



We Got the Neutron Bomb: The Untold Story of L.A. Punk

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Taking us back to late '70s and early '80s Hollywood—pre-crack, pre-AIDS, pre-Reagan—**We Got the Neutron Bomb** re-creates word for word the rage, intensity, and anarchic glory of the Los Angeles punk scene, straight from the mouths of the scenesters, zinesters, groupies, filmmakers, and musicians who were there.

“California was wide-open sex—no condoms, no birth control, no morality, no guilt.” —Kim Fowley

“The Runaways were rebels, all of us were. And a lot of people looked up to us. It helped a lot of kids who had very mediocre, uneventful, unhappy lives. It gave them something to hold on to.” —Cherie Currie

“The objective was to create something for our own personal satisfaction, because everything in our youthful and limited opinion sucked, and we knew better.” —John Doe

“The Masque was like Heaven and Hell all rolled into one. It was a bomb shelter, a basement. It was so amazing, such a dive ... but it was our dive.” —Hellin Killer

“At least fifty punks were living at the Canterbury. You’d walk into the courtyard and there’d be a dozen different punk songs all playing at the same time. It was an incredible environment.” —Belinda Carlisle

Assembled from exhaustive interviews, **We Got the Neutron Bomb** tells the authentically gritty stories of bands like the Runaways, the Germs, X, the Screamers, Black Flag, and the Circle Jerks—their rise, their fall, and their undeniable influence on the rock 'n' roll of today.

We Got the Neutron Bomb: The Untold Story of L.A. Punk Details

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Liana Polimeni says

This is so hard to rate because on one hand, this book was incredibly fun to read, and on the other hand... I don't actually know how well it was done/how much of it I should be taking seriously. It is an oral history by way of snippets of past interviews pasted together to almost seem like a cohesive story and conversation. That alone makes you wonder how much is cut out and edited to just make the story flow better. As with any oral history there was obviously some conflicting information (and I did like seeing multiple sides to the stories) but there was also a section that had a quote (a section about playing at wong's and hong's) that was assigned to two different people. Unless they all just had the EXACT same words to say about the places (this seems unlikely?), the editors of this book messed up. At the very least they messed up in allowing the quote to be printed twice even if it was said by two different people in some interview in the 80s. It makes the rest seem messy and unreliable. Ah well, other than that I learned a ton of new information and it was like real housewives of LA punk - so basically it was great.

Larry Holt says

The book covered one of my favorite music scenes-and goes in depth on X, Germs, Black Flag & the Go-Go's. It's no 'Please Kill Me', but a solid oral history nonetheless.

Ed says

Really entertaining and thought provoking, funny and sad. Punks in their own words, decades after the scene's peak. My only complaint is that this book's target audience is clearly only people already 'in the know.' I'm sure I missed a lot of references, and there were gaps in the narrative left to be filled by the reader's own previous understanding of the subject, or simply left unfilled. But it put an incredibly important phenomenon, one that continues today despite the mass-commercialization of EVERYthing, in context and perspective--the DIY phenomenon--kids dissatisfied with/disgusted by the culture around them who then build something themselves, among themselves, for themselves. It's happening everywhere all the time and it's really fun to see how it works. People being people.

This is a theme that seems to come up in my life a lot: there are so many effin people on the planet--and so much music being made--and the internet gives us access to more of it than ever in history--but so much can only be experienced in person--and I want to hear EVERYthing. How retarded do we have to be to be content with radio and tv, even youtube? I know that's a tired old poseur's commentary, but seriously. Let's go hear some new shit. It's happening all around us.

And since I missed out on this scene, and ignored even its outward-radiating afterlife in the 90s when it might have interested me (shame!), I'm doing some serious piratebay right now. Thanks Adam!

Robert says

We Got the Neutron Bomb: The Untold Story of L.A. Punk is an ambitious book, following up on its cousin *Please Don't Kill Me* which covers the NY Punk scene. The authors themselves are the first to admit they aren't able to cover everything and despite wanting to stay distinct from the NY Punk scene, the L.A. Punk scene seems to be in the shadow of what was going on elsewhere in the entire book.

I have gotten to enjoy the oral interview format for a book like this, and I do feel it at least fits the subject better than a comprehensive regular styled book. However, my one gripe with the book, ends up being the organization (or lack thereof). A timeline would have been great, if only because so many things covered in the book were happening at the same time at different points in a ten year period.

I am not as big or knowledgeable about L.A. Punk than I am about NY Punk or the Punk scene as a whole. However, it seems odd to me that the book hyped up the influence of the scene's bigger plays on rock and roll as a whole and their stories. However, 9 times out of 10 it ends up being the band quickly falls apart due to violence, drugs, or a combination of the two. In fact, the impact of heroin on the scene as noted in the book probably did its own part in killing the scene in the long run. The harping on the lack of record deals, crappy venues, etc makes the reader left wondering what influence the L.A. punk scene did leave on rock and roll, especially considering most of what passes off for rock both in 2001 and today is very different from what was being played there. Although Kurt Cobain's love of the scene's music is noteworthy.

Overall, *We Got the Neutron Bomb* is definitely a book worth reading for anyone interested in the L.A. Punk scene or music in general. However, it would be a good idea to listen to some of the bands listed in the "cast of characters" section in the back of the book either before or during reading to get a better feel for who is being interviewed.

Andy says

Since I'm all over this book I'm not going to review it (other than the five stars), however I just want to comment that some reviewers have gone into a New York vs. Los Angeles punk debate. That wasn't Brendan Mullen's intention: he simply wanted to document a brief period of time when the Hollywood punk scene was a strange, underground phenomenon.

I think Brendan should have put a time period in the title (1977-1980) as it would have been less disappointing for readers expecting SST and Orange County bands. The title is a little too sweeping, but that could have been attributable to the publishers, too. Who knows? At any rate, it's a decent book about the Hollywood punk scene, but even by my own admission not the most comprehensive one.

Caroline says

As an oral history, this could have been meatier. It's chopped up into small, focused chapters of a few pages each. For such a diverse and interesting scene, this book could definitely have been longer. But I don't want to look a gift horse in the mouth. The early LA punk scene was more open to women and queers than other punk scenes, and for better or worse it kinda arose in a vacuum unto itself. And then hardcore came around and white dudes from Orange County decided that they would vent their adolescent angst by alienating

people with actual problems and making punk less fun and more aggressive. Boo!!!

Adam says

One of three great oral histories of punk I've read. This one focuses on the L.A. scene, which is usually downplayed, if not completely disregarded altogether in punk histories. Overall, it supports the broad characterization of the NYC scene as artsy/intellectual (Patti Smith/Television), the London scene as political (The Clash), and the L.A. scene as fun (The Weirdos).

The really interesting thing about this book is that it reveals how the L.A. punk scene emerged from the glam (or “glitter”) scene. Glam was the major countercultural music current, given that L.A. in the 70s was centered around blues rock, country rock, or prog rock. Imported British stuff like Roxy Music, David Bowie, and Mott the Hoople offered a counterculture for the later-to-be-Punks when they were teenagers. They were beaten up for wearing glitter, make-up, and cross-dressing. By the time they formed bands, glam was all but over, and Raw Power-era Stooges and New York Dolls became the major influence.

Perhaps more so than London and NYC, the L.A. bands were super diverse—from the Americana of X to the violence of the Germs, from the electro-delinquent Scremers to the new wavers the Motels. This is because what began as the punk scene really was a “miscellaneous” category of bands that didn't fit into anything. It's not that there was a punk sound; it's that “punk” was a catch-all category. Many of the people involved were artists of other sorts as well, and were really into the performance aspect. Also distinct from the other scenes, few of the L.A. bands ever left California, signed to major labels, or even recorded albums at all! Especially for this reason, it is exciting to hear all the original scenesters tell their stories. The authors really did a tremendous job finding all the characters, and the oral history format causes everything to flow together the way a film might, making it easy to feel like you were actually there.

Unlike most music histories, those interviewed in this book don't romanticize the time period. Nonetheless, I can't help but romanticize a bit about a time when music could still shock, when a scene was open to all kinds of musical weirdness, and when the community had to be really tight because there was no Internet yet. But other aspects certainly aren't romantic. The scene seemed pretty shocking and extreme. L.A. wasn't about college kids starting bands like it is today: there were stories of 15 year olds taking LSD with strangers at a Taco Bell....

Nonetheless, the scene was definitely all about FUN. The focus on fun, along with the DIY spirit and the creation of alternative show spaces at house parties, and even restaurants, remind me of both Chicago's hardcore scene as well as today's more hipster-dominated indie rock scene that's focused on partying.

Much like the NYC scene, but for different reasons, L.A. punk was pretty fleeting. More aggressive or macho hardcore took over stylistically, and cops broke up some of the alternative spaces that were home to the scene. Perhaps one quote best sums it up: “Everything has its moments and then it doesn't anymore, especially in California” (29)

teresa says

The subtitle of this book is, *The Untold Story of LA Punk*. It is an oral history of the LA punk movement in the 70's and 80's--a parallel to the NY book *Please Kill Me*.

If you have seen the movie, *The Mayor Sunset Strip*, about Rodney Bingenheimer you will be familiar with some of the main characters at the beginning of the movement--Bingenheimer and Kim Fowley.

I think after reading this I should finally try and see *The Decline of Western Civilization*.

catechism says

There was some good stuff in here, but I was left feeling pretty frustrated and disappointed by most of it. I felt like it was just scratching the surface of what was going on, and found it very disjointed. It's no "*Please Kill Me*," I'll say that.

Dale Godfrey says

This book is a great primer for the west coast punk scene. Written in a similar style to "*pleas kill me*", it's an excellent introduction to the characters that litter the scene. It focuses mostly on the pre-hardcore era, but discusses its effect on the scene. I'm following it up by reading "*American Hardcore*".

East Bay J says

We Got The Neutron Bomb is a great oral history of the early L.A. punk scene. It's kind of the L.A. version of *Please Kill Me*. It's just as entertaining, too. Crazy stories abound and you get to read about all the killer bands. People from X, The Blasters, The Flesh Eaters, Black Randy & The Metrosquad, The Germs, The Screamers, The Weirdos, etc. weigh in with their memories of the times. There is a photo at the beginning of each chapter, which means there aren't a lot of photos. For that reason, *Make The Music Go Bang!* is a great companion to this book.

I think it's interesting that so many people in this book comment on how the punk thing started as everyone doing their own thing and how it so quickly got to be a mainstream, by the numbers affair. Even though this book and *Please Kill Me* more or less spell out this philosophy, still there are legions of kids buying the uniforms and the soundtracks, starting their own bands and cloning the sound and style of their favorite bands. It's really, really boring and unimaginative.

But boring and unimaginative have nothing to do with the places, people and things in *We Got The Neutron Bomb*. This one's a good, good read.

Ron Asheton is my hero.

Mark Davess says

It kind of makes sense to me in terms of music to make the 70s actually something like 1972 to 10 years later, and this book tells the story of LA punk over pretty much that timescale, from early beginnings in an underground yet open and accessible hard-partying, glitter-rock alternative to the more sedate singer-songwriter and country-rock mainstream of the day, through to around the 'point' at which the differing agenda of suburban kids eventually attracted to punk turns it towards what then becomes 80s American hardcore. It's inclusive, talking about the successful and the unsuccessful, the bands but also the club managers, the café owners, the audience, the neighbours, the landlords, the parents and siblings, the cops, the hustlers, the pimps, the serial killer, the passersby, the visiting bands, whoever is there or connected and whatever is going on there or around. It has that nice lack of clear boundaries both temporally and spatially that makes it seem credibly authentic. Where punk starts and ends is unclear, what exactly caused it and what it caused for those touched by it is unclear. And that was maybe what punk was all about, living by that which is real but not clearly manageable, there but not always convenient, being authentic, warts'n'all, so Brendan was arguably using his lessons from that experience to inform how he went about this. In terms of bands it maybe can't all be here, but with The Runaways, The Mau Maus, The Screemers, The Weirdos, The Germs, Black Randy, The Bags, X, The Blasters, The Gun Club, Black Flag, The Circle Jerks, The Middle Class, The Adolescents, and more, it's hard to say the landscape isn't properly surveyed. I won't list all the clubs, or residences, or 'scenesters', but they're covered enough to seem equally as real and significant.

Brendan Mullen uses the same technique here as in *Lexicon Devil: The Fast Times and Short Life of Darby Crash and The Germs*. He talked to as many people involved in the events as he could, using some older material, and some written, but all simply words from 'players' in the events relating their recollection and perception of it all. Then he's taken snippets of that and placed them in order to give a story that is mainly chronological, deviating from that occasionally only to follow some thematic thread and/or add greater context, so you basically get told the whole story, people's first-hand view of events and developments, placed together, with the author's voice only being where he himself was there and has something to relate, putting himself in just like all the other 'characters'.

As the founder of the Masque, a basement in a building on the southwest corner of where North Cherokee Avenue crosses Hollywood Boulevard (here, the alley is now blocked with a gate), which he took over as rehearsal space and which mutated into an underground punk venue, Brendan Mullen was therefore not only close to all the people and events, but as much a 'mover' in all that occurred as maybe anyone else, and not just as an observing club proprietor, but actively engaged with the punks, socially, musically, practically, emotionally. I never met him but reading articles by him, reading obituaries of him, and watching him in some videos showed me that he was the kind of sharp, open and humanistic kind of person whose books would surely be worth reading. Incidentally the basement is still there and used to store records or media or something and the graffiti is still on the walls. There are photosets online and videos on YouTube showing it since, one with Brendan Mullen himself in the 80s, another very recently.

By the way, just across Hollywood Boulevard also still stands 'The Canterbury', the home of many of the 'scenesters' and another 'fermentation' spot for much of this culture (here), known now as I write this as 'Alexa Artiste' and apparently, according to yelp reviews, still not such a cosy place to live in Hollywood. I'm sure with time I could provide a veritable 'Google tour' of many of the locations talked about in this book, and that gives an indication of the feel of it: it's very much located in the physical reality of places and real-life interaction, real physicality, very far from the distance, virtuality and abstraction of our times. I think punk was even in part a reaction to a similar kind of 'abstraction via tv' (and media in general) over the previous decades, and maybe reading about it might awaken us a little from our dreams and inspire a return

to reality in us. I went and looked at The Masque's location when I was in Hollywood, but maybe I should have touched its walls. But then dirt is right here, under this very building, 2 continents and an ocean away, and real relationship is potentiated wherever you find people. Life is wherever you are: these people chose to open up to it where they were and something just as authentic and important can equally become reality where you are.

One interesting aspect of the technique used to put this together is how the stories don't fully tie up, how things are remembered and even more so how they are interpreted by those recounting the events, especially as concerns agency and motivation, i.e. who instigated what and why, or who did what precisely and how exactly it happened. The result actually solidifies the history and gives it at least 3 dimensions, being seen from various angles and becoming fuller and richer, and probably as true as could be when you paint in what sense you can from reading between the lines. It also creates a nice space for standing back unjudgementally and starting to see all the people in context, all motivated by inner impulses and needs that elicit sympathy but also can all be seen as flawed in some way, and that is nicely left as not utterly clear; i.e. make up your own mind in what way, how much, etc. This is life in its gritty, messy, undefinable teeming beautiful mess, an openness to which was of course at the centre of that throwing away of norms and neatness that the arrival of punk embodied. It also points well to its own limitations and makes you aware that the actual reality is a far richer and enormous thing of infinite moments and interactions which can never be conveyed or unequivocally interpreted, many of which will never be told and/or are totally forgotten and lost to us all. This life was in the living and not the recounting, so the recounting should reflect that as best it can. And we're still alive. Or, if you're reading this after my death, you are at least. Life is now. These people lived in their now.

So, what you get out of reading this book and his other may vary enormously. It could seem like a pointless, nerdy fan thing about just knowing as many details as you can, maybe not much different to gossip, basically like reading celebrity mags but about the punks you love instead of the movie/tv/pops stars, the usefulness at best being to learn about a new band or two or more; it could seem like an entertaining yet rambling mess of a bunch of aimless and irresponsible kids running wild and having a blast; it could look like a bunch of losers fucking shit up and wasting their lives and kidding themselves so much of the validity of their little clique that they manage to get everyone else's attention and make it into a huge social phenomenon, loved by some, causing some to wade in to stop it with billy clubs; it could provide an interesting journey to see the impulses and developments of punk and to do your own thinking and feeling about what that means, why it mattered (or not), how much, and basically some insight into that eternal question of finding a balance between the orienting and protecting structure of the known and the safe and the definable and manageable on the one hand and the openness and unpredictability and joyride and danger and dirt and going with impulse on the other.

The book was mainly the latter for me, giving me cause to make comparisons with my own UK punk experience (there are surface differences, yet underlying similarities, particularly for me in how punk necessarily is taken from the sharper artistic forces that gave seed to it and appropriated by ordinary kids like myself with coarser issues who simultaneously undermine it while making it grow into something that will positively free up their space and broaden and deepen their boundaries in their own lives) as well as to look at the general broader humanity at the core of it beyond even that. In the end that that rejection of patterns of living is healthy, even essential, even while it might look irresponsible, is the point of view I already came to this book with, and others might need convincing, or disagree, but the process going on here under all the surface of the trivia of the day to day lives shown here gave me cause to focus on how that works, and where maybe it works 'from' in our human subjectivity. Whether I make something valuable out of that is down to me, and it's hard for me to say the book should have given me anything 'more'. That more would be less, as any punk understands.

RandomAnthony says

This list emerges when I play California punk rock word association:

Black Flag
SST records
X
Flipper
The Dead Kennedys
Some other bands
The Decline of Western Civilization
The Minutemen

I don't mean to be all name-droppy. I've learned my musical knowledge, of which I'm pathetically and unreasonably proud, is incomplete to the point of embarrassment. I was too young (yay!) for most of the classic punk years and have spent decades hearing grandma and granpa scenesters five or six years older than me drone on about how much better the "scene" (barf!) was before all us little hardcore kids ruined it. Whatever. *We Got The Neutron Bomb* is pretty good. I now can add, when playing California punk word association:

Tom Waits getting in a fistfight with some guy over Alice Bag (sp?).

The Screamers and The Weirdos. Both sound interesting on paper.

The idea that some people consider Jim Morrison a precursor of California punk. This disturbs me more than I can express. I fucking hate The Doors. Yes, I know their keyboard player is on X's "The World's A Mess It's In My Kiss", one of my favorite songs ever, but...I don't care. Jim Morrison was lame.

Belinda Carlisle (sp?) in her fat, pre Go Gos days.

David Bowie's importance to both the NY and LA scenes. Were I completing a Venn diagram with LA punk on one side and NY punk on the other, Bowie would be in the middle.

The Runaways. I knew about them already, I guess, from the movie and Lita Ford videos, but I gained new respect for Joan Jett, especially.

This book utilizes the same chatty, "artfully cut and paste interview segments into a narrative" format perfected in this volume's NY predecessor, *Please Kill Me*. I'm from Chicago and maintain only a passing interest in most of these bands and their history but I liked the book well enough to stay up late Wednesday night so I could finish. I read *Please Kill Me* maybe four or five years ago, so my memory has faded, but this volume seemed more fun than that one. The California punks seemed less affected than the NY punks. The California punks embraced the theater and spectacle with less of a distant cool, from what I can tell, and with more of an ADD kid's enthusiastic spazziness. Except for the heroin, I guess. Heroin would land in the middle of the Venn diagram, too. And while some of the end-of-scene bands (DK, Black Flag, Circle Jerks, etc.) were seminal influences on my teenage years, this book glosses over that era. But I liked *We Got The Neutron Bomb* and you already, based on your background, can probably discern whether or not you'll like it,

too.

(By the way, I filter my perceptions of California punk through my friend James, who grew up in the area back then. In turn, I assume all California punks 1) know James, and 2) are kind of like James. He now lives in Villa Park, Illinois, where he plays chess and camps in his living room with my godson, Milo. This conflation is fair to neither James nor California punk history. Sorry.)

DJ Yossarian says

Even though I'm using "Boston Not LA" as my Goodreads icon/avatar/profile pic/whatever, I've never really had any particular dislike for the LA punk scene. I'm nice like that.

I'm glad this book exists, and the authors have a point that the LA scene doesn't get the accolades that the NYC or London scenes have traditionally received. Unfortunately after reading the book I've come to the conclusion that even given the diminished expectations LA didn't have anywhere as interesting a scene as NYC, and didn't produce as great a variety of bands. In fact I'd argue that LA doesn't really even measure up well against SF or even Boston. But again the book really is worth reading, mostly because there's a lot in there about X, early Black Flag, a bit about the Dickies, and I did enjoy the Geza X stuff too. There was no mention of the Angry Sams though, and in my opinion the Minutemen deserved a chapter or six of their own.

One recurring theme was the LA scene's emphasis on senseless violence and hard drugs. I don't really need to hear Jack Grisham boasting about torturing some guy in his garage.

"Neutron Bomb" did shed light on the origins of Slash magazine (and the label), and made clear the schism between older "downtown" punks like X and the Screamers and the newer, suburban, hardcore (sometimes skate) punks.

This sounds a bit mental, but given that geography was an important undercurrent in the book, a map of the LA area would have been a helpful touch. The book's not useless without one, but it would have been a good addition.

Amanda-Has-A-Bookcase says

As a huge fan of LA Punk Rock this book is full of fun vignettes detailing the rise and fall of some of my favorite bands like X, Black Flag, Blasters, Germs and many more. So many thoughts and views from those who lived it.

And as a side note, if you haven't watched The Decline of Western Civilization you need to do so asap!
