

“Ramones”—Ramones (1976)

Added to the National Recording Registry: 2012

Essay by Martin Popoff (guest post)*



“Ramones” front cover



Original label



“Ramones” back cover

Much like the two New York Dolls albums and the three Stooges albums, Ramones’s “Ramones,” upon its unleashing on April 23, 1976, became a hotly debated critic’s darling classic—and then sold no records and created no hit singles despite two kicks at the garbage can.

But its brilliance cannot be denied, even by the band, who went on to make a recording another 13 times until calling it a day in 1996, in what is perhaps the most organized band retirement of all time.

Shockingly, all of the original Ramones have now passed on, unsettling, given how visceral and “among us” the band looks on photographer Roberta Bayley’s iconic front cover shot, in which the band—from left to right, Johnny, Tommy, Joey and Dee Dee Ramone—stare out, propping matching uniforms, in front of a brick wall and in front of their own plain-speak logo.

The band, scarcely gathered up and contained for a year-and-a-half by this point, had been making waves at CBGB's, until journalist about town, Lisa Robinson, excitedly brought them up with Doors/Stooges/MC5 enabler Danny Fields, who quickly became their manager, because, as he articulates it, they simply “had it all.” Befitting creative, desperate New York City at the time, it didn’t take much for the band to get signed to feisty indie Sire Records, run by Seymour Stein and his wife Linda, who acted upon the behest of producer Craig Leon, who soon set to work on the band’s audacious, absurdist game-changer of a debut.

Though each member of the band had their own neuroses, the Ramones were somehow able to focus. The most driven in the process was guitarist Johnny, who whipped the band into shape, shape enough to lay down the 29 minutes of music they would need for the album which they record for \$6,400 and in three days. Joey’s careful vocals, along with a bunch of backing vocals, some by the band, some uncredited, would take another four days. Producer Leon was skilled enough to use miking techniques pioneered by the

Beatles, going with bass to the left, rhythm guitars to the right, drums and vocals in both channels. Leon also subtly massaged in additional percussion and doubling techniques to get something of a wall of sound, even if the band would improve upon this tableau on later records, with the best results arguably being achieved by the band's third album, 1977's "Rocket to Russia."

Nonetheless, the damage was done and "Ramones"—Sire SASD-7520, distributed by ABC—dented heads, in the process emerging as what the music industry widely considers the first punk rock album of all time. It's easy to look back and ascertain that many of the punk tropes all in one place are best experienced through an aggregate of UK bands such as The Damned, The Clash and the Sex Pistols, but a purer punk sound—leaving aside the long hair, the matching uniforms and the blue jeans—there never would be, than what occurs right here on "Ramones" from the spring of 1976.

In fact, there's no point ceding anything to the braying UK contingent in terms of the origins of punk, even if first to make an album is set aside as chief qualification. Boil it down and punk is co-invented by the very punky Richard Hell-era Television in the spring of 1974 and the Ramones in the spring of 1974, the former a little more look than the music, the latter a little more music than the look, and both operating from CBGB's.

But the Ramones self-titled debut is remarkable beyond this idea of being the very first punk album. However, before we leave that idea, let's dwell for a second and realize that it is in fact the first album of a whole new type of music—punk rock—but then also realize that as a couple or three dozen additional punk rock bands piled on, none would be duplicates of the Ramones and the world Joey, Johnny, Tommy and Dee Dee created. Nobody had the sardonic adolescent whine of Joey Ramone. None would be able to paint the dark and desperate world of a near bankrupt New York City in such simple, amusing, cartoony shades of primary. In effect, the Ramones made New York friendly. And it wasn't just the wisecracking all over the lyrics. Throughout the album, the band, through the sophistication of what Johnny and Tommy brought to it, were teaching us about the girl group tradition, the garage rock of Lenny Kaye and the "Nuggets" series, all with unlikely, hard-charging guitars that made countless heavy metal fans loyal proselytizers for the band and their brand. With "Ramones," we were getting a history of the local music scene, and even scenes that influenced the influencers, such as surf, and through the imagery, original '50s rock 'n' roll.

And speaking of brand, if the cover of the album wasn't bold enough messaging, on the back we got an image of a belt buckle, designed by graphic artist Arturo Vega, and then worked up for this image in a photo booth. Instantly, through Arturo's imaging and branding for the band, the Ramones would become American ambassadors, in some ways, the official band of the US government, but subversively so, even if you got the feeling that if the Ramones were put in charge, they'd quickly rise up under Johnny's command and run a tight ship.

But back to our original premise: we wouldn't be here talking about "Ramones" as a record worthy of this Library of Congress honour if it hadn't moved past critic's favourite status and into the iconic status it now enjoys. As the first album, it represents the band,

the Ramones, but we also must admire the record because through it, the unique and sufficiently complex world that is the Ramones, arrived fully formed. Therefore, “Ramones” represents what has become a huge pop culture phenomenon—the idea of the band itself—built through years of brand reinforcement through merchandise, touring and regular making of records. Specific to the debut, “Beat on the Brat,” in these politically correct times, has faded as the famous anthem it was for years. But political correctness has not fallen “Blitzkrieg Bop,” which continues to be, with its universally beloved “Hey ho, let’s go!” exhortation from Joey (his first words on a record), one of the most rousing anthems at any sporting event across America, particularly at hockey and football games.

Amalgamating all of this—the subtle lessons about the history of American rock ‘n’ roll, Arturo’s slightly irreverent nationalism, the lyrics very specifically about America’s number one city, the jeans, the black leather jackets, even the very name--the Ramones—what we wind up with (and so capably represented right here on their first record) is an impressive and strident expression of Americana. What’s more, the band would spend the next 20 years exporting their strong American identity through multiple world tours, creating the most mania in territories like Brazil, Japan and Germany; in fact, the official Ramones museum is situated in Berlin.

In conclusion, again, it’s shocking that the personas behind all four of those Dennis the Menace mugs staring out at us from Roberta Bayley’s picture are now gone. But through the eternity of recorded sound—not to mention the perennial shared experience of hearing “Blitzkrieg Bop” in large crowds and the massive fame afforded the white-on-black Ramones t-shirt of Arturo’s blessed making—the Ramones are with us now as a nation far more indelibly than they ever were skulking around the Lower East Side, or in subsequent years, pulling into your town trying to make a point. In other words, the Ramones are now baked into the most permanent parts of the story of American pop culture—etched in stone as it were—and to reiterate, much of that is due to the package of sight and sound and word that is Ramones “Ramones,” a record so good they had to name it twice.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the view of the Library of Congress.