



# Ranters and Crowd Pleasers: Punk in Pop Music, 1977-1992

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## **Ranters and Crowd Pleasers: Punk in Pop Music, 1977-1992** Greil Marcus

Was punk just another moment in music history, a flash in time when a group of young rebels exploded in a fury of raw sound, outrageous styles, and in-your-face attitude? Greil Marcus, author of the renowned "Lipstick Traces," delves into the after-life of punk as a much richer phenomenon a form of artistic and social rebellion that continually erupts into popular culture.

In more than seventy short pieces written over fifteen years, he traces the uncompromising strands of punk from Johnny Rotten to Elvis Costello, Sonic Youth, even Bruce Springsteen. Marcus's unparalleled insight into present-day culture and brilliant ear for music bring punk's searing half-life into deep focus. Originally published in the U.S. as "Ranters and Crowd Pleasers."

## **Ranters and Crowd Pleasers: Punk in Pop Music, 1977-1992 Details**

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# **From Reader Review Ranters and Crowd Pleasers: Punk in Pop Music, 1977-1992 for online ebook**

## **Gaelan D'costa says**

Even though the very title telegraphs the synthesis of Punk and Politics, I was taken aback at this collection of writings by Greil Marcus.

I didn't learn all that much about the music: like Robert Christgau, Greil Marcus' essays evoke moods which endear me to the albums he's discussing, makes me want to listen to them not because I know anything about how I'd enjoy them but because I want to feel anything close to the same sort of profundity Marcus writes about.

The bigger sledgehammer, though, is the political conscience that fills these pages. Even though Punk is a political music, it's currently an empty one, all surface, no feeling. By writing about Bruce Springsteen I can feel the terror of a world governed by Reagan and Thatcher, and I and draw the parallels to the Bush/Blair/Harper world I haven't yet fully escaped as a Canadian.

Reading this book as a punk, politically aware, and a computer scientist, I have to ask myself: Could I ever embed this much concern about the world into works on subjects as seemingly distant as my aesthetic love and my tech love?

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## **Eric says**

A fine collection of Marcus' writings that revolve around punk and postpunk music for the likes of Rolling Stone, Artforum, and other publications. It's a reminder of how intelligent and thoughtful criticism of music and pop culture has suffered a bit in the internet era. I'm sure great stuff is still out there (Tell me!—Where?), but Marcus is unique in how he mixes highbrow assertions with what could be construed as lowbrow subject matter, and then goes deep, sometimes in the course of just 2 or 3 pages. Marcus has a poetic, often hyperkinetic style that suits the subject matter, making daring connections between the musical and the socio-political that never come off overly academic or cerebral. One feels his excitement and tags along on his wild rides of free association. My only criticism is that Marcus plays favorites—John Lydon/Rotten, Elvis Costello, the Mekons, Gang of Four or the Clash crop up in almost every piece in some way—and his critical lens tends to stay within the confines of the postmodern / Dick Hebdige school of pop culture studies. Kudos also for introducing me to postpunk bands such as Essential Logic and Kleenex / Liliput.

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## **Wm says**

I like Greil Marcus' work collected in this volume, but a little goes a long way -- this is something to just dip in to. In aggregate, it's a little much. This is less music criticism as an exploration of aesthetics and more as an exploration of politics. The Mekons, Gang of Four, the Clash, Bruce Springsteen and Elvis Costello all make multiple appearances. The twin spectres of Reagan and Thatcher loom over everything. There is some interesting exploration of gender and punk/post-punk.

It's very much of the time. Which is fine. But the constant gloom and grind and slight tremors wear over time. And the short story at the end is just bad literature. A taboo-splitting, gonzo attempt at a punk story that has not stood the test of time. Unless you want to relive the Thatcher/Reagan years via writing about punk music, much better to read one of Marcus's more academic, more current works.

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### **Tom says**

This is probably the book that had the largest influence on me. I read it at least once a year, and have done so every year since I first found it in a bargain bin in Western Connecticut. It's a collection of reviews and articles Marcus wrote between 1977 and 1992, loosely organized around punk rock. As a jaded 18-year-old punk, I was exposed to all kinds of new things by reading this. If it weren't for this book, I might never have heard the invigorating, life-affirming music of Elvis Costello, the Mekons, the Gang of Four, the Adolescents, etc. But it's not only music: the book is a guide to whole areas of culture I never knew about, and introduced me to dada, the novels of Margaret Drabble, the stories of Raymond Chandler, and the work of sociologist Christopher Lasch (among others). Even today, whenever I see something mentioned in this book - a movie, a book, a magazine, a record - I buy it, like I'm assembling Marcus' secret canon. Of course, this book also had the arguably baleful effect of making my prose a pale imitation of his for the better part of 10 years, but that's another story.

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### **Rafael Eaton says**

This would be a lot better if one out of every two articles wasn't about Gang of Four.

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### **patty says**

Must read for fans of Elvis Costello, Gang of Four, The Sex Pistols, The Mekons, and The Slits.

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### **Drea Carmen says**

Wanted to love this book, and could've given the rich, compelling subject matter. But I will never understand how Marcus is considered a good writer. No, sometimes the subject just can't overcome horrible writing.

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### **Julia says**

(mdc) this is a collection of this dude's essays and articles over the years. i'm only a little ways into it but i think i love it. the guy writes really well and manages to convey his passion for the music he's writing about without lapsing into worshipful dicksucking, like a lot of critics. also the book starts off with an essay about why Let It Bleed is so important, and that's been my favorite Stones album since I was 10. The essay made me want to put it on, which is a sign of good music writing, I think.

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## **Gabriel says**

First read this when I was a stupid kid; it probably left me a little less stupid (as a "punk," I was mystified by the near-constant references to and raptures on Springsteen).

Reading it again now leaves me a great deal less stupid. This book is proof of the power of just this sort of criticism. The impassioned and informed critique of popular culture is not just another manifestation of that culture, but, at least potentially, a far more powerful account of the times in which it was produced than any record of those times could be. As an explication of its time and place (the 1980s in America), this book succeeds where "Lipstick Traces" tried and failed (that book was supposed to be a "Secret History of the 20th c.").

Marcus frequently pulls apart the recordings he is writing about into unrecognizable pieces, but his assemblage is so convincing, so persuasive, that listening again to them, it is possible to hear some of what motivated him to write these pieces. Certainly, one has to believe that something motivated these musicians to do what they did. Marcus is, so far, the most lucid thinker I have read when it comes to the motivations of the punk moment. He goes beyond the situational into the motivational, and in so doing, looks at the society in which these things are happening, giving us (his readers, many years later) a record of that society that is easily apprehensible through the art created out of it.

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## **Albert says**

Greil Marcus is one of my favorite writers. I feel this way not because of his opinions about specific bands but mainly for his political and sociological perspectives upon his experiences with rock music in modern American culture and a little bit of British culture as well. This book is primarily made up of short essays written for magazine publication, and most focus on record or concert reviews placed into his unique historical and sociological contexts. He sees the contradictions and injustices throughout Western culture in the era of Reagan and Thatcher, that still oppress us today. I can only imagine that he would find modern day culture just as vapid as it's pop music, having been a part of the burgeoning punk and post-punk scene of the late 70's and early 80's, writing articles about various punk groups who were less well-known than the Sex Pistols and The Clash, with a particular focus on bands with female members, like Delta 5, X-Ray Spex, Essential Logic, Kleenex/LiLiPut and Au Pairs, particularly due to his focus on the gender politics of the punk movement, as a reflection of the society that inspired it. I found the "creative" essay at the end a bit extreme and disjointed just to tell us how he first heard the X-Ray Spex B-side "I Am A Cliché". And maybe have a few less Elvis Costello interviews (he did write an influential one in 1982 for Rolling Stone, only printed in part for this collection) would have made me increase my rating by a star. Still, a great collection of writing from a keen mind and lover of cool music. I've been listening to Au Pairs for weeks!

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## **Spiros says**

While it is true that Mr. Marcus is occasionally given to disappearing into a semiotic fog, on the whole this collection is pretty entertaining. He does a good, I would guess serendipitous, job of chronicling the arcs (I can't say careers) of acts (not to say artists) such as Gang of Four, the Mekons, the Clash, Elvis Costello, and

Bruce Springsteen. Standout articles include cogent reviews of LET IT BLEED and ARMED FORCES, and a remarkably perceptive account of the dissolution of the Clash. My favorite article was on the death of KSAN, which definitely brought back the despair of watching a precious part of San Francisco turn first into a MOR/AOR ratings obsessed station, then a "modern Country" station, later to be replaced by KRQR ('80's pop-40) and finally KFOG (classic Rock, a concept just about as inane and antiseptic as a Rock'n'Roll HALLOFFAME). I have long maintained that the malaise that gripped the City in the wake of Jonestown and Dan White marked the end of San Francisco's greatness; I tend to forget the part that the death of KSAN, which happened contemporaneously, played in that malaise.

On a slightly different tack: I am sure there has to be a reason why Marcus repeatedly refers to Bernard Sumner as "Bernard Albrecht" (maybe those pawky boys in New Order were pulling his leg), but I have no clue as to why the completely unreadable short story which ends the book was included.

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## **Clay says**

I'm really really into music. I watch reviews by theneededrop, read Nick Hornby novels and check Pitchfork for Best New Music regularly. So when I found this book in a flea market I figured that I could learn more about punk.

Weeeell it was a little bit different than what I expected and I should explain that I "browsed" through the book. It consists of articles by the author and often deals with gigs, albums, songs, tv appearances or interviews by people who played a certain role in the punk movement. They are completely separated from each other. I didn't know a couple of the bands and when the article didn't seem to be too interesting I skipped it. On the other hand I discovered new music this way too.

All in all it was an enjoyable book. You wouldn't guess that many of the articles deal with somebody like Bruce Springsteen but it does make sense in a certain way, I also really liked the fact that the "Nebraska" album got some special mentions, it's just a brilliant album. British band Gang of Four are also frequently mentioned, I liked their music anyway so I was bound to enjoy the descriptions of their albums and songs.

The last chapter of the book is a shocking short story. It was quite disturbing actually, but in the end you understand the point of it.

If you're looking for a good, linear story about punk this book is not for you. But if you don't mind reading articles which are separated from each other and were written during the 80s about punk music you should give this a try.

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## **Marissa says**

It took me a while to get through this whole book, but I'm glad I did. Lately I've been less interested in music than I used to be and I decided to read some of the legendary Greil Marcus' musings as a way of getting myself interested again. I'm not sure if it did that as much as I had hoped, but it was good to read someone gushing about all the post-punk bands that I love, especially the feminist ones. If nothing else, it makes me feel like I should give Gang of Four a second chance. Admittedly, sometimes I think Marcus gets a little too caught up in deep academic meanings and extended adjectives. Comparing it to the Lester Bangs book I read recently, the language and style of the writing is not really as fresh and immediate as his. On the other hand,

I think his pieces have done so much to validate the work of female rock musicians and appreciate it on its own terms in a way that hardly any music journalists have bothered to try to do since. That's admirable enough to be worth some serious hat-tipping.

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## **Roz Milner says**

Why should you or me or anyone at all read a book of rock criticism, especially when it's filled with stuff about records from 30 years ago or longer, of bands who aren't around anymore and musicians who aren't even alive? It's a good question. Why should anyone read Greil Marcus' 1992 collection *Ranters and Crowd Pleasers* (also republished as *Inside the Fascist Bathroom*)?

It's tempting to say something about how it puts music in a proper context, like reading a period review would help us get into the mind of that particular place and time. This might be true for some collections, I imagine, but it's not really why I'm recommending this particular book of Marcus' criticism.

I wouldn't recommend it as a history of punk rock, either. Although it's nominally a book about punk rock, particularly of English punk, and Marcus' reviews cover a pretty good range of bands, generally a handful of names keep popping up, over and over: The Clash, Gang of Four, The Mekons and Lilliput. At the same time, more than a few seminal American bands fall to the wayside: there's only a couple mentions of Sonic Youth and Black Flag, while both Husker Du and The Minutemen don't ever show up at all.

So as a history of punk in the 80s, it only kind of succeeds; books like *Our Band Could Be Your Life* cover the 80s underground in a better fashion. So why am I recommending *Ranters and Crowd Pleasers*, then, exactly?

Basically because it's a collection of criticism about music in the 80s, but is about more than just music. It takes music, ties it into pop culture and examines why this music was so important then, looks to deeper trends in the decade and gets to the core of why some of this music is so powerful and why the decade unfolded as it did.

In his heyday, Marcus wrote smart and literate rock criticism for a variety of magazines (I think now he mostly teaches). Most famously, he wrote for *Rolling Stone*, but the bulk of his best material came for smaller outlets: *New West/California*, *Artforum* and occasionally in *The Village Voice*. Most of these pieces appeared there first. The last of these pieces was written in 1992, but most of Marcus' observations and insights haven't dated very much.

Indeed, the book's most dated moments are when it strays from punk and into culture: for example, there's a look at a one-off anti-Reagan record called *Bonzo Goes to Washington* that I only remember because *Doonesbury* did a bit on it.

But largely, Marcus avoids knee-jerk reactions and delves into critical theory when writing about music. Names like Roland Barthes, D.H. Lawrence and Raymond Chandler pop up here and there as Marcus ties literature, theory and music together. It all sounds kind of high-flutin' and pretentious, sure, and truthfully, I've had that reaction to his writing before (see: *Dead Elvis*). The difference here is the music is often at the same level.

See, the thing that's easy to forget about post-punk is who made most of it: college kids. For example, the

people in Gang of Four weren't a bunch of kids who hung out together at local club, they were a bunch of young adults in university who were steeped in critical theory. This was a band that argued about the meanings and impacts of art amongst themselves. Other bands here – The Au Pairs, Delta 5 and The Mekons, among others – all come from similar backgrounds.

In other words, they brought this on themselves. And when Marcus goes into full-fledged critical mode, their music is packed with enough allusions and meanings for him to work with; this ain't a critical reading of "Blue Suede Shoes."

And indeed, it's a treat. When Marcus breaks open the Au Pairs' first record, he explains how they use an off-kilter, dub-informed rhythm to give their music it's edge, while their lyrics don't force a point of view, but "create situations and assume roles within them." Between the space and thought, it's an intelligent and more nuanced take than, say, a 200 word capsule review by Christgau or Rolling Stone.

But the book really takes off with two figures: Bruce Springsteen and Elvis Costello. Both finished the 70s on high notes – Springsteen with *Darkness on the Edge of Town* and Costello with *Armed Forces* – and spent the 80s alternately making great music and questionable personal choices.

When it comes to their music, Marcus' writing rises to meet these musicians. His essays on the rawness of Springsteen's *Nebraska* or on the sardonic Costello tune "Pills and Soap" are where it all comes together, Marcus tying this bleak music to the nihilism of punk rock and the then-future of Reagan/Thatcher neo-conservatism. To wit:

"Pills and Soap is catchy. And yet it is very nearly too well written, too artful, to sidle its way into a listener's day, which is what it means to do – so that days or years later one will recall its whole, unfragmented vision, as bits and pieces of that vision become true..." (pg 250)

Even if Costello's vision of the future hasn't quite come true (thank god), it doesn't make his music or Marcus' reaction to it any less powerful. And, I think, it's often the case throughout the book. Go read it, then go listen to the bands he writes about. It's easier than ever and he just may convert you, too.

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## **Gordon says**

5 stars? Yeah. What can I say? I like my punk writing to be overly-intellectual.

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