**What Does ‘New Wave’ Mean?[[1]](#footnote-1)**

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I have excellent news for the world. There is no such thing as ‘new wave’. It does not exist. . . . There never was any such thing as new wave. It was the polite thing to say when you are trying to explain you are not into the boring old rock and roll, but you don’t dare to say punk because you were afraid to get kicked out of the fucking party and they wouldn’t give you coke anymore. There’s new music, there’s new underground sound, there’s noise, there’s punk, there’s power pop, there’s ska, there’s rockabilly, but new wave doesn’t mean shit.

So spoke Claude Bessy (aka “Kickboy Face”), in Penelope Spheeris’ immortal documentary of the LA punk scene, *The Decline of Western Civilization* (1981). Bessy himself was the editor of *Slash*—one of the earliest and best underground punk zines in America—so his perspective was of course unapologetically, even enthusiastically, partisan. But his assessment neatly sums up the way new wave has come to be seen by those in the know. On the one hand, it was a bland euphemism for punk—worse, a watered-down, vapid and shamelessly commodified imitation of punk. On the other hand, by the early eighties the genre had became so broad, inclusive and nebulous that it was effectively meaningless (cf. the fate of ‘alternative’ and ‘indie’ in subsequent decades). Indeed, nowadays one can find expertly-curated compilations of virtually every musical genre no matter how obscure or picayune, but to date there are no serious contemporary retrospectives of new wave. And pivotal groups that used to be routinely characterized as new wave have mostly been resituated into more respectable categories: punk, protopunk, postpunk, power pop, art rock. In short, punk’s deflationary take on new wave has won out.

Yet it seems to me this account is too neat and tidy and self-serving. I’d like to propose that new wave was in fact much more interesting and important than that, and that by buying into punk’s sometimes overly-simplistic oppositions (purity vs impurity, authenticity vs. phoniness, integrity vs. venality) we close ourselves off from the power of a musical moment that was in many ways just as liberating and inspiring as that of punk—perhaps in some ways even *more* so. And so here I will try to take a few steps towards doing justice to new wave and perhaps even rehabilitating it as a meaningful and praise-worthy genre. I’ll begin with a quick overview of the emergence and history of the term, because (as with so many things) what it came to signify was not what it always meant.

The expression ‘new wave’ is a bit like the term ‘modern’: it starts off as something rather formal and empty, without any specific categorial standards, but then gradually coalesces into something more substantive. As is often pointed out, the first note-worthy use of the phrase comes from the iconoclastic *Nouvelle Vague* of French cinema in the late fifties and sixties. It was then intermittently trotted out to describe a heterogeneous mishmash of bands in the mid- to late-sixties (e.g., the Supremes, the Rolling Stones, John’s Children, Love, even Country Joe and the Fish!). By 1973, though, the phrase starts to take on a more specific meaning, with critics like Dave Marsh and Nick Kent using it retroactively to describe the Velvet Underground, the Young Rascals and Leslie West’s Vagrants, and then applying it to New York proto-punk acts like the New York Dolls and Wayne County—but also bands like Blue Öyster Cult and Kiss. New wave at this point seems to signify an ethos as much as an aesthetic: leaner, meaner, sometimes more rudimentary or ragged bands that eschew the idealism of the sixties or the self-indulgent technical wizardry of prog rock, and instead tap into the amateurish and transgressive spirit of early rock and roll. By early 1975, the Dolls, having been briefly resuscitated by Malcom McLaren but on the cusp of dissolution, are being marketed by him as the ‘new wave’ of rock and roll. Within months the Dolls will fall apart and McLaren will return to Britain to put the Sex Pistols together, branding them as ‘new wave’ too; the term will be picked up and used to describe the first generation of British punk bands—right alongside ‘punk’ itself. Meanwhile back in the States, ‘new wave’ and ‘punk’ (a label which has its own tangled and contested semantic history) are being used interchangeably to describe a gaggle of exciting new bands clustered around CBGB and Max’s Kansas City: the Patti Smith Group, Television, the Ramones, Blondie, Talking Heads etc. By 1976, new wave and punk are virtually synonymous.

By the end of 1977, however, a shift is underway. Put simply, punk ‘sells out’, but doesn’t sell. That is to say, by this time a good many first-wave punk bands have been signed by major labels who are anxious to commodify the next big thing, but the next big thing proves indigestible to the mainstream. Accordingly, the record industry recalibrates. One the one hand, there is a shift in marketing strategy. Most notably, Sire Records (who had with great prescience snatched up the Ramones, the Flamin’ Groovies, Talking Heads, the Dead Boys, Richard Hell and the Voidoids, and many other seminal punk/new wave acts) starts promoting their catalogue with a new slogan: “Don’t Call it Punk.” The word ‘punk’, Seymour Stein explains, is as offensive as ‘race’ and ‘hillbilly’ were when they were used to describe ‘rhythm and blues’ and ‘country and western’ thirty years before. ‘New wave’ is the preferred term of choice now. In this respect, Bessey was right: it’s “the polite thing to say when you are trying to explain you are not into the boring old rock and roll, but you don’t dare to say punk.” At the same time, labels increasingly begin seeking out bands that have that punkish *frisson*—the energy, the irreverent attitude, the jarring visual aesthetic—but are perhaps less confrontational, less dangerous, more friendly, more accessible and more easily marketable to a broader audience.

By 1978, punk itself is at a crossroads. Theo Cateforis helpfully describes it as splintering into three general movements: one faction sees punk as having outlived its purpose and decides to embrace growth and experimentation, extirpating the residually conservative, ‘rockist’ elements of punk and experimenting with new genres, formats and technologies. Here we have the postpunk moment represented by bands like PiL, Siouxsie and the Banshees, Magazine, Joy Division, the Slits, etc. The second faction doubles down on the original promise of punk, vowing to make it real this time—harder, faster, louder, sometimes more populist, sometimes more political, sometimes more organically rooted in youth culture and in any case more confrontational. This is the ‘second wave’ of punk, manifesting itself variously as ‘street punk’, Oi!, hardcore and anarchopunk. The third faction dials it back, sublimates the anger and aggression of punk, retains its energy, intelligence and humor, makes some prudent concessions to accessibility (lighter—or at least more subtly dark—themes, cleaner, tighter arrangements, melody, hooks, danceability) and becomes new wave. They seem to be the perfect solution to punk dyspepsia.

Now it’s tempting to assume that new wave bands were, right from the get-go, simply a function of the corporate demand for bowdlerized punk. But that’s unduly cynical, I think, and puts the cart before the horse. Consider again Cateforis’ three-fold fragmentation model: it’s an elegant description of the situation in Britain, but it doesn’t map onto the U.S. quite as well. Because even though there was a second wave of punk here (hardcore) and a much-ballyhooed new wave moment as well, there never really was a ‘postpunk’ movement as such. Or maybe the problem is just that in the States, the boundaries between punk, protopunk, postpunk and new wave were always fuzzy. Note that many of the American bands retrospectively categorized as postpunk were in fact arty *proto*punk (e.g., Television, Talking Heads, Suicide, Pere Ubu, Devo, the Residents). Some of them were of course momentarily branded as punk before it was really codified, and some walked out the other end of punk as new wave. Considered this way, I think it’s fair to say that bands like Talking Heads and Devo were in the mid-‘70s *simply making the music they wanted to make* in a decidedly independent and DIY spirit—music that at the time was strange, new, exciting and not particularly palatable to mainstream tastes. It’s not like they *wanted* to be the Stooges or the Dead Boys or Teenage Jesus and the Jerks but somehow lacked the backbone. In its earliest forms at least, then, new wave shouldn’t be seen as a cynical concession to external pressures, but rather as an autonomous and spontaneous expression of creative desire. It’s worth adding that many of the other so-called American postpunk bands that really *did* come after punk chronologically (some of which are discussed below), shared the same general ethos and aesthetic as those seminal new wave bands. In short, despite our anachronistic cravings to separate the ‘pure’ from the ‘impure’, there was no cardinal difference there.

What then was the ethos and aesthetic of new wave? I’m going to cast the net pretty narrowly here, and focus only on American artists between 1978 and 1982. New wave of course continues beyond that, but in the wake of MTV, the Fairlight synthesizer and New Romanticism it begins to take on a rather different character and becomes bit of a grab-bag. So in order to come up with a more distinct portrait I’ll just focus on a small core of artists. Let’s think of Devo, Talking Heads and Blondie as the three archetypal American new wave bands. Devo is in some ways *the definitive* band, for both snobs and novices. They’re the earliest of the three (formed in 1973, but with roots reaching back to the late ‘60s counter-culture) and hailing from Akron, OH, they epitomize the uniquely American weirdness emanating from the Midwest’s decaying industrial centers in the mid-‘70s. But more importantly, they offer probably the densest cluster of readily-identifiable new wave signifiers: the unapologetically intelligent, vulnerable and even neurotic nerdiness (a decisive rejection of ‘cool’ hyper-sexualized rocker machismo), the anxious, staccato, yelped vocals, nervous, twitchy, herky-jerky rhythms and abrupt, unnatural, robotic movements (a self-parodic performance of ‘whiteness’ or more broadly, the frailties of human desire bound up by the mechanical regularity of the modern world), highly processed and manipulated instruments (electric drums, hot-rodded hybrid guitars, keyboards and even synthesizers, a rarity in punk), a wildly imaginative but satirical and cartoonish techno-futurism. Devo provided the blueprint for so much of what came to be immediately identifiable as new wave iconography, from their first album *Q: Are We Not Men? A: We Are Devo!*  (with its childishly garish primary colors and hideously morphed visage of golf pro Chi-Chi Rodriguez), to their ever-changing array of whimsical but vaguely disturbing ‘uniforms’, to the simultaneously incisive, tacky and discomforting “Whip It” video. They were masters of the cheerful uncanny. Looking back on my own first encounter with Devo, I think it ultimately left a deeper and more lasting impression on me than that of either the Ramones or the Sex Pistols: seeing them in their matching yellow jumpsuits deconstructing the Stones’ “Satisfaction” on *Saturday Night Live* in 1978 as a young teenager, I remember being seized by an inexplicable feeling of horror—but also experiencing the intimations of a great liberation that would open up for me the possibilities of modern music, far beyond the tired old predictable horizons of ‘rock’ and ‘pop’.

The other two bands mentioned above hailed from the mid-‘70s CBGB scene in NYC. Talking Heads were in some ways the most visionary and protean of all the early new wave bands, despite their deliberately conservative appearance. They epitomized the ‘artist first, musician second’ ethos that animated so many of the early punk and new wave bands. Their initial sound created a more understated, even austere, template for new wave, with David Byrne’s perplexed, gentle outsider lyrics (alternating between irony and naïveté—like Warhol’s perpetual tourist, always seeing the commonplace for the first time), tense, nervous, wavering vocals (as in Devo, although less obviously so, there’s rejection of the macho ideal and a suggestion of neurosis), thin, clean, ‘clanky’ guitar lines (as in punk, there are few if any solos, but unlike punk, no distortion or power chords either) and minimalist keyboards (always subordinated to song structure), all set against a tight, nuanced and surprisingly funky rhythm section. Listening to *’77* and *More Songs About Buildings and Food* is like taking a shower and washing away all the suffocating, heavy-handed clichés of blues-based rock and even punk. Their next two albums—*Fear of Music*, with its highly-textured, atmospheric and almost claustrophobic art rock constructions, and *Remain in Light*, with its impossibly dense, multi-layered afrobeat-disco-funk grooves and found sound/sampling experimentation—stand as reference points for entirely different avenues of new wave exploration. And of course, their concert documentary *Stop Making Sense* (1984) offers a perfect, if belated, distillation of new wave’s conceptual sophistication and artistic ambition.

Blondie, on the other hand, set the standard for new wave’s campy, kitschy retrieval of pre-*Sgt. Pepper* ‘60s pop effluvia (trashy ‘True Confessions’ lyrical themes, Brill Building girl groups, cheesy farfisa-fueled garage rock) as well as the simple pleasures of well-crafted power pop (a preexisting genre growing out of the British Invasion that would come to have a kind of symbiotic relationship with new wave). They also put their imprimatur on what would become a distinctive new wave/power pop look: simple, solid colors (lots of black and white and red), tailored mod suits with skinny ties, sometimes paired with sneakers. And of course, Debbie Harry as Blondie’s iconic singer—sexy but savvy, cool, tough, ironically distant, embracing the artifice of the whole thing—would become a model for punk and new wave frontwomen alike by complicating and subverting the usual power dynamics of the male gaze. Although Talking Heads and Devo both had their early commercial break-through moments (“Take Me to the River” in ’79 and “Whip It” in ’80), Blondie was the first American punk/new wave act to score multiple mainstream hits (beginning with “Heart of Glass” in 1979, which went to #1).

From this core, we can move outward to similarly familiar bands, each of which brought its own particular synthesis to the American new wave aesthetic: The Cars, the Pretenders, the B-52s, and the Knack (one is tempted to include Joan Jett and the Go-Go’s here, but they’re more like punk translated directedly into the pop vernacular). Beyond this ring lay a treasure-trove of bands often known only as one-hit wonders—the Waitresses, Romeo Void, Berlin, Martha and the Muffins, IRS bands like Oingo Boingo and Wall of Voodoo—but dig deeper into their oeuvres and you’ll find some of the most resourceful, imaginative and exciting music of the late ‘70s and early ‘80s (give me “Jimmy Tomorrow” over “I Know What Boys Like” any day of the week, or “Back in Flesh” over “Mexican Radio”). Wander off the beaten trail a bit and explore some of the lesser-known, artier and more experimental new wave bands from this period: Urban Verbs, Human Sexual Response, Suburban Lawns, the Fibonaccis, Bunnydrums, early Algebra Suicide. One might expect this stuff to sound dated or contrived or derivative in retrospect, but it emerges after forty or so years as a revelation.

The question then is: where does new wave end and postpunk (or art rock, or jangle pop, or mutant disco or any of a dozen other proximate micro-genres) begin? We may balk at calling artists like the Feelies, the dBs, early R.E.M., Pylon, Cristina, Bush Tetras, Von Lmo, Klaus Nomi, or Laurie Anderson new wave as such, but they are in a sense all logical extensions of its worldview. Even pioneering noise/art damage bands like DNA, the Contortions, the Residents, or Tuxedomoon are inextricably bound up with it (for a sense of the overlapping aesthetic, see the sections on No Wave and Ralph Records artists elsewhere in this book). They all exist at least on the outer periphery of the new wave universe. In a way, hot-take compilations from the late ‘70s/early ‘80s (*The Best of Bomp!*, *Troublemakers*, *Attack of the Killer B’s*, *Trouser Press Presents The Best Of America Underground*), as well as soundtracks (*Times Square*, *Rock and Roll High School*, *Liquid Sky*, *Valley Girl*), documentary-movies (*Urgh! A Music War*, *Downtown 81, Smithereens*), public access TV shows (*TV Party*, *New Wave Theater*) and club bills (from venues like the Mudd Club, Danceteria, Peppermint Lounge, etc) offer a more catholic and organic portrait of the period’s diverse musical fermentations than can be captured by our clunky retrospective categories.

I described Devo, Talking Heads and Blondie as a kind of new wave hypostasis from which subsequent styles and approaches emanated and unfolded. But this is not to say they constitute some stable, unchanging ‘essence’ of new wave. As with all things, there are no essences, only histories and family resemblances. So what then is the genealogy of American new wave? As long as we think of new wave as simply a sublimation or dilution of punk, we can pretend its coming-into-being is entirely reducible to that of punk. Of course, the emergent history of new wave *does* overlap to some extent with the emergence of punk in fairly obvious ways. One of the less obvious threads of influence can be found in the nervous, clipped, herky-jerky, sometimes yodely or ‘boingy’ vocal style popularized by Mark Mothersbaugh, David Byrne and Ric Ocasek (and aped by hundreds of lesser lights until it became instantly identifiable as ‘that new wave voice’). Aspects of this style can be found in the earliest CBGB vocalists (i.e., Patti Smith and Tom Verlaine; for variations, see Richard Hell, Joey Ramone and Lux Interior), and can be traced back in part at least to Lou Reed. But the style in some ways hearkens back further—to the stutterings, hypertrophic glottal stops and amphetamine hiccups of rockabilly singers struggling to express the intensity of their feelings in the repressed libidinal economy of the ‘50s (Buddy Holly was, unsurprisingly, a kind of new wave idol, whose sound and image were often appropriated).

But I think new wave has its own sources, too, distinct from the roots of punk. So instead of the usual narrative (from ‘Nuggets’ garage rock and the Velvets to the MC5, Stooges, Dolls and CBGB/Max’s scene), let us imagine multiple alternate lineages. One clearly traces back to early ‘60s *pop* music, rather than rock and roll per se (girl groups, surf bands, Tommy James and the Shondells proto-Bubblegum), as well as the high-brow/low-brow blurring pop art of that same time (Warhol, Lichtenstein, etc). Another runs from the British Invasion and mod through power pop, especially the lesser-known American bands of the early- to mid-‘70s, many of whom found a home on scrappy indie labels like Bomp! and Berserkley: Earthquake, the Rubinoos, Pezband, the Shoes, the Nerves, and perhaps most notably, the Flamin’ Groovies and Jonathan Richman and the Modern Lovers. The Groovies had been around since the ‘60s, when the Beatles, Stones and Stooges all fought a battle for their soul, but by the mid-‘70s they had dialed in a raw power pop sound and found themselves right in the thick of the nascent punk/new wave scene. The Modern Lovers too are often mentioned in histories of punk, but never really fit comfortably into the dominant narrative. While most protopunk bands were writing songs about sexual transgression and drug-fueled self-immolation, Jonathan Richman was singing about how much he loved driving alone at night with the radio on (“Roadrunner”), or how he wanted to date some girl but really wasn’t into drug culture (“I’m Straight”) or hanging in there through all the bitter disappointments of life to achieve serene happiness in one’s golden years (“Dignified and Old”). If Lou Reed or Iggy Pop is the godfather of punk, we might say Jonathan Richman is the godfather of new wave. The clean-cut look, the awkward, amateurish, shaky vocals, the mundane but confessional themes, the crude but surprisingly clean, un-rocky, almost *dinky* arrangements created the template for bands like Talking Heads and the Cars (and it’s no coincidence that ex-members of the Modern Lovers—Jerry Harrison and David Robinson—would go on to join those bands).

Other lines of descent might involve glam/art rock bands like Sparks and Roxy Music (I think the former in particular is an underappreciated source for the quirkier, more eccentric, cerebral and hyperkinetic branch of new wave, as well as certain clever power pop touches). Brian Eno is obviously a massive influence here too, in part because of his ‘artist-technician rather than musician’ ethos, but also in part because of his formative ‘Krautrock’ collaborations and ambient experiments, which certainly had an impact on the more ambitious outposts of new wave. Again, it’s no surprise that Eno became the patron saint of new wave, producing bands like Television, Devo and Talking Heads and collaborating with David Byrne on *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1981). I think there is a rich seam of experimental underground conceptual/performance art (again, in the early- to mid-‘70s) that feeds into new wave as well. Devo’s parodic “De-Evolution” philosophy (replete with a manifesto, homemade instruments, theatrical performances with masks, costumes and characters such as “Booji Boy”, videos, etc) is a perfect example of this, but also the cacophonic absurdism of the Residents and the cartoonish, surrealist Cab Calloway-themed happenings of the Mystic Knights of the Oingo Boingo (a musical-theatrical performance troupe which preceded the actual band by a good seven years). The extravagant early theatrical performances of the Tubes might even be linked here, as well as the *Rocky Horror Picture Show* cult phenomenon. The common theme is a multi-media counter-cultural project that involves, but goes beyond, mere music-making (a kind of art damage version of Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk*, as it were). In some cases, the spirit of these projects can likely be traced back to Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention (an interesting contrast with the Captain Beefheart-inspired postpunk movement).   
 The story of new wave has all too often been told from an external standpoint: either a hostile, exclusive one (new wave as disappointingly scrawny changeling swapped at the last minute for the promising *enfant terrible* of punk) or a shallow, uninformed one (*New Wave Hits of the ‘80s*-style consumerist nostalgia fodder). I’ve tried to counterbalance those caricatures by reconstructing, to some extent, new wave’s own *self-*understanding. I suggested towards the beginning of this reflection that new wave as a musical movement was in many ways just as liberating and inspiring as that of punk—perhaps even *more* so. It was in some ways aesthetically bolder and more willing to take chances than punk, in any case more open to new possibilities. There’s a certain musical promiscuity to new wave that punk lacked, both its terms of instrumentation (e.g., the integration of keyboard, horns, synthesizers, other processed instruments, additional layers of percussion, even sound ‘treatments’) and its willingness to explore and hybridize different styles (power pop, girl group, surf music, *musique concrète*, early electronica, disco, hip hop, noise, glam, ska, rockabilly, big band, afrobeat, etc). It could be experimental and ambitious without lapsing into the sometimes rather bleak and abrasive self-mortifications of postpunk. It was also more socially inclusive—ironically so, given punk’s self-mythologizing as the haven of the outsider. New wave ditched the residual ‘tough guy’ macho pose that punk uncritically inherited from rock, opening the door to less toxic and more malleable forms of masculinity. It was heavily populated with women and LGBTQ artists and welcomed a wide variety of body types (in terms of race and ethnicity, new wave was still predominantly white, although arguably less so than punk). You could say that when punk and new wave went their separate ways in 1978, new wave got the better end of the deal. Punk kept the hog’s share of the energy, anger, volume and cathartic rush, but it grew increasingly brittle, earnest, ascetic, puritanical—obsessed with its own righteousness and authenticity. New wave took the intelligence, the playfulness, the openness, the free-spirited cultural *bricolage*, the Apollonian irony, and yes, the *fun*. It could be ridiculous and embarrassing, but it was rarely boring. Don’t get me wrong: there’s a lot of amazing punk that got made after 1977. But take the best ten slabs of punk from 1978-82 and put them up against your top ten new wave songs: which makes you feel more alive? My money’s on new wave.

1. This essay focuses only on American new wave; for a discussion of British new wave, see Matt Worley’s excellent essay in this volume. There is, surprisingly, a paucity of serious writing on the topic of New Wave music in general, although a number of studies have begun to emerge in the last decade. The best in my view is still Theo Cateforis, *Are We Not New Wave? Modern Pop at the Turn of the 1980s* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), to which this essay is very much indebted. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)