

D.O.A's "General Strike" and the Politics of Punk Rock in Late-Twentieth-Century British Columbia

Hannah Roth Cooley*

Abstract

Within the realm of punk music, little attention has been paid to the musical and cultural movement of political punk rock within the Canadian context. The Vancouver-based punk band D.O.A. has achieved recognition within the punk community both for their music, their political consciousness, and for their role in labour activism in the 1980s. Their 1983 song "General Strike" was written about, and produced as a benefit for, a group of leftists in British Columbia known as the Solidarity Movement, who were fighting against the provincial Social Credit Government headed by Premier Bill Bennett. Using the theoretical framework of Simon Frith's "Towards and Aesthetic of Popular Music," this essay analyzes the way in which punk music and leftist politics intersected during the 1983 Solidarity Protests and how D.O.A. contributed to the construction of a unified communal identity among protestors. Furthermore, in exploring mainstream and underground media coverage surrounding D.O.A and the Solidarity Movement, this essay examines the way in which the political events of 1983 have been viewed in years since and have become part of a national political narrative.

Keywords: British Columbia, punk rock, social activism, Canadian pop culture, labour movement

In the cultural history of Canada, little attention has been given to the country's participation in the punk rock movement of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Punk music - a genre generally associated with the disenfranchised working-class youth of 1970s Britain or the bored middle-class youth of the socially conservative United States - has a legacy within Canada as well, though its history is, in many

ways, markedly different from the mainstream story of the punk movement.¹ The first waves of the punk movement are typically associated with its roots in the working-class

¹ David Simonelli, "Anarchy, Pop and Violence: Punk Rock Subculture and the Rhetoric of Class, 1976-1978," *Contemporary British History* 16, no. 2 (2002): 121.

communities of the United Kingdom.² It was there that the influential group the Sex Pistols got their start as a marketing tool of artist and fashion designer Malcolm McLaren.³ Although this concerted effort to create a punk scene was motivated by economic and artistic goals, the popularity of the band and their punk aesthetic allowed youth across Britain, as well as North America, to embrace the counter-culture movement within their own communities.⁴ Punk rock espoused vague ideals of anarchy, violence, and independence as a means of breaking down a system seen as flawed.⁵ Certainly, significant challenges faced British youth during this time period. In 1975, there were 8 million British citizens between the ages of 13 and 21, and employment opportunities were scarce.⁶ The majority of these youth were working class, and many turned to punk as a means of subverting dominant political and economic ideologies.⁷ In some cases, this subversion was for simple escapism, though in other cases, punk created a space for engaged political dialogue and alternative political activism.⁸

Often thought of as the polite northerly neighbour of the United States, Canada is not associated with the harsh sound, anarchist politics, and violence of punk music. The national narrative largely seems happy to ignore this part of our cultural and political history.⁹ However, punk can be seen as important in shaping Canada's political and social scene, particularly on the West Coast. While a few Canadian punk bands have gained recognition internationally, alongside big American and British names in the industry, they are seen at best as part of a larger counter-culture movement, or at worst as part of a multi-

national commercial industry. However, Canadian punk bands must be understood within the cultural and political context from which they were born - one that distinguishes them from non-Canadian examples, even as there are evident similarities among them. Moreover, punk music in Canada must be seen as not only a cultural or political movement, but also the result of a complex interplay of popular culture and politics that makes punk rock a medium with the ability to transcend the imperatives of both factions.

A particularly telling example of the ways in which punk rock in Canada has pushed the boundaries of thought - in terms of cultural products and political action - is the case of the Vancouver-based band D.O.A. Beginning in the late 1970s, D.O.A. created a unique brand of loud, brash, politically-engaged songs that earned them a place among the great first-generation punk acts.¹⁰ However, D.O.A. was not simply embraced by punks, but was also part of a larger, socialist-inspired labour movement in British Columbia. Their 1983 single "General Strike" was an energetic call to action for British Columbia's citizens and workers, and was embraced by the province's labour activists engaged in conflict with the Social Credit government of Premier Bill Bennett.¹¹ This political and social context allowed D.O.A. to surpass the constraints of the punk community, and gain acceptance within the larger, leftist political community even as they transcended the particularities of British Columbia to achieve widespread acceptance as part of the punk community in North America and abroad.

Simon Frith's framework for analyzing the social functions of pop music shows how punk rock enabled D.O.A. to surpass the constraints of the British Columbia punk community and mainstream politics, while gaining acceptance among the more radical politics of the broader punk community. This paper examines the ways in which D.O.A.'s brand of political activism has enabled them to step out of their musical niche, gaining acceptance among a broader, leftist political community in British Columbia. For D.O.A., the political and social climate of 1983 British Columbia allowed their single "General Strike" to achieve widespread notoriety, transcend the boundaries of both musical and political communities, and establish themselves as an important part of Canadian political history.

² Ibid., 122.

³ Ibid., 123.

⁴ Ibid., 125-126.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 123.

⁷ Bruce Dancis, "Safety Pins and Class Struggle: Punk Rock and the Left," *Socialist Review* 39, no. 8.3 (1978): 63.

⁸ Simonelli, "Anarchy, Pop and Violence," 123.

⁹ Andrew Cohen, *The Unfinished Canadian: The People We Are* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2007), 95.

¹⁰ Joey Keithley, *I Shithead: A Life in Punk* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2010), 11, 45.

¹¹ Ibid., 131.

The political landscape of British Columbia during the early 1980s is particularly interesting when analyzing D.O.A.'s place in Canadian cultural and political history, largely because it presents such an exceptional situation in twentieth-century Canada. British Columbia's history of labour activism is more overtly leftist in its politics than that of other regions of the country, and throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, its workers created a legacy of protest both on economic and political grounds.¹² Leading up to the unrest of 1983, British Columbia hosted nine of the thirty-four largest strikes in Canada, setting an undeniable precedent for reaction to labour policy changes in the 1980s.¹³ In power provincially from 1972 to 1975, the New Democratic Party put in place significant policies to enable collective bargaining for public sector employees, which proved problematic for the incoming Social Credit government.¹⁴ Although the Social Credit party governed the province for much of the second half of the twentieth century, it was after Premier Bill Bennett's election to office in 1975 that British Columbia's economic restraint policies hit citizens hardest.¹⁵ Following the policies of American President Ronald Reagan and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, Bennett and his government introduced a series of cost-cutting measures to tighten public spending in the face of the economic downturn of the 1980s.¹⁶ The Social Credit bill, introduced June 7, 1983 included extended wage controls and the elimination of public sector employees' rights to seniority and to negotiate working conditions.¹⁷ These sudden changes to labour policies in the province had significant implications in the actions of activists, workers, and concerned citizens of British Columbia over the succeeding months.

British Columbia experience the 1980's widespread economic downturn differently than other parts of Canada did. This distinct experience significantly influenced the actions of the provincial government, and the citizens' subsequent reactions. As William Carroll and R.S Ratner point out, British Columbia relied heavily on its export resource economy and also had a history of militant activism and collaboration between labour organizations. By the 1950s, British Columbia had the highest density of unions in North America. Therefore, the government felt the need to enforce large-scale changes to the province's social policies, just as other export-driven provinces did, but these changes were less easily accepted than they may have been in other parts of the country.¹⁸ Adding to the reaction from labour groups was the fact that during debates over Bennett's restraint bills, legislative action to counter the motions was severely restricted. Closure, a tool never before used in the British Columbian legislature, was invoked twenty-one times, and the leader of the NDP opposition was removed from legislature for the entire session.¹⁹ Given this fault in the legislative process, it is not surprising that strikes and radical political action followed. As Mark Thompson notes, "the history of labour relations legislation in BC has demonstrated that lack of consultation can be fatal omission in the process of legislated change."²⁰ The case of Bennett's 1983 legislation, and the way in which it was carried out, confirms that by neglecting union consultation and limiting legislative opposition, the Social Credit government created an atmosphere for radicalism and political and social dissent throughout the summer and fall of 1983.

Enter into this tension-wrought political climate Joey Keithley - then affectionately referred to as Joey "Shithead"-and his bandmates in D.O.A.: Dave Gregg, Brian

¹² Mark Thompson, "Restraint and Labour Relations: The Case of British Columbia," *Canadian Public Policy* 11, no. 2 (1985): 173.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Gordon Hak, *The Left in British Columbia: A History of Struggle* (Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2013): 149.

¹⁶ Ibid., 148.

¹⁷ William K. Carroll and R.S Ratner, "Social Democracy, Neo-Conservatism, and Hegemonic Crisis in British Columbia," *Crit Socio* 16, no. 1 (1989): 37.

¹⁸ Ibid., 33.

¹⁹ Thompson, "Restraint and Labour Relations," 172. Closure is a legislative tool that allows government to end debate on a specific matter, although not all members who wished to speak have done so. It is designed to prevent stalling in debates, and relegates the issue to the end of the session in which closure was invoked; "Closure," *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*, Parliament of Canada, 2009.

²⁰ Ibid., 174-175.

"Wimpy Roy" Goble, and Gregg "Ned Peckerwood" James.²¹ The band formed in 1978 after Keithley had spent time in Toronto trying to make a life in music with his previous band, The Skulls.²² Upon returning to his hometown of Vancouver, Keithley joined forces with his childhood friends Brian, Gerry, Ken, and Chuck, and they immediately took their place within the burgeoning Vancouver punk scene.²³ Drawing on the influence of growing up in politically active Vancouver, just down the street from Simon Fraser University, during the era of the Vietnam War and American nuclear testing, the band became known for their political voice as much as for their driving rhythms and energetic stage performances. Beginning in local bars in downtown Vancouver, the group soon performed throughout North America, most notably at benefit shows, such as a 1979 benefit for Leonard Peltier, Rock Against Racism, and a 1980 Rock Against Reagan concert.²⁴

By 1983, D.O.A. had become known throughout the United States and Canada, playing alongside such renowned names in punk as X, Bad Brains, Black Flag, Siouxsie and the Banshees, and the Dead Kennedys. In the rock press, more prominent well-known bands praised the group for their musical and political might, encouraging a growing following for the boys from British Columbia.²⁵ Despite their popularity in both Canada and the United States, D.O.A. stuck to their political roots, writing and performing songs about the issues facing citizens at home in British Columbia. In this way, they distinguished themselves from many American punk bands who within the early punk movement gained the reputation of lacking the political backing of the original British punks.²⁶ As David Simonelli noted in his history of punk rock, American punk "was born of affluent boredom" rather than the class

struggle of its British predecessors.²⁷ Contrary to many of the popular punk bands hailing from California or New York, D.O.A. went beyond social satire and mindless violence to promote political consciousness.²⁸

In 1983, facing the neo-conservative policies of Premier Bill Bennett and the growing discontent among unions and activists in British Columbia, D.O.A. penned their single "General Strike" as a means of dealing the frustration facing many citizens of the province.²⁹ In addition to serving as an emotional outlet and political rallying song during this turbulent time, D.O.A. pressed and sold one thousand copies of "General Strike," donating profits to Operation Solidarity—the group of unionists, leftist activists, and concerned citizens determined to fight Bennett's legislature through extra-parliamentary action.³⁰ Simple and catchy, it soon became one of D.O.A.'s most popular songs in British Columbia and abroad.

What allowed D.O.A. to spread their political message outside of the relatively small, active leftist community in British Columbia was their following within the punk movement. Punk music focused its substantial energy on political causes, particularly class conflict, youth unemployment, and problematic government intervention in the lives of citizens.³¹ The similarity between the political struggles of punks in diverse regions and the particular struggle of leftists in British Columbia allowed D.O.A. to participate in both the local political struggle and the larger cultural phenomenon. However, equally important to punk as a social movement was the genre's community-building and collective nature. As Bruce Dancis argued, even from the early days of the movement "punk rock reasserts that rock music is a collective form."³² Likewise Keithley did, and continues to, believe in the power of words and community action to effect change: "we believed that injustice and inequality could be dealt with through words, ideas, and

²¹ Keithley, *I Shithead*, 233.

²² *Ibid.*, 45.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 65, 76, 85.

²⁵ Doug Heselgrave, "Talk Minus Action Still Equals Zero: Interview with D.O.A.'s Joe Keithley," *No Depression*, 2014.

²⁶ Dancis, "Safety Pins and Class Struggle," 62.

²⁷ Simonelli, "Anarchy, Pop and Violence," 139.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 130; Dancis, "Safety Pins and Class Struggle," 71.

²⁹ Keithley, *I Shithead*, 130.

³⁰ Keithley, *I Shithead*, 130; "Article title," *Solidarity Times*, November 16, 1983, Petere Poole fonds, Simon Fraser University Archives, Burnaby, B.C.

³¹ Dancis, "Safety Pins and Class Struggle," 59.

³² *Ibid.*, 72.

people power, not through violence and bombs."³³ Theorist Simon Frith identifies four reasons that people listen to popular music, which serve also as reasons that people recognize popular music as important in identity- and community-building. Hence, Frith's theoretical framework for analyzing the aesthetic properties of popular music shows how the musical genre of punk rock allowed D.O.A to convey their political ideologies and create change among their audience.

Frith argues music in the social and political sphere is important "because of its use in answering questions of identity."³⁴ Fans of D.O.A., and punk music in general, often cite punk rock's community-building function, especially for young people. Simonelli notes that "punk subculture presented a united social front in rhetoric and attitude" and it was this unity that allowed the movement to be more than simply a musical genre, but a political and social identity.³⁵ Journalist and D.O.A. fan Doug Heselgrave noted, from his personal experience that "punk... music expressed the dreams and frustrations of kids coming of age in the late seventies and early eighties better and more directly than anything else could."³⁶ In expressing the difficulties felt by many youth, punk enabled a sense of unity and community based in common understandings of individual social positions. Keithley, for whom punk was a significant factor in his growing up, notes that he and his future bandmates considered themselves activists from the age of sixteen, due in part to the influence of early punk bands, which suggests that punk music created a community identity similar to, and overlapping with, that of political activism.³⁷ This feeling of collective identity, along with the genre's often overt politically- and socially critical content, allowed punk to move beyond entertainment to promote "broader changes in values, ideas, and ways of

life."³⁸ Because of this facet of punk music, D.O.A. participated in the building of a collective identity in 1980s British Columbia, which included not just North American punks, but also BC political activists, allowing significant cultural and political cross-over between the two.

Frith's second example of music's social function is in offering "a way of managing the relationships between our public and private emotional lives."³⁹ Punk music is especially notable in this respect, in that it deals largely with anger and frustration, emotions that both youth and politically conscious people often experience. Dancis describes punk as "an authentic, unfiltered expression of the fears, anxieties, sexual needs, and anger that rumble down the corridors of high schools, colleges, factories, and offices."⁴⁰ Certainly, the emotional nature of D.O.A.'s "General Strike" was notable; in the union-run *Solidarity Times*, the song was described as "energetic and up-tempo... [expressing] the indignation many British Columbians feel with the government."⁴¹ Both the music and the lyrics are easily recognized as demonstrating frustration and anger; short verses spit out quickly by Keithley, along with driving guitars and drums, make the emotional connection to the song easy. The second verse, which states, "Everything is not all right / And there's no end in sight. / You can call it, whatcha like. / Come on, stand up for your rights"⁴² shows the citizens' frustration and lack of confidence in the government, while also putting forth a call to action. This song, as part of a larger political movement, allowed audiences to understand their anger and frustration within the context of a larger movement of angry and frustrated people. Through this song, D.O.A. showed that it was acceptable and reasonable to be angry at the government, and helped mediate anger amongst diverse groups.

In the forward to Keithley's autobiography, Jack Rabid notes the emotional connection he felt personally

³³ Keithley, *I Shithead*, 125.

³⁴ Simon Frith, "Towards and Aesthetic of Popular Music," in *Music and Society: The Politics of Composition, Performance, and Reception*, eds. Richard Leppert and Susan McClary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1987), 140.

³⁵ Simonelli, "Anarchy, Pop and Violence," 126.

³⁶ Heselgrave, "Talk Minus Action Still Equals Zero."

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, *Music and Social Movements: Mobilizing Traditions in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 9.

³⁹ Frith, "Towards and Aesthetic of Popular Music," 141.

⁴⁰ Dancis, "Safety Pins and Class Struggle," 62.

⁴¹ *Solidarity Times*, November 16, 1983.

⁴² D.O.A., "General Strike," *General Strike / That's Life*, (Place: Sudden Death Records, 1983).

while watching D.O.A. play: "I wish there was some way to convey how truly stunning a D.O.A. show was back then... They were an absolute whirlwind of lightning guitars, gut-smacking bass lines, and the hottest drumming I've seen in twenty-five years of live concerts... No one could forget the band's raw abandon on stage."⁴³ Conveying their emotions to the audience was clearly not an issue for D.O.A., and when playing this song before more than forty thousand demonstrators at a rally at Empire Stadium on August 10, 1983, D.O.A. was able to embody the energy, conviction, and frustration of the crowd. *The Vancouver Sun* described this rally as a "carnival atmosphere," which suggests the emotionally charged nature of performances and speeches by D.O.A. and others.⁴⁴ The emotional collectivity and sense of unified purpose of these protesters was surely facilitated by D.O.A.'s emotionally charged music. Although D.O.A. was not solely representative of the protestors' political engagement, the band's high-energy style of music and overtly political lyrics further engaged protestors and enabled the expression of their emotions without "embarrassment or incoherence," as Frith suggests.⁴⁵ Furthermore, members of the Solidarity movement, who may not have associated themselves with the punk movement, were able to accept this form of protest and use it within more mainstream activism.

The third function of popular music, according to Frith, is its ability to shape popular memory.⁴⁶ As a result, D.O.A.'s ties to the Solidarity Movement of 1983 are particularly important, within both this movement and the larger historical narrative in Canada. D.O.A. was featured in the CBC production *Canada: A People's History*, for their participation in this political activity as an important contribution to a collective Canadian memory and a meaningful part of the nation's history.⁴⁷ Similarly, at the

time of the political action in British Columbia, the *Solidarity Times* noted that the 1000 copies of "General Strike" that were pressed would serve as "souvenirs of these turbulent times."⁴⁸ In presenting the single as a souvenir, the article's author recognized the place of D.O.A.'s music in preserving a particular collective memory of the events of 1983. The single is clearly meant to serve, in this case, as a historical document. This can be true of punk music more broadly as well, largely because of its political influences. By addressing specific political and social issues, like Bill Bennett's austerity measures in "General Strike" or the Sex Pistols' "God Save the Queen," which criticized the British monarchy during Queen Elizabeth II's silver jubilee, this genre can be understood in the broader context of social history and serves as an indicator of social changes over time.⁴⁹ Punk songs represent memories of particular historical and social contexts. "General Strike" serves as a reminder of 1980s British Columbian society and the way historical and social circumstances encourage people to respond to, and interact with, diverse media in creating a political identity.

Frith's final function of popular music, which he describes as a consequence of all its other functions, is that "music [be] something possessed."⁵⁰ Frith describes this as the connection made between the listener and a particular song, performance, and/or performer. The listeners interpret music in their own ways and make deeply personal connections to it. In this way, D.O.A. contributes further to the political and social identity of leftist British Columbians in the 1980s. The fact that D.O.A. made "General Strike" as a benefit single for the Solidarity Coalition, and performed it for a Solidarity rally, enabled BC's leftist activists to accept the song and the band as part of their political community. By purchasing this single, audiences could symbolically possess not only D.O.A. and their music, but also a part of the Solidarity Movement and the spirit of defiance it represented. Further demonstrating D.O.A.'s sense of belonging to the Solidarity Movement were the mentions of the band in the *Solidarity Times*. In its November 16th issue, the authors of the newspaper promised to provide a profile of the band and its

⁴³ Jack Rabid, forward to *I Shithead: A Life in Punk*, by Joey Keithley (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2010), 10.

⁴⁴ "Defiant thousands rallying," *Vancouver Sun*, August 10, 1983.

⁴⁵ Frith, "Towards and Aesthetic of Popular Music," 141.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁴⁷ Susan Dando, "In an Uncertain World: 1976-1990," Disc 17. *Canada: A People's History*, episode 17, directed by Susan Dando, (Place: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2002), DVD.

⁴⁸ "General Strike single to be released soon," *Solidarity Times*, November 16, 1983.

⁴⁹ Simonelli, "Anarchy, Pop and Violence," 132.

⁵⁰ Frith, "Towards and Aesthetic of Popular Music," 143.

involvement in the movement in an upcoming issue, thus claiming the band as part of their organization.⁵¹ In another issue of the *Solidarity Times*, a photo of the band's guitarist was featured alongside images of strikers and union negotiators under the title "Some of the scenes from the *Solidarity Times*."⁵² This suggests that the political activism demonstrated through D.O.A.'s music and performances was considered on the same level as the public sector strikes and the negotiation efforts of union officials. Although D.O.A. were not members of the striking unions, but participated both through their music and through demonstrating alongside union members, it is evident that both their political allegiances and their cultural craft were important to the political identity they constructed as a part of the events of 1983. Their status as part of the punk subculture did not relegate them to positions as outsiders within the movement; rather, punk politics became part of the politics of the movement.

Furthermore, because D.O.A. was gaining popularity in the North American punk scene during this time, and would continue to perform "General Strike" across the continent long after the events of 1983 had come to a close, audiences who had no ties to *Solidarity* or British Columbian politics were able to bring this song and its political message into their communal identities. In this way, D.O.A.'s music enabled both musical and political communities to overlap, as members of those communities created their own meanings and connections to the single, and digested the political message in diverse contexts. In the context of the *Solidarity Movement*, the song clearly addresses specific issues of the time; however, the words could apply to any number of political situations. The song's lyrics address issues of working class culture that are largely universal, as the third verse of the song shows: "We've been out, breakin' our backs. / Been out workin' gettin' no slack. / All week long, payin' those bills. / That's just the people, that still got a job. / What about the rest of us, on the soupline."⁵³ The song goes beyond the political imperative of rallying members against Bill Bennett. This song could be about any working-class person, anywhere in North America, at any time in the twentieth or early

twenty-first century, which makes it a powerful musical tool for creating a sense of unity and belonging for D.O.A.'s audience.

The aesthetic properties of music were not the only factor promoting the transmission of D.O.A.'s political messages to a broad audience. The political nature of their work made them particularly recognizable within both the global punk community and the Canadian historical and political scene. D.O.A.'s social and economic context had much more in common with their British predecessors in the punk movement than with many of their American contemporaries. Simonelli criticizes punk's politics for being "about protest, not change" and argues that it experienced an identity crisis because it was stuck between anarchist and socialist ideologies.⁵⁴ This appears untrue of D.O.A., who have always backed up their musical messages with political action. The band's motto, which has stayed with them for decades, is "talk minus action equals zero." The ideals that this group drew from their musical genre included: "Think for yourself; don't back down; change your world; be free."⁵⁵ For D.O.A., their music was much more than simply an artistic emotional expression; it was a political ideology based in action. In this way, the band distinguishes itself from both other punk bands of the day and other protestors involved in the 1983 *Solidarity Movement*. By drawing on influences from both the political and musical scenes, D.O.A. was able to create a more all-encompassing ideology, one that did not back down from the pressures faced by other musical and political groups.

After the *Solidarity* protests ended, little changed in the British Columbian political landscape, though it cannot be said that it was for lack of trying. This movement is recognized as British Columbia's largest social protest to date, yet the results were disappointing for many participants, including the members of D.O.A.⁵⁶ The lack of meaningful change is partially attributed to the absence of a single, unified goal on the part of strikers. The movement broadly recognized as *Solidarity* was itself two separate organizations: the *Solidarity Coalition*, which was formed mostly of previously organized public sector unions, and *Operation Solidarity*, which was mostly allied with the NDP

⁵¹ "General Strike single to be released soon," *Solidarity Times*, November 16, 1983.

⁵² "Some of the scenes from the *Solidarity Times*," *Solidarity Times* Dec 14, 1983.

⁵³ D.O.A., "General Strike."

⁵⁴ Simonelli, "Anarchy, Pop and Violence," 128.

⁵⁵ Keithley, *I Shithead*, 96.

⁵⁶ Dando, "In an Uncertain World: 1976-1990."

opposition.⁵⁷ Thus, the movement was made up of discrete segments of the province's leftist population, and the two organizations did not always align politically. Added into this mix were more radical leftists, such as the militant environmental and feminist group known as the Squamish Five.⁵⁸ Hak describes the tension that existed within the movement when he says: "while the hard-left activists could talk stridently, it was also evident that they lacked broad support and that their language of revolt and confrontation was not sufficient to guide the unfolding events."⁵⁹ D.O.A.'s call to "stand up, stand and unite / it's time for a general strike" was likely too radical for some of the participants in the movement.⁶⁰ Hak suggests that despite its long history of labour activism, British Columbia was too tied to the ideals of democratic political systems.⁶¹ D.O.A.'s radical and didactic song, while it provided a great boost to the movement's morale and created a sense of unity among participants, was not enough to change the political ideologies of the majority of British Columbians. Keithley cites this as a reason for his failure to get elected in his recent bid for the provincial New Democrat Party leadership. In an interview he said, "I think they didn't want to elect anyone who had a strong opinion about anything. I guess I had too many definite ideas."⁶² Although D.O.A. had unique access to both the political and musical world, they were still constrained, to an extent, by the conventions of each. Their involvement in the punk movement and the inspiration they took from that community appear to have made their political goals different from those tied to the mainstream political scene.

Although D.O.A.'s activism went beyond politically charged songs, the resolution of the entire affair shows that strong political beliefs are not always enough to make change. As *Canada: A People's History* puts it, "protest and

strike action [failed] to stop Bill Bennett's juggernaut."⁶³ On November 13, 1983 the Bennett government penned the Kelowna Accord, an agreement with the British Columbia's teachers' union - the first to go on strike - and Operation Solidarity, thus ending the strike.⁶⁴ The general strike that D.O.A. called for, and that seemed inevitable in August of that year according to a *Vancouver Sun* reporter, never came to be.⁶⁵ Some of the more radical political actors criticized the accord's negotiators, claiming they had caved to political pressures.⁶⁶ Despite their punk rock dreams of overthrowing the provincial government, D.O.A. returned to the fringes of mainstream society after the strike was over. Although they continued to write songs and perform for political causes for decades to come, the political and musical following of "General Strike" remains unmatched.

Despite the possible perception that D.O.A. had failed in their goal of radical political change, it is clear that the band found success and gratification from their "General Strike" single. As Eyerman and Jamison suggest, "reducing [social movements] to politics... is to relegate them to the dustbin of history."⁶⁷ To consider D.O.A.'s single solely in political terms ignores the reality of this song's adoption as part of a communal identity, both in British Columbia and elsewhere. "General Strike" proves how, by considering the cultural aspects of the Solidarity Movement, the ideals of its actors have a lasting legacy far beyond the particular moment of history that was British Columbia in 1983. D.O.A.'s punk following allowed them to continue to play this song for diverse audiences, raising awareness about the political challenges faced by not only British Columbia's citizens, but also all North Americans at the end of the twentieth century.

D.O.A.'s association with other, larger punk acts allowed them to "hit the big time" to a certain extent, moving them beyond the confines of western Canada to find acceptance along the continent's west coast and in large urban centres such as Toronto, Los Angeles, New

⁵⁷ Carroll and Ratner, "Social Democracy, Neo-Conservatism, and Hegemonic Crisis in British Columbia," 38-39.

⁵⁸ Hak, *The Left in British Columbia*, 158.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 159.

⁶⁰ D.O.A., "General Strike."

⁶¹ Hak, *The Left in British Columbia*, 159.

⁶² Heselgrave, "Talk Minus Action Still Equals Zero."

⁶³ Writers, "In an Uncertain World: 1976-1990."

⁶⁴ Thompson, "Restraint and Labour Relations," 172.

⁶⁵ "Defiant thousands rallying," *Vancouver Sun*, August 10, 1983.

⁶⁶ Dando, "In an Uncertain World: 1976-1990."

⁶⁷ Eyerman and Jamison, *Music and Social Movements*, 9.

York, and London.⁶⁸ "General Strike" remains one of their best known songs, and although it carries different cultural weight when it is performed now, audiences around the world still understand the symbolic meaning of "stand up, stand and unite." In the end, this lyrically and musically simple protest song, which was penned in about an hour and produced in less than a week, holds lasting political and cultural value because of its ability to conflate the two ideologies.⁶⁹ As Simon Frith suggests, "it may be that, in the end, we want to value most highly music... which has some sort of collective, disruptive cultural effect."⁷⁰ While Frith notes that music is only able to do so based on its effect on individuals, in this case "General Strike" was able to create such a disruptive cultural effect because of its impact not only on individuals, but also on broader community interactions.

The cultural and political effect of D.O.A.'s "General Strike" can be attributed to various interdependent political and social factors that were unique to the band's experience in late twentieth-century British Columbia. The political influences of Bill Bennett's Social Credit government, the counterculture movement against this power, and the rise of punk rock communities in North America allowed D.O.A. to transcend its allegiances to each of these things and create a niche in which to make powerful political and cultural change. In this way, D.O.A.'s "General Strike" can be considered alongside contemporary British punk rock activism. However, much of the criticism of the early punk movement in Britain does not apply to D.O.A.'s experience within the political sphere; Dancis argues that British punk relied heavily on vague ideologies of anarchy and revolution, with little action to support these ideas.⁷¹ Furthermore, D.O.A. differentiated themselves within the Canadian context. Stephen W. Baron's study of punk subcultures on the West Coast notes the lack of a unified political perspective among members and of engagement with the existing political system, resulting in

an inability to affect any real political change.⁷² However, D.O.A.'s participation in solidarity was not just "on the street," but within organized political actions through the Solidarity Movement.⁷³ Later, through Keithley's bid for provincial office, the band showed engagement in mainstream political channels.⁷⁴ This multi-faceted political engagement contradicts existing criticisms of punk that suggest that it serves only as a symbolic critique of the existing political structure.⁷⁵

With the disappointing outcome of the Solidarity Movement, especially the Kelowna Accord which largely ignored the grievances of the people, D.O.A.'s mission of a general strike and political upheaval appears to have failed. However, considering their message simultaneously from cultural and political perspectives allows us to examine the larger effects of their work. The intensely emotional, collective, and culturally specific experience of punk music, along with the radical, active, and progressive experience of the Solidarity protests, created an environment in which D.O.A. could be received positively by a diverse audience and have a real effect on their listeners. As a result, this band is remembered not simply in counterculture punk communities, but also within British Columbian and Canadian political history. While D.O.A.'s motto is "Talk minus action equals zero," for "General Strike," within the context of 1983 British Columbia, talk and action have a much more complicated relationship.

⁶⁸ Heselgrave, "Talk Minus Action Still Equals Zero."

⁶⁹ Keithley, *I Shithead*.

⁷⁰ Frith, "Towards and Aesthetic of Popular Music," 149.

⁷¹ Dancis, "Safety Pins and Class Struggle," 124.

⁷² Stephen W. Baron, "The Canadian West Coast Punk Subculture: A Field Study," *The Canadian Journal of Sociology* 14, no. 3 (1989): 292.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Heselgrave, "Talk Minus Action Still Equals Zero."

⁷⁵ Baron, "The Canadian West Coast Punk Subculture," 292.
University of Saskatchewan Undergraduate Research Journal

Bibliography

- Baron, Stephen W. "The Canadian West Coast Punk Subculture: A Field Study." *The Canadian Journal of Sociology* 14, no. 3 (1989): 289-316.
- Carroll, William K., and R.S Ratner. "Social Democracy, Neo-Conservatism and Hegemonic Crisis in British Columbia." *Crit Socio* 16 no.1 (1989): 29-53.
- Cohen, Andrew. *The Unfinished Canadian: The People We Are*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2007.
- Dancis, Bruce. "Safety Pins and Class Struggle: Punk Rock and the Left." *Socio Review* 39, no.8.3 (1978): 58-83.
- Dando, Susan. "In an Uncertain World: 1976-1990." *Canada: A People's History*. Episode 17. Directed by Susan Dando. Location of Recording Company: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2002. Film.
- D.O.A. "General Strike," *General Strike / That's Life*. Sudden Death Records, 1983.
- Eyerman, Ron, and Andrew Jamison. *Music and Social Movements: Mobilizing Traditions in the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Frith, Simon. "Towards an Aesthetic of Popular Music." In *Music and Society: The Politics of Composition, Performance, and Reception*, edited by Richard Leppert and Susasn McClary, 133-151. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.
- Hak, Gordon. *The Left in British Columbia: A History of Struggle*. Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2013.
- Heselgrave, Doug. "Talk Minus Action Still Equals Zero: Interview with DOA's Joe Keithley." *No Depression*, 2014.
- Keithley, Joey. *I, Shithead: A Life in Punk*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2010.
- Rabid, Jack. Forward to *I Shithead: A Life in Punk*, by Joey Keithly, 9-14. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2010.
- Simonelli, David. "Anarchy, Pop and Violence: Punk Rock Subculture and the Rhetoric of Class, 1976-78." *Contemporary British History* 16, no.2 (2002): 121-144.
- Solidarity Times*. Peter Poole fonds. F-161-1-0-0-21. Simon Fraser University Archives, Burnaby, B.C.
- Thompson, Mark. "Restraint and Labour Relations: The Case of British Columbia." *Canadian Public Policy* 11, no.2 (1985): 171-179.

