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MUSICKING THE CITY: POPULAR MUSIC AND THE SPATIO-RHYTHMS OF AARHUS, 1960s-1980s

Punk Rock Roulade in Husets Musikteater 1981 – a hub of musical counter-culture

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Introduction

The punk styles emerging from of the late 1970s are among the main examples of a youth subculture defining itself against mainstream norms. These styles involved conspicuous visual elements and an entire *ethos* around the "no future" slogan and elements of anarchism. Punks developed a cultural geography, a sensuality and a complex of emotional practices all their own. The key reference, however, was the music. In other words, the *production of sound* and the *definition of a sonic style* was at the centre of the punk style as it crystallized in British cities in the mid-to-late 1970s and was disseminated, received, performed and, to various extents, localized in Continental European cities.

Such styles have often been studied – in visual, behavioural and sonic terms – but mainly in their most paradigmatic examples from the bigger cities of the UK and Continental Europe. In this paper I suggest a different approach to studying such styles, emphasizing their contradictory, often hybrid, localized forms, starting from the sonic and more broadly sensory and emotional aspects of a particular music event in Aarhus, Denmark's 'second city'.

The event was called *Punk Rock Roulade*, a one-day music festival at the venue *Husets Musikteater* – in brief: *Huset* – in central Aarhus on the 10th of January 1981. It was organized by the nearby local youth club *Vester Allé Kasernes Ungdomsklub* (also known as *Opgang 2*) on its tenth anniversary, featuring several music bands from its present and past. Thus, it was not a punk event exclusively, yet punk was featured prominently as both a key concept in the very title of the event and as an instantly recognizable style among many of the participants, on stage

Fig. 1: Steen Thomsen, lead singer in the punk band the Zero Point, performing at the Punk Rock Roulade in Huset, Aarhus, 10 January 1981. (Photo: Dennis Jensen)

as well as in the audience. In other words, this event provides us with an example of how punk elements could be actively received, produced and localized as a key part of a more complex youth culture of the 1970s and early 1980s.

Of course, we can rarely reproduce past sounds completely in the present, much less the historically conditioned, entangled and often polysemic *experiences* of such sounds. We are often left with the task of reconstructing elements of sound and auditory experience from sonically silent sources, invoking elements of cross-modal interpretation. So let us begin by attempting to *see* the music in the photograph reproduced above, a snapshot capturing an intense moment during the one-day festival.

There is a lot going on. The blond-haired person to the left, with the microphone in hand, is Steen Thomsen, the 18-year-old lead singer in the local punk band The Zero Point. He is shown here bending down from the low stage, allowing a member of the audience – a member of another band featured at the same event – to sing along with him. Behind them, others are dancing and singing along too. Still others attend the performance in the background, without dancing or participating in the punk gesturing – an indication that participation in a style is not necessarily a question of either being in or being out, but rather of taking part in different ways and with very different levels of individual engagement.

The music appears as the core element around which all the other signs of punk identification are organized here, including the obvious visual signs: the cropped hair, leather jackets, studded wrist bands, braces and so on. As such, the looks and gestures of the local Aarhus punks in this picture are all aspects of what the musicologist Christopher Small termed *musicking*, that is, music as not as a distinct object created by a composer or produced on the stage for pure auditory consumption but as a much wider assemblage of entangled practices comprising audiences and organizers along with musicians and composers, and implicating not only the production and perception of sound but also other senses as well as bodily practices such as dancing, drinking etc.[1]

From the punk looks and gestures to the solemn intensity of the singing faces near the microphone, there is much to indicate that this was hardly a quiet moment. This is a picture of *noise-making*.

In fact, we can ascertain that it *wasn't* quiet. A low-fi video recording of that performance exists, featured at the beginning of a one-hour amateur video documentary of that event. The opening segment confirms our vague initial expectations of loudness, while adding more concrete content to our perception of it.[2]

This is music performed in a frenetic tempo, with drums, bass and guitars incessantly repeating simple figures at a very loud volume, with an emphasis on the treble in the guitar figure, all instruments played with a hard, harsh attack, supporting front singer's aggressive, in-your-face performance.

The primitive recording not only gives us an impression of very loud music emerging from the stage. We also get a sense of music bouncing against the hard walls of the venue, resulting in somewhat shrill room acoustics, far from the traditional ideals of how a concert hall should allow for hi-fi sound projection.

Thus, the material conditions of *Huset* became integral to the musicking within it, in sonic and acoustic terms as well as in other respects. The building from 1881 containing *Huset* was originally built as an archaeological museum and remained so until the late 1960s, when a new archaeological museum was constructed at Mosesgård just south of Aarhus. The older building near the city centre was only reconceived as a cultural hub and a music venue after left-wing squatters took over the building in 1969, and municipal authorities then decided to acknowledge their initiative, despite persistent opposition from the conservative minority in the city council.

In sharp contrast to the nearby municipal concert hall, *Musikhuset*, constructed in the early 1980s, *Huset* was not a *conceived* musical space. It was a *lived* musical

1 Christopher Small, *Musicking*, (London: Wesleyan University Press, 1998).

2 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vzxPC4HQD2w 0:00-0:30. Accessed 23 October 2023.

space, to borrow categories from Henri Lefebvre's approach to the production of space. And the ways that *Huset* was *lived* as a music venue resulted in particular *perceptions* of space, including a certain acoustic harshness, largely unintended – and to some people undoubtedly unwanted – yet quite fitting for punk aesthetics.[3]

At the same time, the event in *Huset* became a hub of complex spatial relations. At the most general level, the musical style, and the language of the most paradigmatically punkish performances here, reflected an orientation towards British punk. The co-singer pictured in the audience is wearing a T-shirt featuring the cover of a recent record by the Poison Girls, an anarcho-punk band formed in Brighton, 1976, by the singer and guitarist Vi Subversa. Thus, the event embodied a transnational punk culture.

At a smaller scale, the event was a part of the urban geography of punk musicking in Aarhus that tended to be concentrated either along the Western border of what had been the medieval city or along a small segment of Mejlgade near the harbour. Both were situated at some distance from the centres of mainstream entertainment. Yet, none of these centres of punk musicking were exclusively defined by paradigmatic punk styles. On the contrary, within each of these centres, punk styles were intertwined with other sorts of musicking outside of either the classical tradition or the music of rivalling youth cultures: the music of the discos or the older-style pubs where the young 'rockers' would go. This distance provided not only a degree of physical protection from the violence against punks but also rich potentials for punk identifications with *Huset* as a hub of counter-cultural activities.

Thus, it was not taken lightly by the young members of the counter-cultural youth club that the municipal authorities decided to place the grandiose *Musikhuset* on the grass field right behind the abandoned officers' buildings housing their club – and a few hundred meters uphill from *Huset* – which was under construction during the one-day *punk Rock Roulade* event and finally opened in 1982. To the members of these counter-cultural environments this would inevitably appear as a gentrifying encroachment on an urban space which they had become accustomed to consider as a refuge outside of mainstream culture, marked by counter-cultural dress-codes, gestures and sounds. We may gain a sense of this opposition in a 1982 photo of members of *Opgang2*, posing with intentional disorder on the grass field behind their youth club, with *Musikhuset* unfinished and scaffolded in the background (fig. 2, p. 6).

This conception that *Huset*, *Opgang2* and their immediate surroundings belonged, in a cultural or 'lived' sense, to the youthful counter-cultural environments, was also reflected in the lived micro-geography of the room – not least in the

3 See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991).

Fig. 2: Members of the Opgang2 youth club, outside their headquarters in an abandoned officers' barracks. Musikhuset, still under construction, represents the onslaught of mainstream music culture literally in 'their' backyard. (Photo: Opgang 2)

blurring of boundaries between the stage and the audience area that I mentioned before.

At the same time, these spaces were *temporalized* in multiple ways. The frenetic tempo of punk music announced a new style of musicking as well as a new relationship to the social order, mainstream culture and the rival currents of counter-culture. While the sense of socio-cultural alienation expressed in punk music was perhaps not all that different from that expressed by hippies or the political far-leftists, the punks did not strive hopefully for de-alienation through music, dancing or political activity. Instead, they contested alienation through an ambiguous, desperate radicalization of its terms to the point of subversive absurdity. There was a complex re-constellation here of musical rhythms *and* the rhythms of life and society.

But just as the photograph revealed persons with different levels of punk commitment, the musical soundscape of this event was also a hybrid, combining punk sounds, punk sensibilities and punk rhythms with other, very different sounds, sensibilities and rhythms. We can hear this in in the youth club leader Søren Marcussen's encouragement of the audience to sing along with him to the tune of a

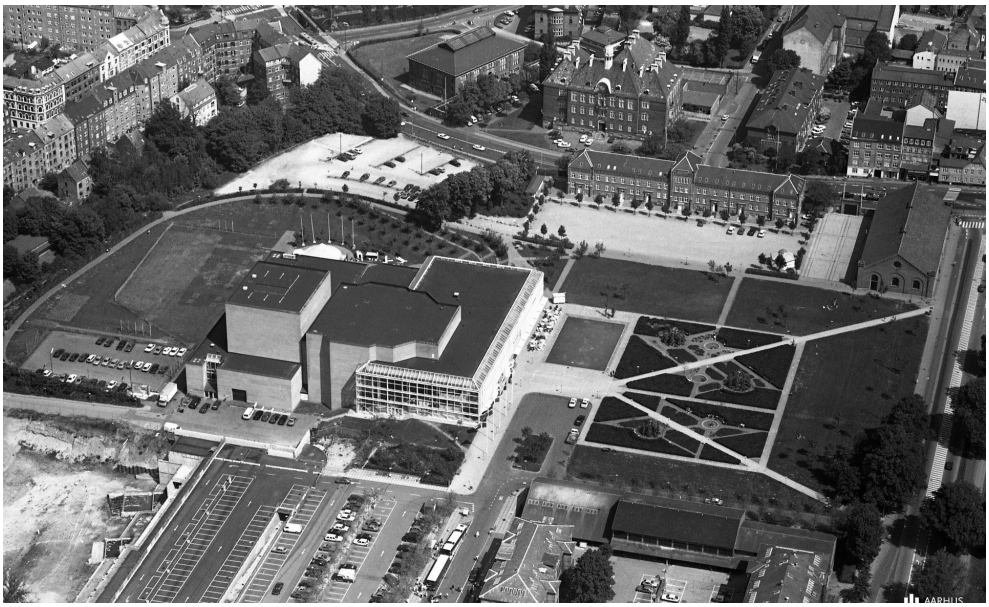

Fig 3: An areal photo of Musikhuset, 1992, taken from the opposite side of the previous photo, showing the abandoned officers' barracks housing Opgang 2 just behind the grass field. Huset is barely visible here, situated next to the pedestrian crossing at the top left, yet privising a sense of how closely these places were situated within the urban space. The old city center is situated to the top right of this photo. (Photo: Jens Tønnesen/Aarhus Stadsarkiv)

anti-capitalist anthem from a decade earlier: "Det kan blive bedre, kammerat", a song from the Maoist-inclined squatters of the early 1970s, but with a subdued, folkish, hippie-like, languid quality to it, performing de-alienation in the music itself as a counterpoint to the mainstream demands for disciplined efficiency. [4]

As recently emphasized by two German historians (Juliane Brauer and Henning Wellmann, borrowing a conception from Barbara Rosenwein), the punk style can be defined fruitfully as an *emotional community*, that is, a community defined or characterized by certain emotional norms or practices.[5] In our case, the defiant performances of aggressive, unruly behaviour spiting authorities and oppressive norms; the protest against the perceived hopelessness and alienation of established society – and rejection of the hopeful expectations characteristic of the counter-cultural movements defined a decade earlier.

4 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vzxPC4HQD2w 16:19.

5 Juliane Brauer, "Clashes of Emotions: Punk Music, Youth Subculture, and Authority in the GDR". *Social Justice. A Journal of Crime, Conflict & World Order* 38(4), 2012, 53-70; Henning Wellmann, "'Let fury have the hour, anger can be power' Praktiken emotionalen Erlebens in den frühen deutschen Punkszenen", in Bodo Mrozek, Alexa Geisthöve and Jürgen Danyel, eds., *Popgeschichte Band 2: Zeithistorische Fallstudien 1958-1988*, (Bielefeld: transcript, 2014), 291-314.

However, what we see in the *Punk Rock Roulade* is very far from a monolithic community of stylistically uniform members. Not only were some of the paradigmatic features of British or German punk culture apparently absent in this case – heavy drinking, drug abuse, internal violence. The elements of paradigmatic punk style co-existed with cheerful features more reminiscent of a variety show. The participants laugh and support each other across stylistic and generational differences. The aggressive expression of punk music appears not to incite violence or destructive behaviour. Rather, it provides a sense of release and relief, mixing musical and stylistic seriousness with good-natured fun. On the dance floor, male-dominated punk gestures alternates with good-natured Cossack dancing and light foot-tapping among the young audiences across the gender spectrum. Even *within* the punk bands, the most decisively punkish in their noisy leather jackets can play with peers whose outfits and hairstyles could easily fit in other parts of the city as well. In brief: Punk's stylistic features are unmistakably present, and they are being welcomed and consumed by the audience at large, but they are mixed up and woven together with others. To a certain extent, this probably reflected the provincial setting of Huset. Indeed, members of the punk communities in both Copenhagen and Aarhus were quick to emphasize perceived contrasts between the 'serious' Copenhagen punk scene and the more benevolent or humorous Aarhus scene, and both tended toto regard British and, to some extent, German punks as the real thing.[6] To that extent, we might be tempted to conclude, at a more general level, that the blending or hybridizing of a certain style would ever more pronounced as it disseminated from its centres of origins towards peripheries of reception. Yet, such a neat distinction between origins and reception, or between production and reproduction of a style, would also be misleading. Firstly, as stressed above Aarhus punks were never uniformly fun-loving. Rather, they expressed very different commitment to fun and seriousness. Secondly, reception should not merely be conceived as passive reproduction or approximation but also as active, productive enactment and localization. Aarhus punks did not merely emulate the styles of London punks or Copenhagen punks more or less accurately; they also shaped their own localized ways of being Aarhus punks. Finally, for its part, punk had never been 'pure', not even in what was perceived as its points of origin. In his classic study of the early British punk scene as a subculture, cultural theorist Dick Hebdige did note that "the members of a subculture must share a common language", but he also emphasized that "the punk style is in a constant state of assemblage, of flux" an that "different youths bring different degrees of

6 Jan Poulsen, *Something Rotten! Punk i Danmark: Maleri, musik og litteratur*, (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2010); Jørgen Nielsen, ed., *Rock i Århus*, (Aarhus, Klim, 2012), 121-42; Jørn Rasmussen, *Musikmiljø Århus*, (Aarhus, 1984).

commitment to a subculture".[7] To us, these considerations points to a need for thinking of *style* in terms of flexible, variable *performance* rather than fully-fledged acceptance or rejection. In such performances of style, processes of identification interact with various kinds of *dis*identification, even within and around the community. In the photograph and the video segment just shown, some people were engaging strongly in performing elements of a punk style, others were less so. And in brief interview segments in the video documentary on this music event, several participants express strong qualifications about the punk label. "Are you punks," the interviewer asks two of the most clearly identifiable punks in the crowd. The one affirms, the other protests at being "put in a box". Processes of disidentification are intertwined here with stylistic identifications.

In other words, rather than being simply inside or outside a specific community, people *relate* to certain collective performances of style from multiple positions, in various ways and to different degrees. In such processes, people negotiate the terms of participance as well as the key features of the style itself and its relationship to other styles, in sonic terms as well as in other sensuous-emotional terms.

7 Dick Hebdige: *Subculture: The Meanings of Style*, (London: Routledge, 1979), 122, 126.

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