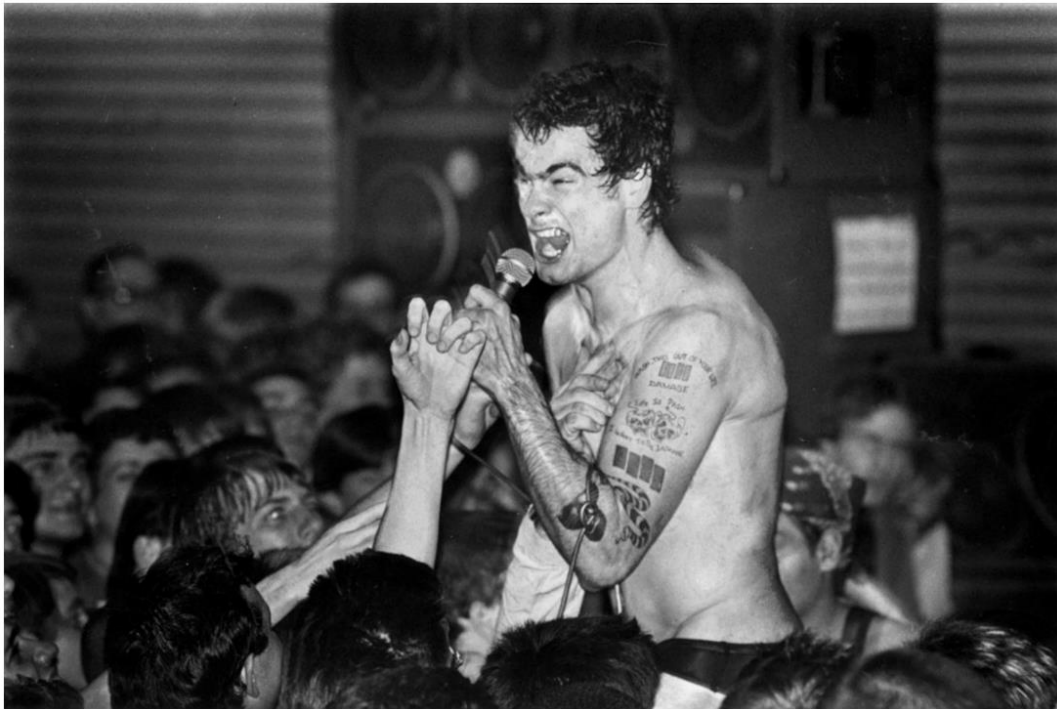


THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

October 6th, 2016

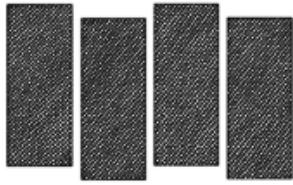
For Sale: Black Flag's Logo, the Most Iconic Symbol of Hardcore Punk

At 40, genre gets nostalgia treatment, to chagrin of fans; \$265 T-shirt at Barneys
By **NATHAN HODGE**



This summer, the upscale retailer Barneys New York began selling a “black brushed Japanese cotton-cashmere jersey” with decorative elongated zippers along the sides. The price was \$265.

That is a lot of money to pay for what is, by any reasonable standard, a T-shirt. But what really got people worked up was the logo printed on the chest—Black Flag.



Black Flag logo

Seeing the symbol of one of the world's most iconic hardcore punk bands displayed on a pricey fashion garment is enough to make retired slam-dancers spit out their coffee.

“Real punks don't shop,” scoffed Glen E. Friedman, a photographer and skate punk who documented Black Flag during their peak years. “They are not consumers.”

It could have been worse. A separate registration filed in 2005 (and subsequently canceled) would have allowed a Japanese company to sell Black Flag-branded toys, including dolls, and “toys for domestic pets.”

Rock memorabilia, including vintage T-shirts, have been big sellers for years. Famous bands see their coolness spike as new generations discover them.

As punk turns 40, it is getting its own nostalgia treatment. London is hosting a series of events and exhibitions this year of old fanzines and posters at respectable venues such as the British Library.

A cottage industry has sprung up remembering CBGB, the New York Bowery dive that gave the world Television, the Ramones and the Talking Heads. The CBGB logo can be easily spotted on T-shirts worn by suburban dads and celebrity chefs.

In Boston, an underground club called the Rathskeller, aka the Rat, was torn down to make way for the luxury Hotel Commonwealth, which now has a memorabilia-filled suite named after the place (“Grit meets grace in this suite, an upscale retro room,” the hotel website reads). The going rate for a room is \$500 to \$900 a night.

Yet when it comes to hardcore punk—the faster and more abrasive offshoot that Black Flag helped pioneer—memorabilia of any kind can be hard to come by. Fanzines and fliers, the main visual art, were made on copy machines and discarded. Short-lived bands issued cheaply recorded albums in limited pressings before breaking up.

First formed in 1976 in Hermosa Beach, Calif., as Panic, Black Flag eked out a poverty-level existence staying in filthy squats on the road and playing equally filthy dives from Los Angeles to London.

Somehow the band endured for a decade—through multiple lineup changes, gigs broken up by police and thousands of miles in beat-up vans. The group sealed a reputation for violent, unpredictable and absolutely riveting gigs.

At a 1979 show at Polliwog Park in Manhattan Beach, Calif., vocalist Keith Morris antagonized the crowd, which pelted the band with picnic food and beer cans. Confrontations between punks and police were common.

Amid that atmosphere, the band created defiant anthems such as “My War,” “Nervous Breakdown” and “Rise Above.”

Hardcore bands earned a modest income on the road selling T-shirts, stickers and albums at the merchandise tables of clubs, sometimes battling club owners for their share of the door. Back then, a T-shirt at the merchandise table would have cost 1/25 as much as the one sold at Barneys. Most of the original merchandise is long gone. Since the band’s breakup in 1986, however, nothing has shown more staying power than its logo. Perfect for spray-painting on a freeway overpass or converting into a homemade tattoo, the four bars became the symbol of a movement. “It’s an astonishing logo, as blunt and as brutal as the music itself,” said Stevie Chick, who wrote a book about the band. “It’s basically four black bars, and it communicates so much.”



A screenshot of the \$265 Black Flag T-shirt from the Barneys New York website
PHOTO: BARNEYS

But how did hardcore punk's most recognizable logo—the Black Flag bars—end up at Barneys?

The retailer declined to comment on the T-shirt; a link to the item on the company's website said it is no longer available.

"I know nothing about the origins of the shirt," Henry Rollins, a former frontman for the band, said in an email. "I have no ownership of the band's name or logo. That's where I begin and end with it."

The Black Flag bars were designed by Raymond Pettibon, a well-regarded artist who is the brother of Greg Ginn, the band's founding guitarist. A representative for Mr. Pettibon said that the artist had not been involved in "this particular collaboration."

Kazuo Yamada of R13, the company that designed the \$265 T-shirt, said it negotiated a licensing agreement with listed representatives on the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office website.

The owner of the bars? According to a U.S. Patent and Trademark Office document, the Black Flag bars are owned by SST Records, Inc., of Taylor, Texas, which was founded by the band's Mr. Ginn.

The USPTO registration, which describes the logo as “4 vertical black lines in various heights,” points to the myriad ways in which the image can be reproduced—on “Hats; Pants; Shirts; Socks; Sweat shirts; T-shirts.”

Cheryl Hodgson, an attorney based in Los Angeles, confirmed she handled the transaction with R13 for SST and Mr. Ginn. SST didn’t respond to requests for comment.

During the band’s touring days, Mr. Ginn and his cohorts set a grueling schedule of gigs and kept trundling across the country in beat-up trucks and vans, according to memoirs and histories of the band. “It was like a military operation,” said Mr. Chick. “They were soldiers fighting to spread the word of Greg Ginn—not so much a band as much as a guerrilla movement.”

The irony of selling the rights to punk’s most provocative symbol of anti-authoritarianism isn’t lost on the band’s original singer, Mr. Morris.

“We have no control over T-shirt prices, as that’s a Ginn and SST thing,” he said. “The ‘Four Bars’ have been used so many times on shirts, stickers, patches, buttons, women’s edible underwear, baby bottles and football helmets that it would be a never-ending job to find out who is printing them.”

Added Mr. Morris: “I think it would be safe to assume there are people bootlegging them in garages and warehouses across the world, and to these people I say, ‘Party away!’”