LIPSTICK TRACES

A SECRET HISTORY OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

GREIL MARCUS

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PROLOGUE

From inside a London tea room, two well-dressed women look with mild disdain at a figure in the rain outside. "It's that shabby old man with the tin whistle!" says one. A battered fedora pulled down over his eyes, the man is trying to make himself heard: "I yam a antichrist!" "It is," reads the caption to this number of Ray Lowry's comic-strip chronicle of the adventures of has-been, would-be pop savior Monty Smith, "seventeen long years since Monty was spotted in the gutter outside Malcolm MacGregor's Sex 'n' Drugs shop . . ."

Years long enough: but as I write, Johnny Rotten's first moments in "Anarchy in the U.K."—a rolling earthquake of a laugh, a buried shout, then hoary words somehow stripped of all claptrap and set down in the city streets—

I AM AN ANTICHRIST

—remain as powerful as anything I know. Listening to the record today—listening to the way Johnny Rotten tears at his lines, and then hurls the pieces at the world; recalling the all-consuming smile he produced as he sang—my back stiffens; I pull away even as my scalp begins to sweat. "When you listen to the Sex Pistols, to 'Anarchy in the U.K.' and 'Bodies' and tracks like that," Pete Townshend of the Who once said, "what immediately strikes you is that *this is actually happening*. This is a bloke, with a brain on his shoulders, who is actually saying something he *sincerely* believes is happening in the world, saying it with real venom, and real passion. It touches you, and it scares you—it makes you feel uncomfortable. It's like somebody saying, 'The Germans are coming! And there's no way we're gonna stop 'em!'"

It is just a pop song, a would-be, has-been hit record, a cheap commodity, and Johnny Rotten is nobody, an anonymous delinquent whose greatest achievement, before that day in 1975 when he was spotted in Malcolm McLaren's Sex boutique on King's Road in London, had been to occasionally irritate those he passed on the street. It is a joke—and yet the voice that carries it remains something new in rock 'n' roll, which is to say something new in postwar popular culture: a voice that denied all social facts, and in that denial affirmed that everything was possible.

It remains new because rock 'n' roll has not caught up with it. Nothing like it had been heard in rock 'n' roll before, and nothing like it has been heard since—though, for a time, once heard, that voice seemed available to anyone with the nerve to use it. For a time, as if by magic—the pop magic in which the connection of certain social facts with certain sounds creates irresistible symbols of the transformation of social reality—that voice worked as a new kind of free speech. In countless new throats it said countless new things. You couldn't turn on the radio without being surprised; you could hardly turn around.

Today those old voices sound as touching and as scary as they ever did—partly because there is an irreducible quality in their demands, and partly because they are suspended in time. The Sex Pistols were a commercial proposition and a cultural conspiracy, launched to change the music business and make money off the change—but Johnny Rotten sang to change the world. So did some of those who, for a time, found their own voices in his. In the small body of work they left behind, you can hear it happen. Listening, you can feel yourself respond: "This is actually happening." But the voices remain suspended in time because you can't look back and say, "This actually happened." By the standards of wars and revolutions, the world did not change; we look back from a time when, as Dwight D. Eisenhower once put it, "Things are more like they are now than they ever were before." As against the absolute demands so briefly generated by the Sex Pistols, nothing changed. The shock communicated by the demands of the music becomes a

shock that something so seemingly complete could, finally, pass almost unnoticed in the world of affairs: "This was actually not happening." Music seeks to change life; life goes on; the music is left behind; that is what is left to talk about.

The Sex Pistols made a breach in the pop milieu, in the screen of received cultural assumptions governing what one expected to hear and how one expected to respond. Because received cultural assumptions are hegemonic propositions about the way the world is supposed to work—ideological constructs perceived and experienced as natural facts—the breach in the pop milieu opened into the realm of everyday life: the milieu where, commuting to work, doing one's job in the home or the factory or the office or the mall, going to the movies, buying groceries, buying records, watching television, making love, having conversations, not having conversations, or making lists of what to do next, people actually lived. Judged according to its demands on the world, a Sex Pistols record had to change the way a given person performed his or her commute—which is to say that the record had to connect that act to every other, and then call the enterprise as a whole into question. Thus would the record change the world.

Elvis Costello recalled how it had worked back when he was still Declan McManus, a computer operator waiting for his train to Central London. It was 2 December 1976, the day after the Sex Pistols appeared on a television talk show to promote the record that was to change the world: "'God, did you see the Sex Pistols on TV last night?' On the way to work, I was on the platform in the morning and all the commuters were reading the papers when the Pistols made headlines—and said FUCK on TV. It was as if it was the most awful thing that ever happened. It's a mistake to confuse it with a major event in history, but it was a great morning—just to hear people's blood pressure going up and down over it." It was an old dream come true—as if the Sex Pistols, or one of their new fans, or the commuters beside him, or the television itself, had happily rediscovered a formula contrived in 1919, in Berlin, by one Walter Mehring, and then tested the formula to the letter, word for

word save for the name of the game:

??? What is DADAyama ???
DADAyama is
to be reached from railroad stations only by a double somersault
Hic salto mortale /
Now or never /
DADAyama makes
the blood boil like it
enrages the crowd
in the melting pot /
(partly bullfight arena—partly Red Front meeting—partly
National Assembly)—
1/2 gold plate—1/2 silver-plated iron
plus surplus value

$$\frac{\qquad\qquad}{\infty} = \text{Everyday life}$$

Echoing each other across half a century, Costello and Mehring raise the question that shapes this book: is it a mistake to confuse the Sex Pistols' moment with a major event in history—and what is history anyway? Is history simply a matter of events that leave behind those things that can be weighed and measured—new institutions, new maps, new rulers, new winners and losers—or is it also the result of moments that seem to leave nothing behind, nothing but the mystery of spectral connections between people long separated by place and time, but somehow speaking the same language? To fix a precious disruption, why is it that both Mehring and Costello find themselves talking about train platforms and blood pressure? The happenstance of specific words in common is an accident, but it might suggest a real affinity. The two men are talking about the same thing, looking for words to make disruption precious; that may not be an accident at all. If the language they are speaking, the impulse they are voicing, has its own history, might it not tell a very different story from the one we've been hearing all our lives?

THE QUESTION

The question is too big to tackle now—it has to be put aside, left to find its own shape. What it leaves behind is music; listening now to the Sex Pistols' records, it doesn't seem like a mistake to confuse their moment with a major event in history. Listening to "Anarchy in the U.K." and "Bodies," to Elvis Costello's *This Year's Model*, to the Clash's "Complete Control," to the Buzzcocks' "Boredom," X-ray Spex's "Oh Bondage Up Yours!" and *Germfree Adolescents*, Essential Logic's "Wake Up," the Raincoats' "Fairytale in the Supermarket," Wire's *Chairs Missing*, the Mekons' "Never Been in a Riot," Joy Division's "An Ideal for Living" and *Unknown Pleasures*, the Slits' "Once upon a time in a living room," the Gang of Four's "At Home He's a Tourist" and "Return the Gift," the Au Pairs' "Kerb Crawler," Kleenex's "Ü" and (after Kimberly-Clark forced the band to change its name) Liliput's "Split" and "Eisiger Wind," to the Adverts' *Crossing the Red Sea with the Adverts* (on the sleeve, a smear of color around a photo collage of a public housing complex and a white billboard with the words "Land of Milk and Honey" running in bureaucratic type: the sound was millenarian from the beginning, certain to lead the listener into the promised land, or forty years in the wilderness)—listening now, and listening especially to *The Roxy London WC 2 (Jan-Apr 77)*, a shoddy live album where behind table talk and breaking glass one can hear various groups of public speakers which before Johnny Rotten announced himself as an antichrist had not existed even in the minds of those who made them up—listening to this relatively small body of work, now exiled to cut-out bins, bargain racks, collectors' sales, or flea markets—I feel a sense of awe at how fine the music was: how irreducible it remains.

What remains irreducible about this music is its desire to change the world. The desire is patent and simple, but it inscribes a story that is infinitely complex—as complex as the interplay of the everyday gestures that describe the way the world already works. The desire begins with the demand to

live not as an object but as a subject of history—to live as if something actually depended on one's actions—and that demand opens onto a free street. Damning God and the state, work and leisure, home and family, sex and play, the audience and itself, the music briefly made it possible to experience all those things as if they were not natural facts but ideological constructs: things that had been made and therefore could be altered, or done away with altogether. It became possible to see those things as bad jokes, and for the music to come forth as a better joke. The music came forth as a no that became a yes, then a no again, then again a yes: nothing is true except our conviction that the world we are asked to accept is false. If nothing was true, everything was possible. In the pop milieu, an arena maintained by society at large both to generate symbols and to defuse them, in the only milieu where a nobody like Johnny Rotten had a chance to be heard, all rules fell away. In tones that pop music had never produced, demands were heard that pop music had never made.

Because of Johnny Rotten's ludicrous proclamation—in one sense, he was from his first recorded moment a shabby old man in the rain trying to get out his crazy words ("I want to destroy pass–ers–by," croaks the Antichrist, reading from his smudgy broadsheet; you give the bum a wide berth)—teenagers screamed philosophy; thugs made poetry; women demystified the female; a nice Jewish girl called Susan Whitby renamed herself Lora Logic and took the stage of the Roxy in a haze of violence and confusion. Everyone shouted past melody, then rhyme, then harmony, then rhythm, then beat, until the shout became the first principle of speech—sometimes the last. Old oaths, carrying forgotten curses, which themselves contained buried wishes, were pressed into seven-inch pieces of plastic as a bet that someone would listen, that someone would decipher codes the speakers themselves didn't know they were transmitting.

I began to wonder where this voice came from. At a certain time, beginning in late 1975, in a certain place—London, then across the U.K., then spots and towns all over the world—a

negation of all social facts was made, which produced the affirmation that anything was possible. "I saw the Sex Pistols," said Bernard Sumner of Joy Division (later, after the band's singer killed himself, of New Order). "They were terrible. I thought they were great. I wanted to get up and be terrible too." Performers made fools of themselves, denounced their ancestors, and spit on their audiences, which spit back. I began to wonder where these gestures came from. It was, finally, no more than an art statement, but such statements, communicated and received in any form, are rare. I knew a lot about rock 'n' roll, but I didn't know about this. Did the voice and the gestures come out of nowhere, or were they sparked? If they were sparked, what sparked them?

A TWENTY

A twenty-year-old stands before a microphone and, after declaring himself an all-consuming demon, proceeds to level everything around him—to reduce it to rubble. He denies the claims of his society with a laugh, then pulls the string on the history of his society with a shift of vowels so violent that it creates pure pleasure. He reduces the fruits of Western civilization to a set of guerrilla acronyms and England's green and pleasant land to a block of public housing. "We have architecture that is so banal and destructive to the human spirit that walking to work is in itself a depressing experience. The streets are shabby and tawdry and litter-strewn, and the concrete is rain-streaked and graffiti-strewn, and the stairwells of the social-engineering experiments are lined in shit and junkies and graffiti. Nobody goes out of their rooms. There is no sense of community, so old people die in despair and loneliness. We've had a lowering of the quality of life"—so said not Johnny Rotten as he recorded "Anarchy in the U.K." in 1976, but "Saint Bob" Geldof (first runner-up for the 1986 Nobel Peace Prize because of his work organizing pop-music campaigns to fight African famine) as he repeated the social critique of "Anarchy in the U.K." in 1985. Reduced to a venom-

ous stew, that was what the song had said—except that as the Sex Pistols performed it, you heard not woe but glee.

> Is this the em pee el ay
> Or is this the yew dee ay
> Or is this the eye rrrrrr ay
> I thought it was the yew kay
> Or just
> Another
> Country
> Another council tenancy!

It was the sound of the city collapsing. In the measured, deliberate noise, words tumbling past each other so fast it was almost impossible to tell them apart, you could hear social facts begin to break up—when Johnny Rotten rolled his *r*'s, it sounded as if his teeth had been ground down to points. This was a code that didn't have to be deciphered: who knew what the MPLA was, and who cared? It sounded like fun, wrecking the world. It felt like freedom. It was the freedom, after hearing the news that a San Diego teenager named Brenda Spenser had, because she didn't like Mondays, opened fire on her high school and killed three people, to write a song celebrating the event—as Bob Geldof had once done.

"I Don't Like Mondays" was a hit; in the United States it might have made number one, save for Brenda Spenser's superseding right to a fair trial. Too bad—wasn't a song like "I Don't Like Mondays" what "punk," which is what the putatively nihilist music generated by the Sex Pistols would be called, was all about? All about what? In the course of an interview, Bob Geldof's version of "Anarchy in the U.K.," like the explanations Johnny Rotten offered interviewers in 1976 and 1977, is perfectly rational: on record, both flesheater Johnny and Saint Bob call up the words of surrealist Luis Buñuel—who, Pauline Kael notes, "once referred to some of those who praised *Un Chien Andalou* as 'that crowd of imbeciles who find the film beautiful or poetic when it is fundamentally a desperate and passionate call to murder.'"

It is a question of nihilism—and "Anarchy in the U.K.," a

fan might like to think, was something different: a negationist prank. "'Anarchy in the U.K.' is a statement of self-rule, of ultimate independence, of do-it-yourself," said Sex Pistols manager Malcolm McLaren, and whatever that meant (do what yourself?), it wasn't nihilism. Nihilism is the belief in nothing and the wish to become nothing: oblivion is its ruling passion. Its best depiction is in Larry Clark's *Tulsa*, his photographic memoir of early 1960s youths spiking themselves to death with speed rather than becoming what they already look like: local Charley Starkweathers and Caril Fugates. Nihilism can find a voice in art, but never satisfaction. "This isn't a play, Larry," one of Clark's needle buddies told him after he'd taken one too many pictures. "This is real fuckin' life." "So other people didn't think it was a play," Clark recalled years later, "but I did"—even though he'd been in it, using a shutter timer to shoot the blood running down his own arm.

Nihilism means to close the world around its own self-consuming impulse; negation is the act that would make it self-evident to everyone that the world is not as it seems—but only when the act is so implicitly complete it leaves open the possibility that the world may be nothing, that nihilism as well as creation may occupy the suddenly cleared ground. The nihilist, no matter how many people he or she might kill, is always a solipsist: no one exists but the actor, and only the actor's motives are real. When the nihilist pulls the trigger, turns on the gas, sets the fire, hits the vein, the world ends. Negation is always political: it assumes the existence of other people, calls them into being. Still, the tools the negationist seems forced to use—real or symbolic violence, blasphemy, dissipation, contempt, ridiculousness—change hands with those of the nihilist. As a negation, "Anarchy in the U.K." could be rationally translated in interviews: seeking to prove that the world is not as it seems, the negationist recognizes that to others the world is as it seems to be. But by the time of "Holidays in the Sun," the Sex Pistols' fourth and last single, issued in October 1977, just a month short of a year after "Anarchy in the U.K.," no such translations were offered, or possible.

BY THAT TIME

By that time, countless new groups of public speakers were issuing impossible demands, and the Sex Pistols had been banned across the U.K. Waving the bloody shirt of public decency, even public safety, city officials canceled their shows; chain stores refused to stock their records. Cutting "Anarchy in the U.K." out of the market just as it was reaching its audience, EMI, the Sex Pistols' first label, dropped them after the televised "fuck" that made Declan McManus' day, recalled the records, and melted them down. Patriotic workers refused to handle "God Save the Queen," the follow-up single, a three-minute riot against Elizabeth II's silver jubilee; A&M, the band's second label, destroyed what few copies were produced. Finally released on Virgin, the Sex Pistols' third label, "God Save the Queen" was erased from the BBC charts and topped the hit parade as a blank, thus creating the bizarre situation in which the nation's most popular record was turned into contraband. The press contrived a moral panic to sell papers, but the panic seemed real soon enough: the Sex Pistols were denounced in Parliament as a threat to the British way of life, by socialists as fascist, by fascists as communist. Johnny Rotten was caught on the street and slashed with a razor; another band member was chased down and beaten with an iron bar.

The group itself had become contraband. In late 1975, when the Sex Pistols first appeared, crashing another band's concert and impersonating the opening act, the plug was pulled after ten minutes; now to play in public they were forced to turn up in secret, under a false name. The very emptiness of the terrain they had cleared—the multiplication of new voices from below, the intensification of abuse from above, both sides fighting for possession of that suddenly cleared ground—had pushed them toward self-destruction, into the silence of all nihilist noise.

It was there from the start—a possibility, one of the alleys leading off the free street. There was a black hole at the heart of the Sex Pistols' music, a willful lust for the destruction of

values that no one could be comfortable with, and that was why, from the start, Johnny Rotten was perhaps the only truly terrifying singer rock 'n' roll has known. But the terror had a new cast at the end: certainly no one has yet seen all the way to the bottom of "Holidays in the Sun," and probably no one ever will.

They had begun as if in pursuit of a project: in "Anarchy in the U.K." they had damned the present, and in "God Save the Queen" they had damned the past with a curse so hard that it took the future with it. "NO FUTURE"—

NO FUTURE
NO FUTURE
NO FUTURE FOR YOU
NO FUTURE
NO FUTURE
NO FUTURE
NO FUTURE FOR ME

—so went the mordant chant as the song ended. "No future in England's dah-rrrreeming!": England's dream of its glorious past, as represented by the Queen, the "moron," the nation's basic tourist attraction, linchpin of an economy based on nothing, salve on England's collective amputee's itch for Empire. "We're the future," Johnny Rotten shouted, never sounding more like a criminal, an escaped mental patient, a troglodyte—"Your future." Portrayed in the press as heralds of a new youth movement, with "God Save the Queen" the Sex Pistols denied it; every youth movement presents itself as a loan to the future, and tries to call in its lien in advance, but when there is no future all loans are canceled.

The Sex Pistols were after more than an entry in the next revised edition of a sociology text on Britain's postwar youth subcultures—just what more, one could perhaps have learned from a fragment that made up part of the collage on the back sleeve of the Clash's first record, "White Riot"/"1977": "that there is, perhaps, *some* tension in society, when perhaps overwhelming pressure brings industry to a standstill or barri-

cades to the streets years after the liberals had dismissed the notion as 'dated romanticism,'" some unidentified person had written at some unidentified time, "the journalist invents the theory that this constitutes a clash of generations. Youth, after all, is not a permanent condition, and a clash of generations is not so fundamentally dangerous to the art of government as would be a clash between rulers and ruled." So maybe that was what the Sex Pistols were after: a clash between rulers and ruled. As the number-two London punk band, the Clash's pop project was always to make sense of the Sex Pistols' riddles, and this made sense—except that a single listening to "God Save the Queen" dissolved whatever sense it made.

The consumptive disgust in Johnny Rotten's voice ("We love our Queen / We mean it, man / God *save*"—that was the end of the line), the blinding intransigence of the music, so strong it made intransigence into a self-justifying, all-encompassing new value: as a sound, "God Save the Queen" suggested demands no art of government could ever satisfy. "God *save*"—the intonation said there was no such thing as salvation. A guitar lick ripped the song and whoever heard it in half.

What was left? Mummery, perhaps: with "Pretty Vacant," their third single, the Sex Pistols had risen from graves hundreds of years cold as Lollards, carriers of the ancient British heresy that equated work with sin and rejected both. Work, the Bible said, was God's punishment for Original Sin, but that was not the Lollards' bible. They said God was perfect, men and women were God's creation, so therefore men and women were perfect and could not sin—save against their own perfect nature, by working, by surrendering their God-given autonomy to the rule of the Great Ones, to the lie that the world was made for other than one's perfect pleasure. It was a dangerous creed in the fourteenth century, and a strange idea to find in a twentieth-century pop song, but there it was, and who knew what buried wishes it might speak for?

"We didn't know it would spread so fast," said Bernard Rhodes, in 1975 one of Malcolm McLaren's co-conspirators at the Sex boutique, later the manager of the Clash. "We didn't

have a manifesto. We didn't have a rule book, but we were hoping that . . . I was thinking of what I got from Jackie Wilson's 'Reet Petite,' which was the first record I ever bought. I didn't need anyone to describe what it was all about, I knew it . . . I was listening to the radio in '75, and there was some expert blabbing on about how if things go on as they are there'll be 800,000 people unemployed by 1979, while another guy was saying if that happened there'd be chaos, there'd be actual—anarchy in the streets. *That* was the root of punk. One *knew* that."

Socialists like Bernard Rhodes knew it; it was never clear what Malcolm McLaren or his partner Jamie Reid, before Sex an anarchist publisher and poster artist, thought they knew. Unemployment in the U.K. had reached an unimaginable one million by the time "Pretty Vacant" was released in July 1977, and the punk band Chelsea summed up the social fact with the protest single "Right to Work." But Johnny Rotten had never learned the language of protest, in which one seeks a redress of grievances, and speaks to power in the supplicative voice, legitimating power by the act of speaking: that was not what it was about. In "Pretty Vacant" the Sex Pistols claimed the right not to work, and the right to ignore all the values that went with it: perseverance, ambition, piety, frugality, honesty, and hope, the past that God invented work to pay for, the future that work was meant to build. "Your God has gone away," Johnny Rotten had already sung on "No Feelings," the flipside of the first, abortive pressing of "God Save the Queen"—"Be back another day." Compared to Rhodes's sociology, Johnny Rotten spoke in unknown tongues. With a million out of work the Sex Pistols sat in doorways, preened and spat: "We're pretty / Pretty vacant / We're pretty / Pretty vacant / We're pretty / Pretty vacant / And we don't care." It was their funniest record yet, and their most professional, sounding more like the Beatles than a traffic accident, but Johnny Rotten's lolling tongue grew sores for the last word: like the singles before it, "Pretty Vacant" drew a laugh from the listener, and then drove it back down the listener's throat.