



One Chord Wonders: Power and Meaning in Punk Rock

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Winchester and Oxford and, at the time, a junior officer. Mullen claims that “Pop Goes the Major,” a song that suggests that a Sergeant Major would “pop” if burned to death, “says much about the inexpressible suffering of ordinary soldiers under their superior officers” (174). Songs of this kind have been written about every war; they are no more indicative of the true feelings of ordinary soldiers than any other manifestation of the black humor and hyperbole indulged in by soldiers. Mullen believes that NCOs and officers were attacked in song because of their oppressive actions when it is instead their role that was being ridiculed. Mullen states that “the sergeant is the officer most insulted in the songs” (208). Sergeants are not officers, they are simply the authority figure with whom ordinary soldiers come into contact most frequently. Strangely, when discussing the bawdy use of hymn tunes in songs such as “When This Bloody War Is Over,” Mullen agrees with Alan Wilkinson that these songs mocked authority as a coping mechanism for the men. This point was strongly emphasized by Les Cleveland in his study of war in song and popular culture, *Dark Laughter* (1994). Cleveland’s is another important source not referenced by Mullen.

These issues of historical interpretation are regrettable. While remaining critical of a war that was waged during an era of imperialism and class antagonism, Mullen could have avoided them and still maintained his main purpose of demonstrating the crucial role popular music played in the lives of both soldiers and civilians. However, if one skirts round the historical analysis, *The Show Must Go On!* is a valuable addition to a still underrepresented area of the study of popular culture, and its wealth of examples provides a good starting point for anyone with an interest in the historical study of popular music.

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One Chord Wonders: Power and Meaning in Punk Rock, David Laing, with foreword by TV Smith, Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2015, 224 pp., \$17.95 (pb), ISBN: 978-1629630335

The reprinting of Dave Laing’s 1985 *One Chord Wonders* is cause for excitement. In the 30 years since its original publication, the book has become something of a cult classic. Long out of print and prohibitively expensive in used bookstores, it circulated through an underground network of savvy scholars. Many first read the text in badly faded editions or blurry photocopies. Even in tarnished form, it was captivating. For those working to drag pop music into academic discourse, *One Chord Wonders* was a message in a bottle.

But first things first. There is little to say about the new edition itself. Laing adds a single-page contextual preface. There is also a new foreword, contributed by Tim “TV” Smith of the Adverts (the title of the book is taken from his group’s 1977 Stiff Records single of the same name). Smith’s piece is a nice enough reflection on what it felt like to be involved with British punk during its heyday. It will offer little to guide a reading of Laing’s text, and it is not clear if he actually read much of the book. Otherwise, the content remains

largely unchanged. The virtue of the reprint, of course, is that it makes this pioneering text available once again.

Pioneering though it is, *One Chord Wonders* was far from a singularity. In fact, it was on the tail end of a publishing revolution that defined rock writing in the 1960s and 1970s. Dozens of classic books—think of Charlie Gillett’s 1970 *The Sound of the City* or Greil Marcus’s 1975 *Mystery Train*—predate *One Chord Wonders* by a decade or more. Laing himself produced a number of excellent works in this era. *The Sound of Our Time* (1969) is one of the first books to theorize the study of popular music, and *Buddy Holly* (1971) deserves to be read alongside the best early writing on rock and roll.

One Chord Wonders wasn’t even unique in focusing on punk. Along with Dick Hebdige’s (1979) *Subculture* and Marcus’s (1989) *Lipstick Traces*, Laing’s book was part of a paradigm shift in rock criticism. Writing on artists like the Ramones and the Sex Pistols nearly constituted a cottage industry by 1980. While this was just a continuation of that earlier rock critical vanguard, many writers (Laing included) felt that punk was a game-changer. Punk-centered articles, booklets, and fanzines sprang up in droves, each professing to make sense of the musical phenomenon that was scandalizing parents and romancing the media.

What makes *One Chord Wonders* stand out in that ambitious project is the way it comfortably straddles the line between early rock criticism and university scholarship. The book takes seriously the significance of punk without slipping into either academic reportage or punker worship. It avoids the most idealized moments of Hebdige’s *Subculture*, which, for all its many merits, occasionally oscillates between cultural analysis and typology. And yet Laing appears truly convinced that punk was powerful, whatever that might have meant.

Despite this, the central focus of Laing’s book is not on power, but on meaning. The central task of *One Chord Wonders* is to produce a *semiology* of punk. The text features eight chapters, each of which contributes to a dynamic fabric of the meanings produced by the genre’s fans, critics, and detractors. The core theoretical framework of the book melds Foucauldian discourse analysis with musical semiology, especially that formalized by Philip Tagg. While semiotics was gaining sway as a research methodology in the 1980s and 1990s, Laing was not simply grafting theory onto music. Given his topic, the semiological turn had urgency. It was obvious from the get-go that punk was not just about the sound of a chord, but also what Laing defines as the “culturally-defined web of associations” (3) that latched onto punk music and images.

Chapters 2 through 5 of the text explore these connotations at length, addressing topics from punk visual culture to the debates surrounding the label “punk” itself. The most impressive section is the third, “Listening,” which still stands as a model of how to analyze music. There, Laing anticipates a number of current trends in music scholarship. He focuses not only on recordings but also on live performance and the punk voice, aiming to tease out what about the sounds of the genre made it feel so urgent.

Insightful as Laing’s semiology is, what is perhaps most striking is what might be termed his phenomenological approach. Laing begins his introduction with apprehension:

In the mid-1980s, punk rock is in danger of being taken for granted. Like Elvis or the Beatles, the term is used in a way which assumes we know exactly what it is and what it meant....In the present account, “punk rock” is used in no special sense. (1).

In this spirit, Laing avoids the reductionism that often accompanies discussions of this controversial genre. He offers no guiding principle of punk, instead letting the material shape his study. This sensitivity saturates the text’s outer chapters (1 and 6–8). These expand

beyond the strictly semiological, accommodating the historical and social complexities lurking behind the music. Ultimately, Laing's text is at its most forceful where it acknowledges punk's promises and its debts—even those left undelivered and unpaid.

Since *One Chord Wonders* was first published, many newer and shinier studies of punk have entered the field. They have expanded our historical, musical, and social knowledge of the genre, often in ways that surpass Laing's earlier work. Given this, some criticisms are due. The first chapter, "Formation," occasionally dwells on now-tired questions of who-did-it-first and who-influenced-who. The second, "Naming," a chapter literally about people's nicknames and band titles, bears a hint of semiological bookishness in an era where tending to language is not just acceptable but orthodox. Finally, the supplemental chronology and discography sections can only appear dated when the Internet makes a far more exhaustive catalog of British punk available with a few clicks.

Even so, Laing's opening polemic about self-evidence remains as timely as ever. In a moment where punk has become high canon and television shows rehearse its history like sacred myth, it is easy to lose sight of the genre's complexity. *One Chord Wonders* challenges us to recognize the many directions punk has taken, both in its earliest years and as it has expanded into a multigenerational and multinational movement. This is a lesson that extends well beyond rock. Laing reminds all who write about music that the goal should never be the search for easy truths.

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