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No More Easy Riders: Spatiality in Early Californian Hardcore Punk

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As a musicologist, musician and guitarist, I recently defended my PhD dissertation whose English title is “Urgency and Nihilism: The Emergence of American Hardcore Punk”.¹ Starting from the hypothesis that the rise of hardcore punk rock in the United States in the late 1970s and early 1980s was not just a youth subculture, but, at a deeper level, linked to a certain psycho-social context in which the whole American society found itself at the time, and on the other hand, with a view to deciphering the social dimension of this music from a meticulous analysis of “musical materials” in themselves (as suggested by Theodor W. Adorno), which have been historically established throughout the evolution of what I call *guitar-driven short fast rock songs* (dating back to Chuck Berry in the 1950s), I sought with my thesis to reveal that the early American hardcore punk music embodies, in itself, a certain sense of “urgency” and what I call “nihilistic creation” by way of a dialectic of these two notions.

Based on main ideas from my doctoral thesis, in this paper we’re going to compare two American rock songs, especially created by two California-based bands, that appeared about a decade apart. One is the blues-oriented hard rock band Steppenwolf’s greatest hit, “Born To Be Wild”, the other is one of the first hardcore punk band Black Flag’s debut recording, “Nervous Breakdown”.

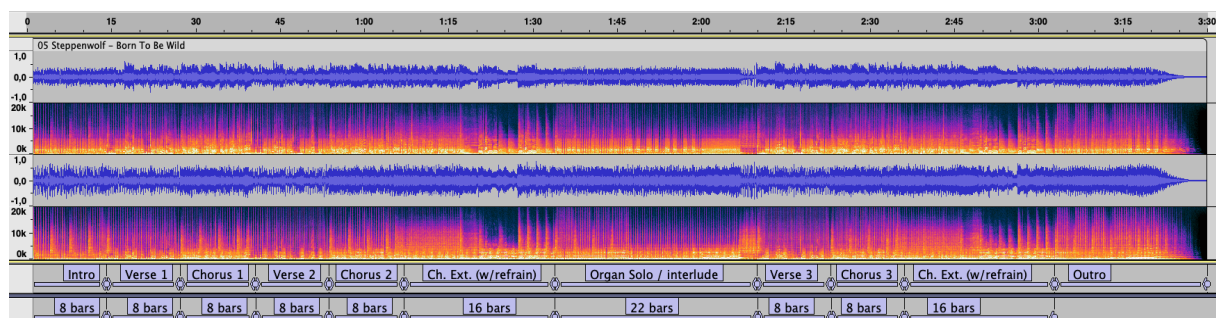
Steppenwolf’s “Born To Be Wild” is often described as one of the first heavy metal or ‘proto-metal’. Some say, including the singer himself, that it’s only due to these three words, “heavy metal thunder”, in the lyrics, with no sonic affiliation with heavy metal to come. Whether it has enough “heaviness” in its sound or not, however, the temporal and horizontal progression of “Born To Be Wild”, both on the macro and micro levels, shows the legacy of

¹ Sangheon Lee, « Urgence et nihilisme : l’émergence du punk hardcore américain » (PhD thesis, Marne-La-Vallée, Université Gustave Eiffel, 2022).

hard rock that will be maintained, in particular, by heavy metal. In this regard, Black Flag’s “Nervous Breakdown” has in fact many traits in common, contrary to popular belief about punk rock, with this hard rock tradition epitomized by the Steppenwolf song. However, as we will examine here, it is also this temporal progression that distinguishes Steppenwolf’s hard rock song from Black Flag’s hardcore punk song.

Figure 1: “Born To Be Wild”²(by Steppenwolf)’s temporal structure

Time	Bars	Section	Main Chord Progression	Lyrics	Comments
0:00-0:14	8	Intro	E		
0:14-0:27	8	Verse 1	E	Get your motor runnin' Head out on the highway Looking for adventure In whatever comes our way	Call and response between vox (guitar cutting) et comping (guitar+organ)
0:27-0:41	8	Chorus	G-A-E	Yeah, darlin', go and make it happen Take the world in a love embrace Fire all of your guns at once And explode into space	Call and response between vox et guitar blues lick
0:41-0:54	8	Verse 2	E	I like smoke and lightnin' Heavy metal thunder Racing with the wind And the feeling that I'm under	Call and response between vox (guitar cutting) et comping (guitar+organ)
0:54-1:07	8	Chorus	G-A-E	Yeah, darlin', go and make it happen Take the world in a love embrace Fire all of your guns at once And explode into space	Call and response between vox et guitar blues lick
1:07-1:34	16	Chorus (extended)	E	Like a true nature's child We were born, born to be wild We can climb so high I never wanna die Born to be wild Born to be wild	(1 st part) Snare on every beat, and cymbal rolls only (2 nd part) No snare beat; mainly guitar+organ following the refrain melody, and tom-tom rolls at end
1:34-3:30	60+ (f.out)			Interlude (incl. organ solo), then going back to verse (=verse 1), chorus+chorus extended, and outro (similar to interlude)	



Originally written by Mars Bonfire, a Canadian musician and long-time aficionado of “hiking” and close friend of the band, the song describes bikers’ appearance, attitude and state

² Written by Mars Bonfire; Recorded by John Kay (Vocal, Guitar), Michael Monarch (Guitar, Backing Vocal), Goldy McJohn (Hammond Organ), Rushton Moreve (Bass), Jerry Edmonton (Drums), and Gabriel Mekler (Producer) at American Recording Co. Studio in Fall 1967; Released in January 1968.

of mind, who (see the lyrics above) “head out on the highway” and “look for adventure”, “in whatever comes (their) way”, such as the wind, the mountains, that is, nature, without reserve or hesitation. It is precisely about a ‘spatial expansion’ and the space they’re going through, which exactly matches the footage from the film *Easy Rider*, where this song was actually used, when two biker heroes start a road trip out of California to the South, carrying the proceeds from a cocaine deal, without any concern about what would occur to them in the latter part of the film.³

In terms of its horizontal form, “Born To Be Wild” can be divided into a few conventional sections like instrumental intro, verse, chorus, et what is more, all these sections are eight bars long, which is a very predictable structure, on top of the steady, loud standard backbeat on drums. Following the well-known 8-bar guitar intro, both verse and chorus are composed of call-and-response pattern (as it’s a song composed by a blues-based band), where every vocal phrase is responded by a brief guitar lick or an organ comping, which reinforce the sense of ‘temporal balance’. The second chorus is largely extended, adding several sections of the same length. Thus, as the sections progress one after another at regular intervals, the song appears to display an image of making ‘progress’, ‘change’, and ‘horizons’ in a most stable way.⁴

A sequence of two verse-chorus formula, that has been unfolded in such a “stability”, is followed by the most ‘tight’ and ‘urgent’ section of the song, all the beats being pounded by the snare drum. Then, as the next subsection, the third and last eight bars of this extended, the most calm and relaxed part of the song begins, the drum almost steps back and the guitar and organ imitate the vocal’s slow refrain melody; at the same time, there is a change in the film’s ride trip scene as well, where the two bikers move out of the highway and into the center of a small town, ‘decelerating’ their bikes. At the end of this last 8-bar subsection, the song moves forward, having been anticipated by tom-tom rolls, to the long interlude featuring an organ solo, while the steady, loud backbeat resumes, whilst in the film two bikers get through the town and enter the highway again. The space is extended again for these heroes.

The song being combined with the film, the image implied by the lyrics became all the more clear and visible, visualized and spatialized. The film reminds us that the various forms and styles of the 1960s counterculture, in the real or imaginary world, contain the concept of *expansion*, and that of *movement* from one place to another, movement to an unknown place,

³ Directed by Dennis Hopper; Written by Peter Fonda, Hopper, and Terry Southern; Producer: Fonda; Cinematography: Laszlo Kovacs; Edit: Donn Cambern; Released in July 1969 in U.S.

⁴ Listen to the first half of the song with the corresponding images in the film:
<https://youtube.com/clip/UgkxptrvViKazkbYr8GNvjIAulGUPBVOPguz;>
<https://youtube.com/clip/UgkxdlvkjLY4JIm9wR8SUaWGWJKTZJn7fSs>

as an ‘alternative’ that refuses to be confined to the boundaries of traditional or suburban middle-class life and customs. It’s not just the film’s bohemian protagonists. Another example depicted in the film, the hippie ‘commune’, located somewhere in the Arizona desert, is an act of *relocation*. What about the hallucinations from narcotics? As LSD ‘prophet’ Timothy Leary puts it, it was supposed to lead individuals to higher consciousness, let them to *expand* their consciousness.⁵ As just implied in the word LSD *trip*, it leads to another world that could not be visited in a *clean* state of reality. While Leary’s Harvard crowd who took LSD to explore inner space, writer Ken Kesey and his compatriots called “pranksters” went so far as to “re-negotiate social space” through their adventurous outdoor campaigns.⁶ As the Detroit-area rock and roll promoter and writer John Sinclair argued, “LSD opened the road into the future as wide as the sky” (quoted below). Of course, there were people who wouldn’t intend to go beyond personal and isolated satisfaction, whereas a considerable number of young people tended to dream of a larger collective *future* (“together in harmony and peace”) through LSD.

The music was what gave us our energy and our drive, but it took the magic sacramental acid to give us the ideology which could direct that energy. Marijuana, which had come to us directly from black people and black musicians, in particular, had given us a start in this direction, but LSD opened the road into the future as wide as the sky and we were soaring! Acid blasted all the negativism and fear out of our bodies and gave us a vision we needed to go ahead, the rainbow vision which showed us how all people could live together in harmony and peace just as we were beginning to live with each other like that [...]⁷

The same goes for music. The length of the song gets longer and longer, while psychedelic, progressive, and even hard rock songs have in general a long interlude or an extended intro or outro as if they would lead to *some other, unknown place*. As would be the case at the concert of The Grateful Dead, who were one of the house bands of Ken Kesey’s acid test in San Francisco, the improvisation with no fixed length was a sort of “journey” to an unknown world, and the return to the theme or the verse-chorus formula announces that this journey is over.

As Barney Hoskyns noted in his rock history of Los Angeles, California, the film *Easy Rider* implied “that storm clouds were gathering ahead”, before in real life of the summer of 69 the hippie dream of ‘peace and love’ was annihilated once and for all.⁸ The film exhibits several aspects of 60’s counterculture such as overt uses of drug and collective life, but also feeling of

⁵ David Farber, « The Intoxicated State/Illegal Nation: Drugs in the Sixties Counterculture », in *Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and '70s*, edited by Peter Braunstein et Michael William Doyle (New York, London: Routledge, 2002), 22-23.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 24-26.

⁷ John Sinclair, *Guitar Army* (New York: Douglas Book, 1972), 22-23. Quoted by Farber, *ibid.*, 27.

⁸ Barney Hoskyns, *Waiting for the Sun: Strange Days, Weird Scenes and the Sound of Los Angeles*, New edition (London: Bloomsbury, 2003), 178.

loss, emptiness, disillusion, and on-going antagonism from other parts of the country, who were jealous and fearful of the freedom represented by the people like two heroes of the film. The film ends with the murder of all the protagonists, as though reflecting the chronological distance between the song and the film.

On the one hand, the film may be testifying that the 1960s was a time when more and more Americans were realizing that the existing ‘myth’ in the American society was just an illusion.⁹ Furthermore, in the aftermath of the political, social and cultural turmoil of the sixties, as Christopher Lasch said in his 1979 bestseller, great disillusionment and anxiety appeared to underlie every sector of the American life.

Impending disaster has become an everyday concern, so commonplace and familiar that nobody any longer gives much thought to how disaster might be averted. People busy themselves instead with survival strategies, measures designed to prolong their own lives, or programs guaranteed to ensure good health and peace of mind. [...] After the political turmoil of the sixties, Americans have retreated to purely personal preoccupations. Having no hope of improving their lives in any of the ways that matter, people have convinced themselves that what matters is psychic self-improvement: getting in touch with their feelings, eating health food, taking lessons in ballet or belly-dancing, immersing themselves in the wisdom of the East, jogging, learning how to “relate,” overcoming the “fear of pleasure.” [...] Indeed Americans seem to wish to forget not only the sixties, the riots, the new left, the disruptions on college campuses, Vietnam, Watergate, and the Nixon presidency, but their entire collective past, even in the antiseptic form in which it was celebrated during the Bicentennial. [...] The live for the moment is the prevailing passion—to live for yourself, not for your predecessors or posterity. We are fast losing the sense of historical continuity, the sense of belonging to a succession of generations originating in the past and stretching into the future. It is the waning of the sense of historical time—in particular, the erosion of any strong concern for posterity—that distinguishes the spiritual crisis of the seventies from earlier outbreaks of millenarian religion, to which it bears a superficial resemblance.¹⁰

As a result, all value of existence was now placed primarily on the pursuit of a certain psychological serenity, as well as on physical health, things that one could obtain immediately, “right now”, without relying on a distant, too uncertain future. As expectations of collective progress in the future faded, the anxiety of “survival,” and even immediate individualistic survival, took “priority.” Moreover, historical consciousness, that should have made the link between past, present and future, was weakening, even disappearing.

Both Hardcore punk and 60’s counterculture were the reaction against the rather affluent, well-to-do suburban middle class, which best represents this serenity and a certain mediocre

9 “The Sixties were centrally about the recognition, on the part of an ever-growing number of Americans, that the country in which they thought they lived—peaceful, generous, honorable—did not exist and never had.”, Marilyn B. Young, “Forword”, Peter Braunstein et Michael William Doyle, ed., *Imagine Nation : The American Counterculture of the 1960s and ’70s* (New York/London: Routledge, 2002), 3.

¹⁰ Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations*, New York/London, W.W. Norton & Company, 2018 [1979], 12-13.

complacency. The difference is that hardcore punk's disillusion was not only against the mainstream culture and way of life, but also that against the utopianism of the 60's counterculture. It should be noted however that hardcore punk is also based on certain aspects of the dominant mentality in American society, such as "radical individualism", and what I call "double break"¹¹, that is, a break not only with the past but also with the future, and the need or desire to make something happen immediately without waiting to be able to obtain a "deferred gratification". And whether it's 60's counterculture or 70's and 80's hardcore punk, perspective in time, history, and temporality is closely tied to perspective in space, to the notion and the extent of "community" and "collectivity".

Punk in postsuburbia did not recreate the youth culture revolts of earlier generations, but reflected instead the fragmentation, isolation, and individualism of the 1970s. While earlier punks had wrestled with the leftover ideals of the sixties, hardcore punks rejected them outright. The transition from punk to hardcore, and from the sixties to the eighties, occurred when new punks no longer held out hope for revolution from within or without¹².

As Dewar MacLeod noted, compared to young people in the fifties and sixties who could identify themselves as part of a generational cohort, by the mid-1970s young people saw themselves only as individuals, with little attachment to any larger group or society. Reflecting this individualism, Hardcore punk did not go to the city in the traditional manner of bohemians, avant-gardists, and even earlier punk rockers. They stayed home. In fact, so-called D.I.Y ethics itself allowed young people to withdraw from social or political issues.

"Nervous Breakdown" was recorded in January 1978 by Black Flag in a studio in Hermosa Beach, LA's suburban area, where all the band's members lived. It's one of the eight songs recorded during this session. The band was formed by the guitarist and main composer Greg Ginn and the singer Keith Morris in 1976. It was the band's first recording session. Their first EP of the same name, *Nervous Breakdown*, was released in 1979 with other 3 songs selected from that session as the first release by SST label that was founded by Greg Ginn himself.¹³

Both songs, "Born To Be Wild" and "Nervous Breakdown", have an 8-bar intro, which starts with a highly amplified and aggressive two-bar guitar riff, and they also have in common that the bass guitar joins later after one or two presentations of this guitar riff, which generates a typical "gradation" by steps shown in so many a rock composition. Both riffs use syncopation or anticipation in latter part of the riff. Interestingly enough, both guitarists also make a certain

¹¹ "Double rupture" in French. Lee, « Urgence et nihilisme : l'émergence du punk hardcore américain ».

¹² Dewar Macleod, *Kids Of The Black Hole* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010), 99.

¹³ One of the first hardcore punk records along with *Out Of Vogue* EP by Middle Class, band from Santa Ana, California

richer and more distinguished from other notes appearing before and after this one. Apart from certain harmonic partial tones, the mid-range zone is relatively weak, which lead to make a “basin” in the middle of this spectrogram image.

Figure 3: the sound of the main guitar riff in “Born To Be Wild”

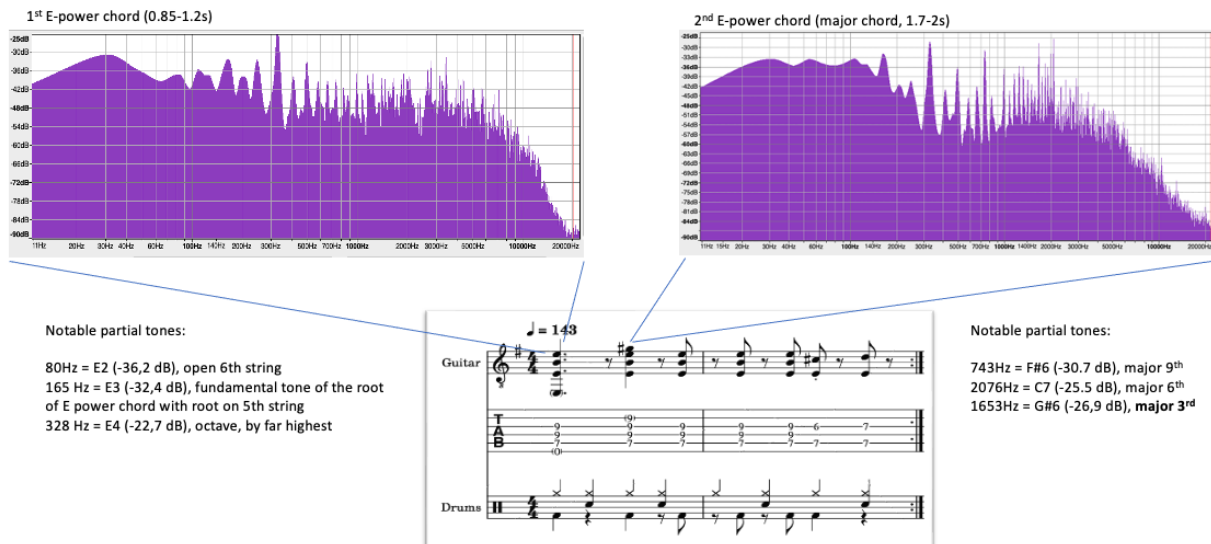
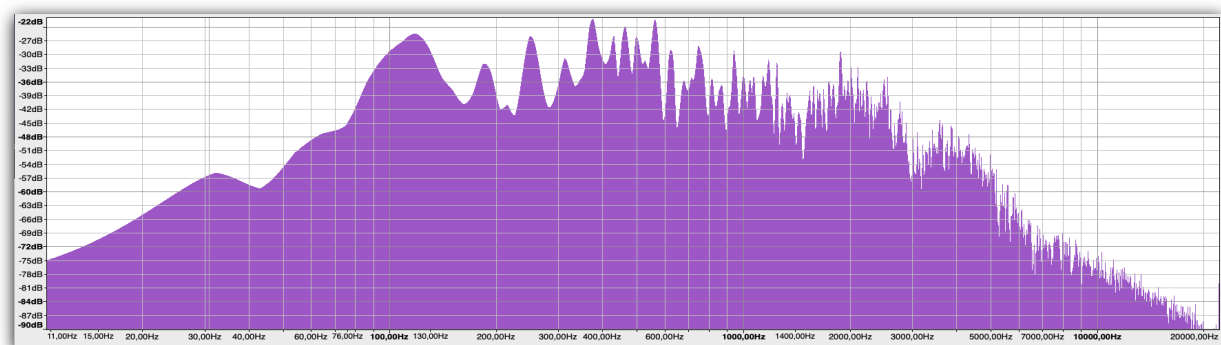


Figure 4: the frequential distribution of the first power chord in “Nervous Breakdown”



By contrast, the power chord of “Nervous Breakdown” (figure 4), B power chord with root on the 6th string, has its highest and most intense harmonic and inharmonic partials between 500 and 600 Hz, low medium frequencies, while the other partials form an almost gradual slope from this mountaintop. There being smaller distance between “peaks” and “valleys”, it means the background noise or inharmonic partials are highly augmented in the guitar sound of “Nervous Breakdown”, i.e. more distorted sound than that of “Born To Be Wild”.

It should also be noted that whilst the guitar sound of “Born To Be Wild”, as is visualized in the spectrogram (figure 2), appears to be “cut”, or filtered, above 6 kHz, in order to leave a sonic space to other parts like the vocal, but also to make the sound more focused and sharper, the guitar sound of “Nervous Breakdown” is rather fuzzy and unfocused, but its range is utterly broad and even dominant. As shown in the wave form (figure 2), the homogeneity of the lighter

blue line,¹⁴ before and after the kick drum and snare roll and bass guitar join in, demonstrates the predominance in intensity of the guitar, compared to other instruments. The point is not only that the guitar sound is dominating in sonic space of this recording, but also that this sonic dominance is *related to the temporal or horizontal progression* of the song.

It is widely accepted that the electric guitar represents a phenomenon that is located on the process of gradual transition from the “percussive model” to the “vocal model”, to use the terminology of Martin Laliberté. In general, the percussive tendency blends with the vocal tendency in a mixed sonic space, which represents all music.¹⁵ Compared to its precursors, the guitar has become capable of sustaining its sound by means of various processing tools, such as amplification, distortion, echo and reverberation. Also, on the other hand, there is a need to acquire diversity in horizontal progression (and limit the duration of the sound) by means of ‘palm mute’, ‘cutting’, or playing chords by staccato. In a way, it is a partial return to the percussive model. We can observe such an approach in the guitar riff of “Born To Be Wild”.

In this riff (figure 3), two relatively long notes on downbeats are followed by three 8th notes on upbeats. The resulting syncopation or anticipation contributes to building up a certain “narrative” on this riff. Besides, every guitar attack is mostly supported and reinforced by kick and snare drums, which makes each of these attacks concentrated on an “independent” and vertical moment. Besides, the verse, which comes next, is distinguished from the intro by mute picking on the guitar. Diversifying thereby each moment horizontally or vertically, despite small number of simple chords, and, on the base of it, presenting alterations on each of the next sections, which lead to expansion of the possibility of horizontal development, this is the very method of horizontal composition that is common in different styles of rock including hard rock, progressive rock, and even heavy metal.

By contrast, while “Nervous Breakdown”’s riff uses syncopation and major 3rd to create a distinctive outline, it tends on the other hand to hide its curves by intentionally blurring the *distinction between guitar notes being attacked*. Not only quantity of distortion but also lack of muting or cutting in guitar leads to this blurred form. On top of that, this character is more clarified by the kick drum pattern that does not necessarily follow the guitar’s accentuation.

The chorus of “Nervous Breakdown” lasts ten bars, which is not a typical quadruple length. Three power chords ascending throughout the first two bars (on Black Sabbath-style aeolian mode) change the direction abruptly at the beginning of the third bar: the same three power

¹⁴ This lighter blue line designates the average intensity value of the recording at the given moment.

¹⁵ Martin Laliberté, « Notations pour la guitare électrique », *Appareil [En Ligne]*, n° 5 (2010), p. 2.
<https://journals.openedition.org/appareil/1017>.

chords descend more rapidly than the first two bars, i.e., within half-length of the former temporal unit, which thereby generates a certain sense of urgency (figure 5).

Figure 5: vocal and guitar of the chorus in “Nervous Breakdown”

The image displays a musical score for the chorus of "Nervous Breakdown" by Black Flag. It consists of two systems of vocal and guitar notation. The first system covers the lyrics "I'm cra-zy and I'm hurt" and "head on my shoul-". The second system covers "- der" and "It's go-ing ber - serk". The guitar part includes a fretboard diagram with tablature for both systems. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 176.

Figure 6: the horizontal progression of “Nervous Breakdown” by Black Flag

	Bars	Section	Main Chord-Progression	Lyrics	Comments
0:00-0:11	8	Intro	B-EB / A-DA		
0:11-0:22	8	Verse 1	B-EB / A-DA	I'm about to have a nervous breakdown My head really hurts If I don't find a way out of here I'm gonna go berserk	
0:22-0:34	9 (3+3+3)	Chorus	G-A-B	I'm crazy and I'm hurt Head on my shoulders It's going... Berserk!	
0:34-0:39	4	Link (=intro)	B-EB / A-DA		
0:39-0:50	8	Verse 2	B-EB / A-DA	I hear the same old talk talk talk The same old lines Don't do me that today If you know what's good for you [...]	
0:50-1:03	9 (3+3+3)	Chorus	G-A-B	Cause, I'm crazy and I'm hurt Head on my shoulders Going... Berserk!	
1:03-1:08	4	Link (=intro)	B-EB / A-DA		
1:08-1:18	8	Verse 3	B-EB / A-DA	I won't apologize For acting outta line You see the way I am You leave any time you can cause	
1:18-1:30	9 (3+3+3)	Chorus	G-A-B	I'm crazy and I'm hurt Head on my shoulders Going... Berserk!	
1:30-1:41	4	Link (=intro)	B-EB / A-DA		
1:41-2:07	16+	Coda	B-EB / A-DA G-A-B	Crazy! Crazy! Crazy! Crazy! I don't care what you fuckin' do! I don't care what you fuckin' say! I'm so sick of everything, I just want to... Die!	

Then, an instrumental ‘link’, almost identical to the intro, announces the re-appearance of the verse-chorus formula, which is nothing but a conventional progression. After this second formula, however, the same formula is repeated for the third time with no more than slight change of the lyrics. It is a totally cyclic sequence, which is hardly ‘moving forward’ or changing its ‘place’ by means, notably, of a solo performance or an interlude, just as in “Born to be Wild”. In other words, *it doesn’t go anywhere*.

Figure 7 : sectional progression in eight songs recorded by Black Flag in January 1978 (I=intro, V=verse, C=chorus, L=instrumental ‘link’, D=coda, B=bridge, the total number of bars in the right column)

<i>Nervous Breakdown</i>	I(8) V(8) C(9) L(4) V(8) C(9) L(4) V(8) C(9) L(12) D(11)	90
<i>Fix Me</i>	I(4) V(8) C(4) V(8) C(4) V(8) C(4)	40
<i>I’ve Had It</i>	I(4) V(8) C(4) V(8) C(4) V(8) C(4+8)	48
<i>Wasted</i>	I(8) C(4) V(8) C(4) V(8) C(4)	36
<i>Gimme Gimme Gimme</i>	I(4) C(8) V(8) C(8) V(8) C(8) V(8) C(8) B(4) C(8) V(8) C(8)	88
<i>I Don’t Care</i>	I(6) V(8) C(8) V(8) C(8) V(7)	45
<i>White Minority</i>	I(12) V(8) C(8) V(8) C(8) V(8)	52
<i>No Values</i>	V(16) C(8) V(16) C(8) V(16) C(8) V(14) D(6)	92

This tendency is more evident in the other seven songs recorded by Black Flag on the same day (figure 7, three of them, “Fix Me”, “I’ve Had It”, and “Wasted”, were released on *Nervous Breakdown* EP, whereas the other four were released later in a compilation album *Everything Went Black* in 1982). None of these songs but *Gimme Gimme Gimme* have any instrumental links connecting sections, any solos, or any bridge sections. Unlike “traditional”, or generally accepted narrative, there is no “departure” for somewhere in the middle of the temporal progression. This approach is also fundamentally different from such an ‘experiment’ as Bradley Osborn rightly describes in some of the so-called post-Millennial rock setting up the climax in the last part of the song.¹⁶ As if to mock all the ‘artistic’ devices, these hardcore punk songs deliver ‘immediately’ what is to be said, and put an end abruptly. Many of them end at the very moment where the last chorus or the last verse ends, not showing any performance ending gesture. What we often ignore when talking about 1970s and 1980s punk rock is that the emergence of these phenomena were based on a sort of unprecedented “deep disillusionment”, in my own terms, “followed by a radical negation of all artistic ambition

¹⁶ Bradley T. Osborn, “Beyond Verse and Chorus : Experimental Formal Structures in Post-Millennial Rock Music”, PhD dissertation, University of Washington, 2010.

itself”.¹⁷ By the same token, it would be safe to call this temporal approach of hardcore punk song “nihilist creation”. Further, these devices appear to reinforce a certain sense of urgency of the song. They can also be found on countless other recordings of the early 1980s American hardcore punk. To conclude, Black Flag’s “Nervous Breakdown”, recorded in early 1978, is a prime example showing the stylistic “transition” between the late 1960’s hard rock, epitomized by the song “Born To Be Wild” as well as the motorbike scene from the film *Easy Rider*, and the early 1980s hardcore punk, the latter having “no ambition to go anywhere”.

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¹⁷ Lee, « Urgence et nihilisme : l’émergence du punk hardcore américain ».