1976. For instance, their use of sharp, clean-cut clothes was in contrast with the 50s leather style that many wore. Likewise, the alienated, eccentric tone of Byrne's voice, along with Tina's "rudimentary bass lines, and the martial little-drummer-boy beats" pointed more toward an art performance than most live CBGB concerts. "The Heads were so quirky and weird that they set much of the stylistic tone. Not punk, but a transition period," record man Joel Webber recalled.[46] Similarly, even The Shirts, after their debut with The Planets, started to play regularly. Annie Golden was the lead singer and although they "were the most melodic and mainstream of the original CBGB bands," they had a unique 'charisma' and 'energy,' at least according to Kristal, who later decided to manage them and to got them signed. Despite the energy of their songs, the audience did not hugely acclaim The Shirts. Neither did the press, and after 1980 they only played there once. Leaving The Shirts behind, Kristal decided to manage The Dead Boys, a punk rock band with a harsh, impressive sound and characterized by 'dynamic' live shows. Composed by singer Stiv Bators, guitarist Cheetah Chrome and drummer Johnny Blitz, the band, originally from Cleveland, moved to New York City in 1976 after meeting Joey Ramone, The Ramones' lead singer. The energy of their performances, that included songs such as "Sonic Reducer," "All This And More" and a cover of Iggy Pop's "Search & Destroy," was intense and aggressive, like their clothes and attitude. Stiv used to "hang himself on stage" and Cheetah normally wore a dog collar and orange hair.[47]

With Robert Gordon as lead singer, Jeff Salen and Bobby Butani on guitar, John DeSalvo on bass and Jim Morrison on drums, Tuff Darts were another band

[46] Kozak, *This Ain't*, 41.
[47] Ibid., 81-85.

playing CBGB and providing a different attitude and sound. During their live performances, they dressed in suit and tie, playing songs like "Rats," "All For The Love Of Rock 'N Roll" and "Fun City," whose rhythms clearly fused fifties rock and roll, a more harsh punk sound and pop melodies. Their 'unique' identity however was created through a direct irony and anger in terms of lyrics. In the case of "Fun City," for instance, the contrast between the title and the meaning of lines such as, "I'm sick of the dogs, and my noise and neighbors/ I'm sick of the showbiz and I'm sick of the crowds," and "I'm sick of the crap, I gotta take on this town," gives the ultimate and straightforward silly critique upon city life. All these bands certainly characterized the CBGB scene as a wide-ranging one in which different sources for music, styles and fashion collided. The artistic character of the scene was marked by a diversity of clothing styles, as the contrast between the Heads and Ramones shows, by a diversity of music genres, Tuff Darts in contrast to the Dead Boys, and by a diversity of attitudes during live performances.

Some Start Leaving the Bowery: The Role of the Press and Recording Possibilities

As these bands were playing, the music press started to gravitate around the Bowery to document the dynamics of styles and sounds that were being created in the scene. After the first CBGB festival, in 1975, at which new musicians played, hoping to be recruited as new bands for the club, many journalists, photographers and record men started to pay more attention to what was going on at the Bowery. Their attention towards the bands, in addition, was particularly influential in the 'creation' and 'naming' of the scene itself. The Village Voice, the Weekly Soho News and Punk Magazine, were the

three main newspapers that supported the emerging scene on the Bowery, covering stories and images on the bands' live performances at CBGB, and that got involved in the debate of how to name the scene: punk, new wave and even Kristal's street music were some of the labels used.[48] As the press was still deciding how to deal with CBGB's bands, Kristal began to see the "recording possibilities" and decided to release a compilation in 1976. The *Live at CBGB* compilation was released on the self-run CBGB label, although eventually Atlantic bought the rights, and featured bands such as Tuff Darts, The Shirts, Mink DeVille, The Laughing Dogs, The Shirts as well as Manster, Sun, Stuart's Hammer and The Miamis. Intended to be an anthology of the most exciting "live performances," as Kristal himself put it in the liner notes, the 16-track album included two or three songs for each band and covered a wide arrangement of musical genres and styles. Kristal's compilation, however, proved not an acclaimed success as some of the musicians and people from the audience involved in the scene did not consider it to be a truthful representation of the scene at that moment, lamenting that some bands barely played at the club and that the most important ones were not included. However, the decision not to feature artists such as Patti Smith or the Ramones, was a result of the fact that they had by-then already got their label contracts, making their own records.[49] In a couple of months, Television were signed to Elektra, The Shirts and Mink DeVille to Capitol, and all the bands involved in the making of Kristal's compilation embarked on a national tour, while the Ramones played their first UK gigs. The CBGB's scene was no longer an underground one. [50]

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[48] Kozak, *This Ain't*, 43.
[49] Hermes, *Love Goes*, 184.
[50] Kozak, *This Ain't*, 69-73.

3 1977: Labels Push Them Away From The City

"CBGB has showed that a local scene can be every bit as good as what's played on the national radio. It inspired Athens, Georgia, it inspired London, it inspired Los Angeles. It inspired the world."[51]

(Roy Trakin)

In a 1976 article, music journalist Wayne Robins discussed the role played by record industries, concluding that the best thing for the New York bands, was a that moment to play and to be left alone, because none of them was ready to sign with record companies. "The healthiest part of this scene is that record company people checking it out don't understand it," stated producer Richard Robinson. Robinson's words underlined the fact that record companies, at least until 1976, remained almost aloof from the scene, with some exceptions nonetheless, maintaining the scene's identity as a strictly live performance phenomenon without recording sessions and Top 40 hits. Before 1976 the fact that labels did not show a particular interest in the underground bands and that record company people were afraid to go to dirty clubs like CBGB, what normally got signed on the national level was different from the high energy of this 'street music.' However, despite this previous aloofness, as producer Marty Thau remembered, "all of sudden there

[51] Kozak, *This Ain't*, 132.

was interest."[52] Although the people in the audience probably wanted the bands to remain local, by the end of 1976 and throughout 1977, following Kristal's compilation, record companies actively started to pay attention to the evolution of the scene and to sign these bands. In turn the attention of record companies attracted more and more people and eventually expanded the underground sound "beyond the boundaries of its Lower Manhattan triangle," carrying it away from CBGB, Max's and Mother, the three main live music clubs.[53] All of sudden, journalists, many other writers, players, actors, and people connected to major merchandising and marketing companies came in and, "people started to realize" that it was "more than just a local thing."[54] For instance, sometimes considered the first record to came out of the scene, Smith's *Horses* was released in 1975 on Arista and was followed by, *Ramones*, The Ramones' debut album released in 1976 on Sire Records. Later, following Smith and The Ramones, Marty Thau himself, who owned Red Star Records, signed Blondie, whose "Call Me" single "broke through on pop radio in 1980," and Seymour Stein, owner of Sire Records, signed Talking Heads, publishing their debut album *Talking Heads: 77,* Television's *Marquee Moon* and eventually Tuff Darts and the Dead Boys as well.[55]

Certainly, the role played by record industries, and by the music press as well, became particularly important in the understanding of the expansion of the scene, expanding its influence from its Manhattan origin to a wider geographical area, and in the understanding therefore of its 'underground' sound, image and identity. Especially, the question on locality proved essential with regard to the music press and the journalists'

[52] Ibid., 70-72.
[53] Robins, "Punk Rock."
[54] Kozak, *This Ain't*, 70.
[55] Ibid., 68.

opinions regarding the authenticity of music and musicians' artistic integrity. Journalists writing for national magazines diverged from those writing for a smaller audience, as was the case of the Heads' *Talking Heads: 77.*

"Love Goes to Building on Fire," was the single debut of Talking Heads, but it was not included on their LP debut, released on September 16, 1977. The album included songs such as "Uh-Oh, Love Comes To Town," "The Book I Read," and what arguably became their most famous hit, "Psycho Killer". Overall, the eleven tracks were "short, minimally apportioned, full of hooks," the "rhythms were spasmodic," and Byrne's lyrics playful, fragmented and intrigued by a diverse arrange of subject-matters, leaving completely aside the rock n roll emphasis on rebelliousness and misbehavior, as expressed by other NYC punk rock bands.[56] Byrne, by "exploring the logic and disorientation of love, decision making, ambition and the need for selfishness, ... gropes for articulation like a metaphysician having difficulty computing emotions," wrote Stephen Demorest in *Rolling Stone* right after the album was released, acclaiming it as one of the most influential albums of the decade.[57] In contrast to Demorest's strikingly positive review, Roy Trakin, from the *SoHo News,* "was both exhilarated and disturbed at how commercial-sounding the band had become."[58]The album brought them to tour the UK where they met British musician and producer Brian Eno, who later decided to move to New York to work with the Heads on their second album, *More Songs About Buildings And Food.* In New York, he spent his time together with guitarist Robert Fripp, who was living on the Bowery, went to see Devo playing Max's Kansas City and strolled "Lower

[56] Simon Reynolds, *Rip it Up And Start Again* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), 134.
[57] Stephen Demorest, "Talking Heads '77," *Rolling Stone*, 1977.
[58] Hermes, *Love Goes*, 269.

Manhattan like a native New York flaneur." [59] As he was falling in love with "the most beautiful city on earth," as he said he befriended D.N.A.'s Arto Lindsay and started to get involved with the No Wave artists. [60]

By late 1977, on the Bowery, as these bands toured or signed contracts, the CBGB scene began to welcome new bands that continued to bring a variety of sounds and style, making it the national "mecca of the new music," and changing its identity. Being it no longer an underground scene, where mostly local people played and contributed to the artistic development of it, but it was becoming a larger one, influencing and attracting national and international attention. These new bands were coming not only from New York, but also from all over the country to play CBGB and included, to name a few, Devo, the B-52s, Pere Ubu, The Runaways, Tom Petty and the Cars, from the UK, The Jam, Police and X-Ray Spex. AC/DC also played CBGB, as did a hardcore band from the Bronx.[61] In October The Jam made their US debut at the CBGB as the opening band for DMZ, playing songs such as "The Modern World" and "In the City."[62] Likewise, The Police, almost totally unknown and inexpert debuted in a "smoky and crowded" CBGB. According to Jim Green, who reviewed their first concert, the band "combine[d] straight-ahead super speed new wavery rock with slower reggae-oid section, with great hooks out of classic Britrock tradition" which made them not the "usual punks." An American tour, that lasted more or less two weeks and that ended with the return of the band to the CBGB, followed. This time, they demonstrated a more self-conscious sound and group

[59] Ibid., 270.
[60] Moore, *No Wave*, 78.
[61] Kozak, *This Ain't*, 96.
[62] "The Jam – CBGB 1977," *Roio, From The BigO Audio Archive*, 2014.

bonding.[63] While these new bands played CBGB and the original ones began their national and international tours becoming well-known starts in the music business, the romanticized myth of the local scene was lost as well as its feeling of a punk rock community and, more importantly, its subcultural entity as an alternative music generator. As UK punks began to attract media attention, the rhetoric of the 'Blank Generation' seemed outrageous no longer.[64]

The potentiality of the 'creative danger' of the city, nonetheless, continued still to attract visual artists and musicians, mostly art students from the University of Florida and Cleveland, who sought between the streets of New York, new and more experimental artistic opportunities. [65] Some of these artists went to the big, metropolitan city to find artistic opportunities "pursuing painting, sculpture and performance art" and a place in the conceptual, avant-garde downtown art scene, "but they decided that New York's music scene was much more vital than its art scene – and much more open to their radical ideas."[66] Between 1979 and 1981, "DNA, Bush Tetras, and the Contortions brought newer and sometimes more radical musical approaches to the club," [67] and became influential in the underground scene, together with other bands such as Mars, Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, The Gynecologists and The Theoretical Girl. The emerging 'No Wave' scene found inspiration in the dark atmosphere of previous bands, such as Suicide, and in the nihilism of Richard Hell, taking their concepts and playing with them.[68]

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[63] Jim Green, "Police Lean To America...," *Trouser Press Magazine*, 1979.

[64] Reynolds, *Rip It Up*, 50.

[65] "No Wave Now: Lydia Lunch on the cultural history of No Wave," *YouTube Video*, 36:15. Posted by "Mocad," 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XIj8VWPHxB8.

[66] Marc Master, "No! The Origins of No Wave," *Pitchfork*, 2008.

[67] Byrne, *How Music Works*, 287.

[68] Master, "No! The Origins."

The Second Generation: 'No Wave' And New York City

Short-lived and never considered as a movement by the artists involved, 'No Wave' pushed the anger, the refuse to conform and the alternative attitude of punk/new wave bands to an extreme and yet created its own artistic character, rejecting the stylistic and musical elements of the punk/rock tradition, adopting the essence of an apolitical, 'hedonistic,' bohemian lifestyle. The first use of the term 'No Wave' seems to have been used ironically by Roy Trakin in the *SoHo News* in an interview with Lydia Lunch, and it well embodied the new musical, artistic direction of the entire movement and its ambivalent relationship with musical traditions, art and anti-art sentiments. 'No' signified the total negation and rejection that these artists wanted to express, the willingness to "despise conventions" and categories, the disinterest towards an artistic unity, the happiness of remaining an 'underground' entity and the fact that they had nothing to do with punk and the new wave bands who were at that time becoming mainstream and increasingly influenced by the rules imposed by the music business. "For No Wavers, No was not just a negative, but a contradiction – a way to say that whatever we are, we're also the opposite."[69]

The No Wave scene developed into an 'anti-everything' attitude along the lines of the tenets of Dada anti-art and Surrealist aesthetics, and from the will to create and 'destroy' all previous artistic inspirations and models of rock tradition, embracing an 'angry' and 'ugly' and 'loud' overall attitude.[70] As Lunch later put it, "No Wave was the waste product of *Taxi Driver,* Times Square, the Son of Sam, the blackout of '77, widespread political corruption, rampant poverty, the failure of the Summer of Love, the

[69] Ibid.
[70] Moore, *No Wave*, 4.

hatefuck of Charles Manson, the hell of the Vietnam War, and a desperate need to violently rebel against the complacency of a zombie nation dumbed down by sitcoms and disco."[71] To violently rebel, therefore, instead of adopting or creating a well-defined, specific sound or style, these artists embraced a 'Year Zero approach,' embracing a wide range of early musical and artistic sources and cultural traditions, and yet "acting as if they had no ancestors at all." Their music was 'angular,' 'brutal' and 'unfriendly,' and their songs adopted harsh "noise, lack of melody, technical naïveté" anything else that was not 'musical' and dissonance as key elements[72], showing a general detachment towards music composition and theory, considering that most of them were mere listeners and that did not play any instrument before getting into the scene – and, in some cases, even after. "Who wanted chords, all these progressions that have been used to death in rock? ... To this day, I still don't know a single chord on the guitar," affirmed Lunch, certainly following the 'anti-rock' stance of CBGB's punk bands. Yet, even if they rejected rock tradition they used its basic tools to do so, using for instance the basic guitar, bass and drums system. The music draw from punk rock to jazz, disco and funk, and the scene "ranged from Teenage Jesus' stentorian dirges to Contortions' jazz-scarred thrash-funk, from Mars' guitar-flagellating clangour to DNA's dislocated grooves."[73]

Apart from the music, it is essential to draw attention on the general role of art and on the impact of other artistic medium used in the scene in the No Wave urgency to react and rebel. The whole scene saw the juxtaposition of different disciplines and the multifaceted nature of the artists, who painted, played, wrote songs and directed movies all at once. "It was just all interconnected," said Lunch, "We were all friends and

[71] Ibid.
[72] Master, "No! The Origins."
[73] Reynolds, *Rip It Up*, 51-52.

frek-by-nature outsider artists. I think it was just the freak nature of our base elements that brought us together."[74] The radical experimentation and the keen desire to create art – "the most instantaneous something was, the better"[75] – was for the No Wavers a way to get rid of the political disillusion that characterized the sixties, of the poor living conditions of New York during the seventies and "a psychic defense." Artistic expressions were seen as a "projection of the insanity of the city at that time," to express their inner 'nuts' and 'corrosive' psychological sensations as products of all the anxiety and the pressures that the city produced.[76] No Wave also involved painters, photographers and filmmakers, such as Amos Poe, Vivienne Dick, Eric Mitchell, James Nares, John Lurie and Jim Jarmusch, whose films, which often featured some of the musicians, "were short, funny, and created quickly and cheaply on Super 8." For instance, according to James Nares, the story of *Rome '78,* in which Contortions' guitarist Pat Place and Lunch acted, connected the collapse years of the Roman Empire to the decadent elements of New York in the seventies when "nobody had money" and the city was a "desperate place."[77]

The Lower East Side and Downtown Music/ Art Venues

In 2007, Teenage Jesus and The Jerks' singer Lydia Lunch recalled the social and artistic milieu of New York during the late seventies in the foreword of Thurston Moore's *No Wave.* Inspired by the writings of Lester Bangs in *Creem* Magazine and by the music and poetics of the Velvet Underground, the New York Dolls and Patti Smith, she went to

[74] Master, "No! The Origins."
[75] Ibid.
[76] "No Wave Now." *YouTube Video.*
[77] Moore, *No Wave*, 90-91.

New York City in 1976, when the city was dirty and impoverished and were poverty and poor hygienic conditions characterized the area around the Bowery and Downtown more broadly. [78] Developed out of the CBGB/Max's underground scene, the No Wave artists started to gravitate mostly in the Lower East Side. The urban environment of Downtown New York was still decadent full of drugs and violence, lacking running water and proper lighting and electricity. As Lunch and Mars' China Burg recalled, the area was "incredibly empty" without stores and an endless line of "blocks and blocks of abandoned buildings."[79] The fact that the rent remained extremely cheap allowed the artists to work sporadically and offered the same artistic and social opportunities, giving them the time to dedicate to art. [80] As for the punk/rock bands, the SoHo area was too expensive for many of them and Tribeca, although affordable was too dangerous a neighborhood.[81] Moreover, Soho which was the until then an important center for artists of all kind, was by-then gentrified and full of galleries, it was therefore no longer considered an exciting place for radical, artistic innovations but simply the center for 'pallid' and 'genteel' minimal musicians and artists. No Wave artists indeed preferred the "the sweat and rowdiness of proper rock 'n' roll" around Max's and CBGB. As music journalist Simon Reynolds writes, "in the cultural geography of downtown New York, No Wave's mixed feelings about art and translated into a hostile, jostling rivalry between the Lower East Side and Soho." [82]

However, eventually, the No Wave scene expanded beyond the area into music venues, artistic centers and artists scattered all around Downtown. Apart from CBGB and

[78] Ibid., 4.
[79] Master, "No! The Origins."
[80] Reynolds, *Rip It Up*, 57.
[81] Moore, *No Wave*, 73.
[82] Reynolds, *Rip It Up*, 57.

Max's, the exciting places they deemed worthy for their non-conformist way of life were mostly cheap bars and other music/ art venues. On Duane Street in Tribeca there was the Barnabus Rex, a bar that became an important, popular gathering place for artists, musicians and filmmakers.[83] Later, Mudd Club gained importance along with the Ocean Club, a new club opened in 1976 by Max's founder Mickey Ruskin. The club did not last long, but it was nonetheless an influential artistic center. There, in July 1976, for instance, Lou Reed, John Cale, Patti Smith and David Byrne played in front of Byrne's bandmates, Andy Warhol, producer Clive Davis and Lydia Koch, who soon after changed her name to Lunch and started her own band, The Teenage Jesus and the Jerks.[84] More important was the 'No Wave' connection to the Artist Space, a non-profit/artistic gallery and performance art space in the Tribeca area, where many of most exciting musical and artistic events were hold. [85]

The Collision of Art and Rock

Using these music/art venues as key spaces where to express themselves, the same experimental approach that characterized the composition of music, was obviously a key element during their live performances. The whole scene in fact involved "young visual artists who had grown up listening to rock music ... who had come to New York to do visual arts, to do painting, to do conceptual art," and got instead caught up with the CBGB's sensibility, and later imagined to go up on stage and do the same: to play "art music."[86] Their gigs were marked by a connection with the artistic, ideological and

[83] Moore, *No Wave*, 60.
[84] Hermes, *Love Goes*, 191.
[85] Reynolds, *Rip It Up*, 57.
[86] Master, "No! The Origins."

conceptual ideas of the avant-garde movements of the sixties, from Fluxus to the Viennese Actionists. From these traditions, they took the provocative, border-crossing aesthetic and expanded it to its extreme, questioning the role of art as well as the boundaries between performers and their audience, with the result of turning concerts into artistic happenings. Arto Linsday, for instance, admired the performances of Vito Acconci and his extreme artistic gestures and James Chance, singer and saxophonist in Contortions, often attacked the audience during their lives and challenged them. Certainly, this urge to combine music with artistic ideas during live shows, was borrowed from Suicide, who are often cited as the No Wave major inspiration along the Dead Boys. In fact, "although they pre-dated both No Wave and punk by several years, Suicide were in many ways the archetypal New York collision of art and rock."[87] From both bands, who "channeled prime aspects of the proto-punk Stooges and exhibited a charged sexual edge,"[88] the No Wavers borrowed the intensity of 'confrontational' shows, physical interaction with the audience and the idea that concerts should have been lively situations, simply not static. Merging music and art, and fully embracing the possibilities of performance-art, the No Wave artists expressed themselves playing live and loud music, without seriously taking into consideration the potential of the recording studio. [89]

Recording The Scene: ZE Records and Brian Eno's *No New York*

The refusal to record their songs, however, was challenged by Terry Ork, owner of Ork Records, by Charles Ball, who worked with Ork and eventually founded the Lust/ Unlust label and who recorded Teenage Jesus for the first time, and by Michael Zilkha

[87] Reynolds, *Rip It Up*, 53.
[88] Moore, *No Wave*, 56.
[89] Reynolds, *Rip It Up*, 55-57.

who co-founded ZE Records together with Michel Esteban.[90] In 1978, inspired by a five-day music festival at Artists' Space, Eno decided to record his own compilation. Although artistically and conceptually distant from the no wave attitude, a fascination with the development of short-lived art scenes brought Eno to record the "experimental-but-ephemeral" identity of some of the bands involved with it. The production of the 'No New York' compilation, released in 1978, was intended in order to 'document' the songs and artists without major technological modification and studio interventions, without "separation between the instruments" or overdubs. [91] "I very much had the sense that this wasn't going to last for long. It just seemed to me like one of those sort of flames that burns very brightly for a short time and then it goes out," said Eno.[92] The final LP featured a limited lineup composed by only four bands, The Contortions, Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, Mars and DNA, and the choice produced a dissatisfied reaction from other musicians. Some other bands such as the Theoretical Girls, Glenn Branca's band, and The Gynecologists were dismissed because of their connection to the more sophisticated SoHo artistic life, a choice that recalls the relation between the various areas of the city. Along with the latest bands, others felt unhappy with such decision and believed that the record did not reflect the scene in its entirety.[93] Following *No New York*, Max's closed, the CBGB was more and more a club for well-known rock bands and the identity of the No Wave, as a "cultural spasm" and "extreme gesture ... could only exhaust itself."[94]

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[90] Moore, *No Wave*, 40.
[91] Reynolds, *Rip It Up*,58-59.
[92] Moore, *No Wave*,78.
[93] Reynolds, *Rip It Up*, 58-59.
[94] Ibid., 71.

4 1977: New York Arrives In London

When the British clothes designer, artist and manager Malcolm McLaren went to New York City, he borrowed the 'ripped style' and went back to London, where he opened his own clothing store, "SEX," and created the Sex Pistols. "New York had arrived in London. Back in New York, the cover of Punk featured the Sex Pistols."[95] From its London-based origin, the UK punk rock and new wave scene evolved into a national musical and political movement that, in contrast with the more localized and less fashion-oriented CBGB's scene, showed through sounds, lyrics and clothes a more direct visual and irreverent attitude. Certainly, with the exception of successful bands such as The Ramones, Blondie and Talking Heads, the scene around the CBGB, and Downtown New York more generally, remained in the late seventies the home of an underground culture, while in Great Britain radio broadcasting and the widespread circulation of music newspapers and magazines, such as the NME and Melody Maker, made punk the source of a nationwide key issue concerned with economic stagnation, unemployment, ethnic controversies, urban, violent and disenchanted life. The Sex Pistols, Malcom McLaren and the whole English punk scene "stole the media thunder from the more introspective, apolitical and generally less showy bands at CBGB." [96] As The Damned, The Jam and

[95] Hermes, *Love Goes,* 232.
[96] Kozak, *This Ain't,* 94-95.

The Police were playing CBGB, Richard Hell and Suicide debuted in the UK, both opening for The Clash.[97] The Automatics were there too.

The Automatics, who would later evolve into the Specials, coming from the punk Coventry scene and influenced by a variety of musical genres, were composed by musician Jerry Dammers, Horace Panter on bass, Silverton Hutchinson on drums, singer Tim Strickland and Lynval Golding on guitar. The band started playing reggae with a punk fashion and soon, when Strickland left, recruited Terry Hall as lead singer.[98] Before playing side by side with The Clash and Suicide, the band began by playing a number of gigs in the local punk scene at Coventry and later debuted in London, although without great success. In addition, when guitarist Roddy Radiation joined, the name of the band changed to The Special A.K.A. The Automatics, later shortened to The Special A.K.A, and finally The Specials. Despite the appreciation of radio broadcaster John Peel and help from The Clash's manager Bernie Rhodes, the band was not as successful as other punk reggae outfits. The confusion in their mixed sound indeed brought Jerry to rethink their music, ultimately deciding to experiment with ska as well as the image and style of the band, and eventually, in 1979, to form their own label – 2 Tone Records. [99] Over the years some other bands, from various UK cities, signed to Two Tone, but it was, thanks to the groups from Midlands, The Beat from Birmingham and The Specials and The Selecter from Coventry, whose line-up showed an ethnically mixed membership, that the two tone style initially developed. These bands "sought to display the contradictory

[97] Hermes, *Love Goes,* 268 and 275.
[98] George Marshall, *The Two Tone Story* (Lockerbie, S.T. Publishing, 1990), 9-10.

[99] Ibid., 12-17.

politics of 'race' openly in their work," [100] even more than their colleagues from London, and their lyrics were deeply based on their relation with the social and living conditions of their inner cities, most specifically, the industrial and multiethnic city of Coventry.

Coventry: Industrial and Multiethnic

In the fifties and sixties, following World War II, Coventry and other urban centers in the West Midlands area, such as Birmingham, experienced an unprecedented period of prosperity and the most successful post-war suburban growth. Thanks to the blossom of small, light industries and to the development of engineering and motor manufacturing, Coventry became an important and innovative technological center. The success of the local car industry accompanied by the great, continuous demand for cars turned the city into the 'British Detroit' and the West Midlands into a symbol of post-war economic prosperity in the UK. [101] Many Caribbean immigrants moved to the area in order to work in the industrial sector, making Coventry a city characterized by a large multiethnic population and the center for industrial integration, in which black and white people worked together. In terms of architecture, urban growth came from the rebuilding of public spaces and buildings along 'modernist principles.' It saw therefore the construction of tower blocks, shopping centers and motorways that made Coventry, surely not pretty but still a vibrant center, at least until the late seventies. The seventies then saw the decline in prosperity as the car and motor industries began to lose their local relevance. [102] Beginning with the oil inflation in 1972, this economic decline reached its

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[100] Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black In the Union Jack'* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 170.

[101] Arthur Marwick, *British Society Since 1945* (London: A. Lane, 1982), 30-31.

[102] Reynolds, *Rip It Up*, 284.

peak between 1978 and 1979, when West Midlands cities recorded a 7.5 per cent unemployment rate[103] and the Thatcher government implemented new economic policies, affecting the British industry as a whole and the life of city centers. Coventry lost its vitality, but the Two-Tone was at its best.

The Two Tone Response: Music and Fashion

"Lots of people said that they were ripping off the original sound of ska, but I wouldn't say that ... it was great for me to see Jerry Dammers and his posse doing what they were doing."[104]

(Laurel Aitken)

The first record in the 2-Tone catalogue was The Specials' debut, *Specials,* whose 14 songs, produced by Elvis Costello, clearly presented a new, aural and visual, attitude towards the relation between Jamaican and British cultural and music traditions. The combination of ska rhythms with punk fury and, more importantly, references to a local street lifestyle gave the album a quite unique identity, in the flourishing years of the national reggae punk scene. While the album initially received mixed receptions, the 2-Tone movement became one of the most popular musical scene around the entire country, at least for a year and a half, until the summer of 1980 when the media began to look for something new.[105] Like The Specials' debut, the Two Tone as a musical and dynamic movement, showed a distinctive identity based on the appropriation of old, both British and Jamaican, sound, images and styles and, in turn, on the adaptation of those traditions

[103] Marwick, *British Society*, 197.
[104] Marshall, *The Two Tone Story*, 33.
[105] Ibid., 75.

to the reality of Britain in the late seventies, relating them to the locality of social, political and economic conditions. From the name of the label, to the clothing style and music, Two Tone succeeded in projecting the experiences of young, urban Britons, fusing rock and ska, politics and music, white and black.

While the name of the label was borrowed from the name of the 'tone suit' worn by the British youth years before during the sixties, the design showed the figure of a Jamaican rude boy. Together with the rude boy, an image by John Sims depicting Walt Jabsco and based on a photo of Peter Tosh from the Wailers, the design presented a black and white check, "which not only looked great but symbolized the movement's ideals of racial harmony and musical hybridity." Both the name and the design, moreover, emphasized not only direct connections to the rude boys, "disaffected, unemployed youths who dressed slick and got into trouble with the law,"[106] but also their devotion to a sharp style, a meticulous attention to clothes and the multi-racial nature of Two Tone. In an interview with the NME, Terry Hall said "The clothes are almost as important as the music as far as I'm concerned."[107] The style looked back towards the Jamaican rude boys together with the British mods and skinheads from the sixties, styles that were by-then considered mostly outdated apart from the mod revivalists that emerged alongside the ska ones. Both adopted "pork pie hats, tonic and mohair suits, Ben Sherman and Fred Perry shirts, loafers, brogues, crombies, Harringtons, boots and braces," as trademarks.[108]

In terms of music, the ethos behind Two Tone Records was not, at least initially, the specific search for a ska sound. Dammers intended it to be the British Motown: a tight

[106] Reynolds, *Rip It Up*, 287.
[107] Ibid., 289.
[108] Marshall, *The Two Tone Story*,17.

musical industry in which artists provided a common but diverse sound.[109] Yet, it eventually became associated exclusively with the genre, acquiring the identity of a 'ska revival.' Taking as inspirations the music of Jamaican musicians such as Prince Buster, Rico Rodriguez and Laurel Aitken, the music returned to early soul and Jamaican ska, seeking the "rawer, high-energy black sounds" that characterized these music traditions of the sixties, leaving completely aside the technological advancement of the seventies that were producing polished, more complex black sounds. To music and fashion, moreover, bands added the DIY attitude and energy of punk, an emphasis towards live performances and recording – the latest, however, lost its prominence soon - and, ultimately an 'accessive' and 'danceable' combination of rock, pop and disco sounds, addressing in their lyrics contemporary political and social issues regarding youth culture, unemployment, marriage, city life and racism.[110]

Ghost Town: Coventry Lost Its Vitality

If any two-tone song best encapsulated the situation in the UK streets and the "mood of a country," it was "Ghost Town," British film director and DJ Don Letts has said.[111] Although the Specials' 1981 single was inspired by a trip to Kingston and by the "effect of Thatcher's policies on Coventry's economy and nightlife," its success mostly came from the way in which the themes of the lyrics could have been adapted to any British inner city at that time, and to the rage and energy that exploded in the streets during the urban riots. The Specials' single was included in an EP with the same title

[109] Reynolds, *Rip It Up*, 289.
[110] Ibid., 281-282.
[111] "Under The Influence: 2 Tone Ska." *YouTube Video*, 34:01. Posted by "Noisey," 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AGV6i8kiOHw

together with 'Why' and 'Friday night, Saturday Morning." The cover featured a black-and-white figure of a two skeletons, one playing the piano and the other seated on a chair right next to the piano, desperately listening to it. In a later interview, Terry Hall said that the EP represented the duality of Coventry. While 'Friday Night' was all about having fun and dancing, Ghost Town was the dark atmosphere of unemployment and angry kids fighting in the streets.[112] Certainly, a line like "Government leaving the youth on the shelf," and the subsequent "This place (town) is coming like a ghost town," clearly show the direct, desperate side of the EP, contrasting with lines such as, "I like to venture into town/ I like to get a few drinks down." Furthermore, the music video for Ghost Town, an additional visual source which was by then becoming as popular as songs themselves, showed the members of the band "dressed up as gangsters ... in deserted night-time streets," surely revealing the borrowed 'rude boy' posture and their interest in urban culture.[113] All in all, the Ghost Town EP not only, "cleverly entangled its pleas against both racism and youth-cultural sectarianism,"[114] but it also portrayed the contrast between the "good old days" and the contemporary troubled, empty ones, sketching "a sonic portrait of de-industrialization,"[115] in terms of lyrics, sound and music video.

The Sense Of Belonging

What was supposed to unite 2-Tone artists, then, was the working-class background, the ideal of refusing to conform and the willingness to not let the political worries and difficulties of life destroy their lives. As The Selecter's lead singer Pauline

[112] Reynolds, *Rip It Up*, 300.
[113] Marshall, *The Two Tone Story*, 93.
[114] Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black*, 171.
[115] Reynolds, *Rip It Up*, 299.

Black put it, Two Tone was meant to be a collective response to the turmoil of the time through adopting of a more enjoyable and carefree lifestyle and music. "There's no point sitting around like the punks did and getting completely depressed about the whole thing," she said.[116] Looking at the larger political and musical picture, it is worth noting that in the midst of the political and social chaos that affected the nation in the late seventies and in a time when the anger of the punk movement was everywhere, Two Tone offered an alternative. The late seventies and the early eighties were years in which the society in the UK dealt with questions of race and sex discrimination, poor educational system, environmental issues and with the regeneration of inner-city areas.[117] The economic and political policies implemented by the Thatcher government resulted in political dissatisfaction and social turmoil, which reached its extreme representation in the 1981 riots, and the growing success of right-wing organizations such as the National Front and the British Movement. Thus, contrasting the rampant racism and violence that was flourishing all over the country, 2 Tone bands and their audience provided a 'sense of belonging' to something culturally different, which, although short-lived, proved capable to represent the rage, the alienation and the anger of UK inner-cities.[118]

[116] Marshall, *The Two Tone Story*, 46.
[117] Marwick, *British Society*, 241.
[118] "Two Tone Britain." *YouTube Video*, 49:00. Posted by "Michael Kane," 2012. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ueMDcBp5tQU.

5 Conclusions

The three cases presented provide valuable examples of the relation between cities and their cultural activities. All of them show different levels of understanding the urban environment as a context in which culture is continuously created and distributed and provide further thoughts on the analysis of the urban dimension in popular music. Question on the meaning of the 'local,' of social space and of the artistic identities of neighborhoods as well as issues of ethnic diversity, population migration and urban lifestyles, associated with the economic and political circumstances of a city, have been here taken into consideration. All these issues proved essential to describe the ways in which musicians, as youth and citizens, lived their spaces and experienced those circumstances, how they creatively and 'uniquely' created their music and look, as well as how the audience and the press valued the songs. The music coming from New York City and the music coming from Coventry shared a similar attitude in the ways artists, as collective subcultures, considered and took inspirations from their local circumstances. More importantly, they both present cases of how urban alienation and subcultural values and meanings, such as clothing styles, behavior and leisure time, were influential in the construction and dissemination of musical texts.

While in New York City, the issues connected to the physicality of space and the economic characteristics of a city area influenced the development of a particular music scene and social community, Coventry is an example of how ethnicity, as covered in the

larger political context, provided different opportunities for the creation of a new local genre.

The City As A Risky, Creative Milieu: New York City

Considered as a continuous musical tradition coming principally from the Lower East Side, the punk rock bands that played CBGB and Max's Kansas City and the later No Wave ones, shared a similar discomfort that marked the city of New York during the seventies and early eighties. The city was economically and politically broken which resulted in the general degradation of the urban environment and which affected the behaviors of musicians and the creation of music. With regard to the bands that contributed to the development of the CBGB/Max's scene, the importance of the architecture of the music venues and of the neighborhood at large. Certainly, the poor conditions of the neighborhood and of the lofts, the widespread lack of primary goods and scarcity of civic services, together with the qualities of the music venues were particularly influential in the way these musicians thought about their music, their looks and their performances. The formation of the initial 'Blank Generation' attitude, characterized by a practical, basic approach to music and look, echoed the nastiness and the roughness of the places in which these artists were living and performing. The ripped t-shirt, the do-it-yourself approach and the feeling of belonging therefore were all shaped by the actual conditions of the surrounding and all contributed to the development of a strictly unique identity of the scene that expressed an intimidating, confrontational and contrasting character.

Moreover, further thoughts on the understanding of the scene, in the context of 'authentic' local music as opposed to the national, international mainstream one, are

provided by the role of the press and record labels. As the scene got bigger due to the interests of A&R people and music articles in the national press, the confrontational character and attitude started to be perceived as a 'commercial' expression that lacked the former communal, expressive meanings attached to it. By attracting more people in the audience and more artists on the stage, it was no longer a local-based community and it was no longer a scene tied to its 'underground' identity, creative values and intense live performances. From the perspective of the audience and music journalists, as the initial bands got signed, released their debut albums and started their national and international tours leaving the Bowery, their music lost its most provocative, subversive and aggressive essence, becoming instead a music characterized by the same market-driven principles that the entire scene tried to reject.

As a consequence of the big bands' departure and due to the connection with the CBGB's bands, the 'No Wave' movement developed, in the same area and under similar circumstance. The bands involved in it were mostly visual artists and non-musicians attracted by the artistic opportunities offered by New York and by the punk/rock underground music coming from the Lower East Side area. As both a continuation and a rejection of that scene, the No Wavers experienced the same urban, economic and political circumstances that affected the previous generation but they reacted to them in a more radical, experimental way. Drawing from different sources, refusing them and lacking, however, a coherent characterization, the music was generally coming from the repetition of loud, distorted, harsh and abrasive sounds. Still, the intimidating attitude and alienation that characterized the previous generation was there,

as a product of a city in a desperate need of urban renovation, social opportunities and culturally in transition.

The Multiculturalism of The City: Coventry

The growth of the 'ska revival' thanks to the bands involved in the Two-Tone records, provides an example of how the political and cultural dimension of the city affects popular music when questions on race and city life are taken into consideration. The style and the music that those bands adopted was a product of the multiculturalism that affected Coventry in the seventies, and during the previous decades when Jamaican people traveled to the United Kingdom to find better living conditions. They were, moreover, a fusion of the more direct energy of the punk movement, which was by-then popular throughout the country, and of the subtler, more enjoyable elements of black music culture, specifically soul, reggae and ska. More importantly, and particularly unique in the Two-Tone case, these two cultural and musical backgrounds were merged and put into consideration alongside the political, social and industrial context of British cities during the late seventies and early eighties. Indeed, along with the music, the ska revivalists borrowed the 'street life' attitude and clothing style of the Jamaican Rude Boy culture and adopted elements of the British mods and skins subcultures, portraying nonetheless their own, personal urban experiences. All the issues connected to the growth of industrial unemployment, social unrest, racial tension and urban riots and demonstrations that shaped the environment of inner cities as a violent one and limited the social and cultural opportunities for urban kids, were addressed in a more entertaining and subtler way than the contemporary rock punk bands.

The City, Identity And Art

Some of the issues raised in connection to musical forms and practices coming from Downtown New York and Coventry, such as the importance of the notion of the local in the development of the artistic character of a scene as well as the construction of a public self, pose further questions on the relation between the city, identity and art. It may be true that, in the context of contemporary popular music, the importance of locality, that gave to the CBGB/Max's scene its 'authentic' connotation, is no longer a valid measure by which both listeners and music journalists should be capable to appreciate and evaluate the qualities of songs and the artistic identity of bands. In today's digital environment, where music is fluid, malleable and online journalism is widespread, debates over independent and underground in connection to authenticity are valid no more. The wider geographical space in which the diffusion of music takes place together with the role of the internet, carry musical texts outside their city's boundaries, shaping the cultural and physical limits by which music is constructed, exchanged, received. Likewise, the collective sensibility and feelings of commonality promoted by subcultural 'spectacular' elements in opposition to the complexities of urban life, shared music culture, lifestyles and clothes, lost ground to the rhetoric of individualism and to new understandings of concepts such as public self, identity and subjectivity.

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