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“Self-destruction” of lyrics in punk rock: from “slogанизation” to “performative” vocal delivery

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This paper is part of my PhD thesis that I defended in Gustave Eiffel University in June 2022, entitled (in French) “Urgence et nihilisme : l’émérgence du punk hardcore américain” (in English: “Urgency and nihilism: the emergence of American hardcore punk”). First of all, I’d like to thank the organizers of this beautiful symposium about the relationship between “Punk and language” for giving me this opportunity to present, moreover as the first speaker. However, strictly speaking, my paper is not about the meaning of words in punk rock songs, but about in which way these words, especially a small number of key words, are “tactically” organized and characterized on the “composition” level of recorded songs.

There is a feeling in the best punk 45s that **what must be said must be said very fast**, because the energy required to say what must be said, and the will to say it, can’t be sustained. That energy is going to disappear, that will is going to shatter—the idea will go back in the ground, the audience will get up, up on their coats, and go home. Like its rhythm, the punk voice was always unnatural: speeded up past personality into anonymity, pinched, reduced, artificial. It called attention to its own artificiality for more than one reason: as a rejection of mainstream pop humanism in favor of resentment and dread; as a reflection of the fear of not being understood. But the voice was unnatural most of all out of its fear of losing the chance to speak—a chance, every good punk singer understood, that was not only certain to vanish, but might not even be deserved¹.

I would argue that the music of the early American hardcore punk can be explained by a certain sense of *urgency*, not just a “harder, louder, faster” version of punk rock. Greil Marcus, although he did not actually use the word “urgency”, suggested that there should be a certain feeling of “what must be said must be said fast”, because, according to him, the energy or this opportunity to say what must be said fast cannot be sustained, is going to disappear at any time soon.

« There was a strong sense of **urgency**, like there was gonna be no tomorrow so you had to give it all you got. [...] Black Flag, Circle Jerks, and the other bands really drove home the bleakness, and it made people want to « do something » in some small way — thus all the

¹ Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of The Twentieth Century*, Twentieth-Anniversary Edition (London: Farber and Farber, 2001), 76.

intensity to “make” things happen with the DIY eruption of flyers, fanzines, record labels, bands, shows, and so on », Sal Canzonieri (Rebel Rouser Records, Irvington, NJ)
« There was this sense of **urgency** to have something else because arena rock was all there [...], clubs were doing disco and, you know, there was just no place for us misfit. », Kira Roessler (ex-Black Flag, Los Angeles, CA)
« We weren’t into the fashion as much as we were into the approach and intensity and **urgency**. », Ian MacKaye (ex-Teen Idles, Minor Threat, Dischord Records, Washington DC)
« Their [Black Flag] songs are about **urgent** feelings that any punk can relate to. », Tim Tonooka, interviewer de Black Flag pour le fanzine *Ripper*.

The word “urgency” has actually been used very often by the early American hardcore musicians and fans to describe what they were feeling at that period, in early 1980s. In my opinion, this urgency was embodied by certain musical devices or the sound structure of the music itself. And more importantly, those aspects are something that distinguished the early hardcore punk, and the punk rock in general, from any other music genre in the world.

Among many musical elements and compositional devices that can be regarded as generating this sense of urgency in music, today I’m focusing on what constitutes an essential part of the song structure of hardcore punk, which I call “refrain”. As distinguished from “chorus”, this term was defined by music theorist Ken Stephenson, as regards popular music in general:

The word refrain comes from the Latin *refringere*, which means “to break again”; as its etymology implies, a refrain is a passage that breaks into the form (or onto the scene) repeatedly. Not a complete section, a refrain consists of one or two textual lines that recur periodically. A refrain normally ends a verse, as in “I Want To Hold Your Hand,” or begins a chorus, as in the Lovin’ Spoonful’s “Do You Believe In Magic.” In some cases the refrain ends the verse and begins the chorus, as in Bob Seger and the Silver Bullet Band’s “Old Time Rock And Roll.” Occasionally, a refrain begins a bridge, as in Dan Fogelberg’s “Hard To Say.” Again, the refrain is not a complete section but rather a specially designated part of the verse, bridge, or chorus in which it appears. »²

This compositional device, which is not an “independent” or complete section, but which protrudes by breaking the sonic surface, as implied by its etymological origin, multiple times, and at various places, *inside* the main sections like verse or chorus, in order to put forward the main idea of the song. So in many cases it is the same as the title of the song, like this example, “Old Time Rock’n’roll” by Bob Seger, released in 1978. [listen]

In hardcore punk, the main idea of the song or, to put it another way, the “target” the song is aiming at, accusing or despising, often takes a “radicalized” form of the *refrain* that is highly


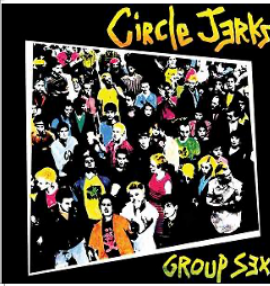
² Ken Stephenson, *What to Listen for in Rock: Stylistic Analysis* (New Haven; Londres: Yale University Press, 2002).

condensed, concentrated, striking like a “slogan”, like in this song, The Circle Jerks’ “Red Tape” from their first album in 1980.



“Red Tape”, Circle Jerks (1982)

		Sections		(Power) chords	N° bars	Lyrics
		Intro			1/2	(Four drum stick shots)
0:00-0:10	A	Verse 1	Verse 1	F#--- / B-A- F#--- / B-A- F#--- / B-A- F#--- / B-A-	8	Red tape / I can see, can't you see? red tape / do it to you, do it to me red tape / bureaucracy & bourgeoisie red tape / killing you killing me
0:10-0:14		Chorus 1	Chorus 1	C#--- / B-A- C#--- / B-A-	4	tax this / tax that tax this / tax that
0:16-0:24	A	Verse 2	Verse 2	F#--- B-A- F#--- / B-A- F#--- / B-A- F#--- / B-A-	7	I can see, can't you see? red tape / do it to you, do it to me red tape / bureaucracy & bourgeoisie red tape / killing you killing me
0:24-0:28		Chorus 2	Chorus 2	C#--- / B-A- C#--- / B-A-	4	tax this / tax that tax this / tax that
0:30-0:38	B	Interlude	Interlude	F#--- D--- / F#--- D--- / F#--- D--- / F#--- D---	7	no more red tape (Guitar fills)
0:39-0:48	A	Verse 3	Verse 3	F#--- B-A- F#--- / B-A- F#--- / B-A- F#--- / B-A-	7	Red tape I can see, can't you see? red tape / do it to you, do it to me red tape / bureaucracy & bourgeoisie red tape / murdering you murdering me
0:48-0:54		Chorus 3	Chorus 3	C#--- / B-A- C#--- / B-A- F#---	4 1	tax this / tax that tax this / tax that no more red tape!

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Besides the quasi-omnipresence of the refrain “red tape”, what is also interesting is a *temporal confusion* that the song provokes. As you can see in this chart, the refrain “red tape” appears at the first half of every four phrase of the verse. Then comes the chorus, which ends with a variant of the refrain “no more red tape”. In terms of lyrics, this variant of the refrain makes a conclusion of the chorus (“tax this, tax that, no more red tape”). However, the second verse that follows does not start with the refrain, as the first verse did, but with the second half of its first phrase. So, is this “no more red tape” (grey-colored) the end of the chorus or the beginning of the second verse? You may actually feel that the second verse would start with “I can see, can’t you see”, not with “red tape” like the first verse. As the confusion in its song structure and temporal perception is exacerbated, especially under the rowdy whirl of tom tom roll by the most skillful drummer of the early American hardcore, Lucky Lehrer, a sense of instability and urgency it provokes are also amplified.

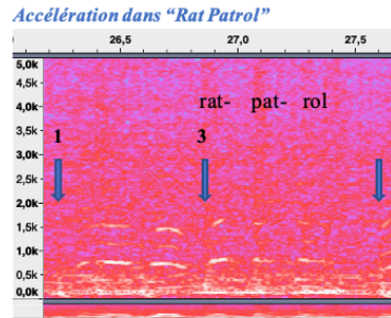
Micro-acceleration in the *refrain*

« Rat Patrol »,
The Untouchables (1980)



Chorus (including refrains)

♩ = 162-172



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These hardcore punk refrains sometimes undergo a subtle and spontaneous acceleration, as in another song released the same year, “Rat Patrol” by The Untouchables from the early DC scene, where its refrain in the chorus, “rat patrol”, once again a *target* the song aims at, tends to be subtly accelerated in its every appearance. [listen] This type of acceleration was normally considered an error or lack of instrumental skill, since it occurs due to a lack of control, particularly under the influence of too much emotion. The early hardcore punk transformed this lack of certain musical skills into a specific musical device for a distinct effect, which is a very rare case in the entire history of music, I would argue.

Now, we’re going to talk about a “radicalisation” of these compositional process with the first EP from D.R.I., a band from Houston, Texas, as an example. Recorded at the end of 1982 and released in 1983, this EP with 22 extremely short materials reflects the influence from other bands’ recordings prior to them. But what is this “radicalization” that characterizes the early songs from this Houston band?

Une « radicalisation »: le premier disque EP (1983) de D.R.I.
 (Dirty Rotten Imbeciles), fondé à Houston, Texas

Tempo et durée des morceaux du premier EP des D.R.I.

<i>This side (face A)</i>				<i>That side (face B)</i>			
N°	Titre	Tempo	Durée	N°	Titre	Tempo	Durée
1	<i>Sad To Be</i>	258/132	2:11	1	<i>I Don't Need Society</i>	181/240	1:15
2	<i>War Crimes</i>	206	1:11	2	<i>Commuter Man</i>	107/139/241	0:56
3	<i>Busted</i>	62/142	0:46	3	<i>Plastique</i>	224	0:23
4	<i>Draft Me</i>	175/155/220	0:19	4	<i>Why</i>	196/222	0:18
5	<i>F.R.D.C.</i>	258-232	0:21	5	<i>Balance Of Terror</i>	TL/250	0:39
6	<i>Capitalist Suck</i>	TL/250/208	0:36	6	<i>My Fate To Hate</i>	250	0:26
7	<i>Misery Loves Company</i>	250/TL	0:33	7	<i>Who Am I</i>	238	0:45
8	<i>No Sense</i>	72/135(270)	1:16	8	<i>Money Stinks</i>	181-205	0:43
9	<i>Blockhead</i>	90/258	0:55	9	<i>Human Waste</i>	220	0:19
TL: Tempo libre				10	<i>Yes Ma'am</i>	50/251	0:48
x/x : Changement du tempo				11	<i>Dennis's Problem</i>	246/201	0:51
x-x : Fluctuation spontané du tempo				12	<i>Closet Punk</i>	200-182	0:31
				13	<i>Reaganomics</i>	234	0:40

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The first thing is the shorter length and the faster tempo of the songs. The result is that more of the temporal and horizontal spheres are concentrated on a few key words, that is, on the “refrains”. Second, as DRI songs were covering more diverse social-critical topics like conformism (of suburban life or in school), war, the environmental crisis, capitalism, as we can notice with a simple overview of the song titles, such topics are condensed into only a few words which are moreover repeated with more frequency than earlier hardcore songs. As a result, the refrains occupy more space on the linear progression of the songs. Besides, in many songs, the verse-chorus couple is repeated numerous times and within very short interval. Often different verses have the same lyrics, which raises confusion in distinguishing verses from choruses. Further, without any intermediate sections like bridge or solo, not to mention a “climax” in the middle or a “grand finale” at the end, the songs appear to be totally “indifferent” to any artistic device, be it conventional or experimental, and comes to an end, abruptly.

One of the best examples would be the 20-second “Reaganomics”. This song only has “refrains” in terms of lyrics. And the section that should be considered as the verse in a musical sense has no lyrics. This weird verse-chorus couple repeats “indifferently”. Right in the middle is a short instrumental section, which is identical to the intro and the outro. As can be seen in the wave form of the song, its linear structure makes a total *symmetry* without any musical index to lead a narrative or a progression whatsoever. I call the repetition of such degree « nihilist »,

in that it seems to despise the slightest effort to do something artistic that has already lost its value, meaning and aim in an irreversible and irretrievable way. Neither traditional nor avant-garde.

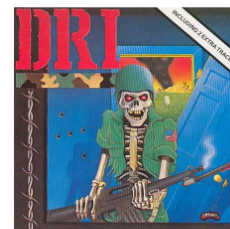


“Reaganomics”, D.R.I. (1982/1983), 41 secondes



Forme horizontale de Reaganomics

La formule de Reaganomics (voix, guitare et batterie)



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We noticed that the combination of this brevity and this speed has the effect of galvanizing the vertical accentuation of words by compressing or polarizing them, but the music of D.R.I. goes so far as to cause a considerable decline on the semantic level, either due to the singer’s harshly distorted tone or the speed of its delivery or just murmuring without ever seeking to pronounce every syllable of the lyrics. This combination of extreme brevity, speed and distortion in vocal delivery leads to a considerable ‘retreat’ on the semantic level of the words, which thwarts, paradoxically, the very purpose of the sloganization of key words (that they should be easily intelligible). However, paradoxically, this semantic weakening due to the loss of the meaning of words will allow to acquire another type of meaning, another way of taking actions, so to speak, by opening up a “performative” dimension, to borrow Austin’s linguistic term. Embodying the urgency itself.

Let’s see the last example, “Draft Me” from D.R.I. Over the course of this song of 19 seconds, the refrain “Draft me” becomes more of a *non-verbal* action like the drumming or a staccato rhythm cutting from the distorted guitar. Besides, we cannot approve that the other lyrics, especially those noticed here in brackets, are actually articulated by the singer. However, that doesn’t mean the words no longer exist. Rather, with a help of this barely intelligible lyrics, the music *embodies* the motto of “what must be said must be said very fast”, in other words, a

feeling that “something needs to be dealt with immediately”, that is, the sense of urgency, in the musical structure itself.



“Draft Me”, D.R.I. (1982/83, 19 seconds)

The image displays a musical score for the song "Draft Me" by D.R.I. It includes three staves: Vocal (Vc), Guitar (Gt), and Drums (Dr). The score is divided into sections: [Intro] with a tempo of 178, [Verse] with a tempo of 155, and [Chorus] with a tempo of 192. The lyrics are: "draft me (I want to have fun draft me give me a gun draft me I want(to) help (America keep the peace) (I want to be a trooper in the world police) draft me". Below the score is a waveform visualization showing the audio signal over time, with a speaker icon to the left.

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“Draft Me”, too, applies a subtle compositional device to generate temporal confusion and destabilization, but, in this case, by adding the refrain “draft me” of two 8th notes, very short, after every chorus so that the chorus takes on 8/9 irregular time signature. [Listen] So, “Red Tape” by Circle Jerks and “Draft Me” by DRI are similar in terms of linear structure in that the refrain at the end of each chorus produce confusion as to where the verse begins. And these subtle but chaotic musical phenomenon was made possible thanks to the advanced skill in playing instruments for these two bands, compared to the Untouchables’ “Rat Patrol”, where their musical incompetence leads to a subtle spontaneous acceleration and its particular effect, which comes to characterize an aspect of hardcore punk music. However, it is still the same kind of effect that those musically advanced bands seem to be aiming for. Thank you for your attention.