From punk into pop (via hardcore)

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DOI:
10.1386/punk_00086_1

Title: From Punk into Pop (via Hardcore): Re-Reading the *Sub Pop* Manifesto

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Abstract: Bruce Pavitt's music fanzine *Sub Pop*, the first issue of which appeared in 1980, is often presented as a simple case of independent culture versus the reviled mainstream, with little reference to the actual written and graphic content of its pages. This article challenges and complicates that view with an account of Pavitt's usage of language and specific genre terms: in particular, his tendency to rebrand punk as (indie) 'pop'. This he reinforces with all manner of written and visual references to 1950s pre-corporate means of production and consumption. In so doing, I argue, he projects what numerous theorists have defined as a 'genre culture' based around pop.

Pavitt also tries, however, to absorb the immediate indie legacy of hardcore within his genre culture. As the second part of the article demonstrates, this generates stark tensions within his fanzine reviews and other copy – not least when his opening *Sub Pop* manifesto rejects the toxic masculinity of corporate rock but simultaneously celebrates hardcore's own carefully policed American, anti-British, anti-theatrical masculinity. Such tensions, I suggest in closing, found their way into Pavitt's most famous creation, where they were partly, if still messily, resolved: this was the Seattle indie record label, also called Sub Pop, and its signal genre of grunge.

Keywords: fanzine, Sub Pop, punk, post-punk, indie, hardcore, rock criticism, pop

From Punk into Pop (via Hardcore): Re-Reading the *Sub Pop* Manifesto

> Only by supporting new ideas by local artists, bands, and record labels can the U.S. expect any kind of dynamic social/cultural change in the 1980s. This is because the mass homogenization of our culture is due to the claustrophobic centralization of our culture. We need diverse, regionalized, localized approaches to all forms of art, music, and politics. (Pavitt 2015: 15)

Radical words from the young Bruce Pavitt. In May 1980, at 21 years of age, this resident of Olympia, WA had hand-finished 500 copies of the first issue of his new music fanzine, titled *Subterranean Pop*. The quotation above is a central paragraph of its opening manifesto, and captures some of its key terms, underlined as in Pavitt's original. From this viewpoint, American music was becoming – had, perhaps, already become – choked to death by the centralizing of power, money, and influence into a few elite media strongholds: New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco. Localization into a network of small regional scenes meant freedom from this stranglehold, and in turn offered a shimmering utopian glimpse of social transformation and, just as valuable, cultural capital. 'A decentralized cultural network', Pavitt writes a few issues later, 'is obviously cool. Way cool' (Pavitt 2015: 167). And, most memorably of all, 'emphasis: EXPLOSIVE artistic hanky-panky is everywhere. Sometimes it just needs a little support' (Pavitt 2015: 50).

Even some forty years later, these remain alluring statements. For the general countercultural reader, they hold the promise of a power shift from the hands of the few to those of the many, the bristling intimation of 'subterranean' revolution from beneath and around. For the specifically academically minded, they hint at rich resources for American independent 'scene studies', with the fanzine as central document of these scenes' formation, their practices, and their interactions. To this it might be added, of course, that Sub Pop is one of the great indie success stories after punk. Famously, in 1986, Pavitt transferred the name of his fanzine to his new Seattle-based record label that would release some of the most celebrated independent rock artists of the late 1980s and early 1990s. In so doing, he proved highly influential in the founding of the genres of 'grunge' and 'alternative rock', as well as the documenting of the key Seattle scene at their heart. This same Sub Pop label – still just about 'independent' in the sense of ownership, though Warner Bros now holds a large stake in it – continues to operate from Seattle today.

Yet, bearing in mind the obvious importance conferred by this success narrative, it is surprising to find that very little has been written about the actual *content* of Pavitt's fanzine. This is surely reflective of broader scholarly attitudes to fanzines, which, as numerous commentators have pointed out, typically focus on their graphic design at the expense of other elements (Worley et al. 2018: 5; Atton 2010: 518). It may also betray a lack of access to the sources. Like many similar examples, the early *Sub Pop* fanzines were produced in short runs of 500 to 2000 copies, and are held in few, if any, archival collections. Even so, it seems particularly stark that, beyond a few standard soundbites on music-cultural decentralization – much as I have excerpted them above – it is hard to find any extended commentary on this particular fanzine's material. This seems to hold whether we are talking about the original *Subterranean Pop* (1980-82; the title shortened, from Spring 1981, simply to *Sub Pop*), the three tape-fanzines (1981-83) showcasing regional music, and the monthly column (*Sub Pop USA*) that ran in the Seattle music newspaper *The Rocket* from April 1983 until July 1988.[1]

Like numerous other fanzines of the era, however, *Sub Pop* has recently been republished in a glossy, and widely available, collected edition (Pavitt 2015). This certainly attests to nostalgic interest in the period on the part of those whom it formed. But it also provides an opportunity to reflect on further reasons for the overlooking of the fanzine's content, in support of those scholars who remind us that such phenomena ought never be dismissed as ephemeral or parochial 'pop detritus' (Worley et al. 2018: 1). My thought on this point is that, to put it simply, it has suited most commentators to ignore much of what populates *Sub Pop*'s pages. Eager to make historical links backwards to the punk of the late 1970s and forwards to the famous Seattle indie label of the same name, and usually seeking to stress the label's own 'independent' credentials against the commercial industry, critics have framed Pavitt's fanzine as straightforwardly oppositional, a blunt model of resistance against a mainstream (Gaar 2018: 1-13). In turn, they have typically assumed a tight 'homology' (Atton 2010: 517-19) between the fanzine's contents, aesthetics, and the social experience of its makers and readers. This is an approach that reflects the 1970s work of prominent subcultural theorists like Dick Hebdige, and has left detailed examination of the fanzine seemingly redundant, beyond the general acceptance that the fanzine screams what Hebdige once called a 'Refusal' (Hebdige 1979: 3). Yet it is worth remembering that *Sub Pop* first appeared in 1980, not 1976; it was the work of an American college student from Illinois, not disaffected working-class youth from suburban London. These two bare facts alone might encourage a closer look at content and a loosening of the homological guidelines, moving away from the standard punk-derived subcultural model that has so often guided the fanzine discourse.

In this article, I want to reconsider *Sub Pop* from a novel perspective, in part by focusing on its writing and language – an aspect of fanzine studies that, in particular, has received little scrutiny (Atton 2010: 519). Hebdige, from his punk-subcultural platform, considers typical fanzine language to be 'determinedly "working class"', by which he means that

> it was liberally peppered with swear words […] and typing errors and grammatical mistakes, misspellings and jumbled pagination were left uncorrected in the final proof. Those corrections and crossings out that were made before publication were left to be deciphered by the reader (Hebdige 1979: 111).

Similarly, Hebdige's approach leads him to place fanzine writing into a homologous relationship with the music it describes. Both music and text are little more than a 'strident buttonholing', he writes, that is deliberately 'difficult to "take in" in any quantity', and only occasionally admits higher forms of intellectual prowess such as wit (Hebdige 1979: 111-12).

Certainly, it can hardly be denied that strident buttonholing is an occasional part of Pavitt's *Sub Pop* linguistic formations. 'Buy it or I'll kill you' is a favourite refrain in his record reviews (e.g. Pavitt 2015: 27). Likewise, it would not be difficult to find in *Sub Pop* the swear words and grammatical errors that Hebdige notes. Yet it is important to accept that these exist within a larger and more intricate web of language, that is, they emerge amidst experiments in speech genre and addressivity, including personal asides, insults, obvious delusions of grandeur, and sudden turnarounds in evaluation. Hebdige would surely assess all these as imaginative outgrowth of the 'ironic self-abasement' that he sees as key to punk subculture (Hebdige 1979: 112). But they are also, in a single word, funny; they make the fanzine into a site for sheer pleasure in writing about music. In fact, I would say that *Sub Pop*'s written aesthetic and evaluative discourse – in conjunction with its graphic design – is one of its chief joys, perhaps its principal attraction. Pavitt's ironic wit thrives on the brutal brevity made necessary by his small format pages and by his commitment to the coverage of a range of independent American scenes, bands, and records in every issue.

Nonetheless, I am wary here of detouring the political by way of the pleasurable. Simon Frith, after all, has written of fanzines as 'ideological magazines [that] champion a particular sort of music in terms of its supposed political or social meaning', and as 'the most effective way of putting together new taste and ideological musical communities' (Frith 2002: 240). This clearly applies to *Sub Pop* and the intersections it forged between critics, reader-listeners, and practitioners focused on American independent music – particularly when we realize that, no

less ideologically, what 'independent' really meant in this case was not just a market position, but also a fairly narrow stylistic-generic bias towards certain taste factions within the post-punk: rock, pop, and DIY tape-driven musical experiment. I agree, then, with the recent remark of Pavitt's chief collaborator during the early years of the fanzine, Calvin Johnson, that one of the special qualities of *Sub Pop* was that it 'made readers want to hear the music they were seeing' (Pavitt 2015: 135). This is oddly put, but it nonetheless seems exactly right: the contents of each page do not so much model specific musical experience (Hebdige's 'strident buttonholing') as generate excitement, amusement, and curiosity for the cultural production and consumption of what I argue is a proposed 'genre culture' of American independent music (Holt 2007: 19-20; Toynbee 2000: 115-18). In this case, the genre culture is, perhaps unexpectedly, centred on 'pop', a term that simultaneously fulfils several important roles: it is light-hearted, attractive, humorous, often ironic; it shapes the aesthetic discourse and organization of the fanzine, and thus of the 'underground' it treats; it indicates norms of musical practice, performance, and feeling; and it implies social formations that bind artists, ideologues, and consumers together and, in turn, position the resulting collective in political terms.

Approached in this way, Pavitt's genre culture – we might name it 'subterranean pop' – is far more than a rigid network of largely discrete local post-punk scenes, or a coordinated refusal of the centralized mainstream. Rather, it is shown to be something more productive, informative, and messy: a 'cultural space' for creative expression (Worley 2018: 56) and a site, bounded by the fanzine, for the continual working out of a new indie 'pop' that attempts to absorb legacies from the immediate past – not least the 'British invasion' of the 1960s, the corporate rock of the 1970s, and the independent hardcore punk of Pavitt's close environs – and articulate them to a new market in the dawning 1980s. That this was a project fraught with contradictions goes without saying. But it is no less clear that it is an instructive case study in our attempts to understand the early American post-punk era, its inheritances, and the tangle of avenues that led out of it. As I shall show in the second half of the article, the *Sub Pop* manifesto, printed in the first pages of its first issue, provides direct evidence of such inheritances and onward avenues, alongside its better-known emphases on independence, localism, and decentralization. They lead over, indeed, into the founding of the influential Sub Pop label and the contributions that it made to the critical discourse on a supposedly new and 'alternative' rock late in the decade.

Sub Pop as Genre Culture

On the first page of *Sub Pop* #3 (Spring 1981), there is a pair of black-and-white photos of Bruce Pavitt. Poorly photocopied and mismatched in size, they represent him as vulnerability itself: his eyes are turned towards the floor and he sports a plaid shirt and cardigan, the very outfit that would soon become the uniform of the stereotypical 'loser'. Underneath, a handwritten note – not so much a letter as something one might find stuck on the fridge – relates the following:

> Hi there – my name is Bruce and we have to decentralize our society and encourage local art and things and music. SUB/POP can be an outlet for this kind of subversive entertainment perspective but only if you help me by writing local gossip and sending it in right away to me with money and photos of you and your friends playing rock star. Send it in and I will print it. O.K. Bruce x (Pavitt 2015: 84)

In the small space of a 7 x 8.5 inch page, this achieves a great deal. The note introduces, of course, the key ideological terms 'decentralize', 'local', and 'subversive'. It also emphasizes the urgency and emergency of the project ('right away', 'only if') and removes all barriers between editor and contributor, submission and acceptance ('send it in and I will print it'). Such features, combined with the self-portrait photographs, the messy handwrittenness, the curiously juvenile run-on grammar, the first-name terms, and the kiss at the end, conspire to generate a 'sense of openness and availability for human contact', as the fanzine scholar Alison Piepmeier once put it, 'that creates pleasure for the reader' (Piepmeier 2008: 222). Opening *Sub Pop* #3 and happening upon this note, the reader becomes positioned as a friend, receiving some personal, perhaps secret, correspondence. Moreover, holding and reading the fanzine in its original form – its small, non-standard format, the marks of production and distribution embedded in the paper itself – must have made it seem a gift, something specially handcrafted that embodies humane connection: '[t]he reader can revisit it, and although the text will stay the same, the artefact itself will change in subtle ways, like a body itself' (Piepmeier 2008: 235).

Of course, very few of the 500 or so readers who received this issue would have known Pavitt, and even fewer of those would have received it for free, that is, literally as a gift. (As Pavitt's request for money in the above indicates, *Sub Pop* had running costs; it typically cost 50 cents to $1, with tape issues around $5, while a subscription could be taken out for a few

dollars). Nor, in fact, was Pavitt likely to publish anything his readers sent in. While *Sub Pop* had numerous occasional correspondents based in regional scenes, and while Pavitt's friend Calvin Johnson often contributed record reviews and other copy, the fanzine never had a true letters page, and certainly never a page for anything that could be described as photos of readers 'playing rock star'. Yet such criticisms also miss the point. Pavitt's introductory note is designed to signpost his fanzine as the gathering-place for local instances of what Bourdieu called 'field[s] of restricted production', in which 'the producers produce for other producers': that is, cultural economies in which local creators, readers, and writers are implicitly the same (Bourdieu 1993: 39). Within such restricted economies, the 'loser wins', since the ordinary pursuit of profit, power, and authority are explicitly rejected; in turn, this redraws the nature of cultural consumption as dedicated personal involvement. As much as anything, it is this redrawing, I think, that roots Pavitt's *Sub Pop* strongly in punk; it is what connects it to specifically localist, 'place-making' notions of DIY independence (Lashua and Cohen, 2011: 90), as inherited by Pavitt from punk ideologues past and, perhaps most of all, his own mentor at the Olympia college radio station KAOS-FM, John Foster. As Pavitt himself recalled, 'John's philosophy was that punk was a folk music and that what was radical about it was that anybody could put out music and put out their own records' (Yarm 2011: 97).

This is not to imply, however, that *Sub Pop* relies on 'punk' as a genre label, or indeed as a broader descriptive term or badge of identity. Actually the word appears relatively infrequently in its pages, and this sets it apart from other contemporary music fanzines – for example, nearby Seattle's short-lived punk-conservative *Desperate Times*, launched in 1981 – that remained far more strongly committed (Masco 2015). In *Sub Pop*, in fact, 'punk' is often deployed in a clearly pejorative sense, chiefly on account of its tendency to persist within and thus reinforce established centres like Los Angeles and San Francisco. This leaves open, of course, the possibility that other, small unknown locales may produce a new, reinvigorated punk. But it also throws the emphasis *away* from punk as valid term of genre identification. Instead, as its overall title already proposes, the *Sub Pop* fanzine is much more strongly devoted to an alternative to 'punk' – namely 'pop'. The Spring 1981 abbreviation of the title's original 'Subterranean' is significant in this regard: shortened to 'Sub', it stands ambiguously for 'subversive', 'submissive', 'substitute', and 'sub-par', all adjectives that invest in the fanzine's loser economy. But it also stops the multi-syllable 'subterranean' stealing the limelight from 'pop', and allows an easy stylisation into various striking and balanced typographies: SUB/POP, as in Pavitt's note above, quickly becomes one such standard.

In her ethnographic studies of American independent music scenes of this era, Holly Kruse finds numerous instances of genre identification with 'pop'. For those who used it, Kruse writes, pop typically implied musical traits such as an emphasis on melody and certain kinds of instrumentation and arrangement: 'jangly' and 'Beatles-esque' are two familiar and evocative terms used by her interviewees (Kruse 2003: 115-16). Pete Dale identifies a similar usage, and a similar preference for 'pop' over 'punk', in British fanzines of the mid-1980s (Dale 2018: 170-5). This was not, however, only a question of aesthetics. As both authors also demonstrate, it was a deliberately multifaceted oppositional stance – in that to be 'indie pop' was to identify with one particular style of independent music and its more moderate practices against the extremes of others, not least the burgeoning indie (or 'alternative') rock. Simultaneously, to be 'indie pop' was to relate directly with the production and consumption practices, and subject matter and lyrical content, of Top 40 pop, and implicitly to find the indie version superior (Kruse 2003: 115-16). Pavitt is certainly in dialogue with a number of these usages. His description in November 1980 of the Dead Kennedys' 'Holiday in Cambodia', for example, as 'gut-shredded pop' draws attention to its memorable melodies, visceral harmonic structures, and reverberating guitar effects at the same time as it indicates something of its distinctive lyrics (Pavitt 2015: 64). The song gleefully imagines the torture of American college kids – one of the band's key markets – at the hands of the Khmer Rouge; Pavitt's description of it as 'pop' invites other college kids to embrace it as their own mainstream, a marker of their difference from, and superiority to, the complacent norm.

As this example further shows, 'pop' is one of the central triggers for Pavitt's linguistic inventiveness. Over the eight-year run of the fanzine and column, he diffracts it through all kinds of modifiers, and in so doing seems to use the genre to confirm Simon Frith's description of musical meaning as an 'adjectival experience' (Frith 1996: 263). Through the same process, however, he also proposes pop's endless potential for originality, and its all-encompassing relevance to what might be considered numerous stylistic branches of his independent underground after punk. Thus three- and four-piece guitar bands like the Nurses, Hüsker Dü, and Soul Asylum are representative of scenes in Arlington, VA, Saint Paul, and Minneapolis respectively; but they are also proponents of 'econo-pop', 'raw pop', and 'intense post-thrash pop' (Pavitt 2015: 38, 295, 313). The Delinquents (a four-piece, with prominent keyboard, from Austin) play 'garbage pop', while Steve Fisk's tape-looping collective Anonymous (Seattle) offer 'electro-pop' (Pavitt 2015: 69, 17). Wazmo Nariz (Chicago) is said to have achieved an 'underground pop classic' with his 45 'Tele-Tele-Telephone' of 1978 (Pavitt 2015: 26). And so on. It is ultimately as if there is little music in Pavitt's independent network, past

or present, that cannot be labelled with this term: pop is the vital ligament that holds the whole structure of structures together. Moreover, it draws in others from the surrounding landscape. John Foster, Pavitt's mentor, had an experimental collaboration at this time named 'Pop Philosophers', one track by which ('a pop masterpiece') is re-released on the tape-fanzine *Sub Pop #9* (Pavitt 2015: 196). Likewise Peter Belsito's book *Notes from the Pop Underground*, a collection of interviews with prominent indie artists including Diamanda Galas and Jim Jarmusch, is affectionately recommended by the *Sub Pop* column in late 1985 (Pavitt 2015: 301).

All this is not to claim that, in their strong emphasis on pop, Pavitt and his *Sub Pop* colleagues are anything other at base than rock critics. Indeed, this is just what they are, as is made clear by their belief in qualities such as originality, rawness, and sincerity of expression, as well as the manner in which they clearly seek to cultivate a sympathetic understanding, a common knowledge, between a select group of musicians and their no less select audiences (McLeod 2001: 50-2). Yet, in *Sub Pop*'s case, we must make the crucial adjustment that this superiority is intended to be felt to Top 40 pop while appropriating its genre-term and its practices and merging them into the legacy of punk. This is nowhere more obvious than in terms of recommended consumption: Pavitt's fanzine proposes that its consumers (whom he likes to stereotype as teenagers) buy 'pop 45s' by the 'most promising pop combos of the year', listed according to his regular charts of 'fave' hits. (Pavitt 2015: 27, 68, 40). They listen to 'abrasive pop' for hours a day on community-college radio stations like KAOS-FM. And they are encouraged to evaluate tracks by bodily effect, for how 'danceable' they are (Pavitt 2015: 16-17). Indie pop is thus the key *Sub Pop* badge of identity, but it is also a post-punk route, for producers and consumers, out of what seemed in 1980 the stale impasse of both 'punk' and 'rock'.

As such, Pavitt's 'pop' clearly does not only categorize and curate the aesthetic features of the music he reviews, but indicates something far more intricate, a 'genre culture' that shows music to be intertwined with behaviours, practices, meanings, histories, and pleasures (Holt 2007: 19). Moreover, if it brings a small jolt of ironic delight to label a venomous song like 'Holiday in Cambodia' as 'pop', it also uses the connotations of that term to float the idea that this music could have mass appeal, if only a larger select audience would recognise its existence and collaborate on its fame. In other words, it gives pop just what it is not supposed to have, and what rock conventionally denies to it: importance, a future, something more than a transitory existence. Pavitt confirms this design in an editorial for the *Sub Pop* column of July 1983:

> There are thousands of unusual, local artists in this country, expanding the concept of 'pop' music. Ideas and trends come and go, evolve and splinter into more ideas, more change. How does one gain access to this elusive, 'underground' information? 'Fanzines', publications put together with enthusiasm by fans, manage to document the most provocative local artists. […] Through a network of independent distributors, noncommercial radio, and the aforementioned fanzines, avant-garde pop music is being heard, talked about, and debated in cities across the U.S. and around the globe. All this without the visibility of a major label record contract. For people truly interested in the future of popular culture, these local, independent artists and publications can't be ignored. (Pavitt 2015: 214)

It is specifically fanzines, then, that lead the charge: the mediators of a national pop movement that both looks forwards and seems to enjoy a certain historicity. As Pavitt says later in the same piece, '[n]ew pop music in America […] is just as vital now, in 1983, as any other time in American history'.

Yet, if this seems to bring the fanzine – and the genre culture it details – to the brink of a kind of progressive politics, however vague, it must also be added that 'pop' works just as strongly in the opposite direction. Framed as simple pop, after all, the fanzine's music inevitably resonates with conditions of innocence and purity. Specifically as 'indie' pop, moreover, it allegedly remains untainted by market forces, disinterested, the product of 'a decentralized network of regional and local bums who refuse to get an honest job' (Pavitt 2015: 147). Again we think of Bourdieu's field of restricted production, artists working only for the acclaim of other artists, but with the proviso that Pavitt especially emphasizes the sheer pleasure, even hedonistic activity, that takes place within these scenes. In August 1982, for example, he calls an EP by Seattle's Visible Targets 'pure pop, pure product' (Pavitt 2015: 170).

Such descriptions seem like a deliberate turning away or inwards, back towards the protection of the enclosing scene; it is hard to locate much political acuity within them. This could also be said of the frequent references to the 1950s and 1960s that flow across *Sub Pop*'s pages. These include the slicked-hair cartoon figures drawn by Pavitt's fellow Olympia student Charles Burns and frequently appearing on the fanzine's covers (see e.g. Pavitt 2015: 191), as well as, of course, countless examples from its writing. We have seen the 'pop combos' and 'pop 45s', but Pavitt also writes of 'art-pop dance bands' and points his teenage (sometimes rather quaintly spelt 'teen-age') audiences towards a 'pop rave' or some choice 'rock 'n' roll'

(Pavitt 2015: 36, 54, 62). Of course, such turns of phrase are funny; it is a matter of goofy humour and charm to use such obviously dated terms in what is still largely a punk context. But they also complicate the goals of the ideological community that Sub Pop promises to form. They help to spirit this pop away from contemporary politics and into a distant idyll, long before the narrative of the 'corporate' 1970s and the metamorphosis that saw 'rock 'n roll' transform into 'rock' alone (Pavitt 2015: 214).

A key example of this effect is in *Sub Pop*'s response to Portland's Wipers. For many Wipers may simply be a punk band, and yet, across the eight years of the *Sub Pop* fanzine and column, they are again and again held up as a 'great rock n' roll trio' (Pavitt 2015: 21). This is in part a generic description, built on their stylistic tendency to 'strip back a layer of sound, leaving only the bass, drums, and vocals'. 'When the guitar finally rips in', Pavitt insists, 'you <u>feel it</u>' (Pavitt 2015: 22). Yet this latter seems as much a commandment as anything else, not least because the same summary also gestures dogmatically to a higher realm of ethics: the stripped-back Wipers convey '<u>incredible honesty</u>', and, as Pavitt later puts it, their music is evidence of 'staunch integrity and refusal to compromise'; it is 'the most powerfully heartfelt, honest, and true collection of rock 'n' roll ever released from the Pacific Northwest' (Pavitt 2015: 22, 322). This is not nostalgia, as Wipers continued to record and release throughout *Sub Pop*'s existence. Rather, as Chris Atton has written of a later fanzine, it is an expression of 'musical passions' that are 'rooted in history – in a past youth culture – but are available in the present […] for new listening experiences' (Atton 2010: 525). Wipers, then, seem to demonstrate the ultimate sound of Pavitt's genre culture in its most meaningful aesthetic and ethical dimensions – an 'alternative rock 'n' roll', as he evangelized it in early 1985 (Pavitt 2015: 268). But in so doing they also tip the fanzine's overall balance towards a stance of indie principles rather than indie politics. The championing of Wipers in this way symbolizes, I think, a general retreat towards a moral highground rather than a position of direct political commentary, whatever the rhetoric of the fanzine's manifesto-like moments sometimes implies.

Pop, Hardcore, and the (second) British invasion

It should come as no surprise at this point that the full *Sub Pop* manifesto – printed in issue #1, May 1980 – is entitled a 'New Pop Manifesto'. It is also not surprising that Pavitt's text is set off by cut-and-paste pictures of a couple in 1950s garb dancing and what appear to be promotional images of the RCA Victor '45' player (introduced in the early fifties), or something very like it. These seem comically intended to represent 'tomorrow's pop', as the text puts it: a product that, if only consumers would recognise it, is already being made and released by 'small decentralized record labels that are interested in taking risks, not making money' (Pavitt 2015: 14-15). These labels will bring about new American horizons, the 'dynamic social/cultural change in the 1980s' – to return to the section of the manifesto I cited at the very beginning of this article.

It is well worth asking, however, what exactly it is that is being opposed and resisted here. What is it, in short, that raises the need for a new pop manifesto in the first place? One ready answer, of course, is what Pavitt derides as the centralized 'system'. In his words, the 'fat, cigar-smoking dough-boys at Warner Bros.' have no interest or investment in 'anarchy and invention', and the 'machine-like organisations' they represent 'could care less about new sounds or new cultural heroes'. They are interested in 'one thing only – money'. Moreover, you ('yes, you') are supporting them every time you buy a commercially released record, and in turn supporting the existence led by the artists they promote. Levying what seems a specific attack on the toxic masculinity of corporate rock, Pavitt complains here specifically of 'macho pig-fuck bands whose entire lifestyle revolves around cocaine, sexism, money and more money' (Pavitt 2015: 14-15).[2] The commanding binary seems simple to summarize: a stand-off between new local pop – healthy, progressive, human, humane – and the music of the existing machine – robotic, destructive, repugnant.

Nonetheless, to insist on this binary alone is to overlook the messiness of Sub Pop's cultural position. More specifically, it is to overlook the key opening lines of the manifesto, which complicate the picture considerably by adding another adversary:

> As our teen-bongo, Space Age counter-culture becomes infiltrated by wimpoid TV 'mop tops' in skinny ties and leather pants, it becomes apparent that the bland sameness of the pop suprastructure is with us once again. (Pavitt 2015: 14)

The mention of TV and the 'pop suprastructure' here places *Sub Pop* in another vanguard – not only against a narrowly conceived corporate rock, but against something much broader, the advent of what Will Straw has identified as 'a new pop mainstream in North America' in the early 1980s. This was a phenomenon that responded to conflicts in target audiences between radio broadcasters and record companies and produced, amongst other things, the regeneration of Top 40 radio, the inception of national music video, and the rapid absorption of British post-punk styles and genres (Straw 1993: 4-6). Pavitt is clearly aware of this new British emphasis in particular, as his sly mention of 'mop tops' and 'skinny ties' indicates, while his talk of infiltration (read: invasion?) of 'our counter-culture' emphasizes the same trend as direct threat to American indie culture: it is not merely a problem of a new and repulsive mainstream to be shunned. It might be added that, elsewhere in the fanzine, the curious adjective 'wimpoid' denotes Britishness fairly reliably (e.g. Pavitt 2015: 54), and also that this word links Pavitt's vocabulary to the American rock critics from whom he is descended. I think, for example, of Robert Christgau and his infamous one-line review for *Creem* of Queen's 1974 album *Queen II*. 'Wimpoid royaloid heavoid android void', Christgau writes with remarkable economy, a dismissal that captures the same sense of British-led regal-theatrical emptiness, over-technologization, and inanity that Pavitt's 'teen-bongo' and 'Space Age' evoke in the *Sub Pop* manifesto (Christgau 1982: 312).

It is actually this British-led 'new pop mainstream', I propose, that shaped the genesis and terms of *Sub Pop*'s project as we have considered them in the first section of this article: its search for a new American indie pop genre-culture, one certainly in dialogue with pop's defining concepts of artifice and authenticity, and yet ultimately finding itself to be not so beholden to image – as the emergence of music video would insist as standard, and as the 'honest, heartfelt' integrity of bands like Portland's Wipers would counteract. But I would further submit that this same development led to a strong thread of productive anti-Britishness in the fanzine; that, in fact, British music – whether originating from major labels or indies – becomes a persistent antagonist across the entire run of the *Sub Pop* fanzine and column.

There is perhaps no better example of this than in *Sub Pop*'s approach to hardcore (which, true to form, is typically used without the 'punk' as a post-punk genre in its own right). *Sub Pop* #6 (February 1982), as a case in point, begins with a front-page homage to hardcore that presents the genre in a direct confrontation channelling Black Flag: 'Fuck Authority. I hate war and I hate big business and I'm glad that other people feel the same way […] RISE ABOVE' (Pavitt 2015: 147). Simultaneously, however, the same statement brings hardcore into line with

the new pop manifesto of Sub Pop #1, developing its terms by pitting American hardcore against a 'soft' British antithesis that seems to deny the latter any meaningful credentials:

> 1981? Simple enough … Britain gave us New Romantic white/electro/disco/funk and America gave us what? Hardcore. […] Surprise. Today's Hardcore teenage army is the most dominant, the most obvious scene in the American music underground. Hardcore is intense, honest American music, burning red, white and blue images confronting specific American problems. Anthems like 'Justice For All', 'Six Pack' and 'Guns or Ballots', band names like the Dead Kennedys, The Minutemen, and yes, even Jody Foster's Army. Does this sound British? No! (Pavitt 2015: 147)

Certainly, this feels exaggerated for comic effect: it is both entirely typical of Pavitt's ironic humour and seems to concede that a rejection of Britishness could never be taken literally – British indie music, after all, was widely available in the US through licensing and distribution deals, had always stood as a major influence for American bands, and was regularly cited by *Sub Pop* as such. But such effect does not prevent Britishness emerging as the weak, dishonest, effete foil that shapes Pavitt's new American pop as 'authentic' and simultaneously connects it with the immediate legacy of hardcore, as well as conventional-wisdom constructions of American masculinity that date back as far as the Revolution (Kimmel 1996: 13-42). Indeed – in a typical move for punk fanzine polemics – it allows Pavitt to present the allegiance he desires as a straightforward, common-sense binary choice. In the introduction to the tape-fanzine *Sub Pop* #5, a collection of local music from Seattle to Saratoga Springs, he tells the reader that '[i]n the next two minutes, you can read about great **American** bands. Or you can toss this book and spend big bucks on the latest hype from England' (Pavitt 2015: 138). Likewise, when the same fanzine introduces the Embarrassment (Wichita) as 'a great rock and roll band: simple, honest, sophisticated … [They] are real Americans; they do not wear sashes and make up', Pavitt's readers will know exactly what he is talking about (Pavitt 2015: 143).

Even so, this use of hardcore is no less striking because it so obviously creates a series of stinging tensions that *Sub Pop* is forced to wear on its sleeve. How could it, after all, both stand against corporate rock's 'macho pig-fuck' masculinity and at the same time side with hardcore's own careful policing of the masculine self, the banning of the sashes and make-up? Was this latter not, also, a potentially toxic form of masculinity? This apparent contradiction links, moreover, to a much bigger issue, a classic conflict between freedom of personal speech and the desire to advocate for others. On the one hand, you, a hardcore male individual, have

the absolute right to say whatever you like. You may take strong, ugly, offensive, iconoclastic positions, if you like: 'No rules means no rules', as Steve Albini, writing in Chicago's *Matter* fanzine, once put it with anarchic flourish, even if this means attacking society's 'tender subjects like gays, women and cripples' (and, as he shows elsewhere, 'bozo' British foreigners) (Albini 1984: 13; 1983: 12). Pavitt was clearly drawn to this stance: in fact, he has recently cited Albini's 'really brutal reviews' for *Matter* as a central influence on *Sub Pop* (Kissel 2020). But on the other hand, there is the imperative, enshrined within the *Sub Pop* manifesto and within many American left-leaning fanzines of the day, not to be a sexist corporate pig, and by implication to empathize with other subject positions, to exercise something very like 'political correctness' and recommend that others do the same.

With the greatest consequence for its reviews and its language, *Sub Pop* finds itself frequently caught on the hop between these stances – between hardcore's 'no rules' and an implicit acceptance of the standard contracts of liberal society. The fanzine's punk roots make it side with the former, I think. The risk is simply too great that, in speaking up for others, one will lose one's hardcore self. See, for example, Pavitt's review in late 1985 of the 'positive punk' band Justice League, whom he advises to 'drop the "unity" pose and just be themselves' (Pavitt 2015: 298). But equally as often, the contradiction forms an impasse beyond which the fanzine's evaluations cannot, or will not, move. Reviewing Black Market Baby in 1983, Pavitt accepts that they are 'reactionary, sexist pigs' but, significantly, cannot come to a conclusion about which is better: 'stupid, powerful music like this, or lame "politically correct" rantings like the latest dud from MDC' – another 'positive punk' band slaughtered by *Matter* (Albini 1983: 12). Apparently there is no means by which to have it both ways in this new economy of American subterranean pop. Expressive power and liberal orientation are mutually exclusive, and so the burden of the question is pushed on to the reader. 'You decide': the review concludes with a fizzle rather than a bang (Pavitt 2015: 226).

A Democratic Conversation?

On one occasion, however, these contradictions did turn productive, delivering something like a decision on what the fanzine would stand for. *Sub Pop* #6, as we saw, had grasped hardcore as a key marker of the 'all-American' (in its own words) identity that it coveted for a new national pop running against the grain of the mainstream (Pavitt 2015: 148). It is striking, then, when the very next issue begins with what sounds like an apology from Pavitt for exactly the same strategy:

> Fellow comrades, I have read your letters and you are right – Nationalism is the father of Fascism. So while we will continue to embrace grass-roots American pop, we will also open our arms to any and all contributions, both national and international. (Pavitt 2015: 156)

I take this to be a significant moment, not least because it seems to evidence what Chris Atton, following Simon Frith, has called the 'democratic conversation' between writers, musicians, and readers that is one of the hallmarks of a fanzine like *Sub Pop*, and represents its chief claim to being a 'material realization of a rock critical utopia' (Atton 2010: 526-9; Frith, 2002: 241). That is, this is a moment in which readers – on whose financial contributions, it is worth remembering, the fanzine's continuing existence depended – came to govern the direction of the fanzine. Even so, it is worth pointing out that *Sub Pop* never had a letters page, and so the readers' letters to which Pavitt refers were never actually revealed. Perhaps the most we can say, then, is that this introduction demonstrates Pavitt's recognition that his fanzine *should be* a democratic conversation: it enlists a body of readers in justifying the move away from any potential overlap with a supremacist, national-masculine right wing that might be drawn to Albini's hardcore rejection of 'gays, women and cripples'. Instead, following up directly on the cue of the *Sub Pop* #7 apology, the tape-fanzine *Sub Pop* #9 (June 1983) repositions itself. Its introduction announces that its '[n]ew format is international', and, as evidence for this it features a track by the French band Magnétique Bleu, two anonymous hardcore-like songs 'brought in from behind the Iron Curtain' and apparently shouted in Russian, and a tape mash-up of Pavitt's created from, and titled, 'Random Swedish Radio' (Pavitt 2015: 191-9).

On the one hand, there is no denying the novelty of this altered approach. *Sub Pop*'s search for 'grass-roots pop' scenes on an international basis produced at least one find that would gain in significance over the decade: the Japanese band Shonen Knife, whose music Kurt Cobain loved and which both Pavitt and Calvin Johnson would later release with great success to

audiences in the USA. On the other hand, the whole affair tends to demonstrate the discursive limits of the Sub Pop concept, not its international applicability. It is easily noted, after all, that, against the total 24 tracks of *Sub Pop* #9, the four 'international' ones listed above are in very slender proportion against the American ones – even if the latter include foreign-sounding band names and titles like Actuel, Egoslavia, and 'Samizdat'. This tells us that, if the burgeoning British indie market was still to be shunned (indeed, no British track appears here), then other non-American pickings remained slim in the extreme – presumably because distribution of non-British indie labels was poor in the USA, because records sent in unsolicited from abroad were rare, and because it simply was not clear where and how to find other worldwide pop 'underground' scenes.

Indeed, looking even closer, of all the tracks on the tape-fanzine *Sub Pop* #9, only one (Magnétique Bleu's 'Virgin Boy', sung in English) definitely originated outside the USA, and this means that the claim on the cassette's spine ('4 countries, 14 cities') is at best questionable. The later advertisement for the tape, '21 groups from 14 countries', is even more baffling, and perhaps relies on assessments of American artists' now-distant foreign heritages (Pavitt 2015: 214). This may sound like splitting hairs; it may also miss the point that Pavitt is attempting to project a utopia of world indie pop here. Yet we can also note that, shortly afterwards, in April 1983, *Sub Pop* would become 'Sub Pop USA' permanently, as if admitting defeat in its world project. What had always been implicit now became explicit, part of its new title as Pavitt repurposed his brand as a column for Seattle's *Rocket* paper.

In the final analysis, what the brief, unrepeated experiment of *Sub Pop* #9 points up, I think, is more than just the limits of trying to create an international indie utopia without the Brits on board. It also reinforces the Americanness of 'subterranean pop' as a genre culture in the first place. As we have seen, this culture had been brought together from local scenes, perceived as and joined up into a productive network of producers and consumers that was both forward-facing and rooted in the pleasures of the past. This entailed a kind of discrete 'scene-mindedness' that was intended to make musical and social experiences more profoundly intertwined, in turn accessing what Pavitt has recently called the 'deeper sense of the artist':

> Like, 'Oh, Husker Du is from Minneapolis, and they're hanging out with the Replacements, and they're all drinking beer down at the Seventh Street Entry, and they're buying records at Oar Folkjokeopus and the guy who runs Oar Folkjokeopus probably helped produce this other record', and once you break it down, it's kind of like, 'These guys are kind of like my friends'. I could go to Minneapolis, plug in, go to Oar Folkjokeopus, talk to the store owner,

> and the next thing I know I'm having a beer with Bob Mould [of Husker Du] in his living room, you know? (Kissel 2020)

The logic of this is crucial: again, the distinction between fan, artist, writer, and reader collapses (or, at least, appears to collapse, insofar as a capitalist system will allow). In a very large country like the United States with small, widely spaced and localized scenes such as Minneapolis, this might seem conceivable. If you lived in Minneapolis in the early 1980s, perhaps you knew these places, perhaps you could imagine these kinds of encounters, and perhaps, quite reasonably, this will have enriched the personal meaningfulness of this music for you. It might also have enabled the kinds of transregional encounters that regional 'scene' awareness made available in the first place – you could compare your Minneapolis to someone else's Seattle, or Austin, or Pittsburgh. A fanzine like *Sub Pop* could, in turn, help mediate that transregional encounter.

In a distant, smaller country with geographically proximal urban centres, however, these kinds of discrete scene-experiences proved far harder to detail, characterize, and mobilize. *Sub Pop* #9 gives a postal address for Magnétique Bleu in Dijon, for example, but it is by no means clear from the fanzine in what sense the band was active there; they may well have recorded or played or bought their records in another centre nearby. Certainly, there is never a correspondent's account of the Dijon scene that might give more information along these lines, or that might place Dijon in some form of mutually shaping dialogue with another scene in France or elsewhere, and thus broadcast the artistic network from which Pavitt's 'subterranean pop' might emerge. In this French case, the particular 'deeper sense' of the artist that he seeks to promote seems somehow missing, and this leaves the *Sub Pop* genre culture ultimately as an American concept, one that it struggles to make resonant beyond national borders.

Conclusion: Sub Pop as label

What we learn from the example of the *Sub Pop* fanzine and column is not only how an 'independent' or 'alternative' phenomenon constructs itself against the mainstream it resists. We also see what I have termed an attempt to derive a 'genre culture' – in this case governed by the term 'pop' – from amidst the morass of post-punk styles, genres and discourses, and in so doing, to enter into competition and conflict with the claims of other indies, not least those representing American hardcore. I suspect that Bruce Pavitt must have been flattered, moreover, to realize that Kurt Cobain, an avid reader of the early *Sub Pop*, directly absorbed his preferences and his terse review style. In a journal entry from no earlier than 1990, Cobain writes one-line responses to his favourite records, among them Wipers' 1980 LP *Is This Real?* 'Yeah it is', he says (Cobain 2002: 163).

Essentially, *Sub Pop* is an instructive case for what happens when a fanzine dedicated to the propagation of independent music follows the logical path and becomes an independent record label (as happened with numerous others – for example, the directly comparable fanzine-label *Touch & Go*, launched in Lansing, Michigan in 1979). A record label typically articulates to a market in quite a different way from a fanzine, of course: at least in the conventional template followed by Pavitt and his Sub Pop Records, it has far fewer opportunities for the kinds of manifesto-like texts, paratexts, and images that detail a genre culture as we have understood it here. A label loses elements of that crucial engagement between producers and consumers that a fanzine, by contrast, will tend to maintain. The sense of a levelling democratic conversation between writers and readers, and the promise of the critical utopia, is far more conceivable in the context of a fanzine.

This is, in part, because the founding of a record label takes far bigger investments, which inevitably skew its power relationships relative to fanzines. The cash injection in 1986 from Pavitt's new business partner Jonathan Poneman ('Mr Big-Money inheritance', as Cobain once called him; Cobain 2002: 1) was vital to kickstart the label, and the need to protect this investment also explains Sub Pop's sudden attachment to new northwestern rock almost exclusively, marginalizing the other post-punk genres (tape experiments, for instance) that had often featured in the pages of the fanzine. The typically sharp, self-effacing, grandeur-deluded humour remained in some of the new label's descriptions of its wares, but 'pop' all but vanishes at this point, drawn into the label name only. It is replaced by a strong accent on claims of rock-genre fusion, as well as exaggerated – often ridiculously so – character tropes taken directly from rock's history of violent opposition. The test case here is the band TAD: led by Tad, a

300-pound man who (so the label mythology goes) wandered into Seattle's Reciprocal Recording to cut his first 7", on which he sang and played all the instruments, creating a music that fused the key legacies of hardcore, metal, and industrial noise. Perhaps Tad was a butcher, or a lumberjack, or a serial killer, depending on how Sub Pop chose to dress him up on a given day; certainly he and his music were branded 'heavy' in ways that might appeal to fans of both metal and punk, and provided them with a figure of threat and of fun (Prato, 2009: 196-200).

This is not to imply, however, that all the former *Sub Pop* fanzine discourses were simply junked along with the move away from the 'pop' emphasis. Rather, they became focused into this new, exaggerated, and in many ways ridiculous rock. After all, the plaid- and denim-wearing TAD, and numerous others – Cobain's Nirvana amongst them – were presented by the label as having just wandered out of the primeval forests of the American Northwest, guitars in hand. Thus they were recognisable as the descendants of the fanzine's beloved Wipers: honest, heartfelt, real men from the ignored Pacific Northwest. And in this was perhaps the greatest stroke of genius, something that could never happen in quaint old England, however great and influential its independent music scene. Pavitt, Poneman, and the Sub Pop label ultimately used this appearance of 'backwoodsness', this dark American difference, to sell their 'heavy' rock back to the British, Europe, and the rest of the world, in the form of a new and authentic genre that would soon cut a deep groove through the mass markets of the late 1980s: grunge.

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[1] In the following, for reasons of conciseness, I refer to all these simply as *Sub Pop*, with distinguishing details where necessary. It should also be noted that these italicized variants always refer to the fanzine, tape-fanzine, and column, while roman letters ('Sub Pop') denote Pavitt's record label, operative from 1986.

[2] Here Pavitt appears to link the label 'pig-fuck' to general aggressive rock masculinity, rather than its more recent association with certain strands of noise rock.