The Counterculture Icon: From Beat to Punk

And you can't help me now, you guys
And all you sweet girls with all your sweet talk

The Velvet Underground & Nico, 'Heroin' (1967)

Of the three famous Beat writers, William Burroughs was bound to hold the most serious interest to the punks. Burroughs was an anti-spiritual voice within a spiritual school; a satirist who used obscenity as he used heroin – to drill down into rather than up and out of human cruelty. To musicians like Lou Reed, David Bowie and Patti Smith, seeking new countercultural positions at the come down end of the hippie trip, he was an example of how to challenge the establishment while refusing the con of pop cultural political idealism. To the generation who came after these three path-breakers, younger and necessarily more dramatic in their rejection of "peace and love", "flower power" and all the slogans and values Burroughs' friend Ginsberg had coined in the counterculture, this be-hatted older gentleman in glasses and a three-piece turned out to be a credible tonic to the fogginess and hypocrisy the punks diagnosed in "corporate rock and roll".

Among the many paradoxes about Burroughs was his position between arch anti-humanism (the doubts about human perfectibility which he inherited from Joseph Conrad, Oswald Spengler and Louis-Ferdinand Céline) and a bohemian communalism. Here was a writer who boiled morality out of human motivation, reducing it to the 'algebra of need',[1] but whose descent into addiction in New York, Mexico City, Tangiers and Paris led him to protest acerbically, humanely against the systems of control keeping everyone down (economic, cultural, linguistic and political). Wheeled out for the umpteenth retrospective documentary on the Beat Generation, Burroughs spoke not disparagingly, nor too cynically, but at a customary remove about this 'cultural revolution' that had expanded into an 'unprecedented worldwide extent'.[2] The impact, Burroughs said, in his best patient, grandfatherly drawl, was more 'sociological' than a 'literary'.[3]

Such statements indicate the attractive spirit in which he took name-checking by Frank Zappa, David Bowie and Iggy Pop and Patti Smith courting him in a friendship that would end up lasting three decades. In interviews with and about these subjects, he seemed amused, interested by his pop cultural apotheosis (grateful too, of course, that it kept young people buying his books) but resisted Ginsberg's tendency to proselytize on his own importance. Indeed, set Burroughs' comments about the Beats' influence next to Ginsberg's on hearing Bob Dylan for the first time ('I wept because it seemed that the torch had been passed to another generation'), and we get a picture of the humility and scepticism that allowed Burroughs to endure as an icon from the 1960s into the 1970s and beyond.[4]

Patti Smith — a performance poet before she became a musician, and a conduit between the Beats and the generation that followed Dylan's — revered Ginsberg, made friends with him and Burroughs, but was more artistically attuned with *Naked Lunch* than *Howl.* Burroughs had been a symbol rather than a major influence in the 1960s rock counterculture — appearing in Peter Blake and Jann Haworth's collage of cultural icons for the front cover of the Beatles' *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, hanging out with Paul McCartney in London, but distanced himself aesthetically from the jangly guitars and be-in spirit that animated bands like Peppers-period Beatles, the Byrds and Buffalo Springfield. In the late-'60s era of the Summer of Love, and the height of the 'cultural revolution' Burroughs referred to, its main protagonists owed much more to Ginsberg and Kerouac's romanticism and hedonism

than to Burroughs' hard-boiled street slang or hallucinated science fiction. While Ginsberg was visiting Rimbaud's grave with Dylan or immersing himself in Ken Kesey and Timothy Leary's cross-continental acid tests, Burroughs was living in London bitching about Leary (who he called a "horse's ass" and a fraud). With the rise of musical artists like Patti Smith, though, or Lou Reed, even Bowie, and the shift in the visual arts towards the kind of self-referential, conceptual commentary epitomised by Andy Warhol, his own caustic, satirical aesthetic overtook his friends' as barometric of its time.

The moniker 'godfather of punk' was a lazy one, bestowed on him by journalists from the mainstreaming of that movement in 1977 until his collaboration with the Pistols and Burroughs adoring Kurt Cobain in 1993.[5] It was also a label he was predisposed to reject, as he rejected all categories, including 'Beat', and extending to 'gay'.[6] What is clear, however — as well as helpful to an understanding of 20th and 21st century literary and countercultural history — is the meaningful aesthetic, political and philosophical affinity that so many involved in that 1970s to 1990s countercultural shift found with Burroughs. As Casey Rae has detailed meticulously in his *William Burroughs and the Cult of Rock 'N' Roll*, the affinity manifested through the lifting of particular phrases from Burroughs' work for lyrics (from Smith's pre-punk 'the boy looked at Johnny' in 'Horses' and Iggy Pop's use of Burroughs' hero, 'Jonny Yen' in 'Lust for Life', to Joy Division's filching on *Naked Lunch* for 'Interzone');[7] through homages in person, whether during documented dinners at Burroughs' New York Bowery 'bunker' in the 1970s or tributary gigs and collaborations; and through the invocation of creative methods (David Bowie and Iggy Pop's public endorsement, for example, of Burroughs and Gysin's 'cut-up' method on their work together in Berlin).[8]

Both a progenitor of America's first mass-consumed experimental school (the school that translated radical, anti-establishment political-literary ideals for the young people who would go on to make pop music the central outlet for youth politics in its time) and an oracle to the young artists who were disgusted by where that school had ended up, he sheds light on Anglo-American cultural history from the early twentieth century to the present. Burroughs' endurance past the '60s points to a relationship between avant-garde artistic methods and new political thinking across the 20th century; from the 'cut-up'-antecedent-Surrealists to the new technologies of simultaneity suggested by punk and continued over into sample-centred hip hop from the 1980s to the present.

The 'cut-up' method provides a tangible way into the Burroughs-punk nexus – a network based otherwise on visceral but abstract touch-points of tone, melody and attitude (as well as a shared way of life and of seeing, and the conversion of subsistence on the ragged margins into sardonic art). The process that Bowie and Iggy Pop appropriated, and that was taken up in the late '70s by midlands electro-punk band Throbbing Gristle, then by Kurt Cobain and Thom Yorke in the 1990s, had a major conceptual influence on the English evolution of punk. Devised by Burroughs and his friend and collaborator, the painter Brion Gysin, in the late 1950s, 'cut-up' was their post-Second World War countercultural take on Dadaist subversions of linearity. By snipping the full body of a text into segments and rearranging these at meaning-and-reality-altering random, Burroughs worked with Gysin to bring to his postmodern moment something like what Tristan Tzara's lines-from-a-hat poetry had to his modern one — namely, a formula for escaping formula. A way to relieve the mind of the patterns of language learned through external reality — imposed patterns of control which determine both internal, private thought and public communication. As Oliver Harris notes in his introduction to Burroughs' cut up product, *The Ticket That Exploded*, the 'politically sharp' (punk appropriate) joke of the process was the 'inescapable complicity' it implied in its user.[9] In dismantling the old system into components that could be reassembled,

he was ‘bringing the word virus out into the open’,[10] showing how the phrases hook into the flesh of the mind regardless of their efficacy, showing the ‘Singing Sickness’ as it works on every mind,[11] and thus giving the writer to ‘fight fire with fire’.[12]

Burroughs was introduced to these ideas in Paris in the 1950s, a milieu that was also formative in the manifesto-thinking of punk (or at least punk as it manifested in London in the 70s, and which came to define its look and sound internationally). If 21-year-old John Lydon’s anti-government, anti-monarchy lyrics were the aural hook (outrageous snarled profanities smuggled into heads through catchy pop refrains; send ups of the ‘Singing Sickness’), punk was initially a visual ‘situation’ created by a set of directives and ‘cut up’ slogans and images. From their headquarters-cum-clothes boutique on the Kings Road, Vivienne Westwood and art school itinerant Malcolm McLaren gestated Situationist, Surrealist, Dadaist and Vorticist manifestos and used the statements, the colours, the layouts and modes of address to concoct an avant-garde aesthetic for the post-Countercultural twentieth century. As John Savage outlines in his history of the nascent stages of punk, *England’s Dreaming*, McLaren and Westwood’s punk aesthetic was developed outwards, beginning with the provocative clothes in their shop, then making its way onto posters, press releases and album covers for the band they shaped out of young crowd drawn to that provocation. Among the images they plastered onto t-shirts were a Burroughsian set-to between manly cowboys who just happen to be naked from the waist down, their erect cocks aimed at one another, an extract of lesbian fantasy from the writer Alexander Trocchi’s Scottish brand of Beat/Existentialist fiction, and an image of an early teenager blowing smoke suggestively at the camera, lifted from a borderline paedophilic magazine.[13]

The recent musical roots lay in America, in ’68 with Iggy Pop’s garage rock bacchanales in Detroit; then in ’73 with the New York Dolls’ combination of DIY guitar and lurid drag,[14] but it was this British imaging that inaugurated punk as both a visually artistic youth cultural movement and the raw materials for a ‘media creation’ (Burroughs’ own, neutral term for punk, when asked for his feelings in 1978).[15] Manager of the New York Dolls beforehand, and self-styled spin doctor for his new band and the movement, McLaren was an outrageous opportunist but more than the superficial marketeer he has been labelled. If Lydon’s lyrics defined Punk politically, the splicing of word with image that began with the fashion and flyer-ing announced it as a new and genuinely subversive artistic departure. It was through McLaren and Westwood’s efforts that punk was able to do what rock and roll had done in the 1950s and 60s — shocking adults over 25 (at the youngest), and asserting for the first time since the 1950s the thrilling, era-stamping ‘generation gap’ between teens and their parents that had made rock and roll such a rite-of-passage-like, mass participatory event. Aged 31 already when the group hit the headlines, and triumphant in the irony that this was the end result of the ‘great rock and roll swindle’, McLaren conned the world in order, he said, to expose the deeper, larger con beneath. Like Burroughs, he was half serious, half poker-faced — working with the fact that he knew that you knew he was having you on. In this sense, McLaren’s version of ‘punk’ — the first version that managed to go media-viral — reproduced the old Burroughsian/Situationist magic trick of bringing ‘the (word) virus out into the open’ for all to see: an anarchic ‘detournement’ of the usual visual, audial, narratological order of things to expose the luridness of the attraction to that order in the first place.[16]

This is the humane quest for meaning beneath the apparent nihilism of punk lyrics, and of the grim affectless sex scenes in Burroughs’ 1970s literature — works like *The Wild Boys: A Book of the Dead* and *The Ticket that Exploded* (the latter in fact published in 1962 and popularized by a Grove edition in 1967, but read widely by punks and proto-punks into the 1970s).[17] For Burroughs, just as for post-modernist contemporaries like Samuel Beckett and Thomas Pynchon, the literary exploration of human feeling, of desire, was a provocation for

the reader to examine one's motivations, to discard easy assumptions about essential individual love for mankind or love even for the human beings in one's immediate vicinity. To a young junk-strung-out Iggy Pop in the late 1960s, or a Delmore Schwartz reading Lou Reed, seeking artistic expression in street level New York at the same time, Burroughs' hallucinated agents and subjects of control — young boys controlled by drugs and sex toys, populations hypnotised by the concept of love so that they cluck in unison like chickens, and the vermouth-dry alternative reality CIA cops who explain the whole charade — were a gratifying answer to the '60s quest for LSD and commune-inspired transcendence.

If these pre-punks took up Burroughs' attitude to sex as a 'flesh gimmick', seeing the world as he did from the submarine depths produced by morphine, then from the abject yearning of its withdrawal, the punks themselves behaved like characters from The Wild Boys — from Johnny Thunders and Sid Vicious as junkie avatars to Johnny Rotten and Joe Strummer as hood-rat agents provocateurs, all pre-empted in fact by Bowie, who based Ziggy Stardust at least in part on what he read in that novel.[18] Burroughs applauded the Sex Pistols' assault on the British class system in 'God Save the Queen', going as far, he said, as to write them a letter of congratulation (itself a bizarrely regal move you might expect to read in a Burroughsian sketch).[19] But his own viscerally felt anger at social inequality was muted under layers of satirical impersonation: disgust at the racists he grew up around in St Louis transmitted through a bit with a black chauffeur and his pig-stupid employer;[20] the brutality masked by English class decorum dealt with through the fictionalised/fantasised story of how the Burroughs' English governess came to work for them;[21] then stony-faced British and American civil servants, agents in the 'control game', with absurdly logical explanations and demeanours for atrocities that read like satires on the crimes of the Nazis.[22]

As Johnny Rotten, John Lydon expressed his dissent from under costume and make up, ventriloquising it through twisted, theatrical lips, but it was nonetheless a more earnest protest than Burroughs'. Lydon and the punks were direct and visceral, not world-aware enough yet to appreciate their own complicity in what Burroughs would call the farce of control. This, in many respects, points to a greater tragic irony about the movement than the one that is usually recognised (the one about Lydon selling out to advertise butter, or old men with mohawks hawking selfies to tourists in Camden Market). No, the real sadness of this gob of spit in the face of the establishment was that the trick it played on the media (via Malcolm McLaren) it also played on the kids who stalked its audiences and stages. They were transparently, willingly, grinningly, set up as stooges — a little like Alex and his 'droogies' in Oxford don Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange*, whose combination of delinquency and fetish for outrageous clobber McLaren and Westwood also drew on.[23] The point of punk was never as politically straightforward as the lyrics to 'Anarchy in the UK' suggested. Like Burroughs in his satires, like Guy Debord on the streets of Paris, McLaren rallied the disaffected kids who hung around his shop to create situations that shone a light on the grimness of Thatcher's Britain, on corporate staleness, on the messaging of countercultural positions that had long been co-opted as sellable heresy, but also on the weakness for conformity, fatuousness and hypocrisy undergirding all human being.

In McLaren's conception, punk might be the countercultural project carried to the anti-humanist philosophical conclusion first suggested by Burroughs' involvement with Kerouac and Ginsberg. To McLaren and Westwood — just as to Lou Reed in 'Venus in Furs', his literarily sharp homage to S&M — liberation from Victorian puritan strictures meant exposing sordid fantasies and true fetishist aesthetics (aesthetics sold in the 'Sex' boutique through naked readers wives plastered onto ripped T-shirts, or handwritten rape scenes from the pornographic side hustle of Burroughs' ally, Alexander Trocchi). If Burroughs had joined in with and enjoyed the throwing off of inhibitions that led Ginsberg to develop his Whitman-modelled, clothes-off-thoughts-off long line style, his own work was always mired in a

blackly humorous/ blackly realist understanding of sex as furtive, covetous, ashamed, absurd and obscene (obscene not in the spiritual manner of Henry Miller, or Allen Ginsberg, who expressed unacceptable truths about sex to foster self-acceptance, but in a brazenly disgusting way, indifferent to such aims).[24] The practical joke that British punk played on the hippies — starting with Westwood and McLaren's fetish shop plonked right in the middle of a road that had been iconic to swinging '60s London — was a version of the joke of Burroughs' 'unwholesome'[25] Swiftian satires about amphibian rent boys, torture and telepathy within a movement that had grown out of a wholesome Transcendentalist attempt to explore America, her body and her soul.

As well as punk's relation to the Beat Generation and the '60s Counterculture, Burroughs' influence illuminates the movement's debts to earlier, politically reactionary and artistically elitist forms of modernism. Punk shared with writers like Burroughs and Trocchi, a piquant combination of absurdist utopianism gleaned from the Dadaists—filtered through the manifestos of the Lettristes and Situationists— with a fatalism about the future of humanity in line with much European modernist writing between the 1910s and the 1930s. In Burroughs, that utopian/fatalistic tension is there to see in the promise of a glimpse of the future he ascribes to his tape cut-up method set against his lifelong devotion to the end-of-civilisation theories of Oswald Spengler.[26] It is evident too in his wonder both at Kerouac's *On the Road* having catalysed a 'global cultural revolution'[27] and the similarities between the impact of the Rolling Stones on the youth and Hitler's at Nazi rallies.[28] In McLaren's case, it means the radical freedom bestowed on young people through the juxtaposition of graphically taboo imagery with glow-in-the-dark colours and carnivalesque haircuts, of throwaway, badly played and catchy guitar riffs with macabre calls to bring down the government.

The American punk inheritance of that anti-sentimental, anti-humanist bent had less to do with the aesthetic strategies of particular European movements, but involved more direct engagement by its participants with writers like Burroughs. Across the Atlantic, rather than the Sex Pistols expressing their rebellion by staring down and swearing at TV interviewers, audiences could find Iggy Pop — sweating and breathless after a studio performance, flinging himself down on the interviewer's couch, missing teeth, looking every bit the life-imitates-art junkie, but explaining clearly his informed view of how this new form of consciously artless performance art was in fact a Dionysian upsurge after a glut of cerebral Apollonian rock music.[29] If British punk was choreographed by thinkers in the Burroughs mould but executed by boys and girls who couldn't give a fuck, the American branch might be seen as less politically situationist — less connected to the sort of experiments Burroughs was up to in his literature — but practised by men and women who understood it in postmodern terms of a layered narrative: writer, speaker, bard, audience, persona among personae.

The flaws punk exposed in 1960s countercultural arts and politics, and that Burroughs had pre-empted with his cynicism through the 1950s onwards, are so painfully obvious today that mentioning them seems quaint, a naive error of taste almost. In our age of Amex-sponsored music festivals and glossy nostalgic Netflix dramas about those cheeky scamps, 'The Pistols', of ubiquitous corporate endorsement of anti-corporate feeling, even the sending up of that endorsement looks tired. It is difficult to feel our way back into a time when a cultural act could appear as politically radical as the Sex Pistols parking their boat opposite parliament on the Queen's Jubilee and playing their treasonable anti-national anthem. We cannot fathom, perhaps, a historical moment when new fashion, art or music, let alone new literature, could offend so profoundly with sexually graphic language or anti-establishment statements. Where Burroughs and punk do still offend is in the uglier area of race and rape related symbolism. In the healthier, more defensible, case of Burroughs, that means the use of

the “n” word to satirise brutish racism, but there remain clear, complex problems surrounding this. In the case of punk, it means an Alt-Right-pre-empting willingness to play around with Swastikas on T Shirts, Nazi language in band names (Joy Division, New Order), that begs questions about the moral efficacy and long historical legacy of that countercultural provocation in the first place.

Punk was culture and lifestyle using obscenity to express political disaffection, while at the same time laughing at how ridiculous the hippies (and the Beats) had been to absorb politics into culture. Now that the absorption is total, now that radical politics and art have been reduced to performance for consumption on Tiktok and Instagram, it is itself just more fodder for countercultural recycling and nostalgia. Revisiting Burroughs’ affiliation with the movement allows for more than just a nostalgic celebration of one writer’s impressive reach beyond their medium. It is a reminder of aspects of his work that were more complex, more self-effacing, and more culturally explorative than in the work of his more accessible and mainstream-accepted contemporaries. It is also a reminder that this Beat writer who tutored his friends in the European writers and movements they were hoping to emulate, and who was the only one of the three who kept up with postmodern concerns about the insidious messaging within free expression, offers a rare insight into the meaningful social, political and aesthetic rebellion that culture represented briefly, almost half a century ago.

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[1] William S. Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* (London: Flamingo, 1993, 1959), p. 8.

[2] Yony Lesser (dir.). 2005. *A Man Within.* New York: PBS.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Martin Scorsese (dir.), *No Direction Home: Bob Dylan* (New York: PBS, American Masters, 2005). Interview originally recorded in 1990.

[5] Burroughs’ media reputation as the ‘godfather of punk’ is discussed by Victor Bockris, his friend and publicist in the 1970s, in a 2010 interview for the Beat-dedicated website, Reality Studio: ‘Interview with Victor Bockris on William Burroughs’, https://realitystudio.org/interviews/interview-with-victor-bockris-on-william-burroughs/ (May 27, 2010)). Burroughs collaborated with Cobain (lead singer and songwriter of the band, Nirvana) on a track called long ‘The “Priest” they called Him’ (Tim/Kerr, 1993). Cobain cited *Naked Lunch* as one of his favourite books and described the experience as among the most creatively memorable of his career.

[6] ‘I am not a punk and I don’t know why anybody would consider me the Godfather of Punk’, he told Raymonde Foye, who was interviewing him for the punk rock magazine *Search & Destroy* in 1978 (‘Hollywood: October 1978’, pp. 121-127, *With William Burroughs: A Report from the Bunker*, ed. by Victor Bockris (New York: Seaver Books/Grove Press, 1981), p. 127). Questioned on his position on Stonewall for Yony Lesser’s documentary, *The Man Within*, Burroughs quipped, ‘I have never been gay a day in my life and I’m sure as hell not part of any movement’ (Yony Lesser (dir.), *A Man Within* (New York: PBS, 2005)).

[7] Casey Rae, *William S. Burroughs and the Cult of Rock 'n' Roll* (Austin: University of Texas, Press, 2019); Patti Smith, ‘Horses’, on *Horses* (Arista, 1975); Iggy Pop, ‘Lust for Life’, on *Lust for Life* (RCA, 1977); Joy Division, ‘Interzone’, on *Unknown Pleasures* (Factory Records, 1979).

[8] Rae, *William S. Burroughs and the Cult of Rock 'n' Roll*, p. 131.

[9] Oliver Harris, ‘Introduction’, in William S. Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded: The Restored Text* (London: Penguin, 2014, 1962), p. XX.

[10] Ibid. XX.

[11] Bockris (ed.), *With William Burroughs*, p. 226.

[12] Harris, ‘Introduction’, *The Ticket That Exploded: The Restored Text*, p. XX.

[13] Jon Savage, *England's Dreaming: The Sex Pistols and Punk Rock* (London: Faber & Faber, 2011, 1991, p. 100).

[14] Discussing garage rock bands like The Stooges and MC5, then responding to The New York Dolls in terms that suggested a more definite scene, lead writers for Detroit’s *Creem* Magazine, Lester Bangs and Dave Marsh, were the first to play around with the term ‘punk rock’ (‘punk’ as a subversion of the insult for young people without social purpose and with a taste for delinquency). What McLaren did was to cut and paste that American new media concept — a concept which, in Lester Bang’s words, celebrated a return to ‘Rock’s essential barbarism (and the worth of its vulgarism)’ (Savage, p. 100) — onto a politically theorised, European version of cultural political revolt.

[15] Bockris (ed.), *With William Burroughs*, p. 127.

[16] Harris, ‘Introduction’, *The Ticket That Exploded*, p. XX. See my p. 3.

[17] William S. Burroughs *The Wild Boys: A Book of the Dead* (New York: Grove Press. 1971); William S. Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded: The Restored Text* (London: Penguin, 2014, 1962 [Obelisk], 1967 [Grove Press]).
[18] Casey Rae, *William S. Burroughs and the Cult of Rock 'n' Roll* (Austin: University of Texas, Press, 2019), p. 112.
[19] An anecdote recalled by Victor Bockris in Teeuwen, 'Interview with Victor Bockris on William Burroughs', https://realitystudio.org/interviews/interview-with-victor-bockris-on-william-burroughs/ (May 27, 2010).
[20] Burroughs, *The Wild Boys*, pp. 30-31.
[21] Ibid., p. 28.
[22] Ibid., p. 34.
[23] Anthony Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange: Restored Edition* (London: Penguin, 2013, 1962).
[24] For more on the spiritual, 'humanist' goal behind Miller's anti-humanist rhetoric, see my *Anti-Humanism in the Counterculture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).
[25] Burroughs, *The Wild Boys*, p. 40. In a section that slides in and out of scenarios informed by Burroughs' own childhood, he writes of the unhappy Audrey Carsons, 'he was painfully aware of being unwholesome'.
[26] 'When you cut into the present, the future leaks out', he wrote in his essay, 'Origin and Theory of the Tape Cut-Ups,' delivered as a lecture at the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics, Naropa Institute, Boulder, Colorado, **April 20, 1976**. The lecture was recorded and compiled for the LP, *Break Through in Grey Room* (Sub Rosa, 1986).
[27] Lesser (dir.), *A Man Within*. See my p. 2.
[28] Bockris, *William Burroughs: A Report from the Bunker*, p. 226.
[29] Iggy Pop and Tom Snyder, *The Late Late Show with Tom Snyder* (CBS, 1980).

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