

LESTER BANGS

“The White Noise Supremacists” (from the *Village Voice*, 1979)

The other day I was talking on the phone with a friend who hangs out on the CBGB's scene a lot. She was regaling me with examples of the delights available to females in the New York subway system. "So the train came to a sudden halt and I fell on my ass in the middle of the car, and not only did nobody offer to help me up but all these boons just sat there laughing at me."

"Boons?" I said. "What's boons?"

"You know," she said. "Black guys." "Why do you call them that?"

"I dunno. From 'baboons,' I guess." I didn't say anything.

"Look, I know it's not cool," she finally said. "But neither is being a woman in this city. Every fucking place you go you get these cats hassling you, and sometimes they try to pimp you. And a lot of the times when they hassle you they're black, and when they try to pimp me they're always black. Eventually you can't help it, you just end up reacting."

Sometimes I think nothing is simple but the feeling of pain. When I was first asked to write this article, I said sure, because the racism (not to mention the sexism, which is even more pervasive and a whole other piece) on the American New Wave scene had been something that I'd been bothered by for a long time. When I told the guys in my own band that I was doing this, they just laughed. "Well, I guess the money's good," said one. "What makes you think the racism in punk has anything special about it that separates it from the rest of the society?" asked another.

"Because the rest of society doesn't go around acting like racism is real hip and cool," I answered heatedly.

"Oh yeah," he sneered. "Just walk into a factory sometime. Or jail."

All right. Power is what we're talking about, or the feeling that you don't have any, or how much ostensible power you can rip outta some other poor sucker's hide. It works the same everywhere, of course, but one of the things that makes the punk stance unique is how it seems to assume substance or at least style by the *abdication* of power: *Look at me! I'm a cretinous little wretch! And proud of it!* So many of the people around the CBGB's and Max's scene have always seemed emotionally if not outright physically crippled—you see speech impediments, hunchbacks, limps, but most of all an overwhelming spiritual flatness. You take parental indifference, a crappy educational system, lots of drugs, media overload, a society with no values left except the hysterical emphasis on physical perfection, and you end up with these little nubbins: the only rebellion around, as *Life* magazine once labeled the Beats. Richard Hell gave us the catchphrase "Blank Generation," although he insists that he didn't mean a crowd with all the dynamism of a static-furry TV screen but rather a bunch of people finally freed by the collapse of all values to reinvent themselves, to make art statements of their whole lives. Unfortunately, such a great utopian dream, which certainly is not on its first go-round here, remains just that, because most people would rather follow. What you're left with, aside from the argument that it beats singles bars, is compassion. When the Ramones bring that sign onstage that says "GABBA GABBA HEY," what it really stands for is "We accept you." Once you get past the armor of dog collars, black leather,

and S&M affectations, you've got some of the gentlest or at least most harmless people in the world: Sid Vicious legends aside, almost all their violence is self-directed.

So if they're all such a bunch of little white lambs, why do some of them have it in for little black lambs? Richard Pinkston, a black friend I've known since my Detroit days, tells me, "When I go to CBGB's I feel like I'm in East Berlin. It's like, I don't mind liberal guilt if it gets me in the restaurant, even if I know the guy still hates me in his mind. But it's like down there they're *striving* to be offensive however they can, so it's more vocal and they're freer. It's semi-mob thinking."

Richard Hell and the Voidoids are one of the few integrated bands on the scene ("integrated" -what a stupid word). I heard that when he first formed the band, Richard got flak from certain quarters about Ivan Julian, a black rhythm guitarist from Washington, D.C., who once played with the Foundations of "Build Me Up Buttercup" fame. I think it says something about what sort of person Richard is that he told all those people to get fucked then and doesn't much want to talk about it now. "I don't remember anything special. I just think that most people that say stuff like what you're talking about are so far beneath contempt that it has no effect that's really powerful. Among musicians there's more professional jealousy than any kind of racial thing; there's so much backbiting in any scene, it's like girls talking about shoes. All musicians are such scum anyway that it couldn't possibly make any difference because you expect 'em to say the worst shit in the world about you."

I called up Ivan, who was the guy having trouble at the pinhead lunch counter in the first place. "Well, I was first drawn to this scene by the simple fact of a lot of people with musical and social attitudes more or less in common. No one's ever said anything to my face, but I overheard shit. A lot of people are just ignorant assholes. I don't think there's any more racism at CBGB's, where I went every night for about the first year I lived here, than anywhere else in New York City. Maybe a little bit less, because I find New York City a million times more racist than D.C., or Maryland and Virginia where I grew up. There's racism there, outright killings around where I lived, but here it's a lot more insidious. You get four or five different extremes, so many cultures that can't stand each other. It's like, when we toured Europe I was amazed at the bigotry between people from two parts of the same country. They'd accept me, but to each other they were niggers, man. And at CBGB's it's sorta the same way, sometimes. Mutants can learn to hate each other and have prejudices too. Like Mingus said in *Beneath the Underdog*. forty or fifty years ago, in the ghetto, the lighter you were the better you were. Then you'd turn another corner and if you were somewhat light, like Mingus, there'd be a buncha guys saying 'Shit-colored mutha' ready to trash your ass. My point is, regardless of how much people might have in common they still draw away. There are certain people on the scene, like say this girl in one band who's nothing but a loudmouthed racist bitch--it's obvious we want nothing to do with each other, so I stay away from her and vice versa.

"I'll tell you one thing: the entrepreneurs, record company people and shit are a hell of a lot worse. People like Richard Gottelher, who produced our album, and Seymour Stein and a lot of the other people up at Sire Records. They were totally condescending, they'd talk to you differently, like you were a child or something. I heard a lot of clichés on the level of being invited over to somebody's house for fried chicken."

I was reminded instantly of the day I was in the office of a white woman of some intelligence, education, and influence in the music business, and the subject of race came

up. "Oh," she said, "I liked them so much better when they were just *Negroes*. When they became *blacks* . . ." She wrinkled her nose irritably.

"Race hate?" says Voidoids lead guitarist Bob Quine. "Sure, it gives me 'n' Ivan something to do onstage: *The Defiant Ones*. "

But the ease and insight of the Voidoids are somewhat anomalous on the New York scene. This scene and the punk stance in general are riddled with self-hate, which is always reflexive, and anytime you conclude that life stinks and the human race mostly amounts to a pile of shit, you've got the perfect breeding ground for fascism. A lot of outsiders, in fact, think punk is fascist, but that's only because they can't see beyond certain buzzwords, symbols, and pieces of regalia that (I *think*) really aren't that significant: Ron Asheton of the Stooges used to wear swastikas, Iron Crosses, and jackboots onstage, but I don't remember any right-wing rants ever popping up in the music he did with Iggy or his own later band, which many people were not exactly thrilled to hear was called the New Order.

In the past three years Ron's sartorial legacy has given us an international subculture whose members might easily be mistaken at first glance for little brownshirts. They aren't, for the most part. Only someone as dumb as the Ramones are always accused of being could be offended when they sing "I'm a Nazi schatze," or tell us that the first rule is to obey the laws of Germany and then follow it with "Eat kosher salami." I've hung out with the Ramones, and they treat everybody of any race or sex the same—who *they* hate isn't Jews or blacks or gays or anybody but certain spike-conk assholes who just last week graduated from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* lines to skag-dabblings and now stumble around Max's busting their nuts trying to be decadent.

Whereas you don't have to try at all to be a racist. It's a little coiled clot of venom lurking there in all of us, white and black, goy and Jew, ready to strike out when we feel embattled, belittled, brutalized. Which is why it has to be monitored, made taboo and restrained, by society and the individual. But there's a difference between hate and a little of the old *epater* gob at authority: swastikas in punk are basically another way for kids to get a rise out of their parents and maybe the press, both of whom deserve the irritation. To the extent that most of these spikedomes ever had a clue on what that stuff originally meant, it only went so far as their intent to shock. "It's like a stance," as Ivan says. "A real immature way of being dangerous."

Maybe. Except that after a while this casual, even ironic embrace of the totems of bigotry crosses over into the real poison. Around 1970 there was a carbuncle named Wayne McGuire who kept contributing installments of something he called "An Aquarian Journal" to *Fusion* magazine, wherein he suggested between burblings of regurgitated Nietzsche and bad Celine ellipses that the Velvet Underground represented some kind of mystical milestone in the destiny of the Aryan race, and even tried to link their music with the ideas of Mel Lyman, who was one of the prototypes for the current crop of mindnapping cult-daddies.

On a less systematic level, we had little outcroppings like Iggy hollering, "Our next selection tonight for all you Hebrew ladies in the audience is entitled 'Rich Bitch!'" on the ¹1974 recorded-live bootleg *Metallic K.O.*, and my old home turf *Creem* magazine, where around the same time I was actually rather proud of myself for writing things like (in an article on David Bowie's "soul" phase): "Now, as we all know, white hippies and beatniks before them would never have existed had there not been a whole generational subculture

with a gnawing yearning to be nothing less than the downest baddest *niggers*. . . . Everybody has been walking around for the last year or so acting like faggots ruled the world, when in actuality it's the *niggers* who control and direct everything just as it always has been and properly should be."

I figured all this was in the Lenny Bruce spirit of let's-defuse-them-epithets-by-slinging-'em-out in Detroit I thought absolutely nothing of going to parties with people like David Ruffin and Bobby Womack where I'd get drunk, maul the women, and improvise blues songs along the lines of "Sho' wish ah wuz a nigger / Then mah dick'd be bigger," and of course they all laughed. It took years before I realized what an asshole I'd been, not to mention how lucky I was to get out of there with my white hide intact.

I'm sure a lot of those guys were very happy to see this white kid drunk on his ass making a complete fool if not a human TV set out of himself, but to this day I wonder how many of them hated my guts right then. Because Lenny Bruce was wrong—maybe in a better world than this such parlor games would amount to cleansing jet oftakes, and between friends, where a certain bond of mutual trust has been firmly established, good natured racial tradeoffs can be part of the vocabulary of understood affections. But beyond that trouble begins—when you fail to realize that no matter how harmless your intentions are, there is no reason to think that any shit that comes out of your mouth is going to be understood or happily received. Took me a long time to find it out, but those words are *lethal*, man, and you shouldn't just go slinging them around for effect. This seems almost too simple and obvious to say, but maybe it's good to have some-thing simple and obvious stated once in a while, especially in this citadel of journalistic overthink. If you're black or Jewish or Latin or gay those little vernacular epithets are bullets that riddle your guts and then fester and burn there, like torture-flak hailing on you wherever you go. Ivan Julian told me that whenever he hears the word "nigger," no matter who says it, black or white, he wants to kill. Once when I was drunk I told Hell that the only reason hippies ever existed in the first place was because of niggers, and when I mentioned it to Ivan while doing this article I said, "You probably don't even remember-" "Oh yeah, I remember," he cut me off. And that was two years ago, one ostensibly harmless little slip. You take a lifetime of that, and you've got grounds for trying in any way possible, even if it's only by convincing one individual at a time, to remove those words from the face of the earth. Just like Hitler and Idi Amin and all other enemies of the human race.

Another reason for getting rid of all those little verbal barbs is that no matter how you intend them, you can't say them without risking misinterpretation by some other bigoted asshole; your irony just might be his cup of hate. Things like the Creem articles and partydown exhibitionism represented a reaction against the hippie counterculture and what a lot of us regarded as its pious pussyfooting around questions of racial and sexual identity, questions we were quite prepared to drive over with bulldozers. We believed nothing could be worse, more pretentious and hypocritical, than the hippies and the liberal masochism in whose sidecar they Coked along, so we embraced an indiscriminate, half-joking and half-hostile mind-lessness which seemed to represent, as Mark Jacobson pointed out in his *Voice* piece on Legs McNeil, a new kind of cool. "I don't discriminate," I used to laugh, "I'm prejudiced against *everybody!*" I thought it made for a nicely charismatic mix of Lenny Bruce freespleen and W. C. Fields misanthropy, conveniently ignoring Lenny's delirious, nigh-psychopathic inability to resolve the contradictions between his idealism and his infantile, scatological exhibitionism, as well as the fact that

W. C. Fields's racism was as real and vile as-or more real and vile than anybody else's. But when I got to New York in 1976 I discovered that some kind of bridge had been crossed by a lot of the people I thought were my peers in this emergent Cretins' Lib generation.

This was stuff even I had to recognize as utterly repellent. I first noticed it the first time I threw a party. The staff of *Punk* magazine came, as well as members of several of the hottest CBGB's bands, and when I did what we always used to do at parties in Detroit—put on soul records so everybody could dance—I began to hear this: "What're you playing all that nigger disco shit for, Lester?"

"That's not nigger disco shit," I snarled, "that's *Otis Redding*, you assholes!" But they didn't want to hear about it, and now I wonder if in any way I hadn't dug my own grave, or at least helped contribute to their ugliness and the new schism between us. The music editor of this paper has theorized that one of the most important things about New Wave is how much of it is almost purely white music, and what a massive departure that represents from the almost universally blues-derived rock of the past. I don't necessarily agree with that it ignores the reggae influence running through music as diverse as that of the Clash, Pere Ubu, Public Image Ltd., and the Police, not to mention the Chuck Berry licks at the core of Steve Jones's attack. But there is at least a grain of truth there—the Contortions' James Brown/Albert Ayler spasms aside, most of the SoHo bands are as white as John Cage, and there's an evolution of sound, rhythm, and stance running from the Velvets through the Stooges to the Ramones and their children that takes us farther and farther from the black-stud postures of Mick Jagger that Lou Reed and Iggy partake in but that Joey Ramone certainly doesn't. I respect Joey for that, for having the courage to be himself, especially at the sacrifice of a whole passel of macho defenses. Joey is a white American kid from Forest Hills, and as such his cultural inputs have been white, from "The Jetsons" through Alice Cooper. But none of this cancels out the fact that most of the greatest, deepest music America has produced has been, when not entirely black, the product of miscegenation. "You can't appreciate rock 'n' roll without appreciating where it comes from," as Pinkston put it.

Musical questions, however, can be passed off as matters of taste. Something harder to pass off entered the air in 1977, when I started encountering little zaps like this: I opened up a copy of a Florida punk fanzine called *New Order* and read an article by Miriam Linna of the Cramps, Nervus Rex, and now Zantees: "I love the Ramones [because] this is the celebration of everything American—everything teenaged and wonderful and white and urban. . . ." You could say the "white" jumping out of that sentence was just like Ornette Coleman declaring *This Is Our Music*, except that the same issue featured a full-page shot of Miriam and one of her little friends posing proudly with their leathers and shades and a pistol in front of the headquarters of the United White People's Party, under a sign bearing three flags: "GOD" (cross), "COUNTRY" (stars and stripes), "RACE" (swastika).

Sorry, Miriam, I can go just so far with affectations of kneejerk cretinism before I puke. I remember the guy in the American Nazi Party being asked, "What about the six million?" in PBS's *California Reich*, and answering "Well, the way I heard it it was only really four-and-a-half million, but I wish it was six," and I imagine you'd find that pretty hilarious too. I probably would have at one time. If that makes me a wimp now, good,

that means you and anybody else who wants to get their random vicarious kicks off White Power can stay the fuck away from me.

More recently, I've heard occasional stories like the one about one of the members of Teenage Jesus and the jerks yelling "Hey, you bunch of fucking niggers" at a crowd of black kids in front of Hurrah one night and I am not sorry to report getting the shit kicked out of him for it. When I told this to Richard Hell, he dismissed it: "He thinks he's being part of something by doing that joining a club that'll welcome him with open arms, trying to get accepted. It's not real. Maybe I'm naive, but I think that's what all racism is not really directed at the target but designed to impress some other moron."

He may be right, but so what? James Chance of the Contortions used to come up to Bob Quine pleading for Bob to play him his Charlie Parker records. Now, in a *New York Rocker* interview, James dismisses the magical qualities of black music as "just a bunch of nigger bullshit." Why? Because James wants to be famous, and ripping off Albert Ayler isn't enough. My, isn't he *outrageous*? ("He's got the shtick down," said Danny Fields, stifling a yawn, when they put James on the cover of *Soho Weekly News*.) And congrats to Andy Shernoff of the Dictators, who did so well they're now called the Rhythm Dukes, for winning the *Punk* magazine Drunk as a Skunk contest by describing "Camp Runamuck" as "where Puerto Ricans are kept until they learn to be human."

Mind you, I like a cheap laugh at somebody else's expense as well as the next person. So I got mine off Nico, who did "Deutschland Ober Alles" at CBGB's last month and was just naive enough to explain to Mary Harron, in a recent interview in *New Wave Rock*, why she was dropped by Island Records: "I made a mistake. I said in *Melody Maker* to some interviewer that I didn't like negroes. That's all. They took it so *personally* . . . although it's a whole different race. I mean, Bob Marley doesn't resemble a *negro*, does he? ... He's an archetype of Jamaican ... but with the features like white people. I don't like the features. They're so much like animals.... it's cannibals, no?"

Haw haw haw, doncha just love them dumb kraut cunts? And speaking of dumbness and krauts, my old pal Legs McNeil has this band called Shrapnel, who are busy refighting World War II onstage in dogtags, army surplus clothes, and helmets that fall over their eyes like cowlicks, while they sing songs with titles like "Combat Love." Personally I think it's not offensive (well, about as offensive as "Hogan's Heroes") that they're too young to remember Vietnam it's funny. The whole show is a cartoon (it's no accident that they open their set with the "Underdog" theme) and a damn good one. Musically they're up there too-tight dragstrip guitar wranglings that could put them on a par with the MC5 someday, combined with a stage act that could make them as popular as Kiss. The only problem, which has left me with such mixed feelings I hardly know what to say to them, is that the lyrics of some of the songs are nothing but racist swill. The other night I sat in the front row at CBGB's and watched them deliver one of the hottest sets I've seen from any band this year while a kid in the seat right next to me kept yelling out requests for "'Hey Little Gook!' `Hey Little Gook!'" the whole time. [Robert] Christgau, who considers them "proto-fascist" and hates them, told me they also had lyrics on the order of "Send all the spics back to Cuba." I mentioned this to Legs and he seemed genuinely upset: "No," he swore, "it's `Send all the spies back to Cuba.' "

"Okay," I said (Christgau still doesn't believe him), "what about `Hey Little Gook'?"

"Aw c'mon," he said, "that's just like in a World War II movie where they say 'kraut' and 'slants' and stuff like that!"

I told him I thought there was a difference between using words in dramatic context and just to draw a cheap laugh in a song. But the truth is that by now I was becoming more confused than ever. All I knew was that when you added all this sort of stuff up you realized a line had been crossed by certain people we thought we knew, even believed in, while we weren't looking. Either that or they were always across that line and we never bothered to look until we tripped over it. And sometimes you even find that you yourself have drifted across that line. I was in Bleecker Bob's the other night, drunk and stoned, when a black couple walked in. They asked for some disco record, Bob didn't have it of course, a few minutes went by, and reverting in the haze to my Detroit days I said something about such and such band or music having to do with "niggers." A couple more minutes went by. Then Bob said, "You know what, Lester? When you said that, those two people were standing right behind you."

I looked around and they were out on the sidewalk, looking at the display in his front window. Stricken, I rushed out and began to burble: "Listen ... somebody just told me what I said in there ... and I know it doesn't mean anything to you, I'm not asking for some kind of absolution, but I just want you to know that ... I have some idea . . . how utterly, utterly *awful* it was...."

I stared at them helplessly. The guy just smiled, dripping contempt "Oh, that's okay, man . . . it's just your head. . . ." *I've run up against a million assholes like you before, and I'll meet a million after you so fucking what?*

I stumbled back into the store, feeling like total garbage, like the complete hypocrite, like I had suddenly glimpsed myself as everything I claimed to despise. Bob said, "Look, Lester, don't worry about it, forget it, it happens to everybody," and, the final irony, sold me a reggae album I wondered how I was going to listen to.

If there's nothing more poisonous than bigotry, there's nothing more pathetic than liberal guilt. I feel like an asshole even retelling the story here, as if I expected some sort of expiation for what cannot be undone, or as if such a tale would be news to anybody. In a way Bob was right: I put a dollop more pain in the world, and that was that. There is certainly some-thing almost emetically self-serving about the unreeling of such confessions in the pages of papers like the Voice—it's the sort of thing that contributed to the punk reaction in the first place. But it illustrates one primal fact: how easily and suddenly you may find yourself imprisoned and suffocated by the very liberation from cant, dogma, and hypocrisy you thought you'd achieved. That sometimes—usually?—you'll find that you don't know where to draw the line until you're miles across it in a field of land mines. Like wanting the celebration of violent disorder that was the Sex Pistols, ending up with Sid and Nancy instead, yet realizing the next day that you still want to hear Sid sing "Somethin' Else" and see *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle*, and not just because you want to understand this whole episode better but to get your kicks. These are contradictions that refuse to be resolved, which maybe is what most of life eventually amounts to.

But that's begging the question again. Most people, I guess, don't even think about drawing the lines: they just seem to go through life reacting at random, like the cabdriver who told me that the report we were listening to on the radio about Three Mile Island was just a bunch of bullshit dreamed up by the press to sell papers or keep us tuned in. And maybe if you go on like that (assuming, of course, that we all *don't* melt), nothing will

blow up in your face. But you may end up imploding instead. A lot of people around CBGB's are already mad at me about this article, and the arguments seem mostly to run along the lines of Why don't you can it because there's not really that much racism down here and all you're gonna do is create more problems for our scene just when this Sid Vicious thing had blown over. I mentioned Pinkston's experience and was told he was paranoid. Like the people at Harrisburg who didn't wanna leave their jobs and actually believed it would be safe to stick around after the pregnant women and children were evacuated, these kids are not gonna believe this stuff exists until it happens to them. Hell, a lot of them are Jewish and still don't believe it even though they know about the neighborhoods their parents can't get into.

When I started writing this, I was worried I might trigger incidents of punk-bashing by black gangs. Now I realize that nobody cares. Most white people think the whole subject of racism is boring, and anybody looking for somebody to stomp is gonna find them irrespective of magazine articles. Because nothing could make the rage of the underclass greater than it is already, and nothing short of a hydrogen bomb on their own heads or a sudden brutal bigoted slap in the face will make almost anybody think about anybody else's problems but their own. And that's where you cross over the line. At least when you allow the poison in you to erupt, that can be dealt with; maybe the greater evil occurs when you refuse to recognize that the poison even exists. In other words, when you assent by passivity or indifference. Hell, most people *live* on the other side of that line.

There is something called Rock Against Racism (and now Rock Against Sexism) in England, an attempt at simple decency by a lot of people whom one would think too young and naive to begin to appreciate the contradictions. Yippie bullshit aside, it could never happen in New York, which is deeply saddening, not because you want to think that rock 'n' roll can save the world but because since rock 'n' roll is bound to stay in your life you would hope to see it reach some point where it might not add to the cruelty and exploitation already in the world. In a place where people are as walled off from one another as we are in America now, all you can do is try to make some sort of simple, humble, and finally private beginning. You feel like things like this should not need to be said, articles like this should perhaps not even be written. You may think, as I do of the sexism in the Strangers' and Dead Boys' lyrics, that the people and things I've talked about here are so stupid as to be beneath serious consideration. But would you say the same thing to the black disco artist who was refused admittance to Studio 54 even though he had a Top Ten crossover hit which they were probably playing inside the damn place at the time, the door-man/bouncer explaining to a white friend of the artist, "I'm not letting this guy in-he just looks like another street nigger to me"? Or would you rather argue the difference between Racist Chic and Racist Cool? If you would, just make sure you do it in the nearest factory. Or jail.