

## The Important Sound of Things Falling Apart

© Cowie, Jefferson R., Aug 17, 2010, Stayin' Alive : The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class  
New Press, The, New York, ISBN: 978159585325

In 1975, rock journalist Nik Cohn embarked on an underground tour of the working-class disco scene in Brooklyn with a black dancer named Tu Sweet. “Some of those guys,” explained Tu Sweet, “they have no lives. Dancing is all they got.” That idea sunk into Cohn, whose British roots gave a class edge to his understanding of pop music. “I’d always thought of teen style in terms of class,” Cohn reported; “Rock, at least the kind that mattered to me, attains its greatest power when have-nots went on the rampage, taking no prisoners. ‘Dancing’s all they got.’ It sounded to me like a rallying cry.” His adventures at a club named 2001 Odyssey ended with a stellar piece of reportage for *New York* magazine about living to dance and dancing to escape called “The Tribal Rights of the New Saturday Night.” The theme of the piece was that only a select few were capable of rising above the “vast faceless blob” of humanity that does most of the nation’s working and dying. Only a select few “faces” knew “how to dress and how to move, how to float, how to fly. Sharpness, grace, a certain distinction in every gesture.” As Vincent, king of the 2001 Odyssey explained, “The way I feel, it’s like we’ve been chosen.” The *New York* article became the foundation for the most popular movie of the decade, *Saturday Night Fever* (1977).<sup>1</sup>

There was only one problem: Cohn fabricated the entire story—from the characters to their performances, from their looks to their dreams. His editors did not know of his deceit. Concerned that the public might not buy the veracity of Cohn’s tales of the disco underground, the editors went so far as to include an inset, claiming “everything described in this article is factual and was either witnessed by me or told to me directly.” But Cohn’s journalism was

just one more part of the seventies hustle. He did show up at the club to do his research with Tu Sweet after wandering lost in the “dead land” of Brooklyn, but when he stepped out of his gypsy cab, there was a brawl taking place in the parking lot, and then someone spun around and threw up on his pants. Figuring nothing could be worth such a price, he immediately headed back to Manhattan. After other failed attempts to penetrate the scene, he gave up and decided to make up his tale from thin air and a few fragments that were burned into his mind from his unsuccessful excursion over the class divide.

One particular image provided the inspiration for the fiction of “Tribal Rights.” Before retreating to his cab, Cohn recalled “a figure in flared crimson pants and a black body shirt standing in the back doorway, directly under the neon light, and calmly watching the action. There was a certain style about him—an inner force, a hunger and a sense of his own specialness. He looked, in short, like a star.” This random encounter with seventies street-cool would be transformed into the quintessential icon of the decade, *Saturday Night Fever*’s Tony Manero (Vincent in the article). Although Cohn later failed in his efforts to transfer his myth making into a screenplay (Norman Wexler, who had done two other seventies blue-collar scripts, *Joe* and *Serpico*, had to be brought in to do the job), his brief moment in a Brooklyn parking lot was the spark that made pop culture history.

Tony Manero, as played by John Travolta in the screen adaptation of Cohn’s story, became not simply the definitive seventies icon but also one of the most revealing and popular working-class heroes of the decade. Two critics described the white-suited disco king as a “high-powered fusion of sexuality, street jive, and the frustrated hope of a boy-man who can’t articulate his sense of oppression.” The film, they suggest, gives “the impression that it knows more about the working class psyche and ethos than it is willing to risk showing us.” The classic cinematic theme of imprisonment or escape is pitch perfect, and the disco setting makes it emblematic of the seventies. The urgency and desperation of its themes make the movie more than a dance flick: *Saturday Night Fever* is both symptom and exploration of the most important breaking points in the nation’s white, male, working-class identity.<sup>2</sup>

The film begins with one of the great opening scenes in American cinema, featuring Travolta strutting confidently through Bay Ridge to the beat of the Bee Gees’ “Stayin’ Alive.” He then works the customers at a hardware store with the same grace and ego that he later reveals on the dance floor of

the renamed Club 2001. All of his spark and charm contrast markedly with the world of fixed values and social limits that constantly contain his expressive individuality. His slick salesmanship and confidence are interrupted only by the horrific realization that he could be stuck peddling paint for the rest of his life like his broken down co-workers. Begging his boss for an advance so he can buy a new shirt for his true passion, the weekend festivities in the disco, Tony gets a lecture from his boss about not frittering away his money. "Fuck the future!" Tony angrily retorts. The boss fires back that no, "The future fucks you." It was a refrain heard often in the shrinking seventies, not the least significant of which was the chorus of the Sex Pistols' riot anthem of the same year, "God Save the Queen:" "No future, no future, no future for you."

The workplace is only a minor set in *Fever's* blue-collar teen drama, as the plot centers on Tony's attempt to conquer the discotheque, win over an upwardly mobile dancer, Stephanie (Karen Lynn Gorney), deal with his gang of futureless buddies, and, most importantly, find some sense of himself. Stephanie, the object of his affections, continually rebuffs him, explaining, "You're a cliché. You're nowhere on your way to no place." Tony's attempt at impromptu self-improvement quickens as he tries to fake his way through a conversation with someone who is, herself, trying to fake her way rather sadly across the river to upwardly mobile Manhattan. Before heading to the disco, Tony carefully prepares his look surrounded by posters of Bruce Lee, Farrah Fawcett-Majors, and Sylvester Stallone, inserting himself into the galaxy of stars by imagining himself as the Pacino of Bay Ridge. As Cohn originally wrote, "Whenever he gazed into the mirror, it was always Pacino who gazed back. A killer, and a star." The twinkling allure of fame is his hope. He and his friends, explained one critic, stuck with unemployed fathers, an economy in the dump, and a vacuum in national leadership, "are part of the post-Watergate working-class generation with no heroes except in TV-show-biz land; they have a historical span of twenty-three weeks, with repeats at Christmas."<sup>3</sup>

Once Tony is finished preening (looking "as sharp as I can look without turning into a nigger"), the true action of the film happens on the dance floor. He bursts with the creativity and sense of self that he cannot find anywhere else in his life. Bathed in the immediacy of the backlit floor, Tony gets the attention and adulation missing in both his job and his home life as the crowd parts in celebration of his prowess. "The bodies, the drugs, the heat, the sweat, the sunrises, and the throb of the music all conspired to create a heated

sense of nowness,” explained one writer on the disco experience, “a sense that nothing existed outside of that room. No past, no future, no promises, no regrets, just right now and those strings from ‘Love’s Theme’ cascading all over you and prickling your skin.” Tony is no longer pretending to be Pacino; the working-class hero has become king.<sup>4</sup>

The film turns as Tony’s claustrophobia begins to build as the walls of ethnic and sexual violence close in on him. Enraged when the first-place trophy in the dance contest is given to him (like the judges, a fellow Italian) rather than the obviously better Puerto Rican couple, he turns over the trophy to the reviled ethnic newcomers and storms out of the club. With this act of betrayal—choosing merit over ethnic loyalty—he has begun a path toward individualism, mobility, and independence, an escape from his shrinking and intolerant working-class world toward an expansive, even open-minded, new life. As he storms out of the dance contest, Tony harangues his partner Stephanie with a furious, primitive, Marxist sociology that explains gender, race, and class in a few easy pieces: “My Pa goes to work, he gets dumped on. So he come home and dumps on my mother, right? Of course, right. And the spics gotta dump on us, so we gotta dump on the spics, right? Even the humpin’ is dumpin’ most of the time.” Tony proceeds to prove his point about oppression rolling downhill, when, in a rage of frustration, he attempts to rape Stephanie. By the time an insane night of gang-banging and suicidal behavior is over, the drama concludes with a tightly wrapped, if largely improbable, plot resolution. Unable to contend with either dwindling economic opportunity or the dead-end racial, ethnic, and gender hatreds around him, Tony chooses to sever all ties to his working-class community and create himself anew. “They’re all assholes,” he declares as he escapes the limits of Brooklyn after riding the subway all night, emerging in Manhattan in the early morning light.

When Tony resurfaces from his subterranean ride, bruised and battered from his inter-ethnic street warfare, he is all but reborn with a new day dawning in the upper-class world of Manhattan. Stephanie’s apartment (borrowed from an older boss whom she seems to be sleeping with in the exchange) is a place where a Matisse print hangs on the wall, and jazz is in the air. The nation as a whole was asked to make a similar journey by the dawn of the 1980s, and like Tony and his new friend Stephanie, they had to fake it. The characters are sitting in a borrowed apartment—literally inhabiting somebody else’s world. In this new place, their identity as members of a class—such a salient aspect of their lives just an endless train ride ago—is on its

way to being denied or covered up. Their old blue-collar community is relegated to some forgotten past to which neither they nor the viewer will return. Tony and Stephanie are in the midst of a fantasy that they can remake themselves by changing their surroundings and abandoning their past. Even the violence of their sexual encounter melts into a new platonic relationship. Class is neither community nor culture nor occupation nor power but a mere affect that the select few, the chosen ones, can drop. A Matisse print, a borrowed apartment, and the ability to do the hustle are all that is needed.

The theme of relegating class to some distant geographic or temporal past is driven home by the Bee Gees' disco anthem "Stayin' Alive" from the film's immensely successful soundtrack. The song thumps through the opening scene of Tony strutting down the street, seemingly in control of his tiny world. "Music loud and women warm / I've been kicked around / Since I was born," they declare in their famous helium falsetto. "Life goin' nowhere. Somebody help me," they plea in the lower ranges with just a splash of social-realist pain. But then comes the twist; rather than a call to act, the Bee Gees, like the film itself, offer permission to forget: "And now it's all right. It's OK. And you may look the other way" as Tony, Stephanie, and the audience turn their back on the unseemly race-class stew of Brooklyn, pointing their faces toward a future purged of the working class. Not to worry, this is a pain I can carry myself, the narrator of "Stayin' Alive" mutters beneath the pulse and the chorus. The megahit of 1977 allowed the nation to begin to move toward the eighties celebration of working-class heroes who managed to get out, while casting those who could not into cinematic (and political) darkness.<sup>5</sup>

Just as the song offered permission to cover up, to deny, and to forget—and then rolled it all up in polyester and cast it under swirling lights—so the discotheques themselves inhabited the former physical settings of the old industrial working class by inhabiting the buildings of a once mighty occupational past. "Despite its veneer of elegance and sophistication, disco was born, maggot-like, from the rotten remains of the Big Apple," explains the genre's otherwise sympathetic historian Peter Shapiro. As New York's manufacturing base evaporated into empty factories and bolted warehouses of New York City, discotheques moved into those abandoned locations, "recolonizing the dead industrial space, replacing the production of goods with the production of illusions. The economy was in tatters and people wanted to do what they did during the Great Depression—dance."<sup>6</sup>

The Depression analogy, alive through much of seventies pop, obfuscates important differences in the meaning of dance, cinema, and politics in the thirties and the stagflation era. Like so many of the constant echoes and reverberations of the thirties and forties in seventies popular culture, Tony's love affair with the Verrazano Narrows bridge, the frequency of trains in the film, the grit and violence, and the urban skyline that precedes Tony's famous Bay Ridge strut are suggestive of the social-realist motifs and iconography of a previous generation. In many ways, however, *Fever's* runaway individualism is the opposite of the notorious dance marathon contests of the thirties, as depicted most famously in Horace McCoy's novel *They Shoot Horses Don't They?* (1935). McCoy explored the collective dehumanization and degradation of the unemployed who dance for days and weeks for the entertainment of others—a far cry from dancing as a showcase for individual stardom. Like the ever down-and-out but suave Fred Astaire, perhaps Tony's best Depression-era analogue, the thirties dancer, served a different function. Astaire possessed a tuxedoed panache with a huckster's edge—always demonstrating control of his social environment like Tony. Unlike Tony Manero, Astaire's characters were not “clichés going nowhere” but guides for common people to the world of the affluent. “One function of the song-and-dance man in the 1930s films,” explains Joel Dinerstein, “was to resolve and mediate class differences in his role as well-dressed entertainer.” As much as Astaire's performances served to keep society together, Manero functions as the opposite. He is neither a go-between nor a class interpreter; he is an escape artist.<sup>7</sup>

As much as curmudgeonly Archie Bunker was the definitive character of the first half of the seventies, doomed to be on the losing side of history, Tony Manero served that role for the second half by battling his way toward the winning side of history. He showed that, for the able, “working-class” may be something that could simply be rejected like any other style choice in the world of self-constructed identities, and that the cost was merely severing all connections to the past. And not only *could* it be rejected but, if possible, it *should*. “These are not nice people for the most part,” admitted a perceptive film critic about the characters of Bay Ridge, “but they are alive and striving—it is a mistake to ignore them or, maybe worse, pretend that their lives have no meaning.” As Tom Wolfe proclaimed, the decade belonged to those who did pretend, those willing to ignore, and those who found meaning in “remaking, remodeling, elevating and polishing one's very self.” For those with the resources or the talents, the malleability of the seven-

ties self might have been liberating. For others, however, the Maneroesque fantasy was simply mean. And, we might recall, a deception from the very start.<sup>8</sup>

## I

Disco, of course, was much larger than one immensely successful film and its runaway sound track, and the supersonic flight of the craze across the cultural skies of the 1970s revealed much about class and the cultural shifts of the second half of the decade. The same disturbing scenes of decline and despair that chilled Michael Harrington as he strolled across the Greenwich Village in 1977 were embraced by the disco movement in celebratory ways: a sense of cultural dissent without direction, and an anti-bourgeois sentiment without a need to build an alternative to the status quo. Such points of despair for Harrington provided a sense of freedom for others. "The 60s were clutter. The seventies are very empty," explained noted artist and denizen of disco palace Studio 54, Andy Warhol. Disco attempted to fill the emerging cultural void of the 1970s with the glitter of a multicultural individualism, the shimmer of aristocracy, the promise of physical ecstasy, and the possibility of forgetting. And its promise of personal liberation proved more lasting than the "come together" spirit of the sixties.<sup>9</sup>

Discotheques negated the gloom and the emptiness by manufacturing a spectacle of meaning out of the very same void that others feared. Yet it was "false promise," explains Anne-Lise Francois, whose "total fulfillment in the fictive realm of the strobe-globe precludes and always exceeds its realization elsewhere." The experience of the discotheques dissolved the pain of the past into the celebration of the present, allowed indulgence to be the salve for the wounds of hope, and embraced the cult of celebrity in lieu of a generation's search for authenticity—all mixed with a splash of Weimaresque fatalism. "The postindustrial, inflationary '70s spawned their own fantasy factories," explains Peter Shapiro, "combining nostalgia and extravagance with devil-may-care attitude that not only perfectly summed up the times, but also foreshadowed the bleakness of what was on the horizon." Christopher Lasch noted how hedonism and spectacle, fantasy and celebrity, came "to dominate the modern psyche" in the seventies in such a way that living "for the moment" had become "the prevailing passion." Disco certainly made a good case. The beautiful people, the glamour, the drugs, and the big party all

trumped the waning struggle over meaning—just as the empire tipped toward disaster.<sup>10</sup>

Disco was a contradiction. It too easily gets conflated with the affluent hedonism of the beautiful people, but it was also one of the few integrated working-class cultural movements of the second half of the decade—particularly its earliest forms. The alter ego to its aristocratic exclusiveness was actually the promise of a new inclusiveness that could bring together the races, the sexualities, the classes, and the ideologies into one big—if fleeting—social triumph over the fragmentation of social life. Since the eclipse of the integrated rock scene of the early seventies, most popular music had fractured into insular societies—“white rock was sounding whiter and black music was sounding blacker,” as Craig Werner explains. The exception was disco, which formed a temporary bridge between what George Clinton famously called the chocolate cities and the vanilla suburbs, encouraging women, gays, blacks, Latinos, and ethnic whites to enjoy a polyrhythmic point of integration—even if it was based on erasing, as the Bee Gees sang, that “the price of meat is higher than the dope on the street.”<sup>11</sup>

Although disco may have begun with an inclusive impulse, it drifted toward the exclusive and the aristocratic, and was plagued with a nagging sense of whether poppers, beats, sex, and coke could amount to a social vision. Dancing was, as one aficionado explained, “a way of communicating with people you might not have anything to say to if you sat down to talk.” If the basis of that communication merely amounted to ecstasy and desire, however, it may have offered less of a vision than a punctuation point to the end of a larger narrative. Disco, continues Shapiro, “attempted to suggest answers to questions posed by a society in the process of abandoning a universalist communitarian model for a vision based on cutthroat individualism; disco’s glitter queens and escapist working-class teens were kicking against the pricks the only way they knew how.” The redemption it could offer was not spiritual, political, or material, but corporeal. In its hedonistic and solipsistic response to an economy gone bad, a state revealed as corrupt, and a nation bereft of its mission, disco was like “being trapped in the headlights of the oncoming cultural paradigm shift—not quite dancing through the apocalypse, but something similar.” Like liberals’ failed efforts to stitch their vision back together with full employment and labor law reform, disco “was liberalism’s last hurrah, the final party before the neocon apocalypse.”<sup>12</sup>

And the more popular the genre became, the less content it had. Between the pretensions of royalty and the promise of a people’s dance movement



erupted a routinized corporate drumbeat in place of the genre's dwindling polyrhythmic complexity. Quickly, as disco went from underground movement to craze, the studios took the roots of the music and drained funk of its funk, soul of its soul, and the blues of its rhythm. The music devolved into the most manufactured art form, representing the triumph of the producer over the artist, and the victory of those who were willing to pander to the market to the point of destroying what they purported to love. Disguised as liberation, it was the ultimate triumph of capitalism over art. "It is a riot of consumerism," acknowledged Richard Dyer in a critical defense of the genre, "dazzling in its technology (echo chambers, double and more tracking, electric instruments), overwhelming in its scale (banks of violins, massed choirs, the limitless range of percussion instruments), lavishly gaudy in the mirrors and tat of discotheques, the glitter of denim flash of its costumes. . . . Gone are the restraint of popular song, the sparseness of rock and reggae, the simplicity of folk." But, as Dyer explained, it felt good when little else did.<sup>13</sup>

If disco contained more than hints of the Weimar Republic, the heartland's "Disco Sucks!" movement was its Beer Hall Putsch. By the late seventies, disco had moved from an innovative art form to a fad and finally to a cultural volcano with heat, swell, and territorial ambition—taking over radio stations, rock bands, clothing styles, and mating patterns. Perhaps not the least significant absorption was the seizure of the affectations of working-class masculinity by the campy ensemble the Village People. Many traditionalists fought back without much generosity of spirit, and one of the first and most notable was a small-time country-rock outfit called Chuck Wagon and the Wheels. While playing at the Stumble Inn in Tucson, Arizona, a polyester-studded heckler demanded that the band "Play some disco!" Chuck and the boys volleyed back with a disco beat and a spontaneous chant of "Disco Sucks!" The combination struck a nerve as the several hundred people in the club roared with approval. Realizing their potential new market, the band then tossed off another in a long line of painfully bad novelty songs littering the decade called, of course, "Disco Sucks." "I like songs about drivin' trucks," Chuck Wagon sings of the feelings of the heartland working class, "And I don't make a whole lotta bucks / But I know enough to know that disco sucks." The song got immediate airplay on album-oriented FM rock stations in 1978, and the "Disco Sucks" uprising was born.<sup>14</sup>

The most public face of the anti-disco movement was a disc jockey at Chicago's WLUP named Steve Dahl, who quickly adopted Chuck Wagon and

the Wheels' song as the anthem for a new movement. Dahl had been fired from an album-oriented station just before Christmas Eve when the station suddenly turned to a disco format, and he exacted his revenge publicly with regular anti-disco rants and the playing of "Disco Sucks" during his new show on WLUP. Dahl organized his shock troops, which he called the Insane Coho Lips Army, named after the salmon responsible for ridding Lake Michigan of the parasitic and destructive lamprey eel. The height of the rebellion came during the 1979 baseball season at a double header with the Detroit Tigers. The fortunes of the White Sox were sagging, so, as part of a promotional deal, fans were let in for 98 cents if they brought a disco album for Dahl to destroy between games in what he called a Disco Demolition Derby. The usually empty seats of the ballpark were crammed with fans (and tens of thousands more denied access were milling around outside the park and even more stuck on the surrounding expressways trying to get there). Ten thousand disco records piled up on the field for mass destruction—fans brought so many that they were allowed to keep their discs, which readily turned into Frisbees when things got wild. Dahl took to the diamond in full military regalia, including fatigues, helmet, and a jeep. As he blew up the records, a riot ensued as thousands of rock/baseball fans poured out onto the field, lighting bonfires, ripping down the backstop, stealing bases, tearing up the grass, and even, it was alleged, engaging in oral sex on home plate. The mayhem was such that the White Sox made baseball history by forfeiting the second game to the Detroit Tigers because the field was rendered unplayable.<sup>15</sup>

Dahl's disco riot was another pillar in the bridge between Nixon and Reagan, offering an addition to the identity of the white everyman on the road to the counter-revolution. Not far below the shrill aesthetic critique of the musical genre could be found deep wells of homophobia, racism, and longstanding anti-Eastern establishment sentiments dating back to the dawn of the republic. In Detroit, a group had originally wanted to go so far as to call itself the Disco Sucks Klan but agreed to change its name to the less racially charged DREAD (Detroit Rockers Engaged in the Abolition of Disco). They still held mock on-air electrocutions of disco fans by name (and even traveled with an electric chair as a promotional prop)—only a few degrees of separation from the Klan analogy. Along with the constant references among disco-phobes to the music "lacking balls," it was difficult to find any distinct line between where the aesthetic critique stopped and the larger cultural backlash began. As Craig Werner writes, "Driving disco from the

charts, the alliance [of disco haters] also succeeded in destroying the last remaining musical scene that was in any meaningful sense racially mixed. After nearly a quarter century of doubt, white America had recovered its sense of self."<sup>16</sup>

The "Disco Sucks" rallies and the various burnings, steamrollings, and smashing of disco records (by the "Saturday Night Cleaver" no less) seemed like the last stand of white blue-collar Midwestern males against all that was cosmopolitan, urbane, racially integrated, and, most of all, gay. Disco's challenge to both segregation and straight identity created an open forum for the celebration of the different, the outcast, and the wild, while simultaneously creating a focal point for young, white, male, blue-collar kids who fetishized the phallic guitar solos of rock, despised the producer-driven mechanized format of disco, and felt secure in the increasingly white envelope of seventies rock. The guys in the "Shoot the Bee Gees," "Disco Sucks," and "Kiss Army" t-shirts were ingredients in a larger rage of Midwestern males against the system, but like Dewey Burton's commitments to the anti-busing cause, it was more complicated than just race or just sexuality—it tipped into economic power, class, and cultural authority. It was also a raised middle finger to the decadence of those who would party through double digit unemployment and the deindustrialization of America.

The anti-disco movement was less about the materiality of working-class identity than what white, male, blue-collar identity had morphed into: a populist grab bag of resentments based on region, race, economics, and sexuality. White guys, already insecure about their employment future, now faced threats to everything else they thought they could rely upon: racial identity, masculinity, and, what by then had become a safely white genre, rock 'n' roll. The protest was not simply about racism or deviance; it was about something far more threatening, explains Shapiro: "impotence."

Detroit had once been the shining industrial beacon of the American economic miracle. Its massive car factories provided high-paid blue-collar jobs to just about everyone, and the images of third-generation Germans, Jews, recent Polish immigrants, and newly arrived African Americans from the Deep South working side by side on the shop floor were enduring symbols of both the might and beneficence of American capitalism. . . . The high falsettos of disco stars like the Bee Gees and Sylvester sounded the death knell for the virility of the American male. Disco came from New York, "Sodom on the Hudson," the home of both namby-pamby knee-jerk liberals and Spiro

Agnew's "Northeast liberal media elite." Viewed in this context, Dahl's military pomp makes a bit of sense: He was waging a war on the enemy within that was draining America of its life force.<sup>17</sup>

Vying against both the disco craze and the homogenized landscape of corporate rock was the underground scene of the New York City club, CBGB's. There the Ramones, a bunch of long-haired, leather-clad, white boys from Archie Bunker's Queens, stripped rock of fifteen years of accumulated commercial bloat and artistic pretense and boiled it down to two-minute songs made of three chords and a hurricane of energy. *Creem*, the famous Detroit rock 'n' roll magazine, summed up the Ramones' aesthetic as set against "ponderous middle-aged labor unions like Zep, Bad Co. and Foghat."<sup>18</sup>

The Ramones returned rock 'n' roll to its proper garage setting, promising a do-it-yourself kit for those interested in emancipation from the chains of mainstream seventies music that Greil Marcus could dismiss as little more than "a habit, a structure, an invisible oppression." They were the United States' most important contribution to, and much of the catalyst for, the Anglo-American punk movement, but what was curious about the band, especially as opposed to their British cousins, was their distinct lack of class politics—and, when they had them, their often conservative bend. Rather than being class conscious or even political, they tended to embrace simply being "dumbbell pillhead teenagers" stripped of any sentimentality and who could whipsaw angst into contempt and farce. It is not that the Ramones were not often witty or even brilliant, but simply, in contrast to much of the punk movement across the Atlantic, they were part of the breakdown of class as a category of analysis rather than a re-imagining of it.<sup>19</sup>

In many ways, one could take away the drugs, the leather, and the long hair, and imagine Johnny Ramone, at least, relating pretty well to his old neighbor back in Queens, Archie Bunker. Despite their distinct edge and their time with the avant-garde CBGB's crowd, the Ramones wallowed in their American provincialism. On a European tour with the cerebral art school band the Talking Heads, they demonstrated their parochial view of the world. "The Ramones hated Europe," reported the Talking Heads manager. "They didn't like the idea that people didn't speak English. The Talking Heads adored it. It was really yuppie chic at work. The Ramones were like Archie Bunker at the Vatican. They were not amused. They hated the food and just looked for hamburgers everywhere." When they got to Stonehenge, the Ramones did not even bother to leave the bus. Joey Ramone

would go on to criticize the Reagan administration in the eighties, but Johnny, who left his job as a construction worker in 1974 to don his trademark bad haircut and leather jacket, became a vocal right-wing Republican.<sup>20</sup>

The limits of the American punk scene only make sense when compared with their UK equivalent, where the Clash and the Sex Pistols proved to be the driving forces of innovation. While the Ramones were always detached from issues of class, preferring a fury of irony and a mess of fun, British punk was all about an expansive—and explosive—vision of it. British punk voiced working-class anger—of the sort that would have its direct analogue in the 1978–79 British strike wave known as the Winter of Discontent—and it was a direct assault on the pomp of the upper classes. In the case of the Clash, the music was also global, strongly influenced by reggae, ideologically aligned with the class struggle, and proclaiming revolutionary solidarity through albums such as the sprawling *Sandinista!* The band's first single, the 1977 "White Riot" urged white working-class youth to quit taking it out on black people and find their own cause: "Are you taking over / Or are you taking orders? / Are you going backwards / Or are you going forwards?" Even the nihilism of the Sex Pistols derived its edge from class. The Ramones, in contrast, gave us intentionally dumbed-down, anti-social irony, such as the 1977 cut "Commando," which offered up four basic tenets of social behavior: "First rule is: The laws of Germany. Second rule is: Be nice to mommy. Third rule is: Don't talk to commies. Fourth rule is: Eat kosher salamis." West Coast hardcore bands like the Dead Kennedys did offer an unyieldingly savage critique of the United States (including a cover of a modified version of Johnny Paycheck's "Take This Job and Shove It"), but American punk never became a national outlet for class antagonism even when it shared some of the aesthetics and anger of the British insurgency.

The most important thing that a band like the Clash had that almost all American music of the late seventies lacked was a conscious infusion of black musical traditions. As rock critic Lester Bangs put it, "Somewhere in their assimilation of reggae is the closest thing yet to the lost chord, the missing link between black and white noise, rock capable of making a bow to black forms without smearing on the blackface." Unlike the musically integrated London scene, there was zero funk in American punk and barely any in new wave either. The integrated band sound of the seventies, like the hope of a multi-cultural class identity more generally, was lost. In the United States of America, there was little hope of a progressive working-class identity without confronting its full racial complexity, and on those grounds the

nation's music failed to offer assistance. Punk and "classic" rock, on the one hand, and disco and hip-hop, on the other, were re-segregating audiences. The occasional, antediluvian, but "heroic," acts of some bands, like the Talking Heads, of covering songs like Al Green's "Take Me to the River," was the moral equivalent of attempting to re-unite the shifting tectonic plates of American culture. Its brilliance was also an isolated one, accepted mostly on college campuses and the club scene, far from the antidisco shock troops commandeering Comiskey Park.<sup>21</sup>

## II

Given the black-blue tensions in the air at mid decade, it ought not to be surprising that the pop culture fantasy for the bicentennial year 1976 rested upon the ability of a down and out, golden hearted, dim-witted white guy to go the distance with a gorgeous and talented black man. The measure of success for the great white hope of seventies America, according to the smash hit boxing movie *Rocky* (1976), had been reduced from victory merely to be still standing at the end of the day. *On the Waterfront's* (1954) Terry Malloy, to whom Rocky was inevitably compared in reviews, "coulda been a contender" if he had not been sold out by the mob and his brother. Rocky, however, really does get his chance—plucked out of the white ghettos of Philadelphia with the fortune of a lottery winner—to take on the fast-talking and commercially savvy black superstar Apollo Creed in a testament to "the dream of uplift to the common man through individual initiative." He proves himself a contender in this cinematic version of the *Bakke* case—though not quite a full winner until the growing absurdity of later sequels.<sup>22</sup>

What is amazing about *Rocky* is its triple layer of Cinderella-like fantasy—from the fight that inspired it, to the writer who maintained his claim to it, to the film itself. The film was based on reality, created out of necessity, and spoke directly of the issues of the day. Like films from *Dog Day Afternoon* to *Blue Collar* to *Saturday Night Fever*, Rocky's working-class plot came straight out of the headlines. In 1975, the African American boxing promoter Don King (who had orchestrated the famous Rumble in the Jungle in Zaire between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman) decided, as he saw it, to give a white guy a break. Declaring that world heavyweight champion Ali

was “an equal opportunity employer” he looked for a white boxer to give him an opportunity to slug his way to the title. “I am,” explained King with a wink, “for the heavy-laden and downtrodden.” The sacrificial white man selected for the job was Chuck Wepner, a club fighter and liquor salesman who, far from an athletic star, got up in the morning and went to work like everyone else selling his goods in the bars of New Jersey. He was also a highly ranked journeyman fighter with forty-one fights to his name and over three hundred stitches holding his face together. They called Wepner the “Bayonne Bleeder” after his New Jersey hometown and his propensity to get his face ripped open. Thickly built, scarred, ungraceful, and thinning in hair, he was a marked contrast to the smooth-skinned beauty and dancing grace of Muhammad Ali. Just as in *Rocky*, the champ would make \$1.5 million for the stunt and the challenger would earn \$100,000 for taking the beating.<sup>23</sup>

“Here I am going in with a damn legend,” explained the thirty-five-year-old Wepner. “You know, most people live dull lives, never get a break, but with one punch I could be a millionaire, and my wife wouldn’t have to work on the post office night shift anymore, and my name would mean something for a long, long time.” The advertising posters called it “The Chance of a Lifetime.” On fight day, Wepner defied all odds and almost went the distance; he was only the sixth person in boxing history to answer the bell for the fifteenth round with Ali. Wepner was also one of the very few to have ever knocked the champion down (although many others say Ali simply tripped over Wepner’s feet). But it was a grueling marathon—“more a trans-fusion than a boxing match.” Ali mugged, teased, taunted, and ridiculed Wepner throughout the fight, while the challenger clumsily lunged his powerful fists at the champ. His sweaty strings of thinning hair bouncing from his bleeding head with each punch, Wepner took Ali’s merciless punishment into the fifteenth round. In the final nineteen seconds of the final round, Ali finally managed a knockout, bringing the horrific contest to a close. When they dragged the Bayonne Bleeder semi-conscious to his corner, Ali came over to congratulate him for almost going the distance. “None of my fights was tougher than this one,” Ali later said. Making it to the fifteenth round was a moral victory, commentators seemed to agree, for what everyone called “the ordinary guy.”<sup>24</sup>

The cinemagraphic quality of the fight was obvious to many watching it—especially a young and hungry actor named Sylvester Stallone. He watched

the fight intently in a theater with closed circuit television, amazed at the support the embattled Wepner received from the screaming crowd. Stallone rushed home afterward and, in a four-day writing frenzy fueled by caffeine pills, created one of the most popular and metaphorical films of the decade. Stallone took Wepner's second tier, outsider status and amplified it to create the doe-eyed Rocky Balboa as a loser with a heart, out to prove, if he could, that he was not "just another bum from the neighborhood." In the inverted cultural world of the seventies, boxing was not a vehicle to explore corruption and oppression—its typical role in American social problem film—but a setting for hope and possibility. Like Wepner, Stallone's title character did not have to win but merely prove that a white working-class hero could go the distance with a black superstar.

The studios were anxious to buy Stallone's script, but the author punched back with his own underdog's gamble: he refused to sell it unless he got to play the lead. Completely broke and with very few acting credits to his name, Stallone's prospects to play the lead were as much of a long shot as Wepner's with Ali. With a mere \$106 in the bank, Stallone refused ever-escalating offers from the studio that reached \$150,000. As Stallone recalled telling his wife, "If you don't mind going out in the backyard and eating grass, I'd rather burn this script than sell it to another actor." The studio eventually caved and let Stallone have the part, but, in the process, sliced the budget for the film down to bare bones.<sup>25</sup>

In *Rocky*, the heavyweight champion of the world, Apollo Creed (Carl Weathers), loses his planned-for opponent due to an injury and decides to turn the stroke of bad luck into a spectacle of good fortune. By plucking the second-rate "Italian Stallion" out of a book of club fighters, Creed hopes to revive (manipulate) the American dream for the bicentennial year. "I'm sentimental," explains Apollo Creed, a thinly veiled Muhammad Ali figure. "A lot of other people in this country are sentimental and would like nothing more than to see Apollo Creed give a boy from Philadelphia a chance at the biggest title in the world on this country's biggest birthday." Apollo likes Rocky's Italian ancestry, since Columbus discovered America. "What would be better than getting it on with on with one of his descendents?" As a tale about a dead-end Italian street fighter who manages to go fifteen rounds with an arrogant, commercially manipulative, and beautiful black super hero, the film easily lent itself to white ethnics who wanted a crack at redemption after feeling themselves to have been sacrificed to the cause of racial justice.



*Rocky* was a racially charged film, but it appeared to be less about racial redemption than hope, while really being about the intersection of the two. A brilliantly assembled hodgepodge of cinematic clichés, *Rocky* is often compared with Frank Capra's movies about the triumphs of the little man (and Capra liked *Rocky*), yet Capra's characters battled greedy businessmen and corrupt politicians, not black men. Like the politics of the late seventies, the film combines white blue-collar renewal with what borders on revenge against the success and power of black people. Rocky's patriotic mission becomes all the more clear at the beginning of the fight when Apollo shows up dressed as George Washington and Yankee Doodle Dandy, while the Italian hero can merely mutter and watch. African-Americans, it would seem, own Americana. Rocky is an inversion of the black ghetto superstars like *Shaft* (1971) and *Superfly* (1972), whose fantastic powers of masculinity allowed them to take on all challengers. With Rocky's quiet blue-collar attitude, however, he is determined to get the job done without fanfare and despite all odds.<sup>26</sup>

The film's director was John Avildsen, who also directed the clunky backlash film *Joe*. The warm-hearted Rocky lacks the meanness of Joe; that role is left for the often overlooked supporting role of the grim and violent Paulie, the brother of Rocky's love interest, the painfully timid Adrian. Again, like *Saturday Night Fever*, the audience is presented with a choice between the future heroics of a star or the psychological burdens of the past. As Stallone explained, he wrote Paulie to serve as "a symbol of the blue collar disenfranchised, left-out mentality, a man who feels life has given him an unfair amount of cheap shots." Both Tony Manero and Rocky Balboa have the opportunity to escape, and Paulie is, in many ways, like the same characters Tony left behind. As Stallone said, "when they're cheering for Rocky, they're cheering for themselves." Rocky, as another critic put it, is "for but not really of the working class. . . . He gives substance to our escapism."<sup>27</sup>

Stallone continued his working-class studies with a biopic about the Teamsters' leader Jimmy Hoffa called *F.I.S.T.* (Federation of Inter-State Truckers). The film begins with the noble origins of the truckers' union on the docks where it has to battle the arrogance of management—"That damned Roosevelt; what this country needs is Douglas MacArthur," says the boss as his workers assert their power to strike. Although the subject choice—one of the most notoriously corrupt labor leaders of the century—might imply a certain anti-labor bias, the film is actually a sympathetic treatment of the origins of organized labor in the 1930s and a compassionate

and even endearing portrait of working-class life. Stallone, as the fictionalized Hoffa character Johnny Kovak, is a rare figure in American cinema: a valiant, militant, sharp, and much needed voice for working people. Even the Faustian pact he stumbles into with the mob seems a reasonable turn given the power of management. The *mise-en-scène* appears to have been taken straight out of a piece of thirties agitprop, with an overdose of smokestacks, folk songs, picket lines, rich social life, and girls serving up soup, coffee, and sandwiches to the deserving strikers.

The overarching theme of the film, however, is that worker militancy is a thing of the past, and organized labor—however necessary it may have been at one time—achieved its success illegitimately. In *F.I.S.T.*, explains historian John Bodnar, “The entire union movement is held up to ridicule for betraying the noble goals of the Depression decade.” In the second half of the film, Kovak moves to the plush union headquarters in Washington, DC, and he and his union sink deeper into the mob and pursuit of power for its own sake. Material concerns trump all others. At national negotiations, Kovak wants an 8 percent wage increase when the cost of living is only 5 percent. He gets his 8 percent but only with a no-strike pledge and the agreement to end all wildcats—the rank and file’s main source of power—in forty-eight hours. Throughout the film, another character, Abe, serves as Johnny’s conscience. He stays connected to the rank and file and remains very suspicious of Johnny’s new world. Toward the end, in a nod to the seventies insurgencies, Abe calls his West Coast local out on a wildcat in violation of Kovak’s national contract. The union sends in the thugs to rough them up. By the end, the union has Abe, the last democratic voice, killed. Whatever death labor experiences after this film—by subpoena, legislative act, or business offensive—seems reasonable and justified. Militancy may have once been a beautiful thing but not any more.<sup>28</sup>

### III

After Arthur Bremer shot George Wallace in a shopping mall parking lot, investigators found his journal, published the next year as *An Assassin’s Diary* (1973). Bremer, the son of a truck driver who had most recently worked as a janitor and busboy, filled his journal with the rage of the lonely. “ALL MY EFFORTS & NOTHING CHANGED. Just another god Damn failure,” he wrote in his diary. He longed “to do SOMETHING BOLD AND

DRAMATIC, FORCEFULL & DYNAMIC, A STATEMENT of my manhood for the world to see.” That something was to shoot either Nixon or Wallace for the fame it would deliver. He speculated that his excuses when caught would be “‘I don’t know,’ or ‘Nothing else to do,’ or ‘Why not?’ or ‘I have to kill somebody.’” Bremer’s story became the inspiration for the bicentennial year’s neo-noir anti-hero character, Travis Bickle (Robert De-Niro), in one of the decade’s most iconic films, *Taxi Driver* (1976).<sup>29</sup>

The film centers almost exclusively on Travis’s occupational life as a cabbie who plies his trade through the New York City at its socio-economic nadir, the metropolis teetering on bankruptcy and engulfed in crime. Travis, a feverish combination of cowboy, terrorist, soldier, and street warrior, is the common man traveling through a world of filth and injustice. He wanders through a tortured existential crisis before performing his own gory spectacle of violence. “Loneliness has followed me my whole life, everywhere. In bars, in cars, sidewalks, stores, everywhere. There’s no escape. I’m God’s lonely man.” He despises the world he inhabits—the “whores, skunk pussies, buggers, queens, fairies, dopers, junkies, sick, venal. Someday a real rain will come and wash all this scum off the streets,” he grunts. Bickle looks for a way to assert his masculinity over the degradation, and—armed with rage and guns and loneliness—he sets out to purge New York of its filth. “Listen you fuckers, you screwheads. Here is a man who would not take it anymore,” he exclaims. “A man who stood up against the scum, the cunts, the dogs, the filth, the shit, Here is someone who stood up.” In this film, the only thing more frightening than the social degradation Bickle rails against is Travis Bickle himself.

At first Bickle seems to be trying on everyone else’s identity, searching for belonging, then finally succumbing to his fantasy of power and bloodthirsty redemption. His is a world of overblown realism without the social. We live the film and travel the streets through Travis’ eyes; it is wholly his world detached from all other points of social reference, and we have no idea what made him the creature that he is beyond vague suggestions of his experience in Vietnam. He is the opposite of those other famous cabbies from American letters in Clifford Odets’ *Waiting for Lefty*. Odet’s taxi drivers, “the storm birds of the working class” as one character puts it, were struggling toward a collective identity that would deliver them to a strike—if not socialism. Travis, in contrast, is suspicious of all institutions and stifled by his alienation; he is driven by an impossible longing, as he tells us, to “become a person like other people.” As Barbara Mortimer suggests, “what *Taxi Driver* documents

is not only the desire of people today to create 'authentic selves,' but the impossibility of doing so."<sup>30</sup>

The lonely, alienated tones of seventies films like *Taxi Driver* might be related to the production process brought about by the much-honored individualism of the auteur cinema movement. Rejecting the studio production process as too stiff and stultifying to the creative process, the great young directors of the seventies, like Martin Scorsese, Robert Altman, Francis Ford Coppola, and Stanley Kubrick, were given free hand to make their own adventurous cinematic statements unfettered by the constraints of the old Hollywood. "Although the collapse of the studios has allowed filmmakers to confront cultural and aesthetic problems in ways that would not have been possible under the determining control of the old Hollywood," writes Robert Phillip Kolker, "they have had to undertake their confrontations alone—not only without secure financial support, but without creative support, without a community among which ideas and concerns might be shared. In the true spirit of American individualism they work in a creative vacuum." Without all of the old craftsmen, who shared the experience of making many films together and played central roles in the creative process, the occupational culture of the filmmakers affected the end product. The new artistic freedom was the freedom to be alone. "The power is with the people now," George Lucas argued with unintended irony and ideological confusion. "The workers have the means of production."<sup>31</sup>

In addition to *Assassin's Diary*, Scorsese's inspiration for *Taxi Driver* was John Ford's classic Western *The Searchers* (1956) in which the cowboy-soldier-hero cannot enter the community, condemned to wander unconnected; and part of screenwriter Paul Schrader's inspiration was Sartre's *Nausea*, which he called the "model" for the film. Like Bremer, Schrader, too, was lost in social isolation, and the diary must have spoken to him (and the film would go on to inspire yet another psychotic shooting, that of John Hinckley's attempt on Ronald Reagan). Schrader, once the darling of New Left film circles, had drifted into the worst aspects of failed idealism that the decade had to offer—all of which he freely projected directly onto his proletarian anti-hero: "I was very enamored of guns," he recalled, "I was very suicidal, I was drinking heavily, I was obsessed with pornography in the way a lonely person is, and all those elements are upfront in the script." Schrader was also obsessed with film noir—having written one of the most highly regarded essays on the subject—and Bickle was meant to be "the last noir man in the

ultimate noir world: closed and dark, a paranoid universe of perversion, obsession, and violence."<sup>32</sup>

As much as America celebrated *Rocky*, *Taxi Driver* is about the Paulies of the world. Politically, the film captures the inversion of the blue-collar themes of an earlier era, as Schrader explains, since Travis "takes out his anger on the guy below him rather than the guy above." The film's rejection of class as either a political or an economic category makes Travis a strange new anti-hero in a strange new cultural class war.<sup>33</sup>

The alternative, political outlets for Travis' concerns were empty at best and cynical at worst. He pursues a beautiful campaign worker (Cybill Shepherd) who works for a presidential candidate named Palantine, a McGovern-like figure but of the worst, most plastic, sort. His campaign slogan, "We are the people" appears frequently throughout the film, but it is the opposite of what his campaign really is. As Palantine condescendingly proclaims in one speech, "The people are rising to the demands I am making on them!" "We the people suffer," he declares, "from Vietnam, inflation, crime, corruption." In reality, "the people," if they exist at all, suffer from Palantine. The chasm between occupational life and politics cannot be crossed. When Palantine gets into Bickle's cab, they talk right past each other. Even his fellow cabbie, The Wizard (Peter Boyle again), unlike Odets' cabbies, only talks in circular nonsense.

Given this lineage of alienation, it is not surprising that Travis Bickle is simultaneously sympathetic and pathological, endearing and murderous. By the time viewers warm to Travis, it is too late—he has hatched his angel-of-death plans. Unlike his inverse, the true proletarian hero, he is not of the people but against them; his line of vision is always filled with unredeemable prostitutes, junkies, and criminals. Unable to win the woman he knows he cannot have, he turns to saving the girl he does not want. By the end of the film, he is the twisted working-class vet turned vigilante, attempting to purge society of its filth as a way to redeem his own failure to be a part of society. Rather than the classic Capraesque Hollywood theme of a pure commoner in battle with a corrupt world, here is the working-class hero out to make the world that much more sordid. The "final phase" of noir, writes Schrader, "was the period of psychotic addiction and suicidal impulse" caused by "the loss of public honor, heroic conventions, personal integrity, and finally, psychic stability." As much as film noir is about, as George Lipitz writes, the "presumption that society will blame and punish the hero for

acts he never committed," *Taxi Driver* turns the genre on its head. In the end, Travis is made into a hero for the bloody acts of misguided vigilantism that he did do. Ironically, as Bremer explained to the judge after sentencing for his attempt on Wallace, the assassin actually longed for the social cohesions and constraints of civil society. "Looking back on my life," he told the judge, "I would have liked it if society had protected me from myself."<sup>34</sup>

#### IV

"Then one day I came across the Lordstown, Ohio, strike, the Chevy Vega plant," screenwriter Paul Schrader reported after the success of *Taxi Driver*. "All the autoworkers were under twenty-five, they were not interested in what the union had done for dad and grandpa. What it had done for them was nothing," he recalled in a somewhat vengeful reading of the strike. "Yes, we hate management, but you know who we hate worse? Our union. It betrays us," Schrader concluded with a projection of his own post-sixties anti-institutional sentiments. Schrader's success as a screenwriter for *Taxi Driver* gave him the Hollywood credibility to make his first movie, and Lordstown gave him his topic. The result was the controversial *Blue Collar* (1978), featuring three autoworkers, Jerry (Harvey Keitel), Smokey (Yaphet Kotto), and Zeke (Richard Pryor in a rare dramatic role), who try to buck the system.<sup>35</sup>

The original Lordstown dispute contained all the variables of the new labor politics: youth, inter-racial solidarity, and protest against the quality of production rather than the quantity of compensation. In the hands of filmmaker Paul Schrader, the event was reinterpreted from one of hope and agency to one of the bleakest meditations on blue-collar America ever made. Schrader's contemptuous manipulation of working-class reality is typical of many of Hollywood's professional middle-class productions, but the film's twisting cinematic daggers also spoke to some larger truths. Despite Schrader's re-interpretation of seventies labor history, the film is beautifully crafted in a classic social-realist style. Like many seventies artists, Schrader looked to the old imagery and narratives of workers from the thirties and forties to provide the tools, tropes, style, and comparative backdrops for the new seventies worker albeit for different purposes.

Like most seventies films dealing with working-class themes, the sense of psychological violence and claustrophobia are quickly established with char-

acters literally squeezed into the scenes. There are also occasional borrowings of some of the anger and language from the 1960s. Particularly obvious is the influence of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers' documentary film *Finally Got the News* (1970)—including Richard Pryor calling the plant, the “plantation.” Part of the source of the claustrophobia of the film came from Schrader's autobiography. “Even though I was a middle-class kid,” Schrader explained, “the fact that we lived in a poor part of town gave me the sense that rich people aren't going to give you anything, you're gonna have to take it. That Animals song, ‘We've Gotta Get Out of This Place,’ was a real strong song for me, and a real strong feeling for me.”<sup>36</sup>

The imagery may be social-realist and the energy of the sixties, but the plot shows the influence of a post-New Left intellectual that has given up on the working class. The movie revolves around the disintegration of a once very solid inter-racial camaraderie among three autoworkers—two black and one white—as a sort of New Deal coalition on the shop floor. *Blue Collar* begins commandingly with an overhead shot of the auto plant that directly quotes the opening scene of Sergei Eisenstein's immortal film *Strike* (1925) and features a Muddy Waters/Bo Diddley blues song blaring over the din of the assembly work (juiced up in volume, lyrics, and profanity by Captain Beefheart sounding like a psychedelic Howlin' Wolf). The story turns on the three workers who are alienated from their work beyond measure, punished by inflation, and floundering for solutions. As *Cineaste* explained, “The three heroes of the movie are the kind of workers who abound in cities like Detroit. They have an ingenuous American moral sincerity, a camaraderie that transcends personal racism, drive that defies resignation, and refusal to be suckered. They have only the common illusions about their place in capitalist society: that one person or a bunch of buddies can beat the system. They are the kind of people who need and are ready for political consciousness, who sustain our belief in an impending class struggle.”<sup>37</sup>

At first they do seem like perfect seventies workers. They defend their union, they despise their foreman, and they support each other; but Schrader quickly shifts the plot to cynicism and betrayal as the workers turn to robbing their union to solve their problems. Schrader envisioned the film as one about workers “who commit metaphorical suicide by stealing from the union, the organization which is supposed to protect him.” The three men rob the union, finding only \$600 in the safe, but then realize they have something even more valuable: the ledger of the union's loan sharking activities. The workers try to blackmail the union, the union tries to rip off the insurance

company, and the company gets off with nary a scratch. Schrader believed that the film was an exploration of the “self-destructiveness” of workers who “attack the organization that was supposed to defend them. And how that kind of dead-end mentality is fostered and engendered by the ruling class in order to keep the working class at odds with itself.”<sup>38</sup>

While that plot line is considerably far from any form of 1970s reality other than, maybe, the democratization movements in unions like the United Mine Workers or the Teamsters, the political sensibility of the film does capture the decade well. “Its politics are the politics of resentment and claustrophobia, the feeling of being manipulated and not in control of your life,” Schrader explained. The otherwise depressing sets are laden with symbols of past struggles that haunt the present moment (resulting in the same nostalgic affect as *F.I.S.T.*)—as photos of Martin Luther King, John F. Kennedy, the sit down strikes, and UAW president Walter Reuther drift throughout the picture. Those are images of a once mighty past; in the film, the 1970s class war is against the union, not the company or even, potentially, both the company and the union. Even the scene in which Zeke is seduced by the union into selling out takes place on an overpass, reminiscent of the infamous 1937 “Battle of the Overpass” when Walter Reuther and three UAW organizers were assaulted by Ford Motor Company goons while the press looked on. Rather than the place union organizers fought off company goons this overpass is where Zeke sold his soul to union corruption.

*Blue Collar* delivers a working-class stripped of agency other than the ability to destroy itself. There are no avenues to liberation possible here, merely a crushing sense of hopelessness. By the end, all hope for inter-racial solidarity that opened the film is destroyed. The union has the street-wise militant Smokey murdered in a gruesome scene of suffocation in the paint room, killed by a collusion of the union and workplace technology. Zeke ends up selling out to the union bosses who have sold out long ago when he accepts their offer to become shop steward. And Jerry, now “thinking white,” as Zeke tries to explain to him, ends up turning to the FBI out of fear for his life. With black militancy dead, reformism co-opted, and the white working-class siding with state authority, the cohesion that once animated these workers has turned into racial hatred. In a review of the film called “On the Auto Front,” the *New York Times* critic—like so many others—compared the film to Elia Kazan’s classic *On the Waterfront*. “The emphasis on inevitability, which is one step away from complete passivity, may be the essential difference between a certain kind of pop culture today and that of the mid-



50's when Elia Kazan made his furious, idealized film about crooked locals on NY piers."<sup>39</sup>

In the final scene of *Blue Collar*, former friends Jerry and Zeke, having called each other every racial slur in their imaginations, pick up tools and go after each other in open conflict. Solidarity is destroyed, and the one-time glue of class has become the solvent of race. The movie ends in a freeze frame of white worker against black worker. Smokey's prophetic lesson for his co-workers, imparted to his comrades earlier in the film, returns in an overdub from the grave: "They pit the lifer against the new boy, the young against the old, the black against the white. Everything they do is to keep us in our place," he explained in what Schrader called the *Waiting for Lefty* moment. In a complete inversion of 1930s proletarian drama, however, the working class is in the midst of meltdown, not unification. Without a hint of irony, Schrader called the violent freeze frame of workers assaulting workers a "classic social-realist poster" that "should be in a post office somewhere."<sup>40</sup>

The ending of the film could not be further from the dignity of a Works Progress Administration (WPA) mural. Schrader may have derived his working class from real life and captured its tone with perfect pitch, but his use of social realism was so refracted through New-Left cultural resentments as to be unrecognizable. The specifics of the film do not connect with reality, and the anger of the film as well as its anti-unionism are palpable. Yet if we accept *Blue Collar* as more allegorical than literal, the confusion of identity, the questions of agency, and the dissolution of the limited racial solidarity make it one of the more successful explorations of working-class identity of the decade.

## V

Like Paul Schrader, one of Bruce Springsteen's anthems was The Animals' hit "We Gotta Get Out of This Place." After the success of *Born to Run* (1975), a rock 'n' roll fantasy of escape, Springsteen turned to those trapped in the reality of home. In crafting his next album, he turned to observations of friends and family "living the lives of my parents in a certain way," in the types of "everyday kind of heroism" necessary "to lead decent, productive lives." If *Saturday Night Fever* was about "the chosen ones" who could escape, Springsteen's late seventies characters are the opposite. Here was a study of those left in what he dismissed as a "town full of losers" in *Born to Run's*

"Thunder Road." Trapped somewhere between the political potential of *Grapes of Wrath* and the underground estrangement of film noir, they live in a world in which expressions of inequality have not disappeared—merely been pushed inward, smoldering in characters who lack any means of expression for their position. The cars are still there and so are the girls of the emancipatory *Born to Run*, but his end-of-the-decade recordings are drained of optimism and hope, driving through the *Darkness on the Edge of Town* (1978).<sup>41</sup>

Springsteen explicitly placed his claustrophobic blue-collar world in a creative tension with the sources of his own performative optimism: sixties pop—especially soul. Although this last of the great working-class heroes is typically seen as a descendent of blue-collar troubadours like Walt Whitman, Woody Guthrie, and Bob Dylan, the more appropriate—or at least coequal—lineage would be Sam Cooke, Smokey Robinson, and James Brown, artists who adapted gospel traditions—sometimes scandalously—for secular pop. "It seemed like in those songs by The Drifters and Smokey Robinson, there was a promise, and it was just the promise of a right to a decent life," he recalled about his youth spent glued to top-forty radio. "That you didn't have to live and die like my old man did, working in a factory until he couldn't hear what you were saying anymore." Musicians like Springsteen who are connected to the gospel impulse bear witness to the shared struggles and despairs and burdens of secular life but call audiences upward toward a better day. The feelings of redemption, communal belonging, and suffering open up what Joel Dinerstein calls the sacred/secular crossroads, holding out the promise of a new day. His epic performances sought to conquer the alienation evident in his own lyrics, with shows that were what he called "part political rally, part dance party, and part religious revival."<sup>42</sup>

In the confined, airless lyrical domain of *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, however, the stories are not of emancipation or redemption as much as they are digging in to survive the long haul of working-class adulthood. Springsteen himself had escaped his working-class roots via the power of rock 'n' roll and his performances urged others to do the same, but, shaken by fame and the corruption of the record machine, he returned to the setting of those he grew up with who were now charged less with rebellion than with resignation. An album "suffused with class consciousness," according to his biographer, the characters of *Darkness* face making their peace with their entrapment in a place, according to the title track, "Where no one asks any questions / Or looks too long in your face." He was one of the few artists to explore the

“trouble in the heartland” of those people who did not get out, who were not Manero (or Springsteen). As Dave Marsh explains, “for all the cars, the violence and the search, the dominant image of *Darkness on the Edge of Town* is labor.”<sup>43</sup>

In writing *Darkness*, the Jersey rocker used the social-realist themes of an earlier generation and the expressive modes of the hopeful spirit of the sixties in order to study the shrinking sense of opportunity that defined working-class life in the seventies. Musing about influences on the album, Springsteen pointed to “early pop class consciousness” of some of the British invasion bands, as well as the car songs of both Chuck Berry and the Beach Boys. “I wanted my street racers to carry the years between the car songs of the 60s and 1978 America.” While pop car songs were fun, they did not explain the world he grew up in: “the stress and tension of my father’s and mother’s life that came with the difficulties of trying to make ends meet.” To explain those lives, he turned to earlier constructions of working-class characters. While making *Darkness*, he explained, “I discovered Hank Williams. I’d seen John Ford’s *Grapes of Wrath* for the first time. Film Noir.” “I was searching for a tone somewhere between *Born to Run*’s spiritual hopefulness and 70s cynicism,” Springsteen explained. “I wanted my new characters to feel weathered, older, but not beaten. The sense of daily struggle in each song greatly increased. The possibility of transcendence or any sort of personal redemption felt a lot harder to come by. I intentionally steered away from any hint of escapism and set my characters down in the middle of a community under siege.”<sup>44</sup>

The songs on *Darkness* are about surviving, of not surrendering; it is all a struggle with neither defeat nor victory. “You can just tell some of these guys are looking for trouble. But they’re not looking to punch anybody out. They want to *be* punched.” The album is infused with themes of work and futility. Six of the ten cuts mention labor, and almost all the rest deal with wealth inequality in some capacity. These are working people without control, hungry for something that they cannot stop chasing but with little hope of deliverance beyond survival. “Something in the Night” breathes the stale, claustrophobic air of working-class seventies in deeply, exhaling little more than futility. “You’re born with nothing,” the character wails, “and better off that way / Soon as you’ve got something they send someone to try and take it away.”<sup>45</sup>

“Racing in the Street,” one of the artist’s favorites and a cult hit among fans, begins with a particular image: a ’69 Chevy parked outside of a 7–11

store. One could envision Dewey Burton at the wheel. The automobile is stationary, but we feel its rumbling power ready to screech out of the most generic of postwar consumer landscapes. Simply reading the lyrics of "Racing" would lead one to presume that the song is another anthem, but it is, in fact, a melancholy lament that, like another cut, "Factory," approaches a funeral dirge in cadence and tone. It consciously upends the bragging of the Beach Boys' "Little Deuce Coupe" or the pursuit of the girl in Chuck Berry's "Maybelline." It is, in essence, a meditation on survival:

*Some guys they just give up living  
And start dying little by little, piece by piece  
Some guys come home from work and wash up  
And go racin' in the street*

Here the open road appears to be the salvation but only in the most limited terms: it offers not freedom but a momentary piece of ownership of one's own life. Street racing is merely an escape from the dreary existential suicide of the work-a-day world.<sup>46</sup>

The meaning of the plodding lyricism of "Racing in the Street" can only be gleaned from juxtaposing it to its creative opposition: Martha and the Vandellas' Motown party anthem "Dancing in the Street." While the sound of the two songs could not be more different—one a public celebration and the other a private struggle to stay alive—Springsteen's paraphrasing of the Motown hit is overt: "Summer's here and the time is right, for racing in the street," and "Calling out around the world, we're going racin' in the street" are obvious quotes. Springsteen was well aware of not just the power of the Motown dance song but also how "Dancing in the Street" took on political significance as a declaration of public presence for African Americans as the civil rights movement moved into the urban North. No longer hidden from the public view, black America sent out "An invitation across the nation / A chance for folks to meet / There'll be laughing, singing, music swinging / Dancing in the street." "Racing in the Street" inverts the Motown message for white working-class men; while "Dancing" is public, social, joyful, and adopted for the political, that of "Racing" is desolate, alone, and somewhere below politics. Like film noir characters, the people of "Racing" are in the grips of a private pain, a closeted agony buffeted only by the love and compassion they are able to muster for each other.<sup>47</sup>

The automobile functions as a metaphor for limits in “Racing” at a point in time in which hopes were deflated and the price of energy was inflated. Tinkering with cars was one of the great postwar refuges for the victims of Fordism and Taylorism—the last place for armchair craftsmen to use their hands against the swelling tide of the “degradation of work.” As Dewey Burton readily grasped, car building and modifying was a hobby, a preoccupation to prevent the dire truths of the assembly line from creeping in, a tool to prevent the all-powerful “they” of the shop floor from taking over. No matter how many hot rods were built or modified, however, it could not prevent the inevitable: “But now there’s wrinkles around my baby’s eyes / And she cries herself to sleep at night” laments Springsteen. “She sits on the porch of her daddy’s house / But all her pretty dreams are torn / She stares off alone into the night / With the eyes of one who hates for just being born.” The song ends with the narrator driving off toward the sea with his aging “girl” to “wash these sins off our hands.” The sense of pain and isolation remains inescapable. As Jim Curtis argues, the holy trinity of Girl, Car, and Night are broken. If “Dancing in the Street” made African-Americans visible, “Racing in the Street” portrayed the white working class in a desperate and dark silence—perhaps even a new invisible man.<sup>48</sup>

Yet Springsteen is about nothing if not faith. In the title track to *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, his main character is alone on the hill, struggling against all odds. As opposed to the plodding pace of “Racing,” “Darkness” is delivered with all of the faith and power that is rock ‘n’ roll. In performance, the individual pain becomes collective triumph as the fans respond to the promise of a soul-based deliverance from the darkness. His character is alone, on a hill, determined to struggle forward. Forward toward what—other than simple survival—is unknown:

*Tonight I'll be on that hill 'cause I can't stop  
I'll be on that hill with everything I got  
Lives on the line where dreams are found and lost  
I'll be there on time and I'll pay the cost  
For wanting things that can only be found  
In the darkness on the edge of town*

He is invisible in the night, searching for what comes with great sacrifice but appears to promise little in the way of payoff. This working-class hero is a

perpetual motion machine of struggle, pushing toward what may be a fruitless hope.

The core theme that spans much of Springsteen's working-class studies is the disconnection—real and feared—of working people from the things that ground them: job, family, home, and community. “I live now only with strangers,” he sings in “Streets of Fire,” “I talk to only strangers / I walk with angels that have no place.” As Springsteen explained, “I think what happened during the seventies was that, first of all, the hustle became legitimized”—and he did not mean the disco dance. By the time of his follow up *The River* (1980), when his character receives his “union card and a wedding coat” for his nineteenth birthday, that union card was a symbol of a failure to get out, a source of entrapment. What was a source of material liberation in the 1930s, membership in a trade union, had become a symbol of those *not* chosen, those left behind.<sup>49</sup>

## VI

Just before the complete economic collapse of Akron's faltering rubber tire industry, the improbably vibrant music scene of eastern Ohio coughed up a phenomenon that was part rock band, part postindustrial ideology, part sci-fi kitsch, and part media art known as Devo. Springsteen may be the most iconic—and arguably, romantic—artist to examine working-class communities under siege in the 1970s, but he was known to show up in the late seventies to witness Devo's stone-cold vivisection of American culture. The band neither criticized nor shied away from the socio-economic failures they saw around them; instead, explicitly rejecting the neo-realism of a Springsteen, Devo embraced the decline, marching fearlessly into the oblivion of repetition, commodification, and vacant fun. The band was named after the process of “de-evolution” in which humankind, descended from brain-eating apes, was claimed to be regressing toward some backward state. Devo neither praised the glory days nor held out hope for what was about to unfold; for the band, there was little salvageable from the past, little romance in the present, and even less in the offerings of the future. “Of all the bands who came from the underground and made it in the mainstream,” declared Kurt Cobain later, “Devo were the most challenging and subversive of all.” That subversion had little to do with working-class solidarity or an assault on capitalism.<sup>50</sup>

Devo emerged at the time when rock 'n' roll was something akin to the aural wallpaper of American life, and they challenged stadium "cock rock" by performing as tweeky, demasculinized oddballs. Acting like spasmodic—if synchronized—short-circuited mutants in industrial jumpsuits and 3-D industrial safety goggles, the members of Devo presented "a deliberately opaque vision of mass braintdeath" with an infectious pop drive. As pioneers in the music video genre, they made their music into a visual artistic experience, and their performances exhibited unnervingly high levels of control and discipline. Their Dadaesque anti-agitprop, as front man Mark Mothersbaugh put it, was a sort of "guerrilla behavioralist experiment," and the band's music, as they repeatedly said, was "the important sound of things falling apart."<sup>51</sup>

The pop eggheads' first video performance, *In the Beginning Was the End: The Truth About De-evolution*, which won a prize at the 1976 Ann Arbor film festival, contained two separate songs: their cover of "Secret Agent Man" and their breakthrough, "Jocko Homo." The video begins with band members as bored and indifferent factory workers doing their repetitive labors while waiting for quitting time. Realizing the hour has finally arrived, they hop into their beat-up car, leaving the rusting hulk of a factory behind them. Still wearing their blue workmen's suits and eerie clear face masks (except for Mothersbaugh, who appears in the creepy man-child Booji Boy mask that will become a Devo staple), they head to a broken down club to play "Secret Agent Man." The song is an oddly brilliant choice, retooling the sixties pop narrative as radical critique: "They've given me a number / But they've taken away my name / I've got one hell of a job to perform for the U.S. of A." The original song of adventure and dedication to the security state becomes, in their hands, a trenchant critique of American identity and fantasy. "Every night and day / I salute the flag and say / Thank you Jesus / Cause I'm a secret agent man." The performance of the song is interspersed with a panoply of wild visuals—two men in monkey masks spanking a waitress with Nixon and Mao ping pong paddles, a clichéd rock star playing a double-neck guitar, Booji Boy disco dancing with a waitress, an ape eating a popsicle.

The "Jocko Homo" half of the film starts as Booji Boy urgently runs through an Akron parking lot and up the fire escape in front of a massive mural proclaiming "Shine on America." Once in the office, he meets General Boy and gives him the news. "In the past this information has been suppressed," explains the General, "but now it can be told. Every man, woman, and mutant on this planet shall know the truth about de-evolution." Named

after an obscure anti-evolutionary pamphlet from the twenties, *Jocko-Homo Heavenbound* (1924) by B.H. Shaddock, the song turns to a mad scientist—Mothersbaugh again—lecturing at Kent State with the medical classroom bordering on a riot. The professor asks “Are we not men?” with exclamations of “We are Devo!” ricocheting in a call and response ritual as far removed from its origins in the black church as one might get.

“Are we not men?” a question focused more on evolution than masculinity, informs all of Devo’s creative works. The question came from the 1933 sci-fi horror film *Island of the Lost Souls* (adapted from H.G. Wells’ *The Island of Dr. Moreau*) where scientific experiments to turn animals into humans on a remote island go terribly awry. There the doctor creates horrific man-beasts, and one of them, played by Bela Lugosi, asks, “Are we not men?” The mutant creatures eventually storm the doctor’s compound and perform a savage bloodbath of revenge.

For Devo, the working class people of Akron were much like the evolutionary disasters of the *Island of the Lost Souls*. “Those mutants were fucked with,” the band explained. “They looked like people from Akron.” The industrial landscape for the twin videos of *In the Beginning was the End* “worked as an art-directed backdrop for this kind of music we were making,” band member Jerry Casale said about the dying rubber town where the glory days of economic success meant sweeping up the black tire soot from workers’ front porches. It “had this hellish, depressing patina. . . . and the people in Akron seemed—their spirits were depressed; they were desperate; their kids were kind of like the characters in the *Island of Lost Souls* that rebelled in the pit. In other words, they were just ready to go over the edge at any moment. They were so beaten down that they were gonna freak out. And it fit in with the early-20th century art movements—Expressionism, Dada and others that were influenced by those kinds of environments in Germany and England. We had our very own backyard version of it. A rubber version.”<sup>52</sup>

Not so ironically, the terrain that fostered Devo’s surrender of agency was the same place that the American working-class hero had originally come of age. Akron was the genesis point for the dramatic sit downs, the mass pickets in sub-zero temperatures, and the guerrilla warfare against the rubber tire magnates in the 1930s that made the tire builders “the first to fight their way to freedom,” in the words of one chronicler. Their struggle blazed the path for the rest of industrial America to join the great leap forward in



working-class organizing in the thirties—the coming of the CIO. As one of the key flashpoints in labor history, the workers opened up a new world of opportunity, and the city in turn pried open the hope of unionization for the rest of the nation's industrial workers. Using words like pride, class, skill, and freedom, which Devo would later only be able to use with irony, Ruth McKenney romantically extolled the meaning of the rubber workers' victory in Akron in the 1930s:

The CIO was first a bulwark for the working people of Akron and, after them, for the small businessman who was dependent upon their wages; but beyond that, union organization taught the rubberworker pride of class. . . . Mass industry has not crushed the spirit of the free-born. Rubberworkers, no matter how skillfully they work on the conveyor belt, are not robots. A membership card in the [union] is the rubberworker's declaration of freedom. The union is the answer of American workingmen to the impersonal dictatorship of a far-away Board of Directors. . . . the rubberworker has learned how to defend liberty. In his hands, and in the hands of his friends and allies everywhere, lies the future of our country.<sup>53</sup>

Fast forward four decades, and Devo, staring out at the same location before them, stripped their subjects not just of romance but even their humanity, declaring the citizens of Akron (and themselves) to be mere "Spuds." The days of such working-class heroics, and the artistic and political popular front that supported them, had gone the way of the smoldering stench of the prosperous rubber tire industry—and the wages and the jobs that accompanied them—receding into rusting industrial hulks and boarded up downtown windows. A city in which nearly two out of three workers once carried union cards, in an exceptional distribution of class power, had since lost the entire automobile tire industry by the late seventies and was en route to losing the rest of tire production by the early eighties.

The culture that Devo identified was as vacuous as the empty hulking tire factories around them. This one-time postwar success story was based on the two things that Devo went on to mock with absolute irreverence: industrial and consumer cultures. These were the twin pillars of the high modern postwar success story in America, the high tide of American white guy, lunch-bucket labor liberalism that Devo watched in the throes of death. Not to say the promise of industrialism and consumerism did not have their

massive hollow spots, but simply that they appeared all the more absurd after the hope had been drained from them. As fellow Akron rocker Chrissie Hynde of the Pretenders put it, when she went back to Akron, "My city was gone / There was no train station / There was no downtown . . . A O, way to go, Ohio."

According to Devo, there was no nobility in the suffering of the people, no working-class agency—just regression to corporate stasis, blue collar fading to colorless grey. As one critic put it, Devo "astutely observed that American consumer society had become enslaved to some falsely idealized sense of the 'good life' that supposedly could be attained through a stringent, mechanized work ethic and the conspicuous consumption of material products and goods." And that was when things were going well. Devo's brilliantly robotic, dehumanized, musical and video landscape is a product of life saturated in a corporate culture. Their hometown was so dominated by the rubber tire industry that a worker could "wake up at a house in Goodyear Heights, settle into a car with Goodyear tires, drive down Goodyear Boulevard to the Goodyear factory, grab a quick haircut at the Goodyear barber-shop before clocking in at the Goodyear plant, then drive home later with the Goodyear blimp watching above." "Look we are spuds," explained one of the band members. "We're very average looking, normal gene pool. In Akron, it's the Goodyear Museum and the Soapbox Derby and McDonald's and women in hair rollers beating their kids in supermarkets. We were products of it and used it."<sup>54</sup>

Akron's disillusioned pallor was only part of the equation of origins—the rest belonged to the vibrant arts scene at Kent State University and the tragic shooting of four student protestors there by the Ohio National Guard. "I would not have started the idea of Devo unless [the shootings] had happened," explained Jerry Casale. The shooting "was just the defining moment. Until then I might've left my hair long and been a hippie. When you start to see the real way everything works, and the insidious nature of power, corruption, injustice, brute force, you realize it's just all primate behavior." The local events and national response, explained the band, "showed human beings at their worst. It was real Devo."<sup>55</sup>

The sixty-seven shots unleashed in the infamous thirteen seconds at Kent State University were the bloodiest battle of the early seventies internecine class war: angry and desperate blue-collar students at the modern multiversity, outraged by the escalation of the war into Cambodia, confronted by a

terrified National Guard filled with blue-collar kids avoiding the draft, all of which earned the enmity of the “Silent Majority” in Kent and the nation. Polling suggested that a large majority of the nation blamed the protestors for their own deaths; “the only mistake they made was not to shoot all the students and then start in on the faculty” was a popular sentiment. Students compared it to *Easy Rider*—the apocalyptic revenge of the rednecks upon the counterculture. It then spilled into the streets of the financial district of New York in the notorious Hard Hat Riot as the construction workers pursued war protestors upset about the Kent State killings through lower Manhattan. This was followed by a month of pro-Nixon rallies. When Nixon named the head of the New York building trades, who promoted the demonstrations, to the position of secretary of labor, the deal was done. “I’m scared,” explained one student. “If this is what the class struggle is all about . . . there’s something wrong somewhere.” No wonder Devo embraced the politics of the absurd.<sup>56</sup>

Yet Devo played their status politics from both ends. The references to “spuds”—as an epithet for themselves and others—placed them in a category with basic earth-dwelling humanity, but the band, like much of new wave, was fundamentally elitist in many ways. The “simple act of pointing out dullards put them in a position of superiority,” explains the band’s historian. In Devo’s lexicon, “there were Readers, and there were Breeders, and it’s safe to assume Devo didn’t consider themselves Breeders.” The band’s performances toyed with “a certain populism,” even as they disdained the populace. The concept of “Real humans” was a moniker of a bygone era and “rebellion” an “outmoded and obsolete” artifact. While simultaneously rejecting rebellion and detesting the way ordinary people lived (“getting fat, getting mellow, getting drugged out, getting married. Getting real Devo”) they left themselves a space to be part and parcel of the system they were as much entwined in as critical of. Rather than advancing into the promise of modernity, according to Devo, the nation and its workers were turning into a bunch of idiotic, infantile, backward sliding stooges, and all the band could do was buckle in for the ride.<sup>57</sup>

For Devo, like the social critic Jean Baudrillard, the autonomous position of critique was gone; there was nothing outside of the system—no leverage, no purchase, no vantage point. “We learned something from the hippies that, unfortunately, the punks at the same time didn’t learn,” explained Mothersbaugh, “and that is that rebellion is obsolete. In a healthy capitalistic

world, rebellion is just something else to market." When the band covered the Rolling Stones' "Satisfaction" in a brilliant testament to how white the nation's rock could be, they also delivered one of the finest comments on the moment: a "shriveling, ice-cold absurdity [that] might not define the Seventies as much as jump the gun on the Eighties."<sup>58</sup>

## VII

Just above Lordstown on the list of the seventies' most famous labor disputes is the organizing drive at J.P. Stevens. The film that captured the initial hope of these events was the remarkable, Academy Award-winning *Norma Rae* (1979). Sally Field earned an Oscar for her portrayal of the title character, which, for a Hollywood production, was modeled very closely on one of the real protagonists from the 1974 organizing drive: labor activist Crystal Lee Sutton. Like other films of the blue-collar seventies, the realism in *Norma Rae* is particularly real: she did stand on that table and hold a UNION sign over her head, the police did take her to jail, the campaign did overcome the divisiveness of race while still beginning in an all-black church, and she did have the famous heart-to-heart with her children in which she confessed all of her past indiscretions so that they would not be hurt by the town gossiping about her. Most of all, the film does accurately trace Crystal Lee's rising consciousness as both a woman and a labor organizer and does an extraordinary job of showing the difficulties in union organizing. Director Martin Ritt also did a masterful job in capturing the confinement, the noise, and the struggles of southern mill town life.

*Norma Rae* was thus a distinct oddity in seventies popular culture: an optimistic message about the capacity of working people and one of the very few unabashedly pro-labor movies of the decade. As film critic Stanley Kauffmann put it, "Norma Rae shows that, at least within the frame of limited objectives, heroism is still possible, which means that hope is still possible."<sup>59</sup>

Several issues make *Norma Rae* unique, and the first was director Martin Ritt. While most of the pieces discussed in this book were by filmmakers coming out of the New Left and auteur cultures, Ritt was one of the very few remaining filmmakers coming out of the *Old Left*. His credentials were complete: he was a veteran of both WPA theater and Group Theater, an as-

sistant stage manager on Clifford Odets' *Golden Boy*, and, if not a member of the Communist Party, certainly a fellow traveler and a victim of the Hollywood blacklist. This places him in a completely different political tradition than the other artists and helps to account for his other sympathetic portraits of the working class in the 1970s in *The Molly Maguires* (1970) and *Sunder* (1972). By the 1970s, Martin Ritt was, in essence, an anachronism making wonderfully anachronistic projects. For Ritt, the power of Crystal Lee's story, which first surfaced the *New York Times*, was literally the melding of thirties realism with the new social movements of the seventies—a conscious intervention into the missing dialectical synthesis of the seventies. “When I first heard about the situation in this industry,” Ritt wrote, “I could not believe that I was not reading a period piece, and was further excited to find how many women were in the forefront of the struggle for civil and economic rights.” No matter how compelling the mill drama was, however, the issues never would have made it to the screen had Fox studios not been flush with cash after the runaway success of *Star Wars*.<sup>60</sup>

In addition to Ritt's exceptionalism, one of the most important aspects of the film is the subtle way that both individualism and feminism subtly trump workerism in the film. Rather than creating a solid foundation for the merging of gender and class, as Ritt had hoped for, this film was backed and marketed as a women's picture. Like all Hollywood productions, the film focused on the rising consciousness of the lead heroine at the expense of the rest of the workers' efforts. Crystal Lee found this so problematic that she came close to suing Martin Ritt and launching a competing narrative of the events in collaboration with the Academy Award-winning documentary filmmaker Barbara Kopple. The narration of individual uplift also became the center of the marketing strategy. There were, for instance, two promotional posters for the film. One was a classic social-realist image with Sally Field's shadowy face behind a large mill, and the other was Sally Field as a liberated woman with up-stretched arms feeling happy and free (a scene that never even happened in the film). The former was almost never used, while the latter was *the* promotional image for the movie. The overdub for the film's trailer sounded like it was straight out of *Saturday Night Fever*: “Norma Rae is a survivor and for the first time in her life she has the chance to become something more—a winner!” In fact, the up-stretched arms image of Sally Field was even used as an advertisement for

a new brand of (non-union!) women's clothing: Norma Rae jeans: "The Work n Class jeans and slacks at the Work n Class price." As the historian Robert Brent Toplin sums up, *Norma Rae* was promoted as "a story about a female 'Rocky' and as a film that exuded feminist spirit while not overtly preaching feminism."<sup>61</sup>

Suggestions as to the gender-class problem can also be found in the male lead. In the film, Norma Rae's fictionalized union mentor, Reuben Warsovsky, is a New York intellectual who reads poetry, enjoys opera, and eats Chinese food. Ruben has all of the cultural trappings of the smart-talking but ultimately new sensitive male of the seventies—a sort of upper-West Side Jewish Alan Alda. He is not only prepared to accept a liberated woman, but he is a man who can help in the process of consciousness raising. As one film critic ranted, "Despite its claim to being a serious examination of the working man's situation, *Norma Rae* is really a post-women's lib love story. A man representing a superior culture (political awareness, good literature) enlightens a downtrodden woman and then graciously refuses to take advantage of her: Cinderella, with a truly liberating ending, he frees her from her chains and from himself as well."<sup>62</sup>

Crystal Lee continues to have deep respect for the real Reuben, a man named Eli Ziskevich, whom she has called "the most intelligent person I've ever met." The real union organizer, however, was a former coal miner who could not have been more different than the hip New Yorker. Criticizing the groovy, sixties-influenced re-invention of his image on film, he recalled, "Sneakers, I didn't wear. I don't happen to own a pair of jeans. I'm pretty conservative in my dress and I've never worn what they call a shoulder bag in my life, and I stay away from people who wear shoulder bags. He [his fictional representation] would have never worked for me because, frankly, I would have fired him." By the 1970s, was it impossible for a man of old-school union sympathies—rather than a man of post-sixties therapeutic self-awareness and literacy—to be able to play a role in Crystal Lee's transformation?<sup>63</sup>

As one of the best and most sympathetic portraits of work and unions in mainstream American cinema made since *Grapes of Wrath*, *Norma Rae* stands as an exception to the rule of the 1970s. As Crystal Lee argued, she may not have seen a nickel from its production, it may not have dealt with the other workers adequately (choosing instead to focus on her as the hero), and it failed to deal with Brown Lung disease, one of the core issues in the mills during the seventies. But, as she explained despite her ambivalence, "It

made me laugh and it made me cry. . . . It's the best pro-union movie ever made and for that I'm grateful."<sup>64</sup>

Gender overwhelms class more definitively in the popular pink-collar farce *9 to 5* (1980), which was also based on the real experiences—and revenge fantasies—of women office workers. In this film, three office workers, played by an amazing ensemble cast (Lily Tomlin, Jane Fonda, and Dolly Parton), fantasize about exacting revenge on their chauvinist boss in an often hilarious romp through the demeaning world of patriarchal corporate culture. The boss (Dabney Coleman), as the workers call him, is a “sexist, egotistical, lying, hypocritical bigot.” As the three co-workers get very stoned (on a single joint), they fantasize about what style of torturous treatment they would like to inflict upon him as the film fades to some wonderful dream/fantasy sequences. Dolly Parton’s character, the victim of endless sexual advances, wants to hog tie him like a Wild West heroine; Jane Fonda dreams of hunting him down like a safari animal; and, in the best of the lot, Lily Tomlin’s character poisons him in Snow-White-style animation while little furry woodland creatures look on. Slowly, their fantasies come true throughout the movie, and they have to deal with the consequences. As Violet (Lily Tomlin) says, “I killed the boss. Do you think they’re not going to fire me for that?” The end result is a screwball comedy in which the office workers manage to take hold of the corporate reins and remake the office altogether by introducing flex time, day care, and a host of reforms while stashing the idiot boss away in a crazy S&M rig made out of an electric garage door opener.

The idea for the farcical *9 to 5* also came from the struggles of real women office workers. The movie was based on interviews of a group of Cleveland office workers called Working Women. “Jane [Fonda] wanted to know more about what office workers thought about their jobs,” recalled organizer Karen Nussbaum, “and so early on, we invited her to come to Cleveland.” There, about forty office workers, Fonda, Nussbaum, and a script writer spent a long night discussing women’s problems with the boss on the job. “And then,” explained Nussbaum, “ultimately, every detail in the movie, with the exception of hanging the boss up by a garage opener system, actually came from these women.” The film helped bust open an issue—sexual discrimination and harassment on the job—that was just beginning to get recognition. “You had to fight hard on this issue about whether there was discrimination or not,” continued Nussbaum, “and then Jane Fonda makes a movie that mocks discrimination in the workplace and the argument is over, because

women have been poised on the edge of their chairs, ready to understand it this way and then this capped it and made it, the behavior of the bosses and the discrimination, the object of ridicule." It switched the debate from whether the problem existed to what to do about it. Nussbaum and Fonda did national tours to support the film and the cause, hitting the local morning talk shows. "It was the best example I've ever seen of popular culture helping to lift organization and movement," concluded Nussbaum.<sup>65</sup>

What is fascinating about *9 to 5* is the degree to which it succeeds wonderfully as a feminist comedy but fails as a film about class—better and female management is all that is needed. In fact, compared with movies like the similar comedic workplace fantasy *The Devil and Miss Jones* (1941) (and its connections to the real-life Woolworth sit-down strikes of 1937) *9 to 5* could have been produced in a modern Human Resources Department. As Michael Rogin explains, *The Devil and Miss Jones* "affirms two new working-class institutions, union organization at work and urban public pleasure. The result is not a traditional carnivalesque but one that generates a new deal." In the hands of Jane Fonda, who piloted *9 to 5* from idea to screen, the film advocates new solutions outside of the New Deal by making the movie about women's rights stripped of any connection to the political economy. "Forget the energy crisis, inflation, recession, job shortages, the disappointing sales of the Chrysler 'K,' urban blight and the price of gold," exclaimed the *New York Times* reviewer; "There's no problem with capitalism that these three liberated Nancy Drews can't solve if they don't have to keep running out to get coffee for their superiors." Indeed, the bad guy here is not capitalism at all, but sexism stripped of its economic setting. Once the sexist pig of a boss is removed from power, and a fine thing that, feminism is allowed to work its magic in the transformation of the workplace. Indeed, enlightened feminism is compatible with the modern workplace where unionism is not. As the *Times* reviewer continues, the film actually inverted the social-realist message for the seventies: *9 to 5* "begins as satire, slips uncertainly into farce . . . and concludes by waving the flag of feminism as earnestly as Russian farmers used to wave the hammer-and-sickle at the end of movies about collective farming."<sup>66</sup>



## VIII

“The world promised in the 1950s, a world apparently on the verge of realization in 1965, seemed like a cruel joke by 1975,” explained rock critic Greil Marcus in his eclectic world history of the underground score of dissent, *Lipstick Traces*. “Panic set in . . . so did the urge to seek revenge.” While the punks Marcus celebrated went on rampages of brilliant anger, the broader polity sought their comfort in the overstuffed armchairs of nostalgia.

For years Ford autoworker Dewey and his wife Ilona held annual parties in honor of one of the first popcorn blockbusters of the 1970s, George Lucas’s rock ’n’ roll nostalgia tour, *American Graffiti* (1973). Although made in the seventies, the film was the inauguration of that decade’s love affair with the “Happy Days” of the fifties (though set in 1962, arguably the last year of the “fifties”). As the United States teetered on what Francis Wheen calls the “pungent mélange of apocalyptic dread and conspiratorial fear” of the seventies, Lucas created a mythic, comic book community of youth untainted by parents, war, civil rights, or protest. Cruising on the strip in a hot rod, searching for the blond in the white T-Bird, listening to the Wolfman spin disks, and drag racing was all there was to be concerned about. On the last night of cruising before heading off to college—and on to Vietnam, urban riots, Watergate, and energy crises—the assemblage of characters provide the audience with what they want most: permission to forget.<sup>67</sup>

Lucas’s successful exploitation of his audience’s longing for safety and predictability made *American Graffiti*’s “effacement of history,” as Fredric Jameson argues, the “inaugural film of postmodern nostalgia.” The music (fifties rock ’n’ roll) and the setting (Modesto, California) serve to convey a mood but not a history, a style disembodied from conflict, a recent past unconnected to the present. Yet not completely so. The James Dean like character, John Milner (Paul Le Mat), visits a foreboding car graveyard strewn with totaled dragsters. “The whole strip is shrinking,” he laments. It was an appropriate epitaph for the exact moment that the oil embargo was brewing, bringing an end to a wave of car culture. The symbol of America’s strength was becoming the symbol of its decadence.<sup>68</sup>

For Dewey Burton, *American Graffiti* captured “the last time the world was ran right.” The combination of design, manufacture, power, influence, speed, pay, glory, purpose, reward, and power all made sense. In the disorganized

culture of post-1970s capitalism, fifties auto culture was Dewey Burton's Archimedean point, the position from which all the world might be made sensible. His own custom hot rods function as the material embodiment of that alternative world.

There was one person who, as if captured in a cultural bell jar and protected from the upheavals of history, unified the late postwar blue-collar narrative: one time rock 'n' roll rebel, Elvis Presley. To many he was a gaudy joke by mid decade, but if the majority of white working people got their vote, the real working-class hero of the postwar era would not have been Bruce Springsteen or John Lennon (both of whom were too serious to carry the title) but Elvis. Yet it was not the man who once kicked down the nation's doors of sexual mores and square taste in 1956, who freed the teenage body, and performed the synthesis of the nation's racial dialectics but who, by the time of the 1970s, had become a beacon of safety, whiteness, and postwar affluence. No matter how many top hits he had or B movies Colonel Parker stuck him in, Elvis remained loved as the "sharecropper's son in the big house," that truck driver who made it big. When he arrived to stardom he brought his friends, and he did not donate his wealth away to elusive foundations but showered it freely upon friends and strangers alike, bestowing Cadillacs and expensive jewelry on those who happened to be within eyesight, while building a gaudy personal empire and playground that flew in the face of every kind of taste—except that of the people.<sup>69</sup>

When Elvis died in 1977, he was grossly overweight and with the better part of a pharmacy running through his veins—"bloated by the American ambrosia—peanut butter, Pepsi, pills and success," as *Newsweek* put it. A thousand and one newspapers wondered what happened to the glory days of the "King" who once oozed "sexuality and redneck chic," as the *Philadelphia Inquirer* recalled; "The Elvis Presley of 1956 was a lean, mean, whip-like young man, whose greasy hair, sideburns, white pants, purple shirts and all around low-rent, drugstore-hood appearance set teenage America on fire." Transformed into the "hillbilly Faust" when he sold his soul to the Colonel, he lost his revolutionary powers of cultural transformation just when the nation was beginning to think about the barricades. When he returned to touring in the seventies, he often simply performed Elvis Presley performing Elvis in rudimentary ways, but other times he belted out some of the most transcendent shows of his career. As his gluttony even pushed him from his standing as a Las Vegas spectacle, he began touring the little cities across

the nation by mid decade, hitting the types of places that never would have had a visit from the King otherwise, declaring his love for both the people and the establishment all along the way.<sup>70</sup>

Seventies Elvis became a sacrament for those, like the King himself, whose gratitude for postwar success had mutated into a defensive conservatism. The performer who had dissolved the adhesives of American culture, who sexualized performance, mixed the races, and even gave straight male fans what Lester Bangs called an “erection of the heart” had by the seventies become the traditionalist, the patriot, the totem of once great dreams. His many concerts—from the massive 1973 television extravaganza “Aloha from Hawaii” to his last swing through life in places like Lincoln, Rapid City, Montgomery, and Johnson City—served, as Greil Marcus explained, as “a kind of unifying ritual, as if Elvis, through his charisma and commitment, could bind the nation’s wounds and heal the divisions that had racked America since the mid-1960s.” By the 1970s, Elvis had become a living repository of fifties virtue, a time capsule of values, a specimen preserved throughout the cultural turmoil of the sixties who reemerged, however bloated, gilded, caped, and bell-bottomed, singing the good old stuff to women in beehive hairdos, men who still buzz cut their hair, and rock fans who needed a glimpse of where it all began. His outlandish costumes and garish sets expressed Elvis’ unique combination of the southern, the working class, and the evangelical along with a “penchant for excess derived from the ‘populuxe’ aesthetic of postwar consumer culture.”<sup>71</sup>

As one of Elvis’ biographers wrote, many working class fans “had lived through dramatic changes during the postwar economic boom, when widespread affluence had lifted countless poor and working-class people into the ranks of the comfortable middle class. In a sense, Elvis’s success epitomized their own. . . . The distance many had traveled from their often humble origins left them nostalgic and sentimental, emotions expressly evoked by Elvis’s show[s].” When he died in Graceland in August 1977, so did a point of cultural unity, a symbol of the postwar dream. In the midst of a key moment of cultural breakup, he was, arguably, the last unifying vision of what the nation was for white working-class America. As cultural tastes scattered into its many cul-de-sacs in the seventies, he was the only figure capable of carrying the crown. In the King’s passing, the irrepressible rock critic Lester Bangs found the unhinging of the nation’s culture and arguably the final word on a postwar dream gone bad:

We will continue to fragment in this manner, because solipsism holds all the cards at present; it is a king whose domain engulfs even Elvis's. But I can guarantee you one thing: we will never again agree on anything as we agreed on Elvis. So I won't bother saying good-bye to his corpse. I will say goodbye to you.<sup>72</sup>