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Burning £5m of punk memorabilia isn't anti-capitalist ... it's just dumb

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Corré blimey. Punk.London

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It is 40 years since punk came to the world's attention with the release of *Anarchy in the UK* by Sex Pistols on November 26, 1976. The band's infamous appearance five days later on Bill Grundy's Today Show, during which Steve Jones called him "a dirty bastard" live on air, caused a level of public outrage not seen since the early days of rock 'n' roll, and never quite repeated.

To coincide with this anniversary, Joe Corré, whose credentials as self-appointed guardian of punk culture rest exclusively on him being the son of notorious svengalis Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood, is burning £5m of his memorabilia collection in London on November 26.

Up in flames will go items including clothing belonging to Westwood and John Lydon in his Sex Pistols days, and a doll of Sid Vicious wearing a swastika. The purpose? To protest at punk's ongoing co-option and commodification by the capitalist mainstream, particularly this year's commemorative

Punk.London celebrations, which Corr  has decried in a series of public rants.

On one level, one can see where Corr  is coming from. The arrival of the Sex Pistols really was greeted with horror by the 1970s UK establishment, led by the Daily Mirror's landmark "The Filth and the Fury" front page. Concerned citizens were demanding a political ban of this "disgusting, obscene and morally subversive filth", and that punks be thrown in prison to protect the supposedly vulnerable youth and society. Punk was banned from the radio and many live venues until 1977-78.

Yet the classic tunes can now be heard on radio at any time of day. Many have become marketing's soundtrack of choice, selling everything from butter to women's clothing to motor and cycling equipment. McDonald's this year advertised its Big Flavour Wraps in Jamie Reid's iconic cut-up lettering style, with a pretty punk girl preparing them to the tune of the Buzzcocks' What Do I Get.

Most importantly, the same cultural institutions that once loathed punk as the lowest form of popular culture are behind Punk.London. Funded by no less than the UK Art Council, it has amounted to a whole year of events, exhibitions, gigs and art performances. The retro-styled models in the promotional material, which didn't resemble the original punks, looked designed to reiterate popular stereotypes and London punk clich s for the benefit of the nostalgic city tourism market.



Flame game. Punk.London



Punk.London promo shot. Punk.London

God save the punks

In this light, Corré's stunt makes sense – but for two major issues. Most obviously, the burning was announced in the Punk.London programme as early as March and is the festival's closing highlight. Corré himself, the founder of the Agent Provocateur lingerie chain, has been touring the TV news stations and breakfast shows for months promoting the event, backed by a stream of releases on his blog, social media and YouTube.

Not surprisingly, several original punks including Lydon have dismissed the protest. He called it the “self-centred, pompous and ludicrous publicity stunt by a narcissistic, lonely man”.

The second and less obvious objection is about the punk ethos. Far from being anti-capitalist, punk's inherent “three chords” DIY culture was initially based on the social capitalist belief that everyone should have the same opportunities. The mentality of “stop moaning, get off your lazy arse and start something” was a response by people feeling alienated from the marketplace.

It was all about encouraging individuals to express their individuality through their personal style, band, fanzine, record label, store, live venue or whatever. It was only later that parts of the hardcore and post-punk scenes would adopt an anti-capitalist ideology.

To protest against the supposed co-option of punk by mainstream culture is to misunderstand the essence of the movement. Apart from the blatant self-promotion, Corré seems to have bought into too many of the same myths, clichés and stereotypes that stem from the punk commodification he is “opposing”. Then again, given the role his parents played in creating and spreading many of these stories, what else would you expect?



Nostalgia London Sex Pistols