Abstract: Northern Ireland during The Troubles (1960s-1998) was a region divided, with Catholic resistance to British/Protestant dominance creating a constant state of conflict and aggression. Out of and in response to this environment emerged a vibrant and energetic punk subculture during the late 1970s. Both Catholics and Protestants participated in a scene that often explicitly espoused nonsectarian values and anti-police and anti-paramilitary political views, as well as practicing subversive styles of dress and behavior. Thus punk bodies and spaces became radical alternatives to the dominant culture of Northern Ireland.

In this proposal I am requesting funding to conduct research in Northern Ireland, with the goal of creating an institutional history of the punk subculture. Building off of the contacts I made during my short trip to Belfast, I plan to conduct as many interviews as possible with former members of the scene - about their backgrounds, experiences, and memories - in order to produce a history that integrates elements such as class, religion, and education, mapping out the paths and points of intersect between individuals and politics and music and style, and the subsequent development of a subculture in opposition to and in conversation with the dominant culture. Ultimately I will create a digital multimedia exhibition bringing together both academic content as well as archival materials that preserve the individual voices and experiences of participants in the scene, to allow for a more complex and nuanced understanding of subculture as shaped not only by bands or record labels but by its participants.
The violence and conflict of the Troubles touched all aspects of life in Northern Ireland, including music. In 1975 a cover band called the Miami Showband was violently attacked by members of the UVF, an event that “shattered the myth of sectarian free music,”¹ and encouraged touring bands to steer clear of Northern Ireland. This resulted in an increase in local bands making their own music.

This newfound musical vitality coincided with the explosion of punk rock in England, spearheaded by the Sex Pistols and the Clash. The latter band’s visit to Belfast in 1977 brought together Catholic and Protestant fans, and when the concert was cancelled by nervous venue owners, they rioted, for once on the same side². The riot is commonly held to mark the beginning of a vibrant DIY punk scene in Northern Ireland.

Punk was ideally suited to be the soundtrack of life in late 1970s Belfast. Martin McLoone explains: “If there was an element of ‘the abject’ about punk - gobbing, vomiting - there was no more abject place in the Western world than Northern Ireland, specifically Belfast, in 1977.”³ Youths disillusioned by the violent sectarianism espoused by their parents and peers found a new home in a subculture free from the constant aggression that pervaded their daily lives. Will Straw writes that “scenes actualize a particular state of relations between various populations and social groups, as these coalesce around specific coalitions of musical style,”⁴ and no other music scene actualized this statement so vividly as Northern Ireland punk. Both Catholics and Protestants found common ground in the mass of sweaty punks thrashing around the cramped floors of concert venues in Belfast and Derry.

Nevertheless, though often eulogized as a utopian performance of nonsectarianism, the reality of the scene was more complicated. Certainly, many bands took strongly political or apolitical stances against bigotry, paramilitary violence, and police brutality, but punk shows

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³ McLoone, “Punk Music in Northern Ireland,” 32.

were far from uniformly nonsectarian spaces. Paul Burgess, drummer and lyricist of the band Ruefrex, remembers

being chased at gunpoint from the Harp [Bar] after playing Sham 69’s ‘Ulster Boy’ and having a succession of police and ambulances sent to my parents house on the pretext of my murder! This followed a volley of pool balls through their windows after interviews I gave legitimising - in theory - a conditional United Ireland.”

While accounts such as this do not discount the radical alterity of the punk community and spaces like the Harp Bar, they point to a complexity that is lost in more romantic memories of the scene.

While the Northern Ireland scene has received very relatively little academic attention, the wider punk movement, especially in Britain, has long been the favored subject of subcultural theorists. Hebdige, characterizing subcultures as forms of subversion and negative response to the dominant culture, applies semiotics and the sociology of deviance to analyze the phenomenon of working-class youth subcultures, including punk. Hebdige focuses on punk’s attempt to “detach itself from the taken-for-granted landscape of normalized forms” by analyzing the subculture’s “style”- its music, dress, argot, and ritual. This method of broad analysis set the tone for much of the subcultural research that followed, focusing on grand narrative and broad theories based on attempts to ‘read’ subcultures as texts. Although this approach makes possible a necessary conceptual ordering of things David Muggleton’s Inside Subculture criticizes the sweeping certainty of Hebdige’s theorizing as “the tendency of academics to reify the concept of subculture - to treat the concept as a real, material thing with its own properties that stand apart from the complex lived reality of individual members.” Instead Muggleton proposes a neo-Weberian framework that privileges the subjective meanings applied

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7 Ibid., 19.
9 Ibid., 22.
to the subculture by the participants themselves, and recognizes the fragmented and overlapping formation of identity that occurs for subcultural participants.10

This project will serve as a continuation of research I began during a weeklong visit to Belfast in summer of 2017. While also completing an ethics course through the LMU University Honors Program, I conducted a series of informal interviews with several participants in the punk scene. Subjects included Terri Hooley, founder of the Good Vibrations record label; John T. Davis, director of the documentary *Shellshock Rock*; Glenn Patterson, novelist and screenwriter of the 2013 *Good Vibrations* film; and other former punks now involved in academic or archival work. These interviews yielded fascinating and unexpected details of the subjects’ interactions and involvements with the scene. Subjects also expressed that they knew other people who would be interested in participating in this research, which suggested to me the possibility of conducting a sort of tardy ethnography that could allow the creation of a more nuanced understanding of this historical moment.

By conducting field research in Northern Ireland- interacting with people and artifacts from this unique historical moment- I hope to fill the gaps in the current writing on Ulster punk and create a more complete phenomenological understanding of the subculture. How did political, religious, social, and economic institutions of Northern Ireland affect the historical course of the punk subculture, from its emergence in 1977 to its decline in the mid-1980s? Additionally, how did these factors influence the subject formation of the individual participants in the scene, and how does this deviate from the established narrative surrounding the scene? To what degree did the stylistics of the subculture - clothing, music, writing, spaces - challenge or subvert the dominant sectarian culture?

The keystone effort of this project will be a three week trip to Northern Ireland, during which I will conduct interviews with members of the Troubles-era punk scene as well as members of the current punk scene. These interviews will be loosely structured and informal, and will cover a range of topics. Questions will focus on how subjects encountered punk and became involved in the scene, what forms their participation took, how they presented

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10 Ibid., 12.
themselves, and how their participation in the scene or performance of punk style affected their own subjective identities. Furthermore, I will ask the subjects about general information about their lives at the time, including their neighborhoods, family, schooling, and social life.

Using video and audio equipment, I plan to record the interviews in the interest of preserving the subjects’ voices and stories.

I will also seek out artifacts produced during the scene, such as fanzines, concert posters, and photographs. While various archival projects of N.I. punk have been undertaken, many objects are still undocumented, and few of these pieces have been incorporated into any academic work on the scene. Zines in particular have the potential to serve as a wealth of information, since they preserve in writing the contemporary views, events, and attitudes of the subculture. My goal will be to examine and scan or photograph as many of these documents as possible, and incorporate them into my final analysis.

Additionally, I will spend time visiting, documenting, and mapping out the physical spaces formerly and currently inhabited by the punk subculture in the areas of Belfast, Derry Londonderry, and Omagh. The location and accessibility of physical spaces such as music venues and record stores are key elements in tracing the institutional history of a subculture. For example, the short-lived but influential “Anarchy Centre” established in the Belfast City Centre in 1983 staged live music, art shows, and film screenings on Saturday afternoons, making it possible for youth to travel from all around greater Belfast to participate in these events. This angle is particularly interesting given the geographic, often state-enforced segregation of Northern Ireland’s urban areas along community and class lines, which in some cases determined what communities were able to access the spaces that allowed the subculture to coalesce while growing through the dissemination of style.

Using the recordings of former participants I will assemble an oral history, which I feel is one of the best ways we can interact with the N.I. punk scene almost forty years later. I will also draw on the information obtained in these interviews to write a paper exploring the institutional history of punk in Northern Ireland, to address how these individual experiences were shaped by

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11 *The A Centre or the Lost Tribe of Long Lane*, edited by David Hardine and Dave Hyndman (Belfast, UK; Northern Visions, 2010) vimeo web player.
the particulars of the social and material realities of the society from which they emerged. The results of this project will be assembled into a website that serves as a sort of multimedia exhibit and documentation of the subculture, compiling interview transcripts, audio and video recordings, photographs, and my academic writing, while also linking to other resources and information about Northern Ireland, including academic writing, documentaries, and related online archival projects.
Works Cited

*The A Centre or the Lost Tribe of Long Lane.* Edited by David Hardine and Dave Hyndman, Northern Visions, 2010.


Budget

(All amounts in USD)

Lodging - $963 total

Prices from airbnb.com
Belfast - Private bedroom located near city centre and Queens University $602 for 9 nights ($63 per night + fees) (May 8-May 17)
Derry: Private bedroom located near Old City $118 for 3 nights (33 per night + fees) (May 17-20)
Belfast $243 (May 20-23) (63 per night + fees)

Recording Equipment - $200

Food - $350

Travel - $1332.52

Airfare - $1200 (Price estimate from British Airways)
Train tickets - Single ride Belfast-Derry and Derry-Belfast at £12.00 ea. - $32.15 (£24.00)
Busfare - 3-day Goldline pass (for travel to Omagh, Lisburn $33.49 (£25.00)
Additional Train/Bus Fare - $66.88 (£50)

Total Amount - $2,845.52

Itinerary

Travel Day: (Los Angeles - Belfast) May 7-8
Belfast: May 8-May 17
Travel Day: May 17
Derry: May 17- 20
Travel Day: May 20
Belfast: May 20 - 23
Travel Day: (Belfast-Los Angeles) May 24-25