

# The Youth Rock and Roll Club Culture of 1970s and 1980s Los Angeles

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## Abstract

Los Angeles rock and roll clubs had a strong influence on youth of the era, revealed by the way these clubs served as focal points for new movements. Although contrasting genres, like punk and heavy metal, defined their music and goals differently, these movements all ultimately shared a need to break away from the established generation of adults ahead of them. By turning to aggressive music, drugs and distinctive anti-authoritarian attitudes, Los Angeles youth were able to vent their social frustrations in clubs that bred separateness.



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## **The Youth Rock and Roll Club Culture of 1970s and 1980s Los Angeles**

The rock and roll industry is relatively new to the realm of music, beginning in its most identifiable foundations only approximately fifty years ago. However, the “age of rock” has shaped the culture and lives of varying generations of youths for the latter half of the twentieth century into the modern day. This vast influence of music on the minds of youth is apparent in many instances, including that of the Los Angeles region during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Rock and Roll’s growth during this time period ushered in a new era of music that was different from its predecessors in a variety of ways, causing stirs within the community similar to the way its forebears had during the 1950s and 1960s. The hundreds of young Los Angeles teenagers who saw their futures filled with dreams of stardom and public recognition through rock reveals this particular case of musical influence. In this changing environment of experimentation in music and the introduction of new subsections of rock, including glam metal and New Wave, young artists began turning to louder chords and explicit lyrics to reveal their underlying frustrations with the community that they lived in. This youth backlash against the traditional lifestyles of the Baby Boomer generation was expressed in a variety of musical forms, most tellingly in punk and heavy metal rock.

The musical styles of punk and heavy metal became infamous for the former’s violent fans and the latter’s emphasis on sex, drugs and fame. By pushing against traditional values in society, adherents to both genres, punk in particular, needed a public forum for expressing their unique views and musical tastes in an environment that accepted their radical behavior. The savior for these rock movements was the many clubs dotting the Sunset Strip and Orange County area, clubs that not only provided a place for performances, but became cultural havens for the disenchanting youth of Southern California. The influence of club playing on Los Angeles youth during the 1980s resulted in a counterculture of drugs, sex, and violence that centered on the hope for musical discovery, Hollywood stardom and resistance against the traditional grain of the conservative adult society. Such separation from preceding generations, specifically the dominant values of the Baby Boomers, led to a new identification for Los Angeles youth that found its expression in the club scene of the 1970s and 1980s.

The concept of club playing in Los Angeles arguably arose with the Whisky a Go Go, a club that originated as a discotheque in 1964. Founded by Elmer Valentine, the club was modeled on a Paris disco club

of the same name in the 1960s, a place where youth congregated in order to dance to the popular disco songs of the time.<sup>1</sup> Instead of playing pre-recorded tracks, Valentine introduced a policy of live entertainment, an act that ushered in the “go-go” age of the late 1960s.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, the concept of headlining acts every weekend allowed up and coming bands, most often rock bands, to perform in public venues that often gained a wide following. The ability to dance in front of an act ushered in a new era of live entertainment on the Sunset Strip, an event that suddenly created a new culture for local youth. A 1967 video of the club shows a performance of a young male band with haircuts reminiscent of the Beatles playing for a crowd of swaying teens and young adults with gyrating go-go girls on pillars to the side.<sup>3</sup> Although the club scene was relatively new in the late 1960s, it had already originated as a haven for young artists and their followings to express their talents in a new venue. Described as the “most important rock club in town,” the Whisky a Go Go was hailed as “an incubation spot” for fledgling rock bands to flock, a focus that evolved into the more aggressive culture of punk and heavy metal.<sup>4</sup>

The year 1977 was a watershed date for the evolution from pre-punk club playing to an aggressive, anti-authoritarian form of protest against mainstream society. The beginning of punk bands, a genre that inevitably brought to its shows a writhing, screaming mass of young fans, changed the environment of live club entertainment so thoroughly that they were often not welcome at traditional venues. The fledgling punk circuit was saved by Brendan Mullen, a journalist from Scotland who moved in 1977 to a ten thousand square foot basement on Hollywood Boulevard.<sup>5</sup> The rented space in Cecil’s Hollywood Center Building “morphed into probably the first illegal club space...since Prohibition,” an environment that soon became populated by “various runaways, musicians, welfare people, artists and other street people from the boulevard.”<sup>6</sup> The goal was a “rehearsal room rental business,” an idea that changed into a haven for punks who had already been ostracized from

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<sup>1</sup> Obituary of Elmer Valentine, *Los Angeles Times*, December 7, 2008, <http://latimes.com> (accessed February 21, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> David Kamp, “Live at the Whisky,” DavidKamp.com, <http://davidkamp.com> (accessed February 21, 2011), originally published in *Vanity Fair*, September 4, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> “Whisky a Go Go (1967),” Youtube.com, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=653hwzWJagE> (accessed February 20, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Robert Hilburn, 1977, quoted in Obituary of Elmer Valentine.

<sup>5</sup> Marc Spitz and Brendan Mullen, *We Got the Neutron Bomb: The Untold Story of L.A. Punk* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001), 123.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

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more mainstream clubs like the Whisky.<sup>7</sup> The impromptu gigs every night, where bands were said to arrive on the doorstep at all hours of the night to play, began the standard of punk clubs that filtered into the genre's other club homes.<sup>8</sup>

The Masque environment reflected the attitudes of its performers, revealed by the graffiti-filled walls sporting phrases such as "Kill a cop" or "Rolling Stones' Dream" with an arrow pointing towards a urinal's drain (the band was not popular amongst punks at the time).<sup>9</sup> According to Mullen, there was a "secret passage" that was located in the back of the room, an area reserved for the "crazy party room," where extra passages and tunnels allowed individuals to disappear from the main concert area. Similarly, the "cow incident," described by Mullen as an event when punks tried to force a cow down the basement's narrow stairs, was forever documented on the wall with the words "the cow wouldn't."<sup>10</sup> The erratic dancing in the club, driven by a combination of amplified guitars and an excess of alcohol, came to symbolize the punk movement as a whole through its physical representation of a breach with tradition.<sup>11</sup> The anarchic state of the club, exemplified by the ability of the movement's adherents to graffiti on every available space and "drink anything from paper bags outside in the parking lot," led to the creation of a new punk culture, one that emphasized freedom of expression through any medium, often offending other members of the local community in the process.<sup>12</sup>

On January 17, 1978, the club was checked for safety by the Los Angeles Fire Marshal, an inspection that inevitably found health and safety violations in the Masque's stuffy basement.<sup>13</sup> Almost immediately, a two week "Save the Masque" benefit was held at the nearby Elks Lodge, an event that showcased the punk rockers in a public venue outside of their underground haven.<sup>14</sup> Mullen's goal with the exhibition was to

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Hal Negra, quoted in Spitz, *We Got the Neutron*, 128.

<sup>9</sup> MTV, "Brendan Mullen Shows the Masque in 1984," Youtube.com, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jADOjncmSYk> (accessed March 6, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Philomena Winstanley quoted in Spitz, *We Got the Neutron*, 129.

<sup>13</sup> "1978 February Save the Masque Benefit," The Go-Go Notes Blog, entry posted March 10, 2008, <http://gogonotes.blogspot.com/2008/03/feb-1978-save-masque-benefit.html> (accessed March 2, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> Editorial, *Los Angeles Times*, February 28, 1978.

portray the L.A. punk scene as a positive force, one that pushed rock music to new limits without extraneous technology.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately for the punk rockers, the Masque was closed in 1979, a move that was not surprising given the club's many safety violations (including lack of exits, bad ventilation and blocked off areas).<sup>16</sup> However, the club's closure was not enough to stem the momentum of the punk movement as it began attracting more followers, allowing it to play in larger venues than illegal basement clubs. In 1978, punk band venues had been expanded to include the Whisky, the Starwood and the Troubadour, all clubs that previous to 1976 had included very little punk and new wave music in their repertoire.<sup>17</sup>

The types of individuals involved in the punk rock music scene were generally young, white males who saw themselves as members of a conservative adult culture that misunderstood their needs as an incoming generation. The focus on songs and lyrics that were centered on youth (for example, The Adolescents, an Orange County punk band, had a song called "Kids of the Black Hole" and an album titled *Brats in Battalions*) reveal that the members of the punk rock circuit were largely stemming from teenagers and young adults. The fact that the original Adolescents formed in their teens reflects the namesake of their band as catering to the interests and needs of Californian teenagers.<sup>18</sup> The rebellious music of punk rockers extended against their views of unfairness and corruption in the world. The slogan of the early punk band, The Dills, described their band as "urine-stained communists" that were "anti-business" and wrote songs titled "I Hate the Rich".<sup>19</sup> Similarly, the focus of The Screamers was not "to play music" but to try "to create an anxious sound."<sup>20</sup> These young bands of teenagers, tired of the traditional institutions and music styles that had been prevalent during the 1970s, focused on resisting the status quo through loud music and uncomfortably truthful lyrics, both of which incited little initial support among the record industry and Sunset Strip music clubs.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ed Kelleher, "This Ain't No Garage Operation..." *Billboard*, January 14, 1978, 64.

<sup>18</sup> "About the Adolescents," The Adolescents Web Page, <http://www.theadolescents.net> (accessed March 2, 2011).

<sup>19</sup> Mick Farren, "The Hollywood Binliner: LA Punk," *NME*, November 19, 1977, <http://www.crawdaddy.com/index.php/2008/03/26/the-hollywood-binliner-la-punk> (accessed March 2, 2011).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

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The next generation of punk live entertainment came in the form of a club owner by the name of Jerry Roach. Known as the “father of punk,” Roach owned an assortment of clubs in the Los Angeles and Orange County areas that were infamous for their brawls and loud music. Having played as a member of the house band at Roach’s Radio City Club, Todd Waltz (bass player for the rock band Merge) described his experiences with Roach both on a business and personal level. Waltz explained how Roach paid his bands well and would then accompany the members to their houses for the after party.<sup>21</sup> This personal attention to the band members, Waltz explains, was flattering coming from a “bigwhig” in the club scene like Roach. The legacy of Roach, however, came largely before the success of his Radio City Club, stemming from the infamy surrounding his legendary Cuckoo’s Nest. Instituted as a club that was strictly for the fledgling bands associated with punk rock, the Cuckoo’s Nest was known as the “birthplace of slam dancing and scene of legendary battles with police.”<sup>22</sup> In fact, events at the Cuckoo’s Nest were immortalized in songs by The Vandals, one of the most successful punk bands of the era. However, after legal troubles with the surrounding community concerning the Cuckoo’s Nest influence on the youth of the area, Roach was forced to close down the club that had incited the beginnings of the punk musical genre.

The importance of the club on the punk rock movement is expressed by TSOL’s Jack Grisham who claimed “It was the only place around here where we could play. A lot of places wouldn’t let guys like us play there.”<sup>23</sup> Even with claims that he “didn’t like punk rock,” Roach realized that the young musicians would bring friends to their shows. Eventually, Roach found himself dealing with hundreds of spectators a night, causing his club to “become the epicenter of the punk rock movement.”<sup>24</sup> This epicenter, however, also became the focus of lawsuits against the owner for riots against police officers and unruly violence with the country music fans from Zubie’s across the street. Finally, the tension escalated until the Cuckoo’s Nest was burned down in an unresolved case of arson. Although it was never fully established how the club burned down, Todd Waltz describes how rumors circulated that Roach had done

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<sup>21</sup> Todd Waltz, interview by author, Kaysville, UT, March 15, 2010.

<sup>22</sup> Tom Berg, “O.C.’s Infamous Punk Club is Subject of New Film,” *The Orange County Register*, February 10, 2009, <http://www.ocpunk.com> (accessed March 1, 2011).

<sup>23</sup> Brianna Bailey, “Good Old Days: Cuckoo’s Nest History Kept in Punk Lyrics,” *Daily Pilot*, January 17, 2009, <http://articles.dailypilot.com> (accessed March 1, 2011).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

it himself to end the controversy surrounding the Cuckoo's Nest.<sup>25</sup> No matter how the burning happened, however, this event ended the Cuckoo's Nest legacy in its purest form as Roach replaced the original club with Radio City, which was not strictly labeled as a punk club.

One of the most characteristic traits concerning these young punk musicians were their blatant attitudes of disrespect against all established forms of authority. The Cuckoo's Nest Club was often the center of these displays of aggressiveness, memorialized through the lyrics of The Vandals in "Urban Struggle" and "The Legend of Pat Brown." These songs tell of incidents of fighting between club members and the infamous assault of a police officer that caused the lawsuits against the club.<sup>26</sup> This trend of violence outside of the clubs was perpetuated on the dance floor, where masses of writhing bodies shoved against each other in circular arrangements around the stage. This new "slam dancing," currently known as the precursor to "moshing," is reflected in a video of a Circle Jerk's concert at a Sunset Strip club in the heyday of the early punk movement.<sup>27</sup> The heavy interaction between the performers and their audience members catapulted the clubs into looking like a "war zone of busted tables, doors and toilets, with water flooding from the restrooms."<sup>28</sup> The wild nature of these club concerts were unlike traditional live entertainment, where members danced, but in a much more reserved fashion.

In an early interview with Henry Rollins of Black Flag, a cult punk band that gained a wide following in Southern California, the attitude of a typical punk rocker comes across heavily. Rollins' blatant disregard for the young interviewer, who is dressed in a flannel shirt that looks quite at odds with his own cut off T-shirt, juxtaposes the two young adults as clearly coming from separate culture groups. The comparison between Rollins and the young interviewer from Michigan are heavily pronounced from their appearances and bantering for the camera. The interviewer's affirmation that he dislikes his hometown is met with ridicule by Rollins who asks if he has no "tribal instincts" for where he came from.<sup>29</sup> Rollins's parting comment that "we don't play for you, we

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<sup>25</sup> Waltz, interview.

<sup>26</sup> The Vandals, "Urban Struggle," *Peace Through Vandalism*, 1982.

<sup>27</sup> Circle Jerks, "Back Up Against the Wall," *Group Sex*, <http://www.youtube.com> (accessed March 20, 2010).

<sup>28</sup> Berg, "O.C.'s Infamous Punk Club."

<sup>29</sup> BPV, "Early Henry Rollins/Black Flag Interview," aired October 19, 1985, <http://www.youtube.com> (accessed March 20, 2010).

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play for us,” echoes the sentiments of all punk bands as they fought against the mold of the traditional perceptions of rock music during the 1980s.

Ultimately, the punk movement during its early years in the 1970s and 1980s was perceived as being extremely limited, finding a small following among its adherent members in the Los Angeles and Orange County areas. A contemporary *NME* article published in 1977 began with a statement that there were only “70 punks in LA,” and most of these bands were not producing “new, creative music”<sup>30</sup>. This fervent belief that the creative energies in California were dying with the advent of punk allowed many music critics and adherents to traditional 1970s rock to worry deeply about the future influence of Southern California on the music industry. However, for a small demographic of teenagers growing up in Los Angeles, punk rock provided them with an escape. Although, like the other outgrowths of rock in the 1970s and 1980s in the area, the movement did invite the use of drugs, drinking, sex, and violence, punk music allowed for forms of creative expression that gave vent to the frustrations with society that the youth recognized. The desire for public recognition of their music as well as their need to symbolically rebel from the failings of their society allowed the punk musicians of Los Angeles to establish a niche that significantly influenced the culture of a discontented youth group in Southern California during the 1970s and 1980s.

The rise of punk rock in Los Angeles came at a time when music was shifting from the lower key melodies of The Beatles to heavier rock bands such as Mötley Crüe. However, the influence of The Beatles on punk rockers allowed these new musicians to take from an earlier era when protest against the political and societal system was an accepted form of entertainment. Unlike the punk scene, the heavy metal rock bands that flooded the Sunset Strip in the early 1980s chose another method of social protest that differed with the blatant dislike of contemporary society expressed by punk bands. Besides musical influences, the heavy metal music scene was inspired by similar circumstances that created an urgent desire to “get signed” for young Californian bands. According to Todd Waltz, a participant in the Los Angeles rock music culture during the 1970s and 1980s, the group that started the rush for record contracts was Mötley Crüe.<sup>31</sup> The success of

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<sup>30</sup> Farren, “The Hollywood Binliner.”

<sup>31</sup> Waltz, interview.

Mötley Crüe's 1981 record label was reflected in the glam band's attitude and their blatant openness concerning their drug and sex lives.

Nikki Sixx, the bassist and member of Mötley Crüe, proudly claimed that the band was "paid in flesh. Our audiences are sluts."<sup>32</sup> The glamorous life of the young men who were catapulted to stardom inspired hundreds of copycat bands in the Los Angeles area, all looking for a piece of the rock star heaven that Mötley Crüenow epitomized for the rest of their musical compatriots. Many heavy metal bands bought into the same concept of drinking, having sex, and doing drugs as modeled by Mötley Crüe. As Nikki Sixx declared in an interview concerning the growth of drugs and drinking in the California rock culture, "Doesn't everybody [do drugs]? The only difference now [that we are signed] is we can afford better drugs."<sup>33</sup> The party "anything goes" lifestyle of being rich and famous appealed to many members of the Los Angeles youth who saw in music a road to easy and pleasurable living. This standard of success as lying on the path to fame was an alternative view of rebelling from tradition, a form that enticed many Los Angeles youth to focus on building a life as a rock and roll star.

The clubs of the Sunset Strip quickly became the focus ground for heavy metal rock bands, primarily due to their ability to catapult amateur bands through public exposure to a professional label. The clubs in question, although supposedly in a higher league than punk clubs like the Masque, at the time were not high class places for traveling tourists. Waltz recounts how the clubs generally smelled "like beer, puke and piss" and the bathrooms were generally down small side hallways that "you had to squeeze sideways to get to."<sup>34</sup> Similarly, Waltz remembers that "duct tape was everywhere...I don't know why, but I always saw lots of duct tape in every club."<sup>35</sup> However, the clubs were "basically big parties," a scene where people were bent on having a good time listening to bands trying to play good music.<sup>36</sup> Prior to Mötley Crüe's signing, a band from Pasadena, led by the two Van Halen brothers and a charismatic front man by the name of David Lee Roth, worked their way through these clubs of the Sunset Strip to become one of the most successful rock bands of the 1970s and 1980s. Although the original lineup of Van Halen started

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<sup>32</sup> Sylvie Simmons, "Interview with Motley Crue," *Creem*, January 1985, [http://www.absolute-motleycrue.com/creem\\_jan\\_85.html](http://www.absolute-motleycrue.com/creem_jan_85.html) (accessed March 2, 2011).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Waltz, interview.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

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playing in backyard high school parties, the band eventually cracked the club circuit by getting booked for Gazzarri's, a club that was known for its attention to young, amateur bands as live entertainment.<sup>37</sup>

Originally started as an Italian restaurant on La Cienega Boulevard in the early 1960s, Gazzarri's, founded by Bill Gazzarri, was eventually turned into a dance club on the Sunset Strip, where the now famous club has jumpstarted careers for acts like Jim Morrison and the Doors.<sup>38</sup> The prominence of Gazzarri on the careers of many Hollywood hopefuls is revealed by the example of Van Halen, whose innovative guitar licks and unique sound allowed the band to usher in the new heavy metal era in Los Angeles. Todd Waltz recalls how Gazzarri's was also the first club that booked his band, Merge, before they became the house band at Radio City.<sup>39</sup> Whereas larger scale clubs, like the Roxy and Whisky a Go Go, typically only booked bands that could draw larger crowds, Gazzarri's was focused predominantly on the strong youth group involved in the club scene. In a 1990 interview, Gazzarri spoke about the many acts that made it big after playing his club, an impressive list that was ended by his exclamation that he "love[d] to see all these people make it big. It is a job well done, I think."<sup>40</sup> The existence of Gazzarri's was a symbol of the rock culture where becoming famous was a task worked at continuously by musicians.

The process of infiltrating the club circuit included surrendering original work for traditional favorites that were popular for fans and club managers. In order to even be allowed through the door, bands like Van Halen played songs from KC and the Sunshine Band along with other favorites, which could then be interspersed with a few more risky originals. Waltz recalled how there was no better feeling in the world than when the crowd got excited about an original song, an indication that the band had started to gain followers and recognition for their own writing and not just musical skill.<sup>41</sup> The ability to become publically recognized for new material caused many Los Angeles youth to pursue a music career

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<sup>37</sup> *The Van Halen Story: The Early Years*, directed by Mark McLaughlin, Passport International Entertainment, 2003, documentary.

<sup>38</sup> Obituary of Bill Gazzarri, *Los Angeles Times*, March 16, 1991, <http://articles.latimes.com> (accessed March 1, 2011).

<sup>39</sup> Waltz, interview.

<sup>40</sup> MTV, "Last Bill Gazzarri Interview," September 6, 1990, <http://liveleak.com> (accessed March 1, 2011).

<sup>41</sup> Waltz, interview.

even more strongly, allowing them to attempt to follow in the footsteps of other bands, like Van Halen and Mötley Crüe, who actually had made it to the big time. The allure of stardom, continuously fed by new stories of small time bands that had worked hard and long enough to finally crack the fame bubble, beckoned teens and young adults who felt that they too were good enough to make it. The success of Van Halen, a band that appeared to epitomize California culture in the late 1970s, was a guide to Sunset Strip success, a path that many youth embraced with fervor.<sup>42</sup>

The late 1970s and early 1980s of Los Angeles saw the creation of a new youth culture that used music as a method of expression and separation from contemporary society. By creating a haven in the clubs of the Sunset Strip and Orange County, members of the movements that would eventually become known as punk and heavy metal rock, embraced their generational differences by emphasizing anti-authoritarian attitudes and pleasurable living. The need to assert separateness from mainstream American culture and the values of an older and seemingly unsympathetic generation fueled the urgency of the club movements, undercurrents of rebellion that manifested in aggressive lyrics, heavy drug and alcohol abuse and a very distinctive identification with Los Angeles clubs. When asked what he was planning on doing after playing in a band, Alex Van Halen answered that there was “nothing after this.”<sup>43</sup> The concept of having no life outside of the band revealed the notion that playing clubs was not simply a hobby for Southern California youth. It was, in a very real sense, a lifestyle. This pursuance of a lifestyle that gave individuality to a youth culture resonated deeply among musicians of the decade, an identification that ultimately found a home among the Los Angeles club environment.

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<sup>42</sup> *Van Halen Story*.

<sup>43</sup> Greg Emerson quoted in *Van Halen Story*.

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