New Wave

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, “new wave” was a catch-all term for music that directly followed punk. In retrospect we see that the music should be divided into two categories – “post-punk” and “synth pop.”

Post-punk music was more arty, difficult and challenging. To quote Allmusic: ¹

For many artists and musicians, punk rock represented the relaxation of artistic conventions and restraints. While some musicians interpreted this relaxation as a cue to be vulgar and anti-social -- and thereby laying the groundwork for the nihilistic hardcore movement -- just as many interpreted it as a way for them to push musical boundaries. These artists were initially categorized as part of the New Wave, but it became clear that the post-punk bands were more ambitious, serious and challenging than the pop-oriented New Wave groups. As a result, they rarely had the same commercial success as New Wave, but their records received greater critical acclaim and large cult followings that eventually turned into musicians themselves.

Post-punk was artier and darker than punk. It was less concerned with rock, preferring to concentrate on alternately haunting and abrasive textures, incorporating elements of the avant-garde, funk and worldbeat into their minimalistic rock & roll. Essentially, it was assaultive art-rock, one that had little connection with the bloated prog-rock of the '70s but owed a great deal to the experimental music of the Velvet Underground, the Who, Frank Zappa, the Stooges and Captain Beefheart. [My emphasis]

Synth pop, on the other hand, was more pop-oriented and accessible.

A. Postpunk

1. Read the first chapter of Rip It Up and Start Again about the “The Unfinished Revolution” and the transition from punk to postpunk.
   - At the beginning of the section Reynolds describes what postpunk bands wanted to do. How were they moving beyond the raw music of punk? What did this have to do with the backgrounds of many postpunk musicians?
   - What early art and prog rock bands did the postpunk bands draw from?
   - What did David Bowie contribute to the postpunk movement? What Bowie and Bowie-produced albums were particularly important? Why?
   - What was happening politically in the US and Britain during the seventies? How did postpunk musicians react to this atmosphere?
   - What does Reynolds say all of the postpunk musicians inherited from punk?

2. Read pp 76 – 84 from *Rip It Up and Start Again* on Devo, listen to the recording of “Satisfaction,” and watch the video of “Gates of Steel” by Devo.

- The two members of Devo who were its conceptual core were deeply affected by the incident captured by the famous picture at the right. Where was this picture shot and what had happened? How did the incident influence Devo?
- How was Devo’s music influenced by Captain Beefheart and Roxy Music?
- Compare Devo’s version of “Satisfaction” with the original by the Rolling Stones. How does this song illustrate the description of Devo’s rhythms described on p 78 of the reading?
- What opinion did Devo share with punks about the hippies of the sixties? Devo’s “postmodernist protest band” strategy was quite different from many punk bands, especially no wave. How so?
- Compare Devo’s performance of “Gates of Steel” with previous live videos you have watched in this course. How does it correspond with the description of their live shows on page 80?
- What kind of influences on Devo can you hear from other musicians, groups, composers, and musical movements we have covered in this course? Which punk group do they resemble most closely?
- What happened to Devo? Did their “postmodernist protest” work out?

3. Read about the Manchester scene on pp 103 – 123 of *Rip It Up and Start Again* (particularly the portion on Joy Division). Listen to the recording of “Shadowplay” and watch the YouTube video of Joy Division performing the song.

- Describe Manchester in the early 1970s. How did the atmosphere of the city find its way into recordings of postpunk bands, such as the Fall and Joy Division? How is this illustrated by “Shadowplay”?
- The announcer in the Joy Division video is Tony Wilson, who will be featured in the “24-Hour Party People” film we see later in the course. “24-Hour Party People” also includes the high-handed producer, Martin Hannett. From your reading, how did Hannett’s production methods differ from punk recordings? How are they evident in “Shadowplay”?
- What was the Factory? The Factory also will be featured in “24-Hour Party People.”
- What illness did Ian Curtis suffer from? How was it being treated? What eventually happened to Curtis?

4. Read about Public Image Limited on pp 15 – 25, 212 - 224 of *Rip It Up and Start Again*, listen to “Swan Lake” by PiL, and watch the video of “Death Disco.”

- Who was the leader of PiL? Why had he become disillusioned with his previous band? What had happened to him as a result of “Good Save the Queen”?
- What punk band did PiL’s guitar player come from? Why were this guitar player’s skills different from most punk guitarists?
- What did Lydon announce that his new band would be?
• “Swan Lake” was first issued as the single “Death Disco.” What saddening incident in Lydon’s life lead to the lyrics for this tune.
• How is “Swan Lake” more influenced by the avant-garde then the Sex Pistols’ music?
• Reynolds mentions Yoko Ono and Lydon’s vocal style on “Swan Lake” in the same breath. How is Lydon singing like Ono?
• What other influences on PiL can you hear from the musicians, groups, composers, and musical movements we have covered in the course?
• How did the title “Metal Box” relate to the way this unusual album was packaged?
• What happened to PiL?

5. Read about the Gang of Four on pp 54 – 69 of Rip It Up and Start Again, listen to “Damaged Goods” and watch the video of the band performing “Love Like Anthrax.”.
• Where did the phrase “Gang of Four” originate and how was it related to the band’s politics?
• Reynolds describes their music as “stark and severe.” How is this apparent in “Damaged Goods” and “Love Like Anthrax.”
• Listen to the lyrics of “Damaged Goods.” As Reynolds describes, how has the band done their “Marxist homework” for this sone.
• What was unusual (for 1979-80) about the way that “Love Like Anthrax” begins
• The lyrics of “Love Like Anthrax” are a bit hard to understand. Why? Reynold’s description will help. What are they doing?

6. At least one person² has argued that the broad definition of post-punk in Rip It Up and Start Again makes a false distinction between punk and post-punk. Bands generally classified as punk and post-punk may have been too intermingled to be separated into clean categories, especially since the term “post-punk” did not even exist during the time this music was being made and consumed. What do you think? Are there sufficient differences between the music of first four bands we have listened to today (Devo, Joy Division, The Fall, and PiL) and classic punk bands, such as the Sex Pistols and Ramones to classify them separately? Why or why not?

7. One version of the lyrics to Nick Cave’s “The Mercy Seat” is below.

It began when they come took me from my home
And put me in Dead Row,
Of which I am nearly wholly innocent, you know.
And I'll say it again
I.am..not..afraid..to..die.

I began to warm and chill
To objects and their fields,
A ragged cup, a twisted mop
The face of Jesus in my soup
Those sinister dinner meals
The meal trolley's wicked wheels
A hooked bone rising from my food
All things either good or ungood.

And the mercy seat is waiting
And I think my head is burning
And in a way I'm yearning
To be done with all this measuring of truth.
An eye for an eye


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Like my good hand I
tattoed E.V.I.L. across it’s brother’s fist
That filthy five! They did nothing to challenge or resist.

In Heaven His throne is made of gold
The ark of his Testament is stowed
A throne from which I’m told
All history does unfold.
Down here it’s made of wood and wire
And my body is on fire
And God is never far away.

Into the mercy seat I climb
My head is shaved, my head is wired
And like a moth that tries
To enter the bright eye
I go shuffling out of life
Just to hide in death awhile
And anyway I never lied.

My kill-hand is called E.V.I.L.
Wears a wedding band that’s G.O.O.D.
’Tis a long-suffering shackle
Collaring all that rebel blood.

And the mercy seat is waiting
And I think my head is burning
And in a way I’m yearning
To be done with all this measuring of truth.
An eye for an eye
And a tooth for a tooth
And anyway I told the truth
And I’m not afraid to die.

and more . . . . .

- What is this song about? What is the “mercy seat”? What does Cave compare it to?
- How does Cave draw on minimalism in this song? What does he draw from religion?

8. Listen to Franz Ferdinand and the Futureheads. We will discuss them in class.

B. Synth Pop

9. Read chapter 18 from Rip It Up and Start Again on Synthpop. Listen to the six synthpop recordings and watch the six synthpop videos assigned.

- One theme in this course is the rise of electronic music. Look back over the course material and briefly discuss what part electronic instruments have played in the music to which we have listened so far.

10. Synthpop draws its name from the synthesizer, the first important one of which was the Moog synthesizer. Read the Wikipedia article on the Moog synthesizer.

- How did the Moog synthesizer get its name?
- What advantages did it have over previous electronic instruments?
- When did it become popular with pop bands?
- How did bands such as Kraftwerk make use of the Moog and its smaller version the Minimoog?

11. We begin with Gary Numan, a pioneer of synthpop.

- How did Numan get into this genre almost by accident?
- Look at the video of the Tubeway army playing “Are Friends Electric” in 1979. Has Numan abandoned traditional rock instruments completely for electronic?
- Using “Metal” and “Are Friends Electric” do Numan’s recordings have traditional lyrics about love and human relationships? How are they different?
- How does Numan layer the sounds from this instrument to build intensity during “Metal”?

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12. Compared with Numan’s music, what kind of new direction in electropop did the revitalized Human League take in 1981? How is “Don’t You want Me” a good example of this? What did the band mutate into? As synthpop became popular, what is ironic about the only way that groups such as Human League could remain on the forefront.

13. Listen to the synthpop recordings assigned for this lesson. Think about the following questions for each:
   - What influences from Krautrock, Eno, and Bowie do you hear?
   - How are synthesizers being used? Are they a major part of the sound or mainly background to vocals?
   - What kind of emotional feel does the music have?
   - What kind of story do the lyrics tell? Are the lyrics supported by the sound? If so, how?
   - Is it more experimental or more traditional and pop-oriented?
   - Is it danceable? How much so?

14. Read “The Death of New Wave” by Theo Cateforis, a professor of Music History and Cultures at Syracuse. To what does Cateforis ascribe the death of new wave music.

15. In this course we are following five general trends that characterize most, if not all, of the ways that the avant-garde music has influenced popular music. Which of the five general trends is evident in the music to which you have listened today?
   - Simplicity
   - Decomposition of Musical Structure
   - Pastiche
   - Electronic Music
   - Noise as Music