

PUNK RECORD LABELS

Alan O'Connor

When punk emerged in London and New York about 1976, there were no punk record labels. The goal of most bands was to get signed by a major label. That meant record labels such as CBS, EMI, Warner, PolyGram and MCA. These record labels were formal organizations with talent scouts, artists and repertoire department, business affairs, promotion and publicity departments. There were mainly seeking short-term success, records that climbed the charts and became gold records with sales of 500,000 in the USA, or 100,000 in the UK. Getting signed to a major record label was considered a normal and desirable step for a successful band. But apart from all the glamour, the major advantage was that the majors controlled the distribution network that got product into record stores. There was not much point in being on the front cover of a magazine, if the kids couldn't find your release in a local record store.

The manager of the Sex Pistols, Malcolm McLaren, apparently with some influence from The Situationists (a small group of artists and writers in Paris in the 1950s and 1960s which produced interventions in art, philosophy, and political posters), had rather different ideas. McLaren seemed less interested in promoting the band and more interested in being provocative about the whole business of rock music. The famous appearance of the Sex Pistols on Bill Grundy's television show in 1976 seems like a hilarious send-up of a broadcast interview with a rising band. Grundy seems to assume that the Sex Pistols share the anti-materialist culture of 1960s rock bands. But the band responded that they were quite happy to get money. The more the better. In October 1976 the band signed a two-year contract with EMI. But because of press coverage of the band's notorious behaviour, the major label released the band from their contract. In March 1977 the band signed with A&M Records, but again the record company ended the contract. In May 1977 the band signed with Virgin Records. McLaren seemed to be doing what the Situationists called a *détournement*, hijacking the music industry. He said that he kept going into the offices of record labels and leaving with a lot of money, payments made to end the contracts. It seemed like fun, but members of the Sex Pistols would later sue him for not properly promoting their careers.

On the other side of the Atlantic, bands involved in the emerging punk scene tended to be a bit older, with some influence from the field of art, and rather more sure about what they wanted. The Ramones signed with a small record label because no big record label

would even listen to them. Sire Records made most of its business from licensing European acts such as Fleetwood Mac for release in the United States. By the late 1970s Seymour Stein wanted to release his own bands. The Ramones signed with Sire Records in 1975. Although it was an independent label it operated no differently from a major. The band signed a contract and got an advance of \$6,000 to record their first album and \$20,000 for band expenses. Sire soon linked up with Warner Records and The Ramones third album, *Rocket to Russia* benefited from major-label distribution. Warner also wanted to make the band more suitable for radio play.

The first generation of punk bands was quite diverse. It included semi-professional musicians who had played in bands before 1977, people on the fringes of the art world, and young kids inspired by seeing punk on television. Some of these bands had professional management and some were completely clueless. Some wanted careers as musicians and others were just in it for the fun. Some bands managed to get contracts with major labels, but many didn't. With its rudimentary music style, the conditions of entry for punk bands were quite low. You didn't really need to be a musician. Most first-wave punk bands never had a contract with a big record label. They issued their records themselves, or had a friend do it for them. The records were sold through an emerging network of alternative record stores, supplied by independent distributors that specialized in underground music. Today these records these are rare collectors' items. For many bands, doing-it-yourself came out of necessity. For bands in countries such as Australia, Canada or Spain, it was even harder to sign with a big label. The initial wave of punk lasted only a few years. By the early 1980s punk was over for the major labels. Most of them were relieved and returned to marketing music that they understood. They knew how to deal with Bruce Springsteen but the Sex Pistols and their friends had been a nightmare.

What happened next is crucial for the history of punk. With little interest from the commercial sector, punk went underground. It evolved into different styles of art punk, youth anthems, or "hardcore" punk. The whole scene became more autonomous because it was free of the pressures of commercial success. Bands came to value the respect they got within the punk scene, rather than making it on a major label. At the same time, important punk fanzines emerged that shaped the movement and attempted to hold bands responsible for their actions. The most important of these was *Maximumrocknroll*, published in San Francisco, but influential in punk scenes from Canada to Mexico, Germany to Japan. *MRR* was published by an older generation of political activists who

were determined that the fast punk music they loved would not become commercialized. The monthly magazine was read through out the world. Punks circled small ads for records they wanted and send well-concealed dollar bills though the mail. An ad in MRR could result in 300 or 400 orders and this gave the magazine quite an amount of influence on the underground punk scene from the 1980s.

The music business was all about large-scale production. This new scene from the early 1980s was mostly about small-scale production. Well-known bands were sometime caught out by the changing norms. In the early days, bands such as Black Flag and the Dead Kennedys attempted to release records on labels that were distributed by a major. These bands were attempting to sell 20,000 to 50,000 copies of their records on release. Labels that appeared to be independent sometimes had manufacturing and distribution deals with major labels. They were, in effect, acting as scouts for the majors. In the early 1980s, this kind of behaviour was called out by writers in Maximumrocknroll. Several commercial distributors that handled punk records also went bankrupt about this time, and small punk record labels began to see the advantages of building their own infrastructure. But as the scene became more autonomous and underground, sales began to decline even for well-known bands. Bands became used to sales of 5,000 to 10,000 copies of their records.

The idea of “selling out” was always ambiguous. Musicians always deny there is any artistic pressure on them from record labels. But now, selling out started to mean breaking with the practices of small-scale production that characterized hardcore punk in the 1980s. Crass Records in the UK issued low-cost records with distinctive fold-out posters. Discord Record in Washington DC also issued records at low prices, in a no-nonsense manner: here are some records we sell. Although there was never complete agreement, a set of practices emerged that made the hardcore punk scene more or less autonomous from the major labels. So when a much-loved band such as Hüsker Dü left SST Records in 1986 and signed with Warner Records it provoked a scandal. Every bands that jumps to to a major label weakens the autonomy of the underground scene. Musicians respond to this in different ways, sometimes saying they they don’t understand or share the values of autonomy, but most usually dodging the arguments by appealing to their status as “artists.” The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu points out that artists such as Flaubert and Manet gained their autonomy by rejecting immediate commercial success.

This would also become an issue with the major-label punk explosion of the early 1990s. Nirvana's *Never Mind* was released in 1991 on Geffen / DGC (owned by a major label). Within six months it sold 3 million copies. This provoked an interest in punk bands. The Offspring soon had commercial success with *Smash*, Green Day with *Dookie*, and NOFX with *Punk in Drublic*. Although often justified as bringing the "message" of punk to larger audiences, the actions of these bands in signing with a major label placed a huge amount of stress on the autonomy of the punk scenes through the 1990s, until the interest by major labels faded and they moved on to other things.



Maximumrockroll issue #133 (June 1994). An offprint of the articles and columns on major labels was reprinted by MRR for 50 cents.

There were three main arguments made against punk bands signing with major labels at this time. The first, is that the arrangement rarely works out well. In a famous article that appeared in a special issue of *Maximumrocknroll* on Major Labels (June 1994), Steve Albini did the calculations for a band that has ordinary success on a major label. He showed that a band that sold 250,000 copies would actually make very little money because of the high costs of working within the industry. The band would actually net \$16,000, or about \$4,000 per member. A very few bands, such as Green Day, make more than this. Many bands that jumped to a major label came to regret their decision. Jawbox left Discord Records to sign with Atlantic and eventually regretted it. Fugazi got many offers from major labels in these years and always said no because they thought that the increased pressure on the band would cause it to break up.

The second argument is that bands jumping to major labels weaken the underground infrastructure. By the late 1980s, some independent punk labels had grown. Some had between five and twenty employees. They operated out of small warehouses rather than a kid's bedroom. These labels, along with independent live music promoters (many working on a volunteer basis), mom-and-pop record stores, weekly punk shows on college radio stations (also done by volunteers), created the scene that produced Green Day. If Green Day, the Dead Kennedy's (without Jello Biafra) and Jawbox had stayed in the underground their success would help independent record labels and also the independent record distribution system (for example, Mordam Records) that had been built up over the years. By jumping ship, bands took money out of the underground and allowed major labels to benefit. The major labels might like to boast that they "broke" punk in 1991. But these American bands would not have existed except for the autonomous scene that developed through the 1980s.

The third argument is that the punk explosion of the early 1990s almost destroyed the scene. Record labels and distributors came under pressure to rapidly expand in order to cope with the demand. This pressure on labels and distributors could destroy them. In effect it destroyed Mordam Records. The argument that putting punk on MTV and commercial radio spread the "message" beyond a small underground makes little sense. Some punks calculated that in the early 1990s there may have been half a million kids touched by the underground scene in the USA. Seeing a local live show is not just about music. Kids realize this is not done for profit and is organized by a kid like them. You watched what was happening. Maybe you bought a record at the show, with an insert, or

purchased a fanzine with new ideas. By attending a live show you saw much more than music. (To be sure there were also conservative hardcore scenes in the USA, especially the East Coast straightedge scene.) You don't get that from watching a video of Green Day. All you see on music television is loud catchy music and a smart-ass attitude that is completely acceptable among American youth because it doesn't actually challenge anything. The major labels did in part "break" punk in the 1990s in the sense of putting the autonomous field of culture under enormous commercial pressure.

Research on independent music scenes in the UK describes a somewhat different experience. Hesmondhalgh (1998) and Strachan (2007) describe a more loosely structured field of "indie" music. An autonomous scene may actually exist on a smaller scale and be less visible than in the United States. Some of the DIY punk labels in the UK in the 1990s may have been influenced by US labels such as Discord and Havoc. But it may be that the boundary between punk and indie is more blurred in the UK and this has implications for how record labels are organized. Academic articles about the UK tend to speak more generally about "micro record labels" rather than an autonomous field of DIY punk.

Some music writers described 1970s punk as working-class "dole queue rock," but it was apparent from the beginning that considerable numbers of middle-class kids were also involved (Laing, pp. 121-123). This is also the finding of a more recent sociological study of punk record labels. There are differences between long-established labels (Alternative Tentacles, Discord) and new labels by a kid just starting out. Many of the long-standing labels are operated by punk kids from middle-class and professional families. New independent labels of the 1990s tend to be operated by kids who are drop-outs from the middle class. The important indicator is that many have "some college" in the United States. Many value the year or two they spend at university ("It helped me to think"), but it was often more interesting to go on tour in Japan with their band, or to work full time at their record label (which includes participating at punk shows and festivals) than go back to school and take more courses in Psychology. There are a smaller number of kids from working-class families operating the new record labels of the 1990s, but they tend to be a bit more businesslike about it (while still keeping DIY values). The study of punk-rock practices (such as running a record label) puts into question the idea that "youth subcultures" are oppositional to a parent culture. Most of those interviewed by O'Connor (2008) actually had the support of their parents, who were glad to see their kids play in a band, and sometimes even loaned the family car.

After the explosion of the 1990s, DIY record labels continued their small-scale production of records by bands they liked and had something to say. This happened not just in the USA but in many other countries influenced by DIY punk. But meanwhile, another threat emerged. Punk formats have always been vinyl and cassettes. Especially the 7" record, which is cheap to produce and send through the mail. Cassettes were important in the 1980s, but they continued through the 1990s, especially in countries such as Peru (Greene, 2016), where bands and fans of the music could not afford record players. Most punks never accepted the CD format. It was seen at best as a convenience, or useful for assembling a band's entire discography. The punk movement was taken unawares by the emergence of digital platforms. Bands quickly adopted MySpace in the 1990s as a way to reach both their fans and concert promoters, but the scene never seriously thought about the consequences. (There was a famous MRR April 1 prank in which the magazine announced that bands with MySpace pages would be banned.)

Record labels that were still recovering from the boom and crash of the 1990s had to experiment with strategies for digital music. Alternative Tentacles offered an amazingly generous selection of bands on their website as MP3 files, free to download. Discord Records offered one or two songs from each band on its website. Touch & Go Records reissued in 2006 a limited-edition vinyl LP of the early 1980s hardcore band the Fix. The purchase of the 12" record entitles the buyer to download the album in MP3 format using a unique password included in the record. The recent revival of vinyl and record stores may benefit the punk scene. Record stores were always an important conduit for punk culture.

Independent punk record labels continue, though it is unclear what to think about DIY punk on Amazon. The Exploited's first album *Punks Not Dead* (1981) can be purchased on Amazon as a CD, MP3 download, or streamed free with Amazon Music Unlimited. The *Minor Threat Complete Discography* CD is available through Amazon and the first two *Seven Inches* (with an "Explicit" warning) can be purchased as MP3 files or streamed free with Amazon Music Unlimited. There is a surprising amount of Jello Biafra on Amazon. The compilation album *Not So Quiet on the Western Front* (Alternative Tentacles, 1982) can also be purchased or streamed on Amazon.

Some punks find that Bandcamp is a more ethical platform which treats bands and small labels better and provides an interface that makes it easier to find local bands (Audette-Longo, 2017). A critic at *The New York Times* writes: "Bandcamp has become something like punk's central agency. It's the right medium for it; ergo, nearly all of it is there. I'm

not sure there's ever been anything like that in the past for punk culture, which is low-budget, international and inherently suspicious of commercialism" (Ratliff, 2106). Some punk labels report that half of their sales now come from digital sales or streaming. Both Maximumrocknroll zine and the anarcho-punks at Profane Existence are on Bandcamp. On the other hand, Kent McClard of Ebullition Records, a well-known label and distributor in the USA, refuses to have anything to do with digital sales or streaming, seeing them as too corporate. (Some of the bands make arrangements on their own but the label does not make anything from this.) Studies of Bandcamp describe it almost entirely in terms of marketing, whereas punk zines, punk houses and local shows were always spaces for lively discussion. The Bandcamp Reddit page is mostly contributors promoting their music. There is none of the lively discussion that you find in the columns and letters pages of a zine such as Maximumrocknroll. An article about The Ex on Bandcamp barely mentions that it is an anarcho-punk band. The piece is written in the idiom of music magazines ("this week's essential releases") establishing the band's "cool" roots in early punk, changes in band personnel, developments in its musical style, and listing the band's best-selling records (Willems, 2018).

The important conclusion is that punk is not about a style, nor a technology. After its initial cultural bombshell in 1970s, the punk scene developed into an autonomous cultural field. It developed its own meanings, sounds, and rewards for successful participants. These were not mainly monetary. They involved the respect and the sense of being in good-standing among people in the scene, whom one valued. Punk involved an investment, personal and emotional, in an autonomous field whose meanings could always be contested, but whose value seemed beyond counting.

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