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A Blueprint or Change: How Punk Music in Belfast Affects Activism Today

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Though art can be found in all walks of life, it lends itself particularly well to the expression of political frustration. During the deeply rooted religious conflict between Catholic and Protestant communities in Northern Ireland, commonly referred to as the Troubles, many artists and musicians used their creativity to speak out against the violence of the conflict. Born into a society of religious division and hatred, youths of the 1970s and 1980s often turned to the local punk music movement in order to bridge and speak out against the religious divide. Many believe this was critical to eventual peace in Belfast, sometimes (controversially) referred to as Ulster. Though the punk scene of Northern Ireland has long since passed its peak, it continues to be seen as a powerful force. Punk music has provided musicians today "a blueprint" of how to speak out against modern societal issues in Northern Ireland. This report will be an exploration of what musical activism looks like in Belfast, Northern Ireland and why.

Over the course of three months in Northern Ireland, I conducted ethnographic research to study how the punk movement affects modern activism. My ethnographic research consisted of semi-formal interviews, participant observation, field notes, and coding during analysis. The majority of my semi-formal interviews were with activists, former punk musicians, musicians, and music executives. Participant observation included attending rallies, marches, and other activist events in Belfast. It also consisted of me attending festivals, concerts, and band practices. I also wrote daily field notes about things I saw, heard, and experienced each day. Since September, I have analyzed my interviews and field notes through MaxQDA, a coding system for quantitative research.

Based on my research, I found that musicians mirror their musical intent on punk musicians from the Troubles. Not all musicians were punk musicians. In fact, very few of the people I worked with would define their musical style as "punk." However, many did define their approach to writing and performing music as "punk" because they cared about changing a social issue. As one musician said, "Punk has an ethos… so you're super aware of how the world works around you so…you're not complacent… punk [is] more important [here] than anywhere else in the world because it was the uniting thing… in the peace process." Today's musicians perceive punk music as the reason for the eventual peace in Belfast, they see it as the best way to make change.

Musicians today use the success of punk music as "blueprint" for how to lead successful activist efforts. The principal part of punk music that was mirrored by musicians today was engaging the audience. Like past punk musicians, today's musicians believe that in order to bolster an activist movement, one has to use music as a form of persuasion. Music was and is now used to get the support needed to sustain an activist movement.

Additionally, the perceived success of punk music in helping the peace process led to activists believing that their music was the most effective way to address political problems in Belfast. Like one musician told me, music is a "catalyst for all social, political, [and] cultural movements… every revolution… started with [music]. It's always the catalyst. [It] is just phenomenally powerful… [it] just takes the frustrated emotions and the issue of the time and… alchemizes them." Because many musicians had grown up participating in or hearing about the punk movement in Belfast during the Troubles, they saw how it was used to build community, challenge authority, and create new social norms. Activist musicians today have similar goals. They take their frustrations with the political and social issues they have personally experienced or seen in society and create that is then easily shared in the hopes of creating change by increasing support.

During the Troubles, the punk movement encouraged and fostered the importance of being self-aware of one's role in their community; one could either support the religious conflict of the area or choose to move past it by changing society. Through punk songs, punk musicians hoped to show the inherent power their audience had in creating societal change through local activist efforts. A popular punk band of the time, Stiff Little Fingers, wrote a song called 'Alternative Ulster.' This song was frequently quoted and referred during my time in Belfast, particularly the line "Grab [Belfast], change it, it's yours" (Alternative Ulster). This iconic phrase explicitly told Stiff Little Finger's audiences that change was theirs. perfectly capturing their overall message that in order to create an 'Alternative Ulster,' their audience had to recognize they could participate in activism. Likewise, the song was meant to show a problem that existed in society.

Similar to punk musicians during the Troubles, musicians today use their music to encourage people to support and engage in a political movement. While in Belfast, I met a musician that wrote an album about mental health. She released the album in the hopes of encouraging people to realize and stop the stigma of mental health in Northern Ireland.

Both the punk movement of the Troubles and modern musical activism hold a tremendous political power that does not go unnoticed by the musicians, their audiences, or politicians. Musicians in Belfast today are hoping to create their own 'Alternative Ulster' as their punk musical ancestors once did. While the punk movement sought to create a society free of sectarian violence and hatred, musical activists today are committed to emboldening their audiences to design, construct, and forge toward a better world through increased engagement in local activist efforts in Belfast today.

References:

Stiff Little Fingers. Alternative Ulster. Rigid Digits Company, 1983

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