The Influence Of Punk Subculture On Fashion Industry

Throughout this essay I am going to be discussing the direct link between how music becomes an influence for fashion and especially influences those in the subculture of punk. I will discuss how both the lyrics, style and clothing of musical icons provided a base for those who followed in their direction and led to a bigger movement due to the uprising of the punks. The 70's saw a rise in subcultures that stepped away from the norm of fashion and took on their own identity and personal look as a reaction to society. Each subculture formed their own look but one that really caused a stir in the UK were the punks. Associating a fashion trend with the 70's, the first thing that typically comes to mind is a hippie, free spirited look where people radiated the message of peace and love. However, looking at the punk culture you would see the complete opposite to this. A message of anarchy, disturbance and anger was something the punks were renowned for portraying. With a harsh appearance that was a stark contrast to the hippie trend, punks appeared in leather, bondage and anything they could get their hands on to create a D.I.Y. look. They favoured rips and tears over pristine new garments.

The punk subculture rose with the influence of singers and performers like the Sex Pistols who sang about what made the UK wrong and riled up those who were influenced by them. It was all about anarchy, standing up for what they believed and causing a commotion. Their strong appearance and even stronger beliefs meant people feared these punks and didn't understand why they would want to rebel against society.

In the 70's, people were tired of the peace and love movement and therefore contrasted this with a backlash, they wanted to show they wouldn't conform to those standards expected by those in charge and wanted to show individualism. Punk may be associated with simply a look, but it was much more than that, punk came with a lifestyle and a view on life. 'Punk created another world, parallel to the 'norm' of the cities it inhabited, where skinny youths flaunted the violent secrets of sado-masochism in bondage suits and unravelling string jumpers, and swaggered with cocky delight at the outrage they inevitably provoked.' (Rebecca Arnold 2001 : 47). It was a movement that wanted to take a stand for their beliefs even if they did have to do this in a way that caused shock to those not expecting it. Protests, boycotts and vandalism was a way in which punks would show what they stood for, it was a rebel against anti-authoritarianism. It was 'Anarchy in the UK'. 'Punk did not just signify a contemptuous disrespect for social hypocrisy; it also reflected the sense of discontent of a generation which wanted clothing to provide a costume for their angry lives, not an unreal fantasy of pleasure' (Rebecca Arnold 2001 : 24) In the Sex Pistols song 'Anarchy in the UK' the band sing about wanting to be an anarchy and 'no dogsbody' meaning they don't want to feel the need to be obedient to the government and society anymore. It's a statement that punks followed and were influenced heavily by. What the Sex Pistols sang about, the punk movement agreed with and followed. There was a direct link between their beliefs and the words sung, the Sex Pistols became a public and well-known voice for the statements. (Image 2)

It wasn't about art and crafts for punk fashion, but it was about D.I.Y., there was no need to look pristine and neat when you're rioting and trying to cause commotion and controversy. There was a need to shock people, so they did this by creating a look that people weren't used to. Feathered, mohawks or skinhead looks favoured that of both male and females. They gave

themselves facial piercings with not only normal piercings but also created larger holes with safety pins that they then could hang chains off to create even harsher looks. punk clothing could be purchased from a range of establishments: leather jackets and trousers from Lewis Leathers, a motorbike-clothing retailer; Doctor Martens and army fatigues from army surplus chains. Catering specifically for punks were shops such as Promotaprint that sold mohair jumpers and PVC trousers and T-shirts, mostly made-up by the owner, inspired by what punks were wearing. ‘ (Frank Cartledge 1999 : 146)

The clothing they wore was ripped, even shredded, and often was layered with denim or leather jackets and belted waists. They wore clumpy worker style boots, often Doc Martens. Doc Martens are associated with being heavy duty shoes, they’re made to last because of their thick sole and hard leather. They are known as ‘stomper’ style boots which in term stomper would be associated with anger or annoyance, stomping away after being told something you disagree with. Even without directly doing anything, the clothing punks wore stood for their anger and could portray their feelings through anything as simple as a boot. Anything they could gather together that would cause them to have a strong stand off-ish look was used in their appearance, even as far as razor blades and bicycle chains. There was a link between how the punks revolted against society in a riot of anti-patriotic and how this resulted in their look being so strong, to stand out in society. They saw themselves as outcasts, but this wasn’t an insult to them as they didn’t want to conform to society. To them it was more important to stand out as that was how they wanted to be, they believed that by standing out it would in time get their messages across. ‘The punks wore clothes which were the sartorial equivalent of swear words, and they swore as they dressed –with calculated effect, lacing obscenities into record notes and publicity releases, interview and love songs. Clothed in chaos, they produced noise in the calmly orchestrated crisis of everyday life in the late 1970s’ (Simon Frith 1990 : 47)

With this movement, Vivienne Westwood became an iconic figure as she was one designer who supported the movement of the punks but not only that, she was a designer who embodied the punks by creating clothing to their style. Despite only coming to name in the 70’s, Westwood did not hold back on her first collection as she took inspiration by bikers and prostitution. She used punk as an inspiration due to the shock value it held, she wanted her collections to resemble the same shock value. In a documentary about Vivienne, the narrator states ‘they sold clothing designed to shock traditional sensibilities. Fetish and bondage gear, and slashed and deconstructed clothing all became signifiers of a countercultural revolution captured in the angry energy of punk music’ (Narrator 2008). Westwood continued to be a controversial figure in fashion, she faced prosecution due to t-shirts she created that had provocative messages written on them however, instead of letting these issues get to her she would rebrand her shop creating a new name. The shop became a unique shopping experience unlike others around. It’s no coincidence that the style of the clothing created by Westwood was full of buckles, paper clips, chains and studs just like the punk movement as Westwood’s partner was Malcolm Mclaren, the manager of the Sex Pistols. The two worked closely together throughout this time and were both known as huge influences in the movement. ’I don’t think Punk would have happened without Malcolm and Vivienne to be honest. Something would have happened, and it might even have been called Punk but it wouldn’t have looked the way it did. And the look of it was so important.‘ (Chrissie Hynde 2013) (image 4).

The two renamed the shop in 1976 to Seditionaries: Clothes for Heroes where the clothing was renowned for being controversial and graphic with ripped tees showcasing nipples, the swastika and Sex Pistols famous God Save the Queen cover. Worn by the Sex Pistols themselves, these

pieces were seen in the public eye and caused a lot of controversy, especially having the Queens face vandalised by safety pins through her lip. It is usually an offence to deface the Queen due to her being such an important figure which is why these pieces caused such a shock, and especially to be seen on people in the public eye as it meant the images were broadcasted worldwide. The fact punks would wear clothing that defaced the Queen gave out the message that they didn't care if their acts were criminal so long as it told the message of how they were anti-patriotic and were against there being such an importance of higher figures in the government. It also meant that they were being talked about, even if it was for their wronging's, which meant the movement was being publicised and therefore giving them credit and a platform in which they could use to discuss the issues. The clothing in Seditionaries also featured bondage, big zips and buckles and belts that brought the punk look through to a more luxurious price range which was unusual as punks were known for doing things D.I.Y which meant the clothing they wore would usually be cheap and accessible to anyone. (image 3 sex pistols top)

Through a reign in the charts, the Sex Pistols caused a commotion when their single 'God Save the Queen', hit number one the same weekend that the Royal Jubilee took place in 1977. Music stations and TV channels across the UK refused airtime for the song and it was banned from being played in public settings due to the shocking nature of the song. Stations refusing to play the song only angered punks as they had caused the song to chart yet were being denied the access to listen to it. It was a case that would never usually happen yet because of the song discussing matters related to the Queen, it was given special treatment. The song discusses how there is no future for the UK and that England is simply dreaming of what they want and not the realistic examples for the world. 'What the pistols conducted was a negation of pop undertaken with the realisation that, if such a detournement of a mass form was to be effective, it had in its own turn to be a mass and had to generate a mass impact' (Robert Garnett : 21). The phrase 'no future' from the song became such a mass impact that it was a term associated with punks which they used themselves to show their beliefs and angers with what the world had become, but it was also one used by people viewing the punks as negative and giving an example that if they continued in their boisterous ways they would have no future. However, what these people didn't understand was that the punks weren't negative through choice, they were angry at the way the UK was being ran and they believed that if they rioted and showed an uprising against society then perhaps it would eventually cause a change.

Due to the anger the punks had, they subverted the norms of fashion to create their own anti-establishment personality. The harsh appearance was used as a front against society, exacerbated by using chains, studs and bondage. The harsh metals and leathers are only strengthened by the dark makeup and large facial piercings that portray an angsty appearance. (Image 3) Punks believed that through their actions of rioting and publishing of their views, they may be listened to instead of simply being judged, they wanted to get their message across. In a journal article Ruth Adams said, 'God Save the Queen' likewise, for all its apparent negativity, pointed a way towards a new, more positive, reframing of Englishness—an England, perhaps, of citizens rather than subjects.' (R. Adams 2008 : 474). The song, despite in words perhaps portraying negativity, was overall trying to convey a message of want and need for a change in the UK, a way in which there wouldn't be so much need for people to try and fit the system as instead the system would accept everyone.

It wasn't just the Sex Pistols that influenced the punk movement, during the same time there was many emerging artists that all influenced and took part in this movement. The UK music

scene was full of artists such as The Damned, Ultravox, The Clash and Eddie and the Hot Rods who all were of the punk rock genre. There was a huge serge of musical influences following the punk route which meant there was a huge serge in supporters of this music. Punk music is known to be angsty music that causes an emotion and that emotion would be anger and rage. It was no wonder that those people who were fans of the music had such an anger within them, it was only natural if listening to that type of music then often you would become heavily influenced by the emotions and lyrics they sang about. If you're influenced by their words and lyrics, it isn't unusual to want to also dress like the people you admire.

People saw punks to be just a bad group of youths that wanted to cause nothing but trouble. They believed that their opinions and beliefs were simply a way of young gangs of people rebelling without being as punishable as they placed their opinions on the lyrics of those bands they were influenced by. A punk legend, John Lydon known as Johnny Rotten then from the Sex Pistols, looked back at his youth stating 'In them early days, I was half-expected to be rude and blatantly stupid, which are two things I don't think I am. If I feel like I'm being battered down or badgered, well then I'll let rip in any way I feel necessary' (Lydon 2019). There was a judgement made before people even knew what these punks were about, there was a judgement made simply because these youths dressed and presented themselves different to that typically seen in the 70's.

To conclude, music personas in the 70's such as The Clash and the Sex Pistols were major influences, not just for their music being widely appreciated by fans but also because they took part in shaping fashion and forming a subculture. Punks existed as something minor perhaps beforehand however they never had their own platform, they were constricted to being smaller groups of people who believed in something but weren't entirely sure what this was or how they could voice it. When artists such as the Sex Pistols began singing about these things and voicing their own opinions against the UK ruling and government, that was when people found their voice and guidance from these acts. Having singers and bands that they could follow for inspiration meant that punks began to come together as a whole and find each other amongst crowds. The music was the beginning but what followed was a movement. Punks found their identity, the dark gloomy colours worn by them with the harsh fabrics such as leathers and metal and the rips and distressing throughout their fashion gave punks the strong front they'd been looking for. Witnessing their favourite acts wearing similar clothing or even clothing that was more shocking and rebellious gave these punks the confidence to dress how they wanted and let them do this their own way. Jackets would be vandalised with stud detailing or even painted with words to stand out, their tops and shirts would be ripped or unbuttoned and worn as layers not just a simple shirt. Their hair was shaved, shortened or coloured to create a shock and their face would be covered in piercings and/or dark makeup that opposed the natural look.

There was an influence with strong words and emotions but there was an even bigger influence in appearance and style. The punks alone would cause a shock but when put together in groups they caused much more than this. They were supported by musicians, artists and designers who all agreed with the stand they took and therefore publicised the look and appearance of these punks. Even now a days, if you support or are a fan of a musician, you find yourself following in their footsteps and being influenced by their clothing. So many people will look to artists as an inspiration for what they're wanting to wear, they may copy a whole look, or they may just copy with a similar style, but overall music has and will always be a direct link with fashion. Music influences your style and fashion sense even when you may not realise this.