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Just a noisy hall, where there's a nightly brawl, and all that punk: The problematic union of craft beer and punk.

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Abstract

It has been claimed that craft beer and punk are bedfellows. There are large numbers of Millennials among drinkers of craft beer and fans of punk, and each can play a significant role in drinkers' and fans' identities. Communities are built around the appreciation of each, and precision is important. Subtle distinctions between different craft beers are magnified to craft beer drinkers; subtle differences in sound between different punk bands are magnified to committed punk fans. Obscure craft beers manufactured in low numbers reflect the limited run of 100 units of an album pressed on vinyl by an obscure punk band. These similarities have not gone unnoticed by craft breweries or punk bands. Scottish brewery BrewDog uses the word 'punk' in its products and literature; US brewery Stone Brewing partnered with US punk band NOFX to produce a NOFX-branded craft beer. However, both breweries have suffered as a consequence. This article reflects on both breweries' appropriation of punk and considers factors that contributed to problems that they subsequently encountered. In both cases, though in different ways, conceptions of punk that are lazy, platitudinous or both have contributed towards the issues suffered.

Keywords: BrewDog, genre theory, mainstream, NOFX, subculture, Stone Brewing

Article

Punk as a music genre, an ideology or concept can be difficult to define. Partly this can be attributed to disagreements or confusion relating to its synchronic and diachronic boundaries. These have been referred to as its 'flexible parameters' (Home 1995: 69). Synchronically, which bands in any chosen era playing punk-like music should be considered punk? How straightforward is it to identify a point on a gradation of punk where we can reliably state that a band or song is 'not punk'. Diachronically, contested issues include: When did punk start? Can or should we consider music that influenced punk also to be punk? When did punk end? Did it end at all? If it did end, can or should we consider music influenced by punk also to be, in some sense, punk?

Disagreements on terminology can lead to extremely tightly defined conceptions of punk as both a music genre and a subculture. For some, punk existed only in the form of a small number of bands, with a relatively small number of fans, in specific locations, during a

specific time period and with a distinct set of politics. The motivating factors behind 'boxing in' punk in this way are arguably understandable. This sense of subcultural gatekeeping was already being threatened by commercial interests during the first phase of punk in the United Kingdom in the mid-1970s. Dick Hebdige cites a September 1977 issue of *Cosmopolitan* in which the work of 'punk-inspired' (Robinson 2014: 298) fashion designer Zandra Rhodes was reviewed. The piece considered Rhodes's:

latest collection of couture follies which consisted entirely of variations on the punk theme. Models smouldered beneath mountains of safety pins and plastic [...] and the accompanying article ended with an aphorism – 'To shock is chic' – which presaged the subculture's imminent demise.

(Hebdige 1979: 96)

Similarly, Lucy O'Brien cites the inclusion of Rhodes's 'bejewelled safety-pin and delicately torn evening dress' (1999: 197) in a *Women's Own* article focused on DIY punk. Furthermore, O'Brien (1999: 197) sees this 'obvious' absorption into the mainstream as a death of sorts for punk.

Tightening or strengthening the boundaries of something that is (or was) ostensibly anti-corporate (Mattson 2001) might go some way to diminishing the impact of the mainstreaming of punk in the ways described by Hebdige (1979) and O'Brien (1999). There are issues here, however. First, similarly to punk, 'the mainstream' is a term one might struggle to define. It has been deployed 'in a variety of contexts, ranging from politics and social policy to cultural identity and popular culture, and emerging from academia, journalism, public debate and beyond' (Huber 2013: 3). Huber (2013) argues this can lead to the term losing meaning to the point of having no use theoretically. Despite this, for Huber, 'mainstream' refers to popular culture that 'dominate[s] everyday life at certain times and in certain places' (2013: 12). Using a 1990s pop band with a short-lived career as an example, she highlights how changing tastes, technology and business models can affect what is and what is not 'mainstream'. Being mainstream for a band or genre can be temporary, then, making the task of identifying what is and what is not mainstream somewhat problematic. While it may be misleading to consider as mainstream only 'teen idols, boy bands, girl bands and other seemingly prefabricated pop phenomena [that] appear[s] cynically to appeal to and manipulate the least sophisticated tastes' (Stahl 2013: 25), it is typically music that appeals to young audiences in large numbers and that is featured in music charts that one should consider 'mainstream'. Second, once one has established what one means by the 'mainstream', it may be possible to protect punk from projects that thrust it into the mainstream by tightening its boundaries, in the sense that it would present an evidence-based argument for why these are distinct from punk. However, one might consider it a form of self-harm to allow the appropriating actions of others to influence the form or life-expectancy of punk.

Herein lies part of the problem. Parent culture tends to borrow from deviant or transgressive subcultures, but only certain parts and in certain ways. This way it can lean on the ostensible credibility of a subculture while discarding its arguably uglier sides that do not share the same mainstream or commercial appeal. Indeed, some of these uglier sides,

whether in the form of symbols, slogans, ideas, humour or whatever, exist in part to isolate subcultures from the mainstream/parent culture. One notes that *Cosmopolitan's* commitment to its 'shock is chic' punk aesthetic did not include the Nazi swastikas worn, supposedly ironically, by some punks (Quinn 1994). By being selective in this way, the mainstream can appear to 'have it both ways'. It benefits from the supposed credibility or authenticity of the subculture while ignoring those elements that do not share the same commercial or broader appeal. However, in doing so, it – and by 'it' one should include both the parent culture organizations appropriating the subculture and broader society that buys into it – demonstrates either an intentional or unintentional ignorance of the subculture.

A recent example of this can be seen in the world of craft beer appropriating punk in various ways. First, however, one should note that this union is not entirely without coherent grounding. It has been stated that 'craft beer and punk rock share a number of similarities in terms of approach' (Kristiansen 2020: 33). One way it has been suggested that the two share commonality is in the high proportion of Millennials among consumers/fans. They both play a significant role in the formation of identity in their committed followers; they place a degree of emphasis on experience over 'things' and can form the basis of a lifelong commitment. In some ways, this mirrors the passion for real ale among Baby Boomers (Harkness 2018). Like punks, fans of craft beer can have a preference for categorical purity. There are many kinds of craft beer, many of which are only subtly – but importantly – different from one another. This could be likened to the countless subgenres of punk whose differences may only be minor. Mirroring Freud's narcissism of small differences, in which 'the little dissimilarities in persons who are otherwise alike [...] arouse feelings of strangeness and enmity between them' (1997: 65), subtle differences between beers – or punk bands – can be the difference between adoration and revulsion (Pozner et al. 2021). Furthermore, both share a production process that is often small scale and 'rooted in alternative and/or oppositional identities' (Pozner et al. 2021: 17). Like punks, breweries who violate perceived authenticity or integrity can be castigated or criticized by their 'community' (Pozner et al. 2021). Those craft breweries that achieve unprecedented growth on a worldwide scale can 'blur the lines of what can be considered "craft" and what becomes mainstream' (Cunningham and Barclay 2020: 264). One can see how this same blurring of lines can apply to punk bands that penetrate the mainstream. Considering another type of appropriation but in the opposite direction, Colorado brewery Ratio Beerworks was founded by members of punk band The Fairlanes once the band split up. They saw the same community spirit in craft beer that they had experienced in music and have punk-themed names for some of their beers (Stoller 2020). Perhaps these similarities, among others, are motivating factors behind the creation of the Punk in Drublic Craft Beer and Music Festival, whose organizers include Fat Mike of the San Francisco punk band NOFX. The festival claims to feature 'the best in punk rock music and regional craft beer' (Punk in Drublic Festival 2022: n.pag.).

Despite this, associating punk with craft beer has been problematic. Scottish brewery BrewDog uses the word 'punk' in its products and makes explicit and implicit claims of a 'punk ethos' driving its organization. American brewery Stone Brewing formed a partnership with NOFX and the Punk in Drublic Craft Beer and Music Festival. Both

breweries' interactions with punk presented benefits and drawbacks. In a number of ways, these mirror the 'mainstreaming' effects outlined above. In the case of both breweries, 'having it both ways' appears not to have been possible. By adopting a partial and somewhat incoherent conception of punk, which could be summarized as 'disruptive' or 'anti-establishment', both breweries faced criticism in various forms – which will be addressed later.

This conception of punk is not unique to breweries. Used in this way, the term 'punk' has been applied to a broad assortment of different material and immaterial entities, objects, behaviours and groups (Spicer 2006: n.pag). It has been argued that cryptocurrency Bitcoin is punk on account of its disruption of mainstream finance (Rundle 2017). Gavin McInnes, founder of alt-right group the Proud Boys, considers conservatism to be 'the new punk' (Romero 2021 10) on account of a mainstream political discourse he considers to be overwhelmed with political correctness. In response to this, some have claimed that this is to misunderstand conservative politics. Instead of conservatism, it was the online 'shitposting' that comprises some alt-right discourse on websites such as 4chan that was 'the new punk'. And, by extension, the unorthodox political style of Donald Trump, which arguably more closely resembled 4chan shitposting than it did conservative politics, could be considered 'punk' (Jensen 2017).

Ignoring any ideological gulfs between Donald Trump and punk, lazy definitions such as these can be unhelpful. Arguably they are especially unhelpful when used by members of, for want of a better term, the punk community. To demonstrate this and given that his band will be discussed in detail in this article, Fat Mike of NOFX states that punk could be defined in the following way:

The cool thing about punk is you can do anything, no matter how fucked-up it is, and say, 'Well, it's punk' [...] You can't throw a brick through a window and say, 'That's jazz'. It doesn't work. It only works in punk rock.
(The Doug Stanhope Podcast 2017)

This article will examine BrewDog and Stone Brewing's engagement with punk. The drawbacks that coloured these interactions will be the primary focus. Some time will be spent considering conceptions of punk by punk artists, punk fans, punk academics and others not particularly involved in punk subculture much or at all. I will argue that vague and careless and arguably misleading conceptions of punk have predominantly led to the problems faced by BrewDog and Stone Brewing.

BrewDog

BrewDog is a brewery and pub chain that was founded in Scotland in 2007. Arguably it is best known for its 5.4 per cent India pale ale, 'Punk IPA'. According to a tweet by majority owner James Watt, BrewDog is one of the top twenty highest valued beer brands worldwide (Watt 2020). Despite its apparent high value and wide availability, the brewery claims to reject the conventions of its mainstream competitors. In a book titled Business

for Punks that outlines the successes of the brewery, Watt claims BrewDog does not ‘give a damn and [its] approach has always been anti-authoritarian and non-conformist’ (2015: 8). Despite this approach to doing business – or perhaps in some ways because of it – some of its practices have drawn criticism from various sources, as have the inappropriate ways James Watt has behaved around some staff and customers (‘The Truth about BrewDog’ 2022). While it is not necessary to consider James Watt’s personal behaviour in this article, it is important to establish some of the ways BrewDog’s appropriation of punk into its ethos has attracted controversy.

In 2017 it was reported in *The Guardian* that BrewDog had threatened legal action against Leeds-based music promoter Tony Green (Davies 2017b). BrewDog’s legal threat followed Green’s plans to open a bar titled ‘Draft Punk’. The bar was to be small and family-run, and its name was allegedly a tongue-in-cheek reference to the French dance music act Daft Punk. BrewDog claimed it owns the trademark to the word ‘punk’ when used in reference to beer (BrewDog 2017; Davies 2017b) and so considered this an infringement on its intellectual property. The day after his article was published in *The Guardian*, reporter Rob Davies tweeted the full letter to Tony Green, in which it formally opposed Green’s application to trademark ‘Draft Punk’. The letter cites the brewery has a ‘well established beer under the name of PUNK [...] since 2007 [and] has consequently acquired significant goodwill and reputation’ using the word. It states the UK Trademark Registration Number related to its ownership of the word ‘PUNK’ (fully capitalized in the letter) for ‘beer, lager’ (Davies 2017c).

The manner in which BrewDog conducted its legal threat has been described as unfriendly and unsuccessful (Jong and Ormaechea 2018). However, it is questionable to what extent it was unsuccessful. Green did not pursue his plans to open the bar, and it can be seen in Rob Davies’ tweet that Green withdrew his trademark application on 3 October 2016 (Davies 2017c).

Davies’ (2017b) article in *The Guardian* was not explicitly critical of BrewDog, although its tone could be read as implicitly so. He cites an article he had published in *The Guardian* the previous day in which BrewDog had withdrawn a legal case against another family-owned pub. In this case, the Birmingham-based pub had planned to name itself ‘Lone Wolf’ and had applied for the requisite trademark. BrewDog produces gin under the same name, and so a similar threat had resulted (Davies 2017a). In the article, a tweet from James Watt is cited – which appears since to have been deleted – in which he states the brewery’s intentions to withdraw the case. BrewDog’s lawyers had been ‘a bit trigger happy’, he says, and he was content with the Birmingham pub to retain the ‘Lone Wolf’ name. The article states the pub’s owners were not comfortable with the concept of being given ‘permission’ by BrewDog and so elected to use the name ‘The Wolf’ instead (Davies 2017a). Davies (2017b) also quotes Tony Green who criticizes BrewDog for apparent contradictions between its use of the word ‘punk’ and its actions. Its tactics of intimidation do not align with punk ideals, Green states, and, above all, punk cannot be owned: ‘[T]hat’s the whole point [...] It’s inherited, it’s British culture’ (Davies 2017b).

An earlier article in the same publication by Henley (2016), in which the author interviews the brewery's primary owners and others, goes into far more detail about what BrewDog has done well and what it has not. Some of this involves reflections on the brewery's use of the word 'punk' in its products and literature. It cites BrewDog's claim that it is a 'post-punk, apocalyptic, motherfucker of a craft brewery' (Henley 2016: n.pag.) and that the choice of the name 'Punk IPA' was influenced by a desire for its product to 'blow up' the beer-drinking industry in a way that mirrored the effect they infer that punk had on the popular music industry. The author spoke with Mike Benner, then chief executive of the Society of Independent Brewers, who described BrewDog's strategy as 'their so-called punk philosophy' (Henley 2016).

As a result of its legal threats, BrewDog received a significant amount of criticism via social media. Some of this criticism was aimed at its use of the word 'punk' and so-called punk ideals and how these contradict some of the ways it goes about its business that more closely reflect those of multinational organizations. However, one should not be surprised if BrewDog acts like a multinational organization – it is one (Ahmed et al. 2021). The way it conducts its business is relatively customary in the beer industry, even if it is at odds with its rebellious or atypical approach to marketing (Kmflett's Blog 2020).

A Marketing Week article notes BrewDog's heavy-handedness in the trademark cases it elects to fight and how supposedly 'unpunk' it is to use the force of the law to dominate a competitor in the ways it has (Hammett 2019). It criticizes the brewery in a number of other ways. In 2013 BrewDog rejected spending any money on advertising for ideological reasons. In an interview, James Watt stated he 'would rather take [his] money and set fire to it. [Advertising is] the antithesis of everything we stand for and everything we believe in. It's [...] shallow [and] fake' (Charles 2013: n.pag.). However, in 2019 it embraced a number of high-cost mainstream advertising campaigns (Hammett 2019). Marketing Week also claims the brewery did not pay a PR agency that proposed the name 'Punk AF' for its alcohol-free beer, which BrewDog later adopted. Alongside this, it cites the brewery not paying prospective employees for travel, among a number of other transgressions, some of which have been mentioned earlier in this article (Hammett 2019).

Marketing Week states that BrewDog's attempts to retain its 'disruptive, challenger status' while growing into a mainstream global brand are desperate. Leaning on its use of 'punk', the article states BrewDog 'still sees itself as the Sex Pistols of beer, when in reality it's now about as punk as Green Day when the band released American Idiot in 2004' (Hammett 2019: n.pag.). On this point, it is worthwhile noting that BrewDog does not use any of the signifiers typically associated with punk on its website or in its marketing materials or merchandise. It rejects the 'DIY aesthetic unapologetic for its raw and amateur production quality' (Triggs 2006: 74) found on punk posters and album artwork. The same is true of punk fashion: 'multi-colored, extreme hairstyles and body modifications [alongside] various forms of black leather often studded or spiked' (Langman 2008: 666) are spurned in favour of an overall aesthetic comparable to other craft breweries. Further distancing itself from punk, and acknowledged in the Marketing Week article, BrewDog appears not to have used the music of any punk bands in the promotion of its Punk IPA.

Distancing itself from wider punk culture could be an intentional strategy, although it may be of necessity. On 1 April 2017, an open letter claiming to be from ‘the global punk community’, addressed to BrewDog and titled ‘Cease and desist: An open letter to BrewDog from punk’, was posted to garagelandlondon.com (Garageland 2017: n.pag). The open letter had close to 300 signatories. These were predominantly punk bands (for full disclosure, I previously played in a band that signed the open letter), but also punk record labels, punk record shops and various other punk collectives. Claiming to be ‘benefactors of the punk legacy [and] the owners of the word “punk”’ (Garageland 2017: n.pag), signatories acknowledge that they have tolerated and at times celebrated BrewDog’s use of punk terminology and anti-establishment practices. However, the letter criticizes the brewery in its legal action against Draft Punk. The letter is signed off with the following:

Definitions of punk are varied and debates over those definitions have been going on since before you were born. However, one thing punk is not is a bully! That goes against everything punk stands for. If you continue in this vein your punk credentials will be revoked and you will be called upon to cease and desist.

(Garageland 2017: n.pag.)

As this is the conclusion to the letter, it is not clear how BrewDog’s ‘punk credentials’ would or could be ‘revoked’ by its signatories. Furthermore, one could argue the threatening nature of the letter features the sort of bullying tactics its authors claim not to be characteristic of punk. However, the point is clear: by using the word ‘punk’ and borrowing from or appealing to apparently agreed-upon punk ideals, BrewDog had tacitly agreed to confine itself to expected ways of operating. The critiques of BrewDog discussed thus far appear largely to be a result of it transgressing those unspoken agreements. Nevertheless, if ‘the global punk community’ did somehow revoke BrewDog’s punk credentials, this act appears not to have affected the company in any meaningful or observable way, perhaps beyond no longer counting the letter’s signatories among its customers. BrewDog continues to sell its Punk IPA and Punk AF beers in high quantities, both in bars and supermarkets. It employs 2000 people; its annual sales exceed £215 million; and it owns over 100 bars across the world (Davies 2021).

Stone Brewing

Unlike BrewDog, Escondido’s California-based craft brewery Stone Brewing connected itself to punk in 2017 by partnering with the punk band NOFX. Rather than explicitly committing to any supposed punk rock ideals in the style of BrewDog, Stone Brewing implied its connection to punk through an existing punk band and fanbase. The partnership included sponsorship of a touring festival and, as is still detailed on its website, the creation of a ‘hoppy lager’ that is ‘hopped-up, bold, [and] flavorful’ (Stone Brewing 2022). Both the touring festival and beer are titled after NOFX’s 1994 breakthrough album Punk in Drublic, and their brand identity reflects some of the images used in the Punk in Drublic album artwork.

However, by 2018 Stone Brewing had severed its relationship with NOFX. This was as a result of a joke told by members of the band onstage at the 2018 Punk Rock Bowling and Music Festival held in Las Vegas. The joke referenced the 2017 Las Vegas mass shooting, which remains as of May 2022 the deadliest mass shooting committed by an individual in the modern history of the United States. On 1 October 2017, from his room at the Mandalay Bay hotel, Stephen Paddock opened fire onto attendees at the Route 91 Country Musical Festival. In total, 58 people were killed, 418 were wounded and a further 375 were injured in the resulting panic. Paddock subsequently killed himself (Croitoru et al. 2020).

NOFX has a long history of using humour and telling jokes onstage, in-between songs and sometimes during songs. Some proportion of these are risqué, of questionable taste or in generally poor taste. The joke the band told on this occasion came following a performance of its song '72 Hookers', an anti-war song that leans on the supposition that Muslims who martyr themselves in pursuit of their faith will be rewarded with 72 virgins in the afterlife (Warraq 2002). Its lyrics comedically play on the assumption that if the promise of 72 virginal sex slaves plays some part in the motivating factors for martyrdom, world peace might be more easily achieved if the United States was to send sex-workers to the Middle East instead of the military (Burkett 2012a). The wording of the joke told by three members of the band is as follows:

Fat Mike: We played a song about Muslims and we didn't get shot. Alright.
Eric Melvin: I guess you only get shot in Vegas if you are in a country band.
Fat Mike: You know, I mean, that sucked but at least they were country fans and not punk rock fans.
El Hefe: Hey, that's not cool.
Eric Melvin: You were all thinking it. But he said it [pointing to Fat Mike].
Fat Mike: Did I offend somebody? I can't fucking believe it.

(TMZ 2018)

A video of the joke was shared by online tabloid gossip magazine TMZ, and very quickly, mainstream traditional media outlets in the United States began reporting on it. The video was subsequently shared widely on the internet. Las Vegas DJs Dave and Mahoney from X1075 boycotted the band and urged others to do the same (Lewis and O'Neal 2018). Reputation-conscious promoters and venue owners cancelled any upcoming NOFX performances (Kristiansen 2020). To distance itself from NOFX's comments and confirm the dissolved relationship, Stone Brewing released the following statement:

We at Stone Brewing are aware of NOFX's insensitive and indefensible statements this past weekend. As a result, we are severing all our ties with NOFX, including festival sponsorship and the production of our collaboration beer. We respect punk rock, and the DIY ethos for which it stands. To us, it means standing up for things you believe in, and fearlessly committing to what's right. And it is for that reason that Stone Brewing is immediately disassociating ourselves from the band NOFX. Stone had a sponsorship deal for this summer's Punk In Drublic festivals. Emphasis 'had'. That sponsorship is now canceled. At this moment, there is Stone & NOFX Punk In Drublic Hopy Lager in the marketplace that was brewed by Stone Brewing. It's done already. Know that NOFX does not earn any money from

the sale of the beer. Nevertheless, to try our best to make some good come out of these awful comments, we have decided that we will donate \$1 per six-pack to the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department Foundation, which provides post Route 91 trauma counseling for officers and other first responders alongside other safety programs, training and funding. We have cancelled any future rebrews of this beer. We apologize to the fans of the beer itself, but know that we make this decision out of respect to all. Punk rock is cool. These callous comments were the furthest thing from it.

(Stone Brewing 2018)

What is remarkable about the controversy that followed the band's onstage comments is largely how unremarkable they are among the various things NOFX has done or said onstage (or offstage) across its nearly 40-year history. The band is known for being politically incorrect and regularly uses humour in ways to which some may take offense. As a cursory example of the irreverent and arguably politically incorrect way the band uses humour, one could consider the following tweet from Fat Mike shortly after the release of the album on which the song '72 Hookers' was included: 'Some people are offended by 72 hookers. They say its anti Muslim. It's not. Muslims are cute, smart, and fun loving [...] now don't stab me!' (Burkett 2012b: n.pag.). Despite its flippant political incorrectness, the band has also been politically active against the American right, most notably in the Rock against Bush and Punk Voter movements of the early 2000s and its anti-George W. Bush album *The War on Errorism* (2003). More recently, it has made various statements criticizing Donald Trump. In 2020 it released a live version of its 1999 eighteen-minute song 'The Decline', whose lyrics deal with the general decline of the United States, with altered artwork featuring Donald Trump – implicating Trump in 'the decline'.

NOFX formed in 1983 and comprises bassist and primary vocalist Fat Mike (real name Michael John Burkett and a Jewish American), guitarist Eric Melvin (a Jewish American), guitarist, vocalist and trumpet player El Hefe (real name Aaron Abeyta, a Mexican American) and drummer Smelly (real name Erik Sandin, a White American) (NOFX and Alulis 2016). The band regularly makes references to its members' ethnicities and religious affiliations. A notable example of this is its 1992 album *White Trash, Two Heebz and a Bean*. As implied by its title and demonstrated on the album's artwork, Erik Sandin is the 'white trash'; Fat Mike and Eric Melvin are the 'two heebz'; and El Hefe is the 'bean'. According to the album's liner notes, the album was initially going to be titled 'White trash, two kikes and a spic' (NOFX 1992). It has been claimed that this name was rejected due to concerns it would offend guitarist Eric Melvin's grandfather (Dying Scene 2010). However, the band has since stated that while they said that at the time, it is not actually true (Young 2014).

NOFX typically uses a similar style of irreverent humour in its live performances. The band might criticize its own performance or chastise the audience for being inferior to the one from the previous night. On the band's 1995 live album *I Heard They Suck Live!!* (1995), there are moments of musical and verbal improvisation – likely some real and some manufactured – and a palpable emphasis on humour. It is evident that a significant part of NOFX's performance style involves frequent attempts to amuse the audience. In-between

most songs, members of the band interact with the audience – both en masse and with individual audience members – attempting to make them laugh. On occasion, during the time the band remains on stage following its performance, the song ‘Everyone’s a Little Bit Racist’ from the Broadway musical Avenue Q is played over the PA. The band and some of its touring crew sing along, act out and visualize some of the lines in the song, emphasizing lyrics that refer to stereotypes of Mexicans and Jews (lurknstock 2013).

In 2005, on the second of its twelve-issue 7 Inch of the Month Club series, the band released a song titled ‘Arming the Proletariat with Potato Guns’ (NOFX 2005). The musical part of the song is a trumpet-led instrumental, which pauses five times. When the music stops, a joke is told, before the music starts again. While this song was recorded in a studio, it contains audience-like noises: cheering, chatting and general noises presumably recorded by band members during the recording process. To some degree, this gives the impression the song is being performed live in front of an audience. The way the jokes are structured is as if one member of the band is telling a joke to the other. The jokes address stereotypes about Jewish people, Mexicans and the Holocaust.

The band plays this song live as part of its set, but often changes or adapts some of the jokes. It is evident from examples of this available on YouTube (estileira 2009; Saint Rocke 2011; samuraiska320 2012) that some of these are planned and some are improvised. The following are examples of jokes recorded live that differ from the 7 Inch of the Month Club #2 release (NOFX 2005):

Eric Melvin: Hey Hefe.
El Hefe: What?
Eric Melvin: I’ve got a joke for you.
El Hefe: What?
Eric Melvin: You hear the one about the Mexican who went to college?
El Hefe: No.
Eric Melvin: Me neither.

El Hefe: Hey Mike, I’ve got a joke.
Fat Mike: What is it?
El Hefe: What did the German boy get for his birthday?
Fat Mike: I don’t know, what did the German boy get for his birthday?
El Hefe: He got an Easy-Bake Oven and a G.I. Jew.

Fat Mike: Hey Hefe.
El Hefe: What?
Fat Mike: What did the Mexican get for his birthday?
El Hefe: I don’t know.
Fat Mike: *My* bike.

(estileira 2009, emphasis added)

The following are jokes from NOFX’s performance at SRH Fest 2012, at The Hard Rock Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas on 28 July that year:

Eric Melvin: Hey Hefe.

El Hefe: What Melvin?
 Eric Melvin: What's the difference between Batman and a Mexican?
 El Hefe: Uh, the Mexican doesn't shoot up the theatre?
 Eric Melvin: Well, in my version Batman could go out at night without robbin' (Robin).

El Hefe: Hey Mike.
 Fat Mike: Hey what do you want, Mexican?
 El Hefe: How was the Grand Canyon created?
 Fat Mike: I don't know, by, uh, millions of years of a river?
 El Hefe: No. You see, a long, long, long time ago a Jew dropped a nickel down a gopher hole.

Fat Mike: Hey Mexican friend. Why are there no Mexicans on Star Trek?
 El Hefe: I don't know. Why?
 Fat Mike: Because they don't work in the future either.
 Erik Sandin (Smelly) (following a joke about the Holocaust):
 Hefe, it's me Smelly.
 El Hefe: What?
 Erik Sandin: That joke is so fucking inappropriate and bad. I'm pissed. My grandfather died in a concentration camp, you fucking fat spic.
 El Hefe: I didn't know that, pot-bellied white boy.
 Erik Sandin: It's true, you triple-necked motherfucker.
 Eric Melvin: How did he die?
 Erik Sandin: Fucking stress. Do you have any idea how hard it is guarding six and a half million Jews?

(samuraiska320 2012)

It is evident that, at best, these jokes are told in poor taste. But they are commensurate with the band's history of making self-deprecating jokes that reference members' own ethnicities, religious affiliations and identities more generally. Some of these touch on ethnic stereotypes. The band member whose identity is the target of a given joke often feigns offense or disgust upon hearing the punchlines. Frequently this is guitarist El Hefe. The exception in the examples provided above is the joke from the performance captured by samuraiska320 (2012) in which El Hefe makes reference to the 2012 Aurora, Colorado, mass shooting that had taken place eight days prior to this performance. On 20 July, James Holmes entered the Century 16 cinema in Aurora during a screening of the film *The Dark Knight Rises* from the Batman oeuvre. Using a mixture of smoke canisters, a shotgun, a semi-automatic rifle and a handgun, Holmes killed twelve people and injured a further 70. Holmes was ultimately found guilty and sentenced to twelve life sentences plus 3318 years in prison. At a total of 82 victims, this was at the time the mass shooting with the highest number of victims in modern American history (Holody and Daniel 2017). As can be seen from the samuraiska320 (2012) video, it appears this was an improvised line that the rest of the band was not expecting. Fat Mike seems to find it genuinely surprising and funny, and the audience responds with a mixture of laughs, boos and inaudible comments. It is possible that one audience member shouts, 'Too soon' at the 0:42 mark. Fat Mike high-fives El Hefe; Erik Sandin can be seen smiling; and Eric Melvin appears amused but frustrated that El Hefe's comments have potentially reduced the comedic impact of his

intended punchline (in my version, Batman could go out at night without robbin'). Furthermore, the joke is somewhat absurd as the shooting happened during the screening of a Batman film, rather than by Batman. A strong argument could be made that this absurdity is part of the way the joke derives its humour.

In the two videos examined here – which I consider to be representative of typically how this song is performed live, the sorts of jokes the band tells and the sorts of ways audiences and band members react – both the crowd and the band respond to the jokes with variations of laughter, chuckles, groans, boos and general looks and noises of real or exaggerated or contrived approval and disapproval.

What is pertinent to acknowledge is that every example of arguably transgressive onstage and offstage behaviour exhibited by NOFX discussed thus far came before – and in some cases long before – its partnership with Stone Brewing. In a tweet dated 6 September 2017, Stone Brewing (2017a) stated the NOFX-branded beer would be available to purchase later that month. In a follow-up tweet two minutes later, the brewery apologized for the limited supply of the product and stated this was because 'when Fat Mike came to help us brew he insisted we make as many people mad as possible' (Stone Brewing 2017b: n.pag.). The brewery appears to be leaning on Fat Mike's, and by extension NOFX's, reputation for controversial and sometimes divisive behaviour.

Given how widely the video of the band's comments at Punk Rock Bowling 2018 was shared on social media, and how most of the journalistic reporting of the incident was unfavourable to the band, NOFX elected to apologize for its comments. Initially the band stated its intent to apologize and then later published a full apology. To some, this was an acceptable response. To others, no conceivable apology would be sufficient. Others still were disappointed in the band for apologizing at all (Kristiansen 2020). As will be seen, many of the comments made on social media on all sides of the argument were somewhat ugly (Bernhard 2020).

Punk & Post-Punk published two articles that consider NOFX's remarks in Las Vegas, some of the resulting media coverage, the band's apology and the responses to NOFX's remarks and its apology by fans and non-fans of the band. These were published one after the other in volume 9:1. The first article, by Lars Kristiansen (2020), focuses on the apology itself, using Benoit's theory of image repair as a means of analysis. The second article, by Ellen Bernhard (2020), comprises a discourse analysis of various Facebook comments in response to the incident. Given that NOFX is a band whose myriad provocative onstage (and offstage) comments had managed mostly to avoid any real controversy prior to that point, Bernhard uses the Facebook comments to speculate on what she terms 'the current ethos of punk rock within the scene in the United States today' (2020: 8).

Kristiansen (2020) considers the impact and effectiveness of NOFX's pre-apology and apology. He is both critical and complimentary. He observes that the band attempts to minimize any offense taken by its comments by stating that the intention was for them to be taken as humour, rather than some sort of approval of the deaths of the victims of the mass shooting. While this evidently appears to be the band's intention, it is unclear why

one should consider anything to the contrary. It is not clear why one should assume that to make humorous comments about an horrific act equates to support or approval of that horrific act. To some degree, it is a non-sequitur. Furthermore, it is a common trope that there is a rivalry between country music fans and punk fans. In the 1970s and 1980s, as punk was developing in the United States; fans of country music – who were typically older and conservative – saw punks as a rebellious threat to the ordered life they sought to protect. A rivalry, both in reality and in folklore, has existed since (Martinez 2021: 85). Kristiansen indeed acknowledges that ‘the presumed targets of NOFX’s commentary were country fans’ (2020: 34). So perhaps there is a misunderstanding here between the subject of the joke – the mass shooting – and the target of the joke – the long-standing rivalry between country music fans and punk fans.

Kristiansen argues that the band’s attempt to evade responsibility is

undercut by Fat Mike’s response to the unfavourable audience reaction while on stage in Las Vegas, scoffing in contrived disbelief as the crowd expressed its displeasure. Of course, the frontman’s feigned reaction could certainly be interpreted as a part of the joke

(2020: 31)

Given the myriad examples of the ways NOFX has used humour onstage outlined above, it seems evident that Fat Mike’s response was part of a whole style of humour the band has employed for many years, even when jokes are improvised. An off-colour joke is told by one band member, and another simulates disgust, surprise, amusement or misunderstanding. Indeed, fabricated misunderstanding or confusion plays a significant part in the band’s style of humour. This is an established technique in stand-up comedy, and in humour in general. Part of the humour in NOFX’s joke must be derived from the fact a good proportion of its fans knowing the band does not support mass shootings.

Kristiansen (2020) makes several important points in relation to NOFX’s judgement when entering into a business partnership with a large corporation like Stone Brewing. Although the band indirectly flirted with the mainstream in 1994 when sales of punk records increased considerably following the major label success of Green Day (Ozzi 2021), this partnership represented NOFX engaging more directly and explicitly with mainstream culture. This mainstream was likely unaware of the band’s style of humour and inside jokes, and therefore this partnership came with costs:

The freedom to say anything with only limited consequence came to a crashing halt. [...] Stone Brewing – one of the largest craft brewing companies in the United States – is much more sensitive to the foibles of late-stage capitalism and the pressures of public opinion than NOFX. When flirting with corporate interests, one is ultimately forced to play by their rules.

(Kristiansen 2020: 33)

One could ask, though: why? It may seem unusual for NOFX seemingly to walk blindly into a partnership with a corporation like Stone Brewing without being aware of the emphasis a commercial operation such as this very likely places on corporate social responsibility and branding. NOFX is largely independent as a band. It has its own record store. It has its own record label that it has been releasing its own music on since 1992. Brewing its own beer might be feasible. Perhaps, as Kristiansen implies, NOFX may have been deluded into thinking the ‘similarities in terms of approach’ shared by craft beer and punk were more similar than they actually are (2020: 33). However, could not the same be said of Stone Brewing? By the time Stone Brewing was founded in 1996, NOFX had been a band for thirteen years (NOFX and Alulis 2016). NOFX had released *I Heard They Suck Live!!* (1995) the year before. It had released its biggest-selling album *Punk in Drublic* the year before that. It was the year it released *Heavy Petting Zoo* – an album with controversial bestiality-themed artwork – and *Eating Lamb* – its vinyl counterpart with more extreme artwork on the same theme (Maranhas 2021) that was banned in Germany (Seim 2000). Its *7 Inch of the Month Club* was released over a decade prior to the business partnership. All jokes referenced in the live videos cited above were uploaded prior to the business partnership. The band’s autobiography *NOFX: The Hepatitis Bathtub and Other Stories* (NOFX and Alulis 2016), which provides accounts of drug addiction, sadomasochism, failed attempts to prevent rape and Fat Mike’s interest in urophagia, was released the year before the partnership commenced. Either Stone Brewing did not research the band it was entering into a business relationship with, or it did but not in a thorough enough way to become familiar with NOFX’s use of humour in song lyrics, onstage comments or general ontology. Or it was familiar with the band’s style of humour that references ethnic stereotypes, the Holocaust, mass shootings and whatever else, but elected still to produce the beer. If one were to be facetious, perhaps all previous comments made by the band were aligned with the corporate ideals of Stone Brewing, but there was just something about the band’s comments on the Las Vegas shooting that went too far. Perhaps the negative responses to the incident in mainstream and social media forced Stone Brewing into self-protection. The truth might be observed in the brewery’s own response to the band’s comments, quoted above. To Stone Brewing, punk is ‘cool’ and about ‘standing up for things you believe in’ (2018: n.pag.). As definitions of punk go, these are clumsy at best and platitudinous or totally misleading at worst.

Clumsy definitions of punk are not new. They may be unavoidable. As Bestley (2015) has argued, attempts to define punk can sometimes obscure some of its significant features. To use one example, some accounts of punk, although arguably well intentioned, narrow or warp its boundaries to make it seem more left-wing and have more socially progressive values than is often the case. In the process, some of its arguably uglier sides can be obscured or ignored. A tighter and misleading conception of punk results (Bestley 2015). However, the issues with the conceptions or definitions of punk put forward by Stone Brewing are the opposite: they are too broad. Similar platitudinous language can be seen in some of the comments about punk in response to NOFX’s joke analysed by Bernhard (2020).

Bernhard’s (2020) article analyses 381 Facebook comments in response to the NOFX incident, posted between 31 May 2018 and 10 December 2018. Those selected include a

range of perspectives on the incident. Some support the band and the idea of unrestricted freedom of expression, which necessarily includes the freedom to offend. Some state that punk should be offensive, and that those in opposition to this are somehow not true fans of the genre. Others express frustration that the band apologized at all. Many comments are expressed with an apparent aggression and lack of subtlety – which Bernhard acknowledges may be a result of ‘the perceived anonymity that exists as a result of the sheer number of commenters on this particular post’ (2020: 17). There are a number of posts that are critical of the band and, in Bernhard’s (2020) perspective, more measured, although she acknowledges these comprise a relatively small proportion of the data. While most of these comments lack the unlettered style and aggression of those in support of the band, arguably they do not contain enough substance to be meaningful. In trying to distance NOFX’s comments from any conceivable definition of punk, Facebook commentators’ definitions are reduced to platitudes that mirror those in Stone Brewing’s press release.

Conclusion

It could be argued that Stone Brewing’s appropriation of punk reflects the Cosmopolitan article from 1977 cited by Hebdige. Mainstream culture, which Stone Brewing can reasonably be asserted to be part of, has borrowed from a transgressive subculture, which NOFX – despite its significant commercial success relative to many other punk bands – can reasonably be asserted to be a part of. Given this, NOFX acts as a simulacrum of punk in order to align the brewery with a punk scene and, presumably, increase the brand value and profit margins of the organization. Stone Brewing saw value in the corporate sponsorship of NOFX. However, it appeared not to consider what the consequences might be when the band acted in a way commensurate with the way it has acted for most of its existence. One might therefore commend BrewDog for not formally aligning itself with any punk bands and thus avoiding the swamp into which Stone Brewing seemingly walked. However, BrewDog could be accused of an even lazier invocation of punk than Stone Brewing. Its poorly conceived ‘punk ethos’, which even the brewery itself appears to disregard, implies a rebellion in its business practices that are perhaps only surface level.

Corporate sponsorship of punk evidently comes with contradictions, particularly if one considers avoidance-of-the-mainstream as a core principle of punk. More interesting than its contradictions however, I would argue, is its irony. First, one has to accept that a significant part of what makes punk ‘punk’ is an avoidance-of-the-mainstream. Second, one should observe that mainstream organizations like to appropriate elements of punk in various ways, but crucially not those that are too ugly or transgressive or not palatable enough for a mainstream audience. Third, as a result, the mainstream – organizations and consequently the wider populous – becomes more familiar with punk as an idea. But the version of punk appropriated by the mainstream is incomplete. Therefore, mainstream conceptions of punk are incomplete, lazy or faulty. Finally, given this, we are left with the irony that conceptions of punk by the mainstream go something like ‘anything that goes against the mainstream’.

Hebdige asserted that the 1977 *Cosmopolitan* issue ‘presaged the subculture’s imminent demise’ (1979: 96). It initially seemed as if the Stone Brewing fallout may have sealed a similar fate for NOFX. In a 2022 documentary, Fat Mike claims that immediately following the incident the band had every performance in the United States cancelled and did not play in its home country for a year and a half (Fat Wreck Chords 2022). As others have said, though, punk’s not dead. A video of a performance by NOFX in Dallas, Texas, on 4 December 2021 was uploaded to YouTube (Geoffrey Gardner 2021), during which a version of the 2018 Las Vegas joke is told that itself contains a reference to the original joke:

Fat Mike: Oh my god I just thought of a really funny joke to say in Texas. It would be inappropriate because some people recently died. [shouts of ‘Do it!’ from the crowd]
El Hefe: Don’t go there.
Fat Mike: At least they weren’t punk rockers.

Following the joke, the drummer Erik Sandin performs a ‘sting’ as if to punctuate the punchline. Fat Mike jumps in time with the sting, implying this may have been rehearsed or a regular occurrence. He states over the microphone, ‘Can’t get cancelled twice’.

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