



Punk spoke up for angry kids. Why won't today's bands follow suit?

Krissi Murison

guardian.co.uk, Sunday 14 August 2011 22.05 BST

[A larger](#) | [smaller](#)



'We're hoping to educate any kid who comes to listen to us' ... the Clash in 1977. Photograph: Ray Stevenson/Rex Features

Last Tuesday, copies of the latest NME magazine hit the shelves of any central London newsagent that was still open for trade following the previous night's unrest. On the cover was a 1976 image of the Clash, to mark the 35th anniversary of punk's explosion in London. Inside was a reprint of Barry Miles's first interview with the band: "They talk of the boredom of living in the council high-rise blocks, of living at home with parents, of dole queues, of the mind-destroying jobs offered to unemployed school-leavers. They talk [...] of how there is nothing to do."

Later, as London smouldered, the irony of the Clash – a band forever associated with riot and protest – being on the cover of NME again was all too obvious. But while it would have been satisfying to draw parallels between the Clash's revolutionary tub-thumping of 1976 and the incendiary events of the week, the reality wasn't so neat. The basic facts of being young, broke and bored in London and beyond might not have changed much since those days, but everything else Mick Jones and Joe Strummer described has.

"I think people ought to know that we're anti-fascist, we're anti-violence, we're anti-racist and we're proactive. We're against ignorance," said Strummer, when asked how his band was offering a solution to their boredom and frustration. "I don't have to get drunk every night and go around kicking people and smashing up phone boxes [...] We're dealing with subjects we really believe to matter. We're hoping to educate any kid who comes to listen to us."

If that was punk's manifesto in 1976, then here's the closest thing music has to one in 2011: "Kill People. Burn Shit. Fuck School." It's a song by Odd Future Wolf Gang Kill Them All, whose apathetic anarchy is perhaps a more fitting, if unwitting, soundtrack to the riots of last week than the Clash's. Odd Future, for the uninitiated, are a controversial LA rap collective led by Tyler the Creator – a middle-class drop-out and

pop culture anti-hero beloved of hipsters and indie-rock fans. I'm not dissing Tyler: unlike Strummer, he didn't ask to be a mouthpiece for a generation. And like the kids torching and looting family-run shops in their own neighbourhoods, he's the first to concede he doesn't have anything much to say. He just likes causing a disturbance, however pointless.

This, though, is apparently what rebellion sounds like in 2011: dead-eyed, mob-like and opportunistic. There's certainly no one else currently trying to articulate anything more meaningful in pop culture. Time was when rock stars, and not just the Clash, used to have lots to say about lots of very big, important things. Or so I'm told. The truth is that in my eight years as a music journalist, I've never found one.

Let's look at some of the likely candidates. Alex Turner: lyricist of a generation, everyday commentator extraordinaire, brilliant on chip shops, less so on council spending cuts. Here's what he told me last time I interviewed him, at the time of the student protests and trade-union marches: "Even though [some of our songs] are about 'what's going on' in, like, one part of town, it's not about 'WHAT'S GOING ON', is it? It's not like I'm showing an opinion on what's going on. I just don't know what that would achieve." Or Eton-educated folkie and former Black Bloc anarchist Frank Turner: "I'm uncomfortable being called 'political'. I don't want to be divisive."

Meanwhile, Dizzee Rascal long ago discovered that it was far more commercially rewarding to write about his bonkers showbiz lifestyle than the east London estate he grew up on, and chronicled so extraordinarily on his early albums.

None of these artists are stupid. In fact, they're among the most intelligent we've got. And I don't really believe they haven't got opinions about the big, important things, as well. But I do think there is a stigma attached to caring about those things enough to be outspoken, challenging and – yes – occasionally wrong about them. Just listen to the guffaws the once-credible MIA now incites after one-too-many politically misguided Twitter controversies ("I'm going down to the riot," she tweeted last week, "to hand out tea and Mars bars"). So now no one says anything at all. And then we all wake up and wonder where the art of genuine protest has gone.

Of course, we didn't need last week's riots to tell us there is a huge gulf between what musicians today are writing about and the realities of the streets. But they did throw the problem into even sharper relief than ever. The Clash may have spoken for a highly politicised UK in 1976, but they don't have anything to say to the disenfranchised and desensitised youth of 2011. Unless someone is prepared to stand up in their place and start screaming soon, this generation is in danger of losing its voice altogether – or, worse still, ending up with Tyler the Creator and his blank nihilism as its legacy. And not even he wants that.

Krissi Murison is editor of NME