



MALCOLM MCLAREN'S MAGNIFICENT FAILURE

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McLaren arrested with the Sex Pistols in 1977 following the band's performance of "God Save the Queen" during Queen Elizabeth II's Silver Jubilee celebration

Who is Malcolm McLaren? The white, English eccentric who formed the Sex Pistols? The art-school anarchist who lost his virginity to fashion designer Vivienne Westwood, married her, and opened a punk boutique in London where "nothing was for sale"? The cultural alchemist who was asked to "re-brand Poland"? The egomaniacal marketing Svengali who claims he swindled the record industry?

Viewed with reverence and disdain in equal measure, Malcolm McLaren is, at the very least, one thing: a magnificent failure. Magnificent failure, he believes, is the only real means of effecting change in the popular culture. One could view McLaren's life as a series of cleverly orchestrated disasters. Some of his experiments have changed the face of pop culture (the Sex Pistols and Buffalo Gals). Some of them haven't (Bow Wow Wow). Some of them may do so in the future (8-bit music, bootlegged from old-school video games, which McLaren is currently championing).

Throughout his career, McLaren has enjoyed taking the artistic spectrum, bending it backwards, and forcing its opposing ends to fuse. He merged waltz music with techno in Waltz Darling; layered square dance calls over hip-hop scratching in Buffalo Gals; and dressed the New York Dolls in Communist-inspired fashions, provoking the outrage on which he thrives.

But all of his obsessions (including his latest, the rise of the child intellectual) are, like himself, fueled by one thing: the power of the amateur. McLaren, now 59 years old and based in Paris, France, believes the amateur to be a creature capable of the most magnificent failure. And with Western popular culture split into a dominant, over-produced mainstream and a hidden, independent subculture, remaining an amateur is, for many, the only true path to self-expression available today.

Like him or hate him, never before has Malcolm McLaren made so much sense.

HISTORY IS FOR PISSING ON.



McLaren and partner Vivienne Westwood inside their shop Let It Rock (later known as SEX)

ART SCHOOL

Art school was a place I discovered when I was almost 17. I left school when I was 16 because I didn't feel I had to take exams. So I never took any, and this meant I couldn't actually go any further in education. I started working at this very Dickensian wine merchant. I was a virgin. On our way to lunch, me and the other boys would often pass this doorway where the best-looking girls entered, wearing fishnet stockings and overgrown wooly sweaters with long hair and dark mascara eyes. It was a place called St. Martin's Art School. One day I followed these girls up the stairs and suddenly was confronted with a woman completely naked, very fleshy and middle-aged, with giant tits. I saw all these people scrubbing about on pieces of paper with charcoal, and I thought, "That's good. Can you get paid to do that?" So I decided to get myself fired. And then I enrolled at the local art school, Harrow Art School. My mother sent this ridiculous letter to the principal saying I should be barred from drawing women in life classes. So I went into the art school, left home, and lost my virginity to a girlfriend of a friend. And she was Vivienne Westwood.

At art school, I really only learned one thing. That was during the very first lecture I ever had, at the little art school in Harrow. This goatee-bearded, brown-corduroyed guy walked in and said, "So, I suppose you all think you're going to be successful painters, sculptors, graphic artists, filmmakers, and designers in fashion and textiles?" Everyone nodded their approval, because that's exactly what you want to hear on your first day. Almost within the same breath, he turned around and said, "If any one of you here thinks you're going to be successful, there's the bloody door. Leave right now. What you've all got to understand is that you're all going

to fail." We'd been in the school half an hour. A huge hush fell over the room. Everybody's faces sunk into their shoulders. And then he finally turned around and said, "You know, failure's not such a bad thing. It's just one long struggle, this. To be an artist of any worth is a journey, and the journey never ends, and it doesn't get better from beginning to end. Just understand that. And when you do arrive on that journey, don't think you're alive and happy. You're already dead." And that was it.

One year passed. Many of us fell by the wayside. I barely survived. We were in this room in our second year and the same guy comes in and says, "So, you're still here then?" We nodded. "You're just beginning to understand what failure is," he said. "You understand the struggle. That's why you'll survive. And one more thing: don't think you can just 'fail.' Be a flamboyant failure. That's better than being any kind of benign success." At that moment, I probably learned more about life, certainly about the road I've traveled and any commitment that I've had, than I ever had. When I finally was kicked out of art school after almost eight years, all I said to myself was, "I've got to figure out now how to become an excellent failure; how to create disasters. How to make those spectacular failures in life." And with that, maybe I was getting close to what he understood to be the role of an artist. And dare I say it, I think the Sex Pistols were the architects of brilliant disasters. We created them and manipulated them because we thought that was credible. That had integrity. Success never did. If someone is responsible for punk rock and my role in it, it is probably that brown-corduroyed professor.

MAGNIFICENT FAILURE

To create a magnificent failure is to create the best kind of picture: a picture that really drives and changes things. Because when you see a picture and you say, "That's a very beautiful picture," it is instantly forgettable. A picture that is a magnificent failure actually breathes life and allows the culture to change. If you have perfection, there is nowhere to go. With perfection there is no communication. You have nothing to access. The disasters are what bring life and allow us to connect. That's the magic.

When the culture supports the role of the great amateur, that's when things are exciting. When that amateur turns a corner and suddenly becomes professional, it is never as interesting. It's a strange thing. Even in art, it was always the great amateurs that intrigued me – Picasso [as opposed to] Henri Rousseau, or Van Gogh [as opposed to] Edouard Manet.

All these great amateurs or primitives make the world seem accessible. Sometimes you like your gods to walk amongst you, rather than up high and above you, unreachable. Go back to ancient Greece – people prayed to demigods who walked amongst them, gods who were on the ground, and who looked like us. That is what happened in hip-hop culture. I remember the early days in hip-hop; it was always the amateur aspect that was ingenious. The thought that you could make music literally by stealing your brother's records and turning them into something that sounded contemporary and totally new . . . it happened in punk rock but less so, because it didn't quite last. What was in-built in punk rock was something that prevented it from ever living in harmony with the industry. If ever it got close, it imploded. And, voila: the Sex Pistols.

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Top to bottom: a four-year-old McLaren; the New York Dolls, as envisioned by McLaren, in red patent leather; McLaren's re-creation of Manet's Déjeuner sur l'herbe for the cover of Bow Wow Wow's single "Go Wild in the Country"

FASHION

I've always believed that talent only truly emerges when there is a cause, a cause which is governed by survival. Both me and Vivienne were trying to survive – in a shop. We were creating fashion with no parallel and no industry to be connected to. So from day one we never thought in terms of commercial gain. That was important, because it forced us to survive on our wits. And each time we did something it was not for commercial gain. It was because it was the credible artistic choice.

Having an independent store gave us the ability to create fashion in the bedrooms of our own houses. Bernie Rhodes used to silk-screen all my t-shirts in his bedroom. Vivienne would be sewing them all up in our bedroom. Three or four outworkers would be knitting jumpers in their bedrooms. It was a total cottage industry. And there was never any interest in having a career. I think those very words were driven out of my head through art school, from that goatee-bearded guy.

I loved the whole deconstructive nature of t-shirts with slogans or iconography. The idea of a torn t-shirt or a smudged print, or a t-shirt thrown in a bucket of gray dye and made to look like an oil rag left under a car by an engineer . . . I liked the idea of those rags, those almost-impossible-to-sell objects, things that were almost commercially undesirable to have in the shop. I hung them with great splendor. It was that ingredient, this idea of "not for sale" that I liked. I liked the idea of having a shop in which nothing in it was for sale. I liked the contradictions of that. It turned our shop into a place that people found impossible to leave.

I never believed that the things I made would sell as quickly as they did. I find it ironic that they now stand as *objets d'art* in Sotheby's auction rooms and in museums. They have become kind of paintings. Those oily rags that were meant to be non-commercial are now flat inside a frame and looked at and written about and debated. Because we were not doing it for any practical purpose. We were doing it to create something to rub up against the culture.

I remember when *Vogue* magazine used to come in my shop and I'd say, "For God's sake, get OUT of here! Just the SMELL of you! Now get OUT!" They used to be terrified, all these little girls. They'd say, "I want to borrow something for our styling team," and I'd say, "Get the FUCK out of here!" So anyway . . . to protect oneself is always a massive problem.



Top: the façade of SEX
Bottom:: McLaren in a rubber suit, sitting with friend Helen the Dwarf inside SEX

"I remember when *Vogue* magazine used to come in my shop and I'd say, 'For God's sake, get OUT of here! Just the SMELL of you! Now get OUT!'"



THE SEX PISTOLS

I did a radio interview with Steve Jones recently. I hadn't seen him for a very long time and he has changed immensely. He can't even remember how it all began. I was looking at him and saying to myself, "None of this would have even happened without you. You were the reason the Pistols were formed. You were the guy nicking stuff out of my shop, driving me so bloody crazy I had to give you a job. And then I had to help you form this group. Ultimately, Steve, I wouldn't have even thought about the Sex Pistols had it not been for you. It was YOUR group!" It was very funny saying this to him at the radio station because it was as if he had forgotten. It just tells you something about how even those involved forget. How things change and history is reinterpreted.

The movie *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle* was a random collection of thoughts and ideas; a kind of manifesto; the Ten Commandments on how to swindle the music industry, destroy it, and remain forever an enigma within it.

Once John Lydon (Johnny Rotten) had decided that he didn't wish to take part in it, we knew we only had so much time left. The music industry was scared and was going to try and prevent us from making this movie. We tried to keep it as quiet as possible. But our biggest difficulty was in engaging the group. We certainly couldn't get Rotten to participate. Sid agreed because he was a junkie and needed money. We forced him to come to Paris and I had this idea of him singing *My Way*.

There's a story behind that. We had gone on tour in Holland to tiny little clubs, to get Sid off junk and get him away from the dreadful Nancy. But John was always an attention seeker – when he saw everyone was attending to Sid, he would sit in the corner and drink his woes out of a beer glass. One time, he refused to do a sound check. In the end, Sid said, "I'll fuckin' do the sound check." He strolled up to the microphone and sang every bloody song. Not only were they word-perfect, they were absolutely in tune. I couldn't believe it. I looked at Jones. Jones knew a little of what I was thinking. I tried not to meet the eye of John.

So when we were making *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle*, I knew I wanted him to sing a ballad. One that would have him rival the great crooners. I knew *My Way* was the one. We went to Paris and got an orchestra together. There was no way Sid actually wanted to sing the song, so I had to figure out how to persuade him. I said he should sing it with the orchestra for the first 64 bars and after that just rock it up. I said, "Change the lyrics if you want. No one else would dare change the lyrics." So Sid sat down and wrote the lyrics. All the metaphors and ideas are about how Rotten betrayed him and stabbed him in the back. He prepared for it like a true professional. He put that crooner's jacket on, with his little drainpipe black jeans. He was ready for it.

We needed a big place for Sid to sing this, and we heard Johnnie Mathis was playing at the Olympia. There was a big neon sign on the side, which said, "Tonight, Johnny Mathis!" We replaced it with Sid's name. Inside, they had built this stairway to heaven for Mathis, which we were able to use. It was all there. I don't know why, maybe because I don't like mothers that much because of my own dysfunctional family, but I decided Sid was going to shoot his mother. So we got a "mother" in there. And a bunch of old farts. I cast these characters that Sid was going to sing this song for. It was a little bit metaphorical of my own life.



McLaren with the Sex Pistols (L to R): Steve Jones, Glen Matlock, McLaren, Paul Cook, and Johnny Rotten

Warner Bros. would not allow the film to be released in the United States. So it was never released here. It was not even allowed to be distributed as a video for a very long time, partly because John Lydon hated it so much, partly because Warner Bros. were so embarrassed by it, and partly because the music industry in general were happy for the Sex Pistols to go away. They wanted to get back to the normal way of life, the way of selling music as they deemed fit. But it was too late. The seeds had been planted, the story had been told. And it was now turning into a myth. And, as Joseph Campbell says, myths are the dreams of life. Everybody started to have those dreams. The Sex Pistols were this contagious disease that would just carry on and carry on and carry on . . .

FIRST EXPERIENCE OF HIP-HOP

I first listened to hip-hop in the South Bronx in the days when Afrika Bambaataa was a DJ with a crew. It was around 1980, I was managing Bow Wow Wow and they were playing a showcase gig for the local record company, RCA, then. I had never been further than 62nd Street and I always wondered what was further up there. So I decided to take a walk that afternoon. I saw a humongous guy on the streets of Harlem wearing a bright-yellow t-shirt that had, adorned across it, "Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols." I went up to him and said, "I had something to do with that t-shirt." He had never heard the music of the group that was fully paraded on that t-shirt, the Sex Pistols. He just loved the name.

Then he invited me to a party that night and wrote the address down on a piece of paper. And then I asked him his name and he said Afrika Bambaataa, and I thought, "That's a hell of a name." I went back to my hotel and I phoned my friends, and they said, "Shit man, that was the name of the last Zulu uprising against the English." I thought, "Wow, what an incredible narrative, just in the name."

So I decided to go to this party up in the Bronx. It was the most difficult place I have ever in my life tried to get to. I think 26 cabs passed as I waited outside my hotel in midtown Manhattan – no one would take me there. I actually was about to step back in the hotel; then this last cab decided to take me there. He told me to roll up my windows and put my money in my socks.

Then we arrived. I thought it was going to be an apartment building, but it was just waste ground. I was very scared, I have to say. There was a volatile crowd of kids on this waste ground in the middle of two fired-out condominiums, far, far, far into the Bronx. I decided to pretend I was the representative of a major American record company: "Hello, I'm from CBS. Excuse me, I need to get to the stage." A bit like Moses, I just wanted to part the sea. At the end of the debris field there were these massive tables with record players on them and piles and boxes of records. The guy that I had met in the afternoon was standing back, just looking like he was protecting his speakers, stereo systems and stuff. I literally dived under the table and through the legs of people so I could stand next to him. I was the only honky and I wanted everyone to know that this guy was my man. I tapped him on the shoulder and said, "Do you remember me?" He seemed to vaguely remember me. I said, "I'm just going to stand here next to you." That was my first experience of hip-hop.

I asked him if he ever played in clubs, because I had this group Bow Wow Wow and I wanted him to open for them. He said, "No, we don't play in clubs," but eventually he agreed. Bow Wow Wow was playing for a typical college, Anglo-Saxonish crowd of kids. Suddenly, Afrika Bambaataa and his crew were knocking on the back door. Security wouldn't let them in so they had to come to the back door. I dragged them all in and they mounted the stage, literally laid out all the equipment as they had at that previous show on the debris site. They started to go at it, and a couple of their guys jumped into the crowd. The college kids were terrified. They ran. They all ran upstairs until the ground floor was totally empty. It was extraordinary. These guys started to spin on their heads and it was phenomenal. They already had the attributes that would become ubiquitous in hip-hop style: the caps, the baggy t-shirts . . . all of that was already assembled, but it hadn't hit anybody downtown on a commercial, even independent level.

I went to RCA the following day and said, "You have got to sign this group; they are going to be massive." This was the newest thing I had ever heard. Not only was it brilliant, it was ecological. They were making music out of all this disposable pop rubbish from the past. They were making sense of it all. I said, "This is fantastic!" RCA was absolutely not interested.

I always thought hip-hop was the black punk rock. It had similar DIY aspects and it was definitely a music that, at first, the industry had no interest in. They knew the idea of recycling all this disposable pop rubbish into something else was not something they would necessarily have control over. They were protectionists, jailers: "Hey, that's our copyright! Since when do you own this?" Then it was like the jailer had opened up the vaults and all this music fell out. Like the storming of the Bastille: "Hey it's all out here! We can do something with all this stuff! It belongs to the world!" I think hip-hop had that in the beginning, but of course everyone started to sign forms and the music became inherently controlled by the industry again: "You might be able to use this sample if you pay this much; you won't be able to use that sample because you can't pay." There was a censorship by the industry on that culture and I don't think it ever recovered. It was natural that it was going to follow a road map that would become increasingly driven by money and, thereafter, power. And to some extent, people really looked up to that power. The bling culture for instance.

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Clockwise from top: McLaren with his personalized Duck Rocker boombox; McLaren with hillbilly band during shooting for the "Buffalo Gals" music video (photo by Bob Gruen); cover of McLaren's album Duck Rock, incorporating artwork by Keith Haring



McLaren's Christmas Map of Feelings, rendered in the pixelated style of early video games

ON 8BIT MUSIC

A writer I knew was working with squatters and runaway kids who were computer nerds on the outskirts of Paris. This area was occupied by an awful lot of young people, artists, computer nerds, and runaway kids, and I entered that world nearly two years ago. It intrigued me to see how they could make music out of technology.

There was some anarchic element in the culture of early interactive video games that inspired them. They wanted to grab that sound and use it to express music of their own kind. They love those machines, the consoles, the Game Boys. They weren't as slick or as well programmed back then. There was a rawness in the sound and imagery. They produced a sound that had a connective spirit to the world of punk rock, because it was so DIY, equally disobeying of overly slick productions, equally trying to deconstruct and get down to the roots and rawness, equally using source material instruments that they aren't necessarily in control of. That world, to me, was the next stage.

THE PRETEEN INTELLECTUAL VANGUARD

No one likes to think of children as intellectuals. No one likes to assume that they have a point-of-view that could usurp other previously established points-of-view. Disney likes to think that children like a certain kind of story. But children are far more obsessed with taste than you'd assume. And there's an area within the preteen generation that's becoming exceedingly smart, capable of rocking, rumbling, and changing the culture.

For instance, kids under the age of 12 are beginning to usurp the authority of schools. Not because of the old idea of rock 'n' roll or the spirit of the outlaw – this is a new kind of rebel, one that's more intellectual, to the extent that teachers are having trouble communicating with that preteen generation. Naomi Klein's book *No Logo* contains a simple anecdote about a school that had sold its roof, wall, uniform, and even its textbooks to Coca-Cola. At the end of the term, the Coca-Cola representative was invited to give out prizes and inspect the school and be honored. The school decided to get everyone in their Coca-Cola uniforms and choreograph a dance on the playing field so the kids' bodies spelled out Coca-Cola. One kid arrived at school wearing a Pepsi t-shirt. The teachers were aghast. A saboteur! This was a culturally subversive act, and for that he had to be immediately suspended from any further schooling.

Whatever happened to little Johnny thereafter, I don't know. But that one anecdote fits in with all this rumbling about the preteen intellectual vanguard, led by young kids who are now constantly online from the age of seven and computer literate. *

It's no surprise that Malcolm McLaren's latest passion is the child intellectual. He is himself childlike: wide-eyed, a cultural prospector always on the hunt for new gold, age hasn't jaded him. Failure is never to be feared. For him, it's not the destination that's important – it's the journey.

No one can predict exactly what McLaren's legacy will be, or whether he will ever top his greatest creation, the Sex Pistols. That's the thing about him: you never quite know what's around the corner.

As a message on his website states, "Malcolm will return shortly."



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Clockwise from top left: McLaren and Helen the Dwarf in a scene from *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle*; McLaren sporting his "naked boy" t-shirt and leather jacket; McLaren circa 2005