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Rip It Up And Start Again: Postpunk 1978-1984



Synopsis

Rip It Up and Start Again is the first book-length exploration of the wildly adventurous music created in the years after punk. Renowned music journalist Simon Reynolds celebrates the futurist spirit of such bands as Joy Division, Gang of Four, Talking Heads, and Devo, which resulted in endless innovations in music, lyrics, performance, and style and continued into the early eighties with the video-savvy synth-pop of groups such as Human League, Depeche Mode, and Soft Cell, whose success coincided with the rise of MTV. Full of insight and anecdotes and populated by charismatic characters, Rip It Up and Start Again re-creates the idealism, urgency, and excitement of one of the most important and challenging periods in the history of popular music.

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Customer Reviews

In the reactionary wake of 1970s punk rock came postpunk, a more complex, fragmented brand of music characterized by stark recordings, synthesizers and often cold, affected vocals. Postpunk stands as "a fair match for the Sixties," argues Reynolds, both in terms of the amount of great music created as well as the music's connection to the "social and political turbulence" of its era (the early 1980s). Seeking to address a gap in music and pop culture history, Reynolds (Generation Ecstasy) has penned an ambitious, cerebral effort to establish a high place in rock history for bands such as Joy Division, Devo, Talking Heads, Mission of Burma and, of course, Public Image Limited (PiL), fronted by former Sex Pistols singer John Lydon (Johnny Rotten). Reynolds, an energetic writer, especially captures the postpunk ethic in telling the story of PiL's short journey from record company darlings to utter oblivion. Unfortunately, by the time he gets to bands like Human League and

Frankie Goes to Hollywood, his passion is undermined by his subject. Reynolds succeeds in depicting the icons and the richness of an era that clearly manifests itself as a primary influence among a new generation of musicians. (Mar.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

"Shed[s] dazzling light on a neglected era of music. The definitive word on the subject." — The Times, London
"Anyone who claims to have read five better books about pop is mad, or a liar." — The Guardian, London

I wasn't a big fan of many of the bands in this history, even though it covers all my teenage years, and I was definitely into music then. But I loved many bands that came before and after them, so I thought it would be good to know about the 'bridges' between. The book is very well written and thorough, and written from a UK and European perspective that differs from my own of the time. I thoroughly enjoyed it, and it filled in some gaps in my knowledge, and prompted me to go back and relisten to some old favorites, maybe even make a new one or two.

Simon Reynolds, who previously wrote the definitive early history of electronica, *Generation Ecstasy*, is simply one of the best music historians and critics alive, an exhaustive researcher with encyclopedic musical, literary and historical knowledge who possesses, thankfully, a solid sense of humor. A major problem with the postpunk movement, though, and Reynolds's superhuman efforts in researching and chronicling it, is that an enormous percentage of the music has not survived the test of time. Too much of it was modernism in its best and worst senses: extreme experimentalism and a rejection of past norms (tunes, for example) by young musicians and non-musicians of admirable ambition but questionable talent and inspiration. Many postpunk songs were slapped together in a day by young guys who had picked up guitars, drums and synths for the first time a week before. I often suspect that Reynolds put more effort into researching and describing certain obscure songs than the bands originally spent in writing and recording them. That said, there are many diamonds in the rough to be found by exploring the bands and songs mentioned in this book. I made many musical discoveries through *Rip It Up*, something that's become extremely easy thanks to the Internet. The ability to dial up 60- or 90-second samples on or iTunes of all of the songs Reynolds describes is half the fun. Reynolds accomplishes what he sets out to do: write the definitive history of post-punk, convincingly define what it was (in short, a period of modernism), and explain its important role in music history, namely as the bridge between punk and the British "New

Pop" of the early 80s and a movement that planted the or some seeds of goth, hip hop (via Art of Noise's "Beat Box" and Malcolm McLaren's surprising post-Pistols career), rave, and a host of contemporary bands. He argues, successfully, that postpunk was extremely influential even where the original music hasn't stood the test of time. Many of the reviewers here exhort you to buy the longer UK edition of Rip it Up. My advice: don't... unless you're already into postpunk. The US edition is long enough for the general reader at 388 pages. In the final chapter, Reynolds sets the stage for his next book, *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past*, which presumably begins where New Pop entered its decline, around 1984-85, when the dominant paradigm of music shifted from forward thinking (futurist) to backward looking (retro).

Let me admit right up front that I am not a fan of 95% of the music chronicled in this book. But several of my friends are, so I thought I'd dip into it to see if it would make a nice gift. With that in mind, I read the one chapter that covers music I really love, the chapter about the rapid rise and fall of the 2-Tone ska movement. Those twenty pages were enough to convince me that Reynolds is best kind of music writer, able to write evocatively about the music itself while providing the social, economic, and political context for its creation. He hits the nail firmly on the head in his analysis of The Specials' songs as "cheerless" -- tying them to social-realist cinema and the bleak post-WWII concrete jungle of their native Coventry. Reynolds also does a nice job of describing the origins of ska, its development in England, and rather complicated ties to the mod and skinhead subcultures. He's also brimming with details about the major bands and why it all fell apart so quickly. Two quibbles do present themselves. One is that some of the transitions are a bit choppy, and I later learned that the US edition I read is an abridged version of the UK edition (nowhere is this obviously stated on the US edition). Some 300+ pages were cut, which would explain some of the choppiness I found, and I have to say that I'll be buying the more expensive UK version for my friends. The second reservation I have with the book is the total lack of documentation. It's great to quote Dammers, Hall, Staple, and all these other musicians, but it would be nice to know where these quotes came from so that one could do follow-up reading or research -- there's not even a bibliography! These caveats of abridgement and referencing aside, this appears to be an excellent, well-written account of an overlooked era of music history and should stand as the definitive work for many years to come.

Apparently, the US version is ~200 pages less than the UK version (which was the first copy I read). Though it seems rather blasphemous to excise chapters/portions about Einsturzende Neubauten,

SST Records, Magazine, and (reducing) The Buzzcocks, I think it could also be argued that it streamlined the narrative (how punk influenced post-punk which was then co-opted into the mainstream), even if reading about those other acts/labels was interesting. The UK version was definitely enjoyable, but I felt it was a little bloated (i.e. following up the formation of PiL with... some guy who has a cult following, even by the standards of others in this book) My only real complaint is that I would've switched the last two chapters around. (Frankie Goes to Hollywood and the Goth/Neo-psychedelia chapters, respectively) I was a bit annoyed that SST were barely mentioned in the UK version, and excised entirely from the US version, but in retrospect it makes more sense as they didn't really fit into the above narrative (at least in the years covered. "Michael Azerrad's "Our Band Could Be Your Life" covers them, among others, more succinctly). So in all, it's definitely a great book, even if it does leave out otherwise interesting acts.

This has been one of my favorite books for years. Simon Reynolds finds a way to tie the disparate threads of independent experimentation and unbridled newness of the Postpunk era (1978-1984, formally) into an acceptable narrative thread that's as engaging as it is informative. I cannot recommend this book any higher.

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