

# The Sex Pistols



*By Vivien Goldman*

PERFORMERS



**O**dd what comes hurtling down the hallways of memory when I think of the Sex Pistols being inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. I recall sitting on the balcony of my flat in Westbourne Park, London, in the summer of 1975 with a fellow rock scribe named Pete Erskine, a pretty young man with floppy blond hair, and the way the sunlight dappled the garden as he laconically drawled, “Hey, this guy Malcolm McLaren’s asked me to join a new band. They’re called the Sex Pistols.” Pete was very funny, and I remember how he paused before delivering the group’s name – the punch line – and how he scrutinized my face for the expected look of surprise at the outrageous name, swiftly followed by laughter, both of which I delivered on cue.

Well, John Lydon, singer; Paul Cook, drummer; Steve Jones, guitarist; and bassists Glen Matlock and the late Sid Vicious are all being inducted as the Sex Pistols tonight. But not Pete Erskine (and R.I.P., dear Pete, who died too young). Turned out he was one among many intriguing types that the Sex Pistols’ arch manager/manipulator, Malcolm McLaren,

was trawling for – marketable, malleable young men – to round out the band he was masterminding.

At the time of the band’s bumpy birth, initiated by Steve Jones’s stealing David Bowie’s music gear, young Rotten & Co. would have scoffed at the very idea of joining a hall of fame – what, join that load of establishment tossers? Not till they give us their limos and take our place in the dole queue, mate! But time gives new perspectives, and thirty years on, it’s quite okay for the respect by one’s peers to be expressed by a posh bash, rather than a typical 1976 fan’s tribute, like half a grubby amphetamine pill or a quick shag in the bog. Although it’s a safe bet that the Rotten One, who’s thriving as a host of TV shows about humans and other animals, will rock some challenging hair tonight, he’s unlikely to gob on the recording industry’s great and good; nor will Steve Jones, now a top DJ in Los Angeles, while accepting his award, leap from the stage to smash an audience member in the face. Not unless that audience member throws a beer glass at him first, of course.

The few gigs that the appalled British authorities actually permitted the Sex Pistols to play in their accelerated career (1975–78) were more of a confrontational performance piece

The Sex Pistols onstage: Sid Vicious, Johnny Rotten, Paul Cook, and Steve Jones (from left), c. 1977





ABOVE: On the cover of *Rolling Stone*, 1977. BELOW: Rotten, Cook, Jones, and Glen Matlock (from left). OPPOSITE, FROM TOP: Matlock and Rotten; Lydon takes a break.

than any concert promoted by Clear Channel could conceivably be. There was literally no telling what might occur, or even if the show would go on at all. If in fact it did, I for one could be found cowering in the back as ardent pogoers would

make the floor quiver in the prototypical mosh pit. Pretty soon, I knew, glass would fly, and the thud of the bass on “Anarchy in the U.K.” and “God Save the Queen” would be almost drowned out by the pounding of punching fists in front of the stage. More than a rock concert, the shows were a sort of primal catharsis, a safe space for audience members to act out the petty frustrations of every day and generally vent. Of course, it took a special sound explosion, as well as amphetamines and beer, to unblock that old British reserve. It took the presence of Johnny, yowling and scowling “Pretty Vacant,” contorting himself at the microphone, daring the audience to attack; Paul Cook, as he laid a master builder’s bedrock of drums on “EMI”; Steve Jones to strike a macho posture, ripping raw power-guitar chords through “Holidays in the Sun”; plus Glen Matlock’s bass making sense of the sound – and, of course, after Matlock’s 1977 ousting, Sid Vicious’s slashing at his instrument and inspiring kids with too-fast-to-live, crash-and-burn rock fantasies.

The Sex Pistols were a ferocious audio assault amplified by the way the songs and words rippled with sardonic rage. Undoubtedly, in John Lydon the band had a lyricist for the ages, whose pungency and dark sarcasm were more than a match for the pummeling aggression of the rhythm. The sneering, boastful opening lines of “Anarchy,” for example, are among the strongest ever sung: “I am an antichrist/I am an anarchist/Don’t know what I want but I know how to get it/I wanna destroy/Passerby . . .” You need a pretty dynamic groove to carry those incendiary words, and the Pistols did it.

Yet with all its antiestablishment urges, the punk scene, too, was hidebound by its own version of political correctness, which doomed the two classic songwriting partnerships of the era: the Sex Pistols’ John Lydon and Glen Matlock, and





the Clash's Joe Strummer and Mick Jones. In both cases, the thick-as-thieves managers, McLaren and the Clash's Bernie Rhodes, were yanking at the groups' strings as if they were puppets. Their insinuation was always that the melodic gifts of both Matlock and Jones were too pop – a great sin – and not sufficiently gritty and “punk,” for the revolutionary artists that the Pistols and Clash were programmed to be – and genuinely were. Of course, because McLaren had picked well, pretty soon the eager young musicians in the Pistols began to rebel against the man who fancied himself their Svengali. Given half a chance, the Sex Pistols delivered the goods. They had talent and couldn't be controlled for long. The only party line the musicians wanted to follow was their own – and that one lasted all night.

All the hostility took its toll. On the wall of Rotten's living room was a poster for a 1977 British Pistols tour, with most of the gigs crossed out – CANCELLED. It was presumably John himself who'd scrawled, THIS IS BORING. No wonder that after a short and crazy American tour, Rotten closed the band's career by snarling, “Ever get the feeling you've been cheated?” after the Pistols' last-ever show, in San Francisco in 1978.

Censorship meant that in their brief career, the Pistols barely got the opportunity to refine their sound on the road. Seeing them at their 1996 reunion shows, with Glen Matlock back on bass, was astonishing for those who remembered their initial gigs, fierce and energizing though they were. Nowadays, the Pistols, live, sound as polished and dynamic in their attack as they do on their classic album, *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's*





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Vicious, Cook, Rotten, Jones, at Cain's Ballroom, Tulsa, Oklahoma, 1978; Sid does Memphis, 1978; Nancy and Sid onstage at Max's Kansas City, 1978. OPPOSITE: R.I.P. John Simon Ritchie (1957–1979).

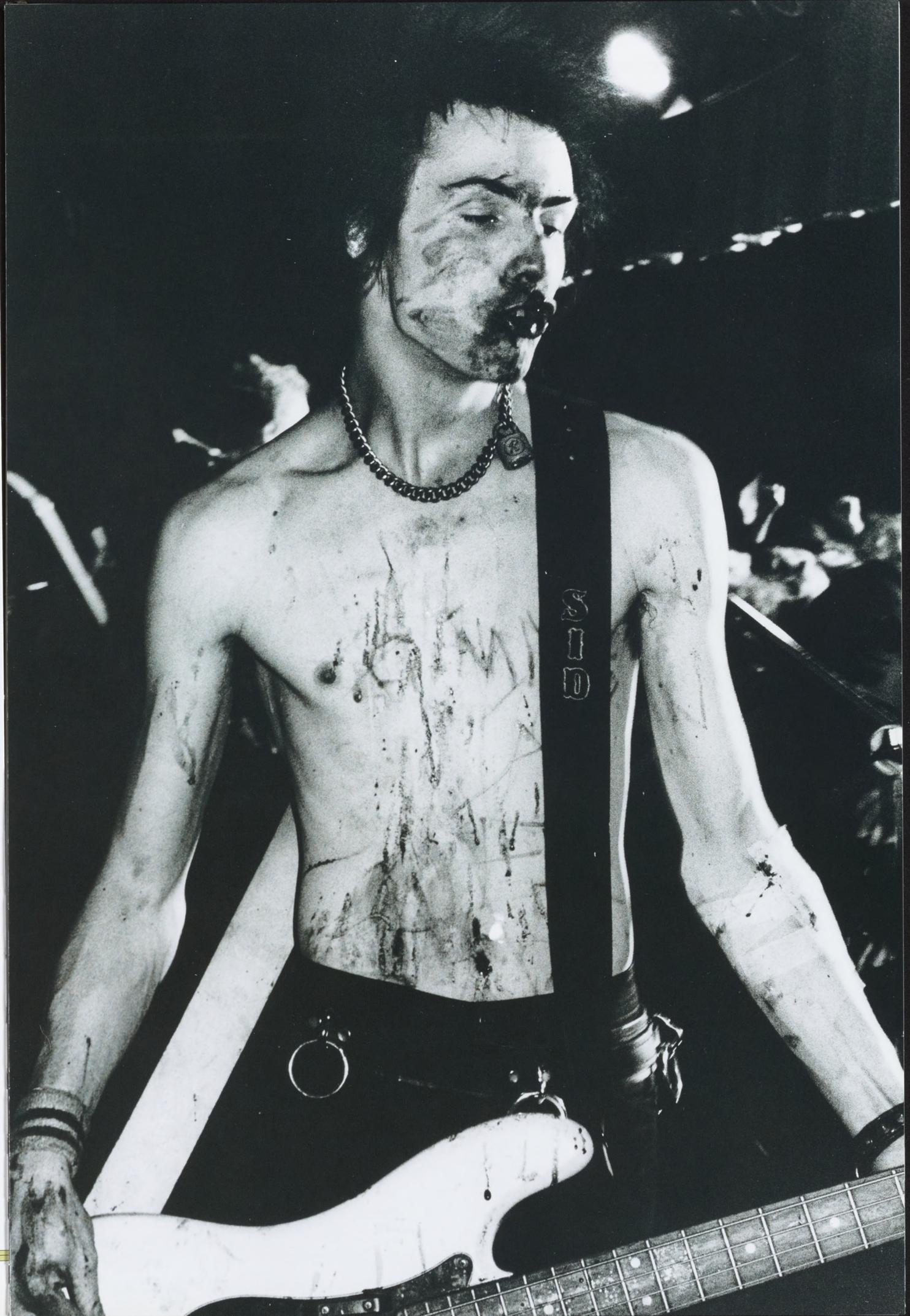
*the Sex Pistols*. Respect is due to the immaculate production skills of Chris Thomas, who knew how to finesse Elton John and Chrissie Hynde, too. In an impressive audio juggling act, Thomas positioned the Pistols to be radio-ready (“God Save the Queen” reached Number One in the U.K. even though it was banned) without trying to tame them, and made anarchy easy on the ears – yet still edgy.

But clearly the tragedy that will always hover over the Sex Pistols legend is the sad fate of Sid Vicious, born John Simon Ritchie, who died of a heroin overdose in 1979, while awaiting trial for the murder of his love, Nancy Spungen. Basically shy and sensitive, Sid concealed his vulnerability in a whirlwind of bad attitude, swastikas, and black leather. Perhaps Sid and Nancy were not always the liveliest of dinner companions, obsessed as they were with junk and their own victimization; they felt constantly under attack and that the whole world was against them. In that, they were not wrong. But the hand-scrawled legend on the back of a shirt worn by an anonymous

punk on the cover of photographer Janette Beckman’s recent book, *Made in the U.K.*, contains a poetic truth: SID WAS INNOCENT. Some will always feel that he died for all our sins, his tenuous grip on his place in society spun around by stardom till he got so dizzy that smack and Nancy were all he could cling to.

Who now could drop a parallel bomb on the industry and rival the exploits of the Sex Pistols? Could a wily deal maker shake today’s industry as McLaren did by playing labels off one another when cassettes were the radical new technology and the Walkman had just begun marching our minds toward today’s iPod? And would Green Day have ever become American icons, not idiots, if the Sex Pistols had fired blanks? The Sex Pistols played the industry, and the industry played them right back. But, finally, compelling music was made that gave voice to a turbulent time and altered the course of everybody’s history.

*God save the Sex Pistols.* ←



# Rip Her to Shreds

The Punk Look and the Destruction of Average



By Ann Powers

**V**ivienne Westwood, the fashion doyenne who became a Dame of the English Crown this year, has often said that a good idea is a perfect surprise.

It offers something shocking that, in retrospect, seems inevitable. That's what the look of punk was like, from its birth in that mythical instant when poet-provocateur Richard Hell ripped his dingy T-shirt to its final resting place in Hot Topics across the malls of America. It shocked us into sense — a sense of the whole picture of modern urban life, its dark alleys and dirty corners pushed up against its futuristic dreams.

Punk gave contemporary fashion a juvenile-delinquent phase. Its self-made style icons gleefully trashed conventions of beauty and glamour while pickpocketing from the coolest underground styles of the previous century. In its glory days, punk fashion followed Iggy Pop's instructions for forgotten boys and girls to gain notice: Search and Destroy. Thirty years later, the focus on punk hasn't waned; the style has become one of ready-to-wear's and couture's building blocks.

Picture punk and you'll see walking toward you the fiery freaks of an urban carnival, confrontational and proud in spiky Mohawks, black vinyl, and heavy boots, their safety pins gleaming in the glare of a street-light. But look a little deeper and this disarray starts to come together. Rock historian Jon Savage described

the look as embodied by its acclaimed early purveyors Hell and his band mates:

"This was a severe aesthetic that carried a series of messages: the existential freedom of the fifties beat, the blazing, beautiful self-destruction of the *poète maudit*, and the razor-sharpness of the sixties Mod. It spelt danger and refusal, just as the torn T-shirt spoke of sexuality and violence."

That's an elegant way to describe punk fashion. A *Time* magazine reporter got more florid in "Anthems of the Blank Generation," a 1977 cover story that copped Hell's most famous lyric for its title. The unnamed scribe waxed horrific about the scene at the Rat club in Boston:

"Musicians and listeners strut around in deliberately torn T-shirts and jeans; ideally, the rips should be joined with safety pins. Another fad is baggy pants with a direct connection between fly and pocket. These are called dumpies. Swastika emblems go well with such outfits. In London, the hair is often heavily greased and swept up into a coxcomb of blue, orange, or green, or a comely two-tone. Pierced ears may sport safety pins, some made of gold or silver."

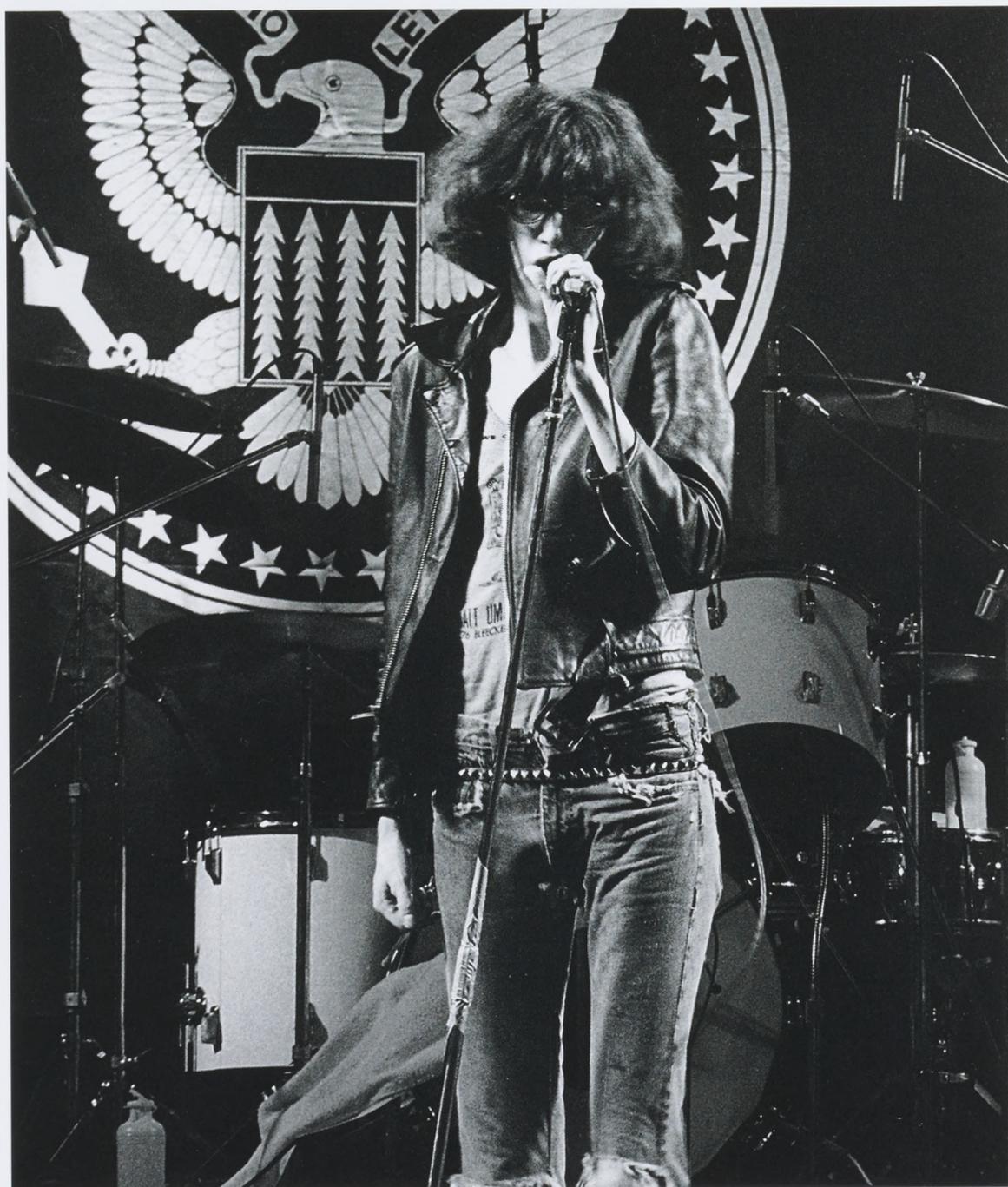
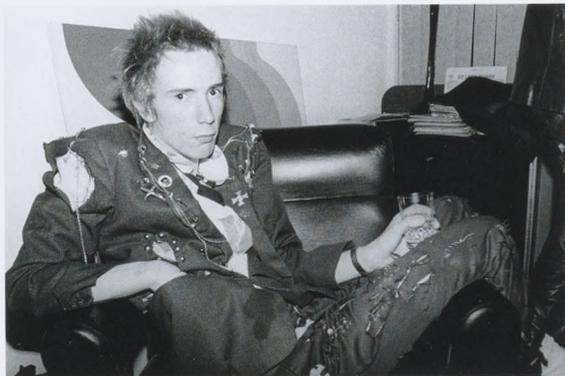
Giving himself the task of encapsulating what he saw and heard in two words, the reporter called out the armed forces: "Buzz and Blast."

In the 1970s, punk style did feel like an attack. Its inventors meant it that way. Hell and the New York crowd were cultivating what he described as a "notch-



ABOVE: A London boy's shirt proclaims Sid's innocence, 1979. OPPOSITE: East Village punks, mach two, 1984.





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren's London boutique; John "Mr. Deconstruction" Lydon; Joey Ramone and his band mates made leather biker jackets, T-shirts, and ripped jeans de rigueur.

thin, homeless hoodlum" look to counteract the decadent mood of glitter rock; designers Stephen Sprouse and Betsey Johnson rescued hippie fancy from itself with a metallic, very downtown edge. On King's Road, Westwood and her partner, Malcolm McLaren, created their groundbreaking pieces by mixing the street cool of London's Mods and rockers with fetish wear yanked out of the bourgeoisie's bedroom closet. Westwood and McLaren called their shop Sex, but it wasn't a sex shop — that contradiction was its essence. Fetish clothes suddenly weren't just for sadomasochists. Flaunting the forbidden became a means of social, not sexual, domination. Here's Jordan, Sex's first full-time clerk and public face, describing a normal workday commute:

"I had a lot of trouble, but what did I expect? Sometimes I'd get on a train and all I had on was a stocking and suspenders [garters] and a rubber top, that was it. Some of the commuters used to go absolutely wild, and they loved it. Some of the men got rather hot under the collar, papers on the lap."

Taking fetish wear out of context, Jordan and her fellow London punks forced people to reconsider the limits of modesty and good taste, and pushed the fashion world to upend the status quo. This approach to cool confused categories until they were obliterated. The hippies had made unexpected but pleasing connections; disco and glam, punk's shunned parents, cultivated outrageousness but still strived for shiny harmony. Punk style thrived on dissonance. It was dialectical, crashing opposites into each other to create a new paradigm.

Patti Smith, her pegged pants and neckties only enhancing her femininity, took hippie-boy androgyny back for the girls. Natural pinup Deborah Harry, dressed in Sunday-comics-style minis by designer Stephen Sprouse, made a sophisticated



TOP RIGHT: Early fashion plates Patti Smith and Tom Verlaine. ABOVE: Inside Sex with Jordan and Sid Vicious (far right) and friends.