

**LIVING THE PUNK LIFE IN GREEN BAY,  
WISCONSIN: EXPLORING CONTRADICTION IN  
THE MUSIC OF NOFX**

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## **LIVING THE PUNK LIFE IN GREEN BAY, WISCONSIN: EXPLORING CONTRADICTION IN THE MUSIC OF NOFX**

### **Abstract**

This paper studies song lyrics from three mid-period songs written and performed by Californian punk band NOFX. I discuss NOFX's skilful exploration of contradiction in the three selected songs, two of which are character studies of a single young male individual. The questions that the songs pose in true dialectical fashion (but do not definitively answer) include: Is it possible to maintain the carefree existential existence of the archetypal punk rocker in the face of the constraints imposed by suburban life and the voices of middle-class moderation? Can a Jewish gang in Fairfax, Los Angeles simultaneously affirm group self-identity, defend its turf, and practise its (marginalized) religion? Can a young man enjoy Christianity because it makes his life 'seem less insane' whilst simultaneously taking control of his life and not being a Christian sheep? NOFX poses these questions in admirable dialectical fashion, allows us to reflexively examine the issues involved, and form our own conclusions. The band rarely descends into moralism but moral values underpin NOFX's worldview. Above all, NOFX tries to maintain a sophisticated but precarious 'both/and' rather than 'either/or' approach to each one of the questions posed in this abstract. Clever lyrics, which highlight the contradictions that a punk rocker must face whilst living in suburban America, have become one of the band's most loved and most enduring themes.

**Keywords:** Christian punk, Christianity, contradiction, dialectic, existentialism, Marxism, NOFX, punk rock, SoCal punk, Joe Strummer.

## Introduction

This paper explores contradiction in the punk rock music of NOFX (pronounced ‘No Effects’),<sup>1</sup> one of the most important bands of the ‘SoCal’ (Southern Californian) punk scene of the mid-1990s. Although much academic and popular literature has been written on the first waves of American and British punk, much less attention has been devoted to the SoCal scene, especially from academics.<sup>2</sup> Whilst many critics dismiss SoCal leader Rancid as a Clash-derivative this judgement seems unfair (Spicer 2006, 262). Kevin Dettmar (2006, 129) cites Nick Hornby (2002, 140) and criticizes him for adopting a naive Romantic view of the creative process in rock whereby individual genius artists produce works of brilliance out of nothing and independently of all that has gone before. By contrast, Karl Marx’s sophisticated dialectical understanding of the historical process can be seen clearly in the following quote:

Men [*sic*] make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living (Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, 1852 (Marx 1994b, 188)).

Likewise, in the same spirit, Keith Negus (1999, 35) writes that ‘record companies, like most of us, have to create their own fortunes within specific social, historical and political conditions’. Clearly punk already had a history in the late-1980s and early-1990s when Rancid and NOFX were setting the directions for their new bands. In this paper I explore further, in relation to 1990s SoCal punk, the questions posed very recently by Steve Waksman (2009, 208): ‘What is the meaning of rock’s past? Which aspects of the past should be retained, and which should be rejected?’ I would argue that SoCal punks Rancid and

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<sup>1</sup> Androutsopoulos (2000) studies the use of non-standard spelling in German language punk rock fanzines and concludes that non-standard spellings are designed to police the boundaries between insider and outsider status and to signal sub-cultural capital (Bourdieu 1979, 1993; Thornton 1995). The incongruity between the spelling and the pronunciation of NOFX is also a means of signalling insider status.

<sup>2</sup> Literature searches for Rancid and NOFX on Elsevier and Blackwell websites revealed no matches in article titles or keywords (of course excluding the multitude of scientific articles that discuss rancid). Bradford Martin (2004) discusses ‘post-punk’ in 1990s America without making it clear exactly which bands fit within this category for him. Although pop-punk bands do not fit this criteria for Martin (see 169 where Martin names Blink 182, Green Day and Sum 41), leading SoCal bands Rancid, NOFX and MXPX are not mentioned by name in his article. Of these bands only the third has been frequently tagged as pop-punk in the popular literature. In personal communication (e-mail dated 7 January 2009), Martin suggests that Rancid would fit into his definition of post-punk.

NOFX both offer ‘an authentic voice of opposition’ (Martin 2004, 169), Rancid a serious and angry one, NOFX a camp and sometimes ridiculous but equally sincere one. Without implying that either band did not have full freedom, in Sartrean terms, to create themselves, I also acknowledge that previous punk bands had been a major influence and neither band could in some sense avoid building on what had gone before. Even Sex Pistols vocalist John Lydon/Rotten (hereafter John Lydon) has commented that there are no original thoughts in rock and that his band built upon its 1960s influences which it then in turn protested against (Lydon et al. 1994, 113). Likewise, Bradford Martin (2004, 156) talks about ‘a salient continuity among post-punk fans [and bands] with the transgressive discourses of 1970s punk’ but he does not resort to essentialist discussions of punk’s ‘true spirit’. In the terminology of the French existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (2003), facticity and transcendence are both essential aspects of our lives in this world. As Sartre (2003, 517, emphasis original) writes, in the spirit of Marx, ‘[i]f the past does not determine our actions, at least it is such that we can not take a new decision except *in terms of it*’ and ‘no free surpassing can be effected except in terms of a past’ (Sartre 2003, 518).

Dettmar (2006) points out the dangers of essentialism in rock popular journalism and academic scholarship where rock is proclaimed ‘dead’ because it has mutated and transformed itself so drastically that its baby-boomer authors now feel alienated and disenchanted. The term ‘classic rock’ (there is even a leading magazine by this name) is a good example of essentialist thought in rock. Punk popular literature (but rarely that written by the musicians themselves) is full of essentialist references to the ‘essence’ or ‘true spirit’ of punk. I aim in this paper to avoid the popular literature’s essentialist logic without attempting to reduce the importance to punk history of its long since reified heroes and anti-heroes, John Lydon, Sid Vicious, Joe Strummer, ‘Wattie’ Buchan, the Ramones, etc.

Glenn Pillsbury (2006, xiii-xiv) has written in *Damage Incorporated: Metallica and the Production of Musical Identity* that it is always dangerous to write academic work about a living artist since obviously the academic could be proved hopelessly wrong by future events. This problem, whilst it will always be present to some extent, can be minimized by focusing on a particular clearly defined period of an artist’s career. NOFX formed in Berkeley, California in 1983, based around an original trio of ‘Fat’ Mike Burkett, Eric Scott Melvin, and Erik Sandin, and its first album to hit the stores was *S&M Airlines* in 1989 (Spicer 2006, 218). In this paper I focus specifically on songs from the mid-period of NOFX’s long career,

and especially from the band's gold-selling 1994 album *Punk in Drublic*.<sup>3</sup> Enough time has now passed for us to be able to view these years within the context of the whole of NOFX's career to date and developments in the punk music scene. I avoid discussion of the late-period of NOFX's career other than to point out in a footnote that the lyrics are now not at the high standard they once were, the band having largely substituted subtle exploration of contradiction for direct abuse.

I agree with Dettmar (2006, xii) that it is impossible for any scholar in popular music to fully free herself/himself from her/his emotional investment in the music being studied. I am a fan of punk, the Clash, Dropkick Murphys, MXPX, NOFX, Rancid, and the Sex Pistols, although I came to punk only in the last six years. As a teenager in 1983 and 1984 I was a committed fan of both traditional heavy-metal music (especially AC/DC, Deep Purple, Iron Maiden, Judas Priest, Rainbow, and Saxon) and the new thrash-metal sounds coming out of the San Francisco Bay Area (such as Metallica). As will be discussed in the next section, both of these heavy-metal scenes (traditional and thrash), and especially those post-1977 versions of traditional heavy-metal such as the New Wave of British Heavy Metal (NWOBHM) of the late-1970s and early-1980s, owe much to the first wave of punk's energy, freshness, immediacy, and do-it-yourself (DIY) ethic (Waksman 2009, 147).

Why was it that in 2003 and 2004 (age 35 and 36) I suddenly developed a curiosity about, and then a passion for, the Clash? I was, after all, a metalhead and had been so since the age of 15; traditionally punk and heavy-metal have been viewed as 'genre' and 'counter genre' (Heather Dubrow, cited in Waksman 2009, 148). Basically, the Clash's Joe Strummer's complete conviction concerning his own quasi-intellectual, street-based socialism appealed deeply to me as a 30-something urban guy struggling financially whilst studying for a PhD in accounting (yes it's just about as fun as it sounds!) and teaching part-time. Break-up songs such as 'Train in Vain' appealed as I had gone through a recent separation. The Clash spoke loudly to, in, and from my personal circumstances, and led me in turn on to Marxism. In addition, I could see clear similarities between Thatcher's Britain and John Howard's neo-liberal Australia which made Strummer's quasi-Althusserian critique of the British governmental institutions of his era especially prescient. My musical background, as a lifelong metalhead, but with a growing interest in punk, makes me somewhat like sociologist Georg Simmel's 'stranger-observer' (discussed in Blumberg 1989): inside but also outside, close but not close.

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<sup>3</sup> According to Wikipedia (accessed 6 December 2007), *Punk in Drublic* peaked at No. 12 in the US album charts (Heatseekers).

I conclude that part of NOFX's appeal during the mid-1990s was its relentless highlighting of and rejoicing in the contradictions of modern American suburban life. Contradiction is a primary theme in NOFX's best lyrics and it is this rejoicing in contradictions that has helped to fuel the band's camp fun image. Lead vocalist/bassist 'Fat Mike' (real name Michael John Burkett) and his bandmates have also not been afraid to see and rejoice in the contradictions in the band's own position as 'defenders of the punk rock elite'.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, fellow SoCal punk band Rancid rarely examines contradictions (the complex lyric to 2000s 'Radio Havana' that explores the bundle of contradictions that is modern Cuba is a notable exception). Instead Rancid is content to tell straight-forward narratives of working class alienation and brotherhood. Because of this, Rancid has been saddled with a serious image which can be contrasted with NOFX's camp image based on dialectical humour and self-parody. Likewise, Christian punk bands do not revel in contradiction;<sup>5</sup> instead they present Christian doctrine, as well as a positive humanitarian message, to an audience that comprises both Christian and secular punk fans.

Despite Rancid's doubtless commitment to the punk scene and to the punk ethos, NOFX's love of contradictions makes the band arguably the true inheritors of the Sex Pistols' and the Clash's legacy. Both bands' dialectical worldview owes much to the 'cultural Marxism' of Malcolm McLaren, Sex Pistols manager, and his friend Bernie Rhodes, manager of the Clash as well as to Joe Strummer's father Ronald Mellor's possibly more intellectual Marxism. Mepham (1979, 171) writes that 'if there is an Hegelian inheritance in Marx then it will be found to reside in his use of dialectical method'. Cultural Marxists, heavily influenced by Antonio Gramsci and the Frankfurt School, retained a strong emphasis on the dialectic (as, of course, did their antithesis, the 'structural Marxists' of the same period, such as Louis Althusser and Mao Zedong, who retained at least some belief in the continued equating of the Soviet Union project with living Marxist-Leninism).

The dialectician sees society as in a constant state of motion and flux; how the past will be transmitted into the future depends crucially on the balance of forces in the class struggle. Furthermore, there is contradiction built into the *essences* of all things (Mao 2007), and this unity-of-opposites in society (e.g. between the forces and relations of production, between the aristocracy and the industrial bourgeoisie, between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat) is

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<sup>4</sup> The band wrote a (very tongue-in-cheek) song entitled 'It's My Job to Keep Punk Rock Elite' which appears on 1997s *So Long and Thanks for All The Shoes* album.

<sup>5</sup> To assert that Christian punk bands do not examine contradiction is an oversimplification. However, it is less problematic to maintain that they typically do not *rejoice* in it. Christian punk is discussed in more detail in Section 2 of this paper.

always one of tension (Meikle 1979, 26). For both Hegel and Marx, the essentialist (A cannot be not-A) logic of the natural sciences and mainstream philosophy is replaced by the dialectical logic that A can be not-A through a process of becoming (Ruben 1979, 39-42). Crucially, the not-A contains within it the A-seed. To the question whether Leninism contained within it the seed of Stalinism, one senior Bolshevik replied dialectically that it did but there were many other seeds in Leninism as well. Dialectical materialism is not the same as either essentialism (A cannot be not-A) or determinism (A must become not-A).

Crucially, NOFX has *adjusted the punk message* so that it fully responds to the true reality of teenage life in contemporary American suburbia. However, the band's *thinking* remains dialectical in the best cultural Marxist traditions of the Pistols, the Clash, McLaren, and Rhodes. NOFX's approach is consistent with John Lydon and Joe Strummer's repeated calls for punk music to continue to address real contemporary issues rather than becoming a reactionary parody of its former vibrant self (see Gilbert 2004; James in press; Lydon et al. 1994, 63, 70, 72, 215, 241; Salewicz 2006; Savage 2005). NOFX's approach is truly dialectical as it works within, but does not accept as essentialist given, the status quo of modern American suburban society. The band always recognizes both personal and social change as possibilities. Fat Mike and bandmates realize that to replicate mechanistically the lyrical topics and preoccupations of the 1970s British punk heroes would render the band unable to effectively address modern American issues. On the other hand, much of that 1970s tradition is a seed that continues to reproduce itself today in modern punk and other alternative post-punk sub-genres (such as death-metal, grindcore, grunge, hardcore, metalcore, rap, and thrash-metal).<sup>6</sup> As such NOFX draws upon themes and perspectives expressed earlier but transports these and adapts them to the modern American suburban context that is the band's present home.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The next section provides a (very) brief history and sociology of punk rock, including both its English first-wave (1976 to 1978) and its Southern Californian second-wave (1994 to 1996). Section 3 includes lyrics analysis of three topical and influential middle-period NOFX songs, and Section 4 concludes.

### **'Turning rebellion into money': A (very) brief history and sociology of punk rock**

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<sup>6</sup> Mikkelsen (2009) explores the history of grindcore, usually regarded as a sub-genre of extreme-metal, and, in particular, the historic and present social and political activism of bands and musicians within the sub-genre.

Punk is a sub-genre and a scene of rock that, like the philosophies of Marxism and liberalism, continually reinvents itself as its key tenets, ideas, and aesthetics are continually revised and renegotiated. Negus (1999, 174) defines 'genre cultures' (such as punk and rap) as:

... an unstable intersection of music industry and media, fans and audience cultures, musician networks and broader social collectivities informed by distinct features of solidarity and social identity.

The UK 'first wave of punk' remains especially important as its ethos has a continual significance today for modern punks and alternative rockers of every persuasion. Its legendary performers and performances have taken on mythic status in western popular culture. Jon Savage (2005, 588) provides the best definition of the first wave, generally defined as 1976 to 1978, as follows: 'This includes the very first groups formed in response to the Sex Pistols or the existing groups who sped up their R&B modes: common throughout is the Ramonic style which became the standard definition of Punk'. As one of this paper's anonymous reviewers has wisely pointed out, punk has always had both its thinkers and its drinkers and of course most of the thinkers also enjoyed a drink or two. In fact, each member of the UK first wave's original triumvirate, the Sex Pistols, the Clash, and the Damned, brought different ingredients to the table and hence each contributed something special of its own to the movement: in punk journalist Caroline Coon's words, the Pistols had the 'personal politics', the Clash had the 'serious politics', and the Damned had the 'theatre, camp, and good fun' (cited in Lydon et al. 1994, 108). John Lydon, Chrissie Hynde, later of the Pretenders, and Paul Stahl have all expressed their considered views that punk as a movement (of course Lydon very often equates 'punk' with 'the Pistols') was anti-monarchy, and anti-the British class system (cited in Lydon et al. 1994, 3, 81, 120, 196, 221, 282-3, 285-6, 313-14, 319-320). Savage (2005, 336) writes, in his classic punk history *England's Dreaming*, that 'there was a real sense in which Punk's accurate record of England's tensions hit the desired chord – a clash, not between generations, but between rulers and ruled'. This theme, began by the Pistols, was continued by the Clash, which expressed the same sentiments from the time of its first gig on 4 April 1976, supporting the Sex Pistols at the Black Swan in Sheffield (Antonia et al. 2006, 67; Gilbert 2004, 95-6; Heylin 2007, 126-7, 132), up until what Savage (2005, 589) terms 'the last great Punk Rock 45', 1985s 'This is England'/'Do it Now'/'Sex Mad Roar' (Waksman 2009, 156).

When Lydon sings, in 'Anarchy in the UK' (1976), 'is this the IRA?/ I thought it was the UK/ or just another country', he challenges the English ruling class to acknowledge that the post-war 'consensus', built on the presumption of military and moral superiority, might be unfounded. Firstly, the UK is mistaken for (and hence rendered equivalent to) its modern enemy the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and, secondly, the UK is labelled as 'just another country'. Just being another country is the last thing the ruling class wanted to hear or wanted people to believe. Then, after a pause, Lydon barks out the next line 'another council tenancy', implying that the bourgeois administrators who designed and built the council estates have much to answer for; they are to blame for the physical and visual squalor of modern England. What had been in 1945, in most English people's eyes, much more than just another country had become, by 1976, visually and socially, little more than an extended set of interlocking council estates (and all that implies for the nation's social relationships).

The Clash's revolutionary socialism is possibly the clearest political message to have come from the UK first wave bands, with the Sex Pistols being generally seen as anarchist rather than socialist. However, Lydon, for one, refused to give much credit to the Clash, arguing that the band's revolutionary sloganeering was phoney and that the band was a latecomer to the punk scene which added little to what had gone before (Lydon et al. 1994, 106-7). In Lydon's words:

To me the Clash looked and sounded like they were yelling at themselves about nothing in particular – a few trendy slogans stolen here and there from Karl Marx. ... Although they were a bit better than your usual mainstream punk bands (Lydon et al. 1994, 106, 107).

Meanwhile, north of the border, although the band's first album was not released until 1981, Scotland's the Exploited's political rallying against Thatcherism contained powerful social and political critique. The band's critique of Thatcher's harsh neo-liberal imperialism was rendered much more potent, realistic, and sincere because of lead vocalist 'Wattie' (Walter David) Buchan's personal status as a disillusioned former British Army soldier (Spicer 2006, 134-6).<sup>7</sup> As Spicer (2006, 135) points out, 'The Exploited's comments on the futility of war and the hidden agendas that cause it had a resonance born of their singer's time in uniform'.

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<sup>7</sup> The band altered its musical style from traditional punk to thrash-metal around 1987 and now has a dedicated page at the heavy-metal website Metal-archives.com (accessed 15 April 2009).

Joe Strummer (1952-2002) of the Clash, an immense ‘contradiction’ if ever there was one (Charles Shaar Murray, cited in Antonia et al. 2006, 276), had a public school education and had been privy to a grounding in theoretical Marxism from his father, Ronald Mellor, a British career civil servant (Salewicz 2006, 38, 44, 77). As punk (like Marxist-Leninism before it) needed to be a synthesis of theory and practice, Strummer combined his intellectual knowledge of far-off ideological battle zones such as Nicaragua, Civil War-era Spain, and Vietnam with an appreciation of the realities (and the romance) of a down-and-out proletariat life lived out in west London. Interestingly, as Pat Gilbert (2004, 283) points out, it is Strummer’s depiction of English life and its outcast characters (as in the masterful ‘Something about England’), rather than his anti-American rants, that have proven to be his most enduring legacy. Strummer’s analysis of the workings of British governmental institutions, in early material on the 1977 self-titled debut album such as ‘Career Opportunities’, ‘Cheat’, ‘Remote Control’, and ‘What’s My Name’, and in later songs such as ‘Up in Heaven (Not Only Here)’ and ‘This is England’, were intellectually exacting and chillingly close to the lived experiences of a generation of British youth under firstly Callaghan and then Thatcher. Theoretically his descriptions share remarkable similarities with the French structural Marxist Louis Althusser’s classic work on Ideological and Repressive State Apparatuses ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (notes towards an investigation)’ published in English in 1971 (Althusser 2008). One wonders whether Strummer’s early education in Marxism from his father included lessons on Althusser. Years spent alienated from his family in his early-20s and living for free in ‘squats’ in west London, around Camden Town, Ladbroke Grove, and Notting Hill (Emery 2007; Heylin 2007, 61-94; Lydon et al. 1994, 63-68; Savage 2005, 112, 2006), gave Strummer a powerful mix of theory and practice. He could sing about the government departments of 1970s London because he had been to their offices and stood in their dole queues. He would add to that briefcase of experiences by visiting Jamaica with Mick Jones and later Thailand with the whole band. These visits led to two new songs, both grounded in a better appreciation of local issues and contextual factors, ‘Safe European Home’ (1978) and ‘Straight to Hell’ (1982).

The Clash’s clearest Marxist or socialist statements appear in songs such as ‘Bankrobber’, ‘Career Opportunities’, ‘Clampdown’ (one of the few songs to actually critique the nature of social relations on the factory floor), ‘Something about England’, ‘Straight to Hell’, ‘This is England’, ‘The Right Profile’, ‘Up in Heaven (Not Only Here)’ (a detailed realistic yet poetic description of life in a multi-storey council tower-block, built and administered by ‘the

bourgeois clerks who bear no guilt'<sup>8</sup>), and the brilliant 'White Man in Hammersmith Palais'. 'Something about England' is a lengthy 1980 song from the *Sandinista!* triple-album about a World War Two veteran, 'whom time would not erode'. Most of the lyrics involve first-person commentary by the war veteran, with Strummer as audience. The veteran explains the changes that he has observed in English life, most of which were purely technological, amidst the one constant of the class struggle which is one of the few factors that Old England shares with New England.<sup>9</sup> In the last line of the song 'the lights clicked off in the bedsits/ and Old England was all alone', suggesting that social stratification always co-exists with alienation as the young Marx had duly pointed out in 1844.

'The Right Profile', from 1979s *London Calling* album, recounts the story of the 1950s Hollywood actor, Montgomery Clift (1920-1966). The song's narrator recounts how Clift is observed in a car-crash (which occurred in real-life on 12 May 1956) and, as an older man, living as a destitute in New York City. The song is a sad tale about how capitalism turns upon its own once they have outlived its usefulness. The only humanitarian spark in the song is the warmth and affection in Strummer's voice as he mentions Clift by name and asks the car-crash scene onlookers about his welfare. Strummer's humanitarianism is counterpoised by the callous curious questions of the car-crash onlookers so that each fades into its opposite and at times we cannot be sure (without the lyrics sheet) which lines belong to Strummer and which to the crowd. The song opens with Strummer name-checking four of Clift's movies (*Red River*, *A Place in the Sun*, *The Misfits*, and *From Here to Eternity*). Later he uses the language of the cinema as a mark of respect for Clift and to signal his own [Strummer's] chic insider status ('I see a car smashed at night/ Cut the applause and dim the lights'). However, the cited line does more than simply signal insider status: at the same time it indicates Strummer's respect for the present-day Clift by asking that distance and privacy be offered to the car-crash scene and to its unfortunate victims. That Clift was found wandering around 42<sup>nd</sup> Street is sad as well, that being the theatre district around Times Square; Clift is clearly reminiscing and trying to cling on to former glories. The song shows that the Clash often drew upon the history of popular culture rather than repudiated it. Strummer presents the car-

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<sup>8</sup> Clash guitarist/vocalist Mick Jones, in the years immediately prior to the formation of the Clash in the summer of 1976, lived with his grandmother on the 18<sup>th</sup> floor of a council tower block called Wilmcote House which was located on the Warwick Estate, Royal Oak, London W2, and which directly overlooks the Westway, the major arterial road entering central London from the west (Gilbert 2004, 26, 29, 39, 46; James in press; Savage 2005, 233). The song 'Up in Heaven (Not Only Here)' draws in part from Jones' experiences living at Wilmcote House.

<sup>9</sup> The lyrics to this song are fully explored, utilizing a Marxist framework, by James (in press).

crash initially as a literal misfortune, but it also becomes a symbol of the ruthlessness of the capitalist system as it later simultaneously forgets and troubles Clift in his difficulties.

A further source of inspiration for the Clash was its eccentric Jewish socialist manager, Bernie Rhodes, who once asked a very young pre-Clash Mick Jones and Paul Simonon if they had read any Jean-Paul Sartre! Whilst punk has always held a strong anti-capitalist message, few bands could be said to be Marxists-Leninists in any conventional sense. Free-thinking, free-drinking, and a Nietzschean rejection of herd ideologies has always been important to punk. Theory was always subordinated to practice. In his autobiography *Rotten: No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs*, John Lydon dismisses those who want to analyze punk from the confines of their modern-day university towers (Lydon et al. 1994). He cites a claim by Sex Pistols drummer Paul Cook that the French Situationist movement had no influence upon punk (cited in Lydon et al. 1994, 186). To back up the point, Lydon also cites a statement by Chrissie Hynde that Sex Pistols guitarist Steve Jones would have given any observations claiming a link with the Situationists short-shrift had they been made in the 1970s. In response to a question as to how the UK punks would have reacted to mention of the Situationists back in the 1970s, Hynde replies that: 'They would have gone down to the pub – certainly Steve would have. Steve wouldn't have grasped it for a second, he wouldn't have wanted to know' (Chrissie Hynde, cited in Lydon et al. 1994, 186). Although there is a vast gap between a Steve Jones and a Joe Strummer, these thoughts were arguably echoed by Strummer himself in the 1979 song 'London Calling'. The line in the song 'and you know what they said/ well some of it was true' can be interpreted as a sneering challenge to future armchair critics to grasp the dialectical truths of the movement and the facts associated with it better than those musicians and fans who were actually there.

With the reference to 'England's Dreaming' in the lyrics to the Pistols' 'God save the Queen', an interesting ideological point can be raised. Is Lydon, even only at a subconscious level, drawing a comparison between punk and the 'dreaming' or 'dreamtime' of the Australian aboriginal people? For the aboriginals, the 'dreamtime' is a long-ago mythical age when myths and legends were made and when men were supermen, a ground zero in the national story narrative. Given the mythical status attached to the first wave of punk performers, can it be said that they were also a mythical ground-zero for youth anti-culture, a radical time when that culture's self-identity, values, and mission were being formed?

The late-1970s UK punk aesthetic had intellectual links to Sartrean existentialism and cultural Marxism (through Ronald Mellor, Malcolm McLaren, and Bernie Rhodes) but, in addition to that, punk was a rebellion against the bloated and arrogant progressive rock and

heavy-metal bands of the early-1970s, such as Yes and Emerson, Lake, and Palmer, and heavy-metal's unholy trinity, Black Sabbath, Deep Purple, and Led Zeppelin (Lydon et al. 1994, 87, 107, 196). Strummer railed against 'Elvis, Beatles, and the Rolling Stones' in the Clash song '1977' (Waksman 2009, 171) and against 'phoney Beatlemania' two years later in 'London Calling'. John Lydon also never kept it a secret how much he despised Elvis (Lydon et al. 1994, 245-6). However, again and especially with the Clash, viewpoints were never as simple as a straight anti-musicianship line. On the 1977 Clash 7' single A-side 'Complete Control', Strummer appears to tease Mick Jones by calling out 'you're my guitar hero' in the middle of Jones' extended guitar solo (at 1:10 out of the song's 3:15). There are multiple, even contradictory, meanings at work here. On one level, Strummer is simply voicing the traditional punk anti-musicianship message. However, on another level, the act of placing inverted commas around the guitar solo (achieved by the interjection) also serves to literally acknowledge, in the positive sense, both Jones' skills and his right to self-expression. Strummer rejects any dogmatic and simplistic anti-musicianship line. The placing of the guitar solo in inverted commas achieves a complex and wonderful effect that the simple non-playing of the solo could not have achieved. We also have no simple clash of heads here between Jones and Strummer; the song reflects the fact that punk's values were always contradictory, dynamic, open, flexible, and subject to endless re-negotiation. As 'Complete Control' closes out, Jones sings 'C O N control', which is usually misheard as 'see you in control' without a lyric sheet (Savage 2005, 399). The last words of Strummer are 'that means you' followed by another 'see you in control' melodically sung by Jones. As Savage (2005, 399) suggests, the song comes across and is received as an empowerment anthem and a declaration of autonomy in large part due to the misheard lyric.

Savage (2005, 597, 598) writes that, by the northern summer of 1977, punk had divided itself into the arties and the social realists, with the social realists becoming the dominant trend. The British punk 'Oi' bands of the late-1970s and early-1980s, all social realists, had their bona fide socialists (Angelic Upstarts) but most bands just enjoyed protesting obliquely against the system, getting drunk, watching football, and stealing cars (Cockney Rejects, Sham 69, and UK Subs, amongst others). Early punks that were there for the first gigs of the Pistols in the second half of 1975 and the first half of 1976 especially despised the reactionary intolerance of Sham 69 fans in the late-1970s. Paul Stahl writes that 'when Sham 69 came in and the Pistols broke up [in January 1978], that really was the end [of punk]' (cited in Lydon et al. 1994, 223). Savage (2005, 597) explains that 'Sham are the bridge between early Clash and "Strength Through Oi!"' although it is hard to be sure if this is

meant as simply an objective statement of chronology or as further criticism of Sham. Famously, Strummer denounced the new emergent punk bands in 'White Man in Hammersmith Palais' (1978): 'The new groups are not concerned/ with what there is to be learned/ they got Burton suits, ha you think it's funny/ turning rebellion into money'.

In contrast to Stahl's view that punk died when the Pistols broke up in January 1978, Scottish punk band the Exploited (originally from East Kilbride and later of Edinburgh) proclaimed as late as 1981 that 'punk's not dead'. The Exploited's optimistic perspective has merit if punk is viewed as a historical movement of ever-changing social relations rather than as a fixed eternal essence. As Negus (1999, 126) writes, in regards the Nashville country music industry, 'the dynamics of country culture are best understood, not through any textual codings, but through the [ongoing, re-negotiated] connections between fans and performers'. In the world of Marxism, of course Lenin's New Economic Policy (NEP) is the best known historical example of circumstances forcing a modification of the original plan (McCauley 1996). Although Marx referred at times to essences, he did not fall into the trap of essentialism since for him essences were always defined in terms of real social relations (Ruben 1979, 71-3).

Later British heavy-metal bands, especially Iron Maiden, with their short fast stripped-down songs and spiky-haired punk vocalist Paul Di'Anno (fired in 1981), and Saxon, with their working-class struggle songs such as 'Never Surrender', had absorbed something of the punk ethos although they belonged to a genre of music that has traditionally been viewed as the antithesis or 'counter genre' of punk (Waksman 2009, 148, 172-209). Indeed Waksman (2009, 202) writes of Iron Maiden's Di'Anno that 'he carried much of what gave Iron Maiden a punk-inflected aura away with him when he left'. As Waksman (2009, 201) points out, Di'Anno's gruff punk vocals on the 1981 song 'Killers' contribute to the listener's feeling of being trapped within the confines of the foreboding atmosphere of the song. By contrast, his replacement, Bruce Dickinson aka The Air Raid Siren, has a much wider vocal range; his soaring vocals provide a further element of heavy-metal transcendence.

Mungo, reviewer on the dedicated heavy-metal website Metal-archives.com, says that the album *Killers*, whilst '[s]till retaining a strong NWOBHM sound, it increases the punk influence to create a grittier sound than what came before' (posted 22 April 2007; accessed 20 April 2009). The much criticized (by metal fans) song 'Gangland', on 1982s *The Number of the Beast* album, is one of the final residues of punk lyrical themes to survive the end of the Di'Anno era. On Iron Maiden's 1981 album *Killers*, the last with Di'Anno, only two of the eleven songs on the remastered version deal with the traditional heavy-metal themes of

history/mythology/occult. The other songs explore urban street themes and the album cover shows terraced houses at left and centre and what appears to be a council tower-block at right; the lyrics and the album cover are very London and very punk. Waksman (2009, 199) even quotes Di'Anno as saying '[w]e're an HM band with punk attitudes'. NOFX offer the band's perspective on Iron Maiden in the 2009 *Coaster* album song 'Eddie Bruce and Paul' where 'punk' Paul Di'Anno is lauded whilst 'metal' Steve Harris and Dickinson are ridiculed; hence 'Paul got fucked, fucked by Steve', and 'kudos to Paul, fuck you Bruce/ *Number of the Beast* is in bed with Rob and Judas Priest'. The last line here is a non-PC reference to both the classic metal sound of *The Number of the Beast* album and Rob Halford of Judas Priest's (homo-)sexuality.<sup>10</sup>

Even traditional metallers Judas Priest, who predated punk by at least three years, stripped down and shortened their songs on 1978s *Killing Machine* album. Furthermore, the band included first-person working-class urban struggle songs on 1980s *British Steel* ('Breaking the Law') and simplistic anthemic football chants on both *Killing Machine* ('Take on the World') and the follow-up *British Steel* ('United'). The football chant songs attracted much disdain and ridicule from the band's long-term heavy-metal fan base. Then of course there was Motörhead, a fast-living, fast-drinking hybrid of punk and metal whose first album dated back to 1977 (Waksman 2009, 146-171). As Negus (1999, 183) points out, and he could well have been speaking of punk-influenced heavy-metal acts such as Di'Anno era Iron Maiden, Judas Priest, Motörhead, and Saxon, '[c]rossing genre worlds and bringing new genre cultures into being is not only an act of musical creation, it is also an act of social creation'.

The 1990s punk revival, after lean years for mainstream punk during the 1980s, is usually referred to as 'the second wave of punk' or the 'SoCal scene', SoCal being short for Southern California which was the geographic centre for the new movement. The SoCal scene reached its peak of popularity in the years 1994 to 1996. However, there had been an emerging scene in Los Angeles since at least the late-1980s and early-1990s when ska-punk band, and an early incarnation of Rancid, Operation Ivy, released its self-titled album (1990) and the Offspring released its debut album (also self-titled) (1989). Commercially the scene exploded in 1994 when pop-punk bands Green Day and the Offspring released big-selling albums *Dookie* and *Smash* respectively (the latter featuring ubiquitous 'hits', gorged upon by the

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<sup>10</sup> Sadly, direct ridicule and abuse has tended to replace subtler dialectical lyrical messages on the more recent NOFX output.

radio stations needing something to fill the vacuum created by the implosion of first Sunset Strip hair-metal and then Seattle grunge, 'Come Out and Play' and 'Self-Esteem'). Green Day rose to public consciousness after their appearance at the Woodstock II 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Festival of 1994 and the band's *Dookie* album was eventually certified multi-platinum, having sold over twelve million copies worldwide (Antonia et al. 2006, 258-65). Of course it was the pop-punk bands that sold the most CDs and were the most visible manifestation of the scene. Nevertheless, older classic punk bands, such as Bad Religion, traded on the scene's mass impact factor to relaunch their careers whilst younger bands, slightly too rough and streetwise (in Rancid's case), or quirky and obscene (in NOFX's case), also rode the wave of the SoCal scene to some extent with their names reaching larger audiences in 1994 and 1995. Rancid's *...And Out Come the Wolves* album from 1995 and NOFX's *Punk in Drublic* from 1994 are these respective bands' most commercially successful releases and are also often-cited by fans and critics alike as their best albums (see Antonia et al. 2006, 221 where this Rancid album is listed, and justifiably so, among the best 77 punk albums of all time). Both Rancid and NOFX were based in the spiritual home of SoCal punk, Los Angeles, and this fact facilitated fans' identification of these bands with the emergent scene.

If the Pistols' unexpected break-up (being also the end of punk for many people; Savage 2005, 477) and Sid Vicious' death produced shock, disappointment, and a feeling of incompleteness, SoCal bands were able to, in the words of Zizek (2008, 81-2), retroactively retrieve and redeem the past by filling in the present and working towards the future. Ironically the Sex Pistols was able to surf on the popularity of the SoCal scene for the band's reunion tour of North America in 1996. Whilst the SoCal punks tried to retrieve and redeem, the director of *Sid and Nancy* (1986) Alex Cox had earlier attempted a false resolution: at the end of the film Sid encounters some young black boys rapping in a desolate waste ground in inner New York City. As Sid exudes friendliness in this fictional scene, there is an appearance of resolution as one youth counter-cultural movement (punk) seemingly gives way to its successor (rap). Meanwhile, the Exploited tried to expunge the ghosts of punk's past by denying it, hence the band's 1982 song 'Sid Vicious was Innocent'. This is the opposite sentiment to that expressed by the post-Lydon Sex Pistols on 'No One is Innocent', train-robber Ronnie Biggs on lead vocals, where the band prays for God's blessings upon even Moors murderers Myra Hindley and Ian Brady. The understanding here, however, is that sins are not wiped out, simply forgiven, in this very Christian song originally titled 'A Punk Prayer'.

There was also an emerging ‘Christian punk’ scene as a part of the broader SoCal scene with MXPX (from Bremerton, Washington) and Squad Five-O (from Savannah, Georgia) being the bands of this movement that rose to fame in the 1995 to 1998 period. MXPX rapidly increased in popularity and came to be the most high profile Christian band to ride on the wave of the SoCal scene, mostly through the band’s *Life in General* album of 1996 and the ‘Chick Magnet’ single and video of the same year.<sup>11</sup> The band is generally associated with the SoCal scene by most fans despite its home base being in Washington State. Only MXPX of these two bands had the ability to persevere through difficulties (itself, of course, a ‘Christian value’) and to adapt their image and lyrics in a way acceptable both to the Christian youth-group demographic and to a large segment of the mainstream punk audience. Squad Five-O disappeared from view at the tail-end of the 1990s (their 1997 and 1998 albums *What I Believe* and *Fight the System* have not been reissued since 2001, as at the date of writing, but are worth tracking down). Wikipedia (Squad Five-O entry, accessed 14 April 2009) correctly states that the lyrical themes on the first two Squad albums, the second of which leaned in a ska-punk direction, include ‘the power of the youth, the effects of social ills, and Christian unity’. Later less commercially successful releases (including 2000s *Bombs over Broadway*) suggest that the band’s Christian stance and imagery have been all but abandoned. The band has also changed musical style to glam-rock. Squad Five-O’s website went dead in early 2006 and Wikipedia suggests that the band has most probably split-up. MXPX and NOFX are also referred to sometimes as ‘skate punk’ (Spicer 2006, 291) due to their popularity with youth heavily into skateboarding and the synchronization of punk clothing and skateboarding clothing. Some regard skate punk as a (sub-)genre of its own whereas others point out that skate punk bands can also be said to belong to other sub-genres such as pop-punk, hardcore, and/or melodic hardcore (Spicer 2006, 291).

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<sup>11</sup> The original ‘Chick Magnet’ video clip can be viewed on Youtube.com at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wOmL8SZxfyU> (accessed 14 April 2009). The popular video clip (over 270,000 views as at 14 April 2009) shows the seeming band ‘nerd’, drummer Yuri Ruley, a redhead who wears thick-rimmed glasses, attract girls a plenty at a diner. At the same time, the other seemingly cooler tattooed and earringed members of the band (guitarist Tom Wisniewski and bassist/vocalist Mike Herrera) eat dinner alone in the same diner. Later Yuri dances on the table, in nerdish style, in front of his new fans, while the simple chorus of ‘Chick Magnet’ repeats itself. Did the band write this song from a specifically Christian perspective? Does it have a ‘Christian message’, however well hidden? If so is the band trying to communicate to us that ‘the world is full of vast possibilities’ and/or that ‘God is with the lowly and the underdog’? Or is the song designed for enjoyment and nothing more? Another possible interpretation is that, by exposing the modern-day dating ‘meat-market’, the meat-market’s dehumanizing power can be partially countered: Yuri remains completely human throughout the clip.

MXPX's debut album, 1994s *Pokinatcha*, overtly presented Christian themes.<sup>12</sup> However the album demonstrated remarkable lyrical maturity for a band of then 17-year-olds (MXPX's Mike Herrera and Yuri Ruley were both born in 1976); Christian beliefs are used as a backdrop for very angry diatribes, *sans* swearing, about 'friends' that betray or take advantage (see especially the first six songs, 'Anywhere but Here' through to 'Unopposed', with the exception of the third pop-filler joke song 'Want Ad'). Christian faith is presented dialectically as an opposition to both dishonesty and consumerism. In later albums the Christian themes are either abandoned or veiled to be replaced by a positive humanitarian message but the band members all remain professing Christians. Relationships and break-ups are a frequent lyrical topic but the band's Christianity allows it to be honest but not overly hostile or revengeful. Secular punk fans seem to appreciate this 'Christian' mix of honesty and humanitarianism. To identify with the punk ethos and to claim a punk heritage (as MXPX clearly did early on with popular songs such as 'Punk Rawk Show'<sup>13</sup>), MXPX by necessity must emphasize the punk movement's humanitarian and constructive aspects rather than its nihilist and destructive aspects. MXPX must, therefore, be more Clash than Pistols (Steve 'Roadent' Connolly, cited in Savage 2005, 239). Consistent with this MXPX plays the Clash's 'Janie Jones' on (some versions of) the Clash *Burning London* (1999) tribute album, a song that MXPX must find easy to relate to with its theme of devoted boyfriend driving to girlfriend's house after work to enjoy some innocent and well-deserved companionship. That anything other than companionship might be had is only implied in the Clash lyrics and the Clash, primarily Mick Jones, did have a clearly visible poppy, romantic/sentimental side evident in the Jones compositions 'Lost in the Supermarket', 'Should I Stay or Should I Go', 'Stay Free', and 'Train in Vain'.

I attended one night of a punk festival in Perth, Australia in 2004 where MXPX was second on a bill headlined by Unwritten Law (another SoCal scene band from California) and supported by Regurgitator. The Friday night crowd of around 400 was strongly supportive of MXPX which put on a very professional and disciplined performance. A young female fan next to me screamed repeatedly for the band to play 'Chick Magnet'. Although many people in the crowd were clearly there to see Unwritten Law, the mixed Christian and secular crowd knew and strongly appreciated MXPX as well. The average of 4.5 out of 5 stars given to the 1996 MXPX album *Life in General* on Amazon.com (based on 82 customer reviews as at 8

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<sup>12</sup> The band name is an abbreviation of Magnified Plaid with the two x's simply being full stops using the conventions of hardcore punk notation.

<sup>13</sup> The original video clip for 'Punk Rawk Show' can be viewed at Youtube.com at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vfZFTRVH5wE> (accessed 15 April 2009).

December 2008) does suggest strong fan support for, and not much hostility, against MXPX. The fact that Satanism has not been an important or even a marginal ideology in punk rock, unlike in heavy-metal (Moynihan and S oderlind 2003; Waksman 2009, 193-5), has meant that good and committed Christian punk bands, willing to ‘turn the other cheek’ and ‘go the extra mile’ when needed, can ‘cross over’ and gain and maintain secular fan support.

### **NOFX Lyrics Analysis**

In this paper, I discuss three NOFX songs from the mid-1990s, all but one of which is from the band’s gold-selling *Punk in Drublic* album.<sup>14</sup> The songs discussed are: (a) ‘Bob’ (1992); (b) ‘The Brews’ (1994); and (c) ‘Happy Guy’ (1994). All three NOFX songs were written by NOFX’s lead vocalist Fat Mike. All lyrics were accessed from the dedicated punk lyrics website, Plyrics.com, and are in the public domain.

#### ‘Bob’ (1992)

He spent fifteen years getting loaded/ Fifteen years ‘till his liver exploded/ Now what's Bob gonna’ do now that he can’t drink?/ The doctor said, ‘What you been thinkin’ 'bout?’

Bob said, ‘That's the point/ I won’t think about nothing/ Now I got do something else,’/ OI OI OI! ‘To pass the time.’/ Bob shaved his head/ He got a new identity/ Sixty-two holed air cushioned boots/ And a girl who rides a scooter/ Gonna take him out, of town/ They would get away/ Riding around, as the trucks drive by/ You could hear the mother fuckers go...BEEP!

(Trumpet solo by El Hefe).

A couple of lines, an extra thermos of Joe/ He'll be kickin’ in heads at the punk rock show, yeah/ Bob’s the kinda guy who knows just what/ Bob’s the kinda guy who knows just what to do/ When the doctor tells him to/ ‘Quit your drinkin’, now's the time.’/ Will he ever walk the line/ ‘To all my friends, I feel just great’/ But will he ever walk the line/ Kickin’ ass and bustin’ heads/ Red suspenders/ Once a day he shaves his head/

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<sup>14</sup> It might be wondered what interpretation(s) the members of NOFX put upon their own song lyrics. There is almost zero preserved scholarly or quasi-scholarly literature on NOFX that goes into that level of detail about the band nor has there ever been a history book written on either SoCal punk or NOFX. As such the band members’ opinions remain unknowable. I did post a message on the band’s official website in December 2008 indicating that I was doing a research project on the band and leaving my e-mail address on the site. However, no-one from, or connected to, the band has ever made contact. As such I labour on alone with my ‘interpretations’, all of which follow-up papers are invited to correct and to challenge!

But will he ever walk the line?/ Oh will he ever walk the line?/ ...BOB! (Spoken part)

In the popular song ‘Bob’, from the *White Trash, Two Heebs and a Bean* (1992) album,<sup>15</sup> we are introduced to a punk rocker named Bob who has consulted a doctor who has warned him that he needs to curb his drinking. We have a single person character study somewhat resembling Count Leo Tolstoy’s ‘The Kreutzer Sonata’ (1983a), ‘The Devil’ (1983b), and ‘The Death of Ivan Ilyich’ (2008), or Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s (2003) classic existentialist novel *Crime and Punishment*. Existentialism is present in NOFX lyrics as well: for the existentialist we are ‘condemned to be free’ (Sartre 2003, 506) and, as for fellow existentialists Pascal and Kierkegaard, we are never free *not* to choose. Bob here is faced with an important dilemma and the whole song explores this dilemma and his reaction to it. By the end of the song, in Joe Strummer’s words, ‘the future is [still] unwritten’. The doctor’s words hang in the air and, as the song draws to a close, Fat Mike repeats several times the fundamental existentialist question posed by the band: ‘Will he ever walk the line?’

In this song we are introduced to the somewhat ridiculous but totally realistic image of a punk rocker being forced to curtail his extreme behaviour by what we presume is an ordinary suburban doctor. NOFX here parodies the romantic outlaw tales of west London and Edinburgh written by first wave of punk bands such as the Clash and the Exploited. Bob is confronted by his worst fear, which is not the police, the imperialists, big business or the National Front but is simply a health warning issued by a suburban doctor. Whilst John Lydon’s antithesis was the Queen and Joe Strummer of the Clash and ‘Wattie’ Buchan of the Exploited stared down US imperialists and British government departments, Bob’s nemesis is an ordinary suburban doctor. NOFX revels in the humour of the very real and practical situation that it depicts. The song reminds us of our mortality and human weakness. It also refuses to allow us to escape to a romantic world completely divorced from our every-day experiences. We are forced to revel in society’s contradictions rather than escape from them. Sartre talks about people regularly fleeing from the anguish of life in this present world through what he terms acts of ‘bad faith’ (Sartre *Being and Nothingness* 2003, 70-94). In David Caute’s (2001) words, bad faith involves treating one self exclusively as either a ‘being-in-itself’ or a ‘being-for-others’ rather than primarily as a ‘being-for-self’. In other words, it involves treating oneself as some pre-given essence of something and denying the

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<sup>15</sup> The album title is a humorous reference to the band’s ethnic mix of two Jews (Fat Mike and Melvin), one Hispanic (El Hefe), and one white American (Sandin).

reality that for human beings existence must always precede essence. NOFX accepts that many people respond to anguish and crisis through bad faith; in fact the band is probably of the view that this is the most likely way that Bob will respond to his dilemma. His ritualistic daily head shaving is clearly an act of bad faith since it avoids the issue and does not amount to either an acceptance or a rejection of the doctor's words.

As the song progresses, we learn more about Bob. Details about his 'kicking in heads at the punk rock show' outline to us Bob's dedication to the punk scene (his credibility) and also his hardcore violent nature. Bob is portrayed as unsophisticated. The simplistic black-and-white thinking of Bob is implicitly compared with the dialectical sophistication of NOFX. It is this sophistication on the part of NOFX which presumably gives the band licence to sing about Bob. Bob's penchant for violence at punk rock shows suggests his inability to appreciate and understand the contradictions and nuances of punk rock culture: for Bob, all issues are black-and-white and you are either for him or against him. This is an old theme in the thirty-year history of punk: Joe Strummer of the Clash as early as the northern spring of 1977 was expressing his distaste for the reactionary herd of second-generation punk bands and their audiences who frequented clubs such as London's Roxy and provincial venues such as Portsmouth and Southampton (Gilbert 2004; Savage 2005, 301). It is these conservative reactionary punks who were the specific target of Strummer's criticism in 'White Man in Hammersmith Palais' (see earlier discussion in Section 2 and James in press). Their emergence as a numerically important force for conservatism and yobbishness also motivated John Lydon to 'kill off' his Johnny Rotten persona (and so it is *only in this sense* that rock can die (Dettmar 2006, 135)) to leave the Sex Pistols and form the multi-racial, experimental, and urbane Public Image Limited (PiL) (Lydon et al. 1994). Such reactionary and conservative punks soon took control of the UK punk movement with the rise in popularity of the 'Oi' bands and Sham 69 (see discussion in Section 2 and Waksman 2009, 198-9, 201). At the same time, in the USA, the emergent hardcore punk sub-genre was also becomingly increasingly associated with violent fan behaviour and clashes with police.<sup>16</sup>

How did the early punks view violence? Contrary to the conventional wisdom, John Lydon denies that the Pistols was ever a destructive or nihilistic band, at least not in terms of either promoting violence or (with the sole exception of Sid Vicious) willing their own self-destruction (Lydon et al. 1994, 20, 30, 59, 77, 82-3, 151, 261, 356). Instead the Pistols was all about confronting people with their own fears, contradictions, and hidden prejudices (as in

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<sup>16</sup> Hardcore punk is outside the scope of the present paper.

‘Anarchy in the UK’ and ‘God Save the Queen’). In his personal life, Lydon eschewed physical violence, not so much for ideological reasons, but because his small size and long-term poor health, the legacy of a bout of spiral meningitis that kept him in hospital for a year as an eight-year-old (Lydon et al. 1994, 16-18; Savage 2005, 115), would have made him too easy a target. He in fact became such an unwilling target after the 1977 release of ‘God Save the Queen’ when he was brutally bashed in London pubs by self-proclaimed working-class monarchists (regarding the pub bashings see Lydon et al. 1994, 191-3). Lydon’s preferred weapon, from childhood through to mature adulthood, was always words and, in particular, the use of sarcasm. Readers of Lydon’s 1994 autobiography will be treated to a book of witty, sarcastic, but usually extremely perceptive, jabs at society and at individuals in Lydon’s characteristic clipped style of speech (the book uses stream-of-consciousness format). A classic Lydonism compares his own pro-life worldview to that of Vicious, and the reification and self-reification of the early punks by 1994 is clearly in evidence here: ‘That’s the difference between the Sid fanatic and the Johnny Lydon Appreciation Society. Life and death! There’s nothing glorious in dying. Anyone can do it’ (Lydon et al. 1994, 261). Of course many will claim that this is Lydon in 1994 posthumously reinventing and exonerating himself. Lydon would in part agree, claiming that the Johnny Rotten persona, that he chose to kill off in 1978, exuded all the wanton, mocking, hostile, and violent tendencies that had come for many to characterize the Pistols in the 1970s.<sup>17</sup> It is significant that during his legal disputes with Lydon in the 1980s, Malcolm McLaren consistently continued to refer to Lydon as Rotten, thus forever fixing him in time as the Rotten persona of the Pistols years that McLaren perceived was easier to stigmatize and control; in effect McLaren was attempting to deny Lydon the Sartrean right to self re-creation.

In contrast to Lydon, for Joe Strummer the only violence that was worth encouraging (‘let fury have the hour/ anger can be power/ don’t you know that you can use it?’ go the lyrics for 1979s ‘Clampdown’) was strategic violence designed to further a clear political cause, e.g. Strummer and Simonon’s participation (Antonia et al. 2006, 124; Emery 2007) in the riot that followed the August 1976 Notting Hill Festival, immortalized in the lyrics to the 1977 Clash song ‘White Riot’, where black youth took the opportunity of the annual Afro-Caribbean festival to extract some revenge on an English police force that they perceived as

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<sup>17</sup> For Lydon’s 1994 comments on his Johnny Rotten persona, see Lydon et al. (1994, 154, 157). That was the difference for Lydon between himself and Vicious: Sid inhabited his persona 24/7 and in fact became it, taking the lifestyle of the New York glam rockers rather too literally. It was taking that persona literally that of course killed Sid. As Lydon says, Sid ‘didn’t understand Rotten was [only] my alter-ego’ (Lydon et al. 1994, 157).

‘institutionally racist’ (regarding the riot after the August 1976 Notting Hill Festival see Gilbert 2004, 99-103, 134-6; Savage 2005, 233-4, 2006, 94, 96).

Next we learn that NOFX’s Bob seeks a ‘new identity’ and so ‘he shaves his head’. This also is a humorous comment on reactionary punks. Bob is confronted with a difficult dilemma in his personal life. Should he follow the doctor’s instructions? In an act of classic reactionary punk behaviour, he tries to take on a new identity by shaving his head. This is best viewed as further evidence of his simplistic hardcore attitude. Clearly, shaving his head *per se* will not in any way either help or hinder any progress that he might make in relation to his health issue. As stated above, Sartre (2003) would classify this ritual as an act of bad faith. We then learn that Bob has a new girlfriend and that they ride a scooter and head out of town. This could be an indictment on the mentality of punks in that even someone like Bob can find a new girlfriend essentially on demand from within the scene.<sup>18</sup> In typical camp NOFX fashion, we then hear that ‘trucks pass by and you can hear the mother fuckers go BEEEP’. This is followed by an actual truck horn sound at 0:53 in the song which is immediately taken up into the sound of Aaron Abeyta aka El Hefe playing a trumpet solo without any guitar backing (see the official video for the song on Youtube.com).<sup>19</sup> The guitars do not resume again until 1:14, making the trumpet solo very much an extended one given that the entire song lasts for only 2:18. The use of a gleeful trumpet solo in the middle of a rapid-fire punk song is clearly a contradiction in itself and the music reinforces the lyrical preoccupations. The guitars at this stage are careening out of control, proceeding faster and faster, as if to mimic the pace of modern life and Bob’s attempt to wrestle with and escape his dilemma. This taking up of the truck horn sound into the sound of the lone trumpet (and later into the guitars) suggests both that truck horns are an integral part of modern urban society and that NOFX, unlike Bob, is capable of forging an existential and workable synthesis of facticity and transcendence (Sartre 2003, 79). The truck horns in one sense seem to be a typical ‘attack’ on punk ‘freedom’. However, the horns are not ridiculed or condemned by NOFX; they are just another hurdle that a typical suburban punk rocker has to face and overcome. As the song proceeds, the crisp, clear drumming keeps perfect time and adds some structure to the cascading seemingly out of control guitars. Fat Mike’s voice as always is buried low in the mix and sounds world-weary and experienced but not dejected. At times, Fat Mike’s voice seems to be defeated by the instruments but at other times he pierces

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<sup>18</sup> For a discussion as to why the concept of ‘scene’ in alternative music such as heavy-metal and punk is superior to the concept of ‘sub-culture’, see Harris (2000) and Kahn-Harris (2007).

<sup>19</sup> The video clip can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LyUIJIdwEuA> (accessed 15 April 2009).

through the guitars to offer some insightful social commentary. The burying of Fat Mike's voice low in the mix is a feature of all NOFX albums and is almost certainly done deliberately and probably for the reasons suggested here. Fat Mike mirrors the Christian incarnation, he is one of us and not above us; his world is our world (Weil 2006; Zizek 2003, 2008).

Fat Mike sums up the situation completely in two lines near the end of the song: 'Bob's the kind of guy that knows just what to do/ When the doctor tells him to'. However, even this is ambiguous: will Bob rebel or will he change his lifestyle? At this stage of the song, we have heard of Bob's violence, his head-shaving, his new girlfriend, and his escapade on the scooter out in the countryside, and we do not have much confidence in his ability to follow the doctor's instruction. We then hear the doctor's voice of sensible middle-class suburban restraint: 'Quit your drinking now's the time'. The doctor's voice is sung by Fat Mike in his normal singing voice as opposed to, for example, the doctor in Dire Straits' 1982 song 'Industrial Disease' where the doctor's voice is spoken and camp. This might suggest that NOFX views the doctor's voice as *legitimate*, as close at hand, and as an integral part of the present world (echoes of Marx and Sartre: we cannot escape facticity). With the doctor's sentence, the nine-to-five world of suburbia speaks. But Bob lives in another dimension where punk rock has 'burst the bonds of time' (Savage 2005, 513) to create an 'everlasting present' (Savage 2005, 296, 355). Herbert Marcuse (1966, 231), philosopher of choice for the 1960s counter-culture, also speaks of time as being a strong ally of the Freudian death instinct; it is 'the bond that binds Eros to the death instinct' (Marcuse 1966, 231).<sup>20</sup> Rancid, in its song 'Radio Havana', on the *Rancid 2000* album, describes Castro's Havana as a 'fugitive of time [i.e. from time]'. This makes sense, not only because of the '57 Chevys' in the Cuban capital, but because the surplus repression of Anglo-American market capitalism, not a part of Cuban life, is allied with the death instinct, which itself is allied with time. Since Marcuse (1966) argues that it is time that binds Eros to the death instinct, Savage's (2005) statement that punk rock 'burst the bonds of time' suggests that punk rock has always assisted Eros in its struggles to escape fusion with the death instinct and to function more freely.

This leads up to the crucial existentialist question that Fat Mike poses but does not answer: 'Will he ever walk the line?' At this stage, the guitars are at their fastest and most frenetic and unsettling. Fat Mike's question is sung loudly and authoritatively. His speech is

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<sup>20</sup> For a presentation of the post-1920 Freudian theory of life and death instincts, see Freud (1960, 1962), Fromm (1963), Hall (1954), Marcuse (1966), and Robinson (1969).

clearer, somewhat slowed down, and more controlled. He wants us to consider the question which is then repeated many times as the song winds down: 'Will he ever walk the line?' Then we realize that Fat Mike is addressing the 'Bob' living inside each one of us. Will we grow up? Will we accept restraints? It is clear that if Bob does not change his ways, then his future will not be a promising one. What would we do in Bob's situation? There is a Tolstoyean 'moral lesson' in the song but the band does not descend into an unreflexive moralism. The song finally spins on a dime and comes to a quick halt with the last word being a loud spoken 'Bob' as if the band members have given up on him and are shaking their heads in collective bewilderment. This effect is reinforced in the official video clip for the song (208,225 views on Youtube.com as at 15 April 2009 but note that these viewing figures are highly unreliable and subject to wild fluctuations without notice) which ends with Bob about to share a late-night drink offered to him by a drunk at a city bus-stop. We see only a few seconds hesitation before Bob takes the can of drink into his hand, snaps open the can top, and then grins for the camera. The last aural sound in the clip is the noisy (exaggeratedly so) opening of the can top whilst the concluding visual image of the clip is Bob's grinning face. Fellow SoCal punks Rancid covered a number of NOFX songs, and vice-versa. In the video clip of Rancid's cover of 'Bob',<sup>21</sup> the sincerity of Rancid's delivery is evident but the irony, humour, and revelling in contradictions is, for the most part, lost. An electric guitar solo replaces El Hefe's trumpet thus removing another of the contradictions in the NOFX version of the song. Arguably the song does not suit the band performing it.

The NOFX emphasis on health and moderation (so very '90s') could indicate the punk scene's willingness to operate reflexively in line with the traditional Marxist values of criticism and self-criticism. The history of the punk rock movement is littered with instances of early drug-related deaths, the most famous of these unarguably being that of Sex Pistol Sid Vicious in 1979 (as dramatically and sympathetically retold in the 1986 film *Sid & Nancy*, directed by Alex Cox and starring Gary Oldman as Sid Vicious and Chloe Webb as Nancy Spungeon). NOFX may be suggesting a way forward for the punk movement which is a synthesis of historical nihilism and modern moderation. Clearly such a synthesis, if it is to be forged, will be a precarious one. However, to *attempt* to forge it is the brave option and the option of good faith.

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<sup>21</sup> This video clip can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mzqW9Pmr7zo> (accessed 15 April 2009). The following extended 3:20 video clip based around Rancid's version of 'Bob' is also interesting and humorous: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HFM\\_64DVzWY&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HFM_64DVzWY&feature=related) (accessed 15 April 2009). The dialogue scenes here add extra dimensions to the character of Bob that go beyond the song lyrics.

As mentioned earlier, the voice of suburban restraint is one that a punk rocker sooner or later must acknowledge if she/he does not want to go the way of Sex Pistol Sid Vicious (1957-1979) who murdered his girlfriend and died from a heroin overdose at age 22 (for a discussion of the circumstances surrounding Vicious' death see Antonia et al. 2006; Lydon et al. 1994; Savage 2005; Spicer 2006). By confessing its 'punkness', and by making clear and consistent efforts to align itself with punk in general, and with the SoCal scene in particular, NOFX is acknowledging that the history of the punk movement (in both its good and its bad aspects) is also *its* history. We are reminded of the quote from Marx on the opening page of this paper: 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it ... under the circumstances of their own choosing [paraphrased]'. Therefore, dialectically speaking, any movement forward by the punk scene must acknowledge the facticity of the past. The voice of suburban restraint is also looked at dialectically in this song by NOFX rather than being either condemned or lionized. Such dialectical thought is consistent with the British punk scene's intellectual roots in cultural Marxism. The issue of 'living the punk life in Green Bay, Wisconsin', this paper's title and a reference to lyrics to NOFX's 1994 song 'Punk Guy', is explored intelligently by many other songs in the NOFX canon.<sup>22</sup> It is to one of these songs, 'The Brews' from 1994s *Punk in Drublic*, that we now turn.

'The Brews' (1994)

Friday night we'll be drinking Manishevitz/  
Going out to terrorize Goyem/  
Stomping shagitz, screwing shicksas/  
As long as we're home by Saturday morning.

Chorus:

Cause hey, we're the Brews/  
Sporting anti-swastika tattoos/  
Oi Oi we're the boys/  
Orthodox, Hasidic, O.G. Ois.

Orthopedic, Dr. Martins good for/  
Waffle making, kicking through the shin/  
Reputation, gained through intimidation/  
Pacifism no longer tradition.

Modified Chorus:

Cause hey we're the Brews/  
Sporting anti-swastika tattoos/  
Oi Oi we're the Brews/  
The Fairfax ghetto boys, skinhead Hebrews.

We got the might, psycho mashuganas/  
We can't lose a fight/  
As we are the chosen ones/  
Chutspah driven, we battle then we feast/  
We celebrate, we'll separate our milkplates from our meat.

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<sup>22</sup> To clarify what might be a point of confusion, NOFX is based in Los Angeles, California. The 'Green Bay, Wisconsin' reference is to the home of the fictional punk rock vocalist in NOFX's 1994 song 'Punk Guy'. Green Bay, Wisconsin can also be used as a metaphor for reactionary 98% white America suburbia.

(Repeat Chorus)

We now consider the song 'The Brews' on the *Punk in Drublic* album. It would be easy to characterize this song as anti-Semitic on superficial reading. However, that is far from being the case. According to Wikipedia (accessed 6 December 2007), Fat Mike is of Jewish ancestry but does not believe in any higher power. NOFX rhythm guitarist Eric Scott Melvin is also Jewish (Eric Melvin entry, Wikipedia, accessed 6 December 2007). NOFX aims in these lyrics to highlight the (in its view precarious if not completely unsustainable) contradiction between the claimed religious and ethnic Jewish identity of LA gang, the Brews, and the gang's love of hedonism, violence, and retribution. Wikipedia states that '[t]he song lionizes Jews and contains numerous laudatory references to Jewish culture' (The Brews entry, accessed 6 December 2007). However such a superficial reading fails to fully examine both sides of the contradictions NOFX raises in the song. In addition to the Wikipedia comment, 'The Brews' has been lavishly praised by Jewsrock.org (accessed 6 December 2007) which states that, by writing the song, NOFX 'took the Jewish pride a step further'.

Punk rock's historic left-of-centre political position and Fat Mike and Eric Scott Melvin's shared Jewish ethnicity are presumably the reasons why NOFX felt that it could address the delicate subject matter of a Jewish gang. The song's subject matter is consistent with NOFX's desire to explore fully the contradictions of contemporary suburban life, and not to shy away from sensitive subject matter for reasons of political correctness. The fact is that whilst NOFX is an icon within the punk community, the band is not well known outside the scene. As such, NOFX is aware that the audience for 'The Brews' will be nearly exclusively composed of punk scene 'insiders'. By contrast, 1990s SoCal bands who broke out of the narrow confines of the punk scene and attracted much radio airplay and mainstream support (for example, Blink 182, Green Day, and the Offspring) would probably not have been willing to pen lyrics as direct, provocative, and non-PC as the lyrics for 'The Brews'.

In order to understand the song more fully, the following Jewish terms need to be defined (extracted from Plyrics.com): 'Manashevitz' = Cheap wine Jews stereotypically drink; 'Goyem' = Non-Jewish people; 'Shagitz' = Preppies; 'Mashuganas' = Yiddish for 'Crazy'; 'Chutspah' = Untranslatable Yiddish term meaning a cross between balls and rudeness; 'Dai Dayenu' = Part of Jewish Hymn; 'Shicksa' = Yiddish word for referring to a non-Jewish female. The use of authentic Jewish slang gives the song sophistication, credibility, and

‘insider’ chic. The fact that the song lyrics are exclusively in the first-person plural to my mind makes the lyrics less objectionable but also both more interesting and more difficult to interpret. By eschewing the third-person, Fat Mike as lyricist is refusing to avoid some accountability for the Jewish gang’s antisocial behaviour; his identification with the gang in both its positive and negative aspects is complete (although in real life it is doubtful whether Fat Mike was ever a member of this or any other Jewish gang). Use of the first-person plural also avoids any possible accusation of racism and hostility towards Jews. Fat Mike and Eric Scott Melvin’s professed Jewish ethnicity (two-fourths of the band) also makes an anti-Semitic interpretation of the politically incorrect lyrics harder to sustain. It is important also to note that the band performed three concerts in Israel in September 2007.

As mentioned above, the song is sung completely in the first-person plural with the rowdy chorus being: ‘We’re the Brews/ Sporting anti-swastika tattoos’. On a live (Warped tour) concert video of ‘The Brews’, available on Youtube.com,<sup>23</sup> lead guitarist El Hefe is observed at 1:14 and 2:10 rushing to the positioned microphone on centre-left of stage during the chorus and eagerly screaming the chorus into it (Fat Mike is positioned centre-middle of stage, some distance from El Hefe, with Eric Scott Melvin at centre-right although all three move around much during the performance). El Hefe also joins in the singing of the last verse (‘we got the might ... from our meat’) providing a gang vocals effect here too. At 2:06 of the 2:40 video, El Hefe exhorts the crowd: ‘Come on, you Canucks, one more time for rehearsal’ before there is a repeating of the chorus to close out the performance of the song.

With the chorus lyric ‘We’re the Brews/ Sporting anti-swastika tattoos’ contradiction is introduced immediately. Tattooing is forbidden under the Jewish Old Testament law. Leviticus 19:28 states: ‘You shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor tattoo any marks on you: I am the LORD’ (New King James Version, from Biblegateway.com). The anti-swastika tattoos thus clearly denote the ideological stance of the gang but the gang does not seem aware of or be concerned about the contradiction that they create. In other words, Jewish ethnicity/religious affiliation is a major part of the self-conscious group identity of the Brews and is the source of male bonding. And yet the very act of tattooing is a violation of the Jewish law that is an integral part of the same Jewish identity that the Brews are so keen to defend.

The song describes the violence and mayhem that the gang enjoys but reminds us that gang members ‘must be home by Saturday morning’ so as to *be seen observing* the Jewish

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<sup>23</sup> This live video can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xniqEA6ZPuU> (accessed 16 April 2009).

Sabbath. Although the Jewish Sabbath starts on Friday sundown and lasts until Saturday sundown (I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for this information) presumably daytime Saturday is the time that the Jewish young men must be seen publicly with their families and be seen to be *officially* following the faith. Drunk on ‘Manashevitz’ (cheap Jewish wine), the gang on Friday nights go out to terrorize ‘Goyem’ (non-Jews). They ‘stomp Shagitz’ (Preppies). These two enemies, Goyen and Shagitz, introduce another dialectic. One enemy is old, the other new; one enemy reveals the Brews’ Jewishness, the other reveals their contemporary American hardcore attitude. The simultaneous attraction and hostility to non-Jewish women that the Brews display (‘screwing shicksas’) also suggests the alienation faced by the members of this migrant community. It should also be noted that the song clearly fails to adequately address and explore gender issues.

One of the more humorous and provocative lines in the song is where it is stated that the gang ‘cannot lose a fight’ because they have internalized the Jewish Orthodox self-image that they ‘are the chosen ones’. The gang clearly is trying to forge a complex identity in a strange and alien society. The simplistic ‘chosen ones’ ideology is sure to prove irresistibly attractive to the members of the Brews. Clinging to this ideology, however, does reduce the possibility that the gang can ever be fully accepted by, or feel comfortable within, mainstream American society. If we are ‘the chosen ones’, then who are you? Another contradiction possibly present in the song is a controversial one: is the band implying that the Brews’ ethnic minority status is inconsistent with the gang’s positive self-image and extroverted behaviour? Are ethnic minorities that do not culturally merge with the mainstream society to be denied a voice? This question is a much more contentious one than the issue of tattoos and if an interpretation that sees this question as present in the song is viable then it raises the issue of whether NOFX supports cultural assimilation of ethnic minority groups (achieved through ridicule) into the dominant American culture. Fat Mike and Eric Scott Melvin are, of course, *assimilated* non-religious Jews (whilst the Brews are presented as non- or partially-assimilated).

The joyfully sung rowdy chorus ‘Cause hey we’re the Brews’ is an attempt to highlight the gang’s rejoicing in its ethnic and religious identity as well as in its mayhem. The word ‘because’ suggests that the gang’s maintained position is that its identity as ‘Brews’ is more than enough to compensate for *both* its violence and the inconsistencies inherent in its ideology and practice. The theme of the mindlessness and simplistic thinking of youth that we saw in ‘Bob’ re-appears here in ‘The Brews’. Youth are challenged by NOFX to examine the presuppositions underlying their ideology and practice, to recognize the untenable nature

of the contradictions thus exposed, and then to work towards meaningful change. 'The Brews' is an anti-violence song but, more than that, it aims to highlight to us the inconsistency of our own maintained positions and worldviews. In the same way that we identify with Bob, we identify with the Brews. The use of first-person plural pronoun throughout forces us to do this as Fat Mike's linguistic identification with the gang is complete. They are 'we', not 'other'. In the same way, the Clash speaks of 'hate and war' but in the 1977 song of the same name acknowledges that hate and war is 'the only thing we are today',<sup>24</sup> as opposed to an 'out there' label to be assigned only to other people. Likewise, for NOFX, we are all guilty of the same hypocrisies, deceit, and self-righteousness as members of the Brews. In what ways are we blind to the inconsistencies and failings of our own maintained positions? NOFX is hoping that the Brews make us laugh: not in a racist way but as part of a reflexive process of self-reflection where we recognize that, when contradictions are exposed, there is nowhere left to hide. The joyfully rowdy gang vocals in the chorus, especially when the line 'sporting anti-swastika tattoos' is sung, suggests an open rejoicing by NOFX in this contradiction within the strict confines of the song.

The song clearly maintains the same complex nuanced dialectic that we saw in 'Bob'. The Brews' actions are not portrayed as absolutely completely bad. The Brews have their positive aspects. The reference to being driven by 'Chutspah', which is an untranslatable Yiddish term meaning a cross between balls and rudeness, suggests that it is very difficult to classify the Brews as either good or bad; their motivations, let alone their actions, are mixed and confused. This term was also used in a response by one of the post-punk fans surveyed by Martin (2004) suggesting a Jewish influence in punk culture that can probably be traced back as far as Malcolm McLaren, Bernie Rhodes, the Clash's Mick Jones, Blondie's Chris Stein, and mid-1970s New York City band the Dictators. When does courage become rudeness? Use of this Yiddish term keeps the door open to multiple interpretations about motives and attitudes. The rowdy joyous drunken singing of the chorus allows us to revel in and appropriate the power of the Brews in the same way that Robert Walser (1993a, 1993b) argues that the Judas Priest song 'Electric Eye' allows the audience to share in the power of the surveillance camera whilst simultaneously condemning such surveillance from the societal perspective. As another example from the heavy-metal genre, the band-member narrator voice in the Saxon song 'Strong Arm of the Law' (1980) is negative *in the verses*

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<sup>24</sup> This line is inexplicably omitted from the lyrics to the song at Plyrics.com. However it can be heard clearly at 0:44 out of 1:47 of a live video of the Clash performing the song in 1976 available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B58FHKF27qg> (accessed 28 April 2009).

towards the police who stop the band's car after a gig to search for drugs ('You should've seen the stupid smirk drop from his face/ it was a negative exercise/ the way that we dress and the things that we do/ they thought it was an easy bust'). However, in the chorus ('Stop, get out/ we are the Strong Arm of the Law'), the listener is instead invited to revel in the power of the police. In the verses lyrically 'we' is the band members and their entourage; in the chorus 'we' reverts to the police. Therefore, in the song taken as a whole, police power is viewed dialectically as having, consistent with the approach taken by Judas Priest in 'Electric Eye', a positive and a negative aspect. In 'The Brews', too, both the tone and lyrics of the chorus are more favourable towards the Brews than are the tone and lyrics of the verses. Possibly the Brews are being presented somewhat favourably by NOFX because they are clearly 'human, all too human' and their fighting spirit is admirable. Fat Mike would flatly reject the view that the Brews should meekly allow themselves to be bullied by fascist gangs. However, he also wants them to go beyond simply being another gang in the suburban jungle self-righteously trumpeting their own credentials and ruthlessly defending their own turf. Punk was never about that.

The last line in the second chorus amplifies the contradiction by describing the Brews in one line as 'Fairfax ghetto boys, skinhead Hebrews' which surely indicates the complex mix of identities that the gang has appropriated for itself. Fairfax is a Los Angeles suburb which is home to a large Jewish community. The place name Fairfax in 'The Brews' ties the song to the local and to the concrete as Joe Strummer did in his lyrical masterpiece 'White Man in Hammersmith Palais' and the Clash did again a year later on the Paul Simonon composed 'The Guns of Brixton' (Emery 2007; Gilbert 2004). For a punk rocker, walking in the cultural Marxist tradition, *context is always important* because it allows a site to be analyzed in its complete and contradictory totality and allows more complex meanings and prospects for resistance to be constructed and articulated. Clashes between police and working-class and immigrant youth in the Brixton housing estate in 1979 (the subject matter of 'The Guns of Brixton') revealed clearly to the broader society underlying social tensions that probably existed outside Brixton but in a more muted form (or would later break out elsewhere if the dialectic of social change was allowed to run its course). The song presented the perfect message for the first year of Thatcherism, painting a similar picture to Tory rhetoric but in the Clash's case blaming neither the immigrants nor the social underclass. In the first chapter of Volume One of *Capital*, Marx (1976, originally published in 1867) studied the commodity form, rather than some larger totality such as the factory or the society (Tinker 1999). The reason for this is that Marx understood that all of the contradictions of capitalism (for

example, between use-values and exchange-values and between the increasing wealth created by the capitalist mode of production and the increasing impoverishment of the proletariat) are already present in the concrete form of the commodity. NOFX also, and possibly for the same reason, chose to study 'The Brews of Fairfax' in depth and in detail rather than produce an abstract dry totalizing discourse on American society and marginalization. The Clash sung about Brixton, not just about England (although admittedly at times the Clash did that as well). By studying The Brews of Fairfax we have access to a window in which we can observe many of the trends and contradictions which are either lying dormant or are in active operation within the wider American society. To those that might argue that 'Jewish gangs are not a mainstream topic of interest in the broader society', I respond by stating that issues of religious belief, hypocrisy, marginalization, voice, violence, power, immigrant communities, representation, and group self-identity (all topics explored within the 2 minutes 40 seconds of 'The Brews') most certainly are.

#### 'Happy Guy' (1994)

He's just a man getting through life the best he can/ He's not a scientist, he programs a computer/ Before that he sold cars to pay a student loan now he receives pity/ From his family - his friends say how could he/ Turn his back on reason worshipping/ A God finding truth through fear and mind control/ He's just a man trying to explain how/ He found the word of God could make his life seem less insane/ So he shares what he's read, what he understands/ It makes sense to him, it makes perfect sense.

He's never seen the world so clearly/ Turned his back on free will - has he lost his mind?/ He'd rather kneel down than take charge of his life/ And he knows what people think, but it doesn't sway him/ He can read the writings on the wall// 'Cause he knows how people treat, how they treat each other/ A sacrifice to benefit the all/ Don't try to judge him, his theological ideas/ His hopes may be false but his happiness is real/ Don't try to judge him, he's just a man.

This song, 'Happy Guy' from 1994s *Punk in Drublic* is, as with 'Bob', an in-depth Tolstoyean or Dostoyevskyeian character study of a single young male individual.<sup>25</sup> It is also

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<sup>25</sup> Although the vast majority of NOFX's fictional characters are male, and this might concern some people, other songs in the NOFX canon do introduce complex female characters, the most famous of these being Fat Mike's childhood friend and now porn star, Lori Meyers, in the 1994 song of the same name (where Lori proclaims, in justification of her new-found profession: 'I ain't no Cinderella, I ain't waiting for no prince'). In this song, from *Punk in Drublic*, Lori justifies her newfound profession by comparing it with the working conditions and wages on offer at the factory, an avowedly Marxist critique relying on the young Marx's theory of alienation. 'Kim Shattuck (sp?) of the Muffs' (according to Eric Scott Melvin, Frequently Asked Questions, NOFX Official Website at [http://www.nofxofficialwebsite.com/qa/qa\\_read.php3?page=7](http://www.nofxofficialwebsite.com/qa/qa_read.php3?page=7), accessed 17 December 2008) sings Lori's part on the original studio version of the song. Sarah Sandin puts on an

a complex, nuanced, and dialectical analysis of Christian evangelical religion. As we saw earlier, Marx (1976) used the opening chapter of Volume 1 of *Capital* to examine the commodity form in extreme detail because the commodity form contains within itself all of the contradictions of capitalism. In ‘This is England’ (1985), the Clash expresses its exasperation, and simultaneously its identification, with fallen England and its contradictions with the chorus of: ‘This is England/ this knife of Sheffield steel/ this is England/ this is how we feel’. In this song, ‘Happy Guy’, the young man is presented by NOFX as a *living contradiction*. How can a young university graduate depart from what Fat Mike labels as Reason in order to embrace the Christian God by faith? The unnamed ‘Happy Guy’ in the song has made a recent conversion to evangelical Christianity and all of a sudden his world ‘makes perfect sense to him’. In addition, his newfound faith has multiplied his happiness a dozen times. As with the other songs we have studied, NOFX addresses the issue of American Christian religion dialectically and critically. The song seems to resemble in places something that a Christian punk band might have written. In other places, however, the song is critical of religion. However, at no stage does the song degenerate into a religion-bashing exercise. Above all, the song is compassionate and sympathetic to the presumed reasons why the young man became a Christian. Fat Mike presumes that the young man was disenchanted by the way people ‘treat each other’ and the tone of Fat Mike’s voice in the song makes it clear that he regards the young man’s thinking as completely understandable (if not logical). Throughout the song Fat Mike’s voice tone indicates sympathy for the Happy Guy.

NOFX nearly turns into a Christian band at one point in the song as Fat Mike seems to accept the claim of Christianity that the sacrifice of Christ was to ‘benefit the all’. This statement is ambiguous enough to be consistent with any or all of the three main theological theories as to the purpose of the atonement: Christ as Victor Theory, Satisfaction Theory (also referred to as penal substitution) and Moral Influence Theory (for introductions to these three theories see Walls 2004). It is not even inconsistent with the view adopted by the more socially and politically conservative American evangelicals (Satisfaction Theory) that the righteous Christ was a sin offering upon which God placed His wrath rather than upon sinful human beings. This is the theory of the atonement that philosophers regard as being the primary view adopted by Mel Gibson, director of *The Passion of the Christ*, and much of that film’s American audience. As Walls (2004, 33) explains:

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empowering and impressive performance singing Lori’s lines on the 2007 live album *They’ve Actually Gotten Worse Live!*

When Christ is being crucified, Gibson's hand holds the nail that is driven into Christ's hand. Thereby, Gibson depicts the conviction that we – all of us – are responsible for putting Christ to death. It is our sins that he bore, it is in our stead that he died, and because of that we can be forgiven and escape the penalty that we deserve.

Like St. Augustine and the French twentieth-century left-wing philosopher Simone Weil, did Fat Mike find God in the end? Christianity, Fat Mike seems to imply, by pointing the way to Love Incarnate, compensates people for the imperfect and unloving nature of human relations in this world. As Weil (2006) remarks, it is through affliction that we experience God as Christ also Himself suffered affliction and separation from His Father. For Slovenian philosopher, Slavoj Zizek (2003, 2008), who courageously attempts a reconciliation of materialist subversive Marxism with materialist subversive Christianity, the unique aspect of the Christian understanding of God is that God is self-alienated or alienated within Himself (hence Christ on the cross: 'Eloi, eloi, lama sabachthani?' or 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?', St. Matthew 27:46) For Zizek, we cannot hope to relate to God in His bliss (Zizek 2003, 91), but as alienated people we can relate to and identify with the self-alienation of God.

In his analysis of *The Passion of the Christ*, Dallas Willard (2004, 171) explains the not completely obvious link between unkindness in the world and Christ's sacrificial death:

Only by Jesus Christ publicly suffering and dying in circumstances of the worst kind – imposed by a range of different kinds of people, especially Romans and Jews – and then living on beyond all that in the power and goodness of God, could he open the possibility of a good and righteous life to everyone in the world.

Despite the contrary opinion often being voiced, Karl Marx, like Fat Mike, held a sophisticated and dialectical understanding of religion where he acknowledged and understood both its positive and negative aspects.

On the one hand, in 'The German Ideology' (Marx and Engels 1994b) and the 'Preface to "A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy"' (Marx 1994c), religion is relegated to the superstructure, whereas historical change is driven by changes in the economic base and is a function of the ruling class' need to safeguard itself. A mechanical materialist would regard the Protestant Reformation as being the result of changes in the economic base

whereas for the German sociologist Max Weber it was the Protestant work ethic that was the *spirit of* an emerging capitalism. Most Marxists would accept that there is a two-way interaction between the economic base and the religious part of the superstructure, consistent with Althusser's (2008, 9) view that the superstructure has 'relative autonomy', there is 'reciprocal action' between base and superstructure, and the economic base only has 'determination in the last instance'.

However, there is another less-cited side to Marx's thinking on religion. In the 'Introduction to "Toward a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right"', the young Marx (1994a) refers to religion as the 'the heart of a heartless world, the soul of soulless conditions'. It is a sign of real suffering and a response to real suffering. In Marx's words:

*Religious* suffering is the *expression* of real suffering and at the same time the *protest* against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people (Karl Marx, 'Introduction, "Toward a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right"', 1844) (Marx 1994a, 28, emphasis original).

Opium here is being presented as a primitive form of anaesthetic (see also Tolstoy's 'The Death of Ivan Ilyich'), not as a recreational drug and who can blame people for wanting anaesthetic to cope with life's pain? Fat Mike also sees religion as having positive and negative aspects. He agrees with Marx that religion's value lies not in its truth value according to a Correspondence or a Coherence Theory of Truth (Irwin 2004, 129-31) but in terms of a Pragmatic Theory of Truth (Irwin 2004, 131-2), i.e. as a source of comfort and solace in a harsh world.

First we discuss the objections to Christianity that Fat Mike makes in the song. Firstly, the Happy Guy 'turn[s] his back on reason worshiping/ A God finding truth through fear and mind control'. This reification of Reason seems somewhat surprising. Does Fat Mike accept the socially and politically conservative Kantian ideals of the Enlightenment? It is probably better to view these two lines as Fat Mike citing the Happy Guy's family. If we regard these two lines as being Fat Mike citing the Happy Guy's family, we do not need to see Fat Mike as being a modernist champion of Reason. This makes sense as he then goes on to dismiss these objections to the Happy Guy's faith. Fat Mike defends the Happy Guy with the following remarks: 'He's just a man trying to explain how/ he found the word of God could make his life seem less insane'. The Happy Guy is using the 'hey, it works' Pragmatic

Theory of Truth (Irwin 2004, 131-2). Irwin (2004, 131), in the context of his philosophical analysis of *The Passion of the Christ*, succinctly summarizes this theory's implications: 'More specifically we might argue that "Jesus is God incarnate" is true because it works, making life better, easier, and more meaningful'.

As Žizek (2003, 98, 2008, 92, 111-12, 126, 132-3, 136) makes clear, the Christianity of St. Paul *liberates* because it allows the believing Christian to escape from the trapping confines of the law-transgression dialectic of Romans 7:5. It is *agape love* that allows the Christian to transcend this dialectic: 'I died to the law' (St. Paul, Romans 7:6). Hence, 'there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus' (St. Paul, Romans 8:1, New International Version).

Above all, Fat Mike continually recognizes and affirms the Happy Guy's flawed humanity. He's just a man. The humanitarian and fraternal aspects of punk culture are clearly in view here. Although Fat Mike may not share the Happy Guy's theology, he refuses to condemn him and tries his best to be understanding and sympathetic. It is too bad that in real life Fat Mike did not conform to these ideals in his later years. The Christian hardcore band Underoath was recently forced off the punk *Warped* tour by Fat Mike who objected to the public group prayer meetings being held during the tour. In this song, however, Fat Mike sympathizes with the plight of young people in a complex, confusing, rapidly changing, and frequently hostile world. In Fat Mike's thinking, the reason he gives for the Happy Guy's conversion seems to him understandable: 'He found the word of God could make his life seem less insane'. Punk has always had an important aesthetic aspect and personal experience has always been central to punk, making it something of an existentialist movement (see e.g. the lyrics to the Clash's 'London Calling' from the 1979 album of the same name and the lyrics to 'Stay Free' on 1978s *Give 'Em Enough Rope*). Therefore, Fat Mike's sympathy and understanding here for the Christian Happy Guy do not really strike those familiar with the punk movement as being odd. The Clash recorded a gospel song 'The Sound of the Sinners', the Sex Pistols had the band's previously mentioned punk prayer 'No One is Innocent', and Irish-American punk band the Dropkick Murphys performed a cover of the traditional Irish hymn 'God Willing' on 2007s *The Meanest of Times* ('God willing I'll see you on the other side'). Opening song 'Famous for Nothing', on the same Murphys album, has a clear religious theme: although the song narrator did not heed the Lord's call, the Roman Catholic religion and its representatives remain respected. Likewise, in the Dropkick Murphys' song 'Never Forget', which demonstrates the most humanitarian strain within the punk ethos (mixed with the romanticism and sentimentality that is often a feature of humanitarian punk

dating as far back as the Clash's Mick Jones on 'Stay Free'), the narrator comments that: 'To my father's stern direction/ And the lessons that he taught/ My grandmother's affection/ And the faith I always fought'. Jon Young (2007) puts forward his view that the band writes 'surprisingly thoughtful songs that explore lives shaped by drunken violence and Catholicism'. In the song 'Otherside', on Rancid's 2003 *Indestructible* album, the band, in memory of Lars Frederiksen's departed brother Robert (Lynn 2003), expresses a commitment to religious tolerance and understanding, although it does so from a self-confessed atheist position: 'I was an atheist/ You wore the crucifix/ We put our differences to the side'. Clearly it would be wrong and simplistic, even ignoring the whole Christian punk scene, to characterize the punk ethos as anti-religious. Zizek (2003, 2008) says the same of dialectical materialism. Overall, I conclude that Fat Mike and the Happy Guy both give much credence to the Pragmatic Theory of Truth.

We now consider Fat Mike's next objection to the Happy Guy's religion, and this is clearly his own words: 'Turned his back on free will - has he lost his mind?/ He'd rather kneel down than take charge of his life'. While he tries to come across as dogmatic and convinced of his opinion here, the alert listener may be inclined to believe that Fat Mike is willing to give the Happy Guy the benefit of the doubt. Surely only the most narrow-minded and controlling of Christians would argue that a new convert should not 'take hold of his life'. In effect, Fat Mike is challenging the Happy Guy to go beyond the clichéd Nietzschean view of sheep-like Christian conduct and also exhorting him to prove the negative people wrong. The principal contradiction in the song is *not* between faith and reason (an out-dated modernist dialectic that our baby-boomer parents might have used) but between faith and free will or between (presumed) passivity and activity. The latter might be termed an existentialist dialectic.

Like Karl Marx, Fat Mike offers a sophisticated and dialectical analysis of religion where he accepts and acknowledges both its positive and its negative aspects. All of religion's contradictions can be observed in the person of the Happy Guy. Fat Mike fully agrees with both the Happy Guy and Karl Marx that religion is 'the heart of a heartless world, the soul of soulless conditions'. And it is against such conditions that punk has always railed.

## **Conclusions**

This study has explored dialectical contradiction in the mid-period songs of Californian punk band NOFX led by punk scene icon Fat Mike. I find that NOFX is a band willing to fully

highlight and explore the contradictions associated with living the existentialist punk lifestyle within the ordinary and tedious constraints of suburban America and its various middle-class voices of orthodoxy, moderation, and Enlightenment-styled Reason. Clearly NOFX views it as being difficult to ‘live the punk life in Green Bay, Wisconsin’. In fact, it might be much harder to do so than in punk’s original breeding ground, the bed-sits, art schools, dingy corner pubs, and council tower blocks of Lydon, Beverly, Strummer, Jones, Simonon, Headon, McLaren, Westwood, Rhodes, Letts, and Lee’s west London (to name all the usual suspects). West London, for all its failings, was cosmopolitan and multi-cultural; it had a vibe which the punks could appropriate and bend to suit their own immediate purposes and desires (see, for example, the discussion on the culture of 1970s Notting Hill in Savage 2005, 111-12). By contrast, Green Bay is neither cosmopolitan nor multi-cultural.

The members of NOFX clearly have a loyalty and commitment to the scene, similar to that that Kahn-Harris (2007) claims extreme-metal fans have towards theirs. Negotiating suburban life’s hurdles and constraints, whilst staying true to the traditions and ethos of punk, is a difficult achievement but NOFX urges us not to give up. However, equally, NOFX also urges us not to become a reactionary copy-and-paste parody of the far-away punks of 1970s London. Only by acknowledging the past, whilst not being bound to it, can punk continually reinvent itself and remain relevant to a new generation. As Sartre (2003) writes, the task of each new generation is to produce its own workable synthesis of facticity and transcendence. Each new generation must decide for itself whether to honour Lenin’s statue or to tear it down (Sartre 2003, 563). We can learn much from the example of NOFX.

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