7. JUST PUNK ENOUGH

> *I'm not doing this*
> *For you or you or you.*
> *- Just Punk Enough, The Damnit Jims*

I fell in love a couple dozen times over the course of writing this book, as I discovered (and re-discovered) bands, performers, songs, and scenes.[1] The song *Just Punk Enough* by the Damnit Jims sparked a major punk rock crush which probably qualifies as a full-blown long-term relationship at this point. Hearing it for the first time made me feel seen, and it's now in heavy rotation in my "music to listen to while I write" playlist.

The lyrics are an unapologetic declaration of the sufficiency of moderate punkery, a rejection of the purist punk perspective that sets impossibly high standards for who qualifies as a real punk. Instead of obsessing over gaining or losing punk points, the band declares themselves to be "just punk enough…" and they defy anyone who says otherwise.

That strikes me as a perfectly punk attitude that I embrace with vigor. The Damnit Jims and I aren't alone in this. *Punk Enough* by the Fauxriginals has a similar message, with lyrics like "*I don't look punk enough / To be punk enough / So that might make me punk.*"

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[1] It's one of my favorite things about writing books, all the falling in love I get to do. Just one of the many reasons I tell people they should write books.

One of the reasons I love those songs – aside from the fact that they are total bangers *and* kinda funny – has to do with a conversation I had early in the writing process. As I explained what the book would be about to a buddy of mine, he asked an innocent question that briefly took the wind out of my sails: "Oh, were you a punk kid?"

I wasn't quite sure how to answer him. I mean, the short answer was no. That's not a label I used at the time, and no casual observer would have applied it to me either. Growing up, I had a conservative short haircut and a conventional jeans-and-t-shirts fashion sense. I had big muscles from being on the wrestling team, but the group I most identified with was the nerds. We were always talking math, physics, and chess. Of all the guys I hung out with in high school, I'm literally the only one who didn't get a PhD or JD.

So I was not quite a geek, not quite a jock, and not quite a punk. I was just myself. While that might be a very punk thing to be, I certainly didn't fit the visible punk aesthetic – no spiked hair, no ripped denim for me. My lifestyle also skewed towards conventional – I didn't own a skateboard, and the only recreational substance I indulged in was pizza.

But the real answer to my friend's question is more complicated than a straight no, or even a "not really."

My lack of official punk points was more the result of exposure and opportunity than inclination or intent. I was a rebel in every way I knew how to be, and I did it in a way that felt authentic to who I was.

My aversion to alcohol, tobacco, and other harder substances (which would have interfered with my athletic and academic interests) put me at odds with my punk classmates who spiked

their hair and listened to obscure bands. I loved the music but couldn't take the smoke.

Even though I was on friendly terms with a lot of punk kids, I wasn't really *in* with them. I didn't get invited to their parties or shows. As far as I know, none of us had any idea there was a legit punk scene called Straight Edge that avoided all that junk… and I wasn't creative enough to invent it on my own.

Little did I know that back in 1977, Graham Lewis, the bassist for Wire, described his band's alienation from punk in much the same way, writing "We felt an affinity but we weren't part of the social scene." Same, brother. Does that make me even more punk than I thought?

I'd like to think I would have been completely punk, thank you very much, if I had any idea Straight Edge existed. Instead, I remained on punk's outskirts. Discovering The Damnit Jims' song was a lovely affirmation that yes, I was also "just punk enough."

Innovators face the same challenge, the same struggle of identity, community, validity, and sufficiency. We hear stories about start-up founders which make our own abilities look bland in comparison. We may conclude that we don't have enough "innovator points" because we don't wear the right brand of hoodie or don't work for a tech company in Silicon Valley.

Geography seems to be a major source of credibility for both punks and innovators, which is kinda weird, right? What does physical location have to do with any of that?

For all those reasons and more, we may end up thinking we are inherently non-innovative, or that there is no room for us in the innovation ecosystem – whatever and wherever the hell that is. We may decide we're not punk enough to innovate.

It's worse than Imposter Syndrome, which makes people feel like frauds. I call it Misfit Syndrome, where we don't even get far enough in to feel like a fraud and we just feel left out.

I saw this play out in an innovation course I taught recently. One of the participants was a military nurse who had been sent to the class at the last minute, after three other people in line ahead of her had unexpected schedule conflicts pop up. She apologized for being late and shared that she was not sure what to expect or why her boss had sent her or what the class was even about.

She explained that she was not an innovator "because I don't do 3D printing," then added that she was open to learning whatever the class might cover… even thought it was not likely to be anything she could understand or use and that her presence was almost certainly a mistake.

She didn't feel like a fraud in this class. She felt like a misfit.

As the course progressed, she somewhat sheepishly brought up a little side project she'd been working on for the past two years. It was a whole new approach to a critical part of her job, blending IT systems, big data sets, and new policy approaches, with the goal of increasing her unit's ability to do its mission. She cared about it deeply and had dedicated a lot of her spare time and creativity to it, although her progress felt stalled at the moment.

My co-instructors and I watched the light come on as she realized that her side project is innovative… and so is she. Even better, the course material helped her understand what she could do to get the project moving. Over the course of two days, her self-image visibly transformed from "misfit / not an innovator" to "definitely an innovator," and she shared her detailed plan for implementing the principles and practices from the course.

She still didn't know anything about 3D printers. Her primary role was still as a healthcare provider. She was still stationed at a small military base in the middle of nowhere. But now she was just punk enough. That made all the difference.

My new nurse friend and I are not the only ones who struggle with feeling insufficiently punk / innovative. Michelle Cruz Gonzales (aka Todd Spitboy) played in and wrote lyrics for no less than three punk bands – Spitboy, Instant Girl, and Bitch Fight. She had the look, the attitude, the ink, the uniform, and did I mention she was a drummer and lyricist for bands that put out albums and did tours?

Nonetheless, in her memoir *The Spitboy Rule*, Gonzales writes about the challenges of not having enough punk points to be taken seriously enough to be accepted as a punk and to have the opportunity to perform her music in front of audiences.

Racist and sexist elements of the punk scene were all too ready to dismiss a Xicana in an all-female band, to say nothing of someone from a small town instead of a big city. She was more punk than I'll ever be, certainly punk enough by any legit standard. Sadly, some people couldn't see it and tried to force their blindness onto everyone else.

The people who *actually* weren't punk enough were the ones who looked the part but prevented women, people of color, queer people, and others from finding a place in the punk scene. Even the Straight Edge punks (like Ian MacKaye from Minor Threat) occasionally got pushed to the margins by punk's gatekeepers. Mike Watt from the Minutemen experienced the same thing, "People always said, 'You're not a punk band…'".[2] Their white maleness certainly helped prop open some doors, but it turns out punk is not immune from the "you're not one of us" mentality.

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[2] Interview quote in Neate's book *Pink Flag*

The truth is that anyone can be punk, any gender, any ethnicity, any locality… the list goes on. And anyone can be an innovator.

Don't fall for the arrogant excluders who award and deduct innovation points based on superficial attributes and who adopt a hyper-narrow definition of True Innovation™. In their myopic view, anyone who doesn't go fast enough or break enough things is excluded from consideration. Those folks are wrong – there, I said it.

This explains why so many women, people of color, and people from outside certain geographic locations are so underrepresented in the venture capital funding scene (and why so many are coming together to make their own scene!).

That restrictive posture does not just inhibit the growth of the excluded people, it harms the whole community – including the gatekeepers, who miss out on exposure to new ideas and partnerships. Nobody wins.

Punk shows a better way. In a 2002 interview, Ian MacKay listed the bands who most influenced him, saying "… most of them wouldn't be considered punk." He went on to add "I would hope any musician would be inspired by a lot of different kinds of music."

In a similar way, innovators should be omnivorous and promiscuous in their influences. Just as punk musicians should listen to all kinds of music[3], innovators should not just take classes and read books about innovation. That's the surest path to missing the whole point.

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[3] I'm grooving to some blue-eye'd soul as I write this chapter – Say it isn't so! I can't go for that (no can do).

I promise, you don't lose points by being open to a wide range of influences. I've made that point several times in this book. Guess I think it's important.

This chapter's three-word phrase is "**just punk enough**." So it's time to ask yourself: How punk do you want to be?

There are a *ton* of valid answers to that question. Also, your answer might change over time. The only wrong answer is an inauthentic one, based on someone else's priorities.

If you want to go all in on punk or innovation, terrific! Get all the points. Spike your hair and dye it green. Or buy a 3D printer and learn how to use it. You do you.

If you'd rather be just enough, that's terrific too. Ignore the point tally. Skip the 3D printer. Wear your hair however the hell you want to. Be exactly as punk as you want to be. Bring as much – or as little – innovation to the work as you want to.

There's nothing more punk than that.