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In his book about Derry punk rock group the Undertones, published in 2016, bass player Mick Bradley tells how after signing a contract with Sire records in London in 1978, the head of the company Seymour Stein offered to take some of the young band members out for dinner to celebrate. As Bradley recounts: "Baker Street is not short of decent eating houses but I only had one place in mind. If Sire [records] were paying, I was going to have a Big Mac, french [*sic*] fries and Coke"[1]. Out of all the available options, they picked McDonald's. This was not some punk statement pitting junk food against fine dining. Some of the band members had read about McDonald's in the rock magazine *NME* and for these teenagers from Derry, where there wasn't so much as an Indian restaurant, eating at McDonald's – which had only been introduced in London in 1974 – was the height of exoticism. This anecdote betrays the fascination that America held for the Undertones, but it was by no means limited to them. Indeed, Northern Ireland punk rock was significantly influenced by the USA and more precisely by the American teenage myth.

Punk is notoriously hard to define; it is a both a subculture[2] and a complex cultural phenomenon which spanned several decades and several media: music of course, but also fashion, the visual arts, the alternative press, etc. Punk rock was an aggressive, fast and minimalist genre of popular music which partly arose as a reaction against contemporary popular music which was perceived as being too commercial and unexciting or too pretentious and removed from the fan. It emerged in London in 1976 then

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1. Michael Bradley, *Teenage Kicks: My Life as an Undertone*, Omnibus, 2016, p. 86.
2. Use of the term "subculture" is not uncontroversial within the field of cultural studies, but we use the concept as it is defined by Paul Hodkinson, who addresses much of the criticism that has been directed against it. According to his definition, a subculture must respond to four different criteria: *identity*, *commitment*, *consistent distinctiveness* and *autonomy*. See Paul Hodkinson, *Goth: Identity, Style, and Subculture*, New York, Berg, 2002, p. 29.

made its way to Northern Ireland much as it did in the cities and regions of Britain: through John Peel's late night radio BBC One programme, music papers (*NME*, *Sounds*, *Melody Maker*), sensationalist reports in tabloids, siblings or friends coming back from a visit in Britain, and from the summer of 1977 the appearance of a few punk rock or new wave bands on *Top of the Pops* on the BBC. At a time when the "Troubles" and the 1975 Miami Showband massacre[3] discouraged many international bands from visiting Northern Ireland, a vibrant local scene soon emerged, with many young people starting bands such as the Undertones, RUDI, Stiff Little Fingers, the Outcasts and scores of others. Elsewhere, I have written about how the punk scene emerged in Northern Ireland despite the lack of a proper infrastructure for rock music, thanks in part to punks' adoption of "do it yourself" or DIY practises; I have focussed on how, why and to what extent the punk subculture facilitated the transgression of sectarian, class and gender barriers[4]. In the present article I will concentrate on punk rock – the music genre – rather than punk as a youth subculture, and I will argue that the style of punk rock that developed in Northern Ireland during the first wave of punk – from 1976 to the end of the decade – was partly influenced by pop music and particularly the aesthetics associated with the American myth of the teenager. I will thus focus on music groups rather than on the practises of individuals.

One of the main attractions of punk rock was not only the raw, raucous music, but also the fact that it enabled the exploration of a whole new range of themes by anyone able and willing to start a band. Indeed, according to John Mullen, "Punk seemed to open the gates to dealing with a much wider variety of themes in popular song, with a particular emphasis on the gritty"[5]. This was due to punk's irreverent, iconoclastic nature, but also to its emphasis on what would become known as the "do it yourself" ethic: even people with little means or experience could create a fanzine or make music. For the first time in years, young people were able to voice their own views to an audience made up of people their own age. So what did Northern Ireland punks choose to express? During the course of my research for my PhD thesis[6], I decided to classify songs from the first wave of Northern Ireland punk (1976-1983) in order to determine their main thematic concerns. After analysing over two hundred songs, I found that over a third of them tackle various social and political issues;

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3.   On 31 July 1975 three members of the popular Miami Showband were gunned down by the loyalist Ulster Volunteer Force on their way back to Dublin and the other two were injured in a sectarian attack. The incident shocked opinion north and south of the border.

4.   See for instance Timothy A. Heron, "'Alternative Ulster': Punk and the Construction of Everyday Life during the Northern Ireland Conflict", *Imaginaires*, 19, 2015 and "'We're Only Monsters': Punk Bodies and the Grotesque in 1970s Northern Ireland", *Études Irlandaises*, 42 (1), 2017, DOI: 10.4000/etudesirlandaises.5162.

5.   John Mullen, "UK Popular Music and Society in the 1970s", *Revue française de civilisation britannique*, 2016, 11 (3), DOI: 10.4000/rfcb.1695.

6.   Timothy A. Heron, "'Alternative Ulster': Punk in Northern Ireland (1976-1983)", Diss. University of Reims Champagne-Ardenne, unpublished, 2017, TEL: 2017REIML004.

a quarter deal with romantic and sexual relationships; and ten percent are concerned with aspects of teenage pop culture.[7] Among the songs dealing with social and political issues, only a fifth revolve around the "Troubles" (six percent of all songs). The band most associated with this stance is Belfast's Stiff Little Fingers[8], but others addressed the conflict too, notably Ruefrex, the most clearly political and most actively antisectarian of all the first wave punk bands[9]. Most of the other Northern Irish groups avoided singing explicitly about the "Troubles" and instead focussed on the same themes as bands from Britain: antisocial and violent behaviour, international (rather than local) politics, and life within the punk subculture. These bands, though they were numerous, are largely unknown today outside the Northern Ireland punk subculture, but they were of crucial importance as they enabled the local scene to flourish by regularly playing concerts at venues not only in Belfast or Derry city centre, but all across the region. More surprisingly for punk, perhaps, is the large number of songs which deal with romantic and sexual relationships. In *Sounds* magazine in 1977, rock journalist Vivien Goldman said about the punk scene that "No one's singing love songs any more, but that ain't conviction, that's fashion". And yet Northern Ireland punk groups devoted a significant number of their songs to issues such as love, desire, rejection, and break-ups – adolescent themes which were combined with a melodic sound later known as "pop punk". Teenage fantasies are not the first thing that comes to mind when one thinks of punk rock and are more readily associated with more blatantly commercial genres of popular music. "Teenager" was a concept used in the UK to describe mostly working class young people on the threshold between childhood and adulthood – a liminal stage of life, when they were no longer at school but had not yet fully integrated the world of adults, which implied getting a job and, especially in Ireland, getting married. If "youth" was a 1960s ideological concept associated with middle-class students, the counterculture and thus a degree of political awareness, "teenager" was a 1950s concept associated with a specific style of conspicuous consumption which stressed leisure

7.   Concerning the social and political issues and songs about personal relationships, these proportions come close to the findings of rock journalist and academic Dave Laing's own classification of early British punk, in his seminal 1985 book *One Chord Wonders*.
8.   The songs from the band's first singles, "Suspect Device / Wasted Life" (Rigid Digits, 1978) constitute some of the most explicit attacks on paramilitarism in the Northern Ireland popular music repertoire; however, after the release of that single, the band rarely again criticised paramilitaries in such an explicit manner. Most of the songs that followed, and especially those which appeared on their 1979 debut album *Inflammable Material* (Rough Trade) made heavy use of conflict-related iconography, while actually dealing with unrelated issues. This reliance on "radical chic" was part of a conscious strategy to break into the overseas market – and it worked. However, Stiff Little Fingers' success came at a price: for a long time, the band was resented by punks in Northern Ireland who objected to the use of the "Troubles" as a marketing tool.
9.   Ruefrex put into practice the antisectarianism they preached: they played not only in the "neutral" venues of Belfast town centre or in the safety of their own Protestant community, but all over the region, including republican neighbourhoods of Belfast such as Ardoyne, the Falls or Turf Lodge.

and pleasure[10]. For the first time in history, a whole class of adolescents had a certain amount of disposable income as well as time to spend it. This opened up a new and lucrative market, but it also led to concerns from both sides of the political spectrum about idleness and deviance. Moreover, "teenager" was originally an American construct and teenagers were associated with American culture, practices and vices, which was frowned upon in some quarters, not least in conservative Ireland, north and south. Indeed, the teenager was "an ideological vehicle which… stood as a symbol of America's bold march into a new age of hedonistic and leisure-oriented consumption. The myths of abundant teenage fun epitomised the ideals of the American consumer lifestyle"[11]. Postwar Britain and to a certain degree Ireland saw the emergence of highly visible youth subcultures associated with American or American-inspired music: the teddy boys, the rockers, the mods, the skinheads, and later the hippies, all drew inspiration from US culture (though in varying degrees). In the words of Simon Frith, "the American Dream became an inextricable part of mass cultural fantasies"[12], especially for teenagers: "for the British the very idea of the teenager was American. British teenagers were recognized by their American music, their American idols, their American dreams". This was also true in Ireland. Teenagers across Britain and Ireland thus "became part of a mass culture that went beyond neighbourhood or class concerns"[13]. In Northern Ireland this meant that teenagers from nationalist or loyalist backgrounds could have similar tastes in music and film and shared patterns of consumption, to such an extent that in Derry in the 1960s for example, before the onset of the "Troubles", young people from both sides of the city would meet up in the same cafés, dance halls and cinemas, and friendships were forged[14]. Though the effects of the supposed "Americanization" of culture were sometimes deplored, both in Britain and in Ireland, "for many young people in Britain [and Ireland] American culture represented a force of liberation against the grey certainties of British [and Irish] everyday life"[15]. In 1970s Northern Ireland, American music was circulated through *Top of the Pops* on the BBC and chart countdowns on the radio, but the showbands[16] still played an important role, as did the many youth club discos which played chart singles. American acts were still present in the UK charts in the late 1970s. British

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10. Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock'n'roll,* New York, Pantheon, 1981, p. 181-196.
11. Bill Osgerby, "The teenage aesthetic and genealogies of American punk", *Punk rock, so what? The cultural legacy of punk*, 1999, reprint, London, Routledge, 2009, p. 158.
12. S. Frith, *op. cit.*, p. 46.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 184-185.
14. Desmond Bell, *Acts of Union Youth Culture and Sectarianism in Northern Ireland*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1990, p. 144-147.
15. John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*, Harlow, Pearson Longman, 2011, p. 8.
16. Half way between variety entertainers and modern pop groups, showbands were groups of musicians who toured Ireland's dance halls and played covers of international pop hits in such a way that they were not perceived as transgressing traditional values (Nuala 127). Their heyday was the 1950s and 1960s but their popularity endured well into the 1970s.

acts were slightly more dominant, but the myth of America was no longer tied to America itself; this was made clear by the success of continental European or international bands like Abba, Boney M, or Pussycat, which distilled Americanness. The America which was celebrated in lyrics or by the adoption of genres of music which originated in the US was a mythical America – America as an object of consumption. Thus American popular culture – and in the context of popular music, American pop sounds and tropes – could take on different meanings when experienced and produced in a very different cultural context[17].

However, what is the link between the American concept of the teenager and punk rock? Was punk not about "London burning" (the Clash) and "Anarchy in the UK" (the Sex Pistols) rather than about the US? At a first glance, European punk seemed to reject American culture altogether. The Clash, after all, could sing "I'm so bored with the USA" and the Sex Pistols seemed to spurn the discourse of romance associated with the myth of the teenager. However, in Northern Ireland – apart from Derry band the Rip Offs' song "Stuff the USA" – punk groups seemed to embrace rather than reject Americanness. Gerry Smyth associates the Undertones' "Teenage Kicks" with 1950s American rock'n'roll, and sees the song as "a rejection of the dominant discourses of contemporary British punk"[18] while Roland Link, the biographer of Stiff Little Fingers, argues that the Northern Irish "version of punk rock contained little of the negative, elitist, violent, arrogant and nihilistic aspects of some of its mainland counterparts"[19], perhaps because a proto-punk pub rock scene had developed in the region in relative isolation. However, despite the British punk rock scene's stress on existential and aesthetic revolt, British punk and the scenes it influenced elsewhere bear a more ambiguous relationship to pop music than is sometimes assumed, as Bill Osgerby has argued for American punk. While punk is not often associated with teenage pop, Osgerby demonstrates that there was in fact a strain of pop-inflected music running through the genre right from the start. American bands like the New York Dolls, the Dictators, the Ramones and Blondie, he argues, were influenced by bubblegum pop and the related myth of the American teenager: "A mythologised version of American adolescent life, 'the teenager' encapsulated the consumer society's hedonistic fantasies of unbridled leisure, pleasure and carefree fun – a set of images and stereotypes that 70s punk both relished and lampooned"[20]. This strain of American punk, Osgerby asserts, was

17. S. Frith, *op. cit.*, p. 11.
18. Gerry Smyth, *Noisy Island: A Short History of Irish Popular Music*, Cork, Ireland, Cork U.P., 2005, p. 59.
19. Link Roland, *Kicking Up a Racket: The Story of Stiff Little Fingers, 1977-1983*, Belfast, Appletree, 2009, p. 68.
20. B. Osgerby, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

grounded in an encounter with the mythologies and icons that had come to surround *teenage* suburban life. American punk elaborated a tongue-in-cheek pastiche of drive-in movies, high-school proms, beach parties and the whole iconography of carefree 'teenage kicks'. Here, the kitsch emblems of post-war America's consumer-culture were simultaneously parodied and celebrated[21].

Osgerby is speaking about the impact of the myth in the US, but it also had its importance in the punk scenes that emerged in Europe, whether in Ireland, Britain or even France. Punk rock as it arose in Europe was heavily influenced by US bands – Iggy Pop and the Stooges, the New York Dolls and especially the Ramones. Malcolm McLaren, before managing the Sex Pistols, briefly worked with the New York Dolls. Moreover, British and Irish punk rockers were also indebted to British pub rock and glam rock, genres which, partly as a reaction against what was perceived as the pretentiousness of *prog* rock, the distance of arena rock, and the politicisation of leisure by the 1960s counterculture, looked back to the excitement and lack of obvious political concern of 1950s American rock'n'roll[22]. Both pub and glam rock laid the emphasis on teenage leisure and pleasure. T. Rex ("Teenage Dream"), Roxy Music ("Virginia Plain": "You're so sheer, you're so chic / Teenage rebel of the week"), David Bowie ("Starman") and acts such as Gary Glitter, Alvin Stardust, Sweet, Mud, and Suzi Quatro all celebrated and lampooned teenage myths. At least two of Northern Ireland's earliest punk bands, the Undertones and RUDI, started out by playing covers of glam rock. British pub rock bands like Eddie and the Hot Rods and Dr Feelgood played a raw brand of American-inspired rhythm & blues. Significantly, both acts played in Northern Ireland in 1976, and inspired young people who would later become punks to start their own groups. Punk rock as a genre added cynicism and an extra dose of rebelliousness to the *insouciance* and irreverence of these genres. However, top-charting pop music also played a role in propagating teenage tropes as it was the most readily accessible form of popular music and was thus unavoidable. The last of the big bubblegum pop bands, the Bay City Rollers, had in Northern Ireland as elsewhere a huge following, and played there in 1976: local power pop punk band the Starjets opened for them and for the Glitter band in 1976, before turning to pop punk. Bubblegum pop, described by Osgerby as "deftly executed pop hits distinguished by a pumping dance beat and simple but catchy chorus hooks and instrumental riffs"[23] provided great material for punk musicians who had few music-making skills. The Sex Pistols' guitarist Glen Matlock has explained

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21.   *Ibid.*, p. 160.
22.   Malcolm McLaren considered that Billy Fury – one of Britain's earliest rock'n'roll stars – was more important to popular music than Bob Dylan.
23.   B. Osgerby, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

how he lifted the opening hook of "Pretty Vacant" off Abba's "SOS".[24] Furthermore, punk rock, like pop or the teenage-orientated rock'n'roll of the 1950s, favoured the single over the album.

Whether teenage musical and thematic tropes made their way into Northern Irish punk directly through American artists, or through the adoption and adaptation of American genres by British and Irish musicians, they were seized upon, consciously or not, by the young punks who started bands. Many English bands also drew at least some of their inspiration from American-style teenage pop: the Damned, Generation X, Penetration and the Buzzcocks. However, almost all of the first-wave punk bands in Northern Ireland tended to have a more pop-inflected sound than their English counterparts. As Greg Cowan, the singer of the Outcasts, the Northern band with the toughest reputation, has said: "we were all power pop, but we didn't know".[25] In the early days of punk rock it was difficult for young people in Northern Ireland to find out what the music sounded like, because of the limited availability of punk rock records. Thematically, Northern punk groups seemed preoccupied by teenage themes. The most famous example is undoubtedly the Undertones "Teenage Kicks", but adolescent concerns and even the word *teenager* itself appears again and again in the lyrics of a large number of songs from the Northern punk scene: "Teenager in Love" by the Idiots; "Teenage Love Song" by P45; "Teenage Rebel" by Strike, "Teenagers" by the Sect, "The Teen Age" by Victim, "Just Another Teenage Rebel", by the Outcasts, etc. In "Lipstick Heroes", the Androids refer to the New York Dolls as "Teenage heartthrob" and in the song "Number one" by RUDI, Brian Young sings "I wanna be a teenage dream". One of the creators of the fanzine *Alternative Ulster* said about RUDI that "their songs documented exactly what it was like to be a teenager at the time and the subject matter therefore revolved around alcohol, glue, jealousy, girls and trouble with the police. Although I don't remember the one about homework!".[26] This quote can be applied to a large number of Northern Ireland punk groups. It is also interesting to note some of the songs which were covered by these bands: RUDI covered "Yummy Yummy Yummy" by American bubblegum pop band Ohio Express, and the Idiots produced a punk version of "Teenager in Love", an American song originally written by Doc Pomus & Mort Shuman, first for Dion & the Belmonts (1958) but which here references the 1972 cover by American teen idol Donny Osmond.[27] "Teenager in Love" was, in the words of collector and amateur punk historian Sean O'Neill, "a song which practically

24. David Simpson, "Glen Matlock: 'No matter what we do, nothing will equate to the Sex Pistols'", *The Guardian*, 11 April 2014.
25. Greg Cowan, Personal interview, Belfast, 2 July 2014.
26. Sean O'Neill and Guy Trelford, *It Makes You Want to Spit: The Definitive Guide to Punk in Northern Ireland*, Dublin, Reekus, 2003, p. 22.
27. The song was also covered by Connie Stevens on *The Muppet Show* in 1976 (which was produced in Britain by ITV at the time).

every Belfast punk band at the time had a go at"[28]. British punk is some-times seen as bringing forth a sense of the local because singers often held on to or adopted local accents (John Lydon, Joe Strummer, Pete Shelley). However, this was not the case for everyone: in Northern Ireland most punk singers tried to put on an American accent – but usually failed. Often, the voice is neither American nor Northern Irish, but belongs to a space in between. Thus, in covers like "Yummy Yummy Yummy" or "Teenager in Love", the meaning of the songs is displaced both by the genre (punk rock) and by the local accent which unintentionally breaks through.

But what does it mean to produce a punk cover of a late 1960s American bubblegum pop band in Northern Ireland? As Gerry Smyth has stated for the Undertones, "Teenage Kicks' *reiterates* the teenage lust/love scenario from early rock'n'roll, and *re-interprets* it in the light of new tech-nological and ideological developments".[29] By giving teenage songs a punk treatment, whether by covering pop standards or by parodying and per-forming them in a context which contrasted so sharply with the mythical suburban America which had inspired them, Northern Irish punks cre-ated a dissonance, a sense of dislocation. The irony of punks singing love songs in a conflict-ridden society with few economic prospects betrays the fact that despite their affiliation with a subculture which was reputed for its suspicion of romance and of commercial culture, these young peo-ple actually aspired for a life of "unbridled leisure, pleasure and carefree fun".[30] They knew that this was something out of their reach, so in their songs they imagined a teenage world which was both familiar and for-eign, both real and imaginary, a liminal space where they could con-centrate on being teenagers and deal with adolescent problems, such as crushes, sex and growing up. America and teenage pop provided a myth-ical language they could use to navigate their own adolescent years and emotional landscape in Northern Ireland. John O'Neill of the Undertones said in a 1978 *Alternative Ulster* interview: "We really have to make the best out of situations in Derry & N. Ireland to find something to write about that doesn't sound too contrived (*eg*: straight politics). Our music has to [reflect] *our* everyday life or else it just isn't honest". This is signif-icant because it means that the "Troubles" are not considered to be the determining feature of their everyday life but the backdrop to it. Feargal Sharkey of the Undertones famously said: "People used to ask early on why we didn't write songs about the Troubles: we were doing our best to escape from it".[31] However, the interviews I carried out during research for my PhD thesis seem to indicate that it wasn't the violence of the conflict that young people in Derry, Belfast or elsewhere wanted to escape so much as

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28. "Strike", *Spit Records*, http://www.spitrecords.co.uk/strike.htm (last accessed 24/02/2018).
29. G. Smyth, *op. cit.*, p.59.
30. *Ibid.,* p. 156.
31. John Savage, *England's Dreaming: Sex Pistols and Punk Rock*, London, Faber & Faber, 2005, p. 619.

its effects: lack of opportunities and boredom. In this regard the difference of experiences between young people living in towns and cities in the north of Ireland, the south of Ireland and those in Britain is arguably a difference of degree rather than of kind. Nevertheless, the desire to escape was very real. It is made explicit in "Teenage Love Song" by the pop punk/power pop band P45, in which the frontman sings: "You gotta get yourself out of this hole". But this proves impossible: "we're stuck here in this city". The question which is repeated during the chorus – "Why play another, just any other teenage love song?" – receives an answer in the last verse. "So now we're stuck here in this city / But when the bright light shines/ Well people don't - don't like feeling lonesome / So keep on playing time after time". More than simply celebrating pleasure and leisure in song, the teenage pop punk of the Northern Ireland scene had the added value of acting as a self-fulfilling prophecy: it created the opportunities for "unbridled leisure, pleasure and carefree fun" that didn't exist there in the first place, partly thanks to punk's emphasis on DIY. Northern Ireland in the 1970s was hardly a permissive society, and has been described as "probably the most Christian society in the western world except for the Republic of Ireland"; even among young people, social attitudes tended to be conservative: in 1978 Northern Irish male teenagers were much more likely to frown on pre-marital sex than their English peers, for instance.[32] Punk by contrast facilitated the creation of spaces where young people could escape the moral conservatism and sectarian politics of their communities and have a good time, whether by enjoying shows in cross-community settings, consuming alcohol and drugs, or engaging in sex. This is unsurprising: after all, with 1970s punk, as Jon Savage has said, "there was this all-consuming concentration on the now"[33]. But this was more than mere escapism – or rather escapism itself does not preclude a critique of the status quo. Simon Frith has argued that "rock has been used simultaneously as form of self-indulgence and individual escape *and* as a source of solidarity and active dissatisfaction' and that punk rock in particular derived its 'cultural significance [...] not from its articulation of unemployment but from its exploration of the aesthetics of proletarian play"[34]. Punks in Northern Ireland, through their adoption of the aesthetics of American teenage pop culture and its focus on pleasure, emphasised and celebrated leisure perhaps even more so than their contemporaries elsewhere. If we agree with Frith that punk articulated a leisure critique of the work ethic,[35] in the context of the "Troubles" it can be seen as having provided a leisure critique of the status quo. Singing about girls, love and the woes of adolescence rather than about the conflict, and doing so in spaces shared by young Catholics and Protestants alike, can be seen as a way of resisting or

32. Ed Cairns, *Caught in Crossfire: Children and the Northern Ireland Conflict*, Belfast, Appletree, 1987, p. 72-76.
33. Johan Kugelberg & Jon Savage (eds.), *Punk: An Aesthetic*, New York, Rizzoli, 2012, p. 149.
34. S. Frith, *op. cit.*, p. 265-267.
35. *Ibid.,* p. 267.

at least of delegitimizing the process of cultural reproduction of both communities. As Jon Savage has said, "punk was nothing less than the latest rearing up of the teenage id";[36] and the teenage id was clearly influenced by America: "the Americans colonized our subconscious".[37] If punk rock brought to Northern Ireland the excitement needed to entice young people from diverse backgrounds out of their neighbourhoods and encourage them to pick up a guitar and start a band, it was the first wave of punk's focus on sounds and tropes linked to the American myth of the teenager rather than on overtly political themes which enabled them to maintain a degree of cross-community solidarity.

36.   J. Kugelberg & J. Savage, *op. cit.*, p. 146.
37.   Wim Wenders quoted in S. Frith, *op. cit.*, p. 45.