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## PUNK, THE HOLOCAUST, AND THE RAMONES<sup>2</sup>

This paper examines the intersection of the Holocaust and the Ramones as the first U.S. punk rock band. Firstly, the paper elaborates on punk as a genre of music that emerged virtually at the same time in England and the United States as a reaction to the post-war socio-political climate. The paper then focuses on a group of young men who all grew up in New York City and whose music spoke directly to the disillusioned American post-war youth culture – the Ramones. The Ramones were all either Jews or had parents who had survived the Holocaust. Thus, the paper examines the extent to which the Ramones were affected by the trauma of the Holocaust and how they tried to work through it. ‘Blitzkrieg Bop’ and ‘Today Your Love, Tomorrow the World’, both tracks on their self-titled album released in 1976, are thoroughly discussed.

**Keywords:** the Holocaust, trauma, punk, the Ramones, *Blitzkrieg Bop*, *Today Your Love*, *Tomorrow the World*

*I had rock ‘n’ roll and it gave me a sense of my own identity.*  
(Ramone 1997: 24)

### 1. Introduction

The term ‘punk’ first appeared in the 1970s, when American rock critics used it to describe relatively unknown ‘garage bands’ on Manhattan’s Lower East Side (Moore 2004: 309). “Punk is usually thought of as a radical reaction to local circumstances.” (Stratton 2005: 79) There has been much debate about whether punk rock, or punk, first emerged in England or the United States. Most critics, however, agree that the genre developed almost simultaneously in both countries during the 1970s. In England, the punk movement arose in response to the social and economic upheaval of the time. Bands like the Sex Pistols and the Clash addressed the country’s post-war economic collapse, rising youth unemployment, social injustice, and popular culture. In contrast, the U.S. punk scene, which had its roots in garage rock and the early punk bands of the late 1960s and early 1970s (the Stooges, the

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Dictators, and the New York Dolls), initially lacked the political engagement that defined U.K. punk.<sup>3</sup>

By the 1980s, U.S. punk had become more involved in politics and commentary on American cultural life. Punk's emphasis on DIY (do-it-yourself) across both sides of the Atlantic led to the expansion of independent labels and grassroots. This meant less profit for major record labels, but it allowed bands to preserve artistic autonomy while engaging in politics. Throughout the 1990s, many bands fused punk with hip-hop elements to amplify their social activism. It was also around this time that the punk scene saw the development of the Riot Grrrl movement as a response to gender inequality, sexual violence, and women's rights. Ultimately, throughout the 2000s and onward, punk has consistently and effectively addressed contemporary social and political issues.

A pivotal moment in the history of popular culture was the emergence of a group of young men from the Queens suburb of Forest Hills, New York, who called themselves the Ramones. The Ramones were the first U.S. punk rock band. However, like other punk bands of the time, the Ramones, who considered themselves a rock and roll band, openly rejected the punk label (Gaines 2018: 4). In contrast to the U.K. punks, who emerged at a time when their country was dealing with the post-war economic and political consequences, the Ramones were confronted with the suburban pop tradition of 1970s America. Accordingly, the band articulated, above all else, their disdain for what they perceived to be two key aspects of American conformity: mainstream culture and white suburbia. Their lyrics, often misunderstood by the mainstream due to their sarcastic undertones, address youth alienation, boredom, and, in general, discontent with American suburban life ('Now I Wanna Sniff Some Glue', 'I Wanna Be Sedated', 'Teenage Lobotomy', 'Carbana Not Glue', etc.). While America promised its citizens happiness and prosperity, the Ramones sought to 'tell the truth'. Their subversive discourse, for those who understood it, was a call for a more authentic and meaningful way of life.

The Ramones revolutionized the punk genre with their raw sound and minimalist aesthetic, which differentiated them from mainstream rock music. Their music, similar to that of the Sex Pistols, was raw, stripped-down, and fast, but had more of the 1950s and 1960s pop and rock and roll elements, which gave it a lighter sound (Ambrosch 2015: 217). However, it was not only their music that conveyed the subversive nature of the genre but also their edgy, avant-garde appearance. They decided to abandon the classic, flamboyant rock and roll outfit in favor of a more authentic, street-punk look. Thus, the outfit – battered leather jackets, ripped-tight jeans, and soiled sneakers – articulated a visual aesthetic that expressed the grit and defiance of urban decay.<sup>4</sup>

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3 According to Ambrosch (2015: 222), "[...] it was not until the Dead Kennedys entered the scene in the late 1970s that U.S. punk became overtly political in such an eloquent and sophisticated form."

4 "The Ramones' uniform look, which was somewhat reminiscent of iconic 1960s pop and rock 'n' roll acts such as the Beach Boys, has itself become iconic: battered leather jackets,

In his autobiography, *Commando*, the guitarist Johnny Ramone (2012: 194) wrote that the Ramones “wanted to save rock and roll”. He stated that the band did not like “what rock and roll was becoming, which was no rock and roll”. The Ramones were going to save rock and roll. They just had to form a band first. It all started when Monte Melnick<sup>5</sup> sneaked the group into Performance Studios. On their first day of rehearsal at Performance Studios, the lead guitarist and vocalist, Dee Dee Ramone, “had no idea how to tune a guitar and only knew the E chord. No one else was any better” (McNeil, McCain 1996: 182). Joey, too, was inexperienced, having spent two hours getting the drum set ready before he could even start playing. Eventually, he took over as lead singer, as Dee Dee could not sing and play at the same time. This left the band without a drummer, so Tommy Ramone, the band’s manager at the time, took on the role of drummer because nobody else would do it. “That completed the original Ramones lineup.” (McNeil, McCain 1996: 183)

## 2. *The Jewish/Holocaust context for the Ramones*

Tommy Ramone, born to Holocaust survivors, grew up in the Hungarian city of Budapest. Most of his extended family, except for his Jewish parents, had perished in the war. In 1956, the family decided to leave Hungary for America. “It was an uncertain, frightening move filled with major cultural adjustments, not the least of them for Tommy himself.” (Beeber 2006: 107) In the United States, the family resided in the middle-class, predominantly Jewish suburb of Forest Hills in Queens, New York. Initially, Tommy found it hard to bear the burden of being an immigrant and a Jew. He knew that the immigration had made him “an outcast at least twice over” (Beeber 2006: 104). In the meantime, under the pressure of anti-Semitism, Tommy’s father decided to change the family name from Grunewald to the more Hungarian-sounding Edelyi: “It wasn’t that he was ashamed of his Jewishness, Tommy says. He was just tired of constant discrimination. He thought that perhaps by reinventing himself, he would be able to free his family from that curse.” (Beeber 2006: 107) To put it another way, the decision to alter the family name was not only an act of assimilation into the post-Holocaust American melting pot but also an opportunity for the entire family to redefine their identities and assert control over their narrative.

Being both an immigrant and a Jew, Tommy Ramone had a hard time readjusting to his new environment and subsequently turned to rock and roll.<sup>6</sup> He would listen to his parents’ records and attend concerts with his brother. Rock and roll served as an outlet for his anger and frustration. Soon after, he founded his own band, the Ramones. “As first manager Danny Fields says: ‘[Tommy] designed the band... It was Tommy that told us, you know, the

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canvas sneakers, ripped tight jeans, and a distinctive haircut that combined shoulder-length hair with a daring fringe.” (Ambrosch 2015: 217)

5 Monte Melnick was the Ramones’ tour manager.

6 Beeber (2006: 104) finds that the Ramones “[...] fulfilled a fantasy of his, provided a lifeline to surviving in an America where he often felt an immigrant”.

guitarist stands here, the lead singer never moves, there is no spotlight, all of that. Tommy was the architect.” (Beeber 2006: 104) Under Tommy’s visionary leadership, the Ramones became the quintessential punk rock band, paving the way for future generations of rock and roll musicians.

Similar to Tommy, Joey Ramone was born into a Jewish family. Born Jeffrey Hyman, he grew up in Forest Hills, Queens. Before joining the Ramones, Joey was in a glam rock band called Sniper, where he performed under the name Jeff Starship. “It was the glitter days and the New York Dolls and Kiss would come play at the Coventry<sup>7</sup>, all those bands would come in from Manhattan.” (McNeil, McCain 1996: 181) The Ramones’ lead vocalist was a glam rock fan. His tall, lanky figure and distinctive haircut had a certain glam flair to them. He made quite a spectacle of himself as he hitchhiked around Queens to the gigs, wearing huge platforms and glitter garb (Gaines 2018: 18). Joey did not conform to the rest of the post-war American ‘bubblegum’ culture, especially given his identity as both a bisexual and a Jew. Beeber (2006: 119) notes that he initially tried to “reflect the sense of outsidership that he felt by draping it in a freaky ‘starman’s’ clothing”. But there was more to Joey than simply his unconventional wardrobe choices. After causing considerable trouble for his parents, he was eventually forced to leave their home. With nowhere else to turn, he ended up living in his mother’s art gallery.<sup>8</sup> “It wasn’t until Tommy put Joey in front of the band as his emblem, his representative, that he was able to break free of his oppressed history and become a sneering, sarcastic punk.” (Beeber 2006: 119)

Dee Dee Ramone was the band’s primary songwriter and bassist. He penned many of their most iconic songs, including ‘Blitzkrieg Bop’, ‘Teenage Lobotomy’, ‘Rockaway Beach’, and ‘Today Your Love, Tomorrow the World’. Born Douglas Colvin, he grew up in Berlin with an American soldier for a father and a blonde, blue-eyed German woman for a mother. In the opening chapter of his autobiography, *Lobotomy: Surviving the Ramones*, Dee Dee writes that his mother was undeniably beautiful and that his father was also quite handsome. According to him, however, both exhibited distant and vacant stares, suggesting that their war experiences had profoundly impacted their mental state (Ramone 1997: 8). Growing up in post-war Berlin as the child of parents with entirely different ethnic backgrounds instilled in Dee Dee an early awareness of the ‘differences’ between East and West, a Nazi and a Jew. Moreover, his childhood in Germany, coupled with his parents’ disparate cultural backgrounds, would eventually leave him in a state of what appeared to be irreconcilable inner conflict and displacement. “Brought up amidst his parents’ constant fighting – itself deeply driven by their cultural differences – Dee Dee came to see himself as the man without a country [...]. He was divided inside as East and West Germany, as a Jew and a Nazi, as an outsider living in a land he could never really call his own.” (Beeber 2006: 112)

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7 Coventry was a famous rock and roll club in Queens.

8 One night Joey met Dee Dee at the Coventry and took him back to the art gallery, where he slept on the floor (McNeil, McCain 1996: 179).

Unfortunately, the family situation worsened over time, and once his father's alcohol addiction had turned into violent outbursts toward his mother, Dee Dee had no choice but to avoid him altogether: "It became too scary to come home. I spent most of my time wandering around the army base by myself. I had to live in a totally fantasy world. The real world was too fucked up for me." (Ramone 1997: 15)

Once he turned 15, Dee Dee relocated to Forest Hills with his mother and sister. In his autobiography, he writes that he believed that "America was the land of equal opportunity", but as it turned out, he "didn't have the opportunities that the other kids in Forest Hills had" (Ramone 1997: 35). As a high school dropout, he felt like he did not quite fit in. Moreover, he considered himself as having "already graduated to [his] role in life – that of a social deviant" (Ramone 1997: 42). McNeil (2000: x) notes that Dee Dee's life was "[...] a living disaster. He was a male prostitute, a would-be mugger, a heroin dealer, an accomplice to armed robbery, and a genius poet who was headed for prison or an early grave – but was side-tracked by rock & roll." Dee Dee's troubled past did not impede his achievements as an artist. Instead, he was and still is recognized for his contributions to the Ramones, particularly in terms of irony and humor.

In an interview with Legs McNeil, Dee Dee discussed his collection of Nazi artifacts. After his family relocated from Munich to Pirmasens, a small town near the French border, he would hike to the outskirts of town, where he would find an array of military equipment, including German machine guns, helmets, gas masks, bayonets, and machine-gun belts: "All the kids in my housing complex collected and traded in war relics. I got so many of them I started dealing with them. [...]. I loved finding them in the rubble of Germany. [...]. They were just so pretty. My parents were very upset by that." (McNeil, McCain 1996: 235) In this interview, the Ramones' songwriter and bassist also recounts how his mother used to tell him stories about the war: "She would tell me about how they wouldn't let some people into the bomb shelters because they were too full [...]. The whole city would be on fire. And she used to tell me about her relatives, who were Nazis [...]." (McNeil, McCain 1996: 235) The fact that his mother used to tell him war stories suggests that he involuntarily inherited her memories of the past. Marianne Hirsh defines this phenomenon as post-memory – a process whereby an individual passes down their Holocaust memories to a person who did not have firsthand experience of the event.<sup>9</sup> It is also worth bearing in mind the fact that "the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself" (Felman, Laub 1992: 57). This implies that, although Dee Dee did not have firsthand experience of the Holocaust, the trauma of the event must have affected him

9 For a more in-depth analysis of the concept of postmemory, refer to Marianne Hirsch's *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (2012) and the paper by Jovana Kostić and Aleksandra Stojanović, titled *(Re)configuring Language Identity and Memory in Eva Hoffman's Lost in Translation* (2022).

to some extent, as his mother's war stories and her memories of the past were passed down to him.

### 3. *'Blitzkrieg Bop', 'Today Your Love, Tomorrow the World' and the Holocaust*

The Ramones' self-titled debut album<sup>10</sup> started with the raw, stripped-down, and fast-paced 'Blitzkrieg Bop'. The song's rallying cry of "Hey! Ho! Let's go!" illustrates a sense of urgency and the need for listeners to take action. In an interview with Gaines (2018: 14), Joey Ramone stated that the chorus in 'Blitzkrieg Bop' was "the battle cry that sounded the revolution, a call to arms for punks to do their own thing". However, there is another side to 'Blitzkrieg Bop', one that is darker. "When Tommy Ramone, the drummer, and later producer for the band, wrote a song called 'Animal Hop' based on Bay City Rollers-style pop like 'Saturday Night', it was Dee Dee who gave it its Nazi overtones, renaming it 'Blitzkrieg Bop' and altering the line 'They're shouting in the back now' to 'Shoot 'em in the back now.'" (Stratton 2005: 91) The original line "They're shouting in the back now" depicted a group of young people having a good time at a punk concert. Dee Dee decided to alter the line to "Shoot 'em in the back now" because he, as he put it, "thrived on negativity" at the time (Ramone 1997: 54).<sup>11</sup> Stratton (2005: 80) argues that this negativity should be interpreted as a "pre-cursive expression of the cultural trauma of the Holocaust as this trauma began to enter what might be described as the cultural consciousness of the West". Put differently, punk's negativity, and, more specifically, the negativity of 'Blitzkrieg Bop', is the result of its acknowledgment of and confrontation with the historical and cultural trauma of the Holocaust, which is often described as "a disruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates holes in experience" (LaCarpa 2014: 41).

'Today Your Love, Tomorrow the World', the final track on *The Ramones*, is a first-person narrative of a young German boy being bullied. After much discussion, the Ramones changed the opening lines from "I'm a Nazi baby, I'm a Nazi baby, yes I am" to "Well, I'm a shock trooper in a stupor, yes I am" because Sire Records founder Seymour Stein felt that the original lyrics were too offensive.<sup>12</sup> Mickey Leigh, Joey's brother, and a Jew, had no problem

10 The Ramones' self-titled debut album was released in 1976. The band recorded it within a week, spending a total of sixty-four hundred dollars. According to Joey, "[...] some albums were costing a half-million dollars to make and taking two or three years to record, like Fleetwood Mac and stuff. Doing an album in a week and bringing it in for sixty-four hundred dollars was unheard of, especially since it was an album that really changed the world. It kicked off punk rock and started the whole thing – as well as us." (McNeil, McCain 1996: 229)

11 J. Stratton (2005: 91) claims that "[i]t was Dee Dee who provided the band's nihilist negativity, writing, for that first album, 'I Don't Wanna Walk Around With You', 'Now I Wanna Sniff Some Glue', and the unwittingly insightful, 'I Don't Wanna Go Down to the Basement.'"

12 "Seymour Stein came up to the studio in the afternoon and complained, 'You can't say, 'I'm a Nazi baby, I'm a Nazi, yes I am,' referring to the opening lines of the song 'Today Your Love, Tomorrow the World,' which had become the Ramones' signature closer at live shows." (Leigh, McNeil 2009: 133)

with the band's initial choice of lyrics, whereas Tommy, the son of Holocaust survivors, "was more sensitive to this issue but acquiesced so as not to impede with the band's artistic freedom and black humor" (Leigh, McNeil 2009: 134). Given that the Ramones' subversive rhetoric is often overlooked by the mainstream, it does not come as a surprise, then, that the satire and irony of 'Today Your Love, Tomorrow the World' is misunderstood. Legs McNeil (McNeil, McCain 1996: 234) writes as follows: "The Ramones sang that they were Nazis [...], but they weren't Nazis. You see, the entire seventies culture was based on being 'nice.' You had to be nice. [...]. So when the Ramones sang that they were Nazis, they were really saying, 'We refuse to be nice.'" It is also worth bearing in mind that all of the band members were either Jewish themselves or had parents who survived the Holocaust, and that this fact alone proves that the track is not neo-fascist. While it is true that punk's desire is to shock and subvert dominant cultural narratives, it is also true that 'Today Your Love, Tomorrow the World' is an attempt to work through the trauma of the Holocaust.

In the post-Holocaust era, punks like the Ramones were faced with the difficult task of how to confront the personal and collective trauma of the Holocaust. "While the various punk responses to the Holocaust range from the mocking to the shocking to the world-rocking, as in the impulse to identify with the oppressors, each is in its own way an attempt to deal with this tragedy that affected the punks' lives whether they liked to admit it or not. No Holocaust, no punk." (Beeber 2006: 164) The rhetorically subversive 'Today Your Love, Tomorrow the World' portrays a world under Nazi rule.<sup>13</sup> It is hardly surprising that it was Dee Dee who wrote the song; his childhood in post-war Germany, his parents' survival of the Holocaust, and his mother's war stories and memories all affected him and shaped his worldview. It is, however, important to note that the song does not reference either Jews or the Holocaust. That is because the Ramones present a world in which the dominant ideology is that of Nazism and, therefore, a world in which alternative narratives are suppressed and erased. As Stratton (2005: 92) puts it: "While the Judeocide is, as in most punk lyrics, not mentioned, there is a repressed tension in the lyrics of Nazi domination – 'Tomorrow the World' – being sung by a Jew." Apart from this, it is possible that Jews and the Holocaust were not included in the lyrics because the band did not want to create what might be considered an overtly sentimental or pathetic discourse. Lastly, we must not forget the fact that every Holocaust narrative is hindered by the impossibility of telling the story. The past cannot be known either ontologically or epistemologically. Memories are fragmentary and unsettling. This makes writing about the Holocaust selective and that much more difficult.

13 The song title may be a play on the phrase "Today Europe, tomorrow the world", which has been attributed to Adolf Hitler, although there is no evidence to support this claim. It is also possible that the title is a reference to the 1944 film *Tomorrow the World*.

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Јована Д. Костић

## ПАНК, ХОЛОКАУСТ И РАМОНСИ

Резиме

Предмет интересовања рада јесу Холокауст и послератно стваралаштво америчког панк рок бенда Рамонси. У раду се, најпре, разматра панк као жанр музике, који се појавио готово истовремено у Енглеској и Сједињеним Америчким Државама као одговор на послератну друштвено-политичку климу. Рад се затим фокусира на Рамонсе, групу младића из Њујорка чија се музика директно обраћала послератној, разочараној омладини. Сви чланови бенда били су или Јевреји или су имали родитеље



који су преживели Холокауст. У том смислу, рад испитује у којој мери су Рамонси доживели трауму Холокауста и на који начин су покушали да је превазиђу. Истраживачки корпус представљају песме „Blitzkrieg Bop” и „Today Your Love”, „Tomorrow the World”.

**Кључне речи:** Холокауст, траума, панк, Рамонси, *Blitzkrieg Bop*, *Today Your Love*, *Tomorrow the World*.

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