WHY PUNK:
## BACKGROUND COMPARISONS WITH PREVIOUS ART MOVEMENTS; SOME DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS OF PUNK.

"In a mechanical and depersonalized world man has an indefinable sense of loss; a sense that life...has become impoverished, that men are somehow 'deracinate and disinherited,' that society and human nature alike have been atomized, and hence mutilated, above all that men have been separated from whatever might give meaning to their work and their lives." (Charles Taylor as quoted in Man Alone edited by Eric and Mary Josephson, Dell Publishing, New York, 1962, 11).

There is a current feeling in modern society of an alienation so powerful and widespread that it has become commonplace and accepted. Some trace its roots to the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution when the work place became a second home for young and old alike. It does not take a Marxist or a learned sociologist to realize the role of mass production and maximum efficiency in creating alienation. Any rivethead, phone salesperson, or warehouseman could tell us this. The peculiar part is that man has been the one who created, agreed to, and accepted these feelings as normal. Perhaps in the late 20th century we cannot remember a time without such feelings and that we are now merely inheriting the negative structures which cause alienation. Few can argue with the idea that "Western man (and Eastern as well) has become mechanized, routinized, made comfortable as an object; but in

the profound sense displaced and thrown off balance as a subjective creator and power" (ibid, 10).

Human beings act as if they have nothing in common with each other. It is as if we have all been brought here to function for ourselves in a way that does not include others. Many philosophers, sociologists, and theologians have attempted to show the ridiculousness of the
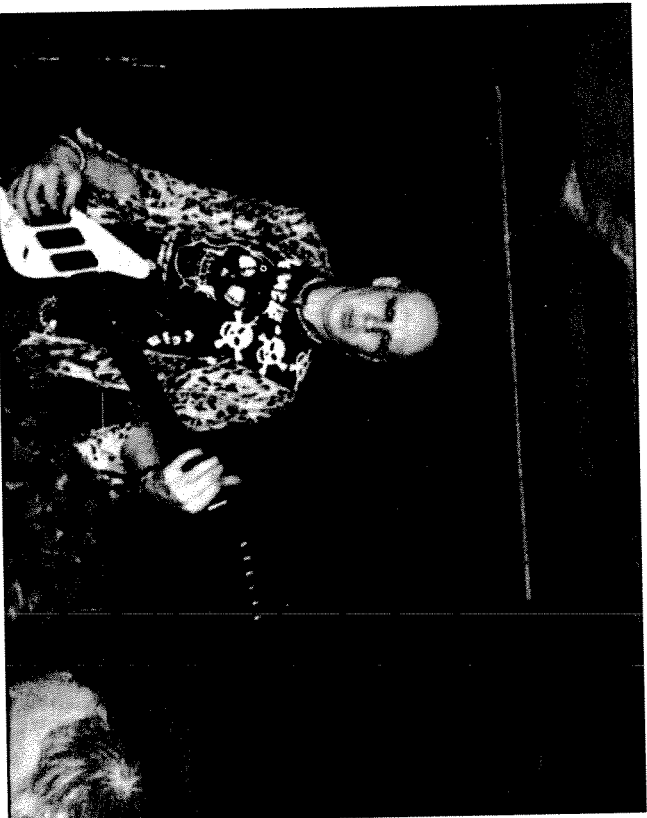
Dead Boys, Enola, Pa, '86

atomistic, alienated lifestyles we have chosen. While the intellectual community has often shown the ability to see the 'big picture' of how things really are, this insight has mostly been kept to themselves in academic publications and confined to institutions of higher education. The elitism and monetary cost of the Ivory Towers insure that the number of people entering who suffer under the oppression the professors are so eager to study will remain few.

Repeatedly, however, a group of the alienated will recognize what is happening to themselves. This realization can be based on an active rejection either of or by the

mainstream society. These groups can either reject the alienation they see before them or can be unwillingly alienated from the mainstream. Blacks, homosexuals, HIV+, the lower classes, etc., all have been brought together by either the realization of hierarchies or forced together by an actively destructive, authority-backed power. It is important to note that the realization of one's own group, or self, being an out-group does not entail the realization of other out-groups suffering under the same treatment. People have too often woken up to see the details of their own suffering while still remaining ignorant to the suffering of others.

Some out-groups greatly desire to be a part of the mainstream while others do not. Nevertheless, "all such out-groups face a certain degree of isolation from society; they are in the community but not of it. As a result, they tend to form more or less distinct 'subcultures' of their own" (ibid, 35). These subcultures appear to have members who are much less alienated from their own being and are often seen trying to reclaim their subjective powers. Members of subcultures, regardless of how oppressed, have often succeeded in finding a solidarity and understanding amongst themselves that is lacking in mainstream society. Members seem to regain a sense of themselves and each other that had been previously lost, forgotten, or stolen. This is seen in the emergence of support groups based on shared experiences, beliefs, sex or race. What subcultures can succeed in doing is "to imbue their members with some sense of higher purpose" (ibid, 51). This higher purpose is not always positive, as in cases such as the KKK or other hate group subcultures, but is an important component to have in any movement desiring to make changes in the status quo.

The subculture of Rock and Roll music has been an unsteady and complicated one to define. It seems idealistic and unlikely that Rock music (having started a number of years before Elvis Presley and continuing in its many forms today) has had any higher purpose than to entertain.

Rebellious youths have been drawn to its changing forms for four decades, but as a whole it has been merely another part of the ever growing entertainment industry. Early Rock and Roll vaguely addressed the racial barriers and inequalities of the fifties, but it was not until the late sixties that distinct politics were carried in Rock music. It was at this time that Rock showed its power and the sub-culture became a counter-culture.

A look back on the radicals of the 60's, and I don't mean the hippies who were content to wear flowers and beg for change in San Francisco, shows their passion for Rock music and the integral link Rock'n'Roll played in their politics. From the Black Panthers falling in love with Bob Dylan in Oakland, CA to White Panther John Sinclair and his **MC5** brothers calling for armed revolution in Michigan, these folks all recognized and appreciated the power of Rock music as the people's music. Prior to death and sell outs, 60's radicals Jerry Rubin and Abbie Hoffman along with countless others, channeled Rock'n'Roll to create an enormous anti-government movement made up of young dissatisfied freaks.

Unfortunately, whatever good this music served by giving praises to freedom and disdain for social hypocrisy, it met the same fate as all earlier and later forms of popular Rock: "commercial dilution/creative exhaustion, co-option and takeover by mainstream forces" (Mark Andersen, Washington Peace Letter, Nov. 1991, 1). Rock music became "either commodified, mainstream music promoted and packaged by corporate giants, or ritual, shallow hedonism" (ibid).

An exception to Rock and Roll's predictable mainstream politics and actions has been the movement called Punk Rock, or simply Punk. The time and birthplace of the Punk movement is debatable. Either the New York scene of the late sixties/early seventies or the British Punks of 1975-76 can be given the honor. For our purposes, neither one deserves a long investigation as the specific politics and genuine forming of a movement was not until the

late seventies. In general it is thought that the New Yorkers invented the musical style while the British popularized the political attitude and colorful appearances. A quick look at the background of the English scene will show the circumstances in which modern Punk was born.

Tricia Henry has written a very good book which documents the beginnings of the Punk movement in New York and its subsequent rise in England. While the book is good, it ignores everything done since 1980, when she considers Punk to have died. Several books of this kind have been written (all concentrating on the largest of all Punk bands, the **Sex Pistols**) and most lack a great deal of information, as they were done by writers who were not part of the movement, but outside interpreters. Henry is, however, correct and thorough on the subject at hand.

"For the large number of people on welfare—or "the dole,"
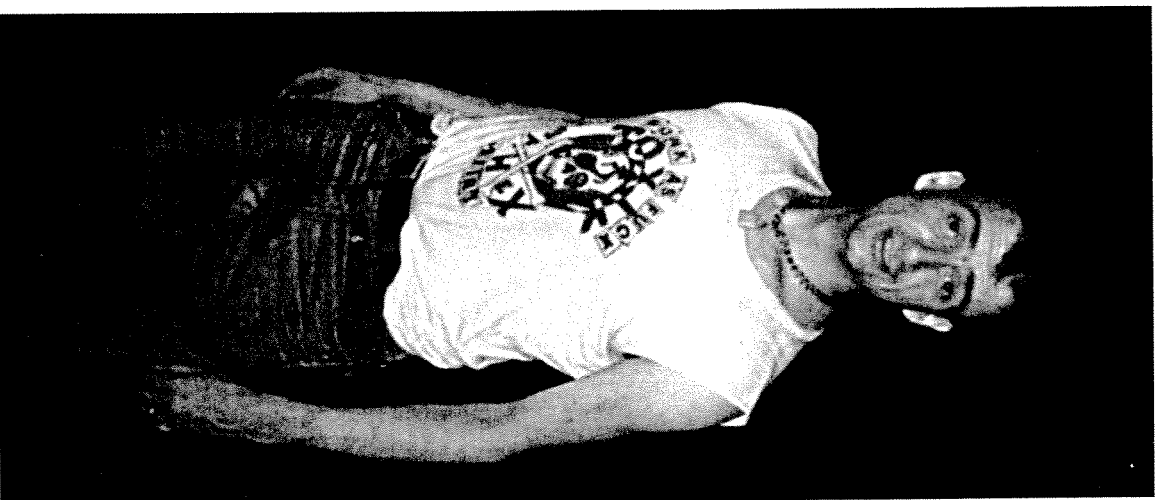
Pete the Roadie, Washington D.C., '95

as it is known in Great Britain—especially young people, the outlook for bettering their lot in life seemed bleak. In this atmosphere, when the English were exposed to the seminal Punk Rock influences of the New York scene, the irony, pessimism, and amateur style of the music took on overt social and political implications, and British Punk became as self-consciously proletarian as it was aesthetic" (Tricia Henry, Break All Rules!, University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, Mi, 1989, p.8).

It is true that unemployment and poor social condi-tions provoke angry feelings of alienation and frustration. It is also true that these feelings can be expressed in many ways. Crime has been the most popular response in recent times, but at this place and time the hoodlums began play-ing guitars as well as committing petty crimes of frustra-tion. "To ignore the obvious connections between the Punk
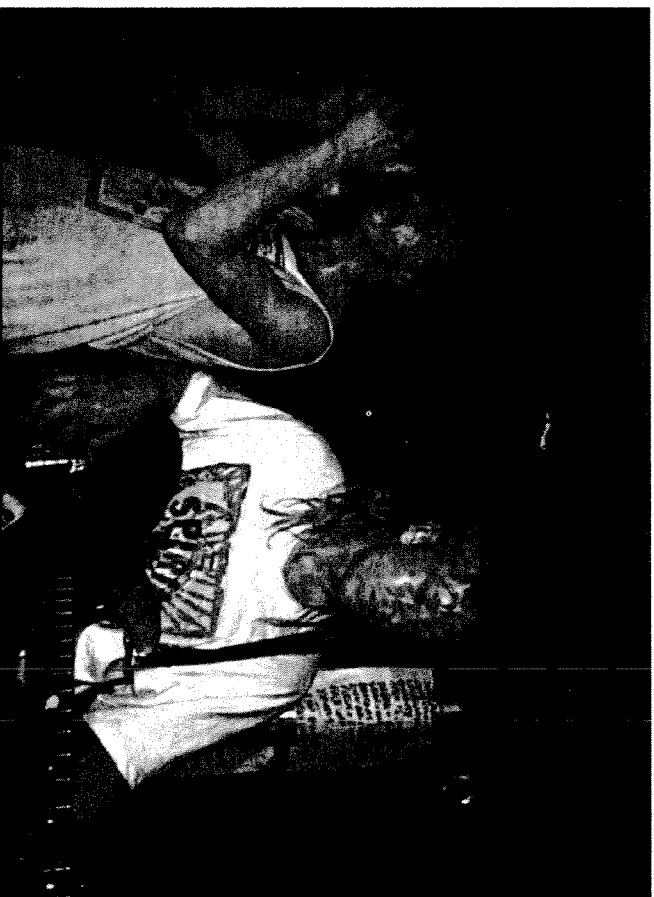
Citizen Fish, NYC, 91

phenomenon and economic and social inequalities in Great Britain would be to deny the validity of the philosophical underpinnings of the movement. Punk in Britain was essentially a movement consisting of underprivileged work-ing-class white youths. Many of them felt their social situ-ation deeply and used the medium of Punk to express their dissatisfaction" (ibid, 67).

The purpose of saying this is to give a basis for where the Punks are coming from and why they hold the ideas they do. It would be a lie, however, to say that these original Punks had well-developed social and political the-ories. They may have been against all the standard '-isms', but were more apt to spit and swear than to explain their feelings to the mainstream public. "These were Punks, not social activists, and their message was bleak. The **Sex Pistols**' music was an outburst of hatred and despair. Face life as we see it, they cried—frustrating, meaningless, and ugly. Scream it out with us...'There's no future!'" (ibid, 66).

The goal of these Punks was to express their rage in a harsh and original way. The most hated thing in the world was someone who was a willing conformist. Many Punk bands have built their platforms or messages with the advocacy and admittance of nonconformity. Conformity is rejected on every front possible in order to seek the truth or sometimes merely to shock people. What is so wrong with conformity? The noted sociologist Elliot Aronson defines conformity as the following: "a change in a per-son's behavior or opinions as a result of real or imagined pressure from a person or group of people" (Elliot Aronson, The Social Animal, Freeman and Company, San Francisco, 1972, 16). The real or imagined pressure that Punks reject is not only the physical kind or the interest to be accepted, but the kind of conformity "that results from the observation of others for the purpose of gaining infor-mation about **proper** behavior..." (ibid, 25).

Punks question conformity not only by looking and sounding different (which has debatable importance), but

by questioning the prevailing modes of thought. Questions about things that others take for granted related to work, race, sex, and our own selves are not asked by the conformist whose ideas are determined by those around her. The nonconformist does not rely on others to determine her own reality.

The questioning of conformity involves the questioning of authority as well. Punks do not have a great deal of respect for authority of any kind, as will be noted in the section on anarchy. In general, forced authority has been looked at as a great evil causing agent. From the German Nazis in World War II, to the subjects of Stanley Milgram's shock experiments, to today's police force, it has been proven that unjustified obedience to authority has resulted in mass acceptance of harmful actions.

By acting as anti-authoritarian nonconformists, Punks are not usually treated very well by those people whose commands to conform are rejected. Our society, well practiced at doublethink and scapegoat imagery, has used language to create a negative image of those who pursue nonconformist means. "For 'individualist' or 'nonconformist,' we can substitute 'deviant;' for 'conformist we can substitute 'team player.'" (ibid, 14). This is exactly what modern society has done and its negative portrayal of the Punk movement will be seen in the section on Punk's media misrepresentation.

We have seen that nonconformists may be praised by historians or idolized in films or literature long after the fact of their nonconformity. As for their own time, the nonconformist is labeled a rebel, a deviant, or a troublemaker by the status quo she is going against. Corporate music and fashion magazines that banned or ridiculed Punk for the last twenty years now hail many bands as "ground breakers" or talented originators. Corporate music executives once disgusted by Punk are now signing young bands left and right in an effort to make money off the "cutting edge," nonconformist sounds.

Jawbreaker, SF Ca, '94

While mass acceptance may be tempting and even lucrative for some, this quote by Dick Lucas of the English bands **Subhumans** and **Citizen Fish** sums up the feelings many Punks have towards society and mainstream culture:

"I have never come to terms with the idea that I am 'part of society' and should construct my actions to suit the prevailing moods of conformity, acceptance and achievement. Closed by the rigorous mind training of school and media, the mass mentality of Western culture revolves around upholding the past to attempt to secure the future, whilst suffering the present as beyond its control, 'safe' in the hands of government who feed the present to the masses as a product of technological/material/industrial progress." (Dick Lucas, Threat By Example, edited by Martin Sprouse, Pressure Drop Press, San Francisco, 1989, 13).

Dick is not alone in his thinking. Hundreds of thousands Punk fans feel the same way. With this attitude in mind, I will attempt to show what Punk is, how it has been portrayed by the media, and some of the specifics of the philosophy.
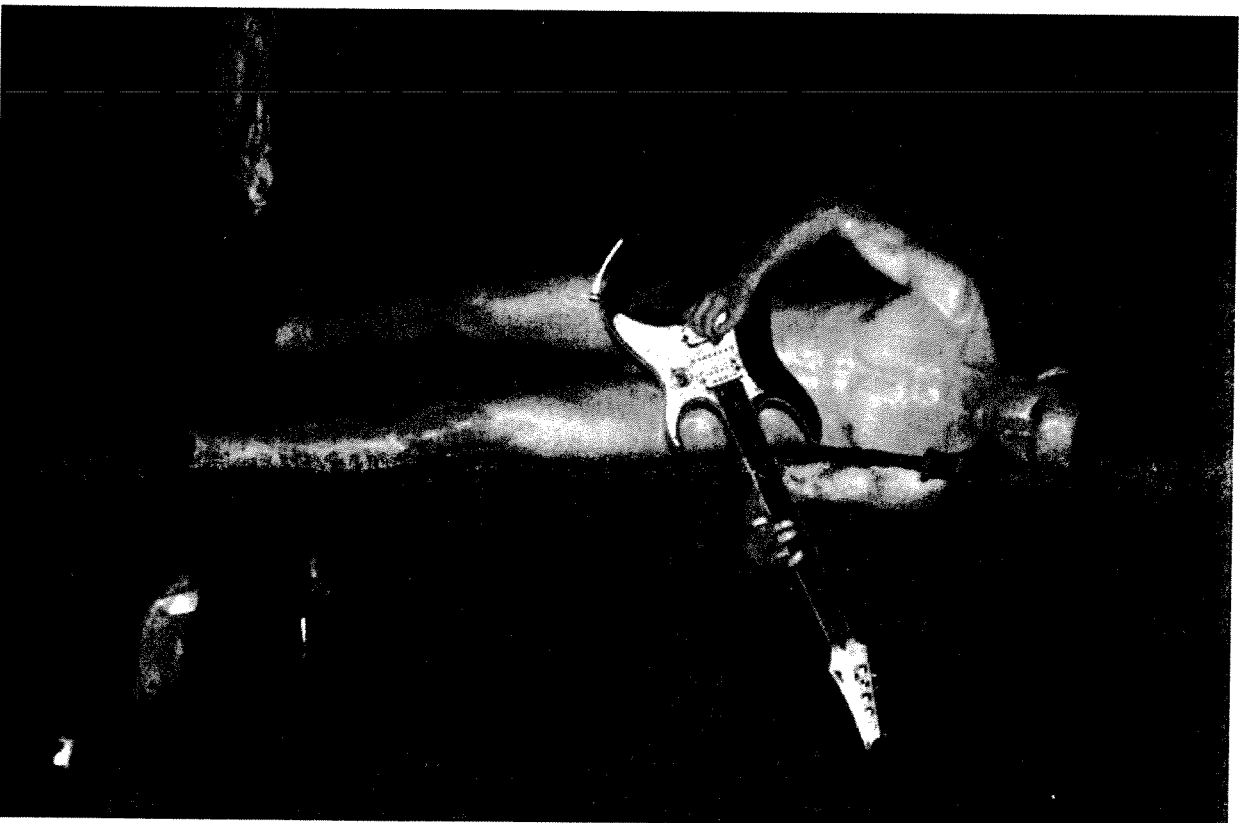
(*above*) *Propagandhi, Nashville, Tn. '96*
(*below*) *AWOL, Harrisburg, Pa, '85*

"The distinguished Soviet psychologist Pavel Semenov once observed that man satisfies his hunger for knowledge in two ways: (1) he observes his environment and tries to organize the unknown in a sensible and meaningful way (this is science); and (2) he reorganizes the known environment in order to create some-thing new (this is art)" (Aronson, 269).

Under this definition Punk can be defined as an art form. Punk is much more than this, as it involves particular theories and politics, but when trying to understand what Punk is, comparisons to previous art movements are helpful. Early Punks (perhaps quite unknowingly) used many of the same revolutionary tactics employed by members of early avant-garde art movements: unusual fashions, the blurring of boundaries between art and everyday life,

C.O.C., Baltimore, Md. '87

juxtapositions of seemingly disparate objects and behaviors, intentional provocation of the audience, use of untrained performers, and drastic reorganization (or disorganization) of accepted performance styles and procedures.

The most frequently mentioned comparison between Punk and a known art movement is with Dada. "Dada, generally placed between 1916 and 1922, gained notoriety in France shortly after World War I for vigorously rejecting all previous existing social and aesthetic values" (Henry, 3). There have been at least three studies that I know of where Punk has been likened to a modern day version of Dada. The comparison is valid though I would guess that Punks would generally show a distaste for Dadaist art. Both are subversive but thankfully Punk appears to be less absurd and abstract about its subversiveness.

A movement to which early Punks expressed greater similarities was the Futurist movement. Futurism was a movement launched in 1909 by Filippo Marinetti with his "Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism," published in the large-circulation Paris daily, Le Figaro. "Like other movements in the historical avant-garde, it was an interdisciplinary movement which included visual art, literature and performance. It was dedicated to the rejection of traditional art forms, non-naturalist expression, and audience involvement" (Henry, 2). This audience involvement is an important link between the art and Punk movements as both have attempted to break down the standard barriers present in the performer/viewer relationship.

"As part of the Punk policy of provocation, performers were known to include in their performances behavior such as vomiting on stage, spitting at the audience, and displaying wounds that were the result of self-mutilation—having cut and bruised themselves with objects such as broken bottles, fish hooks and knives. The audiences role often included throwing 'permanently' affixed seating, beer bottles, glasses, and anything else that made itself available at the performers" (Henry, 4).

This interaction was actively pursued in the early years of Punk, but there is a very large separation becoming more apparent. As the audiences get larger and larger, concerts are becoming more entertainment than interaction oriented. Small gig halls are still hosting interactive settings but larger venues are echoing typical Rock 'n' Roll concerts. Also the performance characteristics of Punks as specified above have been extremely toned down. When these do occur, they are usually thought of as acts of unoriginal shock value or simply yearning for the "good old days" of Punk when there were no politics other than expressing rage.

Also influencing the later Punk movement was the type of dress the Futurists chose. Futurists meant to take their anti-art message to the streets by wearing outrageous clothes, earrings, and make-up. This was later duplicated by the fashion-oriented Punks of Kings Road in London.

An important difference is to remember that Punk has evolved past the 'shock tactics' of colored hair and dog collars to have a fairly cohesive philosophy with little or nothing to do with one particular style of dress. While useful at the time, and still fun today, shocking people with appearances has taken a back seat to shocking people with ideas.

These short comparisons (again, longer ones have been done) of Punk to avant-garde art movements show that Punk was not unique in its expression, or even methods, of rebellion. What needs to be done is an accurate update of what the Punk scene is and has to say in todays world.

From this point forward, I will be using sources from the Punk scene almost exclusively for information. Thousands of fanzines (magazines put out by Punks for and about Punks) have been written expressing the writers' views of what Punk is, its politics, its best music, and the writers' purpose for communication. By using these as sources I will aim to produce an accurate picture of the philosophy of modern Punk.

"To start with, I'll tell you what I think Punk isn't—it isn't a fashion, a certain style of dress, a passing 'phase' of knee-jerk rebellion against your parents, the latest 'cool' trend or even a particular form of style or music, really—it is an idea that guides and motivates your life. The Punk community that exists, exists to support and realize that idea through music, art, fanzines and other expressions of personal creativity. And what is this idea? Think for yourself, be yourself, don't just take what society gives you, create your own rules, live your own life." (Mark Andersen, Positive Force handout, 1985).

There have been many observers and participants in the Punk scene that have not noticed any meaningful underlying purpose. Young people are traditionally known to go through a phase of rebellion which manifests itself against parents, school, and authority in general. Punk has incorrectly been labeled as simply one of these phases in which the rebellious person tries to show that she is different from her peers. It is true that the traditional styles of dress and music of Punk Rock are often offensive and
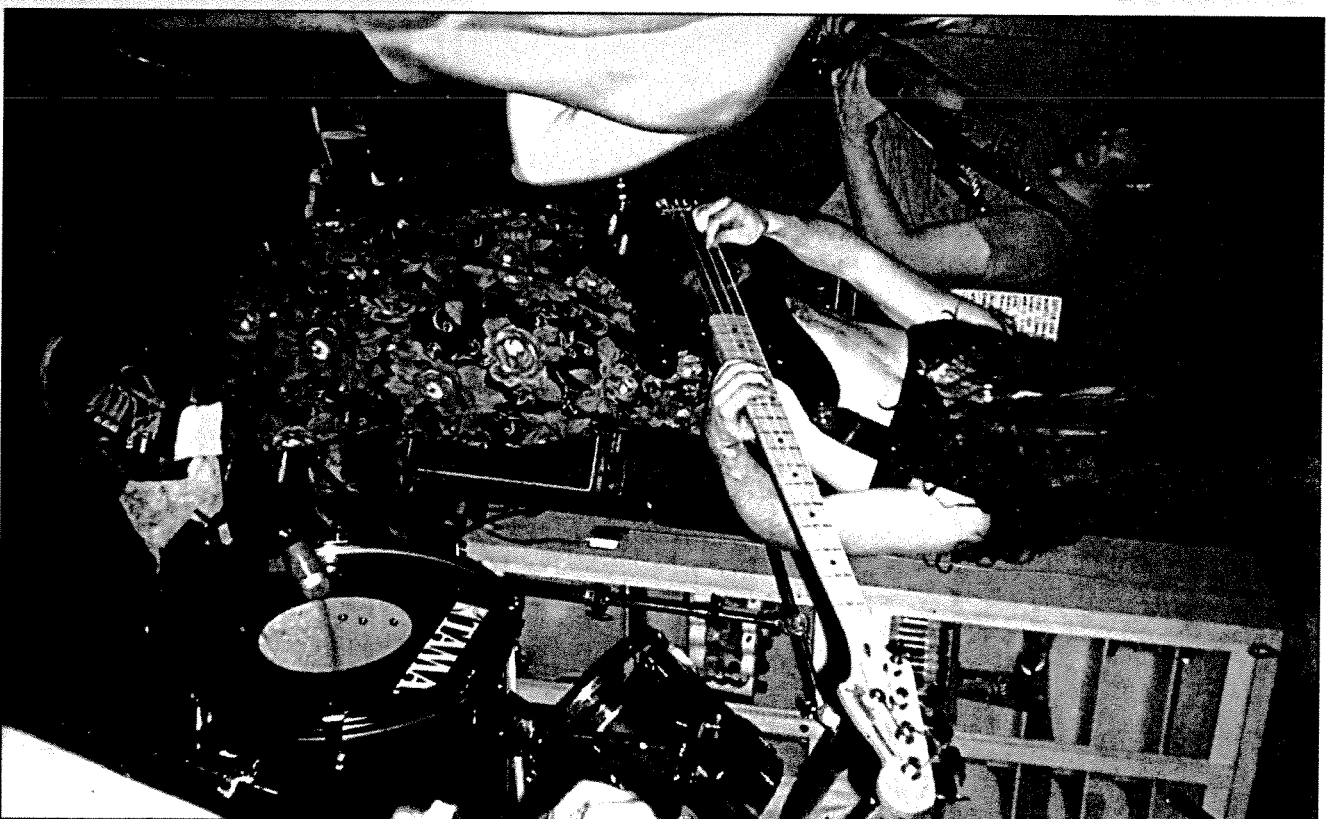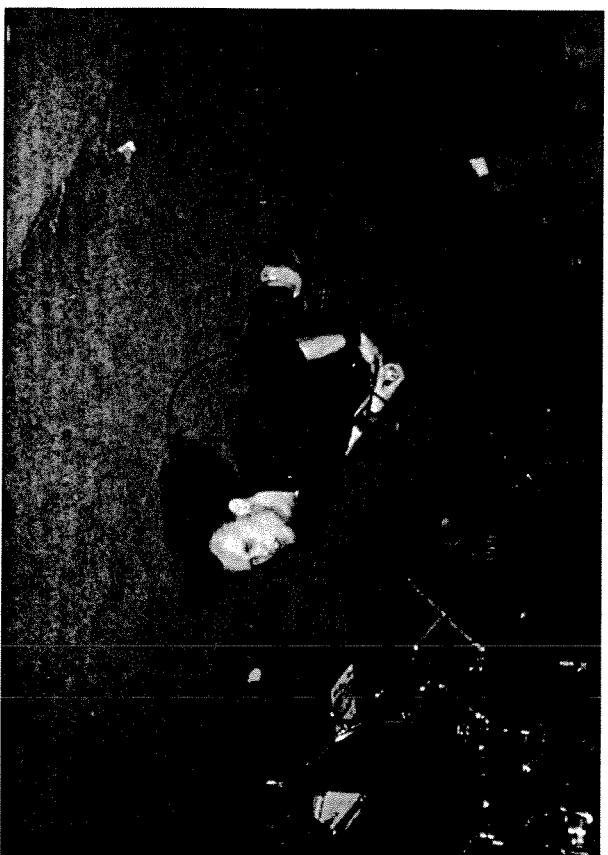
(above) Eightball, Yocumtown, Pa. '91
(left) Ignition, Harrisburg, Pa. '88

shocking to the mainstream public, but it is misleading to think of Punk as an appearance oriented movement. Mindless, temporary rebellion can be very fun, but is not very effective or useful. Punks have evolved far enough to favor substance over style, a fact almost always ignored or twisted in media representations. It is not enough for a person to look different from the mainstream, there is an important emphasis on consciously becoming one's own self.
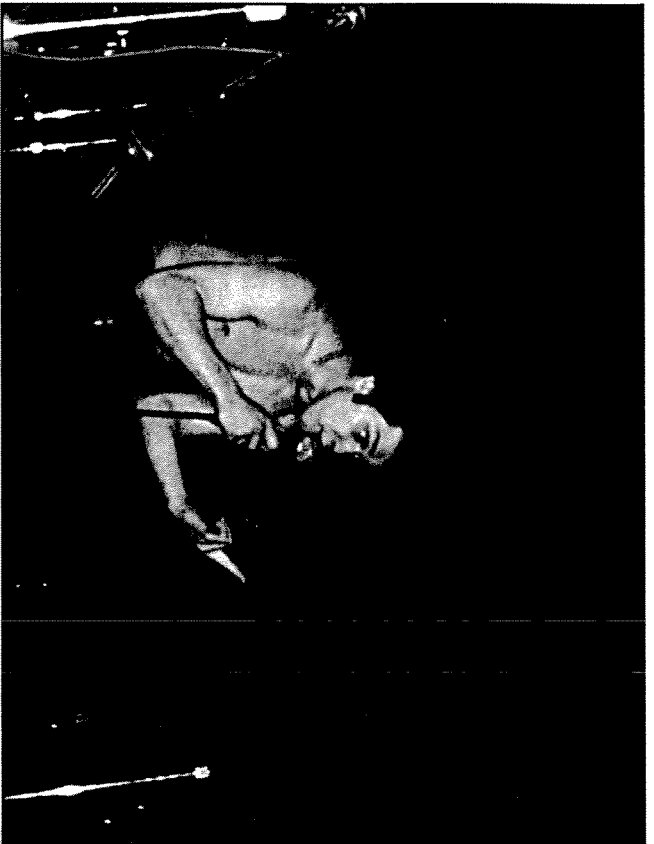
When people who want only to be unique or different from the rest of society adopt the Punk look, they succeed in appearing different from the norm. This is a fairly meaningless step. For someone to attempt individuality and become themselves "requires an honest, often painful look inside yourself, asking tough questions like: Who am I? What do I want from life? What should I want? What should I do? Ultimately, this process will, no doubt, make you refuse to conform to many of society's rules and expectations..." (ibid). It should be stressed that answering these questions requires further questioning of *why* do you want something, *what* are the reasons behind your desires. This process is aimed at making a person aware of himself and his own identity. In this respect the person becomes different from others. From the realization of one's own nonconformity comes the realization that society was not set up to accommodate a civilization of individuals. "Instead it is designed to accommodate some non-existent 'normal' individual and force others to fit into that mold with the end result being institutionalized dehumanization" (ibid).

Rebellion is one of the few undeniable characteristics of Punk. It is implicit in the meaning of Punk and its music and lyrics. Whether a person sticks it out long enough to learn important personal realizations or not, "everyone who gets involved in Punk is usually prompted by some form of rebellion, be it against parents, authorities, or the whole system itself" (Steve Beaumont, letter in Maximum Rock N Roll #53, Oct., 1987). Young people "reach the age where something clicks inside them and

they feel they want to do things themselves. Kids that are fed up with conditions around them—be it socially, musically, or whatever" (Al Flipside, "What's Changed in Ten Years," Flipside #48, Feb. 1986). For those who become associated with the movement (and they need not be young people), this initial rebellion turns into a force for education and personal change.

The most important (and perhaps most radical) thing for the Punks to do is take on responsibility. This goes first for themselves and how they order and live their personal lives, then extends to include others. - What sort of responsibilities are these exactly?... "To use our mind, to treat people with respect, not to judge on outward appearances, to support others in their struggle to have the right

7Seconds, Camp Hill, Pa, '84

to 'be themselves,' even to help bring positive change to our world" (Mark Andersen).

Not all Punks agree on how to support others or bring about change outside of their own circle, but there are agreed upon necessities. As Punk is now comprised of a clear majority of middle and service class whites instead of inner city working class whites or minorities, an important action has been to reject their own privileged places in society. "We are the inheritors of the white supremacist, patriarchal, capitalist world order. A prime position as defenders of the capital of the ruling class and the over-seers of the underclass has been set aside for us by our parents, our upbringing, our culture, our history, and yet we have the moral gumption to reject it. As Punks we reject our inherited race and class positions because we know they are bullshit." (Joel, columnist for the Punk-anarchist fanzine Profane Existence #13, Feb. 1992). If Punks were born into this world to be the sons and daughters of

Underdog, Baltimore, Md '87

America, they have instead become orphans of a fucked up society.

So what is Punk? The following three definitions of Punk must be mentioned, as they are all relevant opinions and are all true:

Punk is a youth trend. "I'll tell you what Punk is—a bunch of kids with funny haircuts talking pseudo-political bullshit and spouting liberal philosophies they know little or nothing about" (Russell Ward, letter in MRR #103, Dec. 1991).

Punk is gut rebellion and change. "Hardcore: a bleached-blonde defiant sixteen-year old living alone in a downtown hotel; sleazy but on her own. Hardcore: the S.S.I. recipient being paid off by the government to stay out of trouble and renting a rehearsal studio with his monthly check. Hardcore: the corporate flunky who quits his job to manage a band of acned adolescents" (Peter Belsito and Bob Davis, Hardcore California, Last Gasp Publishing, San Francisco, 1984, 7).

Punk is a formidable voice of opposition. "We have created our own music, our own lifestyle, our own community, and our own culture.... We are building a movement based on love, taking actions in hope that some day peace may finally be achieved. We may stumble in our efforts, but we still struggle to carry on. Freedom is something we can create every day; it is up to all of us to make it happen" (Profane Existence #4, June 1990).

While the third serves as the ideal to the other two, the first is the one most commonly presented in the media. As will be shown, this is the least accurate but the most popular image of Punk.