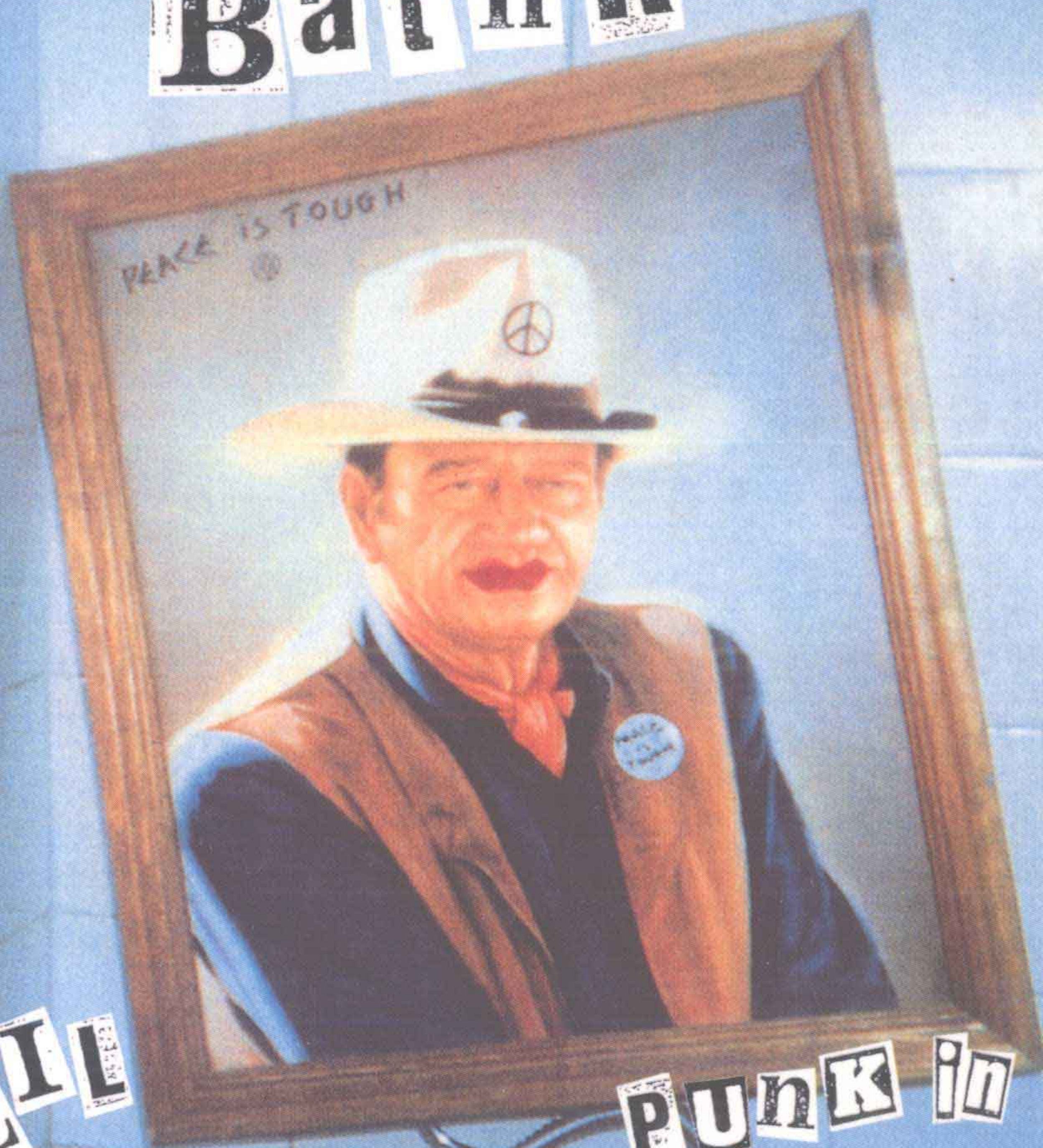


# IN THE FASCIST Bath Room



GREIL  
MARCUS

PUNK in  
POP  
music

1977-1992



IN THE  
FASCIST  
BATHROOM  
Punk in Pop Music  
1977–1992

Greil Marcus

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# INTRODUCTION

News item from the Associated Press, covered in the *Seattle Times*, 8 October 1987:

## WHY DID THE MARKET PLUNGE SO WILDLY?

New York—Wall Street's latest plunge has been partly attributed to the rumored pessimism of a 38-year-old Yale psychology graduate and former rock drummer who has emerged as one of the leading gurus of 1980s stock forecasting.

Robert Prechter is the author of *The Elliott Wave Theorist*, an idiosyncratic investment newsletter that holds that the market reflects mass psychology and that moods go from good to bad in waves.

The former Merrill Lynch analyst has attracted a wide following because of what traders call his remarkably accurate forecasts based on seemingly inconsequential trends ranging from skirt lengths to rock lyrics.

Rumors were widespread Tuesday that Prechter had issued a short-term bearish market forecast on the private telephone hotline for the 16,000 subscribers to his newsletter, which costs \$233 annually.

Traders said those rumors contributed to a massive selloff on Wall Street that erased more than 90 points from the Dow Jones industrial average, the biggest one-day loss in the history of the well-known indicator.

Prechter's fame grew in the late 1970s when he recommended buying stocks, partly because of an anguished song by the punk-rock group the Sex Pistols.

He reasoned that the song's gloom indicated a low point in the



public mood and meant an emotional and market improvement would follow. A few months later the market lifted. . . .

You have to wonder just what Sex Pistols song it was that ultimately led to the erasure of ninety points off the Dow Jones average—or that, after biding its time for a decade or more, finally wreaked its revenge on the paper boom of the go-go eighties. Was it the Sex Pistols' first single, the November 1976 "Anarchy in the U.K.," where Johnny Rotten led off with the strange announcement, "I am an antichrist," and for a few minutes made it seem as if the rage issuing from his mouth could level London? Was it their next record, the May 1977 "God Save the Queen," with its sneering final chant of "NO FUTURE—NO FUTURE—NO FUTURE"? Or did one fan hear, from inside the storm of that song, the Sex Pistols' hardest prophecy of the end of the world, and take it as a sign that nothing worse would be forthcoming, from anywhere?

God save history  
God save your mad parade  
Lord God have mercy  
All crimes are paid

Whatever Robert Prechter heard, a lot of other people heard something just as consequential. Very quickly, pop music changed—and so did public discourse. A NIGHT OF TREASON, promised a poster for a concert by the Clash in London in 1976, and that might have summed it up: a new music, called "punk" for lack of anything better, as treason against superstar music you were supposed to love but which you could view only from a distance; against the future society had planned for you; against your own impulse to say yes, to buy whatever others had put on the market, never wondering why what you really wanted was not on sale at all.

Punk was a new music, a new social critique, but most of all



it was a new kind of free speech. It inaugurated a moment—a long moment, which still persists—when suddenly countless odd voices, voices no reasonable person could have expected to hear in public, were being heard all over the place: sometimes as monstrous shouts in the marketplace, sometimes as whispers from an alleyway. There was an absolute denial of self-censorship in the Sex Pistols' songs that gave people who heard them permission to speak as freely. If an ugly, hunched-over twenty-year-old could stand up, name himself an antichrist, and make you wonder if it wasn't true, then anything was possible.

When the Sex Pistols broke apart after a show in San Francisco in January 1978, people flocked to pronounce the moment dead. Johnny Rotten himself was among them. "It was good at the time," he said in 1986, looking back. "It could have gone anywhere at one point. It kept people on edge. It kept me on edge, I know that. I was scared to walk down the street half the time. At the end there was a pointless rerunning of a B movie, packed with the obvious. It shouldn't have been. It could have been something very courageous, and an absolute change." It wasn't an absolute change—but the truth is that as punk could have gone anywhere, it did. It was a movie rerun again and again—sometimes pointlessly, sometimes not. Pop music had claimed new territory, new subject matter, new kinds of humor, new kinds of noise, all based in that first refusal, the complexity and drama of the Sex Pistols' first no.

The pop marketplace swiftly re-formed, and exiled punk to cult stations scattered along its borders. But especially in backwaters, where the glare of publicity was not much in evidence, when Johnny Rotten's movie arrived at the bottom of a double bill, when it was unspooled once more, the movie changed as it ran, and its characters stepped out of the screen. An example, as typical as any could be: in 1983, five long years after the official death of punk, the news arrived in Aberdeen, Washington, a town of 19,000 about one hundred miles southwest of Seattle. One person in Aberdeen, Buzz Osborne, had a tape



which he played only for those he thought deserved to hear it; on this tape were punk songs, transferred from records that were hard to find, and he passed them on as secret knowledge. Osborne then formed the first punk band in town: “They started playing punk rock and had a free concert right behind Thriftways supermarket where Buzz worked,” Kurt Cobain of Nirvana told Gina Arnold in 1991, looking back as his band rode their punk album *Nevermind* to number one, but not looking down. “They plugged into the city power supply and played punk rock music for about 50 redneck kids. When I saw them play, it just blew me away. I was instantly a punk rocker. I abandoned all my friends, ’cause they didn’t like any of the music. Then I asked Buzz to make me that compilation tape of punk songs. . . .”

You can follow such a story as something very small, or as something very big. However you follow it, it is a story that was played out, lived out, more times than anyone knows in the years after the Sex Pistols vanished—in a village in Andalusia, after class at the University of Leeds, in a warehouse in Prague. The story was always the same: the music made a promise that things did not have to be as they seemed, and some brave people set out to keep that promise for themselves. The story was always different: each version left behind its own local legends, heroes, casualties, a few precious documents, a tale to tell.

This book is a collection of pieces on punk and related matters written from 1977 through 1992. Most of the material is drawn from columns I wrote for *New West* (which became *California Magazine*), *Artforum*, and the *Village Voice*, with occasional pieces from *Rolling Stone* and elsewhere. One piece—the very last in the book, following its formal conclusion—comes from *RAW*, Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly’s graphics magazine. For what became “I Am a Cliché,” I was given a set of



lurid drawings by artist Scott Gillis, already laid out with varying amounts of white space for each one, and asked to produce a specific number of words to accompany each picture. The result was fiction, a violent fantasy that doesn't fit anywhere else: my most extreme version of punk as a force with the capacity to change, or simply momentarily redeem, a life that all unknowing was waiting for it.

Before that last note, in some ways this book is what I left out of an earlier book, *Lipstick Traces*, which also began with the Sex Pistols: that is, music. This book is mostly about records, performances, twists of the radio dial. Readers of *Lipstick Traces* will find here some of what I left in there, mainly quotations—for me, talismans—that occur in these pages in very different contexts. More dubiously, there is also some of my own writing that ended up cannibalized for *Lipstick Traces*—as little as I could manage. Most of the pieces in this book have been rewritten to some degree, not to change judgments, but to correct factual errors, improve clarity, or flesh out passages originally cut for reasons of space or editors' incomprehension. Most of the titles are not original, because most of the original titles were terrible puns.

Because this book is no kind of history of punk, but rather notes from a life renewed by it and yet still lived within the confines of pop music, international capitalism, and revanchist politics, it begins in 1969, with the Rolling Stones' *Let It Bleed*, an album that at the time sounded to me like the last music of the 1960s, and has sounded more like that ever since. Save for "I Am a Cliché," the book ends with a 1991 column on an odd, momentary reappearance of what I suppose ought to be called "the sixties," as a concept more than a time. The book begins and ends this way because the shadow of that period, of its utopianism and failure—its curse coding a wish for the impossible into pop music—hangs over punk from "Anarchy in the U.K." through *Nevermind*, a secret yes the punk no has never banished. "Still the spirit of '68," Johnny Rotten sang in 1979,



then trading as John Lydon with his band PiL. Spreading confusion and alarm: that, he sang, was his albatross, his fated vocation.

In between those spectral sixties borderlines is what I found to write about punk. I made no attempt to write about everything; I missed a lot, and now it is too late to catch what made the Vktms' "Midget" so funny or the Avengers' "We Are the One" so spooky, and anyway I caught up with them only years after the fact. I tried, in the moment, to write about what moved me, scared me, disgusted me, made me and so many other people feel so privileged to be present when, in some nightclub now long gone, rumor turned into fact.

I played favorites, devoting a lot of space to bohemian bands from the U.K. and scabrous groups from Los Angeles, ignoring New York, where most punks seemed to be auditioning for careers as something else. I wrote about a good deal *as* punk that to other people was not punk at all, stuff that sullied the very purity of the concept—anything from Fleetwood Mac's *Tusk* to Laurie Anderson's "O Superman" to a Bruce Springsteen career move to David Lynch's film *Blue Velvet* to a particularly bizarre rendition of Billy Joel's "Uptown Girl"—not because to me punk is an attitude more than a musical style, but because I think it is infinitely more than a musical style, period. Among other things, as an event in cultural time it was an earthquake, and it changed the landscape, throwing all sorts of once-hidden phenomena into stark relief. "O Superman" would have been an obscure, art-world curio before the Sex Pistols, before the Gang of Four, before the Slits; after them, it could invade the center of pop life. A born ranter like Elvis Costello, despite whatever musical style he might favor at a given moment, is unthinkable without punk, and he probably would have been unheardable, too—just as, after punk, the likes of George Harrison's \$354 autobiography, Julian Lennon's "Too Late for Goodbyes," or USA for Africa's "We Are the World" charity record seemed much funnier, or much uglier, than they ever would have



seemed before. Changing the rules of pop, insisting on new values, smashing old pieties, punk revealed its opposite as surely as it turned up allies.

Within those boundaries, I've gathered together pieces that I hope have something to say to each other. Sometimes I wrote about a band once and never again, nothing more to say. Sometimes I followed careers: the Clash, the Mekons, Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, Elvis Costello and Bruce Springsteen. Costello and Springsteen work as parallel figures in these pages: one always nibbling at the boundaries of the mainstream, the other seemingly at home nowhere else. In the 1980s, under Thatcher and Reagan, they were headed toward the convergence of Springsteen's *Nebraska* and Costello's "Pills and Soap" and *King of America*. They were three of the quietest punk records ever made, and three of the truest—negations as complete and unflinching, in their way, as hard and cruel, as any of the explosions in "God Save the Queen." The Sex Pistols' first achievement was to burn rock 'n' roll down to essentials of noise; if punk ever really ended, it was in the middle of its tale, when two singers from whom most punk chroniclers would withhold the name burned punk down to something close to silence.

—Greil Marcus, Berkeley  
10 June 1992







# PROLOGUE

## The End of the 1960s

**L**et *It Bleed* is the last album from the Rolling Stones we'll see before the sixties, already gone really, become the seventies; it has the crummiest cover art since *Flowers* and a credit sheet that looks like it was designed by a government printing office. The tones of the music are at once dark and perfectly clear; the words are slurred and often buried. The Stones as a band, and Mick Jagger, Keith Richards, Mary Clayton, Nanette Newman, Doris Troy, Madelaine Bell, and the London Bach Choir as singers sometimes carry the songs far past their lyrics. There's a glimpse of a story—not much more.

With “Live With Me,” “Midnight Rambler,” and “Let It Bleed,” the Stones prance through familiar roles with their masks on. On “Monkey Man” they submit grandly to the image they've carried for almost the whole of the decade: “All my friends are junkies! (That's not *really* true . . .).” Hidden between the flashier cuts are tunes waiting for a listener to catch up with them: a revival of Robert Johnson's “Love in Vain,” Keith Richards's “You Got the Silver.” But it's the first and last of *Let It Bleed* that tell what story there is.

“Gimmie Shelter” and “You Can't Always Get What You Want” give the lie to the brutalism of “Midnight Rambler” and the easy riches of “Live With Me.” Years kick in: it's a long way from “Get Off My Cloud” to “Gimmie Shelter,” from “(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction” to “You Can't Always Get What You Want.” A new map is being drawn; the old stance of arrogance and contempt isn't erased, but it is blurred. Once the Stones were known as the group that would always take a good old-



fashioned piss against a good old-fashioned gas station. Now Jagger sings it this way: "I went down to the demonstration/ To get my fair share of abuse. . . ."

"Gimmie Shelter" is a song about fear; it probably serves better than anything else as a passageway straight into the next decade. The band builds on the best melody they've ever found, slowly adding instruments and sounds until explosions of bass and drums ride on over the first crest of the song into howls from Jagger and Mary Clayton, a black session singer from Los Angeles. It's a full-faced meeting with all the terror the mind can summon, moving fast and never breaking, so that men and women have to beat the terror at its own pace. When Clayton sings alone, so loudly and with so much force you think her lungs are bursting, Richards frames her with measured, pressured riffs that blaze past her emotionalism and toss the song back to Jagger's distanced judgment: "It's just a shot away, it's just a shot away. . . . It's just a kiss away, it's just a kiss away." You know a kiss won't be enough.

You remember the Stones' girls—say, the common, flirty (or was it "dirty"?) machine operator in "The Spider and the Fly," or for that matter the girl back home who told the singer "When you've done your show go to bed"? They're still around for *Let It Bleed*, with their own masks on—all the cooks and maids, upstairs and downstairs, all the Crazy Horse strippers and London socialites in "Live With Me," or the mangled victims of the Midnight Rambler. But the true women in this music seem to be people who can shout like Mary Clayton—tougher than any of the skirts jumping out of the old Stones orgy, knowing something the rakes don't know. That's what makes "Gimmie Shelter" so shocking—it hits from both sides, with no laughs, no innuendo, nothing held back. It's a search for the future contained in the present; the Stones have never done anything better.

Meanwhile, as the band closes out the decade, a book of pictures by David Bailey (once the Stones' photographer) has ar-