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Music

A timely reminder of how punk changed everything

(Sunday 26 September 2004)

England's Dreaming

Various (Trikont)

ALBUM: Punk compilation CDs, laid end to end, could probably encircle the planet, writes LEE McFADDEN.

England's Dreaming, the belated CD accompaniment to Jon Savage's insightful book of punk, sticks out from the ever-increasing pile of nostalgic collections of that ground-breaking era by including little-heard gems from punk's underground, alongside a few classics.

Also featured are tracks that pre-dated and influenced punk, as well as a few decidedly non-punk tracks that could have only appeared due to the genre's innovative do-it-yourself stance.

Opening with Iggy and the Stooges' still blistering Search and Destroy from 1973, the CD features Patti Smith and Wire dropping their literate and arty pretensions for full-on thrash-outs, as well as the Buzzcocks' hilarious and radio-unfriendly Orgasm Addict and X Ray Spex's chilling, autobiographical Identity.

These are segued with artists that worked with the punk ethos rather than its music. On the Normal's TVOD, future Mute Records supremo Daniel Miller sounds for all the world like an effeminate Dalek and, on the mindblowing 1977 Residents track Beyond the Valley of a Day in the Life, the group's primitive sampling of Beatles tracks makes the Beatles' own avant-garde nightmare Revolution 9 sound as insipid as McCartney's debacle with the Frog Chorus.

It was once quoted that, for every great punk band, there were eight or nine bad ones, and The Germs, The Zeros and The Weirdos do represent the undeniable truth that some so-called punk bands were happy to present any old dross and have it released.

Some were genuinely naive - The Dils' I Hate the Rich is full of confused rants from a pre-political teenager who is angry, but not sure what to be angry about.

The CD culminates in The Adverts' The Great British Mistake - the underrated genius that is TV Smith predicting punk's eventual implosion.

Jon Savage's collection encapsulates punk's heyday and its legacy, with its successes and failures, influences and spin-offs, authentic pleas for political and personal change and obvious cash-ins and the overwhelming fact that its shock intrusion into the bland music industry of the 1970s is still making an impact today.

Indeed, in these sad times of Pop Idol and one manipulated boy band after another, we need the punk ethos more than ever.

England's Dreaming is not only a time capsule of how things were but also a timely reminder of how they could be again.

LEE McFADDEN