

# the book case

## They Just Won't Let You Be

By Bill Kauffman

**Rebel Rock: The Politics of Popular Music, by John Street**  
New York: Blackwell, 247 pages, \$8.95

A recent issue of a small punk magazine, *Maximum Rock and Roll*, carried this dispatch from Czechoslovakia: "There are a lot of problems with the VB (General Security Police), who systematically control the punks, prohibiting concerts, and acting brutal (knocking them down, tearing off earrings, shaving hair). Punks are driven to the police station, beaten, photographed, card-indexed, and sometimes even sent to psychiatric hospitals. Czech punks are very pessimistic, and have nothing to hope for."

Meanwhile, back in the free world, Los Angeles cops clad in riot gear conduct weekly raids on city rock clubs, shutting down music venues for violations of liquor, dance, fire, and building ordinances, all the legal minutiae of neighborly Big Brotherism. The L.A. jackboots crawl from the same noxious pond that spawned the record-burners of the '50s, the FBI tormentors of John Lennon in the '60s, and the well-connected nags of the Reagan-era Parents Music Resource Center.

What is it about rock and roll that so agitates state authorities? Why is it feared and sometimes suppressed by governments that cheerfully subsidize classical, folk, and traditional music? Rock, after all, is simply a hybrid of white country and black rhythm and blues; most lyrics are variations on boy-meets-girl, boy-loses-girl, boy-wonders-why-he-never-meets-girl themes. The music, qua music, is not politically prescriptive. What's the fuss?

Enter John Street, a British intellectual, government professor, and socialist follower of the Labour Party. Strike one, strike two, strike three. Yet he has written an engagingly iconoclastic meditation on the politics of rock music, particularly punk, that is both free of ideological cant



*The Clash of music and politics*

and contemptuous of the Marxist (and conservative?) view of popular music as a post-religious opiate for the masses.

Rock politics, Street notes, may seem oxymoronic to readers accustomed to hearing Phil Collins provide background music for pouty models drinking Michelob in front of wind machines. There are a few explicitly political rock musicians, notably the members of Red Wedge, the British association created by guitar hero Billy Bragg to bring the Labour Party's message to kids.

And a number of regional American bands—Los Lobos, The Blasters, Rainmakers, Long Ryders—are interpreting the American experience through a populist, working-class prism, reformulating the American visions of John Steinbeck, Woody Guthrie, and William Jennings Bryan. Not your standard mawkish love songs—but a clear and present danger to the ruling class?

No, rock's threat to the powers that be, avers Street, is that it has succeeded in conflating *personal* and *political* rebellion. A subject as innocent as young love may be subversive in the extreme if treated in an unconventional idiom. Elvis Presley, the towering figure in rock history, hadn't a political bone in his body, yet the implicit biracialism of his "nigger music" got him scorned and censored.

Street offers a charming contemporary example from Poland of how the personal shades into the political, courtesy the U.K.'s *New Musical Express*: "[The Polish band Republika's] live favourite used to be 'I Want to Be Myself,' because a slight phonetic change converted the chorus into 'I want to beat a zomo'—slang for cop. The group would sing the original and the audience the modification. And though the authorities could hardly condone massed ranks chanting 'I want to beat a zomo,' it would be equally ludicrous for them to ban a group asserting 'I want to be myself.'"

The stuff of rock lyrics changed little in its first decade—teen angst, boy-girl problems, fast cars. Even the British Invasion bands of 1964-65, which revived the sleepy, vanilla American scene, wanted, first and last, a bit of sex. Not until the Vietnam war, and the attendant efflorescence of the counterculture, did rock lyrics bother with politics.

Flower power was the "archetypal anti-authoritarian, libertarian pop movement," writes Street with refreshing candor. Curiously, the antiwar rage on America's streets was transmuted into vague exhortations to universal love ("Come on people now/ Smile on your brother/Everybody get together/Try to love one another right now"). Bands like the Grateful Dead and Jefferson Airplane preached—and lived—hippie anarchism, the blissful, slightly zonked embodiments of the Do Your Own Thing ethos. Flower power was in many ways a quietist response to state oppression, expressed in the Dead's weary lament, "They just won't let you be."

Coincident with war's end and the dissolution of the counterculture, rock became listless and dull, trifurcated into the solipsistic whining of James Taylorish folk, the

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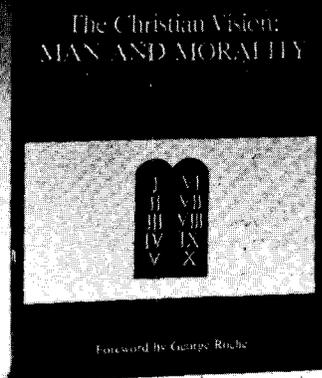
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macho posturing of heavy-metal bands, and the bloodless technological bombast of self-styled progressive rockers like Yes and Emerson, Lake, and Palmer. Interesting figures were oases (Bruce Springsteen, Lou Reed) or cult idols (Alex Chilton, John Cale) unknown beyond urban bohemia.

**T**hen came punk. Alternately an expression of antinomian anarchism (I make my own rules), nihilism born of a lack of opportunity for advancement (There is no future), and radical democracy (Anyone can play music—there are no stars), punk gave a bloated, lethargic rock world the swift kick in the ass it desperately needed. Punks rejected elaborate instrumentation in favor of three-chord savagery and preferred blunt, defiant lyrics over the regnant whimpering and florid metaphor.

In his lengthy discussion of punk, Street makes an oft-unappreciated point: the politics of punk shared the same liberal individualist roots as earlier rock. The first British punks of the mid- to late '70s coupled chaotic musical disarrangements with ban-shee-howls lacerating the cops, the welfare state (particularly the toniest welfare mothers in the world, the Royal Family), and the grey oppressiveness of life under the reigning, pre-Thatcher Labour government. Sex Pistols singer Johnny Rotten (né Lydon), punk's first celebrity, offered his calling card in a guttural wail, "I... wanna be... Anarchy!"

Stateside, early punk politics were closer to the individualist strain in conservatism than to the New Deal. There were anti-state songs (Patti Smith's "Citizenship"), anticommunist songs (the Germs's "Communist Eyes"), even antitax songs (Circle Jerks's "Red Tape"). The zeitgeist was encapsulated in the punk mini-creed "Do It Yourself," an Emersonian declaration of self-sufficiency and independence. The Ramones, the founding fathers of American punk, even endorsed Ronald Reagan in 1980.

But punks read newspapers and watch the news, too, and as conservatives discovered the joys of Big Government, American punk and avant-garde turned solidly anti-Reagan. (The Ramones recently recanted with "Bonzo Goes to Bitburg.") Yet the lyrical individualism persists. Rock generally, and the vestiges of a spent punk movement in particular, remain redoubts of healthy anti-authority sentiment. Two exhibits from a well-stocked pool:

The Dead Kennedys song "Holiday in

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Cambodia" invites a liberal college student on a Khmer Rouge vacation:

You'll work harder with a gun in your back  
 For a bowl of rice a day  
 Slave for soldiers till you starve  
 Then your head is skewered on a stake  
 Now you can go where people are  
 One Now you can go where they get things done  
 It's a holiday in Cambodia  
 Where you'll do what you're told

Committed, eh? And England's The Clash, usually advertised as the most important leftist band in rock's brief history, requests:

If you see an Afghan rebel  
 That the Moscow bullets missed  
 Ask him what he thinks  
 Of voting Communist  
 Ask the Dalai Lama  
 In the hills of Tibet  
 How many monks  
 Did the Chinese get?

I offer even these two samples with misgivings. Politicizing every aspect of our lives, including music, is an enervating, discouraging practice. Street's expansive definition of politics—"how we should act and think"—mars his book (and socialist thought, for that matter). Rock is political because the state defines itself in opposition to boundless self-expression; piling ideological baggage onto the music can be cumbersome and dulling.

At its best, rock affirms the dignity of individual experience and the value of personal freedom. A superb Polish hard-core punk band, Dezerter, has sung (in rough translation): "There won't be necessary repressions and power/To do us in by beating with sticks/Because inside many of us there is a militiaman." That rock and roll invites the militiaman to dance is its most subversive, and salutary, political act.

*Assistant Editor Bill Kauffman was a member of the late '70s punk band The Mannicans, which had neat posters and not much else.*

## The Taste for Freedom

By Rick Vernier

**Liberty in America: Liberty and Power, 1600-1760**  
 By Oscar and Lillian Handlin, New York: Harper & Row, 280 pages, \$16.95

"Abstract liberty," said 18th-century British philosopher Edmund Burke, "like other mere abstractions, is not to be found." Liberty in America, Oscar and Lillian Handlin argue in *Liberty and Power, 1600-1760*, is not a matter of abstractions but the product of a distinctive historical process. American freedoms and our conception of individual rights are a historical novelty that we "stumbled into"; our taste for freedom is a historical accident.

The story the Handlins tell has long been a mainstay of American historians. There is little here that will be really new, either in argument or analysis, to those familiar with American history.

The story turns on the peculiar circumstances made possible by the openness and space of the New World confounding the forms and restrictions of the Old World. Freedom in its Old World context, say the Handlins, was freedom from others' raw exercise of power. As such, it depended on power and privilege to secure that free-

dom. Since power was so dependent upon strength of numbers, the individual's membership in some social group was the only means of securing a realm of freedom. Thus, the Old World order was one of status, position, hierarchy, and rules.

Seventeenth-century efforts to recreate that world in America were continually frustrated by the corrosive effects of a wide-open land. Settlers could be tempted to "turn wild," to move away from the community and its discipline, or to set up new communities more in accord with their peculiar notions of "the common good."

The efforts of would-be feudal barons to duplicate the vast estates and wealth that had been carved out of other colonial possessions like Ireland, and the dreams of English soldiers of fortune to duplicate the looting of the conquistadors, were defeated by North America's lack of population and treasure. The absence of easily extractable sources of wealth meant that America would be spared the development

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