



The Sound of Subterranean Scuzz-Holes: New York Queer Punk in the 1970s

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a historical and theoretical account of a tradition of LGBTQ-oriented punk music in New York City during the 1970s. Queer punk – a scene comprised of LGBTQ people and shaped by discourse around gender and sexuality – was central to U.S. punk’s most infamous moment in a way that has largely been ignored. In order to make sense of why, I draw on period criticism and [historical research into](#) the LGBTQ community in New York, suggesting that New York punk participated in a new moment of queer cultural representation that Rosemary Hennessy terms “queer visibility.” I further theorize this by recourse to the claim by Tavia Nyong’o that punk exists in a “frozen dialectic” with queerness. Ultimately, early punk’s ferment and ferocity stem from its doubled identification with and renunciation of queer culture.

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AQ2 During a March 1976 performance at CBGB—the oft-dubbed “birthplace” of punk—Jayne County hoisted a microphone stand over her head, awkwardly swung it about, and forcefully brought it down. As it sped through the air, it collided with the shoulder of “Handsome Dick” Manitoba. His collarbone shattered instantly.

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Manitoba staggered into a table, a deep gash forming on his head. Drenched in blood, he leapt up and charged County. A short scuffle ensued, but the two were quickly dragged apart. With blood smeared across her wig and tattered dress, County resumed the show. Soon thereafter, Manitoba left the club on a stretcher. A few days later, County was arrested and charged with assault.

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Though the fight lasted only a few brief moments, it could be said that it was years in the making. Jayne County is a transgender musician who was central to New York’s 1970s rock scene. County was present at the Stonewall riots, a participant in New York’s theatre world alongside luminaries such as Andy Warhol and Tony Ingrassia, a DJ at the famed club [Max’s Kansas City](#), and one of the first punk artists to perform at CBGB (1973). County initially appeared in public as a drag queen under the stage name “Wayne County.” In the 1960s and 1970s, the term “drag queen” was used inconsistently – often as a synonym for terms like “transvestite” and “transsexual” – to designate both male-identifying people who dressed as women and people who might identify as transgender. (This [practice](#) has led to a confusing bibliographic record, something

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exacerbated by the fact that County did not perform or record under the name Jayne until 1979 and continues to this day to publish early material under the name Wayne County. In accordance with her own usage, I exclusively refer to her by the name Jayne and use she/her pronouns throughout, with the exception of quotations or titles published under her former stage name.) 40

Manitoba was also a pivotal figure in mid-seventies punk, fronting CBGB regulars the *Dictators*. Born Richard Blum, Manitoba had a reputation as a provocateur. In public, he performed “Handsome Dick” like a character, one of the villains of professional wrestling in the Wild West years of the sport. (He even appears in spandex on the cover of the *Dictators*’ 1975 *Go Girl Crazy!*, a sequined varsity jacket embroidered with his name prominently displayed by his side.) During concerts, Manitoba frequently antagonized his audience from the stage while performing irreverent songs like “Teengenerate” and “(I Live for) Cars and Girls.” Given the fuzzy line that separated performer from audience in early punk, this behavior often carried over into his off-stage activity. 45 50

County reports in her 1995 autobiography that on the night of their fight, Manitoba stood close to the stage yelling, “Queer! Queer! Aaaaah, ya fuckin’ drag queen!” (County and Smith 108). When Manitoba stood up and started for the stage, County worried that he was moving to attack her. Eyewitnesses suggest that Manitoba was simply walking toward the bathroom, a gesture that could be difficult to read given how tiny the club actually was. But as someone who had experienced intense transphobia while living in Atlanta during the 1960s, County felt impelled to act. 55 60

Both County and Manitoba later claimed that the incident was a misunderstanding, *insisting* that they had made peace. The case against County was eventually dropped after Manitoba failed to show up in court. Some reports suggest his absence was intentional. County herself claims that her perception on the night of the fight might have been off, an effect of taking four “black beauties”—a form of speed, similar to Adderall, that was popular in the sixties and seventies (County and Smith 108). 65

This exchange of violence occasionally appears as a dramatic anecdote in histories of 1970s New York punk, though the significance of it continues to divide commentators (County and Smith 107–10; *McNeil and McCain* 268–78; *Valentine* 127–29; *Waksman* 122–23). At the time, the fight shook the punk world. By the spring of 1976, momentum had been building around New York’s nascent music scene. Critics were starting to take interest in a group of bands that regularly performed at CBGB, a Bowery dive bar previously known as a biker hangout. Patti Smith Group’s first album, *Horses*, had just been released to widespread acclaim in fall 1975. By February, a largely unheard group, the *Ramones*, had recorded the self-titled debut that *Rolling Stone* would later call “Year Zero for punk rock” (*Dolan et al.*). The genre was gathering centripetal force, poised to become one of the most hyped-up movements of seventies rock music. 70 75

But this exchange of violence split the young scene in two. Gary *Valentine*, bassist for the group *Blondie*, suggests that the fight exacerbated a creeping division between the bands that played CBGB and those that frequented its chief rival, *Max’s Kansas City* (*Valentine* 128). The *Dictators* were banned from *Max’s*, which had served as County’s de facto home venue since she began her performing career. Meanwhile, a 30 May 1976, benefit for County’s legal fund further cemented divisions in punk. Organized at the Manhattan Centre on 34th Street and 8th Avenue, the show’s roster constituted a 80

veritable who's who of rising punk stars: members of the Patti Smith Group, Blondie, the New York Dolls, and the [Ramones](#), as well as a cast of queer icons including Divine and the Andy Warhol "superstars" Jackie Curtis and Holly Woodlawn. As the photographer and scene insider Bob Gruen recalled, "I felt that it was a kind of turning point, that all these guys had to 'fess up and say that Wayne's our friend. And we stand up for him and it's not ok to come into a club and call a guy queer. It's not ok" ([McNeil and McCain](#) 275).

OK or not, many sided with Manitoba. In particular, the editors of the insider fanzine *Punk*, which had just begun publication two months earlier, rallied against County. In 1978, the *Village Voice* printed "The Punk Manifesto," a text that functioned as a tacit rejection of Gruen's sentiment. Legs McNeil, "resident punk" for the magazine, ranted to *Voice* columnist Howard [Smith](#) that "when all that stuff came about punks being homosexuals and anarchist and all that shit, it pissed us off—these press bastards are destroying our good intentions." The manifesto further questioned the place of LGBTQ people in the genre altogether, boldly insisting that the music "wasn't asexual faggot hippie blood-sucking ignorant scum as the media would have you believe" ([Smith](#) 30; [McNeil, Holmstrom, and Katz](#) 30).

By propelling bands and scenesters to factionalize against each other, the County-Manitoba fight made it clear that all was not right in the house of punk. It was also prophetic. In a spectacular sort of way, the brawl played out a tension that was formative, not just in New York during the 1970s, but in 40 years of punk history since. Simply put, punk has perennially been defined by a fraught relationship to queerness. On the one hand, punk appears substantially queer. Its history is full of famous LGBTQ people, from County to Darby Crash and Laura Jane Grace. Dozens of punk and punk-influenced subgenres including queercore, riot grrrl, and crust punk have made queer politics the centerpiece of musical and social activity ([DeChaine; Ensminger; Fuchs; Leblanc; Marcus; Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*; Muñoz, "Gimme Gimme This"; Needham](#)).

On the other hand, punk also resists queerness. Many standard narratives of punk downplay or ignore the contributions of queer people, and all of the sources cited above speak as much to coalition building and LGBTQ activism as to many moments of homophobia, heteronormativity, and gender policing within the genre. These competing truths sustain the claim made by Tavia [Nyong'o](#) that 1970s punk exists in a "frozen dialectic" with queerness (107). In observing this, [Nyong'o](#) was riffing on Dick [Hebdige's](#) 1979 suggestion that "at the heart of the punk subculture, forever arrested, lies this frozen dialectic between black and white cultures" (69–70). Evoking [Hebdige's](#) thought in the context of LGBTQ culture, [Nyong'o](#) calls attention to a dual identity for punk, one that simultaneously inscribes it as queer and not queer.

My article extends that speculative thought. This frozen dialectic with LGBTQ culture was formative for punk during the 1970s in a way that has largely been ignored. In order to demonstrate this fact, I use queerness as a lens for understanding New York's early punk history. The term *queer* is of recent vintage and carries with it associations of both the academic field of queer theory and a new moment of the pink-haired, alternative nineties, a political discourse rooted in contemporary understandings of gender and sexuality. But the term helps unlock the complicated

circumstances of punk, ones that were nebulously queer rather than neatly intelligible through the more clearly defined categories we know today. 130

There was no formal designation for LGBTQ punk in the years before queercore and other LGBTQ-oriented subgenres. Indeed, the term “punk” itself was only standardized as a category at the end of the 1970s, a function of the evasive character of the music in its first days. But queer punk functions as a necessary heuristic, capturing the centrality of LGBTQ people and discourse to the formation of the genre. In the early years of the decade, there was a widespread queer presence in punk. The profile of early punk was defined in dozens of LGBTQ spaces by LGBTQ-identifying or -perceived people, including Lou Reed, the New York Dolls, the Magic Tramps, Mumps, and Jayne County. 135 140

Further, critical commentary on these artists helped shape perceptions of punk. **AQ3** Looking at the writing of a number of writers including Dave Marsh, Robert Christgau, and Jayne County herself, I show that commentary on gender and sexuality was central to the formation of punk as a cultural project. The genre was defined in relation to the blurry discourse that surrounded a newly minted and publicly visible queer community by the start of the 1970s. This moment marked the early peak moment of mass-media representations of queerness that Rosemary Hennessy terms “queer visibility.” That project cemented a broader, media-based presence for LGBTQ people in the United States, one that remains present – if problematic – to this day. Trafficking in this history, rock critics theorized punk as an aesthetic and cultural expression of New York’s queer, evasive underground. More substantially, then, queerness paved the way for the very existence of punk in the 1970s. 145 150

Additionally, even many instances of punk’s seeming straightness were defined against this queer discourse in negative. A countervailing tendency in critical discourse attempted to dissociate New York punk from the LGBTQ by downplaying the queer implications of early punk artists. This was found not only in Handsome Dick’s homophobic heckling, but also in a broader, concerted project to protect punk from queerness. Ultimately, this work cemented punk’s reputation as a masculinist retro rock project by the end of the decade. 155

In this sense, punk’s musical ferment stems not only from the important contributions of queer people, but also from the combative nature of punk’s frozen dialectic. Punk is paradigmatically queer insofar as it constitutes not a stable set of gender/sexual norms but a polemical space of identity and non-identity, recovery, and abandonment. 160

Queering Punk in New York City

At the beginning of the 1970s, there was no clearly defined link between punk and queerness. But this fact should not seem remarkable in its own right. Really, there was no clearly defined link between punk and much of anything. 165

Initially, the term “punk” functioned less to index a concrete musical practice than to characterize a critical sentiment about rock music history. Especially in the first years of the 1970s, this was largely a theory of rock music from the previous decade. A number of important rock writers including Lester Bangs, Dave Marsh, and Greg Shaw developed a critical theory of punk through album reviews, concert write-ups, and editorials. **AQ4** 170

Many critics placed a premium on the simplicity and grit of 1960s rock. For example, one of the earliest uses of the term “punk” as a musical category appears in an infamous 1971 Lester Bangs article for the upstart rock fanzine *Bomp!* There, Bangs extolled British Invasion group the Troggs, characterizing the vocal delivery of singer Reg Presley with the word: “[T]he best way to describe it would be to say that he sounded punk and raspy and cocky and loose and lewd, like a real rock ‘n’ roll urchin” (“James Taylor Marked for Death” 61). For Bangs, punk stood at odds with smooth sounds and silky-toned vocals of a singer like James Taylor—who, as the title of the article suggests, is presented as punk’s chief musical antagonist. 175 180

This critical tradition has been well-documented (Ervin, “New York Punk Rock”; Gendron; Heylin; Reynolds; Waksman). What is worth emphasizing about this project is its amorphous character. In its early usage, “punk” was often *merely* a theoretical proposition, one that emerged alongside or even preceded musical practice. As Steve Waksman argues in *This Ain’t the Summer of Love*, “the punk aesthetic was as much a fantasy of what rock and roll could be as it was a recollection of how it used to be” (57). Indeed, many of the first “punks” did not self-identify in this fashion, as uses of the term often postdated the idealized historical moment of 1950s and 1960s rock. If the Troggs were punks, they didn’t know it. 185 190

Further, punk as a category lacked the concreteness that eventually accompanied later artists like Blondie and the Sex Pistols. In its early years, punk was largely a name for a critical *attitude* about music. Not just stylistically unclear, the genre was also spatially and temporally undefined. Punk’s imagined origins placed it somewhere between Liverpool in 1960, the Lower East Side in 1967, and Detroit in 1969 – that is, somewhere between the real locations of rock history and an idealized vision of 1960s Anglo-American rock. 195

This image was radically upended by 1980. A media frenzy-driven by upstart magazines such as *Punk* – helped recode the genre as something highly specific: aggressive, guitar-driven urban rock, the music of New York and London’s undergrounds. Though this recoding would take until the end of the *seventies* (especially in the broader public eye), the process of instantiating punk as a New York phenomenon in particular began earlier. The period between 1970 and 1976 led to the substantial remapping of punk as an urban phenomenon and New York the exemplar of its urban ethos. 200 205

Queerness was at the heart of this shift. Many commentators on later queer punk subgenres have demonstrated that punk had to integrate queerness into a preexisting musical aesthetic. D. Robert De Chaine, in a pioneering early article on queercore, shows the fascinating ways that the subgenre “combines much of the aesthetic of punk rock music with radicalized perspectives on gay and lesbian politics and identity” (17). DeChaine’s account of queercore legends Pansy Division is forceful, and it is true that many later punk subgenres had to integrate queer people and discourse against any number of obstacles. But in many ways, their work was not so much an act of fusion as it was one of rediscovery. There was no originary moment prior to the integration of punk and queerness – save, perhaps, punk’s early theoretical moment under the pens of Bangs and Shaw. Rather, punk became *punk* because of the network of musicians, fans, and critics and the writings, recordings, venues, and other institutions that constituted New York’s queer rock scene. 210 215

This shift depended on New York City itself. New York was a mirror to capture early punk's ghostly visage. The city had an abundance of specificity. As the rock critic Dave Marsh joked in a 1973 *Creem* feature on the city's music scene, "sleazadelic" character practically bubbled up in abundance from the "subterranean scuzz-holes of Gotham" ("New York" 39). In taking it as a given that readers of a widely syndicated rock magazine would instantly understand his characterization of the city, Marsh was assuming the clearly demarcated boundaries of New York social life. 220

More specifically, Marsh was gesturing vaguely in the direction of New York's LGBTQ community. It was this world that provided a substantial social and conceptual apparatus for early punk, providing a concrete social character on which to retheorize punk's New York character. 225

The LGBTQ world was an ideal edifice on which to build. By the 1970s, New York had a queer-oriented social structure that was nearly a century old. From at least the late nineteenth century, New York City sustained a broad LGBTQ community with its own extensive network of venues, events, and even entire neighborhoods that facilitated queer lives. While this community lacked legal recognition and faced intense stigma, it effectively constituted a self-contained and dynamic social infrastructure, one driven by its own set of queer-focused social practices and values (Chauncey; Gilfoyle; D'Emilio; Faderman; Stryker). 230

By the start of the 1970s, this world had substantially changed shape. It is a common misconception that the 1960s and the iconic riots at Stonewall Inn formed some sort of "birth" moment for the LGBTQ rights movement or the final realization of a utopian, queer-friendly United States. Struggles for LGBTQ rights predate that moment, and we still live in a world in which an egalitarian present is lacking for queer people – not least within the LGBTQ community itself. 240

What is undeniable is that the period between the 1950s and the start of the seventies substantially transformed not just the queer world but also the United States more broadly. There is much to say about this period, for all of its diversity, its gains, and its setbacks. But what is most important for my purposes is the centrality of a discourse that Rosemary Hennessy calls *queer visibility*: the entrance of LGBTQ people into mainstream conversation through media, political representation, and activist work (Hennessy 111–13). This social project is most intelligible in the period dating from the 1990s to the present, when Ellen DeGeneres and *Orange Is the New Black* are regularly watched and unprecedented numbers of people protest North Carolina's HB2 bill. 245

Even so, LGBTQ media representation began many decades earlier. In the mid-century, the public began to engage with a sector of the U.S. population that was becoming increasingly difficult to ignore. Portrayals of queer people abounded, not only in visual media but also in literature, theatre, newspapers, and magazines. Indeed, there was a veritable revolution of queer mediatization in the period from the 1950s through the 1970s. Journalistic reporting brought the stories of queer people into the pages of *Life*, the *New York Times*, and even *Playboy*. Millions of Americans tuned in to television spectacles, including the highly publicized 1967 documentary by CBS *Reports*, "The Homosexuals," and the 1971 proto-reality hit, *An American Family*. 255

If this coverage paved the way for public discourse about queer people, it left them in a curious place. Queerness became something consumable both by LGBTQ- and 260

straight-identifying people. This meant that queer subjects could be both character and caricature within media, discarded or relegated as quickly as they were adopted. The historian Susan Stryker observes that at the beginning of the 1970s America was becoming fascinated with the drag queens and gay men who were appearing in movies and TV. In her account, even a *transgender aesthetic* “was becoming hip and cool for mass audiences” (91–92). Fabio Cleto makes a parallel claim, suggesting that the subversive world of camp aesthetics gave rise to a mainstream form, *pop camp*. Pop camp marked the intersection between queer and non-queer within mass culture. The late sixties and early seventies, then, were a time when camp appeared in the heady texts of public intellectuals like Susan Sontag and the pages of *Time* magazine, in a report on an avant-garde exposition of works by Andy Warhol, or in an announcement of a furniture sale in the *New York Times* (Cleto 302–03).

Whatever varied forms queer visibility took, its effects were intensely felt in New York. The city became not only one of the biggest consumers and producers of LGBTQ media, but also itself a character in queer drama. Films like *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) and *The Boys in the Band* (1970) brought stories of queer people living at the margins to a larger public, foregrounding the ways New York functioned to define or constrain their lives (Foster; Corkin; Brown). Many of these portrayals focused in particular on the underside of the visibility moment: the isolation, the poverty, and the lingering traces of an earlier, invisible world gradually fading. Part acknowledgment of the hardships faced by those residing in urban LGBTQ enclaves, part romanticization of the “subterranean scuzz-holes” wedged between Park Avenue and Wall Street, these portrayals transformed the Big Apple into the symbolic home of American queer culture.

New York Queer Punk

It was this world – both its citizens and the caricatures of them – that provided the foundation for the recoding of punk. Altering prior definitions of punk style, rock critics aggressively advanced a theory of punk as a queer, New York-based phenomenon. Interestingly, this was driven by many of the same critics who first theorized punk as retro rock. A number of overview pieces written about the New York scene in the seventies drew links between early definitions of punk and non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality.

Much of this was in response to a prominent scene that emerged in New York at the beginning of the decade, what I’ll simply call “queer punk.” Well before famous artists such as the Ramones and the Sex Pistols were established, there was a regular network of hard-rock musicians performing around New York City. Dozens of artists were active in the city between 1970 and 1975, including the Brats, the Harlots of 42nd Street, the Magic Tramps, the New York Dolls, and Lou Reed. Excluding Reed and the New York Dolls, many of these artists struggled to find fame, and so largely have been left out of narratives that focus on Rock and Roll Hall of Fame recording artists.

But in their heyday, a broader coalition of artists was embedded in a large system of venues, had extensive fan networks, and inspired critical accolades from music writers. Indeed, critical interest was as intense for the queer punk scene as it was for groups like the Velvet Underground and Talking Heads. A number of overview

pieces highlighting New York artists helped to establish the reputation of these up-
 and-coming acts. Dave Marsh's *Creem* article quoted above – originally published as 310
 an 6 October 1973, cover story on Jayne County for *Melody Maker* (“Rock”) – was
 one of the earliest sources to talk about New York's music scene as having a unified
 character. In his feature, Marsh expressed awe that a “new wave of musicians” was
 guiding New York's scene toward a great rebirth. Though he acknowledged the
 lingering importance of [Max's Kansas City](#), he expressed surprise: New York had 315
 hidden within it a new scene, featuring dozens of new artists playing in unknown
 venues that even spilled out into the outer boroughs. Marsh's article took the form
 of an overview of a number of New York venues and bands. While he did not
 address gender or sexuality directly, the article was filled with euphemistic terms that
 hinted at the queerness of performers and fans on the Mercer Arts Center scene. 320
 Marsh observed that New York's “new generation of sleazadelic ratpacks,” adorned
 in lipstick or glitter and “dressed up” (that is, wearing drag or other androgynous
 clothing), engaged in “decadence” worthy of inclusion in the John Waters film *Pink
 Flamingos* – an infamously queer film starring legendary drag queen Divine.

Marsh also reserved the highest praise for those who transgressed boundaries of 325
 gender and sexuality, including the New York Dolls and Jayne County's group Queen
 Elizabeth. Marsh showered praise on County in particular, writing:

Queen Elizabeth's show has been cleaned up, but it's still not for family viewing. The act
 still involves all manner of sexual outrage and paraphernalia, without the scatological acts 330
 as such, presented with more theatrical skill than any other group, including Alice
 Cooper. . . Wayne has a barely adequate voice—so does Alice Cooper—but his performances
 are incomparable, the last truly underground phenomenon. (“New York” 76)

In evoking the promise of County for the rock underground, Marsh was setting a
 precedent for later rock critics who turned toward New York artists as a beacon of hope 335
 for rock music. This heroic attitude would only spread, constituting something like the
 default critical perspective on the punk explosion at the end of the 1970s. But at that
 time, there was no mention of the Patti Smith Group or Television. Those groups were
 just beginning music careers that would only later contribute to the frenzy surrounding
 the CBGB scene. Rather, Marsh placed his hope on queerness and artists such as
 County and the New York Dolls. 340

Marsh also leaned on social spaces in order to produce a theory of New York rock as
 a unified musical project. He placed a particular emphasis on those artists who were
 frequent performers at the famed Mercer Arts Center. Located a few blocks southeast of
 Washington Square underneath the Grand Central Hotel, the venue is central to punk
 history today thanks to portrayals in popular histories such as those presented in the 345
 HBO TV series *Vinyl*. In fact, the Mercer's reign was short-lived. Initially opened in
 December of 1971 as an off-Broadway theatre, the venue began to book unsigned rock
 groups in order to generate extra revenue. By the time Marsh sat down to write his
 article, shoddy renovation techniques had led to the August 1973 collapse of the hotel,
 destroying the Center in the process. 350

Even so, the Mercer functioned as an important unifying force for New York's music
 scene, both during its lifetime and after. In its short career, the Mercer hosted a number
 of the most important early punk bands, including the New York Dolls, Suicide, and the

Modern Lovers; Patti Smith even read poems there regularly. As Blondie bassist Gary Valentine writes, the Mercer was “the Mecca of the New York rock scene” in its heyday (3). The Mercer became famous for the fan base it attracted, well known within New York as young, queer, and adventurous. As the critic Ed McCormack wrote, the Mercer scene was defined by its

considerable weirdness: groupies in feathered boas, faghags in Bette Davis Fuck Me Wedgies, flaming creatures of indeterminate gender in silver science fiction jumpsuits, glitter tots in unisex bellybutton shirts, and one strange cult of male crazies in particular who invariably showed up bare-chested with clothespins clamped on their nipples. ...[E] very night was Halloween. (McCormack, “Punk Rock” 35)

McCormack is a straight rock critic who was close to the 1970s punk scene. He recently has spoken about his younger discomfort with the LGBTQ world, recalling a night when Lou Reed pressured him into dancing together at the lesbian bar The Lib (McCormack, “A Last Waltz on the Wild Side”). His account is a mixture of admiration and unease, lumping together non-binary people and those who dress eclectically.

However problematic, McCormack’s account also reveals the formative role of queerness in perceptions of the Mercer scene. Like many straight commentators looking in, he used the crowd’s perceived queerness as a lens for understanding the blossoming punk scene of the city.

A similar framework was commonly used to characterize the artists who played at the club. The most famous act from the Mercer was the New York Dolls. Originally named Actress, the New York Dolls were outer boroughs kids: Johnny Thunders, Sylvain Sylvain, and original drummer Billy Murcia were from Queens; Arthur Kane was from the Bronx; and David Johansen was from Staten Island. After signing to Mercury Records and releasing two albums—*New York Dolls* (1973) and *Too Much Too Soon* (1974) – the Dolls emerged as one of the most hyped cult acts of the early seventies. But by 1975, Mercury had dropped the group and the band had split up amidst infighting and substance-abuse issues. When their career did not progress as expected, the group largely became confined to the role of proto-punk pioneers for the scene that followed in their wake during the mid-seventies.

Before their fall, the Dolls were the center of a dynamic musical community that preceded a more famous CBGB-based successor. As photographer and scenester Lee Childers remembers, “The Dolls created a huge scene and it became extremely fashionable to go see them. You didn’t just go to see the Dolls—you had to be seen seeing the Dolls” (McNeil and McCain 118). Central to the group’s popularity was their link to the outrageousness of queer punk. Prone to performing in androgynous clothing, the Dolls

were largely presumed to be queer by critics. Echoing McCormack’s affected hipster-bigotry, the rock critic Roy Trakin later recalled that the general perception of the Dolls was that “they were soulless drugged transvestites who couldn’t even play their instruments.” Despite the negative implications of such a statement, many actually felt that

their eccentric style would power them to success. McCormack went as far as to speculate that the queerness of the Dolls would be the *source* of their success, claiming that their “funky transsexual style” had made them the “newest darlings of the subterranean satyricon that populates *Max’s Kansas City* and more recently the Mercer Arts Center” (McCormack, “New York City’s Ultra-Living Dolls” 14).

Robert Christgau linked the Dolls to the aesthetic character of New York's queer world most strongly in a 1973 *Creem* article, where he argued that the Dolls constituted a kind of outer boroughs music, at odds with that from uptown Manhattan. Whereas the latter world produced "wealthy and arty" artists like Janis Ian and Carly Simon, the Dolls struck Christgau as the latest form of outer boroughs/downtown rock, a musical expression of Queens, Brooklyn, and bathhouses on St. Mark's Place. For Christgau, the Dolls were the sound of New York's "teenage-wasteland, a subway ride away, just like Warhol trash" (62). 400 405

However canonic they were, the Dolls were no singularity. The Mercer booked many early punk artists, including the Magic Tramps, Jayne County, the Harlots of 42nd Street, the Miamis, Teenage Lust, and Ruby and the Rednecks. These groups were eclectic, but, like the Dolls, stood out for their deliberate eccentricity and non-traditional gender expression and sexuality. 410

The Magic Tramps, for example, became known for their outrageous performances and engagement with queer themes. The group was fronted by the bisexual singer Eric Emerson, who is probably best known in the music world for threatening to sue the Velvet Underground after they used an unauthorized image of him on the back cover of their 1967 *The Velvet Underground & Nico*. But Emerson was widely involved in New York's queer art and music scene. He appeared in a number of Warhol/Morrissey productions including *Chelsea Girls* (1966) and *Lonesome Cowboys* (1968), as well as other Warhol-esque happenings. The most famous of these publicity grabs was a stunt in which Emerson was to marry Jackie Curtis, the Warhol set drag queen, in front of reporters for the *Village Voice*. Emerson apparently got cold feet and failed to show up. 415 420

Emerson was well known in New York for his outrageous performance style with the Magic Tramps. As early as 1971, he developed a reputation for flamboyant shows at *Max's Kansas City*, where he would jump onto tables and dance about wildly. The Magic Tramps also featured a number of songs addressing queerness, including "S&M-Leather Queen" and "Max's," which details a crisis of masculinity as the protagonist attempts to pick up a drag queen in the infamous bar. Emerson's career came to a tragic end in 1975 when he died under suspicious circumstances, reportedly killed in a hit-and-run accident while riding his bike. 425 430

Though the Mercer is the best-known early punk venue today, its collapse only gave rise to a more diversified queer punk scene. Marsh's 1973 report acknowledges an extensive network of venues scattered throughout New York, many of which were located outside of downtown or even were in the outer boroughs: The Coventry in Queens, which was a home base for Mercer regulars the Brats and Teenage Lust, as well as one of the first venues to book the band KISS in their early years; Kenny's Castaways, on the Upper East Side; Times Square's Diplomat Hotel, one of the first venues to book the New York Dolls; and My Father's Place, the long-running rock venue located on Long Island (Marsh, "New York" 39-40). 435 440

Jayne County, herself an aspiring rock critic, addressed the queer character of the early New York punk scene more directly. County is in many ways a crucial figure not only as a musician but also as an insider-commentator on the punk scene. Her song "Max's Kansas City" was one of the first songs to explicitly argue in its lyrics that New York punk constituted a cohesive musical scene. County also wrote a number of

articles about early punk. Her work most notably appears in two columns for well-known rock magazines. *Rock Scene* featured a “Dear Abby” style column, “Dear Wayne,” which fielded questions about gender, sexuality, and rock music. Meanwhile, *Hit Parader* hosted her New York scene gossip column, “Where the Rock Stars Are.” In her autobiography, County claims that her columns were so outlandish that she was eventually fired from both gigs (County and Smith 105–07). 445

In a September 1975 *Hit Parader* column focusing on venues, County suggested that it was gay bars and other queer spaces which provided key early performance spaces for punk groups. Writing in her characteristic stream-of-consciousness, slang-ridden style, County regaled her readers with tales of nights spent hopping across New York with rock luminaries: 455

Where are [the scenesters] hanging out now that our legendary underground landmark [Max’s Kansas City] has closed its doors? Well, you may find Lou Reed at the Gilded Grape. ...La [sic] waiters all dress in Sailor [sic] suits showing mucho box. Mick Jagger was led there one drunken nite [sic] after being promised that the Go Go boy contest was an absolute gas!...Another popular bar located downtown in Greenwich Village is the 220 Club. This place is after hours and doesn’t even open it’s [sic] doors until four in la [sic] morn!...Once again this place caters to the drag set. Real transsexuals and transvestites of every variety...Where else! There’s Le Jardin. This is an uptown disco that caters to a very mixed blend of stars, drag queens and every other gay blade or closet case to be found just about anywhere...Lady Astors’ [sic] has become a hangout for a lot of the old Max’s crowd...Even some of the Rock and Roll kids from Brooklyn and Queens have invaded the place!!! (County, “Where” 41-43) 460 465

County’s article demonstrates the close entanglements between New York’s rock scene and the LGBTQ community. Her account suggests that this community crossed fluidly between rock clubs and the many gay bars that peppered Manhattan. Many of these spaces, including the Gilded Grape and 220 Club, were—like the famous Stonewall Inn—Mafia-owned clubs that catered toward transgender clientele. 470

Ultimately, while County’s writing aimed to capture the outrageous character of the New York scene, it also made it clear that the lines separating New York’s rock and queer scenes were blurry. Indeed, they were often tenuous at best. One of the venues discussed by County, Club 82, was perhaps the most important early punk venue after CBGB and Max’s. Located in the Bowery just a few blocks away from CBGB, Club 82 was a mob bar famous for a drag revue that dated back to the 1950s. By the 1970s, Club 82 had fallen into a slump and was looking for alternative revenue sources. They traded in the piano for a DJ, swapping cabaret for rock and soul, and began to book bands regularly. 475 480

The connections Club 82 formed with the queer punk scene led to a number of important musical and social engagements. Club 82 was a regular hang for rock bigwigs like Lou Reed and David Bowie. Many of Warhol’s superstars, including Jackie Curtis, Candy Darling, and Holly Woodlawn, performed there. The New York Dolls even gave one of their more infamous performances there on 17 April 1974, with all of the members save Johnny Thunders donning drag. Other Mercer regulars including Suicide, Jayne County, Teenage Lust, and the Harlots of 42nd Street migrated there in the wake of the Mercer’s collapse. 485

The momentum of early queer punk even galvanized bands that typically aren't thought of as Mercer acts. Clem Burke and Gary Valentine of Blondie, Richard Lloyd of Television (who also worked as a hustler), and Joey Ramone all started out as participants in the Mercer/glam scene. (Dee Dee Ramone also worked as a hustler, an experience chronicled in the Ramones song "53rd and 3rd," a reference to one of the prime Manhattan cruising spots.) Blondie, first named the Stilettoes, was born out of the ashes of a group called Pure Garbage, which was formed by Elda Gentile and Holly Woodlawn. The group was run under a model similar to many Warhol projects, featuring "direction" by Tony Ingrassia. Chris Stein later joined the group after Eric Emerson introduced him to Debbie Harry.

While these social links were important, equally crucial was the way the rock press used them to redefine punk as an aesthetic concept. Altering prior definitions of punk style, rock critics advanced a theory of punk as a queer, New York-based phenomenon. This was driven by many of the same critics who first theorized punk as retro rock. A number of overview pieces written about the New York scene in the seventies drew links between early definitions of punk and non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality.

Marsh's euphemistic style of addressing sexuality, shown above, was characteristic of much writing about the NYC scene in the early seventies. Lou Reed was functionally a magnet for coy writing about his sexuality—a topic he generally refused to talk about with critics. But in many ways, the "godfather of punk" was also the godfather of queer punk. After leaving the Velvet Underground, Reed released a string of important solo albums in the first half of the decade, including *Transformer* (1972), *Berlin* (1973), and the live album *Rock n Roll Animal* (1974). These helped to establish Reed and the VU as the premier figures of New York rock music. While Reed's songs from this period were not miles away from the Velvet Underground's sixties work (and often were simply songs Reed wrote while in the group), the extent to which Reed's solo work focused on gender and sexuality stood out to critics.

Transformer, abounding with references to the Warhol set and well-known gay cruise spots like Times Square—and frequently dipping into Broadway, cabaret, and other LGBTQ-associated genres—struck many as turning over a new, queer leaf. Many noticed this change, however careful they were about explicitly engaging with taboo topics. In his overview of NYC, Marsh hinted at Reed's queerness, calling him a "kinky, skinny cutie" ("New York" 39). Richard Nusser also alluded to queerness in his article on Reed's solo work, arguing that the singer was willing to embrace forbidden "depravity" in order to depict "reality, however dark it may be" (60). Tom McCarthy was a bit more explicit with his 1974 suggestion that the Velvet Underground prophesied a coming, queerer decade: "Named after a trashy book about swinging sex in suburbia. . . More in touch with Times Square than Berkeley, more at home in a gay bar than a commune. . . [T]hey were the most appropriately named group in rock" (73).

Lester Bangs was one of the few critics to directly address Reed's sexuality and in a July 1973 *Creem* interview pressed Reed to talk about his own life in the New York LGBTQ scene ("Deaf"). By 1975, when Bangs returned to interview Reed, he ran a second *Creem* piece with a lead line suggesting that Reed had turned a "whole generation of young Americans into faggot junkies" ("Let Us" 36).

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As usual, Bangs was attempting to be provocative, this time trading on casual homophobia to bolster his hipster image. His writing on Reed's sexuality is perhaps his worst misstep. In the same piece, Bangs uses horrifically transphobic language to characterize Rachel Humphreys, a transgender woman who was Reed's girlfriend for a number of years during the seventies:

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[Rachel] was beyond the bizarre, beyond light and shade. It was grotesque. Not only grotesque, it was abject, like something that might have grovelingly scampered in when Lou opened the door to get the milk and papers in the morning, and just stayed around. Like a dog that you could beat or pat on the head. ("Let Us" 40)

With these disgusting comments, Bangs jettisoned all of the recognition he might have deserved for daring to write about something most other critics treated with silence or euphemism. Indeed, Bangs's writing on Reed is perhaps most notable for its doubled representation of queer punk, evincing simultaneously the love and cruelty that characterized punk's complicated early relationship with LGBTQ people. Bangs gestures at Reed's queerness for hipster cachet, only to quickly disavow his display of recognition by using some of the most vitriolic, dehumanizing language possible.

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In this sense, however shocking, Bangs's writing is representative. In spite of himself, Bangs was acknowledging something true: Reed was a figurehead for a blossoming punk scene in which queer people were unavoidable. As much as punk depended on LGBTQ people for its early energy, some people were uncomfortable with punk's transgressive queerness. Many critics, artists, and scenesters sought to contain punk's troublesome links to nontraditional gender and sexuality.

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There was a small cottage industry of anxious handwriting about the New York Dolls. Critics downplayed the Dolls' queer reputation, insisting that underneath the drag the Dolls played simple, old-fashioned rock and roll. Steve Simels voiced this act of transformation best when he wrote, in his regular column for *Stereo Review*, "[u]nderneath the urban chauvinism and the drag posturing, there turns out to be a quirky sort of intelligence at work: Johansen's songs, a mildly silly amalgam of early-Sixties girl-group r-&-b and British story rock circa '66, are actually rather touching" (56). Framed in this light, the Dolls' flamboyant performance style and songs that played with gender transgression—e.g., "I'm a Boy, I'm a Girl" and "Personality Crisis"—could be rescued. Interpreted as a continuation of rock and roll's general wildness, the songs' risky play with gender faded into the background.

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Queer punk did face some moments of outright attack. After the County-Manitoba feud, *Punk* magazine led the charge against queer rock artists. In 1977, Legs McNeil was forced to acknowledge the lingering tension between queer punk and its newly emerging children. As punk was beginning to explode into the media limelight, McNeil was interviewed by Ed McCormack for a *Playgirl* feature about the role of women in the upstart genre. Despite announcing the prominent presence of female musicians in punk, McCormack observed that "punks don't like gays." Legs agreed; as McCormack reported: "sometimes punks are mistaken for the so-called 'butch' gays who haunt the waterfront leather bars not many blocks from the Bowery and CBGB. Both affect a stance of exaggerated macho and share at least a fetish for

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black leather.” Though Legs acknowledged this slippage, he desperately insisted a meaningful distinction could be drawn between the two: “[P]unks are not S&M freaks like those creeps. Besides, *my* leather jacket is different from a fag’s” (McCormack, “Punk Rock” 54). 580

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Two decades later, Legs doubled down on his earlier comments. In his 1996 oral history *Please Kill Me*—the standard historical account of New York punk in this period—McNeil insisted that LGBTQ culture stood at odds with the spirit of punk: 585

Gay liberation had really exploded. Homosexual culture had really taken over. . . . Suddenly in New York, it was cool to be gay. . . . So we said, “No, being gay doesn’t make you cool” People didn’t like that too much. So they called us homophobic. And of course, being the obnoxious people we were, we said, “Fuck you, you faggots.” Mass movements are always so un-hip. That’s what was great about punk. It was an antimovement, because there was knowledge there from the very beginning that with mass appeal comes all those tedious folks who need to be told what to think. Hip can never be a mass movement. And culturally, the gay liberation movement and all the rest of the movements were the beginning of political correctness, which was just fascism to us. Real fascism. More rules. (McNeil and McCain 275) 590
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Though Legs denied that he was homophobic, he suggested that punk stood at odds with the “political correctness” of queer people. By his estimation, then, queerness was a corrupting external force, falsely applied to punk by outsiders.

Some of the absence of queer people from punk history is more accidental than an effect of revisionary history. Many early pioneers of the Mercer scene such as the Harlots of 42nd Street and the Brats disappeared from the conversation simply because they failed to achieve major-label representation. Even those who kept critical attention struggled. Despite looking like one of the safest bets in the early seventies, the New York Dolls failed to achieve success with their studio ventures. After a disastrous 1975 tour of Florida led by Sex Pistols impresario Malcolm McLaren (in which the Dolls were clad in red patent leather and performed with a communist flag backdrop), Johnny Thunders and Jerry Nolan quit the group. Though the remaining members continued on, they struggled to find a central place in the newly emerging, CBGB-centered scene. 600
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That scene further marginalized queer punk. Hype surrounding newer acts like the Patti Smith Group and Television superseded earlier enthusiasm for the Dolls. Now debates turned toward whether punk was a form of avant-garde art rock or a turn back toward rock and roll’s teenage escapist roots. With critics such as John Rockwell extolling the virtues of Patti Smith’s experimentalism and *Punk* magazine lauding the comic-book kitsch of the *Ramones* and the *Dictators*, artists like the New York Dolls and Eric Emerson came to resemble the exception rather than the norm. 610
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Even as she continued to play in New York through the mid-seventies, such a focus prevented Jayne County from achieving the same recognition as her peers. County soon relocated to England, hoping that the European market might be more tolerant of her work. She received a somewhat warmer reception from British critics. In October 1978, writing for *New Musical Express*, Graham Lock heaped praise on County’s work: 620

I suspect that Wayne County could be the most revolutionary figure in the mainstream of modern rock ‘n’ roll. . . . [E]very time Wayne County walks out on stage, it’s a political act. The challenge he presents, the promise he offers, is that you too can take control over your

own life. In the words of the song ["Fuck Off" by County], you too can tell society to "Fuck Off." (Lock 29) 625

Lock spoke openly with County about her experiences as a transgender woman, lauding her courage and predicting success in the European market.

In retrospect, perhaps County's relocation was a misstep. After all, the real nail in the coffin for queer punk was not American in origin, but British: the Sex Pistols. The meteoric rise and fall of the Pistols captivated the press and scandalized the public. Stoking fears about violence and blasphemy, writers zeroed in on the perceived anarchistic tendencies suddenly taken to be the heart of punk. It was not uncommon to see celebratory and alarmist writing about the genre appearing side-by-side in the pages of rock magazines. In 1977, "R. Young," an outraged reader of *Melody Maker*, lamented the fact that punk was attracting such glowing praise from the rock press. Young warned, punk shows are 630

reminiscent of the Nuremburg Rallies in Nazi Germany and I am very angry....As a trade unionist and a socialist I think that the punk movement should be discredited and fought against. Punk rock and its degenerate ideology is frightening....Punk rock is not another fashion, it's a sinister political force that can divert young people up the blind alley of fascism and world war. (13) 640

Evoking socialism and fascism to characterize the genre, Young insisted that punk was intimately linked to left- and right-wing politics. Despite condemning punk for its politics, many of the genre's supporters simply adopted the "punk-as-left-politics" thesis in reverse. The genre found a wave of champions in the form of left-leaning critics such as Dick Hebdige and Dave Laing, who lauded punk as the sound of a new radical British left (Hebdige; Laing). 645

This politicization has been a powerful force in punk's history, not least for empowering the genre to present a musical challenge to literal fascism (Ervin, "Inside the Green Room"). Even so, the emphasis on traditional conceptions of politics—e.g., right vs. left, socialist vs. fascist—has fostered a tendency to ignore the messy cultural politics of punk. With the very fate of world democracy allegedly hanging in the balance—and, at the least, with brawls becoming more and more central to punk concerts—the collision of Jayne County's microphone stand with Handsome Dick's shoulder might have seemed like a minor skirmish compared to an inevitable war. 650

Such a sentiment has been paradigmatic for later commentators on punk, many of whom have taken as a given the thought that punk is more about anarchy than about gender and sexuality. Jayne County is today often treated as a precursor to punk, a proto-punk or glam artist—despite the fact that her career has greatly outlasted that of the Pistols. 655

This, then, is the full weight of the claim by Tavia Nyong'o that punk and queerness exist in a frozen dialectic. Punk history is marked by the forgetting, rediscovery, and disavowal of queerness. In its early years, punk could pick over the historical source material offered up by queer culture, regarding it as one of so many resources for its restorative artistic project. Or it could in turn deny even those most intimate connections that linked punk to the past. 660

This has even meant that punk has forgotten and recovered its own queerness, renouncing affiliations, building new myths, and purporting to deliver on lost promises.

Such has been the fate of punk, with participants forced to discover again and again the possibility of queer-oriented rock, to fight for the mere right to be female, **gay**, transgender, or feminine—in a genre invented by women, **homosexuals**, transgender people, and cisnet men in dresses. 670

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