

From Crass to Thrash, to Squeakers: The Suspicious Turn to Metal in UK Punk and Hardcore Post '85.

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I always loved the simplicity and visceral feel of all forms of punk. From the Pistols take on the New York Dolls rock, or the UK Subs aggressive punk take on rhythm and blues. The stark reality Crass and the anarchist-punk scene was informed with aspects of obscure seventies rock too, for example Pete Wright's prog bass lines in places. Granted. Perhaps the most famous and intense link to rock and punk was Motorhead. While their early output and LP's definitely had a clear nod to punk (Lemmy playing for the Damned), they appealed to most punks back then with their sheer aggression and intensity. It's clear Motorhead and Black Sabbath influenced a lot of street-punk and the ferocious tones of Discharge and their Scandinavian counterparts such as Riistetyt, Kaaos and Anti Cimex.

The early links were there but the influence of late 1970s early 80s NWOBM (New Wave of British Heavy Metal) and street punk, Discharge etc. in turn influenced Metallica, Anthrax and Exodus in the early eighties. Most of them can occasionally be seen sporting Discharge, Broken Bones and GBH shirts on their early record-sleeve pictures. Not only that, Newcastle band Venom were equally influential in the mix of new genre forms germinating in the early 1980s. One of the early examples of the incorporation of rock and metal into the UK punk scene came from Discharge. After guitarist Bones left the band in 1982 leaving the *Hear Nothing, See, Nothing, Say Nothing* LP and the 1982 *State Violence, State Control 7"* as his intense legacy, the replacement of him with Pete 'Pooch' Pyrtle shifted the bands direction. Records such as 1983's *The Price of Silence, The More I See and Her Majesties Government 12"* ep clearly marked a shift in playing style with heavy nods to Ozzy Osbourne's vocal style and more rock style guitar and solos. Don't get me wrong, these records were killer, but still the importation and, dare I say, taming of the early, visceral and groundbreaking style was lost on these records. More on later Discharge in a bit. The circularity of influences in UK punk thus began to show themselves around 1983.

Around 1984/5 I spent a lot of my time hanging around with Victim in Nottingham. Guitar player with Concrete Sox, he turned me onto a lot of bands like Metallica, Anthrax and also the mighty Japanese band Gism who were pioneering a heavy mix of metal and aggressive punk into their innovative sound on the first (1984) LP, *Detestation*. All were ace records and marked a widening of my musical taste. My only flirtation with British heavy-metal up to that point was buying Iron Maiden's *The Number of the Beast* 1982 LP. I was intrigued by the flirtation of demonic subject matter and now admit the clear punk influence on their earlier Paul DiAnno period LP's but that was my total experience of metal in that period. Really it did nothing for me. The Metallica and Anthrax LPs were different. Metallica were clearly drawing on the harsher aspects of UK punk and throwing the Danzig period (1982) *Earth AD* misfits records into the mix. The power they displayed had me hooked in late '84.

I'd met Victim hanging around the infamous Foresters Tavern Saturday afternoon punk drinking and gig sessions mid '84. We used to get pissed and watch the Seats of Piss with Hendrix Dead Boy singing into a traffic cone and pissing into pint glasses (another story). Other Notts bands playing these sessions were the Bloodsuckers and Concrete Evidence, Vic's band. Concrete evidence morphed into Concrete Sox shortly afterwards and Vic invited me down to their rehearsal sessions at the Nottingham Queens Walk Community Centre. This was a venue for loads of punk and anarcho-punk gigs alongside the Narrow Boat after the Union and Boat Clubs had ceased putting punk gigs on. Vic (guitar), John (drums) and Les (bass) were clearly into all things thrash-metal alongside loads of

other cutting edge international punk and through a few rehearsals I witnessed this influence appear in their sound and in turn onto their first demo tape. The rest is history and they were one of the UK bands at the beginning of a number of competing sea-changes in the UK punk music sound. The other bands rehearsing there during this time was the early Heresy. They were an example of the faster versions of US hardcore such as DRI, The Offenders and Scandinavian Mob47 and also a peppering of the occasional metal riffs. Nottingham wasn't the only city to be feeling the shift in musical influence. Lots of other bands around the country were following suit. The other significant figure who used to sit in at these rehearsals was Digby Pearson, later of Earache Records, a dodgy lynchpin of the later shifts of underground punk music into the realm of extreme music.

Gradually, throughout 1985, the shift towards a metal crossover became increasingly evident in the UK punk scene at gigs. Key examples for me would be Leamington-based Sacrilege, shifting from their classic Varukers sound to later US thrash metal; Onslaught became increasingly distant from their anarcho roots from their *Power from Hell* LP onwards and most notable would be Antiseptic's *Out from the Void 7"* demonstrating alongside the early germs of the later crust genre. Concrete Sox's first LP (1985), *Your Turn Next* equally captured the early spirit of metal influence in punk. On the other side of the coin, the influence of US hardcore sped things up musically. The Necros, Articles of Faith, Poison Idea, Negative Approach, Bad Brains, DRI, Septic Death, Minor Threat, Toxic Reasons, The Offenders and the mighty Crucifix and MDC all helped shape up the increasingly diverse UK punk canon (and vice versa). A lot of bands began experimenting with both metal and faster playing double kick-drum styles such as English Dogs, Sacrilege & Onslaught, Cerebral Fix, Acid Reign etc. while Napalm Death, Generic, Electro Hippies, Heresy, Extreme Noise Terror and the Stupids experimented with international and US hardcore influences alongside new vocal and drum playing styles -the 'blast-beat- and song length. Things were clearly on the change.

Through 1986 things got more obvious. As with the first-wave of punk the record labels came sniffing and a number of anarcho-punk bands signed themselves into contracts and submitted to glossy pics in the metal press. The shouts of 'sell-out' soon filled the scene air. One of the key examples of this was the *Kerrang!* magazine, 1985-6 spin-off production, *Mega Metal Kerrang!* This rag contained pictures of these once punk bands. Among the professionally-shot photos of Metallica, Anthrax, Coroner, Judas Priest were Sacrilege and the English Dogs, whose (1984) 12" *To the Ends of the Earth* contained some of the most intense punk/metal playing and song writing of that period.

Hair began to grow out too. Punk style was hybridised were with white basket ball boots, metal shirts, cut offs, long hair, colourful patches mixed in with all pre-existing styles. Eventually a lot of that long hair would revert to dreadlocks..., another bloody story. Punk had clearly changed and fragmented into more prospective genres in a real short period.

The afore mentioned Discharge had encountered more line-up changes and the (1985) *Ignorance 7"* reflected this with a much more metal and rock approach to singing about traditional, political subjects. However by 1986, the band style had radically altered as had the singing style. This remains a divisive punk discussion to this day. Alongside Amebix's *Monolith* (1987) the merits of such 'albums' are endlessly and heatedly discussed. The record in question was Discharge's *Grave New World* (1986). Retaining the *Hear Nothing* record members, Rainy, Cal, Garry Maloney and recruiting Skeptix guitarist Fish, the band released their first album since 1982. Let's just say it didn't go down well. Gone was the ferocity of the earlier records and instead a music more akin to hair metal bands such as Motley Crue and Hanoi Rocks etc. Bad enough, but this was topped and blindsided by Cal's bizarre *squeaker* approach to the vocals. I clearly remember the utter disgust I felt after rushing home from Notts Selectadic and playing it. Fucking hell, the band had lost it. They were a massive influence on myself and peers back then and it seemed as if they'd become everything

I hated. Poodle rock for fuck sake! I'll grant that some of the playing on that record is killer and the lyrics retained much of the harsh Cal style subject matter. Still, that was it for me. Shite!

Discharge announced a UK and US tour mid 1986 to promote this record: Nottingham was on the schedule. We blasted over to the Mardis Gras venue in Nottingham and got advance tickets. We all were pissed the new record sucked but held out that they'd at least play the old stuff.....

A week or so earlier the Swedish powerhouse band, Anti Cimex roared through the Notts Mardis Gras venue. That was an amazing gig. Alongside killer sets from Agoni, Napalm Death and Heresy the show was a massive buzz. There's a YouTube video of me in the crowd dancing and 'headbanging' like maniac down the front that was until some of the tough-guy wanker punks-shoved everyone about and pissed me off. Still hated: wankers. Suffice to say the show was one of the best gig experiences of my life. The same could be said of the next Discharge gig albeit for entirely different reasons. Predictably the place was rammed. Skeptix opened and everything seemed as usual, good atmosphere, all the usual faces etc. Good times. Discharge were late on stage. Anticipation was high and good natured. Finally the band took to the stage. If I remember correctly Cal fell over on short stairs to the stage-side. Composure regained, the band burst into the first track off the new LP, 'Sleep in Hope'. Bloody hell it was shit. Cal sounded like a drowned cat, and the metal stuff was not going down well. I noticed the bass player wasn't the mighty Rainy, who'd clearly had the good sense to see the writing on the wall. Another couple of 'squeaker' number's later and Cal addressed the crowd in a corny American accent. "Whoa, we've been gone for a couple of years but now we're back and gonna shake you down!" he said wiping stage-sweat from his eyes, wearing a white vest, blue jeans and a long, bouffant haircut to match the other band members. The first 'boo, get off you're shit' rang out from the increasingly unhappy audience of punks. We were all still angry about the world and this stuff wasn't resonating with us at all. Not one bit! Still we could wait in hope for them to do some of the old stuff. No chance....on went the squeaker with more of this metal dross. The crowd continued to shout for old stuff.... "Fight Back', ahhh' 'Decontrol' and 'State Violence'...., get off you're shit...booh!". The band were stubbornly deaf to this. Another couple of songs and the crowd was boiling-point livid. The gap between band and audience widened and the beer and other 'stuff' began to rain down on them to a mixed audience chorus of "sellouts..., wankers". They did another song but half way through one of the long benches in the venue was launched at the band followed by a few choice bar-stools. Off the band went to the dressing room which was subsequently surrounded by crossed-arm bouncers. Show over. Fuck sake, I was gutted.

The tour continued with similar reactions across the UK and US with HR, singer of the Bad Brains dousing the ill-fated Cal with a bucket of water mid-set. The tour ended and the band headed back to the UK with a seriously smacked arse.

The Discharge brand of metal was not of the thrash variety which, alongside hardcore, took an increasing slice of the UK punk scene. Lots of bands grew their hair out, chugged the chords and learned guitar solos and double kick pedals. Don't get me wrong this was a significant yet not a totalising shift in the British scene. As Ian Glasper in *Trapped in a Scene* (2009) -noted in considerable detail- in his collection of interviews with 1980s UK punk and hardcore bands, there was still much to celebrate in innovative musical terms. Granted some bands like the Varukers grew their hair and played thrash metal, but at least had to sense to change their name to Arbitrator to establish critical distance from previous outputs. That said the decade of 80s punk was marked by a clear merging of musical boundaries and in some cases a defence of existing ones.

Such innovations also had casualties stateside with bands such as Boston's SSD Control adopting hair and poodle-metal styles before exploding, though bands such as Agnostic Front, The Cro Mags and other NYHC bands weathered the storm much better retaining a much harder punk sound amongst the

metal influences. The germs of cross-pollination punk-music had been set free across the world though. Underground punk-genres began to explode into a bewildering amount of sub-categories all replete with individual and global takes on pre-existing punk, metal and rock influences, in addition to a host of other styles. Crust, stenchcore, Britcore, thrash, pop-punk, skate-rock, power violence, grindcore, epic crust, burning spirits, drunk punk, UK82, Nardcore, Horror Punk classic anarcho, NYHC, D-Beat, raw punk, scandi-thrash, straight edge, metal core, noise-punk, hardline, Boston style, Swedish mangel are a small off the top of the head example of the hundreds of international punk styles, communities of taste, now existing. Even the Discharge *Pyrtle* period and *Grave New World* record has admirers and those influenced by it for example. Japan's Final Bombs do an excellent take on the *Pyrtle* years in their 2011 *There Is No Turning Back* LP replete with silver *GNW* style art, while Scotland's Thisclose reinterpret the *GNW* LP in numerous records with Cal style 'squeaking' for a more accepting and open-minded punk generation. The discussion of style influence is endless and unsolvable regarding the merits, intricacies and failures or futures of it all: who sold out, who ripped who off....yawn. All I've offered here is a very partial and personal take on it all. It is safe to say, however, that, thankfully, punk never stays still and is always producing new cutting edges: that's what keeps it strong in the 2010s. There's more to be said on this, but that's for later.