

The Barbarians are coming to town: Mont-de-Marsan and the world's first punk festival

During the summer of 1976, Mont-de-Marsan, a small town in the southwest of France, hosted in its arenas, traditionally used for bull-fighting, the first punk festival in history. Young people from all around France but also from Spain, the Netherlands, Britain and Switzerland, with their dyed hair, outrageous makeup, torn and safety pin-adorned t-shirts all descended on the little garrison town which for the space of a few hours became the world capital of punk. This event, which took place a month before London's 100 Club punk festival, was at the forefront of the punk phenomenon. The line-up included the Damned, Little Bob Story, Eddy and the Hot Rods, Bijou (and, for its second edition, in 1977, The Clash, Doctor Feelgood, and the Damned again). The prefect and the mayor tried to have the festival banned a few days before it was due to start but the young organizers successfully argued that it was impossible and most imprudent to do so, since the festivalgoers were already making their way to Mont-de-Marsan.

The event made the headlines on television and in the newspapers and the commentators mocked and railed about the wave of punks which took over the streets of the town and crowded into the terraces of the arena, not so much causing physical damage as provoking a strong sense of shock. By relying on a corpus made of official press and media texts as well as fanzines and testimonies, our paper will analyse how this festival, which stunned the inhabitants of the town, crystallised contemporary fears and how the event, at the intersection of an urban space which was commandeered, repurposed and hijacked and of forms of popular music which had suddenly become highly visible, invasive and disturbing, at times raised the spectre of a barbarian invasion, and at times heightened fears about delinquency, drug abuse and the ills of modern society.

