

‘Hey little rich boy, take a good look at me’: Punk, class and British Oi!

Matthew Worley

This article looks at the controversial music genre Oi! in relation to youth cultural identity in late 1970s and early 1980s Britain. By examining the six compilation albums released to promote Oi! as a distinct strand of punk, it seeks to challenge prevailing dismissals of the genre as inherently racist or bound to the politics of the far right. Rather, Oi! – like punk more generally – was a contested cultural form. It was, moreover, centred primarily on questions of class and locality. To this end, Oi! sought to realise the working-class rebellion of punk’s early aesthetic; to give substance to its street-level pretensions and offer a genuine ‘song from the streets’.

Keywords: youth, class, punk, culture, skinhead, Oi!

Matthew Worley, professor of modern history, Faculty of Arts Humanities & Social Science, University of Reading. Email: m.worley@reading.ac.uk

Introduction

I don't need a flash car to take me around/ I can get the bus to the other side of town/ I didn't get no GCE/ It makes you think you can't talk to me/ Why should I let it worry me/ I'll never believe you're better than me ('Hey Little Rich Boy', Sham 69).¹

The class character of British punk has long been contentious. From the outset, early interviews with the Sex Pistols focused on the working-class origins of the band's members and traced the source of their ire to the deleterious economic conditions of the mid-1970s. Just as Caroline Coon wrote of 'drab, Kafka-like working-class ghettos' serving as incubators for punk, so Julie Burchill and Tony Parsons invoked the idea of 'seventies street music' made by 'working-class kids with the guts to say "No" to being office, factory and dole fodder' (Coon 1976: 34–5; Parsons 1976: 29; Burchill 1977: 29). For Mark Perry, who founded Britain's first punk fanzine, *Sniffin' Glue*, bands like the Sex Pistols and The Clash provided a mirror image of 'life as it is in the council flats' (Perry 1977a: 3–4; idem 1977b: 9). It was, Peter Marsh suggested, a form of 'dole queue rock' that comprised 'kids' who had 'only just "escaped" from the concrete comprehensive' to realise there was nothing to escape to (Marsh 1977: 112–14). Punk was urban and angry, it seemed, a youthful reaction to the prospect of no future.

Of course, punk proved to be a rather more diverse and complex phenomenon. As Simon Frith was quick to point out in reply to Marsh, many of the ideas that informed punk – and many of those involved in punk, not least Malcolm McLaren – were a product of an art school education. In effect, punk continued in the tradition of radical British art, Frith argued. Though it utilised class rhetoric and urban iconography, any refusal to be office, factory or dole 'fodder' pushed punk closer to a new bohemia than a class war (Frith 1978: 535–6; Frith and Horne 1987). Indeed, those such as The Clash's Joe Strummer who adopted rather than inherited a guttersnipe persona soon came in for criticism once their backgrounds revealed reference to the tower block was born more out of fetish than frustration. Not dissimilarly, the whole question of class was dismissed as a misnomer by many of those associated with

1 Sham 69, 'Hey Little Rich Boy', written by Jimmy Pursey and Dave Parsons, published by Maxwood Music Limited and used by kind permission.

'Hey little rich boy, take a good look at me':
Punk, class and British Oi!

punk's formation. For Siouxsie Sioux, Marco Pirroni and others drawn together by the Sex Pistols, punk (if the term be used at all) was about style and transgression rather than 'oiks' or socio-economics (Paytress 2003: 47; Savage 2009: 336–46 and 354–61).

This article should not, therefore, be seen as an attempt to claim punk as necessarily or inherently working class. It does, however, wish to reassert class as an important component of the cultural critique offered within punk. In particular, it examines the emergence of Oi! to argue that class formed an integral part of what punk meant for at least a section of those drawn to it. If punk's impact came from its fusion of cultural innovation and rhetorical populism, then it offered both a form of cultural experimentation and a medium for social and political commentary. Consequently, the version of punk that ran through bands such as the Angelic Upstarts, Cockney Rejects, Cock Sparrer, Menace, The Ruts, Sham 69, (early) Skrewdriver and the UK Subs was far more concerned with street sensibility than it was with cultural theory. To Jimmy Pursey, the lead singer of Sham 69, punk meant 'a kid in Glasgow, Liverpool, London, Southampton, who lives in a little grimy industrial estate, wears an old anorak, dirty jeans, pumps, goes out at night, has a game of football on the green, throws a couple of bricks through a window for a bit of cheek, a kick. He likes the things he likes, no fucking about ... they're the kids that this was supposed to get over to' (quoted in Morley 1977: 9–10). In other words, these were bands who took up the gauntlet set down by Bernie Rhodes for The Clash to write lyrics relevant to their everyday life. What was once termed the 'sound of the Westway' was distilled into a 'song from the street'; a street-level punk rock that eventually became known as 'Oi!'

The research for this article stems from a Leverhulme Trust funded project designed to explore the politics of British punk both in terms of overt political sensibilities (towards anarchism, fascism, feminism, socialism) and implicit political effects born of agency, reaction and cultural practice. Within this, Oi! deserves attention for continuing a cultural trajectory distinct from the stylish bricolage discussed by Hebdige (Hebdige 1979) or the cultural praxis extolled by Greil Marcus and Simon Reynolds (Marcus 1989; Reynolds, 2005). It moves away from the Sex Pistols and Crass as the locus-point of punk's gestation and evolution (Savage 1991; McKay 1996) towards a culture informed

by a combination of punk's social realism and a working-class style that fed back to the football terrace and street corner. More generally, it reasserts punk as a contested cultural space; a cultural practice of critical engagement that took varied – often conflicting – form. To do this, an emphasis has been placed on what those involved in making the culture said and did; that is, the lyrics, records, interviews and statements offered by bands, fans and writers in contemporary context. Oi!, in sound and in substance, was often blunt and brutal. It was presented as voice from the street; it was interpreted by a hostile media as a hotbed of lumpen reaction. By recovering the voices of those involved, it hopes to present a historical record of substance rather than allegation.

Sounds from the streets: origins and definition

Oi! was not so much created as discovered. The term was adopted by the Sounds writer Garry Bushell in 1980 to describe a new wave of punk bands for whom 'punk ain't dogma or religion but the fulfillment of a burning need for rock 'n' roll in its purest form, raw, aggressive and threatening' (Bushell 1980c: 32–3). Taken from the Cockney Rejects' Jeff (Stinky) Turner's habit of shouting 'oi' at their live gigs, Oi! was first used as the title of a Rejects song ('Oi! Oi! Oi!) before then christening a compilation album designed to reassert punk as a form of 'working-class protest'. More broadly, it served as a catch-all term for what Bushell described as 'a loose alliance of volatile young talents, skins, punks, tearaways, hooligans, rebels with or without causes united by their class, their spirit, their honesty and their love of furious rock 'n' roll' (Bushell 1981a: 11). To the forefront, initially at least, were bands and poets such as the 4-Skins, Blitz, The Business, The Exploited, Infa Riot, Garry Johnson and the Last Resort. For Bushell, they revived punk's original promise in providing 'music made by and for the hundreds of thousands of human hand grenades primed by this middle-class and middle-aged controlled society which has guaranteed them NO FUTURE and left them to fester in their frustration' (Bushell 1980: 32–3).

As this suggests, Bushell was by this time already a veteran of the punk wars. Born in 1955 to a working-class family in south-east London, Bushell was in 1976 a young member of the International

'Hey little rich boy, take a good look at me':
Punk, class and British Oi!

Socialists, or Socialist Workers' Party (SWP) as they were known from 1977. He was, moreover, quick to recognise punk as a form of working-class rebellion resonant of a society in crisis, championing the Sex Pistols and The Clash in the pages of *Socialist Worker* (Bushell 1976: 11). Like many others, he got involved in punk by writing a fanzine, *Napalm*, which brought him to the attention of *Sounds*' editor, Alan Lewis. As a result, Bushell formed part of the new generation of writers recruited by the weekly music press in 1976–78 to charter and interpret the upheavals triggered by punk. Unlike many of his contemporaries, however, Bushell took punk's urbanity and class rhetoric seriously. Though he became estranged from the far left as its class focus began to give way to conflicting identity politics, he retained what he called a 'street socialist' outlook that prioritised collective action rooted in the working class itself. In the language of the time, Bushell offered a 'workerist' perspective that he applied to cultural politics as well as socio-economics. Oi!, therefore, was presented as an authentic version of punk mythology: it was punk as a working-class culture made by and for the kids from the council estates and football terraces that Mark Perry had envisioned back in 1976.

The parameters of Oi! were outlined in a series of articles published in *Sounds* over the course of 1980–81. The first of these, 'The New Breed', complemented the release of Oi! The Album in November 1980 and sought to showcase and contextualise what Bushell distinguished as a particular strand of punk rock. This, as noted above, was born of the Sex Pistols and The Clash but filtered through the rougher-edged 1977-sound of bands such as Cock Sparrer and Slaughter and the Dogs, both of whom featured on Oi! The Album, and the blunt social realism of Sham 69. Two more immediate precedents were the Cockney Rejects and the Angelic Upstarts, the first of whom came from London's Custom House and helped forge the nucleus of a 'scene' in and around the Bridge House pub in Canning Town. While the Rejects produced a kind of 'ruck 'n' roll' that soon found favour with members of West Ham's Inter City Firm (ICF), the Angelic Upstarts offered a more politicised street punk inspired by The Clash but firmly rooted in the working-class culture of their native north-east. Where the Rejects sung of 'fighting in the streets' and eschewed politics in all its forms, so the Upstarts' set concentrated its fury on 'police oppression' and included paeans to mine workers. For the Upstarts' lead singer, Mensi

(Thomas Mensforth), punk was ‘working-class rebellion, a way of making kids think a bit more’. For Jeff ‘Stinky’ Turner, the Rejects’ lead singer, punk was ‘bootboy music. Harringtons, boots and straights, that’s what we’re all about’ (quoted in Bushell 1980b: 50; idem 1980a: 32–4).

The ‘new breed’ article featured two bands from similar stock: the 4-Skins and Infa Riot. Not only did they comprise members who, if not still at school, were building workers, engineers or unemployed, but each sought to write songs that reflected what was happening on their respective east end and north London streets. In the context of 1980, this meant unemployment, street fashions, petty crime, social tensions and run-ins with the police. Both, too, sought to cut across youth cultural, political and football rivalries, fusing a raw punk sound with the skinhead style and sensibility that had re-emerged over the late 1970s. ‘We’re talking about skinheads not as fashion but as a way of life’, Lee Wilson (Infa Riot) insisted (Bushell 1980c: 32–3).

Oi!, therefore, was imbued with what Bushell described as a ‘skin/bootboy/hardcore-punk mentality’. This was presented as quintessentially masculine and based on principles of pride, loyalty and courage. It was also ‘anti-politics’, in that it rejected both mainstream politics and the ‘crackpots’ of the political fringe. Oi!, instead, sought to provide a street-level form of reportage and an alternative means of protest against the ‘smug politicians and greedy bosses [who] have destroyed whole communities and thrown an entire generation on the scrapheap’ (Bushell 1980c: 32–3).

The potential dangers of such expression were duly noted. A masculinity based on strength and pride could all too easily give way to ‘bullying and bigotry’, as in the lumpen ‘yob’ of media caricature. Political disillusionment, too, could bleed into extremist views that rejected conventional politics, or to an impulsive nihilism that found solace in violence, the glue bag or drugs such as tuinal. Indeed, the tendency for some young skinheads in the late 1970s to align themselves with the politics and signifiers of the far right seemingly fused both possibilities. As National Front (NF) and British Movement (BM) interventions at punk and 2-tone gigs became commonplace into the 1980s (especially in London), so the ‘bonehead’ – all tatty MA-1 flight jackets, skin-tight jeans, facial tattoos and over-sized boots –

'Hey little rich boy, take a good look at me':
Punk, class and British Oi!

became a recognisable outgrowth of skinhead. For Bushell, therefore, it was essential that those involved with Oi! refuse to 'play into the hands of the demagogues' and 'keep their protest and righteous wrath untainted by power games' (Bushell 1980c: 32–3). It was for this reason, moreover, that an 'Oi! debate' was organised for January 1981.

The January debate was chaired by Bushell and involved band members and fanzine writers keen to reassert punk's point and purpose (Bushell 1981b: 30–1). First, the question of what Oi! represented, or stood for, was discussed. All agreed that the music should be raw and exciting, that it was avowedly working class, and that it was concerned more with connecting to the 'kids in the audience' than any kind of artistic progression. Oi! was punk for 'ordinary geezers', Lee Wilson suggested, not art school students or 'trendies' following fashion.

There was some disagreement over just what Oi! sought to communicate. Where Mensi recognised the implicit politics of telling 'the truth about police harassment, unemployment [and] Margaret fuckin' Thatcher', Turner felt politics 'had nothing to do with music'. More generally, formal politics were dismissed as divisive and ineffectual; politicians were 'all the same', none of the parties were worth voting for, and none of them related to 'the kids'. Accusations of far-right sympathies were refuted, though little residual support remained for Labour, let alone left-wing organisations associated with 'student' politics. There was, however, general agreement with Bushell's assertion that 'there's poor whites and there's poor blacks and we're all getting everything taken away from us. Instead of slagging each other we should be after the people who are making the cutbacks, they're the real enemies'. Oi!'s principal objective, therefore, was for bands to work together and inject an authentic working-class voice into popular music. While all agreed that punk had been marginalised within the media, its protest was deemed even more relevant in 1981 than in 1976. Or, as Charlie Harper (UK Subs) put it, 'unemployment's ten times as bad as it was in '76, things are getting worse all round, so we've gotta keep talking about it'. Benefit gigs, primarily for the unemployed and prisoners' rights, were seen to offer a way forward (Bushell 1981b: 30–1).

Six months later, and a 'new punk convention' was organised at London's Conway Hall. In the interim, new bands had formed beyond

London and a second Oi! album – *Strength Thru Oi!* – had been released through Decca. More generally, and despite being scorned by the NME, Oi! formed part of a resurgent punk scene that saw bands such as The Exploited and Vice Squad break into the mainstream chart over the course of 1981–2. In May 1981, therefore, a conference of London Oi! bands met to reaffirm their commitment to ‘organise benefits against cuts (hospital and school closures and other matters hitting local communities), against unemployment, against vivisection’ and in support of ‘justified local strikes’ and the prisoners’ rights organisation. They also reasserted their affinity to punk, thereby paving the way for the Conway Hall meeting to demonstrate that Oi! was about ‘all types of herberts, punks and hooligans as well as skins’ (Bushell 1981c: 14). In the event, 57 ‘delegates’ attended from across the country, swapping lists of ‘friendly venues’ and charging Lol Pryor with responsibility to contact the SWP’s Right to Work campaign with a view to arranging a benefit for the unemployed. By the end of the convention, it was agreed that punks and skins should work together (under the dubious banner of skunk rock), and that kids in localities should put on their own gigs, form their own labels or work with trustworthy independents, start their own fanzines, and support local causes so as to never ‘give up the fight’ (Bushell 1981d: 16).

Despite all this, Oi!’s attempt to define itself as a youthful form of working-class protest was soon overtaken by events. First, a gig at the Hambrough Tavern, Southall, on 3 July 1981, featuring the 4-Skins, The Business and The Last Resort, ended in a riot when local Asian youths mobilised in response to the arrival of a large number of skinheads in an area with a history of racial tension. Second, the interpretation of skinheads as violent Nazi thugs was seemingly confirmed by the front cover of *Strength Thru Oi!*, which featured a photo of Nicky Crane, a member of the BM Leader Guard. As a result, the dots were joined between the album, skinheads and the far-right to ensure that where Oi!’s critics had once found a supposed caricature of working-class life, they now constructed a caricature of their own.² And yet, a closer

2 See, for criticism of Oi!’s class approach, Crass, ‘Rival Tribal Rebel Revel’, Crass Records, 1980 (a flexi-disc given away with *Toxic Graffiti* fanzine); Penman 1980: p. 41; Bohn 1981: 36–7. And, post Southall, for its ‘reactionary politics’, Kinnersley 1981: 18–19; Donovan and Evans 1981: 3; Hodges 1981: 3; Spencer 1981: 4–5.

'Hey little rich boy, take a good look at me':
Punk, class and British Oi!

look at Oi! suggests that class remained its overriding motif (Worley 2013: 606–34). The ugly politics of race impinged on Oi!, but the 'beat of the street' remained more readily at war with the 'chosen few, the middle class and the boys in blue' (Johnson 1981b and 1981a).

'Your iron curtain is the public school': expression and articulation

Oi!'s emergence and early development was catalogued on a series of six albums released between 1980 and 1984.³ Most of the principal artists associated with Oi! were included on at least one of the albums, which in turn featured sleevenotes that sought to define and locate Oi! within a broader cultural context. The quality varied, but taken altogether they provided a fairly comprehensive overview of Oi!'s attitude and approach. If Oi! was about 'having a laugh and having a say', as Bushell insisted, then the albums contained a suitable mix of irreverent humour and social commentary.

Throughout, the politics and signifiers of class were to the fore. Most obviously, references to a residual working-class culture pepper the album sleeves and the lyrics of the bands featured. Oi!'s landscape was the inner-city back street; it moved through the pubs, clubs and terraces where youth gang rivalries and the weekend provided tales of punch-ups, piss-ups and bruised pride. Much time was spent exploring the spaces between work/school and home life, forging a kind of celebratory protest that provided for a 'generation of scars' on the one hand and 'dead end yobs' on the other. Oi! was always active: running, fighting, going out. As a result, there was an ambivalence shown towards violence that helped feed Oi!'s negative reputation. Turf wars, football and the bank holiday beano were a recognised part of Oi!'s cultural lineage, as demonstrated by sleevenotes (and songs) that evoked the 'bovver books' of Richard Allen and reveled in the localised identities of Oi!'s youthful milieu. It was precisely the thrill of 'runnin' riot' that gave Oi! its vitality, especially when set against the futility of a boring job, unemployment or impending adulthood.

3 These were, initially, *Oi! The Album* (1980), *Strength Thru Oi!* (1981), *Carry on Oi!* (1981) and *Oi! Oi! That's Yer Lot* (1982), followed by *Son of Oi!* (1983) and *The Oi! of Sex* (1984).

Things you say, things you do, sure worry me/ When we're out on the street making money for you in your society/ It seems to me that the time is right, for another generation and another street fight/ Got no future, sure got a right, I got a right to live. I can't stand the peace and quiet/ All I want is a running riot/I can't stand the peace and quiet/ Because all I want is a running ... RIOT!

Don't you try to understand the way we feel/ Flash limousines and mortgages ain't no big deal/ I've got no friends who want to be, living like you when they're 33/ Getting old sure bothers me, it bothers me to death.⁴

Paul Morley, back in 1978, had noted Sham 69's ability to capture youth's social and domestic claustrophobia; the sense of struggling to cope with a life shaped by factors beyond any immediate control (Morley 1978: 37). This, in turn, continued through Oi! In the context of the early 1980s, with unemployment rising to over three million and Britain's industrial base contracting under the monetarist policies of Margaret Thatcher, so songs of pent up rage and dystopian visions of the near future permeated all six Oi! albums. The 4-Skins, in particular, proved adept at prophesising doom, with '1984' and 'On the Streets' depicting a country caught between authoritarianism and violent social collapse. Others, such as Blitz ('Nation on Fire'), documented the sense of frustration that helped ignite the inner-city disturbances that spread across Britain in 1981. Infa Riot, too, offered a neat summary of the morale-sapping effects of unemployment with 'Each Dawn I Die'.

I'm trapped in here, a self-built cage, nobody's got the key/ I'll scream and shout, please let me out, Margaret give me money/ Pull the cage, open the cage, it's held there by a hook/ 3 million people are trapped inside and none of them get a look. So here I am, no future here, there's nothing left for me/I'm only young, I want some fun, just a bit of security/ A daily job from 9 til 5 would be asking oh so much/ But I don't think I'll work no more, I've just really given up.⁵

4 Cock Sparrer, 'Runnin Riot', words and music by Stephen Burgess and Garrie Lammin, reproduced by permission of Orange Songs Ltd..

5 Infa Riot, 'Each Dawn I Die', words and music by Barry Thomas Damery and Lee Raymond Wilson © 2007 Cherry Red Songs. Administered by Kassner Associated Publishers Ltd. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

'Hey little rich boy, take a good look at me':
Punk, class and British Oi!

Simultaneously, however, Oi!'s negation was complemented by a stubborn refusal to submit. While Prole insisted that they would 'never say die', even as the factories closed and the dole queue beckoned, so The Last Resort's 'King of the Jungle' defined an alternate site of working-class empowerment: youth cultural style. The skinhead persona, so intrinsic to Oi!, was in this instance a statement of class pride; a totem of rebellious youth and street-level 'suss'. As this suggests, Oi! venerated those who sought to circumnavigate the social-economic obstacles before them. Local 'faces' – part of an Oi! milieu that included football firms, pub regulars and associated characters – were name-checked in songs and on the album sleeves. And if, as Garry Johnson insisted, football, boxing and rock 'n' roll were the principal working-class escape routes from the dole queue or the 'dead-end job', then the Oi! albums paid due respect to those boxers (Charlie Magri, Alan Minter), footballers (Trevor Brooking, Dixie Dean) and bands/artists (Conflict, The Jam, Judge Dread, Madness, Rose Tattoo, Errol Scorchers) with whom they felt an affinity (Johnson 1981a). More humorously, Oi! contained a 'pathétique' strand of bands that specialised in bawdy humour and drew from a 'Carry On ...' or music hall tradition of working-class comedy. Indeed, the term 'oi' had links back to variety performers – Jimmy Wheeler, Max Miller, Flanagan and Allen, Billy Cotton – that fed neatly into Oi!'s referencing a down-at-heel Englishness; a 'cockney' culture that resonated beyond its more obvious youth cultural context but was simultaneously being diluted within its traditional habitat.⁶

In terms of politics, Oi!'s perspective was rarely formed by party or ideological allegiance. Members of political organisations on the left and right were involved in Oi!, though such affiliations were not made explicit on the albums. Of those featured, only ABH (on *The Oi! of Sex*) aligned openly with the NF (Anon 1984: 3). Oi!'s audience, too, undoubtedly contained some who embraced (or accepted) the

6 Pathétique bands included The Gonads (featuring Bushell), the Toy Dolls and the various bands led by Max Splodge. The cover of *Carry on Oi!* was designed like a saucy seaside postcard, and each of the Oi! albums came with a billing – eg. 'for your titillation, edification and enjoyment' – that recalled music hall stage announcements. Oi! Oi! *That's Yer Lot* (1982) was named after a Jimmy Wheeler catchphrase.

racial politics of the NF or BM. But in the wake of Southall there was – if anything – a leftist slant to the albums, with the inclusion of overtly socialist bands and poets such as The Burial, the Newtown Neurotics, Attila the Stockbroker and Mick Turpin. Mick O’Farrell, of Red Action, also lent his anti-fascist credentials to the sleevenotes of Oi! Oi! That’s Yer Lot (1982), while the League of Labour Skins Choir sang ‘Jerusalem’ on 1983’s *Son of Oi!* More typically, however, the politics of left and right were seen as divisive and detached from the interests of the working class. So, for example, Garry Johnson’s lyric for The Business’ ‘Suburban Rebels’ bemoaned ‘the middle-class kiddies from public school’ who appeared to dominate the far left by the late 1970s and early 1980s but had no experience of the inequalities about which they campaigned. Nor, Bushell added, did these ‘bedsit radicals’ seem to understand a working-class culture that failed to conform to a romanticised stereotype (Bushell 1982a). Simultaneously, Johnson’s ‘Boy About Town’ depicted a young skinhead enticed by the far right.

Boy about town, dressed to kill, Fleet Street headlines give him a thrill/
 Enoch warns ‘rivers of blood’/ Boy about town can’t see he’s a mug/ On
 a daily diet of stale white bread/ The Sun, the scum, with his middle-page
 spread [...]/ He’s a bully boy in bovver boots/ A willing slave to men in
 suits/ A militant mug, a vicious thug, hooked on hate, a dangerous drug/
 Patriotic songs, slogans of war/ Holocaust anthems we’ve heard before/
 The forgotten boy who loves to hate/ A museum piece who’s out of date/
 The enemy of the working class, got no future, lives in the past.⁷

For this reason, the sleevenotes to *Strength Thru Oi!* railed against ‘twisted nazis’ and ‘middle-class commies’, both of whom ‘try and use us [or] write us off as sub-animal no hopes’ (Bushell 1981e).

The politics of Oi! – its protest – were therefore filtered through a street-level lens. Geo-politics were sometimes engaged with, as on the Angelic Upstarts’ ‘Guns for the Afghan Rebels’ or The Partisans’ ‘Arms Race’, but the focus tended towards the socio-economic and the cultural. Beyond the vivid depictions of recognisable class-cultural signifiers, Oi! kicked back against those social and structural

7 Garry Johnson, ‘Boy About Town’, on *Son of Oi!*, Syndicate Records, 1983, used by kind permission of the author.

'Hey little rich boy, take a good look at me':
Punk, class and British Oi!

forces that served to ensure that 'we're the ones who do the work, we're the ones they take for jerks' (Prole, 'Generation Landslide'). Not surprisingly, the Conservative government was recognised to stand for 'mass unemployment and poverty, a them and us society' (Johnson 1981b). But equal disdain was reserved for social workers, the police and a state that drew on the working class to both generate and protect its wealth. Most poignantly, perhaps, the Angelic Upstarts' 'Last Night, Another Soldier' told the tale of a young squaddie who signed up to 'get out of it' and secure his future, only to be shot down in Ulster to become 'just a number in the papers, another one of the innocents'.

Workplace politics were dealt with on occasion. Oi! The Comrade's 'Guvnors Man' offered a vicious critique of the shopfloor careerist, but the problem of finding work was more commonly expressed. Beyond the Oi! compilations, the Angelic Upstarts' 'King Coal' and 'Heath's Lament' both invoked the miners' struggles of the 1970s, while The Business' 'National Insurance Blacklist' exposed the means by which employers in the building trade sought to silence active trade unionists and workers who stood up for their rights.

Job chances seem very thin/ It's a losing battle we must all win/ The CBI are winning, keep down the pay/ Mysterious people calling early in the day/ The 'x' has appeared, another lost life/ No tears are shed for the children and wife/ The dailies ignore it or treat it with tact/ Since when have you known them to report fact

In our country so fair and free/ So say the holders of the economy/ There is a monster said not to exist/ They call it the employers' blacklist.⁸

As the song makes clear, Oi! bands had scant regard for a media they recognised as complicit in the demonisation of the working class. Cock Sparrer's ironic ode to The Sun, 'The Sun Says', remains an Oi! classic.

Finally, of course, the fallout from Southall ensured that racial politics were projected onto Oi! This, initially at least, tended to

8 'National Insurance Blacklist (Be a Rebel and You'll Always be Wrong)', words and music by Laurence Keith Pryor and Steve Kent © 2007 Cherry Red Songs. Administered by Kassner Associated Publishers Ltd. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

revolve around ‘guilt by association’ rather than accusations of Oi! bands being overtly racist. First, Oi!’s link to a skinhead culture that harboured racist elements ensured that connections were soon made. The media’s interpretation of the late 1970s skinhead ‘revival’ was typically built on a narrative of racism and fascist politics.⁹ Second, Oi!’s unabashed patriotism ensured that its use of the Union Jack was read either as naïve or willfully contentious – charges most Oi! bands refuted (Duffy 1991: 4–5; Rollo 1981: 4).¹⁰ In response, therefore, the Oi! albums released post-Southall sought to redress the balance, be it via the Angelic Upstarts’ ‘I Understand’, a song in support of Richard Campbell, a young Rasta murdered whilst in Ashford Remand Centre, or Garry Johnson’s ‘United’, which made clear that ‘Oi! ain’t about black v white’. Oi!, in any case, boasted close ties to 2-tone – which Bushell championed in Sounds – and, given its skinhead roots, was born into a cross-cultural tradition that belied its media stereotype. Indeed, several Oi! bands played anti-racist gigs or made anti-racist statements over 1981–4; some, too, including the 4-Skins, Blitz, Case and The Burial, adopted ska or reggae elements into their songs.¹¹ Bushell, certainly, refused to cover bands with ties to the far right, a stance that led to him and Garry Johnson both being physically attacked by the NF/BM and condemned by the nascent ‘white power’ scene organised around Skrewdriver.¹²

Oi!, then, expressed its protest in primarily class terms. Its working-class origins served as a common denominator across those associated

9 See, for example, ‘Danger on the Right’, *TV Eye*, ITV Documentary, 1980; ‘Skinheads’, *Arena*, BBC Documentary, 1982.

10 For example, Cock Sparrer’s Steve Bruce insisted that ‘We’re taking our flag back and proving you don’t have to be a fascist to wave the Union Jack. It’s our flag, not the NF’s’ (Bushell, 1982b: 14).

11 For examples of Oi! warning against fascism and racism, see Angelic Upstarts, ‘Kids on the Street’, Blitz, ‘Propaganda’, Cock Sparrer, ‘I Got Your Number’ and ‘Run With the Blind’.

12 Skrewdriver came from Blackpool and became a presence on the London punk scene in 1977. They adopted a skinhead look and attracted a skinhead audience, but passed through a series of incarnations before its founder and singer, Ian Stuart, allied his band to the NF’s Rock Against Communism initiative in the late 1970s. By 1982, Skrewdriver formed the focal point of a white power scene that later became Blood & Honour.

'Hey little rich boy, take a good look at me':
Punk, class and British Oi!

with it; politics, youth cultural identities and, on occasion, football rivalries provided points of tension. In many ways, Oi! offered a living counterpart to John Lydon's 1978 definition of punk as being 'basically a lot of hooligans doing it the way they want and getting what they want' (Coon 1978: 14–15). For Garry Johnson, Oi! meant 'working-class anthems – not mindless violence or dodgy politics but the logical continuation of "Anarchy in the UK", that attitude [...] Not fighting each other in the streets, but fighting the system, challenging the establishment through words and music' (Bushell 1983: 22–3. Oi!'s politics were contestable. But the bands, poets, writers and audience associated with Oi! forged a class-conscious version of punk that provided for a political and cultural impact beyond the rarefied confines of the students' union and the NME.

Conclusion: 'loud, proud and punk'

Writing in 1987, Simon Frith and Howard Horne argued that punk was the 'ultimate art school movement'. Not only, they insisted, were many of punk's leading protagonists art school educated, but its political and cultural rationale was largely shaped by ideas, aesthetics and critiques honed in the studios, bars and bedsits of an increasingly pop-savvy and theory-literate art school milieu (Frith and Horne 1987: 124). Fair enough. It is easy to point to examples that affirm Frith and Horne's thesis. But such an argument is partial. There were many more involved in or inspired by punk, both during its 'first wave' and thereafter, who did not go to art school and who saw in punk a means of cultural expression that bore little relation to either bohemia or the academy. To suggest, moreover, that only 'punk-as-art-school movement' really 'matters in terms of cultural history' is contentious in the extreme (Frith and Horne 1987: 124).

Oi!, by contrast, formed part of an alternative 'pop' narrative. Not simply the 'punk-as-pub-rock movement' that Frith and Horne dismissed as the art school contingent's irrelevant other, but a stylistic and class-based tradition that gave preference to, say, bluebeat over the blues; teds and skins over beats and hippies; Slade and The Faces over prog rock or Roxy Music. If the stylised urbanity of The Clash proved inspirational to many attracted by punk's social realism, then

so too did Johnny Rotten's irreverence and the brash working-class persona of the Pistols' Steve Jones. Punk's claim to give voice to the 'kids' from the council estates and the football terrace was not just art school pretense; it really did provide a cultural space for the likes of Cock Sparrer and Sham 69, not to mention The Jam, 2-tone and the punk resurgence of 1981–2 (in which Oi! played a major part). Just as Oi! contained echoes of the 1950/60s 'kitchen sink' books and films that dramatised the tensions and transformations of post-war Britain,¹³ so we may follow a line from the teds, skins and bootboys through to football casuals, bands such as the Happy Mondays, and into the modern-day housing estates that provide the urban backdrop to grime. Thus, in 2012, as Plan B assessed the fall-out from the inner-city riots of the previous year, he wore t-shirts depicting skinheads and used lyrics that referenced both Sham 69 and Oi! By so doing, he connected the street styles and music of the late 1970s and early 1980s with the grime artists of twenty-first century – that is, kids from the inner-city estates, reporting and celebrating their lives and culture, bemoaning the socio-economic structures that ensnare them, and simultaneously forging a means to avoid the dole queue and the dead-end job. Rather neatly, perhaps, one of grime's defining records was More Fire Crew's 'Oi!', released in 2001.

Class was not essential to punk. As a cultural form, punk proved diverse and open to interpretation. But class remained the defining characteristic of Oi!, even as its influence spread overseas to inform street punk scenes in every continent (Marshall 1996). For the bands brought together under the Oi! banner, class mattered. It defined their understanding of punk and sought to affirm a sense of identity within the shifting contours of British society. Oi! was more than just a voice from the dead end of the street, it was about 'thinking for yourself', being 'sharp in brain and dress', 'knowing no-one is better than you', 'not giving a toss about the boss', being 'proud to be British, but not xenophobic'. Most importantly, however, Oi! was steadfastly and unapologetically 'proud to be working class' (Bushell 1984).

13 The most obvious example of this was Sham 69's *That's Life* album (Polydor, 1978), which documented a day-in-the-life of a working-class teenager from the east end of London. It was also made into a short film ('Grant's Story') by BBC's *Arena*: 'Tell Us The Truth' (1979). Grant was Grant Fleming.

'Hey little rich boy, take a good look at me':
Punk, class and British Oi!

Acknowledgments

Matthew Worley, 'Hey little rich boy, take a good look at me': Punk, class and British Oi!', *Punk & Post-Punk*, 3:1 (2014), pp. 5–20, by permission of Intellect Ltd. The article forms part of a wider research project supported by a grant awarded by the Leverhulme Trust. Many thanks to Angela Bartie, Russ Bestley, Tim Brown, Garry Bushell, Kev Clark, Jon Garland, Keith Gildart, Steve Ignorant, Garry Johnson, Tom McCourt, Lisa McKenzie, Gary O'Shea, Andrew Perchard, Lucy Robinson, Andrew Smith, John Street, Paul Stott, Toast, Tim Wells and David Wilkinson for their help and insight.

References

- Anon., (1984), Interview with ABH, *Bulldog*, Number 39.
- Bohn, Chris (1981), Review of *Strength Thru Oi!*, *NME* (20 June).
- Burchill, Julie (1977), '1976', *NME* (1 January).
- Bushell, Garry, 'Sex Pistols: Whose Finger on the Trigger?', *Socialist Worker* (18 December).
- ____ (1980a), 'The Angelic Upstarts are all Washed Up', *Sounds* (3 May).
- ____ (1980b), 'Harder Than the Rest', *Sounds* (8 March).
- ____ (1980c), 'The New Breed: A Teenage Warning', *Sounds* (1 November).
- ____ (1981a), 'Oi! – The Column', *Sounds* (17 January).
- ____ (1981b), 'Oi! – The Debate', *Sounds* (24 January).
- ____ (1981c), 'Oi! – The Column', *Sounds* (30 May).
- ____ (1981d), 'Skunk Rock '81', *Sounds* (11 July).
- ____ (1981e), Sleeve notes, *Strength Thru Oi!* (Decca Records).
- ____ (1982a), Sleeve notes, *Oi! Oi! That's Yer Lot* (Secret Records).
- ____ (1982b), 'Strictly for the Birds', *Sounds* (20 November).
- ____ (1983), 'The Voices of Britain', *Sounds* (23 January).
- ____ (1984), Sleeve notes, *The Oi! of Sex* (Syndicate Records).

Coon, Caroline (1976), 'Sex Pistols: Rotten to the Core', *Melody Maker* (27 November).

_____ (1978), 'Public Image', *Sounds* (22 July).

Donovan, Paul and Pat Evans (1981), 'Exposed: The Racist Thug on the Cover of this Evil _____ Record', *Daily Mail* (10 July).

Duffy, Mike (1981), 'Playing with Fire – And Other Skin Problems', *NME* (11 July).

Frith Simon (1978), 'The Punk Bohemians', *New Society* (9 March).

Frith Simon and Howard Horne (1987), *Art into Pop*, London: Methuen.

Hebdige, Dick (1979), *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London: Methuen & Co.

Hodges, Lucy (1981), 'Racists Recruit Youth Through Rock Music', *The Times* (3 August).

Johnson, Garry (1981a), 'The Dead End Yobs', *Strength Thru Oi!* (Decca Records).

_____ (1981b), 'United', *Carry on Oi!* (Secret Records).

Kinnersley, Simon (1981) 'The Skinhead Bible of Hate from an Establishment Stable', *Daily Mail* (9 July).

Marcus, Greil (1989), *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century*, London:

Faber & Faber.

Marsh, Peter (1977), 'Dole Queue Rock', *New Society* (20 January).

Marshall, George (1996), *Skinhead Nation* (Dunoon: ST Publishing).

McKay, George (1996), *Senseless Acts of Beauty: Cultures of Resistance since the Sixties*,

London, Verso.

Morley, Paul (1977), 'Don't Follow Leaders', *NME* (12 November).

_____ (1978), Review of Sham 69, *That's Life* album, *NME* (4 November).

Parsons, Tony (1976), 'Go Johnny Go', *NME* (3 October).

Paytress, Mark (2003), *Siouxsie and the Banshees: The Authorised Biography*, London: Sanctuary.

'Hey little rich boy, take a good look at me':
Punk, class and British Oi!

- Penman, Ian (1980), Review of *Oi! The Album*, *NME* (1 November).
- Perry, Mark (1977a), 'The Sex Pistols for Time Out', *Sniffin Glue*, Number 6.
- _____ (1977b), 'The Truth', *Sniffin Glue*, Number 9.
- Reynolds, Simon (2005), *Rip it Up and Start Again: Post-Punk, 1978–84*, London: Faber & Faber.
- Rollo, Joanna (1981), 'Sounds Familiar', *Socialist Worker* (18 July).
- Savage, Jon (1991), *England's Dreaming: Sex Pistols and Punk Rock*, London: Faber & Faber.
- _____ (2009) *The England's Dreaming Tapes*, London: Faber & Faber.
- Spencer, Neil (1981), 'Oi! – The Disgrace', *NME* (11 July).
- Various Artists (1980), *Oi! The Album* (EMI).
- _____ (1981a), *Strength Thru Oi!* (Decca Records).
- _____ (1981b), *Carry on Oi!* (Secret Records).
- _____ (1982), *Oi! Oi! That's Yer Lot* (Secret Records).
- _____ (1983), *Son of Oi!* (Syndicate Records)
- _____ (1984), *The Oi! of Sex* (Syndicate Records).
- Worley, Matthew (2013), 'Oi!, Oi!. Oi!: Class, Locality and British Punk', *Twentieth Century British History*, 24:4.