

## The Damned: Smashing It Up

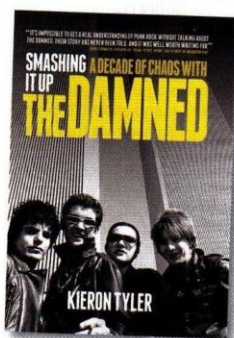
★★★★★  
Kieron Tyler  
OMNIBUS PRESS, £20

Subtitled "A Decade Of Chaos"; which, frankly, is putting it mildly.

Following Wes Orshoski's 2015 film *Don't You Wish That We Were Dead*, MOJO contributor Kieron Tyler delivers the long-overdue print version of *The Damned's* convoluted and emotional car-crash career. Here you get not just the myth but also new details about

aborted deals (the group very nearly signed to EMI for £50K in 1977, a move that would have saved them from indie purgatory; Nick Mason was hired to produce *Music For Pleasure* because he shared the same publisher). Fresh tales of Captain and Rat's drunken madness abound, notably a catastrophic narrowboat holiday that served as bassist Paul Gray's "audition" and a run-in with the Mafia when the group were unwittingly used as drug mules. Proper management and better deals may have mitigated *The Damned's* intra-band feuds; but then, out of the "chaos" came some extraordinary music – and one of rock's most compelling sagas.

Pat Gilbert

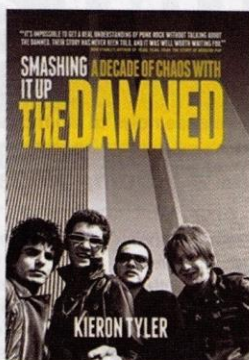


## Smashing It Up: A Decade Of Chaos With The Damned

Kieron Tyler  
★★★★★  
Omnibus Press, £20  
ISBN9781785581908, 298 pages

A highly apt title

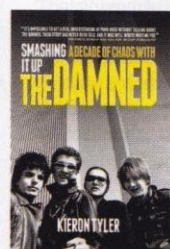
Though they were undoubtedly one of the big three of the early UK punk scene – famously the first at doing just about everything – there's no doubt that *The Damned* have never been afforded the same



level of critical assessment as the Pistols and The Clash. And this is amply reflected in the fact that while we have been bombarded by tomes about Malcolm's and Bernie's boys, there's little to trouble our bookshelves about *The Damned*. Carol Clerk's fine *The Damned: Light At The End Of The Tunnel – The Official Biography*, from 1987, has inexplicably never been reprinted and now goes for silly money, so *Smashing It Up* is well overdue and most welcome.

This highly engrossing book provides a comprehensive overview of the band's first decade, packed with tales of rock'n'roll excess (some amusing, some less so) which undoubtedly held them back at times. But ever resilient, they always bounced back, and their admirable desire to constantly move on musically usually kept things interesting.

And as for the story of how Captain juggled his brief spell as a Proper 80s Pop Star with being gobbled on nightly with *The Damned*, it's a gift for any writer. Shane Baldwin



SMASHING IT UP:  
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7/10

"WE just make a noise and that's it, no politics, no nothing," says Captain Sensible in *Smashing It Up*. Kieron Tyler's solid history of *The Damned's* first decade (there's a frantic coda on their tangled history since 1986). The unlovely runts of the litter, *The Damned* refused to buy into the punk aesthetic, yet the music was often great. From the still-potent rush of "New Rose" – "like jet fighters", says Rat Scabies – to the souped-up garage rock of "Smash It Up" and hilariously grandiose "Eloise", they were rarely predictable – Pink Floyd's Nick Mason produced their messy second album, after Syd Barrett proved unavailable – and often thrilling.

The first punk band to release a single, they're the last to get a thorough biographical study. *Smashing It Up* rectifies that, though the rather overwrought style takes the band more seriously than they ever took themselves. A gang of suburban misfits, they find themselves united by a "slightly brutal" bluntness in their attitude to the outside world. This, it becomes clear, is something of an understatement, as they set fire to Elvis Costello's shoes and stick fag butts in his mouth while he sleeps, piss on people, and scare The Flamin' Groovies into quitting a tour. The author recalls a week's rehearsal on a narrowboat on the Kennet & Avon Canal: "All that had been brought on board was an air rifle and beer."

Little wonder they struggle to hold it together. Stiffed by Stiff – "I wished I'd signed with someone bigger," says Sensible, "they might have paid me" – they fall apart on an annual basis, but keep resurfacing in slightly altered form, eking out a hand-to-mouth existence flitting from prog to psychedelia, goth to '50s rock'n'roll. It's a ragged, disjointed tale, and Tyler provides a decent service in telling it. GRAEME THOMSON

SEPTEMBER 2017 • UNCUT • 111



## Smashing It Up: A Decade Of Chaos With The Damned

Kieron Tyler OMNIBUS

The story behind the custard pies and plastic sunglasses.

**I**f ever there was a tale that needed to be gouged from between the cracks in the vast landscape of dull, scholastic literature that's been accorded the 70s' punk milieu over the subsequent decades, and told properly, it is that of The Damned. The Clash **mattered**, we're always being told in italicised emboldened fonts. The Sex Pistols changed *everything*, generations of received wisdom persistently insists. But The Damned (snort) were nothing but custard pies and plastic sunglasses.

Well, that's just bollocks, for a start. The Damned weren't just the first punk band to vinyl, to America, to difficult second album, to acrimonious split, they also provided the enduring punk blueprint. And while, yes, it was the Sex Pistols who provided the spark to light the bonfire, The Clash who endowed the nascent genre with its left-leaning politics of inclusion and the Ramones that first distilled sonic delinquency's elemental ramalam into saleable two-minute chunks, it's 1977's Damned that every punk band extant still tirelessly emulates from gonk hairstyle to yobbish buffoonery. There's never been a convincing American Sex Pistols; Rancid persist in aping The Clash (with about as much style as Jobriath did

Bowie), but Damned's? From Dickies to Green Day and beyond, the children of The Damned are absolutely everywhere.

*Smashing It Up* knows its audience, it plays the hits. We're not bogged down in too much preparatory background checking. Pre-punk lives aren't fine-toothed combed, and after *Anything's* relative post-*Eloise* flop it ends up as something of a romp for its finish line, but the decade it covers in-depth marks the band's golden era. And not just artistically and commercially. A hell of a lot happened between '76 and '86 and most of it happened to The Damned. While Kieron Tyler's writing style isn't exactly marked by its ornature and flair, it keeps the pages turning and, ultimately, gets the job done. We learn how the band rose from roots in the London SS, and *Damned Damned Damned* producer Nick Lowe considered them 'obnoxious mouthy geezers'. Tough words, but judging by all subsequent descriptions of their behaviour, 'obnoxious' merely scratches the surface. From top to toe. The Damned's career has been marked by mayhem, and when has that particular ingredient never been the essence of great rock biography?

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Ian Fortnam



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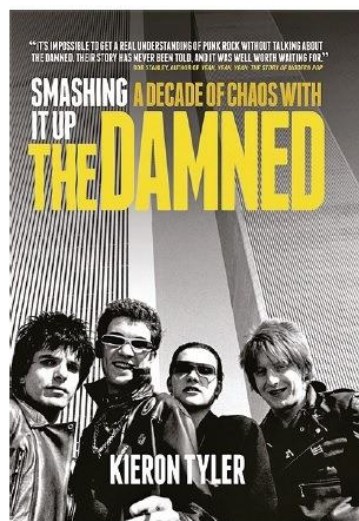
# A Damned good read

Paul Rigby continues his series on music-related books with a tome on punk pioneers The Damned

Smashing It Up: **A Decade of Chaos With The Damned**

Author: **Kieron Tyler**

Price: **£20**



**T**here are too many people out there who still believe that punk began with the Sex Pistols when, in fact, that band appeared late in the scene. America was doing punk way before the UK even heard of the word.

The essence of the scene was – whisper it quietly – hippie-like in its form. That is, US-based ‘punk’ formed a protective home to people who lived outside of the system and really, truly, didn’t give a damn. Bankrupt and decaying New York provided that ideal home. It was a place to share ideas, to be wild, to experiment in art and sex and to have fun. Real fun. No holds barred, drug-fuelled, dangerous fun.

US punks were, frankly, uncomfortable around UK punks and the UK scene as a whole. Part of the reason was because the UK version of punk was a whole lot darker. It was far more political. It was way too infused with Prime Minister of the time Margaret Thatcher – punk’s own favourite Moriarty.

It fell to The Damned to inform the UK public just what pure, undiluted punk was really all about. What the essence of Mk. I punk was. It was not about destruction, that was happening all around – punk or no punk – and it was government sponsored. Being a punk was about living for today. It was about FUN. Not the Sex Pistol’s ‘No Fun’. I say

again, FUN.

This book is all about the UK punk band that ‘got it’. The first punk band to release a single in the UK (‘New Rose’) and an album too (‘Damned Damned Damned’). The original outfit was formed by Brian Robertson (later Brian James), the frustrated founder of the early 70s outfit Bastard, Christopher John Miller (Rat Scabies) and, later Raymond Ian Burns (Captain Sensible), plus lead singer, David Lett (David Vanian).

After a useful introduction in which the reader is offered a potted band history, including the varying line-up changes, we dive into the deep history and how the group members were forged into the band, including some interesting nuggets in which the future punk glitterati mixed and flowed and danced around each other, much like the rocky detritus post-Big Bang, before the bands coalesced and formed into the institutions (oh, the irony) we know today.

It’s at this stage of the book that you perk up a bit because Vanian is quoted via interviews. That, in itself, is a plus for the book. The shy lead singer normally avoids interviews of this type.

The story follows the early scene, the chaos, the violence, the blood and the arrests, as well as the politics, whether that be touring with The Dead Boys or Marc Bolan.

Although as the book describes, the USA didn’t accept the band.

Accusations that The Damned were sloppy, unprofessional, wild and not ‘arty’ enough, prevented The Damned making it big. Even some of the US-based outfits were uncomfortable appearing with The Damned.

“[Television’s] Tom Verlaine didn’t fancy working with us” said Captain Sensible. “Obviously the word had got to him that we were a bit, um, ha ha. It was pretty mad at times. Maybe he was right. If you want an easy life, I wouldn’t work with the Damned”.

Full of detail and insight (from their connections to producer, Shel Talmy to working with Pink Floyd’s Nick Mason).

“It’s a difficult thing to say you like Pink Floyd because of what they became” said Sensible. “Two totally different bands, they became a bucket of s\*\*t when Gilmore stopped copying Syd. Syd Barrett was inspired!”

An entertaining read that focuses on the early years and skips a fair bit towards more recent times later in the tome, this book focuses on the meat of the band’s career and does so with a fast-paced, journalistic zip.