

# WHIP IT!

## Rock 'n' roll resurgence sparks punk trend

By Renee Tawa



Photo by M. J. Koprasika

There is a prevailing feeling in rock 'n' roll circles that "something" is happening out there-- something on the scale of Beatlesque revolutionary period in music. It is rolling in fast, with increasing ferocity, like the tide before a storm, gathering up strength and momentum before it hits shore.

The word in rock music circles is that it has hit, and it has hit hard; and the consensus is - especially in trend-setting Los Angeles - that it is the most exciting thing to happen in rock 'n' roll music in a long time. "It" is the new wave - the new wave of rock music that has caused ripples of enthusiasm to spread across a sea of rock music lovers and has, in its course, swept the music industry off its feet. "This new wave thing is unbelievable," said enthusiastic Brea Musicland employee Khrys Keating, whose record store "can't keep Devo in stock."

The words "new wave," however, can only serve as a broad definition to describe a new trend among rock bands to incorporate all forms of rock music - rockabilly, rhythm and blues and a return to 60s style simplicity - in an exciting, innovative way. Punk rock, which came about as an offspring of this new music trend, is now considered obsolete. Gene Morgan, of Placentia's Music Plus said, "Punk and new wave are blending into one. They're becoming homogenized and punk is phasing out."

This trend in music is a result of several unexplainable factors. The most offered explanation is that rock audiences became bored and restless in the late 70s; rock 'n' roll had reached a stagnant state, as dismal record sales proved. Rock audiences were getting tired of the same commercial, mainstream fluff; the music had lost its original charm and personality in the impersonal era of rock superstars and big stadium shows. "New wave is a return to the original spirit of rock 'n' roll," said *Los Angeles Times* pop music critic Robert Hilburn. "It's that same old Presley-to-Stones tradition. The hard-core spirit of rock faded in the 70s. New wave music is a reaction to 70s music."

The new wave scene has literally exploded in Los Angeles. More than 250 bands perform in the dozen or so clubs within the Los Angeles area, including the Troubadour, Madame Wong's, the Starwood, the Whisky and Costa Mesa's Cuckoo's Nest among others.

Since Los Angeles' entry into the new wave scene nearly three years ago at the now defunct nightclub, the Masque, dozens of local bands have sprung up, reviving the Los Angeles club circuit. At

first, the Masque was the only outlet for new wave bands as L.A.'s nightclub scene began to phase out, showcasing only bands with record contracts. But in the past year-and-a-half, more than 30 L.A. bands have been signed to record companies- more, perhaps, than any other comparable era in recent rock history.

"There has been a real change in the musical influence in Los Angeles," said Maryanne Morino of the Whisky . "X (new wave group) has become popular for everyone now, their appeal is much larger. When we have X here, we don't just get hardcore punk rockers." A check at the Starwood on a slow Monday night found a diverse crowd, ranging from middle-aged men in business suits and neckties, enjoying a drink from their tables, to punk rockers in leopard skin pants, pogoing enthusiastically on the dance floor to the Rubber City Rebels.

Since those early days at the Masque, there has been a noticeable improvement in public acceptance of new wave bands. "There's much more of a calling for it in the Los Angeles market," said Rick Carroll, program director at KROQ (106.7 FM). "The goal of the station is to emphasize modern rock and to de-emphasize oldies."

But KROQ is one of the few radio stations to give new wave music and new bands airplay. "There's so much resistance in radio airplay," said the *Times'* Hilburn. "New wave music will happen if the audience will respond, and that can only be through airplay. It'll be an interesting thing to see if the artistry in new wave will take over, or if the demographic commercialization of radio will."

FM radio, once thought to be a viable alternative to the creampuff sounds of the AM dial, has lately succumbed to commercial pressures where skilled research in "demographics" and "target audiences" are the determining factors in making up airplay lists.

"It's a vicious circle," explained Bruce Ravid of Capitol Records. "Radio stations want bands that are signed and we want bands that will get airplay." Michael Barackman, director of artists-and-repertoire (A&R) at Planet agreed. "The reality is that a record company has to break even on an act. The bigger companies that have someone like Billy Joel can afford to take a chance on a new, artistic act. But you want to turn some sort of a profit. That means selling 75,000 albums. You have to keep the mainstream appeal factor in mind."

It is that "mainstream appeal factor" that A&R executives look for when scouting bands. Peter Philbin, Columbia A&R, takes a refreshing view. "I meet with an



Photo by M. J. Kapustka

**PUNKERS: Bizarre hairstyles, heavy makeup and outlandish costumes characterize the "punk" cultural revolution in Southern California.**

average of 30 bands per week," he said. "When you see a band, you have to ask yourself, 'Does the band have something worth saying and do you believe them?' The number one thing that I look for is individuals that can perform...they have to hit me in the heart."

One of the big questions surrounding the fate of new wave music is whether or not new wave bands can keep their originality and new approaches while still appealing to the mainstream pop audience whose album buying habits are the determinants of success. Record companies wager around \$250,000 in recording costs, distribution and promotion tour expense every time they sign a new band. That's an expensive investment to make in a new band when it would be just as easy to stick with the bands that follow the proven commercial pop formula a la Foreigner.

Also, given the chance, there is a slew of talented L.A. bands that have the potential to "make it." The most commonly mentioned ones are Wall of Voodoo, with their eerie electronic emphasis; the Motels, with dynamic lead singer Martha Davis; the pop, yet explosive Plimsouls; the R&B based Busboys; The Rubber City Rebels, an aggressive heavy-metal band; and the rockabilly sounding Blasters.

But the band that is most often mentioned- and the one that may be the only recent L.A. band besides Pasadena's Van Halen and the Knack to have a real impact on the national rock 'n' roll scene as New

York's Pretenders or England's Sex Pistols have had - is X.

Their music emphasizes dark, social themes in songs like "Sex and Dying in High Society" and "The World's a Mess; It's in My Kiss."

Whether or not avant-garde bands like X will endure remains to be seen. Hopefully, radio and record companies will recognize the importance of the new wave sound coming out from key cities across the country- Chicago, New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles. One gets a feeling of *deja vu* in evaluating today's rock music scene with that of the '60s where rock music exploded in Britain with Cream, Led Zeppelin and Jimi Hendrix; in New York with Bob Dylan; in Los Angeles with the Doors, the Mamas and the Papas and the Byrds and in San Francisco with Jefferson Airplane and the Grateful Dead. These are the bands of the '60s that helped shape rock 'n' roll music as we know it today; these are the bands that many of the new wave groups draw their music from. Today's new wave bands are setting the standards for future rock 'n' roll bands to follow in the next chapter of rock music history.

And despite the seemingly closed-minded attitude of L.A.'s music industry, Los Angeles still remains the place to start in rock 'n' roll. X's first album was appropriately entitled *Los Angeles* because, says bassist John Doe, "it was the natural thing to call it. L.A. is where the music came from." **CU**