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"THIS AIN'T NO FOOLIN' AROUND"  
*Rebellion and Authority in Seventies Popular Culture*

SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER CARVED OUT FOR ITSELF A MEMORABLE, if slightly ridiculous, place in the history of American popular culture. The 1977 film catapulted little-known television actor John Travolta into big-screen stardom. Its soundtrack, featuring recordings by the Bee Gees, became briefly the biggest-selling album of all time and inaugurated a new (and newly profitable) series of collaborations between film studios and record companies. Together the movie and the soundtrack represented the apotheosis of disco. A white-suited Travolta, right hand awkwardly pointed over head in disco dance, became the archetypal image of 1970s America—a graphic depiction of its polyester fakery, its senseless hedonism, its supposed cultural bankruptcy.

But the film itself essayed a far more serious, and darker, portrait of American life in the era of malaise. In *Saturday Night Fever*, disco dancing emerged as an escape, an ultimately unreachable exit from a bleak world of stifling families, pinched circumstances, and decaying neighborhoods. *Saturday Night Fever* simmered in the era's pervasive ethnic conflict. Travolta's Tony Manero, a working-class outer-borough Italian, aspired to the affluence, the glamour, and the polish of WASP Manhattan.

The economic downturn of the Carter years also loomed large in Manero's Brooklyn. Tony works a dead-end job in a paint store. On Saturday night, he begs his boss for an advance to buy a "beautiful shirt" before returning home for a painful supper with his unemployed and thus unmanned father. Tony's mother has defiantly bought pork chops even though the family cannot keep up with the rising price of meat. "Life goin' nowhere," moaned the Bee Gees in "Stayin' Alive," the film's signature song, "Somebody help me."

Still, *Saturday Night Fever's* ludicrous features—the Bee Gees' falsetto vocals, Travolta's white leisure suit, the melodramatic dance contests—proved

more enduring mementos of Seventies America than the film's dark subject matter. Americans still find it difficult to take the Seventies seriously. As novelist Mark Salzman put it in his memoir about growing up in suburbia in the Seventies, "It seemed that everybody had been stoned since the ninth grade except me. I was the only guy in my industrial-arts class who wasn't making a water pipe out of plumbing fixtures."<sup>1</sup>

The prevailing concept of the Seventies remains the idea of the "Me Decade"—an era of narcissism, selfishness, personal rather than political awareness. "The '70s was the decade in which people put emphasis on the skin, on the surface, rather than on the root of things," novelist Norman Mailer complained in 1979. "It was the decade in which image became preeminent because nothing deeper was going on."<sup>2</sup>

Pundits and historians portrayed the Me Decade as the antidote to or repudiation of the activist, altruistic 1960s. When Apple Computer cofounder Steven Wozniak attempted to revive the Woodstock spirit in the early 1980s, he called his venture the "Us Festival." Wozniak billed the three-day celebration of rock music and computer technology as a deliberate effort to usher in an "Us Generation" of social action and communal engagement that would supplant the so-called Me Generation of the 1970s.<sup>3</sup>

Cultural arbiters bemoaned the decade "as a betrayal of sixties passion and idealism, a trashy postscript that found the broad torrents of pop culture siphoned off into tinkling displays of dandyism, self-parody, and androgyny. Instead of Pete Townshend and Jimi Hendrix sacrificing their guitars on pagan altars, we had David Bowie all aglitter, the New York Dolls in downtown drag, midnight showings of 'The Rocky Horror Picture Show.'"<sup>4</sup>

But film and TV critic James Wolcott denounced that dismissive view. "How," he asked, "could a decade that gave us the Rolling Stones' strung-out masterpiece *Exile on Main Street*, the epic scrotum hollers of Led Zeppelin, the booty-shake of disco and funk and the rash of punk rock be dismissed as dull and enervated?" And such energy and experimentation was not confined to popular music. "The seventies were the last time when movies seemed signed with the sweat of a director's brow rather than packaged by a committee of cellular phones. Martin Scorsese, Brian De Palma, Francis Ford Coppola, and Robert Altman invested each film with an integral vision. Looking back on the music and the movies," Wolcott concluded, "one is impressed by their personal stake, their quick incision."<sup>5</sup>

Americans remember the insipid antics of the Brady Bunch; theatrical

outlaw—the Buddha-like boxer in a ten-foot cell. It exposed the corruption, the rotting core of the nation's public life. While Carter wallowed in prison, the real criminals, “in their coats and their ties, are free to drink martinis and watch the sun rise.” To see Carter “obviously framed,” Dylan concluded, “couldn't help but make me feel ashamed to live in a land where justice is a game.”<sup>8</sup>

Dylan's suspicion of established institutions proved particularly revealing and resonant. The underlying theme in Seventies popular culture—the suburban current running under both product (the films and songs and novels being made) and process (the way they were being made, marketed, and distributed)—was the battle between large, constituted authority and its opponents. The films, music, and literature of the era pitted a self-styled outlaw band of rebels against the massive global conglomerates that were coming to dominate the culture industries and were, in their relentless search for the largest possible mass markets, blunting the edges of artistic expression.

The film world graphically illustrated this conflict. The late Sixties and Seventies witnessed the birth of the so-called new Hollywood—a rejection of the film industry's time-tested methods “in favor of freelance, catch-as-catch-can, location-oriented, director-controlled projects.”<sup>9</sup> The old studios finally crumbled, along with the system in which a few major film companies controlled all the talent, the filmmaking process, and the content. Freed from these controls, a cinematic renaissance took place. *New Yorker* film critic Pauline Kael looked back on the 1970s two decades later as Hollywood's single authentic golden age.<sup>10</sup> The decade produced such artists and films as Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* and *The Godfather* Parts 1 and 2, Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets* and *Taxi Driver*, Robert Altman's *Nashville* and *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, John Cassavetes' *A Woman Under the Influence*, and Roman Polanski's *Chinatown*, to name just a few.

These films resisted the major authorities and megacorporations of the film industry; they remained examples of strong directorial autonomy in the selection of locations, the casting, the filmmaking itself. More important, these movies explored dark subjects and advanced iconoclastic arguments. They assailed, mocked, undercut, and exposed the established sources of authority in American life. They echoed Bob Dylan's pronouncement that “the dream is over, the Great American Dream is over.”<sup>11</sup>

In Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974), Jake Gittes, the down-on-his-luck private detective played by Jack Nicholson, slowly unpeels the corruption infesting every layer of southern California society. Set in 1930s Los Angeles,

*Chinatown* dramatized 1970s reservations about political power and the public sector. The film's high-minded liberal, Water Department chief engineer Hollis Mulwray, first appears under a gigantic portrait of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, that ultimate symbol of benevolent government. But Mulwray is naive, and he dies a violent death. Investigating that murder, Gittes ultimately glimpses in the region's most powerful man—its behind-the-scenes power-broker depicted with uncanny vividness by John Huston—a view of pure, unmitigated, unalloyed evil. The audience looks into society's core in *Chinatown* and finds it rotten.

Martin Scorsese's 1976 film *Taxi Driver* tapped this same vein of discontent. Proving the nighttime world of New York City, Robert De Niro plays Travis Bickle, a Vietnam-era veteran—despairing, confused, seething with rage. “All the animals come out at night,” Bickle confides in the audience through voiceover narration—“whores, skunk pussies, buggers, queens, fairies, dopers, junkies, sick, venal. Someday a real rain will come and wash all this scum off the streets.” Bickle's signature expression, accosting his reflection in a mirror at a gunpoint, is an ironic growl: “You talkin' to me?”

Rejected by an attractive political campaign aide, Bickle even contemplates assassinating the candidate. Instead he arms himself and rages against the city: “Listen you fuckers, you screwheads. Here is a man who would not take it anymore. A man who stood up against the scum, the cunts, the dogs, the filth, the shit. Here is someone who stood up.” As Bickle's invective subsides into incoherent, inarticulate fury, a shot of his scribbled diary closes in on the words “Here is” followed by three menacing dots. Ultimately Bickle does stand up, freeing a twelve-year-old child prostitute in a bloodbath of incredible violence. The film ends with Bickle—the deranged, enraged taxi driver—celebrated as a hero. But Bickle is far scarier than the filth he excoriates, and the film discloses something very wrong about American society. If Travis Bickle is a savior, then what kind of nation has America become?

This critical perspective, this hostility to mainstream America and its values, appeared widely in the cinema of the Seventies; it was not confined to searing dramas by maverick directors. The 1977 comedy *Fun with Dick and Jane*, directed by Hollywood journeyman Ted Korcheff (best known for the first Rambo movie), starred Jane Fonda and George Segal as a well-to-do suburban couple living the high life until Segal, a successful aerospace executive, loses his job. With prices soaring out of control and the economy going South, the company ruthlessly casts off its loyal employees. The couple slowly loses its

purchase on middle-class respectability. Repo men seize everything—the car, the furniture, even the shrubs. So how does a hard-pressed young couple get by in the age of malaise? They steal. They rob banks. They flip an upturned finger at the authorities, the police, the company.

Not surprisingly, as American cinema enjoyed this outpouring of caustic, critical attacks on traditional sources of authority, the film empire struck back. If half of the story of Seventies cinema concerned the independent directors and their dark, personal visions, the other half featured a new Hollywood corporate order struggling to assert itself amid the ruin of the studio system. International megaconglomerates absorbed the film companies: Trans-America Corporation took over United Artists; MCA engulfed Universal Pictures; Gulf & Western absorbed Paramount; and the Kinney Corporation, known as the King of Parking Lots, bought Warner Brothers.<sup>12</sup>

The new corporate regime struggled to find blockbusters, formula pictures, sequel makers, franchises that would reach mass audiences. They could not afford movies like *Taxi Driver*, *Fun with Dick and Jane*, *Shafi*, or *Hester Street*—films with edgy messages that found specialized audiences. The new order concocted the winning recipe in 1975 with *Jaws*—the shark-on-a-beach thriller directed by the young Steven Spielberg. *Jaws* set the pattern for corporate Hollywood blockbusters, pioneering the techniques of saturation openings, extensive television advertising, and side-business deals in souvenirs, T-shirts, and toys. *Jaws* proved, according to film historian Robert Sklar, that Hollywood was unwilling “to sustain itself on dissidence.”<sup>13</sup>

By contrast, *Jaws* and subsequent movies like it—films with broad enough appeal to reap the benefits of prime-time television advertising and wide simultaneous release—revealed a potential new mass market. *Jaws* offered a carefully crafted (and completely unthreatening) escapist nightmare, and it broke records at the box office. Among “the victims of a monster shark,” in Sklar’s words, lay the “dream of a personal, participatory cinema”—an idea that thrived in “a time of public turmoil, when Hollywood along with other powerful American institutions seemed in helpless disarray.”<sup>14</sup>

### Gimme Gimme Shock Treatment!

Popular music clearly illustrated this prevailing tension between iconoclasm and authority, between David and Goliath. By the mid-1970s, multinational corporations like Gulf & Western and CBS controlled most of the music industry. Like President Carter, these businesses faced a nation increasingly

riven by race, ethnicity, age, region, ideology, and style. The pop music world and the institutions that had served it—Top 40 radio, chain stores and record clubs, *American Bandstand*—no longer commanded a broad musical common ground. The market had fragmented into many niches.<sup>15</sup>

The new conglomerates were not content with small, specialized markets. They bought out black record companies and produced bleached disco for the suburbs. They created and promoted a handful of megastars, with stadium tours and massive advertising campaigns. The industry sought out big theatrical acts and foisted on the public artificial creations like the Bay City Rollers, a foursome of derivative English mop-tops hailed as the second coming of the Beatles.<sup>16</sup>

Marketing-inspired excess ruled as the record companies spawned theatrical stars in elaborate costumes. Kiss painted their faces and dressed in platform shoes and shiny spandex pants; the group’s “concerts” featured snow machines, rockets, smoke bombs, and levitating drum sets. Encouraged by his agent and record company, Alice Cooper’s shows featured even more bizarre displays: live chickens tossed into the audience, mock executions in fake electric chairs, decapitations of dolls. Cooper freely admitted the commercial instincts that inspired his antics. “I am the most American rock act,” Cooper declared. “I love money.” A parody of the time, *Rolling Stone* critic Greil Marcus recalled, “had a rock star demanding that his label fund the recording of his next album in outer space.” It hardly sounded like satire. Rock music, Marcus lamented, had become “an ordinary social fact, like a commute or a highway construction project. It became a habit, a structure, an invisible oppression.” Surveying the Seventies music scene, *Billboard* magazine reporter Nelson George called the era the “age of corporations.”<sup>17</sup>

The release of *Frampton Comes Alive* in 1976 marked the signal event in the emergence of corporate rock. A&M Records discovered a mediocre, undistinguished British rocker named Peter Frampton and packaged him as something for everyone—part guitar hero, part punk, part heavy metal, part Deadhead, part bluesman. *Frampton Comes Alive*, like most other Seventies corporate rock, offered music with no soul, no message, no recognizable quality to distinguish it from what came before. Yet it became the biggest-selling album of all time—the first multipatinum record.

The ascendance of corporate rock prompted a response. In 1978, Marcus’s friend Lester Bangs, an outspoken champion of the alternative music scene, harshly criticized the recording industry. The “music business today,” Bangs

declared in the *Village Voice*, “still must be recognized as by definition an enemy, if not the most crucial enemy, of music and the people who try to perform it honestly.”<sup>18</sup> Resistance emerged not just from the poisoned pens of critics; it arose out of grungy clubs and dusty garages, from college campuses and independent record stores. America discovered punk.

Like earlier efforts to revive popular music from periods of lethargy and staleness, American punk imported ideas and inspiration from England and eventually domesticated them. American punk grew out of and mimicked, but significantly altered, a politico-musical movement that originally flourished in Great Britain.<sup>19</sup> English punk reflected a concrete political agenda; British punks voiced the discontent of white working-class youth—yobboos facing nothing but dead-end jobs. The Sex Pistols’ irreverent, controversial version of “God Save the Queen” ended with the chorus “no future, no future, no future for you” repeated over and over again.

English punk thus remained class music, yet another chapter in the long, self-conscious British class struggle. It represented resistance against the privileges of a clear upper class—complaints in a culture where class was clearly acknowledged.

In the mid-1970s a bunch of London “rude boys” called the Clash burst onto the scene. Their lead singer had busied himself reading radical tracts, and their first album included “Career Opportunities,” a hit single about economic dead ends. “They offered me the office, offered me the shop. They said I’d better take anything they’d got,” the band growled at breakneck pace. “Every job they offer you is to keep you out the dock. Career opportunities—the ones that never knock.”

The Clash’s most successful album, *London Calling* (1979), sharpened this indictment of modern society and its oppressive institutions. In “Clampdown,” the band depicted contemporary English institutions in the harshest terms, even linking them to the horrors of fascism. The song concluded with a passionate declaration of independence and resistance: “No man born with a living soul can be working for the clampdown.”

But the Clash did not merely complain about oppression; they openly advocated revolution. “Kick over the wall, cause governments to fall,” the band demanded, urging listeners to fight in the streets and topple governments. “Let fury have the hour, anger can be power,” the band insisted. “Do you know that you can use it?” When race riots broke out in London, the Clash suggested that its white, working-class followers stage their own

white riot. The band self-consciously allied itself with Marxist revolutionary movements around the globe, such as the Red Brigade in Italy and the Sandinistas in Nicaragua.

Despite common roots, American punk lacked that political edge, that overt class consciousness. Still, it borrowed much from the Brits and domesticated it for American consumption. First, American punk retained the outrageousness—the raw, unproduced sound, the brazen lyrics, the edgy and even offensive style. Punk rockers never hesitated to offend. They adopted a rebellious, in-your-face stance. A group calling itself Dead Kennedy’s obviously enjoyed flouting established notions of good taste.

Second, they played similar music—loud, fast, hard driving, coarse. Punk records were essentially unproduced: few backing tracks, little mixing and remixing, often recorded live in the studio without multiple takes or overdubs. While some critics felt performers like the Ramones sounded sloppy and unprofessional, the band deliberately shunned the polished sounds of mainstream rock.<sup>20</sup> The raw sound reaffirmed a kind of rock ‘n’ roll democracy—anyone could pick up a guitar and make music—and it emphasized simplicity, experience, and emotion over heavily produced, highly stylized compositions. “The punks who made records in 1977,” one writer insisted, “didn’t know which chords came next.” They just hurled themselves against the musical and political establishment. But their songs carried wallop because the music stayed as tough as the words.<sup>21</sup>

This reflected a third trait that English and American punk bands shared—a kind of rock purity or asceticism. At a time when mainstream popular musicians emphasized costume and makeup, punk rockers sported jeans, T-shirts, and leather jackets. “The whole thing was a reaction to the hippie stadium music,” punk rocker Richard Hell declared. “The ripped T-shirts meant that I don’t give a fuck about stardom and all that or glamour and going to rock shows to see someone pretend to be perfect.”<sup>22</sup> Rock concerts had become elaborate spectacles with lasers, live animals, and exploding walls; punks like the Ramones simply walked on stage, barked “1-2-3-4,” and played the songs. Punk rejected the technical wizardry that had come to dominate rock music—from the new instruments used to produce music to the carefully calculated ways that promoters mounted concert tours.<sup>23</sup>

That asceticism signaled a fourth element that American bands derived from the English, but really made their own. For if American punk possessed

a political message, it was anticorporatism, an attack on the domination of the business by a few big record companies and all that implied: the emphasis on megahits, superstars, and big-ticket acts; the neglect of new groups, new music, and new messages; the slick production values and massive theatrical shows. Corporate rock also meant mainstream distribution: airplay on AM Top 40 radio, chain store record sales, advertisements in national press.

American punk rejected all that. College radio stations played the music; alternative and independent record stores sold it. The performers played in small clubs, close to their audiences. In suburban Connecticut, where *Punk Magazine* writer Legs McNeil spent his youth before making the Lower Manhattan scene in the mid-Seventies, “rock was this big thing that came to a stadium. The concept of people playing their own rock and roll in a hole in the Bowery, to maybe 30 people, was amazing.”<sup>24</sup>

Most important, punk artists recorded on independent labels—small record companies that signed the acts and made the records that the megadealing big corporations rejected. Late Seventies punk recreated the ferment of rock ‘n’ roll’s birth in the 1950s, when thousands of new groups made records and genuine surprises came off the radio.<sup>25</sup>

Punk shared this anticorporatism with another contemporaneous, related movement known as New Wave. For although American punk never became class music, in the sense of explicitly expressing the grievances of a social class as did English punk, it was associated with a certain demographic type: high school dropouts in a Queens garage, not-very-good surfers drifting around southern California beach towns. American punk reflected a working-class aesthetic.

New Wave amounted to punk’s cognate among educated, upper-middle-class college kids. It shared much with American punk—the anticorporate agenda and the asceticism; New Wave performers preferred thin ties and suit jackets to jeans and leather jackets, but still eschewed the glittery rock star model. “When we started,” Talking Heads drummer Chris Frantz recalled, audiences “seemed to think that you had to wear platform shoes and tight leather pants and you had to lead a decadent lifestyle. We came on stage looking like a bunch of Jesuits.”<sup>26</sup> New Wave also preserved the raw, unpolished music and the links to clubs and independent labels.

Indeed, both movements shared a birthplace and a headquarters—Lower Manhattan club called CBGB at the corner of Bleecker Street and the Bowery. The club opened in 1973 with that seemingly ill-fitting name. CBGB

stood for Country, Blue Grass and the Blues, but the club’s full name, CBGB & OMFUG, also promised “other music for uplifting gourmandizers” for a cheap one-dollar admission fee. “Just going to the bathroom” in that long, dark, and narrow club, one music critic recalled, “was an invitation to encounter every sort of downtown denizen and substance consumption known to man (and woman) at the time. Musicians mingled with groups and fans and one another; writers schmoozed with each other and with musicians.” In its heyday, from 1975 to 1978, CBGB became the home turf and launching pad of such performers as the Ramones, the Dictators, Television, Patii Smith, Blondie, Tuff Darts, and Richard Hall and the Voidoids.<sup>27</sup>

That dingy, sweaty, dark place also launched a trio of refugees from the Rhode Island School of Design—a group that combined minimalistically spare instrumentals with its lead singer’s characteristic bug-eyed, chicken-squawk vocals. Originally a trio, Talking Heads later added a renegade from Jonathan Richman’s Modern Lovers to form a four-person band. Thus fortified, Talking Heads burst onto the pop scene with a debut album, *Talking Heads ’77*, and its follow-up, *More Songs About Buildings and Food*. The songs bathed in alienation and disappointment—the stultifying dreariness of the workaday world, the detached isolation of outsiders who cannot connect with other people. In one song, a bland civil servant stuttered about his building “with every convenience.” In another, brutal vocals mocked the very idea of compassion and connection: “So many people have so many problems, I’m not interested in their problems.” Yet the music, in bassist Tina Weymouth’s words, seemed “to raise the banal to the sublime.” Spare, uncluttered, rhythmic, funky, it provoked laughter amid the gloom.

On their next album, *Fear of Music* (1979), Talking Heads spun off “Life During Wartime,” a postapocalyptic nightmare at once horrifying and hilarious. “This ain’t no party, this ain’t no disco,” the chorus declared. “It ain’t the Mudd Club, or CBGB’s. I ain’t got time for that now.” But the lyrics lied. The song itself and the world it evoked were nothing but a big party. The performers and their audience joked about (and danced through) a nightmare landscape. Without the tedious zealotry of much Sixties protest music, Talking Heads marked a clear alternative to the mainstream in the era’s signature style.

### Toward a New Sensibility

Talking Heads, the Ramones, and the other representatives of the 1970s alternative rock scene embodied one final attribute in addition to outrageousness,

asceticism, and anticorporatism: irony. They were not painfully earnest or deadly serious. Rock music and rock-heroes from the first British invasion of the mid-1960s through the acid groups of the late Sixties, to the synths and crunching guitar heroes of the Seventies, right up to British punk acts like the Clash had been very, very serious. The Seventies produced a new kind of rocker and, with them, a new attitude that pervaded American society.

This irony betrayed a wider transformation in sensibility. As *Spy* magazine, the insouciant New York monthly of the 1980s, noted, the nation's preferred hand signals encapsulated a shift in attitude. The late Sixties had favored the peace sign—index and middle fingers in a V—which proclaimed a world of possibilities, the emphatic conviction that young Americans could build a new and better world. During the mid-1970s, the peace sign gave way to “the finger,” the single upturned middle digit. That obscene gesture lacked the hopefulness of the Sixties but still expressed a clear point of view. As the decade ended, however, a new gesture appeared: two bent fingers in the shape of inverted commas, signaling everything within quotation marks—everything ironic, nothing serious.<sup>28</sup>

It became a characteristic mode of thought and expression, a Seventies sensibility. It implied a certain kind of knowingness—an ability to see things for what they were, without romantic illusions. Pop troubadour Jonathan Richman captured this sensibility when he interrupted one of his own songs for a “Monologue About Bermuda.” Richman had begun his career as leader of the Modern Lovers, a protopunk, proto-New Wave band on the Boston rock scene in the early 1970s. The Lovers included future Talking Head Jerry Harrison and future Cars drummer David Robinson, and their performances had achieved something like legendary status long before their first album was released in 1975.<sup>29</sup>

The Modern Lovers made serious, loud music. They played their own songs, expressed their own experiences. Their music was raw, rebellious, and irreverent; Richman even described it as “snotty.” Then the band traveled to Bermuda. “We were playing kind of like triphammers,” Richman recalled. “We were kind of serious. We had a fair amount of equipment for a group back then.” The band’s stance proclaimed, “You know this is pretty important.” But the act just bored their audiences.<sup>30</sup>

The Lovers could not compete with the Bermuda strollers—the street musicians in windbreakers and dark sunglasses. The strollers’ big, fat guitar sound, playful lyrics, and off-color rhymes intoxicated the college students on

spring break and they opened Richman’s eyes. “Ohhh! We really are stiff,” he thought. “These guys really are looser than us.”<sup>31</sup>

The band did not last—not after Jonathan started listening to bongos, buying calypso records, and writing whimsical, personal, idiosyncratic music that defied both the prevailing image of a serious rock star and his own earlier persona as an earnest, tortured young artist. Richman recorded songs in the character of a two-year-old child, a jilted lover of Cleopatra, even from the point of view of a misunderstood, underappreciated mosquito. In many ways, Richman’s post-Bermuda music evoked and defined the sensibility of the Seventies.

Sometimes the sentiment remained simple and direct, easily discerned in the lyrics. One song made fun of stolid, unflashy midwesterners but nonetheless conveyed a genuine respect for them. “They’re not trying on the dance floor,” Richman joked. “Like Sheboygan or Eau Claire, they’re just there.” But heartland taciturnity obscured sincerity and power. “They’re not tryin’ much there on the floor,” the song concludes, “and they’re moving me more.”

But mostly, it remained subtler and more profound. The most obvious marker of the Seventies sensibility—its signature in literature, film, music, politics, advertising—was a kind of double identity. Seventies performers produced works that were a parody of something—a biting, knowing satire—and simultaneously the very thing itself. Consider Nick Lowe’s paean to the down-on-her-luck silent screen star Marie Provost. Provost had been dead two or three weeks when the cops “bust into her lonely nest” and discover her corpse. The humor, the parody is savage—a drippy, sing-songy three-minute pop song that describes a sordid and disgusting scene: Marie’s decaying remains devoured by her starving dog, “She was a winner,” Lowe croons, “who became a doggie’s dinner.” And the song disclaims any sympathy for the victim; it refuses even the slightest gesture of generosity in retelling her story: “She never meant that much to me, poor Marie.” But those lyrics do not accompany raw, hard instrumentals with grinding guitars and tough, gravelly vocals; it is a happy, formulaic pop tune. “Marie Provost” subverted the form while still enjoying it.<sup>32</sup>

Jonathan’s Richman’s records revealed in this kind of fond satire. “Abdul and Cleopatra” updated the smarmy love song, with Egyptian-style guitar solos and absurd lyrics about the ancient queen of the Nile and her imaginary suitor. The tune skewered the silly love songs then still clinging to the top of



the pop charts, but loved them nonetheless. Richman obviously enjoyed the hokey rhymes and silly guitar riffs, even while making fun of them. Richman and his band, one rock critic understood, “sang about hating hippies, because they wore attitudes like shades, so complete in their smugness, so complete that they never noticed *anything*, because they cut themselves off from everything that was good and alive and wonderful about the modern world.” With the world in disarray, the nation in decay, the culture passionless and clichéd, some Seventies artists found relief, hope, humor, and joy in the unluckiest of places. “You weren’t supposed to like these things and we did,” one chronicler of Seventies pop culture remembered.<sup>33</sup>

Seventies sensibility, then, offered a kind of antidote to the melodrama of the Sixties sensibility, an antidote devised by a generation of youth just plain sick and tired of being told how they missed out on the glory days. Americans who came of age during the 1970s, in the words of disco enthusiast Jefferson Morley, “were less idealistic but more realistic. Less wild and less authentic and less sincere but also less melodramatic and less violent. Less courageous but also less foolish. Less moralistic but more ethical.” They “were a sweeter, sadder, sexier, funnier bunch than the kids of the 60s and they’ve never forgiven us for it.”<sup>34</sup>

Still, there was much in life, as in art, that made Seventies Americans grimace. The collective wince of the late 1960s and early 1970s—the profound anguish over Vietnam, race riots, Watergate—gave way to the national smirk of the Carter years—the malaise that President Carter diagnosed in his crisis-of-confidence speech. But this omnipresent skepticism—this sense that nothing is serious, nothing can be trusted—undermined a campaign for national renewal, one that would have to be based on ardent conviction. Punk rockers and maverick directors forged new paths; ironically, they helped clear the way for a more wide-open, southwestern libertarianism that would share little with them but a defiant style and a set of common enemies.

## 7

### BATTLES OF THE SEXES *Women, Men, and the Family*

IN THE EARLY SEVENTIES, BEFORE DISCO AND PUNK, WATERGATE and Jimmy Carter, a sporting event captured the nation’s imagination. On September 20, 1973, a capacity crowd thronged the Houston Astrodome for the “Battle of the Sexes.” In living rooms and bars, a television audience of more than 45 million Americans, the largest ever for a tennis match, tuned in to watch fifty-five-year-old ex-Wimbledon champion Bobby Riggs challenge the world’s top-ranked women’s player, Billie Jean King.

An acknowledged advocate of women’s liberation, King had struggled for several years to bring gender equality to women’s tennis. “At first, when I was becoming aware,” King recalled just before the match, “I blamed the system but when I began to analyze it I realized the ‘system’ is men.” The movement, King told *Boston Globe* columnist Bud Collins, was “showing the gains women can make in a male-dominated area,” and “sports is a place where everybody can see those gains.”<sup>1</sup>

Initially King had ignored Riggs’s repeated challenges—his taunts that women players were inferior, that women athletes did not deserve equal prize money, that even an old man could beat the best female player. But another of the world’s top players, Australian champion Margaret Court, had agreed to play Riggs on Mother’s Day 1973. Psyched out by Riggs’s jibes and unprepared for a major match just weeks after the birth of her first child, Court lost badly. Worse, she lost her cool and seemed to confirm Riggs’s charges that women players could not handle pressure without bursting into tears. Although the Riggs-Court match mustered only a tiny crowd, it generated sufficiently high Nielsen ratings to attract the attention of ABC sports chief Roone Arledge. Arledge, the great impresario of television sports, sensed a ratings and advertising bonanza, and set the stage for Riggs’s next match on ABC’s *Wide World of Sports*.

79. Charles D. Ravenal to Eizenstat, memo, February 26, 1980, DPs-Eizenstat, Box 143, JCL. Address on Economic Policy, Jimmy Carter, March 14, 1980, DPs-Eizenstat, Box 192. For a detailed discussion, see Schulman, "Slouching Toward the Supply Side."

80. Hargrove, *Carter as President*, pp. 104–105. May, "Fiscal Policy," 701.

81. *New York Times*, October 29, 1980, p. A29.

## 6. "This Ain't No Foolin' Around"

1. Mark Salzman, *Lost in Place: Growing Up Absurd in Suburbia* (New York: Random House, 1995), p. 161. For analyses of Seventies nostalgia in the contemporary United States, see "The Decade That Won't Go Away," *New York Times*, October 12, 1997, Sec. 9, pp. 1–3; "Booeying on Back to '70s," *Los Angeles Times*, April 26, 1991, pp. E-1, E-10; "The 70's (Stayin' Alive) Won't Die," *New York Times*, November 13, 1991, pp. B1–B5. For ten years, I have conducted such informal surveys in my courses at UCLA and Boston University. Asked to identify one person who embodies each of these recent decades, contemporary college students answer JFK, Martin Luther King, or Bob Dylan for the Sixties; and Ronald Reagan, Madonna, or Michael Milken for the Eighties. But for the seventies, the same person is proffered every time: John Travolta.

2. Norman Mailer, "Mailer on the '70s—Decade of 'Image, Skin Flicks, and Porn,'" *U.S. News and World Report*, December 10, 1979, p. 57.

3. On the Us Festival, see *New York Times*, September 6, 1982, p. 11. See also *ibid.*, September 4, 1982, p. 12.

4. James Wolcott, "A Time to Boogie," *New Yorker*, January 10, 1994, p. 74.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Paul Cowan, review of *Blood on the Tracks: The Village Voice*, February 3, 1975, quoted in Robert Shelton, *No Direction Home: The Life and Music of Bob Dylan* (New York: Ballantine, 1986), p. 514.

7. Bob Dylan, *Lyrics, 1962–1985* (New York: Knopf, 1985). For analyses of Dylan's career, see also Alan Rinzler, *Bob Dylan: The Illustrated Record* (New York: Harmony Books, 1978); Robert Shelton, *No Direction Home* (New York: Ballantine, 1986); and Bob Spitz, *Dylan: A Biography* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1989).

8. Dylan, *Lyrics, 1962–1985*, pp. 375–377. Rinzler, *Dylan*, p. 103.

9. Lee Keyser, *Hollywood in the Seventies* (New York: A. S. Barnes and Co., 1981), p. 1.

10. Paulina Kael, interviewed on National Public Radio/Weekend Edition, March 9, 1991. See also Diane Jacobs, *Hollywood Renaissance*, (New York: Dell, 1980), and Keyser, *Hollywood in the Seventies*.

11. Bob Dylan, quoted in Shelton, *No Direction Home*, p. 516.

12. The best sources on the blockbuster phenomenon are Keyser, *Hollywood in the Seventies*; Ronald L. Davis, *Celluloid Mirrors* (Fort Worth, Tex.: Harcourt Brace, 1997), and Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America* (New York: Vintage, 1994). A similar emphasis on blockbusters emerged in book publishing. For a critical commentary on the phenomenon, see Mailer, "Mailer on the '70s," p. 58.

13. Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, p. 325. In the light of *Jaws*, Sklar concluded, directors' cinema was clearly defined "as a cinema of niches—of small, defined spaces within the advertising matrix." On the film industry in the 1970s, see also David J. Londoner, "The Changing Eco-

nomics of Entertainment," in Tina Ballo, ed., *The American Film Industry*, rev. ed. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985); Keyser, *Hollywood in the Seventies*; and John Izod, *Hollywood and the Box Office, 1895–1986* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

14. Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, p. 373.

15. On the recording industry in the 1970s, see David Szatmary, *Rockin' in Time* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1991), pp. 214–224; Ed Ward, Geoffrey Stokes, and Ken Tucker, *Rock of Ages* (New York: Rolling Stone Press, 1986), pp. 468–469, *passim*; Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* (New York: Pantheon, 1979), pp. 121–146; and Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 41–51.

16. Armed with a special report by the Harvard Business School, CBS moved into African American music in the 1970s. By the end of the decade, large corporations dominated the field. Black record companies either folded (like Stax Records in 1976) or made deals with the big players (like Philadelphia International Records with CBS). See George, *Death of Rhythm and Blues*, pp. 135–146. For a variety of sophisticated analyses of the music industry in the era, see Tony Bennett et al., eds., *Rock and Popular Music: Politics, Policies, Institutions* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

17. Marcus, *Lipstick Traces*, pp. 47–48. George, *Death of Rhythm and Blues*, pp. 121–146.

18. Lester Bangs, "Growing Up True Is Hard to Do," *Village Voice*, June 5, 1978, reprinted in Lester Bangs, *Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung* (New York: Vintage, 1987), p. 270.

19. Both British and American punk shared roots in the late 1960s and early 1970s New York art rock scene. The Velvet Underground and the New York Dolls proved influential on both sides of the Atlantic. See Clinton Heylin, *From the Velvets to the Voidoids* (New York: Penguin, 1993); Szatmary, *Rockin' in Time*; Thicia Henry, *Break All Rules!* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989); and Bangs, *Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung*.

20. Heylin, *From the Velvets to the Voidoids*, pp. 252–253.

21. Marcus, *Lipstick Traces*, p. 81. Bangs, "Growing Up True Is Hard to Do," p. 271.

22. Richard Hell, quoted in Szatmary, *Rockin' in Time*, pp. 228–229.

23. Ward, Stokes, and Tucker, *Rock of Ages*, p. 547.

24. Eddie "Legs" McNell, quoted in Ira Robbins, "Strolling Down Punk-Rock Lane," *New York Times*, July 7, 1996, pp. 23–24.

25. Marcus, *Lipstick Traces*, pp. 41, 80. On the ferment and surprises of rhythm and blues in the 1950s, see Peter Guralnick, *Sweet Soul Music* (New York: Harper, 1986).

26. Chris Frantz, quoted in Heylin, *From the Velvets to the Voidoids*, p. 210.

27. John Rockwell, "Epiphanies in a Dive," *New York Times*, December 19, 1993, p. V7. Henry, *Break All Rules!* pp. 51–53. Szatmary, *Rockin' in Time*, p. 226.

28. Paul Rudnick and Kurt Andersen, "The Irony Epidemic," *Spy* (March 1989): 93–99.

29. *The Modern Lovers* (Berkeley: Records, 1976). On Richman's early career and the underground reputation of the Modern Lovers, see Marcus, *Lipstick Traces*, pp. 60–63, and Parke Purbath, liner notes to *The Best of Jonathan Richman and the Modern Lovers: The Berkeley Years* (Rhino Records, 1986).

30. "Monologue About Bernuda" (written and performed by Jonathan Richman, on *Havin' a Party with Jonathan Richman*, Rounder Records, 1991).



31. *Ibid.*
32. "Marie Provost" (written and performed by Nick Lowe, *Pure Pop for the Now People*, 1986).
33. Marcus, *Lipstick Traces*, p. 60; Jefferson Morley, "twenty something," *City Paper* (Washington, D.C.), February 19, 1988, p. 18; Puterbaugh, liner notes to *The Best of Jonathan Richman and the Modern Lovers*.
34. Morley, "twenty something," p. 18.

## 7. Battles of the Sexes

1. Bud Collins, "Billie Jean King Evens the Score," *Mt.* (July 1973): 43, 101.
  2. WTBS Television Retrospective, *Idols of the Game*, Part II, 1995.
  3. *Boston Globe*, September 20, 1973, pp. 1, 25.
  4. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
  5. "The Tennis Battle of the Sexes," *Wide World of Sports*, ABC Television, September 20, 1973. I thank Peter Alegi for his transcripts of the broadcast.
  6. *Ibid.*
  7. *Boston Globe*, September 21, 1973, p. 11.
  8. Susan J. Douglas, *Where the Girls Are* (New York: Times Books, 1994), p. 259.
  9. Virginia Valian, *Why So Slow? The Advancement of Women* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), pp. 210–211. U.S. Census Bureau, *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1999* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1999), p. 272.
  10. *Ibid.*
  11. In 1978, the labor force participation rate for women crossed 50 percent for women ages twenty-five to fifty-four; it rose from 50 percent in 1970 to 68 percent in 1984. See U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Trends in Labor Force Participation of Major Population Groups, 1965–92," *Monthly Labor Review* (July 1993): 11. Family size also diminished, from an average of 2.29 children per family in 1970 to 1.85 in the mid-1980s. Consult U.S. Bureau of the Census, <http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/hh-fam/hhfabFM-3.txt> (Internet release date, December 11, 1988).
- The number of female architects quadrupled, doubling their share of the total. Women leaped from 5 percent of lawyers to 14 percent, from 6 percent of judges to 17 percent. During the 1960s only 3 percent of the new lawyers admitted to the bar had been women. By the time of Reagan's reelection in 1984, women made up 36 percent of new attorneys. Hospitals, offices, and faculty lounges also opened to female professionals. Thirty thousand new women physicians began practicing during the Seventies, doubling the ranks of female doctors. In 1980, women accounted for more than 30 percent of the people the Census Bureau listed as "executives, administrative and managerial," as opposed to just 18 percent a decade earlier. See U.S. Census Bureau, *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1985* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. GPO), p. 400. By 1983, the changes were even more dramatic. See U.S. Census Bureau, *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1993* (Washington, D.C.: GPO), pp. 405–407; and Valian, *Why So Slow?* p. 199. Still, progress to real positions of authority in American business remained painfully slow. Consult Valian, *Why So Slow?* pp. 191–196.

12. Boston Women's Health Book Collective, *Our Bodies, Ourselves: A Book by and for Women* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1971), p. 85.

13. "What's a Ms.?" *Mt.* (Spring 1972): 4.
14. Cynthia Ozick, "We Are the Crazy Lady and Other Feisty Feminist Fables," *Mt.* (Spring 1972): 40–44.
15. Pamela Allen (Member of Sudsloppen), "Free Space" in Anne Koedt, Ellen Levine, and Anita Rapone, eds., *Radical Feminism* (New York: Quadrangle, 1973), p. 271. "Redstockings Manifesto," reprinted in Robin Morgan, ed., *Sisterhood Is Powerful* (New York: Random House, 1970), p. 535.
16. Boston Women's Health Book Collective, *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, p. 1.
17. Vivian Gornick, *Essays in Feminism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 1.
18. Douglas, *Where the Girls Are*. Quotations from Howard K. Smith (ABC News) and Eric Sevareid (CBS News) on pp. 163–164.
19. Boston Women's Health Collective, *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, p. 6. For an analysis of the primacy of the argument against difference in the early 1970s, see Hester Eisenstein, Introduction to Hester Eisenstein and Alice Jardine, eds., *The Future of Difference* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1980), pp. xv–xvi. Consult also Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics* (New York: Doubleday, 1970); Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex* (New York: Morrow, 1970); and Elizabeth Janeway, *Man's World, Woman's Place* (New York: Dell, 1971).
20. NOW Statement of Purpose, reprinted in Betty Friedan, *It Changed My Life* (New York: Random House, 1976), p. 87.
21. Ti-Grace Atkinson, quoted in "Great Moments in Herstory," *New York Daily News Magazine*, August 26, 1990, p. 16.
22. Redstockings Manifesto (1969), reprinted in Morgan, *Sisterhood Is Powerful*, pp. 598–601. Radicals found NOW as painfully earnest as it was staid and conservative; they added humor and frisson to the movement as well as militance. Radical feminists hexed Wall Street, crowned a live sheep Miss America, and occupied the offices of the *Ladies Home Journal*. Valerie Solanis opened the manifesto for SCUM, the "Society for Cutting Up Men," by declaring, "Life in this society being, at best an utter bore and no aspect of society being at all relevant to women, there remains to civic-minded, responsible, thrill-seeking females only to overthrow the government, eliminate the money system, institute complete automation, and destroy the male sex." See Valerie Solanis, SCUM (Society for Cutting Up Men) Manifesto, reprinted in Morgan, *Sisterhood Is Powerful*, p. 514.
23. "Critique of Sexual Politics: An Interview with Betty Friedan," *Social Policy* 1 (November–December 1970): 38–40, reprinted in Friedan, *It Changed My Life*, pp. 161–164.
24. Phyllis Schlafly, *The Power of the Positive Woman* (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House, 1977), p. 20.
25. Susan Hartmann, *From Margin to Mainstream* (New York: Knopf, 1989), pp. 51–55. Winifred D. Wandershe, *On the Move: American Women in the 1970s* (Boston: Twayne, 1988), pp. 16–18. JFK showed no interest in women's politics and appointed fewer women to public office than either Harry Truman or Dwight Eisenhower before him. "For women," one commentator wrote, "the New Frontiers are the Old Frontiers." Doris Fleson, quoted in Hartmann, *From Margin to Mainstream*, p. 50.
26. Hartmann, *From Margin to Mainstream*, pp. 72–98.
27. Patricia Schroeder, speech delivered at the National Women's Political Caucus, Houston, Texas, February 9, 1973, in Valdo W. Braden, ed., *Representative American Speeches* (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1973), vol. 45, no. 4, p. 89. "You will probably have a hard time raising money,"