

# PUNK MAGAZINE: THE WIT & WISDOM OF IDIOT SAVANTS

BY CARLO McCORMICK

Every generation seemingly needs its own medium, each moment or movement dependent on and demanding of some specific form of address to convey its great truth and better fictions. In the hangover wake of that epic Sixties youth quake—which had after all left behind its own media legacy in the semblance of freeform FM radio stations, all those free alternative newspaper weeklies that came to proliferate in most cities, and the radical personal polemics of underground comics—Punk would adopt and adapt these nascent strategies into its own subcultural vox populi of abject publications and birth the still kicking bastard of Zine culture. Buried underneath layers of righteous rage, cultural delinquency, personal abnegation, nihilist cynicism and sometimes even a willful stupidity, the fanzines that emerged around Punk's music and lifestyle were often pure genius.

If you buy into Punk as an aggressive kind of folk art, an attitude and style reproducible throughout time according to the urgencies of youth, then *PUNK Magazine* might well be a grand-parental precursor, that ugly evil ancestor, to a long and ongoing lineage of idiosyncratic self-produced missives from the contested and shifting frontlines of our agonistic zeitgeist. If we accept Punk as a historical event fixed in time however, not a style of music and dress to be recycled in that ongoing pastiche by which various modes of dissent enter into the conformities of fashion, then we need to understand what makes its eponymous publication so impossibly different. Let's not fudge history with false equivalences, that bizarre angry love letter to the City of Haters on the Hudson, disturbing as a stalker's stare, unleashed like a Molotov cocktail at the tall ships that would soon be parking their anachronistic asses in that patriotic bicentennial year of 1976, was an SOS message in a bottle from a sinking island that could only be written then and only be poorly imitated forever after.

Yes, *PUNK Magazine* was hugely influential on many, myself included, but it was a pathology all its own, endemic to an early registration of a broader cultural collapse like how the first shudder of an incipient death rattle might be confused with the spasms of a more sensual joy. Punk itself was never so much a paradigm of the best but a lowly example of the very worst. Neither the music nor the magazine meant to make things better, they merely pointed out that if they could do what they were doing so could any of us. The invitation it offered was the tacit promise that if we actually gave a shit we could likely do way better. It was a gauntlet thrown not to imitate but to surpass, and as powerful as that message was its real magic was that no matter how much better we all may have done these things they would never be nearly as good as that first awful time through. Impolitic and impolite as the music it championed, *PUNK Magazine* unleashed a chorus of deviant sounds and visuals, snarls and rants, bellicose, belligerent, and snide, and always the cacophony of things falling—heroes, hopes, standards or any semblance of dignity as if the whole society of politesse was nothing but a set up for the great slapstick joke of a cream-pie or banana peel. *PUNK Magazine* paved the way and it really made tracks, but first and foremost all that followed was the grim gravity of society on the skids.

What *PUNK Magazine* and its immediate successors—*Sniffin Glue* came out of England about a half year later, followed soon after in succession by Cleveland's *Cle*, *Search & Destroy* out of San Francisco and then *Slash* and *No Mag* both from Los Angeles—were all addressing in their own wildly different ways was a chasm of indifference by which the artists that spoke to them fell upon totally deaf ears as far as the rest of the world was concerned. Yes the mainstream ignored it, even reviled it, and for many fans adopting the soundtrack and fashion of Punk might be reason enough for an ass-kicking in most parts, but for all its advocacy there was never a sense in these publications of trying to recruit and convert more fans. No, this was an underground that, however briefly, apparently showed little aspirations for broader success, and as the media by which it would be disseminated and decoded, the printed form was itself an opposition to all the hype and flash by which the loathsome record industry foisted its bogus pop product on the perpetually tasteless and tacky consumer public. Simply put *PUNK Magazine* couldn't give a fuck what you thought of it, and as if to prove the point they put the biggest, most pretentious unmitigated asshole ever on the cover, Lou Reed, just so he could insult the magazine, its readers and the movement that would adopt this down and dirty jailhouse terms for sodomized victims as its *raison d'être*.

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(cont.)

It's hard in retrospect to recall or even imagine how outré the *PUNK Magazine* aesthetic actually was at the time. The year it launched began with Bay City Rollers having the number one song in the country and ended with Rod Stewart at that top spot, including such hits as "Afternoon Delight" by the Starlight Vocal Band, Barry Manilow's "I Write the Songs," and "Disco Duck" by the aptly named Rick Dees and His Cast of Idiots along the way. In the end we won those culture wars, and in the endless nostalgia of our post-modern malaise we're far more likely to hear the Ramones, Blondie, Patti Smith, The Sex Pistols, and Iggy Pop (all of whom were featured in its pages) when you go to the mall than any of the putrid pabulum that passed for entertainment in those years. If ratification had ever been an abiding aspiration for *PUNK*'s founding voices—John Holmstrom, Legs McNeil and Mary Harron—we might say that they were a great success. But if we accept the uncomfortable fact that Punk never meant to make the world a better place, and in fact considered such nonsense as the real problem with those damn hippies they derided, we can allow them the noble mantle of failure they so richly deserve. Music, style and all the myriad signifiers of novelty by which youth culture chugs along will always continue to change, but let's face it, the world still sucks.

With a degree of adversarial dissent baked into the first generation of Punk zines, as well as a highly specific field of advocacy that promoted a narrow band of expressions to an equally selective audience, their terms of success were always dubious at best—evidenced by the short life span of most, two to three years, their demise typically coinciding with the ascension of the bands they covered to wider audiences. What distinguishes *PUNK Magazine* however was its almost pathological disregard for what Punk might actually mean. At the time this seemed natural, because really if you thought about it Blondie had no more in common with the Ramones, than Wayne County with the Dictators, or Talking Heads with Television, so as progenitors of this construct of convenience, Punk felt at reckless liberty to propose most anything as part of their purview. This eclecticism, driven entirely by the vagaries of their idiosyncratic taste rather than those usual editorial mandates of what should be covered or what readers might want, reminds us now how flexible, fluid and almost hypothetical this notion of genre was from the very start. Considering how with every passing decade of subsequent zines parsing out their petty squabbles of what was true punk, or punk enough, those early issues of *PUNK* are a lesson in the vitality of ideas and sensibilities before they become orthodoxies.

Beyond the obvious greats that *PUNK* did so much to support in its day, there is a wider field of irreverence and absurdity that belongs there like the cartoon violence in the Three Stooges or Tom & Jerry. These guys made the gratuitous seem essential, and by whatever dint of insanity or idiocy they made the impossible work just enough to make some unlikely sense. With any clear history of what punk was, and what it wasn't, it's quite impossible to fathom how the likes of Ted Nugent, Blue Oyster Cult, Alice Cooper, The Monkeys, AC/DC or the Bay City Rollers could ever have made their pages. But they did, albeit not always in the most flattering ways. But this is integral to the sensibility of *PUNK* that set it so far apart from the rest. *PUNK* wasn't a magazine in the traditional sense; it was a fucking comic book. Everything was predicated on the kinds of radical exaggeration you get in a bizarro strip, the insane distortions of some Tex Avery or Chuck Jones cartoon brought to caricature extreme. Heavy Metal pomp or Pop music inanity might just as well fit with such a jaundiced worldview, and when articles featured the genius of comic art greats like R. Crumb and Harvey Kurtzman, you knew for sure that far from the typical wanker pretensions of most rock critics these cats were more beholden to the frenzied satire of *Mad* magazine. And when they interviewed B-list comic characters like Sluggo, or Boris and Natasha, or queried the likes of God and Satan, we could all realize that no one, neither our heroes nor villains, really had that much more to say on the matter than the rest of us. And that was *PUNK*.