



## The Heebie-Jeebies at CBGB's: A Secret History of Jewish Punk

*Steven Lee Beeber*

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Based in part on recent interviews with more than 125 people—among them Tommy Ramone, Chris Stein (Blondie), Lenny Kaye (Patti Smith Group), Hilly Kristal (CBGBs owner), and John Zorn—this book focuses on punk's beginnings in New York City to show that punk was the most Jewish of rock movements, in both makeup and attitude. As it originated in Manhattan's Lower East Side in the early 1970s, punk rock was the apotheosis of a Jewish cultural tradition that found its ultimate expression in the generation born after the Holocaust. Beginning with Lenny Bruce, “the patron saint of punk,” and following pre-punk progenitors such as Lou Reed, Jonathan Richman, Suicide, and the Dictators, this fascinating mixture of biography, cultural studies, and musical analysis delves into the lives of these and other Jewish punks—including Richard Hell and Joey Ramone—to create a fascinating historical overview of the scene. Reflecting the irony, romanticism, and, above all, the humor of the Jewish experience, this tale of changing Jewish identity in America reveals the conscious and unconscious forces that drove New York Jewish rockers to reinvent themselves—and popular music.

## **The Heebie-Jeebies at CBGB's: A Secret History of Jewish Punk Details**

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## **From Reader Review The Heebie-Jeebies at CBGB's: A Secret History of Jewish Punk for online ebook**

### **Jenna says**

You know that feeling you have when, say, you know someone well, but then you meet their family and they make sense, have a context? I felt like this book did that for the New York (and a bit of the British) punk scene. It showed how many of these people were already apart from mainstream society before they ever became musicians. Plus, I loved the quotes from these rockstars where they used Yiddish.

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### **Techrtr says**

The best thing about this book is the title - it's quite witty. Trying to convince readers that if it wasn't for Judaism, Lenny Bruce or Hitler, there wouldn't have been punk rock, or that if he hadn't been Jewish, Joey Ramone wouldn't have become the Godfather of punk is a real stretch. In fact, most of the book reads like a compendium of castoff lines from Seinfeld or Sheeky Greene - "it's our musicality and punkishness that has sustained us as a people for 2000 years. . ." The Yiddish expressions throughout the book get really annoying after a while too. You almost need a Yiddish - English dictionary to figure out what Beeber is saying sometimes – in places it reads a bit like an inside joke that non-Jews are not privy to.

Anyhow, be sure to read a preview of this book before you buy it - I found it quite boring and difficult to wade through all of the specious attempts to demonstrate that punk rock would not have happened were it not for "punkish" Jewish kids or agitators like Malcolm McLaren. For a much more interesting read about the New York punk scene, read Micky Leigh's "I Slept with Joey Ramone."

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### **catechism says**

I read this at the same time I read *Please Kill Me*, and that's actually something I think everyone should do. Or, if you are not someone who reads multiple books at once, you should read these close together. They complement one another extremely well. That one's the oral history, the dirt and the gossip and who's fucking whom in which bathroom while on what drugs; this one is the background, the influences, the history and the culture that made that other book possible. (While you're at it, read *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book* around the time you read this, for a look at the Jewishness of an earlier NYC subculture that has a lot in common with punk.)

Beeber's thesis, stated in the intro, is:

Punk is Jewish. Not Judaic. Jewish, the reflection of a culture that's three millennia old now. It reeks of humor and irony and preoccupations with Nazism. It's all about outsiders who are "one of us" in the shtetl of New York. It's about nervous energy, the same nervous energy that has characterized Jews from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob through the Hasids to the plays of David Mamet. Punks, like Jews, self-consciously identify with the sick and twisted, what Hitler referred to as "the decadent." Punk's home is the home of the Jews — New York, especially

downtown Lower East Side/East Village New York, the birthplace of this new music known for its populist vibe, its revolutionary attitudes, its promotion of do-it-yourself like some sort of anarchist mantra.

It's not just that so many in the music, as well as so many in the audience, happen to be Jewish, among them Lou Reed, Joey and Tommy Ramone, the Dictators, Richard Hell, Malcolm McLaren, Lenny Kaye, Genya Ravan, Chris Stein, Jonathan Richman, and Helen Wheels. Punk reflects the whole Jewish history of oppression and uncertainty, flight and wandering, belonging and not belonging, always being divided, being both in and out, good and bad, part and apart. The shpilkes, the nervous energy, of punk is Jewish. That shpilkes, the "Heebie Jeebies" of Little Richard's song, captures exactly what was happening in the Bowery as that first generation to come of age after the Holocaust made its mark on poplar music at a little Jewish-owned and -run club called CBGB.

Of course, people can — and do — go back and forth ad infinitum about where punk rock started: New York or London, New York or London. I don't really care; that part of it isn't particularly interesting to me, and it's not like there's ever going to be a definitive answer. But let's just pretend that we've decided that the answer is New York, that American acts like the Velvet Underground and the Stooges and the MC5 were the progenitors of punk, that the Clash and the Pistols came from us and not the other way around.

Given that, I find Beeber's Punk-Is-Jewish argument completely persuasive. I mean, it's not like he's talking about a handful of people no one's heard of; it's a lot of big names, both in and out of the spotlight, and although Beeber focuses on the Jews, he doesn't do so the exclusion of everyone else. You don't come away thinking the early NYC punk scene was only Jews, which can be a risk with a book like this one. So you've got this book about the history of a movement, about many of the people who were pivotal to that movement, and about what they had in common. And it was quite a lot.

I really learned a lot from this book. I wasn't surprised that there were Jewish punks, but I hadn't realized (or even thought about) how many Jews were involved in the early days, or how pivotal they were, or what the stories were behind many of the stories. As far as I can tell, not many people did — the book has a lot of anecdotes about the author tracking people down who didn't much want to talk to him, who would neither confirm nor deny their Jewishness, who had no idea there were so many others like them.

It's a fairly academic text (my copy has a giant USED sticker on the back of the type you find on books at college bookstores), and there are a few places Beeber was trying too hard to be a ~writer~. At the beginning of one chapter, he takes several pages to try to enticingly set a scene, lovingly describing who's on stage at CB's, how the scene is doing, what Seymour Stein is up to, on and on and on, and meanwhile there is this dude on stage with his back to the audience. And it's like, for fuck's sake, WHO IS IT. JUST TELL ME. Months later, and I get frustrated thinking about it.

Still, despite the occasional misstep, I found the writing to be smooth and entertaining; it definitely wasn't one of those books where I read three pages and then had to read comics for a week until my brain recovered. I mostly appreciated that it offered a different perspective on punk history. As you may have gathered, I've read a lot of books about punk rock, and it's totally awesome whenever one brings something new to the table: a new perspective, a new way of telling the same stories, anything. Beeber does a good job of slotting the punks into the better-known pantheon of smartass Jewish entertainers — he starts with Lenny Bruce — and branching out into John Zorn's dissonant art and then back around to the Beastie Boys, who, if you will recall, started as a shitty hardcore band. But these days, I don't know, they're just three emcees and

they're on the go; Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego.

Verdict: Essential reading for music nerds.

[review originally posted here. I'm moving those reviews to GR at a rate of one per day, if any regular GR friends are wondering why you're suddenly getting updates with really long reviews of books I read years ago.]

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### **Sam says**

The main argument found in Steven Lee Beeber's *Heebie Jeebies* is hinged on two main points: First, Jewish Americans played a pivot role in the formation of not only the punk rock movement, but in American and Western music as a whole. Second, that this is an overlooked secret. To the first part I say: duh; and to the second I say... well I guess it's not such a secret. I was unaware that not only scholars, but people in general were ignorant to the prominence of Jewish Americans in music history and popular culture.

Granted, Beeber effectively highlights some stories of Jewish punk rockers that might get swept under the proverbial rug, but he does so in a way that becomes quickly redundant; to the extent that he seems to stretch issues and points to make connection isn't really there. The strength of the work lies in the analysis surely, but honestly his most thought-provoking arguments seem to be derivative based on his source notes.

To say that I did not like the work as a whole is a fallacy, but it bothered me for several reasons: first the weakness of the thesis, the lack of musical theory to coincide with punk rock as a cultural movement, and finally Beeber manages to make a subject that is not boring, a tedious read. For a more comprehensive look at punk rock, that in my opinion doesn't gloss over the prominence of Jews in punk, just stick with *Please Kill Me* (monograph that Beeber sights often). It's a larger volume, but leaves the tedium at the door.

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### **Sean says**

i really tried to like this book, especially since the subject matter is very near and dear to my heart! but frankly i was very disappointed, most of the material seems like a rehashing of what i had read in *Please Kill Me* except this author is trying to convince you of his theory that Judaism played a key role in the creation of punk. of course i want to buy into this theory with every ounce of my heart, but the poor writing, repetitiveness of each chapter and some sort of naivete that comes from the author's experience with the punk world really left me with a sour taste in my mouth. the fact that he did not mention my band probably pisses me off too! haha. maybe in the revised edition he will throw in a sentence or two about us...lol!

\*update\* after writing this review, i got a fairly nasty response from the author and never bothered to offer a rebuttal. i even noticed that he rated his own book five stars, hey whatever sells copies right? seriously this book is not that bad, you can literally read it on the toilet or in an afternoon quickly, so if the topic interests you go for it. just remember to take it with a grain of salt because the author is by no means an "expert" on the subject matter.

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### **Jo says**

I've been wanting to read this for almost 10 years, and it was only at the end of last year that I finally managed to get hold of a copy. Two copies, to be precise: a book I got via interlibrary loan and a new purchase. Imagine how excited I was.

And what can I say: it was well worth the wait. As expected, I wasn't too happy with the chapter on English punk and how non-American contributions in general are downplayed or neglected. (I recently stumbled across the Peruvian proto-punk band The Saicos, for instance. Why only now?) But of course, a deeper investigation into that would have been beside the point.

Apart from that, the book is just brilliant. My brand new copy soon got stained with coffee and looks a bit rotten. First I was pissed off because of that, and then I thought: how very fitting.

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### **Sherri Machlin says**

It was so enjoyable to learn some of the historical background and theories behind the slam dance between Jews and Punk Rock! Growing up as a suburban Jewish NY teen, I was nourished by The Ramones, Blondie, Richard Hell and the Voidoids, countless other bands- your book was a unique take on the post-modern Jewish experience.

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### **Music Guy says**

FIVE STARS for this bold and surprising read. Through a combination of original interviews and archival research, Beeber uncovers the hidden-in-plain sight Jewish origins of American punk rock, wittily examining the lives and lyrics of artists such as Lou Reed, the Ramones, and Jonathan Richman (the Modern Lovers). Carefully researched and compulsively readable.

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### **NYLON Carry On says**

Jewish punk! Who knew!? I'd never thought about it, or noticed it before... But, yeah, punk is a Jew thang!

Great interviews.

Very well written. Never boring. And, I LEARNED SO MUCH!!!

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### **Robin says**

Oy, those sweet little bar mitzvah pictures.

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### **Lawrence A says**

When I saw the title of this book, I nearly plotzed. I became a punk/new wave fan in 1976-1977, during my freshman year at Brandeis, when my classmate Neil Kaplan (younger brother of Ira Kaplan, the soon-to-be-frontman of Yo La Tengo), played me the compilation record "Live From CBGB's" and Television's "Marquee Moon," the latter of which quickly became one of my 2 or 3 favorite records of all time (see, e.g., my profile picture on Goodreads, in which I'm wearing the cover art of that album on my t-shirt). I was hooked. While I was then, and still am, a big fan of classic rock, psychedelic rock, and jam bands, the immediacy, humor, and outrageousness of the punk ethos appealed to my sense of the absurd and my dislike of sacred cows. In addition, although I've always loved playing the parlor game "Jewish or not Jewish," and I had known for quite some time that several leading lights in the punk movement had Jewish backgrounds (Joey and Tommy Ramone, Chris Stein, Richard Hell), I hadn't thought to connect the issues of Jewish outsiderness, musicality, and the propensity for questioning and arguing about everything, with the sudden flowering of punk as a uniquely Jewish aesthetic. Beeber has done that brilliantly here, tracing the punk attitude back to my "landsman," the great comedian and social critic Lenny Bruce (we both grew up in the same suburban town---North Bellmore, on the south shore of Long Island's Nassau County) and rock icon and Velvet Underground founder, Lou Reed (who grew up in Freeport, only 2 stops away on the Long Island Rail Road), as well as the great Jewish Brill Building pop song craftsmen and women who sometimes informed the interests and influences of their wilder musical progeny. The writing is excellent, both analytically and descriptively, with lots of Jewish humor and more than a little poetry. Beeber not only has meticulously delved into source material and obtained excellent interviews with many of the movers and shakers of the punk era, he also gives a cogent aesthetic, social, and political explanation for the Jewish influence over, if not the conscious creation of, punk and DIY music. Moreover, Beeber has good explanations for the seeming incongruity of Nazi and fascist imagery in much of punk music, both American and British, despite punk's reputation as an inclusive, outsider artform. As he explains it, it was a semi-conscious, or sometimes blatantly self-conscious, attempt by the sons and daughters of the Holocaust generation to defeat fear with irony and humor, as if to say "the f\*\*\*ing Nazis lost and we won" or "we're not little puking Yeshivah-buchers, we're badass" (see e.g., the great Jewish proto-punk band The Dictators or mostly Jewish hardrockers Blue Oyster Cult).

This book was a delight to read, and truly reveals the spirit of the mid-to-late 70s and early 80s, as well as where the various artistic and musical branches led thereafter. Highly recommended!

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### **Ben says**

Be you Jew, punk, or neither, a terribly entertaining and muscular read.

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### **Alysia Abbott says**

Steven Beeber has written the music book I've been waiting to read. From Lou Reed (ne Lou Rabinowitz) to Blondie's Chris Stein, Punk Rock's Jewish roots are vitally important but have been too long ignored. Beeber has the music scholarship and the writing chops to create a vital and compelling read. I couldn't put it down!

The Heebie-Jeebies at CBGB's is a must have for every serious music lover.

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### **Jon Yates says**

Starts out making a somewhat interesting argument about the influence of Jewish culture on Punk before devolving into all sorts of speculation and some fairly insulting, preposterous notions (Nazi-obsessed Ramones Johnny and Dee Dee are de facto Jews because they grew up in as minorities in a largely Jewish enclave...according to Beeber, being alienated or marginalized in any way is synonymous with Jewdom). The turning point comes when Richard Hell (ne Myers) objects to being included (he was raised in Kentucky by his mother and secular Jewish father, who passed away when he was eight), feeling no affinity with Jewish culture, and Beeber still goes out of his way to analyze the ways that being Jewish has supposedly shaped Hell's outlook and music. On top of that, so much was left out- he mentions Rick Rubin and The Beastie Boys and their contribution to rap, but somehow neglects how both got their start in punk (and with all the talk of nazi imagery in "Jewish punk"- Reagan Youth? Hullo?)(hardcore is glossed over entirely, mentioned only in relation to the anti-semitism present in some elements of that scene). Some interesting stories abound, no doubt, but so much is rushed through, and the majority of the book is grasping for straws. Some day someone might very well expand on this concept and make some really excellent points, but overall, it's a slight read with a flawed premise and some rather glaring omissions.

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### **Jennifer says**

Thought I knew a lot about punk 'til I read this book. It's fascinating, but the last few chapters lag compared to the earlier ones. The book inspired me to rummage through itunes trying to find those albums/artists that interested me most. A must-read for music fans!

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