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Suburban Cowboy

Country Music, Punk, and the Struggle over Space in Orange County, 1978–1981

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ABSTRACT This essay analyzes the political and cultural significance of confrontations between country music fans and punk rockers in the suburban community of Costa Mesa, California, in the early 1980s. During this time, Orange County was defined by paradox. On one hand, the region proved historically influential to leading conservative politics and the rise of Ronald Reagan, and bore a legacy of a country music and cowboy culture that well complemented such conservatism. And yet, the area also served as the breeding ground where right-wing politics and suburbanism's sonic resistance, hardcore punk rock, took root. More than a simple culture clash, the conflict between country music fans and punk rockers represented a moment when two uniquely suburban and Southern California sounds collided at a significant point of transition in American politics and culture, and at heart revealed a conflict over the merits of suburban life. This struggle over space was one in which country music fans emerged victorious, as their efforts to violently quash the local punk scene worked in conjunction with city leaders who forcibly closed the region's leading punk venue, the Cuckoo's Nest, in 1981 and revealed a solidarity between country music fans, local police, and local politicians. **KEYWORDS:** suburban history, popular music studies, music history, Southern California, history of U.S. conservatism, history of youth culture

At the dawn of the Reagan era, Orange County stood at the forefront of a wave of conservatism that had recently overtaken national politics and popular culture. With a legacy of grassroots conservatism that helped propel Ronald Reagan to the presidency in 1980, the area also carried a history of country music and cowboy culture as represented in the "urban cowboy" craze that dominated national fashion and music trends at the time. The fad shared its title with a popular film starring John Travolta and was embraced throughout the country as western-wear fashion and country music sales reached new heights, and as thousands of former discos installed mechanical bulls and transformed into nightclubs with a country-and-western theme. Many equated country

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music's unprecedented popularity with the new sense of conservatism that came with the Reagan presidency and the rise of the influential New Right. "The phenomenal popularity that country music has enjoyed recently . . . may have something to do with the general resurgence of political conservatism and patriotic fervor," observed the *New York Times*.[1]

But while Orange County's embrace of conservatism and its cultural counterpart, country music, defined the region in a familiarly conservative light, less commonly acknowledged is the simultaneous presence of a music scene that was politically and culturally antithetical to the region's dominating character: hardcore punk rock. The region's conflicting musical identities came to a head in the city of Costa Mesa, where punk rockers and country music fans violently clashed in a battle over suburban space that revealed a set of competing identities in a region more frequently defined as monolithically conservative, and served as a harbinger for greater political and cultural resistance throughout the Reagan era. In Costa Mesa, joint efforts by country music fans, local police, and city leaders to quash the punk rock scene foreshadowed a broader cultural clash within popular music during the 1980s that pitted country music, defined as the sound of Reagan-era conservatism and wholesomeness, against more youthful popular music, which was viewed as corrupting and a target for censorship by conservative groups like the Parents' Music Resource Center (PMRC).

In the early 1980s, violence regularly arose between fans of punk rock and country music in Orange County. This tension frequently erupted in a parking lot in the city of Costa Mesa, between two neighboring nightclubs: the Cuckoo's Nest, the region's leading hardcore punk venue, which attracted predominantly white youth from throughout Orange County; and Zubie's, a pizza parlor that hosted a local crowd of white, middle-aged country music listeners and followers of the urban cowboy craze.[2] While patrons of both clubs were known to initiate violence, several reports indicated that one side was the more common instigator. "It's the Okies," explained one onlooker, adding that they "gawk at [punks], call them names, get into fisticuffs with them. . . . Yeah, they generally start a lot of the problems."[3] While this summation suggests that country music fans were mostly to blame for this conflict, it also highlights the enduring legacy of Okie migrant culture in Southern California. By 1980, this culture—represented by an achievement of social mobility, pride in suburban homeownership, and political and cultural conservatism—was well entrenched and protected in Orange County. As such, community leaders in Costa Mesa worked with country music fans in a mutual effort to preserve the status quo and to suppress the resistance to the region's cultural and political conservatism that came with the rise of hardcore punk rock.

The conflict between punks and country music listeners in Costa Mesa represented not just a simple culture clash, but a moment when two uniquely suburban and Southern California sounds collided at a significant point of transition in American politics and culture—at heart, it revealed a conflict over the merits of suburban life.[4] The region's country music fans expressed pride in, and protectiveness toward, suburbanism; whereas punk rockers rejected the mundane orderliness of suburban space. The country music fans emerged victorious in this struggle over space, as their efforts to violently quash the local punk scene worked in conjunction with city leaders, who forcibly closed the Cuckoo's Nest in 1981 and revealed a solidarity between country music fans, police, and local politicians.

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This essay adds to literatures concerned with the social, political, and cultural history of suburban Southern California, and to studies of youth culture and the 1980s more broadly. While other scholarship, such as that of Lisa McGirr and Eric Avila, has depicted Orange County as overwhelmingly conservative in the immediate postwar decades, this essay analyzes an emergence of cultural and political resistance by the later decades of the twentieth century. Likewise, this essay builds on studies by Becky M. Nicolaides and Peter La Chapelle on the ongoing influence of migrant communities in southern Los Angeles and Orange County by the Reagan era.[5] Building on works on the history of youth culture that have documented the agency of young people in reimagining alternative ways of being, this essay also analyzes resistance to youth culture and various types of rock music more specifically, and how this resistance remained significant throughout the culture wars of the 1980s and beyond.[6]

By 1980, Orange County was defined by cultural paradox, a region that proved historically influential to leading conservative politics and the rise of Ronald Reagan, and where hardcore punk rock took root.[7] In the post–World War II decades, white flight, propelled by government assistance that made white homeownership accessible, transformed the Los Angeles suburbs (and Orange County in particular) into a cultural and social space defined by racial exclusion and white privilege.[8] Although, overall, Orange County grew increasingly racially diverse throughout the 1970s, the area remained segregated, with overwhelmingly white areas neighboring other communities, such as Santa Ana, with growing numbers of Latino residents.[9] By 1980, local communities like Costa Mesa, whose residents were reported as more than 80 percent non-Hispanic white in the 1980 Census, continued to be dominated by the same racial, political, and cultural politics that overtook the area in the immediate postwar decades.[10] With a background of grassroots conservatism, the county remained staunchly conservative. In both the 1980 and 1984 presidential elections, Orange County voted more heavily for Reagan than any other county of its size nationally.[11] By 1980, country music—by then a symbol of whiteness, suburbanism, and Reagan-era conservatism—had enjoyed decades of popularity in Orange County, and continued to provide a soundtrack for this conservatism, appealing to a predominantly white, middle-aged demographic.[12]

It was within and against Orange County's dominating character that hardcore punk rock took root in the region in the late 1970s. Hardcore punk's loud and aggressive sound, combined with fashion elements like intentionally distressed clothing and blue or red hair, sought to shock and subvert the social norms of the local community when it came to music, fashion, and civility. Although both country music fans and punks shared similar backgrounds with regard to race, class, and gender—being predominantly white, middle-income, and male—the two differed in how they conceived of the space they shared, and in generational outlook. While the mostly teenaged punks rejected the suburban culture that had been fostered in the area, the region's middle-aged country music fans sought to protect it. By 1980, the rebellion invoked by hardcore punk came as a direct affront to older, conservative local residents, who saw little reason for these predominantly middle-class white youth to rebel, and who viewed punk rock as a threat to the local order that needed to be eradicated.[13]

By the late 1970s, no genre of music defined Orange County more than country music. At the time, few areas outside Texas celebrated the urban cowboy craze with greater vigor.

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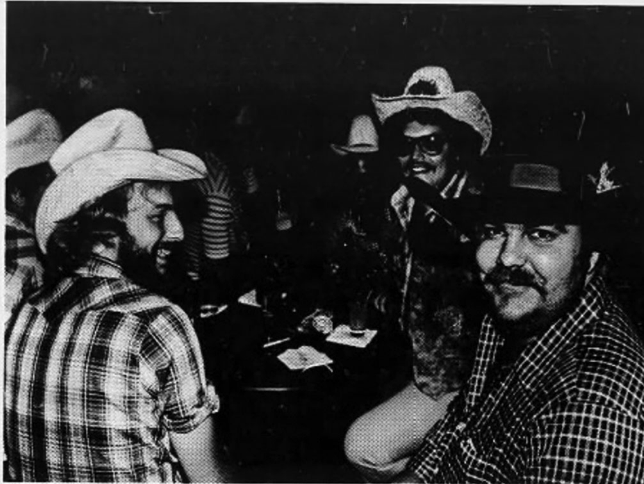

FIGURE 1. A few suburban cowboys enjoying a night out at The Cowboy, a bar in Anaheim.
Courtesy of Iris Schneider

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"The country and western flavor has definitely hit Orange County," declared *Orange Coast* magazine in November 1980, the same month Reagan was elected president.[14] By the end of the year, hundreds of bars and nightclubs in Orange County alone considered themselves country and western (Figure 1).[15] Earlier that year, the theme park Knott's Berry Farm introduced its "Urban Cowboy Days," providing family-friendly entertainment with live country music performances and cowboy-themed activities.[16] For punk rockers, the overwhelming presence of country music and the urban cowboy fad was unavoidable. "The world was so redneck at that time," explained Casey Royer, singer of the punk band D.I.[17]

Orange County's embrace of the urban cowboy craze was part of a longer legacy of country music and cowboy culture in Southern California. By the 1970s, country music had enjoyed decades of popularity throughout California.[18] While the Central Valley is credited with fostering country music's "Bakersfield Sound," Los Angeles and its surrounding areas were vital sites of country music consumption and production. Country music was an integral part of Capitol Records' musical repertoire since its founding in 1942, and even provided the label's first multimillion seller, Tex Williams's 1947 song "Smoke! Smoke! Smoke! (That Cigarette)." Throughout the 1950s, many of Capitol's country artists could be seen and heard on the country music variety show *Town Hall Party*, first a radio program and later a television show that taped on Long Beach Boulevard in Compton. By the 1960s, with artists like Merle Haggard and Glen Campbell, Capitol Records rivaled Nashville as country music's leading recording center. Popular songs by these artists helped define country music nationally during this period as a symbol for conservative, backlash politics and middle-class respectability. Hits like Haggard's "Okie from Muskogee" and "The Fightin' Side of Me" spoke to the desires of President Nixon's Silent Majority, while Campbell's pop-country sound reflected the growing mainstream embrace of country music. During this time, Nudie Cohn of North Hollywood also provided tailoring services for many of the genre's leading stars, like Porter Wagoner and

Hank Snow, who famously wore the designer's bright and bedazzled "Nudie suits." And just a couple miles from Cohn's shop was the Palomino, one of country music's leading nightclubs on the West Coast from the 1950s through the 1980s. But while much of country music's consumption and production were centered in Los Angeles in the post–World War II period, the music was increasingly enjoyed outside of the city and became more established in nearby suburbs by the 1970s. Disneyland began regularly booking country acts in the mid-1960s, and between 1950 and 1970, country music clubs moved from being concentrated in city centers to suburban areas like South Los Angeles and North Orange County.[19]

Not only did country music have a long legacy of popularity in Southern California, but it had also evolved into a uniquely suburban type of music by this time. During a period of white flight in the postwar decades, country music shared a story of social mobility with millions of white, blue-collar migrants who moved to the suburbs and overcame marginality defined by class and ethnicity.[20] Like these migrants, country music, long ridiculed as "hillbilly" music and associated with a lowbrow type of whiteness, increasingly gained mainstream respectability by the 1960s and '70s. Scholars such as Diane Pecknold and Jeffrey J. Lange have documented how the country music genre was looked down upon for its associations with its predominantly southern, white, and rural fanbase within the music industry and by the greater American public from the 1920s onward, and how the genre's business forces mobilized and achieved mainstream, middle-class respectability by the 1960s.[21] Perhaps no area better defined country music's journey toward mainstream acceptance and suburbanization than Southern California. Fueled in large part by the millions of Okie migrants who fled states like Oklahoma and Arkansas and moved to California in search of better jobs and living prospects during the Great Depression and World War II, country music remained popular throughout the state from the 1930s on.[22] As Okies achieved respectability through suburban homeownership, so, too, did their music of choice become respectable and popular within mainstream music tastes.

In Nashville, the center of the country music industry, business leaders worked consciously to brand country as the sound of suburbanism and to move the genre away from its associations with poor, rural, southern whites. By the 1960s, the industry had identified affluent white suburbanites of the postwar decades—regardless of their regional upbringing—as a prime and coveted demographic. At an influential marketing presentation in 1965 by the Country Music Association (CMA), a trade organization for the industry, country music was presented to thousands of advertising executives as a genre intended for suburban consumption. During the presentation, CMA president Tex Ritter spoke of strategies that could be implemented to "retain the suburban audience" and introduced the Anita Kerr Singers by saying, "This talented group demonstrates some of their urban sounds with suburban songs."[23] In 1967, the popular songwriter John D. Loudermilk expressed his understanding of country music's regionality by releasing his Grammy-winning album *Suburban Attitudes in Country Verse*. By the 1970s, the idea that country music was meant for suburban consumption was commonplace far beyond Nashville. In 1977, a newspaper article declared that country music had fully moved to the suburbs: "Middle America now has two cars, two television sets and two Johnny Cash albums. Country music, nurtured in Appalachia, has crept out of the shacks and into the suburbs."[24]

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By the 1970s, country music stood as a symbol not only of suburbanism, but of conservatism and patriotism. Journalist Richard Goldstein elaborated on this symbolism, seeing the rising popularity of country music as part of a time when "the values of Southern, Caucasian, Protestant, suburban, adult Americans have assumed supremacy."[25] Though country music in Southern California had previously been associated with more progressive voices like Woody Guthrie and Gene Autry, who championed New Deal policies throughout the Great Depression, the genre's political affiliations evolved in the decades after World War II. By the 1960s and '70s, conservative values like those espoused by Goldstein proved especially resonant in a place like Orange County, where a conservative movement organized and became active in California elections in the postwar decades, and where popular images of the cowboy and conservatism shared a mutual history. During the 1960s, when grassroots activism in Orange County helped propel Ronald Reagan to become governor of California in 1966, singing cowboys Roy Rogers, Tex Ritter, and even Gene Autry all emerged as supporters of the new Republican Party that helped elect the new governor.[26] Autry's presence in local culture had also become particularly pronounced when the entertainer moved the Los Angeles Angels baseball team, which he had purchased in the early 1960s, to Anaheim in 1966. The legacy of silver-screen cowboys in Orange County reached new heights in 1979, when the region's airport was renamed John Wayne Airport. The decision came after months of consideration that Los Angeles International Airport—not Orange County—should refashion itself under the name of the Western film actor. But upon Wayne's death, it was the O.C.'s Board of Supervisors that quickly capitalized on the actor's legacy, saying, "With a proclamation that John Wayne 'brought pride to all Orange County citizens,' the Board of Supervisors today will rename Orange County Airport in honor of the actor who died last week at 72."[27]

By the late 1970s, however, celebrations of cowboys and conservatism went far beyond Orange County's borders. Beginning in the late 1970s, widespread appropriations of the cowboy dominated popular culture as the urban cowboy craze overtook the country. Western fashion, country nightclubs equipped with mechanical bulls, and country music sales enjoyed unprecedented popularity. But while the fad was popular in urban pockets throughout the country, few areas outside Texas embraced the trend as strongly as Southern California. At the peak of the craze, an estimated one thousand nightclubs considered themselves country-western themed in Los Angeles, Orange County, and San Diego counties combined.[28] For many, including one of country music's biggest stars, Merle Haggard, the genre's popularity was a reflection of a wave of conservatism that overtook the country at the time. As the singer explained: "I think we're experiencing a feeling of patriotism that hasn't surfaced for a long time . . . and I'm glad to see it. We had dipped to an all-time low on the other side not too long ago. But you have to remember that it's happened before. Every time patriotism comes to the surface, you'll find country music, cowboys and so on becoming popular."[29]

In October 1980, Haggard witnessed the popularity of country music in Orange County firsthand, when he recorded the album *Rainbow Stew Live at Anaheim Stadium*. The raucous crowd of 30,000 "was the largest turnout ever for a country music show" in the area, noted the *Los Angeles Times*.[30]

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But just as urban cowboy gained steam, another genre of music was sprouting in the L.A. suburbs: punk rock. Unlike earlier periods of punk that were defined by urban spaces, this new type of punk, referred to as hardcore punk rock, was defined by a rejection of suburban life. As a large body of scholarship has revealed, suburban spaces during the second half of the twentieth century proved to be stifling, anxious environments for some suburban residents, and hardcore punk emerged out of such unease.[31] Orange County punk intended to shock local orderliness with loud and angry sounds, nontraditional hair colors, and intentionally distressed clothing. Not only did such fashion choices reject local politics of respectability, but they also defied conservative, heteronormative gender expectations, as young punk women frequently wore their hair short and dressed in traditionally masculine clothing, and young men wore eyeliner and other makeup. One contemporary article on the Orange County punk scene described a male punk as "dressed in a belt-cinched, leopard-spotted coat over black and gold stretch pants, his hair standing out like a six-inch sun visor over his stark-white, made up face," explaining that the teen had achieved this look with "hairspray, corn syrup, vaseline and stage make up."[32] Lyrically, songs like the Adolescents' "I Hate Children" and Social Distortion's "The Creeps," with its claim "I just wanna give you the creeps," were unmistakable testaments to hardcore punk rock's intentions to subvert Orange County's overwhelmingly conservative and family-friendly culture. Antithetical to country music's synonymity with the region's overwhelming conservatism, hardcore punk overall evoked an unorganized, anarchistic politics, as heard in songs like the Vandals' "Anarchy Burger," and was detached from the working-class politics associated with much of earlier punk rock. But while hardcore punk lacked a cohesive political agenda beyond suburban rebellion, historian Dewar MacLeod explains that Reagan's election in 1980 was key to energizing hardcore punk, "not only because punks opposed his conservative politics, but because here was an enemy with a face."[33]

Punk rock first emerged in the mid-1970s in New York City and England with bands like the Ramones, the Sex Pistols, and the Clash. The stripped-down, minimalist sound of punk rejected the highbrow designation music journalists had espoused during the 1960s generation of rock music and the overall idealism of that era. As a genre, it was defined by subversion, a type of music that represented a rejection of the status quo's definitions of fashion, art, and respectability. By 1977, punk rock had arrived in Los Angeles with bands like X and the Germs, and increasingly, punks and their unusual clothing and hairstyles could be spotted along Hollywood Boulevard. An integral force in the growth of the L.A. punk scene was DJ Rodney Bingenheimer, whose weekly radio show, *Rodney on the ROQ,* first aired on station KROQ in 1976. It was here that Angelenos had their first encounters with little-known punk and new wave bands like the Ramones, Blondie, the Runaways, and other local bands who did not have a contract with a record label. Soon, the show became a cultural lifeline to neighboring L.A. suburban communities, where life felt stagnant and dull for some teenagers.[34]

As remnants of the Hollywood punk scene fizzled, Orange County emerged as a new epicenter for California punk, and gave way to the emergence of hardcore punk rock. By 1979, bands like Black Flag, the Adolescents, and Social Distortion coalesced with a harsher sound and fashion, accompanied by the rise of slam dancing at local

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shows. The growth of punk in Orange County came as a shock to the region. Not only did many believe that punk rock overall was dying out, but the fact that it could reemerge in an area most defined by Disneyland and master-planned communities caused even more surprise. As an article on the Southern California punk scene in an Orange County newspaper stated with bewilderment, "the [punk] scene has been delineated to all but the lowest order of miscreants who frequent Hollywood Boulevard. Not here surely?"[35]

Similar to earlier expressions of white youth rebellion during the 1950s with the initial emergence of rock and roll, hardcore punk emerged in Orange County as the product of predominantly white, middle-class teens.[36] While a number of punks from broken, troubled homes certainly existed, most acknowledged that the scene was not defined by marginalization based on class.[37] Steven Blush, a former punk and author of the punk history *American Hardcore*, recalls: "Most of these kids came from suburban beach towns or the heart of Orange County. Those places, safe and sterile, in 1978–1979 spawned angry bands like Hermosa Beach's Black Flag, Huntington Beach's The Crowd, and Long Beach's Vicious Circle."[38] According to T.S.O.L. singer Jack Grisham, hardcore punk emerged out of class privilege and racial exclusion: "I think if we all lived in the ghetto, punk rock would've never started. . . . [A] lot of us wrote about politics and change, but we didn't do anything about it. . . . We just did it to piss our parents off." Some areas of the county, including cities like Santa Ana and Fullerton, were growing more racially diverse, with a substantial Mexican American population. But the cities where the punk scene was concentrated, like Huntington Beach and Costa Mesa, were largely white.[39] Grisham conceded that most punk rockers in Orange County came from predominantly white communities, saying: "I don't think some of these kids from Huntington Beach saw a black man until they were 18 or 19 years old."[40]

Whereas English punk rock had emerged by the mid-1970s as an explicit expression of British working-class culture, and as a reaction to the country's recession and growing unemployment, punk rock in Orange County initially appeared to be little more than a symptom of boredom on the part of white, middle-class, suburban teens.[41] Cuckoo's Nest owner Jerry Roach summarized his feelings on punks by saying, "I just think they're rebelling, but I don't think they know what they're rebelling against. I just think it's the nature of youth to rebel." Punks themselves often explained their attraction to the subculture in a similar vein. "I didn't like being like everybody else," said one teenage girl. According to Casey Royer of the band D.I., "It's just pretty fun to be into something that people don't like."[42]

Despite the contemporary tendency to dismiss punk as mindless rebellion, others had a deeper understanding of the subversive potential of punk rock's growth in Orange County. Chuck Dukowski of Black Flag explained: "Before it was a threat, someone could laugh it off. When it became something that looked like it was an actual replacement for what other people were doing . . . they put a culture tariff on it, they try to get rid of it."[43] In no place was this presumed threat more glaring than in Costa Mesa, where country music fans at Zubie's witnessed firsthand on a nightly basis the disruption punk rock brought to the local community as they glanced across the parking lot they shared with punk rockers and the Cuckoo's Nest.

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By 1980, Ronald Reagan, local cops, "rednecks," jocks, and suburban cowboys—who collectively represented the local culture that hardcore punk had first rebelled against—became the definitive, explicit enemies of SoCal punks. By this period, being a punk came with serious risks to personal safety. "Every party we went to there was a fight with people who didn't like the way we looked," said Mike Roche of the band T.S.O.L. "It was constant, and if you got caught somewhere along, three jocks would hop out of a car and chase you and beat [you]."[44] For Social Distortion frontman Mike Ness, this violence came as the result of a conscious choice. He recalled: "Where we lived in Southern California, if you walked down the street with a leather jacket and dyed red hair, you were making a decision to get into some sort of confrontation."[45] For some punks, these enemies only invoked more pride in punk identity. "People hated us, but we fed off it," said Casey Royer.[46]

By the end of the 1970s, violence became an integral part of the Southern California hardcore punk scene. This violence began with attacks against punks, though violence also existed among punks themselves. A key turning point occurred on St. Patrick's Day, 1979, in an event at the Elks Lodge in downtown Los Angeles, later referred to as the "Elks Lodge Massacre," when police inexplicably beat and arrested several punks at a show in Los Angeles.[47] Soon, media reports incited panic over the violence, suggesting that punks and punk rock had instigated it. In the summer of 1980, a *Los Angeles Times* article touched on the anxiety the scene provoked, reporting that "accounts of senseless violence, vandalism and even mutilation at some area rock clubs read like reports from a war zone."[48] The article had an unforgiving impact on punks and local bands like Black Flag and Fear. Club managers refused to book their acts, and fears of mayhem arose wherever punk acts performed. In Huntington Beach, police even began to refer to punk bands as "gangs" (a term previously reserved for organized criminal activity). They targeted punks and punk rockers, collecting photographs and dossiers for police files.[49]

During this period, the Cuckoo's Nest in Costa Mesa emerged as the leading venue for hardcore punk (Figure 2). When Jerry Roach opened the club in 1976, he did not intend to make the Nest a punk spot. But at a time when few places were willing to book punk acts, Roach capitalized on the opportunity, saying his "club has found kinetic energy and increased cash by booking advocates of a supposedly dying style."[50] Within months, however, the Cuckoo's Nest drew fear and outrage among nearby business owners and other members of the local community. Soon, the club received more citizen complaints than any other place in the city as reports of violence, vandalism, and drug use at the venue mounted. By 1981, such concerns led to concerted efforts to shut the club down.[51]

No one was more invested in closing the Cuckoo's Nest than John Zubietta, owner of Zubie's, which shared a parking lot with the punk club and attracted a somewhat older crowd of country music fans and followers of the urban cowboy fashion craze. According to Zubietta, punk rockers stole food from his establishment, ripped out bathroom fixtures, and covered walls with graffiti.[52] Still, both attendees of the Cuckoo's Nest and the local media attested that trouble was often initiated by Zubie's customers and local police, not by punk rockers. According to Casey Royer, nearly all of the punk club's issues with police stemmed from altercations between punks and Zubie's customers. "A lot of it had to do with this place next door where all the suburban cowboys went all the time and hung out," said Royer. "They used to hang out there and they used to hate the punks."[53]

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FIGURE 2. Mike Ness and Social Distortion ("Posh Boy" era).
Courtesy of Linda Aronow and 30 South Gallery

"Customers from Zubie's, 1712 Placentia Ave.," reported a local newspaper, "have been arrested for illegal activity in the same net that has caught up the younger crowd [of punk rockers]." At a city council meeting regarding the club, another article documented how "a parade of 'witnesses,' most of them patrons or employees of the Cuckoo's Nest, told the council that crowds at the rock club are no problem.... They conceded that many problems are prompted by 'hippie' and 'cowboy' patrons of nearby bars."[54]

Despite trouble caused by Zubie's patrons, local police, nearby business owners, and the Costa Mesa City Council generally expressed a solidarity with the country music fans of the area and worked together to eradicate the Cuckoo's Nest. According to some reports, local police even coordinated with the country music fans against the punk club. In one instance that resulted in local cops opening fire on the punk club, a local newspaper indicated that "the action centered initially around an off-duty police officer dressed like a cowboy driving his own car," adding that "it sounds like the police acted poorly in the incident," and that "the Cuckoo's Nest cannot be held accountable for the problem."[55] According to Casey Royer, collaboration between the cops and cowboys was common: "The police conspired with [them]. They dressed their officers up as cowboys and they tried to trap punks into trusting them by the cowboy cops handing them beers. And then if they pull something out and they're under 21, if they pull out a joint or something they bust them."[56]

Despite all the complaints leveraged against the Cuckoo's Nest, many who were invested in shunning the club admit they had not personally been negatively impacted by the punks. Instead, their issues with the nightclub were based on hearsay and suspicion. One woman in her early fifties who worked near the club explained that police had been the ones to confirm her fears about the Cuckoo's Nest, saying: "He told me it was just like I

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read about in the papers and see on TV. You know—violent dancing, people ripping at each other and slashing their bodies with knives and other things. Go in there? No, I've never been in there, but I hear it's really something." For others, simply the nonconformist image of punks was enough. "They're spooky," said one local businessman. "They scare the hell out of me."[57]

Soon, complaints leveraged against the Cuckoo's Nest evolved into a battle over the cultural image of the area. "They call this area we're in the cultural capital of Orange County, but I guess it depends on whose culture you're talking about," said Jerry Roach. As the Costa Mesa City Council prepared to hold a public meeting regarding complaints over the club, Roach encouraged punks to mobilize to voice dissent at the meeting. "Come and see the trial of punk rock!" urged Roach on the recording machine at the Cuckoo's Nest, where punks would call to hear updates on which bands would be playing the venue that week. "They're trying to make punk rock illegal in Costa Mesa—set a national precedent," the recording concluded.[58]

The council voted 4–0 to temporarily shut down the Cuckoo's Nest by revoking its entertainment permit. The club's attorney, Ron Talmo, successfully appealed the decision to the California Supreme Court in May 1981, alleging that club patrons' First Amendment rights had been violated.[59] "We've got sort of a social phenomenon over there," he explained. "We've got a group of ex-jocks . . . who simply don't like the sights or sounds of nonconformist-type groups. It's nothing new. The police had the same difficulties with the beatniks, the hippies, the flower children and the surfers."[60]

Word of the Cuckoo's Nest's legal victory over the city council came as unwelcome news to Zubie's customers. "Look, you don't see a regular person over there," said one Zubie's regular. "It's sad to see it open," said another customer. "To me it's an exhibition of violence and unhappiness rather than happiness. A person would like to go out and have a beer and be happy and not have to look at something like that."[61] To these country music fans, the bleached hair, tattered clothes, and loud sounds of punks were too much to endure.

Costa Mesa officials changed tactics. Members of the city council held that the Cuckoo's Nest had no dance permit and refused to issue one. The Nest closed by the end of 1981. It had been one of the few punk venues in Southern California, and its closing was a substantial blow to the local punk rock scene. "Since the demise of the club, hard-core punk has all but vanished in Orange County," reported the *Los Angeles Times* in 1983. As Jerry Roach reflected on the club's closing, he remarked: "Maybe this will be the first time in history that a fad is stamped out by the authorities."[62]

But almost as soon as the Cuckoo's Nest closed, efforts to capitalize on punk rock finally bore fruit. Local bands and record labels were beginning to make money off punk music. The Adolescents' debut album in 1980, for instance, sold around 90,000 records.[63] Locally, the label Posh Boy Records, founded in 1978, also found opportunity in recording punk rock. The label's founder, Robbie Fields, explained: "I felt the kids in the suburbs had a greater feel for popular culture, and the popular culture that swept Orange County in 1978 to 1981 was punk."[64] By the end of the 1980s, Social Distortion became the first Orange County punk band signed to a major label, Epic Records. Most ironically, Social Distortion incorporated heavy country music influences in some of its

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most profitable releases, as heard on songs like "This Time Darlin'" and the band's cover of the classic country song "Making Believe" (recorded by several country artists, but made most famous by Kitty Wells's 1955 recorded version) on its 1992 release *Somewhere between Heaven and Hell*. Though new punk bands like the Offspring and Pennywise emerged in Orange County throughout the 1980s, no longer did they face fierce resistance or represent the shock and threat to local space that the Cuckoo's Nest represented at the beginning of the decade. By the 1990s, rather than being eradicated, punk rock became commodified and mainstream. The punk rock store Hot Topic opened its first location in Montclair, California, in 1989, and within a handful of years the store could be found in thousands of shopping malls throughout the country. In 1995, the Vans Warped Tour likewise commodified the punk rock experience with national tours that continue into the present. Like white migrant groups such as the Okies and like country music, punk rock, too, overcame its marginality.

But while the shock of punk rock in Orange County increasingly wore off after the closing of the Cuckoo's Nest, the attack on punk in Costa Mesa foreshadowed a national culture war throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, led by conservative politicians and groups like the PMRC that sought to censor popular music and warn parents about the corrupting effects of some popular musicians, while at the same time defining country music as the sound of wholesome, Reagan-era conservatism. Little evidence exists to suggest that Ronald Reagan actively listened to country music on his own, but he identified the genre's listeners, like those in Orange County, as his voting base and found value in associating himself with the music. The country music industry likewise saw use in attaching itself to the president and collaborated with him on a number of key events throughout his terms of office. As the urban cowboy craze faded, it still found a welcome audience in the president. In 1983, Reagan hosted an event at the White House to celebrate the CMA's twenty-fifth anniversary. During the celebration, the president lauded the genre as both wholesome and definitive of the era's conservatism, saying: "Country music . . . is a goodwill ambassador for the country's high standards, our strong spirit and self reliance."[65]

The PMRC, a committee formed in 1985 to create awareness for parents about what their children were listening to, also heralded country music as a beacon of wholesomeness in relation to other genres of popular music, including some lingering elements of punk rock. One of the group's founders, Pam Howar, even identified punk culture as having compelled her to organize the group: "One day at the breakfast table my daughter was listening to the music, and I noticed this punk look about her. I started thinking, 'We'd better get a peer group together.' " Led by the wives of prominent Washington politicians, the PMRC created a "Filthy Fifteen" list of artists, including Madonna, Def Leppard, and AC/DC, to alert the public about what they viewed as music too sexual or violent for youth to listen to. As tensions rose throughout the 1980s between the PMRC and critics who charged the organization with limiting free speech, country music was immediately understood as an ally of the PMRC. For instance, Susan Baker, one of the group's leaders, was reported to be a "devout Christian who favors classical and Country & Western music."[66] Although the PMRC was founded nearly four years after the Cuckoo's Nest closed, it was created with the same intentions that animated the resistance to punk

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rock in Orange County. It thus lies at the roots of a culture war within popular music that persisted throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, resulting in the introduction of "parental advisory" stickers to alert consumers about an album's contents in 1990.

Although punk rockers and country music fans violently clashed in the parking lot between the Cuckoo's Nest and Zubie's, both groups of music listeners ultimately shared a similar legacy, one fostered by their shared suburban space. Analyzing how each group interpreted that space, and how each group was received by the local community, reveals much about Orange County's culture and politics in the early 1980s, and about national and cultural political trends during this period. At a time when conservatism appeared to dominate social, cultural, and political life, hardcore punk rock offered one of the first cultural waves of resistance to the conservatism of the Reagan era, and foreshadowed the larger culture wars that emerged between Reaganites and youth culture in the 1980s and beyond.[67]

NOTES

1. Robert Palmer, "The Pop Life; Riding the Country's Wave of Patriotism?," *New York Times*, May 13, 1981, C-34. Special thanks to Sean Graham for his generosity in sharing newspaper scans, without which this essay would not be possible, and his zine about the Cuckoo's Nest, "Suburban Struggle."
2. This conflict is documented in "Urban Struggle," a song released by The Vandals in 1982.
3. *Urban Struggle: The Battle of the Cuckoo's Nest*, directed by Paul Young (Endurance Pictures, 1983), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vMarsBr2PKA.
4. I recognize that some may take issue with my use of the term *suburb* to refer to Orange County in 1980. Still, I've chosen this term rather than alternative ones like *postsuburban* or *exurban* because most local residents continued to refer to their lived experience in Orange County as suburban.
5. Becky M. Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920–1965* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Peter La Chapelle, *Proud to Be an Okie* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Laura Barraclough, *Making the San Fernando Valley: Rural Landscapes, Urban Development, and White Privilege* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011); Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).
6. For studies on youth culture, see Luis Alvarez, *The Power of the Zoot: Youth Culture and Resistance during World War II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); and Joe Alan Austin and Mike Willard (eds.), *Generations of Youth* (New York: New York University Press, 1998). For more on the emergence of rock and roll and its backlash, see Glenn C. Altschuler, *All Shook Up: How Rock 'n' Roll Changed America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Linda Martin and Kerry Segrave, *Anti-Rock: The Opposition to Rock 'n' Roll* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1988). For more on rock music and youth in Southern California, see Jorge N. Leal, "*Aquí y Allá ¡Yo voy a Existir*: Young Latina/o Ingenuity, Sounds and Solidarity in Late Twentieth Century Los Ángeles," PhD diss. (University of California, San Diego, 2018).
7. McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*.
8. Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight*.
9. For more on the changing racial demography of Orange County during the second half of the twentieth century, see Kristen Hill Maher, "Borders and Social Distinction in the Global Suburb," *American Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (September 2004): 781–806.
10. Dowell Myers and Julie Park, "Racially Balanced Cities in Southern California," *Race Contours 2000 Study*, Public Research Report No. 2001–05, at https://cpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/sites.usc.edu/dist/6/210/files/2018/08/2001_Myers-Park_Racially-Balanced-Cities-1a1cxya.pdf; Rob Kling, Spencer Olin, and Mark Poster (eds.), *Postsuburban California: The Transformation of Orange County since World War II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 3.
11. McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, 270.
12. La Chapelle, *Proud to Be an Okie*, 113–158; Jason Mellard, *Progressive Country: How the 1970s Transformed the Texan in Popular Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013), 171–198; Charles L. Hughes, *Country Soul: Making Music and Making Race in the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 179.

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13. For more on the long legacy of racial and cultural protectionism in suburban spaces, see Evan McKenzie, *Privatopia: Homeowner Associations and the Rise of Residential Private Government* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996).
14. Craig Rousselot, "Commercial Cowboy," *Orange Coast*, November 1980, 144.
15. Rousselot, "Commercial Cowboy," 141.
16. *Billboard*, "Knott's Farm Goes Urban Cowboy," August 30, 1980, 32.
17. Eric Eberwein, "The Class of '81: Whatever Happened to Orange Country's Punk Rock Rebels?," *Orange Coast Magazine* (September 1991), 93.
18. For more on California's country music history, see Gerald W. Haslam, *Workin' Man Blues: Country Music in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); and La Chapelle, *Proud to Be an Okie*.
19. La Chapelle, *Proud to be an Okie*, 120, 137.
20. Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven*; David Roediger, *Working toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White: The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).
21. For more on country music's journey toward respectability, see Jeffrey J. Lange, *Smile When You Call Me Hillbilly: Country's Struggle for Respectability, 1939–1954* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004), and Diane Pecknold, *The Selling Sound: The Rise of the Country Music Industry* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).
22. James Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 222–245.
23. Joe Allison, "The Sound of Country Music," marketing presentation at "The Sound of Country Music" convention, July 7, 1965, Chicago, Illinois, Country Music Association Sales and Marketing Programs (microfiche: fiche 1), Country Music Association Papers, Country Music Foundation Archives, Nashville, Tennessee.
24. *Panama City News-Herald*, "From Appalachia to Affluence: Country Music Scales Heights," May 5, 1977, 7C.
25. Richard Goldstein, "My Country Music Problem—and Yours," *Mademoiselle*, June 1973, 114.
26. For more on this transition to conservatism, see La Chapelle, *Proud to Be an Okie*.
27. *Los Angeles Times*, "Airport Given Wayne's Name," June 20, 1979, Part II, 1.
28. Dennis McLellan, " '80s Cowboy Dressing Up, Kicking Back," *Los Angeles Times*, August 14, 1980, Part I, 3.
29. Palmer, "Pop Life."
30. Robert Hilburn, "Willie, Merle Cause Stadium to Sway," *Los Angeles Times*, October 28, 1980, VI:2.
31. For more on suburban discontent in the second half of the twentieth century, see Richard E. Gordon, Katherine K. Gordon, and Max Gunther, *The Split-Level Trap* (New York: Dell, 1961); Robert Beuka, *SuburbiaNation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Karen Tongson, *Relocations: Queer Suburban Imaginaries* (New York: New York University Press, 2011); Martin Dines, *The Literature of Suburban Change: Narrating Complexity in Metropolitan America* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020); Kevin M. and Thomas J. Sugrue (eds.), *The New Suburban History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Matthew D. Lassiter, "Impossible Criminals: The Suburban Imperatives of America's War on Drugs," *Journal of American History* 102, no. 1 (June 2015), 126–140.
32. Donna Davis, "Punkers Jubilant, Neighbors Displeased at Club's Reopening," *The Register*, May 3, 1981, A3.
33. Dewar MacLeod, *Kids of the Black Hole: Punk Rock in Postsuburban California* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010), 103.
34. Steven Blush, *American Hardcore: A Tribal History* (Port Townsend, WA: Feral House, 2010), 19.
35. Michael Paskevich, "Punk Rockers Find Roosting Place in Mesa," *Daily Pilot*, June 15, 1979, C6.
36. Despite the Orange County punk scene being predominantly white, it is important to note that the scene did include some Latinx teens, including members of the bands Black Flag, Saccharine Trust, and Suicidal Tendencies. For more on Black and Latinx punk musicians in neighboring Los Angeles, see Gaye Theresa Johnson, *Spaces of Conflict, Sounds of Solidarity: Music Race, and Spatial Entitlement in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 123–167; Marlen Rios-Hernandez, " 'Don't Be Afraid to Pogo!': A Queer Chicana (re)covery of the Pogo and the Story of How Punk Became White," in Gina Arnold and George McKay (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Punk Rock* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).
37. Daniel S. Traber discusses the ironies of hardcore punk's rebellion in greater detail in Daniel S. Traber, "L.A.'s 'White Minority': Punk and the Contradictions of Self-Marginalization," *Cultural Critique* 48 (Spring 2001), 30–64.
38. Blush, *American Hardcore*, 20.
39. Kling et al., *Postsuburban California*, 3.
40. Eberwein, "Class of '81," 92.
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42. *Urban Struggle*.
43. Ibid.
44. Mike Boehm, "Kids of the Black Hole: The 1970s Were Waning when Orange County's Punk Rock Scene Roared Its Dark, Hostile Message," *Los Angeles Times*, July 23, 1989, 49-C.
45. Blush, *American Hardcore*, 27.
46. Boehm, "Kids of the Black Hole," 49-C.
47. MacLeod, *Kids of the Black Hole*, 110.
48. Patrick Goldstein, "Violence Sneaks into Punk Scene," *Los Angeles Times*, June 29, 1980, 3.
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51. Herman Wong, "Embattled Punk-Rock Club Still Open—Barely," *Los Angeles Times*, December 4, 1981, 6.
52. Jerry Clausen, "Mesa Punks Protest as City Pulls Permit," *Daily Pilot*, February 24, 1981, A2.
53. *Urban Struggle*.
54. Clausen, "Mesa Punks Protest," A2.
55. *Daily Pilot*, "Trouble at the Cuckoo's Nest," February 27, 1981, 26.
56. *Urban Struggle*.
57. Donna Davis, "Punk Rock Showdown," *The Register*, February 22, 1981, B3.
58. *Ibid*.
59. Donna Davis, "Punkers Jubilant, Neighbors Displeased at Club's Reopening," *The Register*, May 3, 1981, A3.
60. Davis, "Punk Rock Showdown," B4.
61. Davis, "Punkers Jubilant," A3.
62. Randy Lewis, "Film Insightful on Punk Phenomenon," *Los Angeles Times*, December 23, 1983, 11.
63. Eberwein, "Class of '81," 96.
64. Boehm, "Kids of the Black Hole," 51-A.
65. Bob Millard, "Reagan Entertains Country Music Stars at White House," *Nashville Banner*, March 16, 1983, B-18.
66. Roger Wolmuth, "Has Rock Gone Too Far?," *People*, September 16, 1985, https://people.com/archive/cover-story-parents-vs-rock-vol-23-no-12/.
67. For more on the cultural and political resistance to conservatism in the 1980s, see Bradford Martin, *The Other Eighties: A Secret History of America in the Age of Reagan* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2011); and Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Cool Town: How Athens, Georgia, Launched Alternative Music and Changed American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

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