1980s Counter Culture

From *The Guardian* newspaper; written by Jason Cowley

For me the 80s began with the election of Margaret Thatcher on 4 May 1979 and ended with the internal party coup that ousted her as prime minister on 28 November 1990. Let's call them the long 1980s. I was working as a paper boy in 1979, and I have never forgotten the delight of the newsagent when I arrived at his shop early on the morning of 4 May to be told by him, "She's won." He was one of Thatcher's Essex men: entrepreneurial, insurgent and weary of the failed quasi-socialist politics of the post-war decades. He, like many people who voted Conservative for the first time in 1979, was restless for change.

Living in the Essex-Hertfordshire borderlands as I did, and making regular hit-and-run raids on London to visit clubs such as the Wag, the Electric Ballroom, the Cha-Cha under the arches at Charing Cross and the Camden Palace, I found those years of the late 70s and early 80s extraordinarily exciting. England was being convulsed by a social, cultural and political counter-revolution. There was violence on the football terraces and on the inner-city streets.

The forces that drove the punks and new wave bands that followed them were similar to those that motivated the Thatcherite ideologues - a profound desire for consensus-breaking transformation. This was a time of great innovation in pop music, as bands inspired by the can-do attitude of the punks and by the art-school cool of David Bowie began to experiment with synthesisers and computers, new technologies that would change forever the way music was made.

Yet some time in the mid-80s everything became becalmed. The fiercest political battles had been fought and won. The miners were defeated. Free-market fundamentalism was the new orthodoxy. People began to feel richer. The pop music was dismal. The culture became coarser and more reactionary.

As an undergraduate from 1986-89, I was surprised by how many of my fellow students were committed Tories. Apparently the urge was no longer to change the world, even superficially in the old spirit of student idealism and adolescent rebellion, but rather to prosper in it. OK, I was at a university in the south of England, popular with nearly-Sloanes and Oxbridge miss-outs - but something didn't seem quite right.

Then there was yet another cultural shift towards the end of the decade. The rave scene began spilling out of the Hacienda nightclub in Manchester and into wider society, altering the mood, energising a whole new generation, many of whom were high on the freely circulating drug ecstasy.

The summer of 1989, the last summer of the decade, was unusually warm and settled in England. Meanwhile, something was happening in eastern Europe, and it soon became clear that entire political eras were coming to an end, with the sudden and dramatic fall of communist totalitarianism. For one sweet extended period that year it seemed as if everything was changing for the better, that the Cold War was at an end, and that we were living, if not quite at the end of history, then at the beginning of something new and promising.

The feeling of euphoria didn't last; in retrospect, how could it have lasted? But it was an inspiring end to a thrilling decade of convulsion and upheaval