The rise of the punk scene in the 1970s and ‘80s speaks to the growing discontent among the nation’s youth at the time. No longer content with the hippie youth culture of the 1960s, when non-violent protest, love, and peace reigned, a growing section of America’s youth wanted to revolt, whether it brought real change or not. Rarely, though, will one find an official, documented, researched history of the rise of this subculture, or counterculture. As Dewar MacLeod states in his concise yet intense peek into the growth of the Hollywood scene of the 1970s, *Kids of the Black Hole: Punk Rock in Postsuburban California*, punk developed into a scene of incredible exclusivity. He tells the story of punk’s growth from a stripped-down, rock’n’roll music scene to a way of life – first a refusal of popular culture, and a culture in and of itself.

From the first page, MacLeod makes it apparent that his book will not simply study the scene from an academic perspective. This scene was a part of his life, a personal excursion away from the generic, monotonous sounds of the rock music industry of the ‘70s. In the introduction of the first chapter, MacLeod laments missing out on the Los Angeles scene, but establishes that he spent his college years in the Bay Area frequenting punk shows. One instance in this initial chapter, he speaks of his own personal experience going to a Ramones show at the Whisky a Go-Go (a rock’n’roll venue on the Sunset Strip that rarely booked punk acts), and he tells the tales of punk shows, life, and rebellion from a third-person perspective. He describes the origins of punk rock in London and New York and then follows its slow migration to Los Angeles and the West coast.

The first sounds were on vinyl, the imported tones of other cities, but Los Angeles—a mass culture powerhouse by the twentieth century—was not content with the music of another city’s scene. New Yorkers and Londoners could not speak for the troubles of Los Angeles’ post-suburbanites. Thus the Los Angeles scene was born, separate and unique from the class conscious Londoners and the artsy, “pseudo-intellectual” style of the New Yorkers.

*Kids of the Black Hole* is short. There is no way around the feeling that MacLeod could have written more, continued his analysis, and told more of the intriguing stories that guide the entire work. MacLeod speaks with obvious passion and knowledge of the topic, though it is considerably more intriguing when he relays the growth of the scene through the stories of concerts, confrontations, and collaboration. There are multiple occasions where he awkwardly, and seemingly reluctantly, transitions from these stories to the standard historical social analysis that makes the work an historical piece. These sections not only transition suddenly, but they also drone at times. With the language evolving into the doctoral discourse that comes standard with any historical work, the lack of such language during his story-telling more accurately portrays his enthusiasm for his topic and drives the book with much greater fluidity and readability.

Through the rest of the book, MacLeod explores the evolution of Los Angeles’ punk rock scene, as it moves from the inner city outward, in search of anywhere that a venue would permit the destructive force of a punk crowd. As the scene evolves, he discusses the conflicts that grew within the movement: the definition of real punks and who among them were simply poseurs, punk ideology, and the definitions of the music itself. The music was always the driving force behind the scene, but the scene itself at the same time defined the music. Moving away from the
glitter and glamour of Hollywood, the punk scene roughened. Its musical definition became “Hardcore”, and the scene changed with this shift to raw speed and gritty, utterly unproduced sound. While many view punk as a violent movement, MacLeod shows how it became that way, and how that view grew through the opinions of the media.

Dewar MacLeod’s firsthand knowledge and enthusiastic undertaking of a project that relates to him personally creates a powerful story-telling capacity and an easy, quick read. Unfortunately, the way he seems to force social analysis into certain sections, rather than let it flow with undeniably interesting stories, makes the book feel uneven and a bit disjointed. The works brevity creates a sense that he could have included much more. Overall, Kids of the Black Hole is well worth reading, providing an accessible, in-depth view into an American subculture that remains largely undocumented and widely misunderstood.

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