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A brief history of punk

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The Sex Pistols: Followed style of New York punks

By **Ian Youngs**

BBC News Online entertainment staff



The death of former Clash frontman Joe Strummer has reminded us how original and influential the first punk rockers were.

The original punk music scene ran like the careers of many of its stars - burning brightly for a short time before crashing to the ground in flames.

But its importance can be judged by the echoes heard in music ever since, as well as the legends and cliches that have grown up around it.

One cliché is that punk was less a musical genre than a state of mind - but that was true in the days before it became fashionable to become a punk fashion victim.

Although its origins can be traced back as far as you like, with every generation having its own youth sub-culture that shocks the established order (some say Elvis was a punk), punk as we know it began in the early 1970s.

Bands like The Fugs, the MC5 and The Stooges all sowed the seeds, but the first group to take on the recognisable attitude and style were the New



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Paul Du Noyer, Music journalist and author

"Easily the most articulate of all that punk generation"

Pat Gilbert, editor of Mojo magazine

"One of the most important bands in musical history"

Joe Strummer
1952-2002

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York Dolls and Television, who both emerged from a small New York scene.

The New York Dolls, befriended by future Sex Pistols manager Malcolm McLaren, were outrageously dressed, and delighted in disgusting people by doing Nazi salutes and vomiting in front of photographers.

McLaren saw something special in Television too - especially their bassist, Richard Hell, whose spiky hair and ripped clothes were taken back to London by McLaren and have been seen on thousands of punks since.

On both sides of the Atlantic, more and more young disillusioned white teenagers were looking for an escape from the boredom and constraints of society, with unemployment, racial tensions and social upheaval providing fuel for their fires.

Punk remained an underground scene until 1976, when two bands - The Ramones and The Sex Pistols - made the outside world take notice.

Not only did they become hugely successful in their own right, but they also provided an inspiration to people who realised you did not need to be able to play an instrument to be in a band - you just had to have something to say.



The punk style was copied around the world

Legend has it that after seeing the Sex Pistols support one of his old bands, Joe Strummer was moved to form The Clash.

Another story says The Clash's Paul Simonon and Mick Jones told The Ramones that their London gig gave the pair the courage to be in a band.

Whatever the truth, the Sex Pistols went on to cause tabloid outrage - using some tricks McLaren had picked up in New York - and the punk explosion disgusted as many as it inspired.

Groups like The Clash, The Buzzcocks, Joy Division and The Stranglers followed, and the punk influence has carried through to current rock bands

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like Green Day, Rancid and Blink 182.

And 25 years after the original scene developed, a new US rock sound, using elements of the New York punk scene, has thrown up bands like The Strokes and the Yeah Yeah Yeahs - although cynics say their retro looks are more important to them than their originality.



Rancid are among the new wave of punk bands

As for the original punks, they are now middle-aged and left largely irrelevant by the passage of time.

The ranting and raving of people like John Lydon - formerly Johnny Rotten - which made him a figurehead for a disillusioned generation in the 1970s, has now come to make him a figure of cartoon-style ridicule.

But the reaction to Joe Strummer's death has proved that we do see the old punks as pioneers who kicked down musical and social barriers, making anything seem possible.

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