

Kevin Mattson

We're Not Here to Entertain: Punk Rock, Ronald Reagan, and THE REAL CULTURE WAR of 1980s America
(Oxford University Press, 2020),
Hardcover only, 380 pages, \$19.95.

Reviewed by Bill Brown¹

This book reminds us that the 1980s—in addition to being a period of reactionary politics (Reagan’s efforts to “make America great again”) and reactionary music (synthesizer-dominated pop and MTV videos)—was also the decade of “hardcore punk,” which was fiercely radical in its stripped-down, jet-propelled sound, its politically conscious and sometimes openly anarchist lyrics, and its jarring album covers, as well as in its intense rejection of corporate culture, mass-produced commodities, and top-down decision-making.

The “punk rock world,” a phrase that Mattson borrows from Kurt Cobain, not only included self-managed bands and homemade recordings, but also hundreds of fanzines, alternative spaces, and tour networks (friends with couches). It wasn’t only centered in New York and Los Angeles, but extended into many suburbs and small towns all over the country. And though it is sometimes thought to have been limited to straight white males, the “punk rock world” in fact included many women, Latinos, blacks, gays and lesbians.

¹ A needlessly shortened and partially butchered version of this already short review was published in the “Anarchist Review of Books” issue of *Fifth Estate* (Fall 2021), p. 6. Copy was cut to make room for a fairly large picture and a caption that had *nothing* to do with the review they allegedly accompanied: “Jordan Buckley and Steve Micciche of Every Time I Die,” is how the caption identified the musicians pictured, *neither of whom were active in the 1980s*. “More metalcore than punk [sic]” – *metalcore was a phenomenon of the 1990s, not the 1980s, and was never known for its politics* – “but the FE couldn’t resist the punk energy displayed.” FE is short for “Fifth Estate,” the publishers of which can’t seem to resist the impulse to *insert themselves into places where they don’t really belong*. (Certainly these questionable decisions were made and executed unilaterally, with zero input from the author, whose byline was also butchered.) Pro tip: *photos and captions should add to the articles they accompany, not subtract or distract attention from them*.

Written by an active participant in the scene—Mattson was both a punk musician and a co-founder of a political organization in the early 80s—this book carefully documents the hardcore punk eruption in chronological fashion. An excellent researcher and scholar, Mattson not only poured through libraries, but also interviewed more than a dozen fellow participants to write it.

Though there are some weaknesses in the writing, especially when music or political theory is being described, this book is sympathetic to its subject, packed full of interesting details, and relatively inexpensive.