

By Charley Walters

**M**OST OF US ARE familiar with the antics that surround British punk rock, or New Wave: concert riots, bizarre clothing, outraged government officials and even assaults on musicians by an angered public. A fascinating and somewhat frightening social development, no question. But what does the music sound like? Rarely is this explored, and it's easy to see why. By intention, the music is overly simplistic and rudimentary. It's also not very good.

Punk rock's roots stretch back to such American groups as the Velvet Underground and the New York Dolls. (The New Wave is hardly new. What is new is the stance, the publicity and the number of performers. Its popularity remains limited.) Guitar/

*Imports*

**Punk:  
pretty  
vacant  
music**



bass/drums/vocals is the most common lineup. Usually the songs are short, the tempos fast, the chord changes few and basic, the melodies obscure, the tonal variations slight and the volume high. The players aim for the most power from the fewest, simplest sources. The result is just more heavy-metal sludge with an extra shot of adrenalin. Minimalism can indeed work (the Ramones are a good example), but not at the hands of most current British groups.

The group that has garnered the most publicity is also one of the genre's best: the Sex Pistols. But unfortunately, "Pretty Vacant"/"No Fun" (Virgin VS 184), their newest single (a debut album is on the way), is a disappointment, coming off the angry excitement and comparative polish of "God Save the Queen." (It's relevant to note that this is their first nonpolitical release.) Produced by the capable and experienced Chris Thomas, "Pretty Vacant" nonetheless falls into the same pit that has swallowed so much promising Seventies music: bottom-heavy engineering that overboosts the bass tones at the expense of the guitars and vocals. What comes out is a clumsy, leaden blur. The B side—a remake of a Stooges song—is too long, too repetitious and lazily timed, amply displaying this ilk's worst indulgences.

Still, an occasional flash does appear, such as a recent single by the Radiators from Space. To be sure, nothing new lurks here, but



*Prime purveyors of punk (from top): the Sex Pistols, Joe Strummer of the Clash and the Damned's Dave Vanian*

both "Television Screen" and "Love Detective" (Chiswick S10) outdistance most of the competition. The drumming is a powerful slice of rock & roll, the bass is neat and modest and the guitars don't get carried away in their distorted frenzy. Maybe best of all, the engineering concentrates on the higher frequencies, giving the songs real bite. Were the Sex Pis-

tols recorded like this, we might really hear something.

In contrast to other recent "underground" rock movements, British punk relies heavily on 45s, although few rise high on British charts. Gradually, albums are now appearing, some of which (Eddie and the Hot Rods, the Jam) have already been released in the United States. But the first album by a British punk-rock group, released nearly a year ago, was the Damned's *Damned Damned Damned* (Stiff SEEZ 1), an uninspiring assortment of sloppy guitars and overblown vocals. The rhythm section is creditable but constantly overwhelmed, few riffs are memorable and Nick Lowe's production is too muddy. The intent of the Damned's music is clear, but the realization falls far short.

The Clash is something different. Better than any other punk-rock album, *The Clash* (CBS 82000) convincingly vents its outrage and frustration (song titles: "White Riot," "London's Burning" and a reggae borrowing called "Police and Thieves") and backs them with simple, careful, driving rock. The Clash knows that volume doesn't always mean power and that melody and subtlety don't necessarily weaken their stance. Much of the guitar work ignores the rasp of distortion, resulting in a richer, more varied sound, something most punk groups stubbornly resist.

Rock & roll is many things, musical and otherwise, and punk rock does retain much of the traditional spirit and motivation. But that's not enough and never has been. The rockers who have wielded the greatest cultural influence—Presley, Berry, the Beatles, Dylan

and many, many more—did so primarily through music that could stand the test of time. Without such music, few would have paid any attention in the first place. Herein lies punk rock's likely fate. Musically, it offers far too little, even considering the possibilities of players like the Clash. As interesting as the idea behind people like the Sex Pistols' Johnny Rotten is, the music is ultimately disappointing. And that's the most important part of all this, as simple as it may sound. Rock & roll will surely stand; today's punk rock probably won't.

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