

Music 262: Rock Music, History and Social Analysis, NY Punk

[Music Playing on Piano]

[Brian Ward]: We also have this proto punk happening in New York City as well. In New York City, we start out with this band called The Velvet Underground. They were really a keystone to both punk rock and new wave artists that came later. They combined music and art. They were friends and had an important association with Andy Warhol and pop art. They were viewed as kind of dark and anti. The critics hated them because they weren't very good musicians in the sense of being trained. But their music had a sort of appeal to it. It was a blend of high energy rock and adventurism, the avant-garde. They also brought realism to the music that wasn't there before. They would sing about real-life situations with drugs and sex, kinkiness in their lyrics. They challenged conventional society in a way they had never really done before. They were also one of the first bands to really take this nihilistic approach with the philosophy of nothing matters at all. That sort of became the punk aesthetic that carried forth from The Velvet Underground. In 1967 they released this record. It's called The Velvet Underground and Nico. Now this album was ignored when it was released. It didn't sell many records. Since then it's become one of the most influential records of rock n' roll. It encouraged a lot of bands later on to go ahead and put together groups of indie bands, new wave, punk groups that heard this. They knew that this was something that they could do as well. You didn't have to have a whole lot of musical training or musical acumen to pull this off. One of the members of The Velvet Underground was Lou Reed. Lou Reed was a very iconic individual in rock n' roll. He would write these songs that had a lot of realism to them. One of the songs is Waiting for the Man. It's a song about a guy in Harlem waiting for his heroin dealer, and the man being the dealer. The song's about just waiting on the corner for the dealer to show up. There's actually a lot of realism in there. Another song written by Reed is a song called heroin. Again, this song hardly endorses drug usage, so it shows the really bad side of drug use. It really doesn't condemn it either, it's just realism. That's the one thing out of the velvet underground that we get is this bringing realism into rock n' roll. So if you listen to the music of Lou Reed, you hear these sing/speak type of vocals and these really gripping narratives. This really helped define the street-savvy rock n' roll and is really influential. He analyzes a lot of subjects of personal experience. He does it so openly. Probably the best example of this is the song Walk on the Wild Side. Walk on the Wild Side is about these real characters in New York City that he knew. A lot of them were transvestites, individuals that would not really be free to express themselves any other place by New York City during that time. So there's a whole cast of characters: Holly Woodlawn, Candy Darling, Joe Dallesandro, Jackie Curtis, Joe Campbell who was the sugarplum fairy. Some of them were prostitutes. Some of them were drug addicts. These were all sort of superstars among the crowd that they were all hanging out with. The really interesting thing about this song is that it has a very catchy hook in the bass. It got a lot of radio play. People didn't realize what Lou Reed was actually singing about: transvestites, prostitution, and

drug use. That's one of the songs that actually missed out on censorship that probably maybe should have been censored. So that was one of the first bands.

Now punk is really starting to emerge. It emerges in New York City. That's where punk rock starts. The whole aesthetic of punk rock is to bring rock n' roll back to its basics. It's actually a reaction to Pink Floyd. It's a reaction to The Moody Blues. It's a reaction to all this heady stuff, the folk rock, the hippies, the hippie movement from San Francisco. So they return to this basic formula of three chords and the simple melody, do it yourself attitude. It became its own genre. Now in America, punk rock was and still is underground music. In the UK however, punk rock became a whole entire sensation and became the norm. It became the mainstream music.

So there are some popular punk bands that started out in New York City. One of them was this band Television. Probably the original punk rocker was the leader of this band, this guy named Richard Hell. He was one of the original punk rockers to emerge from New York City. He's often pointed to as a major influence for all the subsequent punk rock bands. His influences covered music, poetry, clothing, fashion. He wore ripped clothing. He was one of the first guys to do that. He formed a band called Neon Boys and later renamed this band Television. Now Television was a very creative band to emerge on the scene. They were really the antitheses to this happy culture. They went back to wearing short hair. They went back to wearing street clothes. They made their album Marquee Moon in 1977. Now Marquee Moon really laid the groundwork for a lot of other bands. All of these guitar based post punk bands of the 70s and 80s really owe a lot to this record, Marquee Moon. What they did was they took away the blues out of the music, but they kept the raw energy in this garage rock energy. They added complex lyrical solo lines and the music often went in different unconventional directions. One of the most important venues for punk rock in New York City was C.B.G.B.'s. C.B.G.B.'s is still there. It's a rock n' roll venue in New York City. Originally it was there for anybody who could play. They would allow anyone to have a gig there to play music. So these early bands including Richard Hell and Television caught onto this and it became their hangout. It became a place where these kind of misfits could go to and feel like they fit in. They could play any time of music they wanted. There was no pressure commercially on them to adhere to any sort of style or dance music or anything of that nature. They could do whatever kind of music they wanted. So C.B.G.B.'s in New York City became the club that was really the incubator for punk rock music.

Another important singer at this time was named Patty Smyth. Now Patty Smyth was sort of this poet rock singer. She started getting noticed reading poetry in New York City. When she improvised her lyrics, she combined 60s garage rock with literary writing styles of Burroughs and Ginsberg. She's known as the godmother of punk. She made this record in 1975 called Horses. This really anticipates new wave and it's really a hybrid of classic rock and poetry.

So following Patty Smyth and Television is this great punk band that comes out of New York and that's The Ramones. The Ramones are probably the most popular punk band of all time.

They did this by really cutting rock n' roll down to its bare essentials. It's just three chords and a melody. That's all you needed. They really crystallized the genre of punk. They made their songs really short, high energy. They did a lot of fast tempos in their songs. They sang about youth, boredom and they really had these catchy melodies. Also because of these catchy melodies and the appeal, even outside of the punk genre of this band became known as bubblegum punk. Some really popular songs that people know today are Blitzkrieg Bop, which has become a real sports anthem, another song I Wanna Be Sedated, which was a big hit. They were also into this alternative scene so they also wrote the song Pinhead after a movie about freaks. It's a movie called Freaks about some circus freaks. One of the characters in there is named Pinhead and so they took one of the lines from the movie, Gabba Gabba Hey, Gooble Gooble Gobble became one of the catchy hooks in their songs. The Ramones remain to this day one of the iconic punk groups of all time.