

THE PUNK DEBATE



DEAD OR ALIVE?

TRANSCRIBED BY WINSTON SMITH

WELL THE first thing you notice is that punk rock fans look as devastating as their music sounds.

"Torn clothes are held together with safety pins, there's lots of black leather and bizarre hair and the whole idea is to shock outsiders . . ."

ON THURSDAY December 2nd 1982 at approximately 4pm, the third floor conference room at Spotlight Publications found itself involuntarily providing a roof for the most impressive gathering of punk personalities and (it says here) herbert heroes since the legendary 'Anarchy In The UK' punk conference of '76 . . .

Together, in the very same room, around the very same table, were . . . Hoxton Tom, (4-Skins.) Steve Drewett, (Newtown Neurotics.) Beki Bondage, (Vice Squad.) Mensi, (Angelic Upstarts.) Vi Subversa, (Poison Girls.) Jello Biafra, (Dead Kennedys.) Colin Gerwood, (Conflict.) Del, (punk bouncer/Vortex.) Attila The Stockbroker, (punk poet/schizophrenic.)

Gal, (Coming Blood.) Johnny Waller, (midge/'radical' journalist, also chairman.) Winston Smith, ('young'/'unsociable' journalist; also transcriber/composer of this article.)

And Garry Bushell, ('dullard'/'controversial' journalist; also author of a jolly annoying 'Punk Is Dead' article published in *Sounds*.)

As chairman, Johnny Waller introduced the participants, and attempted to get the show underway . . .

RIGHT, HAS everybody read Garry's article? Well does anybody want to agree with it or take issue with it or . . . whatever?"

(Attila walks in . . .) "Bill reckons that you said five o'clock to Jello Gal."

Bushell: "Bollocks. . . Tom: "Well done John, (Attila) you've just interrupted the tape. We were in the middle of a question there and you've spoilt it all. Can you re-wind the tape please Winston?"

Mensi: "What was the question again?" Waller: "Maybe the first step is if anyone wants to say what punk *is*, because it may be that we've all got different ideas of what it is anyway."

Tom: "It all depends doesn't it. Everyone's got their own idea of punk."

Waller: "Exactly." Attila: "And that's how it *should* be."

Mensi: "I think it just depends on what f***in' side he gets out of the f***in' bed! One minute every f***er's the biggest thing since sliced bread, and the next thing it's all dead! It's all down to you (Bushell) being a f***in' dick!"

Attila: "There is a point there Garry, there is a point . . . Tom: "F***in' sure! F***in' hell man! It all depends if he gets his leg over at the weekend who is f***in' who on the f***in' Monday morning . . . F***in' is though isn't it? Jesus Christ!"

Bushell! " . . . I think there's a need for it (punk) and a reason for it, and there's some people who *do* make it mean as much as it always did, but most people who call themselves punks ain't nothing to do with punk."

Attila: "What you said when you started off Waller, was absolutely right. Punk is what everyone *thinks* it is. The point I would say is punk has divided itself into a number of sub-divisions where everyone wears various people's names on the backs of their leathers and *don't* think for themselves anymore."

"It doesn't matter what you *look* like, it doesn't matter how spiky your hair is, how many pairs of bondage trousers you've got, or even what sort of music you listen to. It's an attitude, punk is an attitude."

Vi: "We're not going to get anywhere if we're talking about what *other* people are, or what other people's definitions of punk are. The only way we can start is for people to talk for themselves right?"

"I'm not really interested in sitting round here and hearing you say what you think punks think, I want to hear what *you* think, because otherwise it's all fantasy. I'm not really interested otherwise."

Mensi: "I think I think the same as f***in' what they think."

Vi: "What's that then? Stick your neck out!" Waller: "How would you define punk Mensi?"

Mensi: "Well, since I became a punk I think it's a f***in' working class movement."

Tom: "Bollocks." Waller: "That sounds like trade-unionism; I mean define it more closely than that."

Mensi: "Tell me how many middle-class punks there is!" Beki: "You might have people that were middle class who have rebelled against how they were brought up. Basically it's being an individual and thinking for yourself."

Mensi: "They rebel until they f***in' finish their university f***in' work, and then they become doctors and f***in' politicians . . . Naah."

Steve: "It's too generalised that is." Tom: "How can you help what class you're born into? You can't f***in' say to your mother and father 'don't have me' can you?"

Waller: "Look, Steve, can you say what you think punk is, rather than just arguing against what Mensi's said?"

Steve: "Well basically, we all know the basic underlying things why punk arose in the first place, and that's still valid today. "Something has gone twisted along the line, but er, one thing that gets me is that it seems the punk gig is not a celebration of being alive anymore."

"Most punk gigs are really really depressing, everyone hangs around the walls, everyone's really listless: They don't know what the f*** they want. When I go to a punk gig I want to feel *alive*."

"There's too much piled up against kids, and I always look upon the punk gig or punk record as fortifying the spirit to go out into the world and f***in' keep my chin up. There's enough grinding people down without people taking an attitude of . . ."

"The worst one is 'the bomb's going to drop so we might as well all give up,' you know, the glue-sniffing sort of no-hopers; it's stifling punk, because punk was never that in the first place."

Tom: "But Steve, don't you think that punk is to any person what they think? It's not a fashion, but it's become too much like one — 'I'm a punk/I wear bondage'; Like skinheads has become cropped hair 'n' that. It's not people thinking for themselves, it's just 'I've read *The Sun* or whatever . . ."

Attila: "Look at the American hardcore scene right? Most of those bands, whatever you may think of them, they don't dress up in leathers or whatever, I mean Black Flag came over here and supported the Exploited, and people just didn't relate to them at all because they didn't wear the 'right clothes!'"

Winston: "It wasn't just because of the way they dressed through, it was . . ."

Beki: "And not only that, they're a lot richer in America. You've got to remember when they're coming over here the English kids are very much aware of the fact that in America they're much better off than they are over here."

Vi: " . . . Look, punk's a reaction to power isn't it? It's a reaction of the powerless, in a situation where . . ."

Steve: "Yeah, and there's one important power that punk's denied, and that is airplay. Now I think that this is a very definite thing why everything's going down the drain, because like at the Kennedys' gig on Saturday, this kid said to me 'the thing that gets me is there's no punk on the radio, we can't hear it.'"

"Me and my mates buy four to five punk singles a week and we've heard none of 'em'; and he said, 'all I can go by when I go into a shop is if I see a record with a mohican or punks on the front I'd buy it.' Now I thought he was joking at first, because I thought that was just a cliché, but he was dead serious."

" . . . The other thing about the British punk scene these days is it's very easy to get a record out, so you've got an enormous flood of punk singles coming into the media, and the media's denying it."

"The only thing wrong with punk is the media. The people who've given up on it, in the media, in the papers, are not looking for the good records in there; they just see all the shit that comes out, but underneath that shit is some good records."

"But, the average punk is buying what has a mohican on the front, so you're getting all these records that are all the same, because they know it's the only way they can get a 15,000 selling single and get on a tour, and get people to hear them."

Vi: "Alright, so the fundamental contradiction that we're all dealing with is, on the one hand, how to communicate in this position of powerlessness. I'd imagine we all recognise something to do with powerlessness, I mean I feel it at this table, being one of very few women in a situation where there's a lot of very powerful guys, who I think probably find it easier to talk."

"Anyway . . . If you think about voting, my analysis of power is that we're not going to get out of this position of powerlessness by voting for a power structure which is going to keep us where we are anyway . . ."

"There's always going to be that situation in any mass movement, whereby there's an individual who *can't* actually identify with a gang . . . I mean I can't identify with any of the gangs, or they won't identify with me . . . I'm in a position where I'm fighting for myself, from my own position of powerlessness, and I recognise when other people do, whether they're kids or grannies."

"Now sitting round this table I've heard people talking about 'c***s' and old age pensioners right? Well, I mean I happen to have a c***, and I'm not very far off being an old age pensioner, and those are the people that are *particularly* powerless in our society, and for any definition of punk to exclude a lot of people who are *extremely* powerless is an invalid definition, and it's going to leave you as weak as ever. We've got to make these connections and not keep splitting up."

"The fashions and their gangs are, I think, another response to feeling powerless right? If I go somewhere that there's people I can identify with, through clothes or whatever, I don't feel quite so powerless."

"But, I think they get manipulated by the media, by the clothes dealers and all the other bloody dealers that there are, including the record dealers, and then you end up no better off than you were in the first place."

Tom: "It starts what it was trying to defeat in the first place; It becomes the new establishment, you start all over again."

Beki: "There's always going to be power whether the working classes seize power or the upper classes do. You will always have power. People are not perfect, they're humans. Even if there was anarchy there'd always be some bloke beating up a little bloke . . ."

Waller: "Coming back to one of the things

Steve said, about the media denying punk access; do you think that it's just something that's happened, or do you think there's actually been some sort of physical attempt to deny punk access?"

Steve: "Yeah, I think basically it's the same old thing, and that is the media will only keep it's attention on one particular movement for a short time, because if there ain't a new fashion they'll create one."

"Now basically, without proper media exposure, there's less to aim for, and like I say if you block things off, then people are going to use the narrowest route to get their ideas across: Therefore, there's a big industry of non-thinking ideas on very unoriginal records; and they sell, they really sell."

"But as far as that meaning anything, it doesn't: All it means is that a lot of records are being sold, and the life and soul of the original movement is being strangled."

Waller: "But punk started off being a threat, and you can't hope to be a threat and then complain that the media aren't giving you enough..."

Steve: "I can complain."
Waller: "Well you can, but you can't be surprised at that; The media is bound to give you coverage."

Steve: "No, I'm not surprised; I mean the media does not surprise me. It's bland, it caters for the unthinking to create unthinkiness within people; and this is the direct result of it."

IF POP music is going to be used to destroy our established institutions, then it ought to be destroyed first...

Vi: "I think we've got to stop talking about punk as being just about music and about bands, it's an expression right? We're expressing something, and we're using music as a medium. But if it stays within there, then we're going to become either ignored or just so much fodder and so much product. Unless punk is started to become defined outside the definition of music, then we're wasting our time."

Steve: "... What you said earlier was right. I'd like to hear punk records on the radio, and talking about taking a view from old age pensioners, a section of society which has now become discarded by society because they're past the age of working, therefore they're no longer ploughing money into the system. I mean the only old age pensioner view you get is

on something like the Tweets, or around Christmas time, 'Grandad'."

"Isn't punk the music of the underdog though? I mean that's basically what it should be, and why cut off some parts of the underdog?"

"They should have a channel to express their views as well, and it *should* be on the radio, but the radio's not giving it, and even though it's never been as good as it should be, there was more exposure of those ideas before than there is now."

Waller: "Is it because the late '76 early '77, punk was more concentrated, and now, as you say, it's gone out and split up, and also it was new; and because it's split up there's less of a movement, and that's maybe why you (Bushell) think it's dead, because it is far less concentrated."

Beki: "It wasn't perfect in '77 though was it? It was far from perfect, there's loads of glaring contradictions in it. It was basically people walking on thin ice, trying to find their feet, deciding what they wanted to sing about."

Tom: "Steve, you're talking about records, the establishment and all that, but we know what it's like, right? It's right that to change it. We're all moaning about not getting on the radio and all this, so can anybody think of a positive way we can change things?"

Waller: "Is everyone here agreed that punk *should* be trying to change things, or does anyone think it's just a different form of entertainment?"

Tom: "Can it change things, or will it though?"

Steve: "If only it changes people's minds: If someone had a view of something that was die-hard, that was set and would not shift, and punk jogged that viewpoint in that person's mind..."

"I don't think you should align yourself with something completely and say 'this is all I believe in', you should have doubts, doubts should be in your mind all the time so you question *everything*..."

Attila: "We're talking about ideas and the way punk gets across these ideas. The way we get them across is obviously through the music, and what I think is really terrible and awful about punk at the moment is that it has become so bloody narrow. I mean there's a whole axis in punk which thinks that punk is shouted tuneless thrash..."

Mensi: "Steve, you were saying earlier about gigs, how the kids hang around the walls and how it's all depressing; Well, they've got nothing to be happy about man

have they?"
Steve: "Oh I know, but the music should lift them for a while, and make them think at the same time."

Mensi: "How can the music lift them when we've been saying the same things for four years and they've seen no breakthrough whatsoever? They only get more and more depressed."

(Vi Subversa picks up a copy of the notorious 'Punk Is Dead' article and turns to Garry Bushell...)

"From here it seems you've thrown out nearly everybody. I mean I love Conflict, I love Colin, but down here he's the only one left; and I mean where does that leave the rest of us? Why are we all sitting round here talking about punk?"

Bushell: "I'm talking about the audience more than anything, and I'm also talking about bands. I mean lots of people moan about everything and never do anything about it, that's what really annoys me."

Mensi: "But see it's not as simple as that. You were saying about us not doing benefits and that, but to do a benefit right, you've got to have a PA, you've got to have equipment and you've got to be able to rehearse. Everything costs money, d'you know what I mean?"

Tom: "That's just an excuse, everyone's saying they can't afford it. I mean I set up a few prisoners' rights gigs, and PROP made £500 to print up a book, but that's not hip any more. Nobody gives a toss."

"It's like you're all saying why ain't our music on the radio: It's because we're not hip no more? We're gone, we're the f***in' same as Elvis..."

Mensi: "No, but we haven't gone, we're still here!"

Steve: "You don't have to be hip, bollocks to being hip."

Tom: "But Steve, I know that and you know that, but how do the radio people know that?"

Mensi: "But Tom, we never had vast amounts of radio play anyway."
Tom: "I know, that's what I'm saying. Everybody's meaning about a campaign for punk radio now, but was there one in '77/'78 or what?"

Winston: "Do you think there's enough good punk to go on the radio though?"

Steve: "Yeah there is."
Beki: "You could play all the old stuff couldn't you..."

Attila: "Well look, the latest Upstarts single is a *classic* right? If that got airplay it would have been top ten, no sweat. I've

heard it *once* on the radio."

Tom: "Why worry about the charts though?"

Waller: "Listen, there are tons of records that different sorts of people think about; I mean heavy metal records, new romantic records or whatever. I mean it's not exclusively punk."

Mensi: "Johnny, that's shit!"

Waller: "I mean no-one at Radio One will have heard of the Newtown Neurotics, and that's why you don't get played; It's not just because you're punk as such. If you'd had a hit already..."

Mensi: "We had a hit with 'Teenage Warning' right? We were on *Top Of The Pops* with it. The next single, 'Never Had Nothing', I could count it's radio plays on one hand... With four fingers chopped off!"

Steve: "You're all talking about national radio; now the local radio scene is *terrible*. They don't even cater for the bands in their area."

Waller: "But are you genuinely bothered about that? Do you *want* to be on local radio?"

Attila: "Yeah, why not? Why the sodding hell not?"

Steve: "I do. I'd have thought you'd get on local radio easier than national radio, and I don't want to hear country and western..."

Tom: "So we can all sell more records, is that what it is? Why are we all so f***in' worried about it?"

Attila: "Well if you're doing something..."

Tom: "Doing what? Becoming the new establishment and getting more records out on Radio One? So we become the new housewives' choice, the oldies of the future? Bollocks!"

Attila: "No, if you're doing something you want it to get across to most people right?"

Tom: "We're on Radio One then, so the housewives sit and say 'what a nice record that is...' Why are we all so f***in' worried?"

Attila: "They won't say that, they'll say it's out of order..."

P EOPLE HAVE got worked up about plenty of musicians, from Elvis Presley wiggling his pelvis in the '50s, to the Rolling Stones ten years later. So what have the Sex Pistols got that provokes the same reaction?

continues over



IN CONFERENCE: Del, Mensi, Gal (Coming Blood), Gal (Bushell), Bev Elliot?, Hoxton Tom (standing), Steve Drewitt, Beki Bondage

Pics: Martin Dean

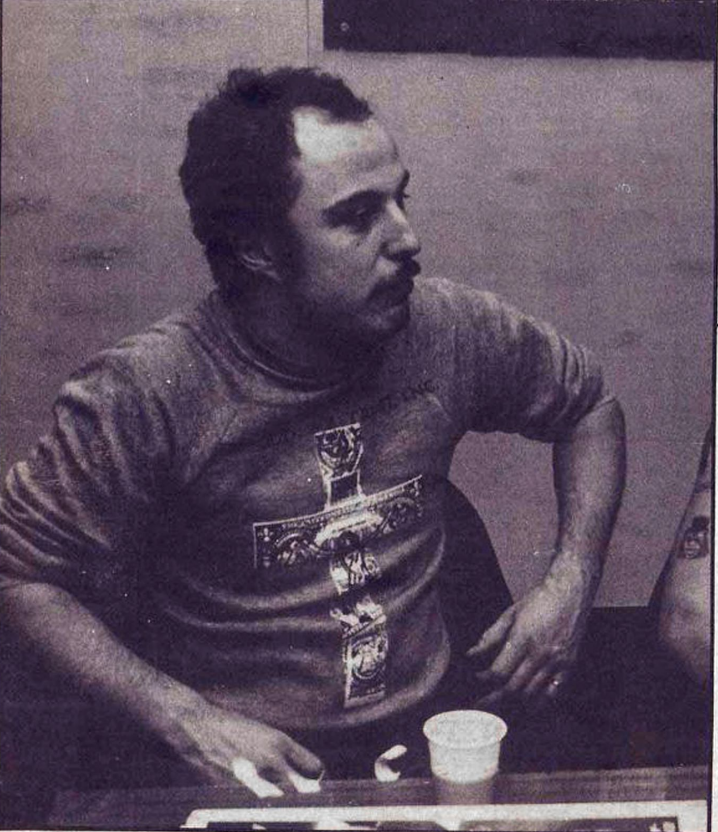
THE PUNK



VI SUBVERSA — JELLO BIAFRA

DEBATE

ATTILA THE STOCKBROKER



(Laughs . . .) You would have thought that people couldn't be shocked by much in 1976 . . .

Colin: "I agree with Tom in the fact that . . . I mean what the f***in' hell difference is it going to make if our records are played on the radio or not? I mean we ain't here to make records for people so they can just go home and play them, we're here to make 'em think."

"I mean what are we talking about? Are we talking about punk changing things, or how many hits we can get in the charts? I mean f***in' hell, we're going to change f***-all by going along these lines."

Steve: "Look it's a lot of money for records, and kids don't want to spend a lot of money on records that are not going to be any good. If they're played on the radio they can take their pick."

Vi: "I'd love to get played on the radio, not just because of selling records, although I won't deny I'm interested in selling records, I mean if we don't sell enough records to pay for our last we've all got to sell the house that we live in."

"But the other reason I want to get on the radio is because of those bloody housewives. I wish to God I'd heard the sort of things I'm saying on the radio 20 years ago because I would have wasted far less of my life."

Tom: "How many people do you think agree? There's a lot of people who don't give a toss. They just say 'I like that tune' or 'I don't like that', and that's it. We've gone without records since 1977, so why are we all getting so f***in' het up about it?"

Vi: "Because we're paying for the bloody radio, we're paying for the whole bloody outfit, and our voices don't get heard on it."

Waller: "What do any of you think yourselves, or punk in general, has achieved, and if it's so little, doesn't that make you even more despondent?"

Attila: "I think it's achieved a f*** of a lot John. I think punk has achieved . . . It changed my life and my attitude to the world completely, totally. I mean before punk I was a complete tosser."

Steve: "It's also de-mystified the process of making records as well, because more people can make them now than ever, and it's exposed the record industry for what it is in a lot of people's eyes."

Attila: "Although there's another point that is very important, and that is the indie movement now is a caricature of what it was."

"All they're doing a lot of the time is putting out awful shitty bands, dreadful crap, with a mohican on the front, y'know — 'F*** Anarchy', 1875 compilations bands from Albania . . ."

Beki: "Why do people buy them? I hate compilation albums."

Bushell: "That's exactly why I wrote that, because Joe Strummer's more to do with punk than that is. Most of the punks you meet in London are the most conservative people you could wish to meet in your life; that's why I wrote this f***in' thing in the first place, they're so boring; they just accept everything."

Vi: "The responsibility for everyone here then, is to not go on feeding their expectations."

Attila: "Sure, yeah, I agree. That's why I play folk music and do silly poems."

Vi: "One of the things we're not talking about is the fact that we're all in competition with each other, those of us in bands, and I want to know what alternative there is to that, because it's what all the other contradictions hang on; like whether we're in it for the money or for the real communication between human beings blah blah, right?"

"I mean I've heard a couple of slag offs of Crass, and I don't want to join in that, but I know that what we were trying to do with Crass was to attempt to do something as an alternative to the hierarchical set-up. Well we failed in a sense, and I think that what we failed about was not particularly to do with us being better or worse than Crass or whatever; I think it was to do with A — the Media, and B — the expectations of people that are all about a hierarchy which is all about competition; and until we can start doing something about that, we're all lost souls really . . ."

Tom: ". . . I'll tell you what. Just say a punk band broke through now, just say they got on *Top Of The Pops*, number one and all that shit right? How long do you think they'd last as they were now, do you think they wouldn't change? Do you think they wouldn't shit on everyone else?"

Beki: "It'd depend on how strong-willed they were wouldn't it?"

Tom: "Yeah, but how many people are that strong-willed Beki?"

Beki: "I don't know. I think I would be . . . I hope I would be."

Bushell: "The Stones were like that and all; especially when Richards was in jail and all that, 'when he comes out we're going to set up our own label and go against the system . . .'. I mean actually though, something like Led Zeppelin were probably more anti-system than half the punk bands that are on major labels. I mean Zeppelin never put out a single; they always went against the system in that sense."

"When it boils down to it, if you're going to change anything you've got to look beyond what you're doing, beyond music. Because music ain't never going to change anything . . ."

RIGHT NOW, the punk musicians can make out that they're just the same as their fans, because most of them still are, and they can sing about getting rid of the establishment, because they're not part of it. But what happens if they do make it and get big and

successful? What would success do to Johnny Rotten?"

Waller: ". . . Is there anything the people round this table could suggest that people could actually do together?"

Steve: "Well one of the things is that the different sections of punk all seem to play gigs with bands in their own vein. I mean you don't get a 'Crass-Band' and an 'Oi-Band' playing a gig together to show some level of solidarity, even though they know they've got vast differences. Y'know, bands think 'who would we like for a support?' And they always go for the obvious."

Gal (Coming Blood): "Another thing to do is move out of the whole framework altogether, y'know what I mean?"

Attila: "Well that's what on a purely personal level I've done by not being in a group any more. I do think that it's very important that we get the basic ideas that we have in common across to a very large number of people."

"One of the reasons I started doing poetry and mandolin stuff was because I know damn well that there was a whole group of people outside the punk scene that could identify with it, because of the *medium* I was using."

"So now I can do everything from punk gigs through poetry readings to bloody Womens' Institute socials if I want to. I think one of the things which is least versatile about the punk scene as we know it today is that there's only a very limited section of people who can actually relate to that noise."

Waller: "Garry, one of the things I want to know about this article is do you stand by every word you wrote in it, or was any of it definitely just as a stimulus or as a wind up, to be totally outrageous; y'know, just to get a reaction?"

Bushell: "I stand by it all, completely: But I think you're misinterpreting it, because I'm saying the punk *spirit* is alive, I mean everybody here's got something to say, so everyone here's still f***in' punk; But everybody else accepts everything though. Go on Winston . . ."

Mensi: "Winstaaahn. Winstaaahn."

Winston: ". . . Everyone here's talking about changing things, but what would happen if all these things were changed? What would happen next?"

Attila: "We'd be able to do something a hell of a lot more positive. Instead of concentrating all our attempts on attacking, we'd be able to do something more positive."

Jello (Just arrived): "Over here, more than in America, although it's happening in America now too, punk has become so big that it's very easy to play it safe: You cut up letters from a magazine for your logo, have one song about how you don't like the police, have one song about . . ."

"I mean there's been a whole new group of kids who've got up off their asses in the last couple of years and got bands going; but in a way, some people, *Sounds* included, pushed them too *quickly*, and thereby people who if they'd had the time and had to work a little harder, could have grown into bona-fide artists, instead just got caught up in a kind of a treadmill and a formula."

"One of the reasons we've had so many soundalike punk bands over here and thrash bands in America, is you've got a group of people who grew up listening to nothing but other punk records and don't have any other influences to draw on."

"What we must try is to keep the element of *curiosity*, to keep the mind open, rather than having it turn into a rut like heavy metal has."

Waller: "But do you really think that it matters whether punk is dead or not? I mean if it's all down to the attitude, does it matter what anyone calls anything anymore, whether there is still A Movement spearheaded by certain bands, or whether everyone's simply doing what they want?"

Vi: "Well, this question 'Is Punk Dead?' to me is meaningless; because for me, punk is about life; Punk was about taking my life for myself. There's no way I can say punk is dead, because while I'm still alive and kicking I need a word for it, and 'punk' will do . . ."

"While people are prepared to take risks and come out on the side of life, and I mean that in everyday life, I don't mean a sort of religious attitude towards some sort of holy bloody thing; I mean that *every day*, to sort of keep going and be alive, and not be trampled down or pushed down by any f***er who's trying to . . ."

Bushell: "But there's possibly more of them people who aren't in punk bands than those who are."

Vi: "That's very possible, and I think that if we end up so bloody narrow-minded that we cut off our own life-source of support from those people who are prepared to take risks, whether they're playing the same sort of music that we're playing or not, then we're cutting our own throats . . ."

BUT WHEN the hysteria that always surrounds a new fashion, be it clothes or music dies down, what's left?
"Is Johnny Rotten the new David Bowie, or will all his tough lyrics and aggression just look dated next year?"

". . . It is disgraceful and makes me ashamed of the pop world, however it is a fact that won't last. We DJ's have ignored them, and if everyone else did, perhaps they would go away . . ."

(All sporadic, uncredited quotes taken from the mouths of Marcus Lipton MP, Janet Street Porter and Tony Blackburn — Vintage 1976 and '77. Draw your own conclusions.)

BERLIN V. BUSHELL:

'White Christmas' writer **Irving Berlin** has steamed into **the Gonads** for their "disgusting" version of his much-loved anthem. Though released a year ago as part of an Oi Oi 'Bollocks To Christmas' collection, Irvy baby only recently ear-wiggled the disc, which includes such blatant **Clash** steals as "Are you taking

orders or are you taking over?" and has done his proverbial pieces.

Now his publishers Chappels are insisting the song be withdrawn (even though it went out of stock six months ago). An unrepentant **Gal Gonad** said: "I stand by the song totally, it's a particularly moving and artistic rendition . . . (cont *White Lion*)

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