Stop Calling it Pop Punk, Just Call it Punk

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11:30 Class

This will be an Op-Ed article. Through this article I would like to speak to ‘punk purists’ about why pop punk should be considered punk rock.

Recently I had the chance to sit down with Michael Barnett, a practicing rock musician of over 40 years and a professor of rock music at the University of Colorado. We discussed many different concepts about the history of punk rock and its fusion with the pop genre. He explained to me his opinion on the concept of “selling out” a common phrase used to describe pop punk artists. And to end our discussion I asked him, “Is there any way that punk purists could ever accept pop punk music as punk rock?” He responded with an answer that surprised me. He said, “To start, I’d stop labelling the music as ‘pop-punk’ but instead just call it punk rock.”

Ever since its creation the meaning of punk has been heavily debated amongst the punk rock community. Patti Smith, a pioneer in the punk rock scene stated her definition in 2010, “Punk is free space, free from profitability.” A user on reddit with the username Parkercannonball labeled punk as, “not caring about people’s bad opinions about you. For example, if your songs are super simple, you sing terrible live, your drummer is off beat a lot or your records have an absolutely horrible production-quality and people know it and they call you out for it, but you still play your shows and make your records, that is what punk is all about to me.” In my words, punk rock is about rebellion towards the older generation, making loud music that puts the previous generation on edge.

I’ve always believed pop punk fit the criteria for being punk, the pop sound never took out the punk in the music for me. The first time I was challenged for my views surrounding the pop punk genre was from my dad. My dad grew up in the ‘70s and ‘80s and is a big punk rock fan. He told me that pop punk singers all have the same whiney voice as each other and the music is extremely repetitive. In his opinion, the lyrics are too juvenile to be considered punk rock. These are common criticisms that ‘punk purists’ make towards pop punk which always infuriates me. The reason being is that punk rock has always been repetitive, and the lyrics have always lacked creativity. Take Black Flag’s “Rise Above” for example, a staple song that all punk rockers know. The song continuously repeats the words, “Rise above! We’re gonna rise above!” and then throws in phrases like, “We are tired of your abuse, try to stop us, it’s no use.” I’m not saying these lyrics are bad I’m just saying, how are these lyrics any more complicated than a pop punk song? What’s the difference between the lyrics in Rise Above versus the lyrics in Green Day’s American Idiot? The two opening lines to American Idiot are “Don’t wanna be an American Idiot! Don’t want a nation under the new media.” Both songs have very similar lyrics with similar meanings. They both are representative of the youth being fed up with the American government, a common cliché in punk rock music. The only difference is that one is labeled as pop punk and the other is labeled punk rock.

Pop punkers don’t care about the critics who are constantly telling them that their music isn’t punk rock enough. You’d need to look no further than the famous pop punk band Good Charlotte for proof of this. In the song, “The Young and The Hopeless” the Madden brothers write, “These critics and these trust fund kids try to tell me what punk is but when I see them on the street, they got nothing to say. It’s me against this world and I don’t care, I don’t care.” In a Youtube video by Nate The Mate, a youtuber with 61,000 subscribers who documents alternative rock, he says that punk rockers have the common understanding that it’s critical to be as “punk rock” as you can be. Pop punkers, however, could care less about being labeled ‘posers’ or ‘pop stars’ and that is one of the most punk rock things that an artist can do.

The irony of punk is that it must be one of the most uptight and judgmental communities for a genre that prides itself on having no rules. The same punk rockers who made punk rock to create a counterculture to traditional rock music that the previous generation loved are now criticizing the younger generation for their music. The ‘punk purists’ have turned into exactly what they were rebelling against.

With the introduction of the Vans Warped Tour in the early 2000’s, a pop punk music festival sponsored by the large corporation Vans, many ‘punk purists’ labeled pop punk bands as sellouts for being backed by corporations. The reason that pop punk band’s affiliation with corporations enrage punk purists so much is because the foundations of punk was built on anti-capitalism rhetoric. Punk was popular in the early ‘70s in Great Britain because large corporations were hoarding the money and there was a high poverty rate and a lack of jobs in the country. As a result, the youth had a lot of free time and decided to make punk rock to rebel against these corporations.

Times change, however. I asked Barnett, “Do you think pop punk bands aligning with corporations takes the punk out of the music?” He responded with a confident “no.” Barnett said, “It’s almost impossible to live your life nowadays without being corporate. You buy a cup of coffee from Starbucks, you’re corporate, you buy a package from Amazon you’re corporate. It’s simply a part of our lives and it doesn’t make you any less punk.” Being corporate backed can also benefit the fans as well. Good Charlotte defended themselves for having their tour sponsored by a large corporation by saying, “They’re going to get a good show, full sets and with the corporate support we’re able to keep the tickets around $15 cheaper.” In my opinion, overcharging your own fans for a concert is about the least ‘punk’ thing you can do. If keeping the tickets cheaper requires you to sign a deal with a corporation then I say 100 percent sign the deal.

Signing large record deals and being corporate backed isn’t just about making the music more accessible to the greater public either. Making money off music is an extremely difficult feat, especially in the modern streaming era. If a band was to make 20% of the royalties, a generous amount, then they’d still only be making $47.6 dollars per 100,000 streams. This is not nearly enough money to make a living off. Being corporate backed in today’s music industry is practically essential to make a proper living and in no way is making enough money to put food on the table selling out or any less punk rock. Kurt Cobain put it perfectly, “I don’t blame the average seventeen-year-old punk-rock kid for calling me a sellout. I understand that. And maybe when they grow up a little they’ll realize there’s more things to life than living out your rock & roll identity so righteously.” Criticizing a pop punk band for being corporate backed isn’t punk rock of you, it’s simply immature.

Don’t get me wrong, I love the classic punk rock bands. They are the pioneers of the punk scene, without them, all the pop punk bands that we know today would never have existed. The problem however is the fans of great bands like the Sex Pistols or The Clash refuse to accept pop punk into the same community. By refusing to accept new bands into the punk community, these ‘punk purists’ are killing their own genre. Without pop being merged with punk than punk rock would’ve faded into obscurity in the ‘80s. Pop essentially saved punk rock and nowadays hip hop is saving pop punk.

Since the early 2010’s pop punk has declined in popularity. Bands like Green Day, Weezer, Fall Out Boy and My Chemical Romance used to top the charts. Nowadays, the top charts mostly consist of hip-hop artists. Recently however, many rappers have been incorporating elements of pop punk into their recent releases. Many of these releases have topped the charts and it’s the first time we’ve seen pop punk hit the mainstream for a decade.

People need to realize that the fusion of genres is unavoidable. The general public doesn’t want to listen to hardcore punk rock music for the rest of time. Bands need to add new sounds to their music in order to stay relevant in the music industry. The most important skill in being a musician is adapting to the modern trends. This is exactly what pop punk bands did, they adapted to the modern trends and at the same time kept the original essence of punk rock going. To me that’s admirable and ‘punk purists’ should be thanking these pop punk bands for keeping the genre alive. If you’re a punk rock fan and you refuse to listen to pop punk that’s fine with me. Continue listening to the Sex Pistols for the rest of your life, just don’t tell me that pop punk isn’t punk.

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