



**HAL**  
open science

# A Certain Sense of Urgency: Hardcore Punk and Temporality in Music

Sangheon Lee

► **To cite this version:**

Sangheon Lee. A Certain Sense of Urgency: Hardcore Punk and Temporality in Music. 2020 Jahrestagung der GfPM (Gesellschaft für Populärmusikforschung), Gesellschaft für Populärmusikforschung (GfPM, la Société allemande pour la recherche des musiques populaires, Sep 2020, Mannheim, Germany. hal-03897542

**HAL Id: hal-03897542**

**<https://univ-eiffel.hal.science/hal-03897542>**

Submitted on 3 Feb 2023

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial - NoDerivatives | 4.0 International License

[Contribution à un colloque]

## **A Certain Sense of Urgency: Hardcore Punk and Temporality in Music**

Conférence annuelle de la GfPM (l'Association allemande pour l'étude des musiques populaire), du 25 au 27 septembre 2020, organisée par la Hochschule für Musik und Darstellende Kunst Mannheim/Popakademie Baden-Württemberg, Mannheim, Allemagne.

[http://wp.popularmusikforschung.de/?page\\_id=2730](http://wp.popularmusikforschung.de/?page_id=2730)

Sangheon LEE (individual presentation)

Université Gustave Eiffel

### Introduction: What is *urgency*?

Defined by Oxford dictionary as “the quality of needing to be dealt with or happen immediately” or “the feeling or belief that something needs to be dealt with immediately” (Oxford), the word *urgency* is used to express a notion of *priority* or *acceleration* in different spheres of human life. When it comes to a sense of priority, it refers to giving importance to something in order to see it happen before anything else in case of necessity; as for that of acceleration, it's about shortening the route to a goal, or bringing forward the arrival of an event, *right now*, in the imaginary timeline that one has already in mind.

“There was a strong sense of *urgency*, like there was gonna be no tomorrow so you had to give it all you got», Sal Canzonieri” (Blush 2010: 320).

“Punk appealed on one level because it was visually and aurally exciting; it injected a sense of youthful energy and *urgency* into pop music” (Worley 2017: 7).

“[...] the *urgency* of a period that felt at once like a terrifying crisis-time and the dawn of a new epoch delirious with radical possibilities», Simon Reynolds” (Wooley 2017: back-cover blurb).

« [...] le sentiment d'*urgence* vécu des deux côtés de la Manche par cette génération de musiciens sensibles au message porté par les New York Dolls [...] à la fois *l'urgence* ressentie par cette génération et son désir de repartir à zéro dans un nouveau *tabula rasa*. Sans espoir de changer la société, sans volonté de proposer de nouvelles alternative » (Zénouda 2016: 18).

“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 (Blair 2019).

“We weren't into the fashion as much as we were into the approach and intensity and *urgency*”, Ian MacKaye (Blush 2010: 151).

“Their songs are about *urgent* feelings that any punk can relate to” (Tonooka 1980).

« Soprattutto se si considera la prima scena Usa quando *l'urgenza* espressiva prevalse sulla capacità tecnica, [...] » (Carassi 2020).

“[...] they all share that primal anger and that desperate *urgency* and in the end that's what makes Italian hardcore what it is” (Earslaugtherers 2020).

[All italics by me]

As quoted above, the term *urgency* is encountered particularly often in the discourse on the punk rock of the first half of the 1980s, which is generally defined by the name of *hardcore punk* in North America, but also, although to a lesser degree, on the punk of the second half of the 1970s, by musicians, fans, supporters, journalists, and researchers, regardless of their nationality, as if to evoke a certain state of mind that seems generally shared at that historical period by most of the participants in any punk scene. However, the origin, the social context or the cause of using the term *urgency* have not been well defined yet. That doesn't mean, however, that the urgency, especially observed in the context of 1970s and 1980s, does not have enough specificity worth trying to find a precise definition for it and also the feeling that provokes it, and then to examine the specific context that gave rise to it. It is highly difficult to cover this huge subject in a short article.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, on the other hand, the notion of urgency takes on a more concrete meaning, even physically perceptible, when it is used to describe a musical phenomenon, i.e., in the analysis of rock music, including punk rock. Therefore, in the first part, we look in depth at examples of using the word *urgency* in musical discourse, though it is not a strictly defined usage but exactly for this reason. By interpreting the imagination, allusion, or intuition, so to speak, that each of the cited authors showed using the term in question as to music, we explore how to define the urgency of '70s punk rock and '80s hardcore punk music. Above all in that recognition, perception, or expression of urgency are fundamentally related to temporality in music, the second part of this article starts by Jonathan D. Kramer's argument about linearity and nonlinearity in music, especially the dialectical interpretation of these two principles, and then discusses about the possibility of explaining the peculiarity and *urgency* of hardcore punk music based on its horizontal structure.

### “As if the plug might be pulled at any time”: *urgency* in musical discourse

As mentioned above, the word *urgency* is used often in the discourse of musicological analysis or critic of rock music. It is thus worth citing some examples and considering with what meaning and in what context the word is practically used, so that we can approach a specific definition of the notion of urgency in rock music in general, in punk rock in particular.

---

<sup>1</sup> This article is, approximately, part of my on-going PhD thesis, »*Sentiment d'urgence et nihilisme : le phénomène punk hardcore dans les années 1980*«, in Gustave Eiffel University, France.

First, David Headlam said in 1995 that the guitar riffs in “Whole Lotta Love” (1969) by Led Zeppelin “are usually in syncopated rhythms against the emphatic, straight eighth-note meter”, and then one of the riffs “continually repeats in the outer A sections, reinforcing the meter each time, and gaining in *urgency* by its unwavering metric placement and power from the overdriven guitar timbre and supporting bass and drums”, which contrasts with the original, “You Need Love” by Willie Dixon, the riffs of which are repeated “in fluid rhythms without strongly defined downbeats” (Headlam 1995: 338; italicized by me). According to Andrew L. Cope who likewise compares, in his 2010 book, an original blues song with its cover by a hard rock pioneer in the late 1960s, “the new levels of *urgency* and aggression” are revealed in the opening riff of “Crossroads”, recorded in 1968 by Cream, especially as the “swing beat” in Robert Johnson’s 1936 original, “is replaced with straight fours and the improvised slide fills are replaced by the main hook” (Cope 2010: 25; italicized by me).

In either case, where the word *urgency* is used to denote an effect brought about by a specific simplification of the metric structure, more precisely, a *leveling*, so to speak, of what was dominant in the original, particularly rich in syncopation and anticipation. This is what the British pioneers of hard rock, Led Zeppelin and Cream here, did with musical materials introduced by blues musicians, Willie Dixon and Robert Johnson, so that it will establish itself as a model of approach to the development of hard rock and heavy metal style. It is no coincidence that the two arguments of the two musicologists have this in common that they propose, along with the notion of urgency, two other parallel effects, respectively “power” and “aggression”. These are indeed effects that one can easily imagine as linked to a sense of urgency. They are attributable to the repetition, at regular and short intervals, of the same sound material, relatively rigid, framed and strong, *square*, which gives the impression that a certain *priority* is installed, imposing itself in this sound event and irresistibly requiring its perception from the listener.

The expression does not appear as such only in musicological discourse on hard rock and heavy metal. David Laing had already remarked in his 1985 work, generally regarded as one of the first musical analysis of punk rock: “The fast tempo combined with the anti-syncopation tendency of many punk songs supported the connotation of *urgency* of utterance which declamatory vocals and their lyrics evoked” (Laing 2015: 80; italicized by me). Unlike the forementioned articles on hard rock and heavy metal, this book on British punk rock of the 1970s, locates the origin of this specific feeling in the vocal style and lyrical content. According to Laing, the fast and direct rhythmic flow helps to heighten the sense of urgency, yet it is the voice and lyrics that trigger this process of expression in punk rock.

The brief remark by this early punk rock scholar refers us to that by Greil Marcus, another pioneer in such work, found in his famous work published in 1989. Indeed, the latter also designates the voice as the medium characterizing a punk song better than any other:

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 deserved (Marcus 2001: 76)

Although the passage quoted above does not include the word *urgency* and it owes a lot to the imagination of the author himself, i.e., mixing his impression from listening to records with his interpretation of the situations surrounding punk musicians in the 1970s, both on the stages of clubs and outside them, it is nevertheless remarkable that he seems to want to try to give a definition to, to characterize what could otherwise be called *urgency*, in particular by assigning it to the vocal. Whatever the reason—one can never tell, listening to a record or watching the concert, whether or not a punk singer is watching over his energy, his will and his audience, which go disappear *immediately*—, the punk song gives the impression of rushing, sometimes by means of a subtle *acceleration*, sometimes of a deformation of the voice, to the point of seeming artificial.

The allusion Marcus makes here to this particular feeling as a musical effect characterizing punk rock also interests us because it thus refers to another characteristic feature of this kind of rock music. Note once again that the phenomenon of *stabilization* in rock, and resulting sense of urgency, in particular in hard rock and heavy metal, was due to certain simplifications, including the simplification, if not total avoidance, of syncopation or rhythmic anticipation, as well as the rigorously regular repetition of sound elements marked by their aggressiveness. But in this case, there is a time-lag or even a temporal mismatch between the parts, especially the vocals and the instruments here, and a certain temporal instability resulting from it might further reinforce the sense of urgency in a piece of punk rock.

Finally, David B. Easley, in one of the rare works dedicated to an analysis of the strictly musical aspects of hardcore punk, and more precisely of certain representative American records between 1978 and 1983, from a good number of examples, uses the word *urgency* in its conclusion. He describes a performance of Black Flag, one of the most influential bands in American hardcore scene, which was filmed by Penelope Spheeris for her seminal documentary,

*The Decline of Western Civilization* (1981). This is a song called “Revenge”, whose first lyrics are performed solo by the singer at the beginning, are also taken by Easley for the title of this PhD thesis:

The performance that follows this guttural scream is equally aggressive, intense, and reflects a channeling of emotions such that the instrumentalists are found attacking their instruments, furiously trying to present every chord or drum pattern *as if the plug might be pulled at any time*. Indeed, there is a sense of *urgency* in the music as the band moves along at a frenetic pace. Further, this *urgency* combines with the dense texture of distorted guitars, screamed vocals, and propulsive drumming to create a powerful sound that is difficult to ignore. (Easley 2011: 280; italicized by me)

It is the only passage of his 300-page thesis where the author uses the word *urgency*; it is not even used, moreover, to refer to a specific concept for this research, which is only dedicated to the identification of musical materials and playing patterns of the early hardcore punk. Nevertheless, it is still legitimate for us to refer to this description, in order to see how the word is used based on the author's own perception and knowledge of hardcore punk, Black Flag, its performance, etc.

The author's gaze rests on the musicians' gestures, on their physical movements interacting with the music they play. In other words, whether he intended it or not, Easley's description of the music bears at every moment, figurative or not, certain gestures of the musicians who are playing it: »attacking their instruments«, »moves along« and »as if the plug might be pulled at any time«. But we should consider that the actions of the members of Black Flag, not to mention those of other hardcore punk bands in general, do not show as much *stability* in terms of rhythmic foundation as the music does itself. Their physical movement is far from being regular, but rather spontaneous, and this *spontaneity* is particularly exemplified in the abrupt and aggressive physical intervention by the bassist brandishing his instrument in front of the singer towards the end of this performance. Besides, it was the singer himself who had just provoked him, turning sharply to his left to grab his colleague by the sleeveless t-shirt.

The figurative expression, “as if the plug might be pulled at any time”, evokes at least two different situations, an expression, perhaps unbeknown to the author, with a double meaning. First, it can mean that the players, especially those whose instruments are plugged into the amp, guitarist and bassist, are moving so vigorously that their cables could accidentally be unplugged. The direction their physical actions take is spontaneous and unpredictable, and the impression is reinforced, amplified, by the movement of the camera itself. In other words, these gestures of the musicians provide the regular rhythmic pattern with additional rhythmic elements, both strong and, contradictorily, jerky or even convulsive, which also implies that the

linear structure of the music itself does not follow simply a regular temporality which comes under the rhythmic foundation of the song.

Moreover, this figurative expression can be understood in another way, echoing the aforementioned remark by Greil Marcus about the *fear* or *anxiety* that everything will disappear soon around oneself: one does not know when, but imminently. Indeed, whether it was Black Flag concerts in the early 1980s in the U.S., or those of the Sex Pistols between 1976 and 1977 in U.K.—Marcus must have had them in mind when he wrote that passage—, the amplifier plug could be unplugged for real without warning at any unforeseen moment by the one in charge of the club where the concert was taking place, whether on his own decision or upon the order of the police, or even by the police intervening themselves, because of noise or violence (Cf. Marcus 2001: 22; MacLeod 2001: 107-110; Azerrad 2001; Rollins 2004). Quite often their concerts were canceled preemptively on both sides of the Atlantic. So, it was not even worth unplugging: the clubs had refused them, alerted especially by the media which had reported the violence in their previous concerts (Savage 1991; Thompson 2004: 33; Belsito and Davis 2004: 46; Spitz and Mullen 2001: 229).

Indeed, “Revenge” is the song where the band expresses most directly, along with “Police Story” in Black Flag's first LP (1981), its opposition, even its hostility, to the police, namely the LAPD (Los Angeles Police Department). The segment of the film begins with a tirade the singer recites against the LAPD, who recently arrested the group for having only, as he says, played punk rock, and the tirade ends with a statement the group makes to the police. The first sentence, “It’s not my imagination, I’ve had a gun on my back”, uttered by the singer's voice alone, without musical accompaniment, constitute an *immediate* communication of what has just happened and is happening constantly in daily life, without resorting to any imaginary dramatization or *musicalization*, so to speak: you do not have time to mobilize all that, to wait for it to be somehow aestheticized by other more sophisticated means of expression. It should be said right now, immediately, sometimes by speeding up, sometimes by skipping over steps, on one's mental timeline that hardly promises anything in the future, particularly in her or his life in the early '80s, being constantly threatened by economic and ecological crises, not to mention nuclear war anxiety. It’s a question of time, after all.

## Linearity and Nonlinearity

As Jonathan D. Kramer states in his well-known work *The Time of Music* (1988), all music has both linearity and nonlinearity (Kramer 1988: 40). First, “Linear time”, according to the definition he suggests, is »the temporal continuum created by a succession [of] events [*sic*] in which earlier events imply later ones and later ones are consequences of earlier ones« (ibid.: 20). Western art music undoubtedly relies more than any other music style in the world on linear time concept, by means of, notably, tonality, “goal-directed processes”, and “constant changes of tension” (ibid.: 25). “Nonlinear time”, on the other hand, is “the temporal continuum that results from principles permanently governing a section or piece” (ibid.: 20) Contrary to the linearity that has a tendency to develop from earlier events in a piece, nonlinearity is rather “a concept, a compositional attitude« that is not to develop but is present from its beginning, and also »a listening strategy” concerned with “the permanence of music” (ibid.: 19).

What the American composer and musicologist is proposing here is not limited to making a differentiation for itself between linearity and nonlinearity, but rather consists in the need to achieve a dynamic elucidation of the character of a musical work, by relying on a multi-dimensional analysis of the relation and interaction between different linear and nonlinear elements. According to Kramer, linearity and nonlinearity are complementary forces in all music, they coexist in different proportions and at different hierarchical levels, so that their interaction determines the style and form of a composition.

*The Time Of Music* is primarily concerned with temporality in Western art music of the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, finding its examples in various tonal and atonal pieces. Nevertheless, popular music studies dedicated to understanding temporality in music can usefully employ certain ideas proposed by this pioneering work, if not at the level of the methodology for practical analysis of the sound elements and musical materials constituting a rock song, at least at the level of understanding the temporal perception of this as a musical phenomenon in general, as well as that of the description of this musique and its perception. Indeed, one can find expressions here which are very suitable for the description of what takes place in a rock song, regardless of the undeniable distance between the forms of Western art music and those of rock, and, further, it is necessary to develop thereby specific ways more suitable for a descriptive analysis of the temporal processes in popular music in general, and in punk rock in particular.

Although Western classical music is predominantly linear, there is a nonlinear counterpart to it, and this can be seen even in Mozart's work, according to Kramer, which



contributes to the formal balance between these two forces. In this regard, he suggests two patterns of nonlinearity in this type of music: “textural consistency” and “durational proportions” (ibid.: 40-43). In the first place, by textural consistency, Kramer does not mean only that of the texture in the strictest sense of the term, but also the consistency of *motivic* material and rhythmic figure: they contribute to the establishment of a feeling of *constancy* by relying on a certain number of repetitions, since the repetitions emphasize a pattern or a rhythmic figure, and thereby the surface that is constituted by the cumulation of these figures is brought to the fore: “In such music the context is not consequence of the way the piece begins, but rather it is determined by the surface of the composition, which is in certain respects unchanging” (ibid.: 40).<sup>2</sup>

As a “listening strategy” and a “compositional attitude” (ibid.: 19), nonlinearity functions on the unchanging surface of a composition. In other words, nonlinearity is not recognized naturally and simultaneously by following the sound events one by one, as is the linearity, namely according to the temporal sequence, but is recognized *after the fact*, i.e., only through a process of retrospection and reflection of the given data. Moreover, the two are entangled. It is appropriate to quote here an impressive passage where Kramer illustrates this entanglement:

It might be argued that a constant context invites a linear hearing. In both preludes and in the Schumann piece, the second measure’s similarity to the first increases our expectation that the third measure will also be similar. Eventually the expectation for consistency turns into virtual certainty, and (in information-theoretic terms) the texture and surface rhythm become redundant. But in retrospect we realize that an unchanging principle of organization, not a progressive linearity, has been determining the texture and surface rhythm since the opening of the pieces. Once this consistency of rhythmic and textural pattern becomes a certainty, we start to notice the nonlinearity of the texture (ibid.: 42).

Likewise, when it comes to pop and rock music, nonlinearity is not supposed to be perceived during a continuation of the song's temporal progression, but the possibility of its perception arises when one or more principles of sound texture emerge in the head of the listener. It may be because you have already listened to the song at least once, or because you already know from experience a certain style to which this song belongs, that you can anticipate that the motivic texture presented at the beginning will repeat itself to some extent, even before you listen to the rest of the song. Numerous rock songs repeat a few patterns—in particular, the guitar or bass riffs, or the vocal melodies of the chorus—which can lead to such nonlinear listening. However, this type of rock, which can be divided into relatively short sections, such

---

<sup>2</sup> Kramer cites as examples of textual consistency Chopin's Prelude in C major (op. 28, no. 1), Bach's Prelude in C major (1st volume of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*) and Schumann's Stückchen (*Album for the Young*, op. 68).

as verse, chorus, bridge and pre-chorus, each of them having quite conspicuous functions as formal constituents of a song, can operate at the same time on a linear principle, similar to following each of the notes composing a melody. But here comes another nonlinear device in popular music, which is very consistent with the second pattern of nonlinearity suggested by Kramer, that is, »durational proportions«.

When he maintains that Mozart's music, which owes much of its musical effect to the principle of linearity, also has nonlinear elements, Kramer points out the results of several studies finding that the proportions between sections of the Austrian composer's music, mostly defined as tonics and non-tonics, show an unmistakable consistency. Considering that such sections are very long and extended, the effect of this nonlinearity can only be achieved by listening called "cumulative" (ibid.: 43). This principle of nonlinearity can be applied far more easily to popular music, especially to countless songs that follow a typical segmentation in their *overall* horizontal form: it is an effect that could be achieved by far fewer number of listening than required by the cumulative listening. So-called radio-friendly songs of three or four minutes, or even a little over two minutes depending on the era, can be followed by the listener with a certain anticipation of their entire horizontal structures. While this overall anticipation is based on the principle of nonlinearity, following each of sonic elements in order comes under the principle of linearity. Mostly, the two principles operate at the same time, but on different levels, affecting to the perception of the listener from different directions: the dialectic between linearity and nonlinearity. After all, the temporality of a certain music consists in how the two forces operate on different levels of its structure.

Is it worth considering the overall horizontal structure of rock music?

One of the early scholars in rock music and culture research, and a major figure in the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies, Paul Willis, in one of his earliest works, *Profane Culture* (first published in 1978), found the essence of rock'n'roll in the regularity and repeatability of its musical elements by linking these characteristics to the sense of time and the lifestyle of motor-bike boys at the turn of the 1970s in England, who had predilection for 50's rock'n'roll, epitomized here by Elvis Presley and Buddy Holly (Willis 2014: 82-104). In so doing, Willis introduced the notion of time into the interpretation of rock'n'roll music, particularly as implied by his expression "timelessness":

Fundamentally, rock 'n' roll has opened up ›new‹ possibilities because it has avoided being trapped by the received conventions concerning rhythm, tonality, and melody. Most importantly, rock 'n' roll escaped from the determinations of the classic bar structure simply by giving equal emphasis to all the beats of the bar. This subverts the bar form, and actually replaces it with a continuous pulse or basic primitive, standardized rhythm. This regular beat, rather than melody or harmony, is the basic organizing structure of the music. Its constancy and continuity mean that the music is, so to speak, a steady stream, rather than a varied structure. [...] The disregard for tonality in rock 'n' roll further enables it to experiment with repetition and 'timelessness'—in a sense to experiment with the ›space‹, the here and now, instead of the ordered time dimension of music. [...] There is little conventional chord progression and very limited development of linear expression in the form of a tune. Where they exist, melodic pieces are short, repeated several times over, and frequently totally obscured by rhythm. The suppression, breakup, or nonexistence of the melody means that each part of the music can be understood by itself. For its appreciation the music does not need to be taken as a whole, as in the classic bourgeois aesthetic principle. [...] the music can be suspended or broken off at any point, or faded at any point (Willis 2014: 100-104).

According to Willis, even if a rock'n'roll song does have a linear form, its expressivity is very limited, because there is no developmental movement in its horizontal structure as in classical music. "Instead of the ordered time dimension of music", he says, rock'n'roll »experiment with the *space*« (see above). It is very significant that Willis mentions the notion of *space* in the perception of rock'n'roll music, a notion that suggests, instead of temporal order in which one receives sound events, a spatial dimension where the listener can take this or that sonic element, striding across this dimension in any direction, as if we looked a painting (Cf. Figal 2000: 16-17). Given that Willis's work is intended to prioritize cultural interpretation, rather than analyzing the structural characteristics of the music, his description about music is a bit exaggerated in more than one way. Still, Willis's remarque deserves to be appreciated as an early and rare attempt to illuminate a temporal feature of rock'n'roll, where the temporal order can be ignored in some way and, instead, a static state, even a *stasis*, is created. He goes as far as to affirm: "For its appreciation the music does not need to be taken as a whole, as in the classic bourgeois aesthetic principle" (see above)

In fact, it is enlightening to consider his arguments in relation to those of Kramer, especially since Willis seeks to identify these features of rock'n'roll by means of a comparison with those of Western art music, in particular as regards rhythm, tonality, and melody. In a way, here, rock'n'roll is considered an antipode to Western art music. In this regard, we have to wonder if, as the research perspective predominates that was established primarily on the basis of differentiating popular music from classical music, any attempt to apply a method close to the horizontal analysis of the latter has not been rejected as being an error of anachronism.

Indeed, in *Take Three Chords: Punk Rock Und Die Entwicklung Zum American Hardcore* by Dirk Budde (1997), one of the first studies attempting to attack the musical side of punk and hardcore, going beyond just historical narrative on it, we can see such *vigilance*. Throughout the book, the author reminds us that punk and hardcore music prioritizes the

vertical aspect of sound, “*Soundwalls*” (Budde 1997: 80), and how far the results of traditional method of harmonic analysis is away from the intentions of rock and pop musicians when applied to popular music analysis (ibid.: 11). The German musicologist offers two perspectives, horizontal and vertical, as the two axes along which songs are analyzed. Yet, while the vertical analysis takes into account all sorts of possible dimensions of instruments and vocals, such as timbre, intensity, and playing mode, the horizontal analysis is limited to noticing the tempo and length of the song and treating the patterns or the structure of phrasing, which are relatively short, i.e., rarely last more than four bars. There is no analysis from the perspective of an *overall* song form. In fact, as for his horizontal analysis, there are no horizontal images or diagrams, let alone traditional sheet music, and features are mentioned in only a few words. Budde intended to avoid errors in rock music analysis, but too much vigilance turned into a lack of completeness in the research. Willis’s assertion that »rock'n'roll music does not need to be taken as a whole« echoes with Budde’s research method perfectly, namely a meticulous analysis of punk and hardcore songs like no one had ever attempted, without ever dealing with the form of an entire song.<sup>3</sup>

We do not completely oppose Willis’s argument that rock’n’roll creates a static state by its uniquely simple and repetitive form or Budde’s that the vertical sound, or the tendency to concentrate all the energy into each of the passing moments, should be given justice by popular music scholars. From the temporal perspective of music, however, there needs to be a dialectic interpretation between different factors operating in different levels and directions, and, as mentioned above, the main characteristics of popular music, if not all genres and styles are concerned, such as the relatively short length, the sectional form, and the conventional order of sections in its overall form, should also be taken more seriously, especially with regard to temporality and temporal perception. Furthermore, with the evolution of punk music, as songs become increasingly shorter and the tempo increases, this horizontal image of music undergoes a major turning point. While the idea of horizontal process with clear division of sections remains hardly changed in punk and hardcore punk, the sequence of sections takes place much faster, i.e., with fewer intervals, due to the extreme compression of the length of the song and its tempo. This *compression* leads to the disappearance of all, or almost all temporal space, the space where the listener could enjoy the static state and timelessness. The change that occurs in the horizontal flow gains importance through several factors, which we will mention in the following.

---

<sup>3</sup> Note that a German translation of Willis’s book had been published in 1991, and it is moreover indicated by Budde as one of the references for his book.

## Gaining a sense of urgency on the horizontal level of a hardcore punk song

*Length:* The first one is length. It's rare to find a song with a length of over two minutes in the repertoire of a band generally regarded as hardcore punk in 1980s. In most cases, the length of a song is around one minute, while there are many songs of less than thirty seconds. The short length is the most apparent factor contributing to the differentiation of this sub-genre from 1970's punk rock. This tendency to *extreme shortness* or *extreme compression* reaches its peak in hardcore variants such as thrashcore and grindcore, exemplified by the early recordings of D.R.I from Houston and Napalm Death from Meriden, England. While their 15-minute-songs with still conventional sectional constituents (e.g., verses, choruses) demonstrate a sort of *miniature* concept, the tracks of less than 5 seconds rather *symbolize* the idea itself of extreme shortness and compression.

*Sectional factors:* If a song which has, by definition, a certain number of repetitions of the main sections such as verses and choruses (or refrains), is of extremely short length, it's not only due to being as fast, but also to the fact that the number of bars covered by these sections is relatively small, or that there are few ›intermediate‹ instrumental sections, including what Chris Endrinal called “link” (Endrinal 2008), that can be found between verse-chorus pairs in many conventional rock songs. Besides, there being often no bridge or solo section, no intro or outro, it results in *immediate* repetitions of verse-chorus pairs occupying almost the whole running time of a song.

*Abrupt ending:* In addition, in many cases, there being no particular ending section, a song finishes abruptly at the very moment when the last chorus, or, less frequently, the whole or part of the last verse, comes to an end. The rest is a memory of roaring sound that lingers on afterwards in silence. While most of the early songs of Black Flag are clearly shorter than those of rock'n'roll, hard rock, and '70s punk rock, there *are* several factors, such as the standard backbeat pattern, the tempo being not so fast, and the sections that are not so short, which might somehow lead to Willis's *stable* and *spatial* mode of listening, a state without any horizontal process considered. However, a certain length of *timelessness* the listener would experience passing through those sections, comes to an end suddenly and unexpectedly, with the song ending abruptly. “Wasted” of the first EP by Black Flag, containing merely two and a half repetitions of chorus-verse pattern within 51 seconds, is the best combination of these three

factors: The shorter, the simpler, so that the overall horizontal structure can easily be kept in mind, the harder the effect of the abrupt ending is.

*Skank beat* and *blast beat*: *Out Of Vogue* EP (1979) by Middle Class, one of the first hardcore records, contains songs which are played at a much faster tempo than those of Black Flag, based on a different kind of drum pattern called *skank beat* as the rhythmic foundation. Characterized by fast alternations (around 300 b.p.m.) between mostly kick and snare hits, skank beat would soon become by far the most favorite drum patterns among hardcore punk bands. The usage of skank beat brings with it two different consequences: first, as implied by the origin of its name, the second and fourth beats, i.e., the snare hits, of a quadruple meter, equivalent to the characteristic guitar strokes (also called *skank*) of ska or reggae, tends not to be counted as beats, since the tempo is so fast that every beat cannot be followed by foot-tapping, let alone by dancing. As with *blast beat*, even faster alternation, any of the beats in a meter can hardly be considered to be tapped by the listener, but it grows to be a block of sound, rather than any rhythmic figure (Pearson 2019). As the most important factor of producing new sense of speed, blast beat is generally known to be first used by D.R.I (1982) and coined as such by Napalm Death, generally considered pioneer of thrashcore and grindcore, respectively. Another consequence with skank beat, and later with blast beat, originates in musicians starting to use these drum patterns as the rhythmic foundation for certain sections of a song, not for the whole song. In particular, the transition from a relatively slow or half-time section into a fast skank beat or blast beat section is intended to cause the sense of *acceleration* and *haste*.

*Micro-acceleration*: In addition to the acceleration mentioned above with skank and blast beat, another kind of acceleration is produced on a *micro-level*, so to speak, either on one part (instrument or vocal) or all parts, as also mentioned earlier with a remarque of Marcus. For example, in the chorus of “Rat Patrol” (1980) by The Untouchables from Washington D.C., where all instruments and lead vocal are *pounding* the song-title, main lyrical idea of the song, like a *slogan*, i.e., with its syllables clearly separated and highly intensified, momentary and slight acceleration is applied to each of the syllables by all four members. A particular sense of urgency is provoked associated with the object attacked in that slogan. This kind of acceleration is something normally considered a mistake or a lack of musicianship, since it occurs due to the lack of control especially when a lot of emotion is going into it. Hardcore punk is among the few musical styles to convert the lack of musical skill or incompetency itself into a musical character or a device of expression. Such *spontaneous* acceleration is also found in many other

songs, such as “I Hate You” by the same band, “Teen Idles” by Teen Idles, both recorded in 1980, several tracks in D.R.I.’s first LP (1982), and in the vocal part of »Out Of Step« by Minor Threat (1983 version).

### Synthesis, conclusion, and beyond

The texts of analytical research and critical reflection that we discussed about in the first part, evoke the existence of a certain relation between this feeling of *urgency* and the use of certain sound and musical materials. Here, we can find two different tendencies. The first one, as in the texts of Headlam and Cope about the appropriation of certain blues elements by pioneers of hard rock, refers mainly to more framed repetition of a unit, and to repetitive beats, around which rhythmic events are polarized and emphasized. Reinforced by regularization, music becomes an act of inciting something of *priority*: this is what must be expressed before anything else. This is achieved either by means of musical units or by words; or both. The second one, suggested by Marcus, distinguishes punk rock from other rock genres. The voice in punk rock, i.e., phrasing, flow, tone, and nuances in its enunciation and pronunciation, tends to be arranged, processed, at times irregularly or *out of time*. It is delicately accelerated in time, either in synchronization with the instruments, or by shifting from them. Besides, what Easley indicates by the word *urgency* is not only musical but also physical. Connoted here by vocal delivery and musicians' gesture, the sense of urgency is provoked in hardcore punk music by a sort of deviation or deviance, by way of unexpected, spontaneous, and temporarily made irregularity to the very conventions to which this music belongs: transgression in terms of temporal progression or transgression of the horizontal structure of the song. In this sense, one of the criteria that best allow to differentiate '80s punk hardcore songs from those of the previous decade is their extremely short length, which is reduced below the usual radio-friendly limits. Besides, this slight deviance from the established formal rules also affects the smaller sections that compose the song. The dialectic of linearity and nonlinearity thus operates on different levels. Briefly speaking, it is linear to be divided into a small number of short functional sections, but non-linear in that each of their functions and the order of their appearances are standardized or dominated by convention. Here again, hardcore punk's unique linearity emerges, when it shakes this stereotype in its own manner. The listener must follow these strangely waving points, one by one, throughout the whole song, which turns out to be linear listening.

Like linearity and nonlinearity, the urgency is created at different temporal dimension of the composition and performance of a song. First, there is the dimension of the whole song. Then, we can divide it horizontally, according to the sections that constitute it, identifiable by their rhythm, chords, presence or absence of each of the instruments, words, tempo, etc. Under the dimension of the entire section, there can be sub-sections made up of several measures, and further, even smaller units constituting them, definable by certain interactions between different sound materials including slight and spontaneous acceleration and temporal rupture between different instruments. The meaning engendered by these interactions is always related to the memory, the recollection, the retention, of the events which precede, and the anticipation of those which will appear, immediately or more distantly, by way of continuity or rupture, similarity or contrast. One of the main characteristics of hardcore punk is that it frequently breaks the principle of nonlinearity, i.e., *stasis* by regularization, of most rock music. A multi-level horizontal analysis of punk and hardcore music is, therefore, indispensable.

And we need to examine more in detail how urgency is generated through certain musical materials and devices in the process of *radicalization* from punk to hardcore. This will also lead to further questions as to whether there is a relation, and if yes, what relation can be drawn between the notion of urgency posed in terms of the culture, the way of life of a certain historical period, whether dominant or marginal, global or local, complacent or alternative, and the sense of urgency that emanates from the structure of music itself.

## References

Azerrad, Michael (2001). *One Band Could Be Your Life: Scenes from The American Indie Underground 1981-1991*. New York; Boston; London: Back Bay Books/Little, Brown and Company.

Belsito, Peter, et Bob Davis. *Hardcore California: A History of Punk and New Wave*. Berkeley CA: Last Gasp of San Francisco, 2004.

Blair, Eric (2019). »Ex-Black Flag Bassist Kira Roessler interview.« In: *The Blairing Out with Eric Blair Show* (Youtube video). [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_9gdqZz67iU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_9gdqZz67iU). Access: 31.7.2021.

Blush, Steven (2010). *American Hardcore: A Tribal History*. 2nd ed. Port Townsend WA: Feral House.



- Budde, Dirk (1997). *Take three chords... Punkrock und die Entwicklung zum American Hardcore*. Schriften zur Populärmusikforschung. Hambourg: Coda.
- Carassi, Clarice. « Hardcore punk, anomalia italiana », 9 mai 2020. <https://ilmanifesto.it/hardcore-punk-anomalia-italiana/>. Access: 31.7.2021.
- Cope, Andrew L. (2010). *Black Sabbath and the Rise of Heavy Metal Music*, New York: Routledge.
- Curran, Kieran (2013). *The Cynic Sensibility in British Popular Literature and Culture 1950 to 1987*. PhD thesis. University of Edinburgh.
- Earslaughterers, The. « Terminal Sound Nuisance: Quali Domani Quale Futuro: a Look at Classic Italian Hardcore 81-90 (part 1) ». *Terminal Sound Nuisance* (blog), 20 avril 2020. <https://terminalsoundnuisance.blogspot.com/2020/04/quali-domani-quale-futuro-look-at.html>. Access: 31.7.2021.
- Easley, David B. (2011). *»It's Not My Imagination, I've Got a Gun on My Back!«: Style and Sound in Early American Hardcore Punk, 1978-1983*. PhD Thesis, Florida State University.
- Endrinal, Chris (2008). *Form and Style in the Music of U2*. PhD Thesis, Florida State University.
- Figal, Günter. « Zeit und Präsenz als Ästhetische Kategorien ». In *Musik in der Zeit Zeit in der Musik*, ed. Richard Klein, Eckehard Kiem, and Wolfram Ette. Göttingen: Velbrück, 2000.
- Headlam, David (1995). «Does the Song Remain the Same?: Questions of Authorship and Identification in the Music of Led Zeppelin.» In: *Concert Music, Rock, and Jazz since 1945 : Essays and Analytical Studies*. Ed. by Elizabeth West Marvin and Richard Hermann,.. New York: University of Rochester Press, p. 313-363.
- Kramer, Jonathan D. (1988). *The Time of Music*. New York: Schirmer Books.
- Laing, David (2015). *One Chord Wonders: Power and Meaning In Punk Rock*. PM Press edition. Oakland: PM Press.
- Lasch, Christopher (2018). *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations*. Reissue with a new introduction. New York; London: W.W.Norton & Company.
- Lipovetsky, Gilles (1983). *L'ère du vide : Essais sur l'individualisme contemporain*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Macleod, Dewar (2010). *Kids of The Black Hole*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Marcus, Greil (2001). *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of The Twentieth Century*. Twentieth-Anniversary Edition. London: Farber and Farber.
- Oxford Learner's Dictionary, »<https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/urgency?q=urgency>«, Access: 31.7.2021.

- Pearson, David M. (2019). »Extreme Hardcore Punk and the Analytical Challenges of Rhythm, Riffs, and Timbre in Punk Music«. In: *Society for Music Theory*. Vol. 25, No. 1. <https://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.19.25.1/mto.19.25.1.pearson.php>. Access: 1.2.2021.
- Rollins, Henry. *Get in the Van: on the road with Black Flag*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Los Angeles: 2.13.61 Publications, 2004.
- Savage, Jon. *England's dreaming: Sex Pistols and Punk Rock*. London: Farber and Farber, 1991.
- Thompson, Stacy. *Punk Productions: Unfinished Business*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2004.
- Spitz, Marc, et Brendan Mullen, ed., *We Got the Neutron Bomb: The Untold Story of L.A. Punk*. New York: Random House, 2001.
- Tonooka, Tim. «Black Flag interview in Ripper». *Ripper*, 6 septembre 1980. [http://www.dementlieu.com/users/obik/arc/blackflag/int\\_ripper3.html](http://www.dementlieu.com/users/obik/arc/blackflag/int_ripper3.html). Access: 31.7.2021.
- Willis, Paul E. (2014). *Profane culture*. Paperback edition with new preface. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Worley, Matthew. *No Future: Punk, Politics and British Youth Culture, 1976-1984*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.
- Zénouda, Hervé (2016). »Au tout début du punk parisien : du lycée Charlemagne au Club 100.« In: *Volume !*. Vol. 13, No. 1, p. 17-19.

## Discography

- Bad Brains (1979). *Pay To Cum*. BB001
- Black Flag (1978). *Nervous Breakdown*. SST 001.
- Black Flag (1982). *Everything Went Black*. SST 015.
- D.R.I. (1983). *Dirty Rotten LP*. R Radical Records 1983.
- The Middle Class (2008). *Out Of Vogue – the early material*. Frontier 31078.
- The Teen Idles (1980). *Minor Disturbance*. Discord 1.
- Various Artists (1982). *Flex Your Head*. Dischord 7.