

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

[Music Playing on Piano]

[Brian Ward]: Punk rock eventually made its way to Britain. How this happened was this guy Malcolm McLaren who was a store owner, he was in New York. He was around this scene, The Velvet Underground, Television, The Ramones. He really got the idea to bring this back to the U.K. His idea was to create a shop that sold this S&M type clothing, this sort of sex shop. He put it in London and he brought this whole aesthetic of punk rock to London through fashion. This became a place where these young kids in London would hang out because they really had no other place to go. There was an economic recession at the time and most young people in England at the time didn't have jobs. These young people would hang out in his shop where he sold these S&M clothes. At times they would even steal from him, but it was sort of a scene. So he got an idea. He noticed a number of his customers, about four of them, and he talked them into creating a punk rock band. This band became known as The Sex Pistols. McLaren of course became The Sex Pistol's manager. The Sex Pistols really were this far out punk rock group. They took punk to the extreme. They would do crazy things on stage. They were very rude in their demeanor. They were very anti-British. They really represented their generation in Britain at the time. They were young and they were bored. They were really rebelling against the staunch upper class at the time. Really at the time they were thought of as a serious threat to the Monarchy and to the UK. They were viewed by the upper class as these social deviants. They really had a major influence on a lot of bands that came after them including The Clash, Siouxsie and the Banshees. In 1976 they came out with their first single and this was Anarchy in the UK. This really touched off a musical and social firestorm. It really created a fear in the establishment. By doing so, it sold a lot of copies in Britain. However, it got withdrawn as soon as the record started selling even more. They were subsequently kicked out of their label EMI. Then they created this record, Never Mind the Bullocks. That was their only album that they created. On this record was a song called God Save the Queen and this was a big chart success in Britain. The lyrics are really gleefully snotty, name calling, declaring the royalty ineffectual and irrelevant, and really showing the decline of Britain as a superpower and really ignoring the bleak times. The public reaction to this was really swift and hysterical. Both positive and negative. The young people loved it; the older people really hated it and were very fearful of this band. By 1978 they were touring the United States and Johnny Rotten decided to quit the band and that was pretty much the end of The Sex Pistols as we know them.

A band that came right after that or at about the same time really had the job of filling their shoes was The Clash. Now The Clash were kind of Sex Pistols but they weren't crazy. They weren't cutting themselves. They weren't shooting up heroin. They were doing things more musically as well. They were influenced a lot by reggae music. They were influenced by rhythm and blues, even some disco elements in their music. They mixed their music with politics. A lot like the Sex Pistols, but they had more of an agenda. Their agenda was really to socially stand up for the little guy. They were managed by a friend of Malcolm McLaren, this guy Bernie Rhodes.

Many people saw at the time and many people still agree The Clash is really the great punk band. They really struggled to find an identity at first. They really had a big job of filling the shoes and the hole that The Sex Pistols left because they started this whole movement and quickly ended. The Clash were kind of left there hanging. They sort of persevered. They came out with some great records. In 1979 they released this record London Calling and really pulled all of their diverse influences together and created a great record. Another album that came out in 1982 was Combat Rock, probably their bestselling record. It reached number 10 in the United States and had the great hit song on there Rock the Casbah. So The Clash were never quite as dangerous and never quite as threatening as The Sex Pistols, but they lasted quite a bit longer.