



BLACK FLAG, CIRCA 1980 (LEFT TO RIGHT): GREG GINN ON GUITAR, CHUCK DUKOWSKI ON BASS, DEZ CADENA UPFRONT.  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY GLEN E. FRIEDMAN

# THE CALIFORNIAN SAFETY PIN

EXCERPTS FROM A JOURNEY TO  
THE ORIGINS OF SKATE PUNK.

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I love doing this!” smiles Steve Olson, sweat dripping from his greying hair. It’s late March but the Los Angeles sun already burns as if it were July. Before I can ask what he’s talking about, he takes his lighter and hurls it down an alleyway, where it explodes on the asphalt with an ear-piercing blast. I’m surprised, slightly impressed, and a little bit confused.

I’ve come to Los Angeles to learn how, and why, skateboarding and punk rock came together in California and went on to become such a global force. My interest is not only personal. In a way, it’s my job. You see, as a grad student at the University of Cologne, I’ve come up with a nifty way of uniting what I ‘do’ with what I ‘love’: I’m writing a dissertation on skate punk. Sounds weird, right? Let me explain.

Like most kids growing up in Germany, I spent my childhood transfixed by all things USA; the TV I watched, the music I listened to, the magazines I read – everything I consumed was doused in Americana. And I loved it. Then something changed. A few months before my tenth birthday the so-called Gulf War broke out, and although I didn’t really understand the political dimensions of that conflict, my perception of the US started to change. Talk of blood and oil scared me, and I suddenly felt ambiguous about the country I so admired. Don’t get me wrong: I’m still obsessed with American pop culture. Only now I feel a need to peel back the layers of the things I love – skate, punk, attitude, style – and understand the forces behind their global spread.

This fascination with the interplay between society, politics and culture got me thinking about

skate punk – or, more specifically, skateboarding and punk as two separate entities. What’s the connection? Why did they unite on the sidewalks of SoCal? What role did suburbia play? And what the hell is ‘skate punk’ anyway? Why not ‘surf punk’, or ‘skate hip hop’? After skimming through piles of ‘zines, after watching tons of skate videos and listening to hundreds of punk songs, I sensed there must be something between the lines of these narratives. Something intangible – a social force, perhaps – that made these two subcultures collide.

To aid me in my journey, I’ve enlisted the help of a few pioneers. First up, there’s the aforementioned Steve Olson, the Californian madman credited with injecting SoCal’s laidback skate scene with a heavy dose of mayhem. Then there’s Brian Brannon, former *Thrasher* music editor and frontman of seminal skate punk band Jodie Foster’s Army (JFA), who’s agreed to meet for lunch at a strip mall in Los Alamitos. Other ‘sources’ include Steve Alba – aka ‘Salba’ – who, along with Olson and Duane Peters, helped cement Santa Cruz’s rep as an anarchic skate brand. When I meet Alba at Fontana skate park, he’s joined by Lance Mountain, legendary member of the Bones Brigade and one of the most modest guys you could hope to meet. Last but not least, there’s the formidable Greg Ginn, founder of proto-hardcore punk band Black Flag and influential eighties

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label SST Records, who will sit down with me in a dusty parking lot and share some nuggets of punk history gold. Over the next few days, these agitators will share eyewitness accounts of how the phenomenon unfurled. They’re the guys who know exactly what went down. And I’m hoping they’ll guide me through my academic abyss.

## ENERGY IS THE GLUE THAT BINDS

With Olson as my first go-to guy, I start my search. We meet at his studio off Melrose Avenue in Hollywood. Beneath a huge canvas that reads ‘Fag It’ in letters made from cigarette boxes, Olson starts retelling his version of skateboarding’s first encounter with the punk rock persuasion – and by the sound of things, he played cupid in the match. In 1978 *Skateboarder Magazine* made Olson Skateboarder of the Year, but the award ceremony didn’t quite go down as the mag men planned.

“I had cut my hair and was totally into the world of punk rock,” says Olson, plastering pieces of cigarette boxes onto a fake female torso. “I thought it was fucking amazing. I got the award and they wanted me to [make] a speech [but] I picked my nose, flipped boogers at them and spat at them [instead]. The magazine was like, ‘We

don’t think [these guys] are good representatives of skateboarding.’ Little did they know, [my attitude] was gonna change the whole fucking look [of] skateboarding.”

Up until that point, professional skateboarding was still clinging on to its clean-cut roots. But the blond-haired, blue-eyed sidewalk surfer was about to be supplanted by his black-clad brethren – all spiky hair and aggressive style. So, was it boogers that released skateboarding on a trajectory towards rebellious punk mayhem? Olson’s give-a-fuck antics may have been a catalyst, but the driving force for the skate punk amalgam is somewhat more complex than just spit and snot.

“You know what, the energy behind [punk] made perfect sense for skateboarding,” adds Olson. “Even more than surfing, because skateboarding was a little bit more rowdy – a bit more dangerous. And punk rock had a little bit of danger behind it. There were a lot of similarities happening, but the energy was the most important. The energy behind punk rock and when you were on your skateboard was extremely raw. [...] The energy is the connection, the rebelliousness against the typical and against the norm.”

The energy. This makes sense. A flipped booger might say ‘fuck you’, but the energy of a skateboard session or a hardcore punk show seems to work on a whole different level. This is physical stuff. This

involves your body. You could get hurt.

I had to find out more about this energy. Could it be the glue that binds skate and punk together? What exactly is energy, anyway? I remember my nerdy friend Moritz, a physics student, trying to explain it to me once. He said something about how energy never gets lost, it just changes form, and then rambled something about heat. So I do some research and stumble across a book on thermodynamics. “Energy,” it says, “is a concept that underlies our understanding of all physical phenomena and is a measure of the ability of a dynamical system to produce changes (motion) in its own system state as well as changes in the system states of its surroundings.”

If energy is capable of sparking off change in its surroundings, could it also influence style – the way in which we skate or the music that we make?

Brian Brannon, who edited *Thrasher* magazine during the 1990s and still fronts JFA, has experienced this raw force for the past thirty years. Over veggie burgers and fries, he tells me that, for him at least, the physical act always came first; style was nothing but an afterthought. “The thing about doing things where it’s really serious, where you’re really going fast, is that it eliminates any extra movement – anything stupid – because you’re committed,” he says. “You pretty much have to have good style. [Anything] ugly catches >





RARE PHOTO OF JFA PRACTICE WITH TSOL DRUMMER TODD BARNES, CIRCA 1986. THIS PARTICULAR LINE-UP ONLY LASTED THE ONE PRACTICE. (LEFT TO RIGHT): TODD BARNES (DRUMS), DON REDONDO (GUITAR), BRIAN BRANNON (VOCALS), MICHAEL CORNELIUS (BASS).

wind. Having your arm straight out or something, that's not gonna work in a heavy situation, whether [you're surfing] a big wave, going down a hill or you're in a deep pool. Just by virtue of what you're doing, you're gonna have a certain amount of style."

So it's heavy situations that influence style. Style, in this sense, is nothing that can be artificially created. It's a necessity. A subconscious reaction to physical reality: something you do first, and think about later. And that, according to Brannon, is where skate and punk unite: "[Skateboarding is] not about, 'Hey! Look what I can do!' It's about the momentum that you gather and then just carry with you. We used to say, 'We don't do tricks. We do moves.' A trick is something you practise and do over and over again. [...] That's not how I skate. I just go as fast as I can and throw it up there and try to pull it back in. It's like anything could happen. And it's the same with music. We just give it our all. [...] Putting the maximum amount of energy into it and just seeing where it takes us."

Greg Ginn, one of the most important characters in the development of early Californian hardcore punk and the only constant member in the history of Black Flag (1976-1986), supports Brannon's view. We meet in the parking lot of the Blue Café in Huntington Beach where he's just played with his current band, The Taylor Texas Corrugators. Everyone wants a picture with the 'Black Flag dude' - "He's a legend, man," whispers a girl in her early twenties - but away from mad fans, Ginn opens up: "I think with skating and extreme sports in general, if you want to use that term, you just have a real 'going for it' attitude. And going all out in a physical kind of way is definitely what Black Flag operated on. [...] How it feels for me is speed and power. You can have control on one end and recklessness on the other. And those kind of extremes are very apparent in, let's say, skating or Black Flag."

If you listen to early Black Flag records you hear what Ginn is talking about. Take their first seven-inch record, *Nervous Breakdown*. Hardly exceeding five minutes, it boasts four songs fuelled by reckless energy, but all with a uniquely Californian twist. In the fifty-one seconds of 'Wasted', singer Keith Morris yells: "I was a surfer / I had a skateboard / I was so heavy man, I lived on the strand." Ginn explains: "Skateboarding was part of the culture that I grew up around living in Hermosa Beach. It was just kind of part of the surfing culture. Skateboarding kind of came out of that. And that was something that I was always around."

As skateboarding and punk grew side by side, the energy of a skate session began to seep into the sound. It's for this reason, says Ginn, that Californian punk was gnarlier than its cousins elsewhere. "I think that one thing that Black Flag brought to the whole thing was just a physical power when [the scene] was kind of a little bit artsy," says Ginn, referring to the punk sounds emanating from the UK and New York City, where

bands like the Sex Pistols and the New York Dolls - under the management of Malcom McLaren and his designer wife Vivienne Westwood - were affiliated with more art-oriented scenes. While this first wave of punk rock in California was paralleled by bands like X, The Screamers or the Go-Go's, Black Flag marked a threshold to a much heavier, and at times more violent, take on punk rock. *American Hardcore*, the 2006 documentary based on the eponymous book by Steven Blush, charts this trend. But why exactly did this new hardcore approach and skateboarding click?

Lance Mountain and Steve Alba have some ideas. When we meet at a skate park in Fontana, birthplace of the Hell's Angels Motorcycle Club, the pair are already charging the deep concrete

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bowls. Mountain takes a rest and picks up where Greg Ginn left off. "The original guys were into the dorky, arty music," he says. "That was a lot different than the second wave of aggressive skate rock."

Taking a break to stretch his legs, Alba goes one step further. According to him, skateboarders didn't just help foster punk's aggressive style - they pretty much owned the mosh pit: "Skateboarders were the same guys that made up slam dancing. Pogo was all-English but [slam dancing] was our version of the pogo in California and we definitely made it up. It was me, Tony Alva, Steve Olson, Fausto [Vitello, co-founder of *Thrasher* magazine and Independent Trucks]. We were trying to get to the stage no matter what it took. [...] We were drinking heavy

- I'm not gonna say we weren't, 'cause we were. And all the other guys were probably loaded up on drugs. [...] But anyhow, yeah, it was rad. We'd climb over the crowd, dance to ourselves - we were so amped, you know, it was like energy! We all just started getting kind of crazy, pulling each other down and hitting each other and tackling each other and sliding into each other and one thing led to another and you kind of crashed into the crowd and the crowd started to get mad kind of pushing you back and we're like, 'Fuck you!' It was just nuts, man. And it was like that any time the skaters got together at any show. That's all our deal was: get on stage. No matter what it took. And that's how we started the whole deal."

### HOT, HOT, POLITICAL HEAT

Back on Melrose, in front of Olson's studio, the afternoon heat engulfs me. Come to think of it, the high temperature is another force involved in the amalgamation of skate and hardcore punk. Don't believe me? Just ask Dick.

In 1979, Dick Hebdige published *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. The first comprehensive study of punk culture in the UK, Hebdige's exploration starts with a heat wave that hit the country in 1976. Establishing a parallel to Britain's social and financial problems, he reads "almost metaphysical significance" into the weather as "the excessive heat was threatening the very structure of the nation's houses (cracking the foundations) and the Notting Hill Carnival, traditionally a paradigm of racial harmony, exploded into violence."

The nation - according to tabloid headlines - was in a state of crisis. A decade of financial decline, unemployment, industrial action and racial tension came to a crescendo in 1979 when 'Iron Lady' Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister. With Maggie came deregulation, anti-trade union politics, Cold War rhetoric and public sector cuts. According to Hebdige, the heat of '76 was an omen for the social unrest that was unfolding. And the 'disobedient' punk culture sweeping Britain was just the kind of 'Last Days' imagery the press loved to exploit. "It was during this strange apocalyptic summer," he concludes, "that punk made its sensational debut in the music press. [...] Apocalypse was in the air and the rhetoric of punk was drenched in apocalypse: in the stock imagery of crisis and sudden change."

Against this backdrop, the safety pin emerged as a symbol of British punk culture - a way for youth to have their say. As a kind of fix-all device, it hinted at the cracks and voids of a country in decline. But instead of reassembling anything, first and foremost, the safety pin emphasised that things were falling apart. If Britain seemed seriously injured during this time, punk was ready to twist a knife into the wound or, more precisely, mend the void with a rusty pin. >

Across the Atlantic, meanwhile, a similar chain reaction was being sparked off by heat. "California at that point had this gnarly drought," says Steve Alba. "A whole bunch of pools were just empty. [...] If you filled the pool up you'd get a fine and maybe even go to jail."

After a lost war in Vietnam, the United States was in a stormy state. The economy was on a downward spiral - inflation and interest rates were soaring - and feminists picking up where the Civil Rights movement had left off were ruffling the feathers of the white middle-class. A conservative backlash was afoot and in 1981 Hollywood actor Ronald Reagan was inaugurated as the fortieth President of the United States. His so-called Reaganomics - much like Thatcherism back in the UK - stood for a rigorous unleashing of market forces through de-regulation, privatisation and the resurrection of federalism.

Reagan's neo-conservative agenda and pro-life propaganda may have hit a chord with the New Christian Right, but it had the opposite impact on suburban teens. While mom and dad were worrying about communists, crime rates and the bomb, their adolescent offspring were embracing the burning sunshine and raiding concrete pools. When Steve Alba recounts his first encounter with a drained Cali pool, it sounds just like a blossoming romance: "These skaters jumped over this fence and we were like, 'What are they doing?' So, we walked up to the fence - we didn't jump over, but we could hear that whoosh of pool skating. It's a weird sound that's hard to describe, but once you actually hear the whoosh of pool skating you don't ever forget that sound."

Just as the British press did not know what to make of teenage punks, California's skateboarders were viewed with contempt. "When you stepped on a skateboard back in those days you were considered an outlaw," says Olson. "People did not need you skateboarding in their driveways or in their swimming pools. The cops did not like you. Citizens didn't like you. You were breaking the law."

The skateboard emerged not only as a symbol of suburban disobedience but, moreover, as a sign of the times. Pool-raiding teens reminded the once upwardly mobile of a frightening truth: suburbia's pools were empty; the American Dream was collapsing. And the kids weren't scared to throw that symbol in their face. "A lot of skaters knew that they were into something that was really special, but the world didn't want to see it," says Mountain. "It just went hand in hand with punk [to say], 'Okay, I'm gonna make people see this. I'm gonna annoy them. I'm gonna show them and be seen.' They wanted to get under people's skins, 'cause they were really good at something only a hundred people in the world were doing. [...] They didn't want people to like them, really. They just wanted to let them know that they were there." Alba nods approvingly and adds: "It was just anti- [everything]."

Seeing Reagan's 'American Experiment' endangered by the change these rolling teens seemed to represent, the authorities mobilised. "The police didn't like the whole punk rock thing," says Greg Ginn. "Like with anything new, you have existing people who feel threatened by that kind of thing. And when skaters got into [punk], the police turned against them." The kids, however, were ready to fight back. "There was a riot at Santa Monica Civic [auditorium]," Alba recalls. "Someone threw a beer bottle at a police car, right through the windshield. [...] I was in the middle of pretty much every major riot that happened in LA." Mountain adds: "It got to the point where the cop cars would just get lined up [outside a punk show]."

And if young punks were vilified, skateboarders had it even worse. "Because of insurance policy complications, skate parks shut down," writes Jamie Brisick in *Have Board, Will Travel: The Definitive History of Surf, Skate and Snow*. "And

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because of its marginalised, below-the-radar position in the world, skaters just carried on doing what they were doing, making it up as they went along." DIY became the order of the day, and backyard ramps and impromptu shows started popping up anywhere that had survived the clampdown. "That's how skate punk started actually," says Mountain. "When the shows started being at the skate parks, they were pretty unsupervised. It was like a bunch of thirteen-to-eighteen-year-old kids basically at a summer camp on their own."

"[Skateboarding and punk] are both aggressive and full of do-it-yourself," concludes Alba. "You can't buy it; you make it."

## SKATE PUNK? WTF?

The social, political and metaphysical undercurrents pushing skateboarding and punk towards

one another were no doubt strong. And the do-it-yourself attitude shared by skateboarders and punks clearly fuelled the union. But at what point did 'skate punk' emerge as a recognisable term?

In the year of its thirtieth anniversary, a turn to *Thrasher* might provide answers. The mag's notorious Skate Rock tapes and punk-splattered pages are often credited with 'inventing' skate punk. Steve Olson sees things differently: "They didn't invent shit. All they did was capitalise on it and considered it skate rock, which is just skateboarders playing rock 'n' roll or hyped-up, sped-up punk. I mean, that whole mantra or just the label 'skate rock' is stupid to me. Why is it skate rock? Are you trying to sell more records because it now has a title? Get away from me. It's just like a new brand. And it's a terrible brand. If they made 'skate rock cigarettes', I still wouldn't smoke them. But that's just me."

The other guys, however, hold an entirely different view. "I'm telling you, man," says Alba, "*Thrasher* in those days, they actively participated in punk rock. Kevin Thatcher [who founded the magazine in 1981 with Fausto Vitello] would go to shows with us all the time - they all did."

Brannon goes one step further when he credits the mag with coining the term: "*Thrasher* came out and they were back to the hardcore spirit, you know, their first issues weren't even coloured, they were just black and white on newsprint. Mofo [Morizen Foché] wrote some stories called 'Wild Riders of Boardz' and one of them talked about The Big Boys as a skate band. I think that's where he coined the name skate rock. But it just kind of fitted, you know - it was skate music."

Just as things are starting to make sense - just as I begin to feel like I'm making headway and approaching the apex of revelation where socio-political and cultural forces are clashing and colliding and sparking change - Brannon errs for a moment, pauses, then says: "You can call it whatever you want, you know, to me skate punk is whatever you're listening to at the time. It could be DOA, it could be anything - it could be John Lee Hooker, you know, whatever you skate to."

Perhaps beyond all the over-intellectualised enquiries - beyond the questions and academic research - the only thing that really matters is the people at the centre of any subcultural force. As Steve Alba says, "I still credit Steve Olson as the first guy to get into punk rock as a skater. He's the guy that got people hooked."

Back on Melrose Avenue, against the scorching heat and blinding sun, Olson wraps things up with an explosive point which, in its ambiguity, says everything that needs to be said: "Skate punk? Yeah, for sure there were skate punks. We were skate punks. We skateboarded and we were punk rockers. And we loved it and it was fun."

And with that he gives me knuckles and disappears into a 7-eleven - to buy another lighter, I presume 🕯