TEN MILES SQUARE

"... such District (not exceeding ten Miles square) ... [shall] become the Seat of the Government of the United States"

THE CONSTITUTION OF THE UNITED STATES

God Save the Scene

D.C. punk has thrived for decades with the help of churches, activists, and even the library. Can it survive the city's rapid redevelopment?

By Matt Connolly

Eight hours before my first-ever show in Washington, D.C., I was standing in the cold while a bearded man from AAA shook his head and explained why I'd never make it. My band, Jet Jaguar, had just played in New York and we were living that rock-and-roll tour life—except our cheap motel room was my parents' house in suburban New Jersey and our rust-bucket tour van was a decade-old Volvo sedan. We had awoken that morning to find that the usually reliable Volvo was refusing to turn on.

For our work-shirt-clad doomsayer, though, the mechanical failure wasn't the problem. The battery was shot, but it was a simple (if pricey) fix, since he had a replacement in the truck. He was just certain that even with a new battery we wouldn't be able to make the drive in time. He assured me I could trust him on that, since he "had some family down there." When I told him we didn't have much of a choice because our band had to play, all sense of urgency disappeared. Did we sound anything like Rush? And did we want to hear a bunch of stories about the dozens of Rush shows he'd been to? The answer to the first question was no. The second question was rhetorical.

Despite a traffic jam outside Baltimore, we made it to the Adams Morgan bar in time for the show; I can neither confirm nor deny that a number of speed limits were broken along the way, though I will say that I'm a better guitarist than driver. We'd played in New York and Chicago before, but I was the most excited to play D.C. I had recently moved back to the city after some time away and, like many others who grew up listening to a certain strain of punk music, had an idyllic picture of the music scene. If your image of Washington stops where the monuments and government buildings end, you may not know that the city is hiding a hugely influential and uniquely accessible punk scene that stretches back more than three decades. I was ready and eager to join in.

Although that show turned out to be kind of a mess.

To understand the attraction of D.C. to a wannabe like me, you have to go back to 1985. That was the year of "Revolution Summer," a season of protest and performance that put the District's scene on the map. While the shouts were aimed at targets like apartheid, militarization, and Ronald Reagan, the revolution had turned inward as well. Washington was a hotbed for punk and hardcore music in the late 1970s and early '80s, but many found the scene violent, sexist, and inaccessible, both in the mosh pits and out. A new activist group called Positive Force and a wave of musicians who rejected those values set out to change that. "Positive Force together with a new generation of bands had a critique of that kind of destructive version of punk," says Mark Andersen, a Positive Force member who literally wrote the book on the D.C. punk scene. "It was an insurrection."

Bands like Rites of Spring (who were hugely influential despite existing for all of two years), Fire Party (whose singer, Amy Pickering, actually coined the term "Revolution Summer"), and Mission Impossible (whose young drummer, Dave Grohl, would go on to be exponentially more famous than everyone else in this article) took part in this pivotal era. But the movement's biggest band, Fugazi, emerged just afterward. Fronted by the D.C. icon Ian MacKaye, Fugazi was known for their staunch independence and dedication to low-priced, nonviolent, all-ages shows. They toured nationally and internationally in the late 1980s and '90s, cementing the city's status as a hotbed for ethical do-it-yourself punk rock. Andersen, who interviewed Grohl right after his new band, Nirvana, had changed the landscape of rock music with *Nevermind* in 1991, remembers, "He was talking about how at the outset his ambition with Nirvana was that he just hoped they could be as popular as Fugazi." To put things in perspective, *Nevermind*'s original run was about 50,000 records. Fugazi's *Steady Diet of Nothing*, which came out that same year, had an original run of 160,000. (*Nevermind* has gone on to sell thirty million copies worldwide.)

For punk rock in the District, this wasn't just a period of increasing popularity. It was also a time of institution building, which would help the ethics espoused by bands like Fugazi take root in the scene and last well into the future. Later generations, like D.C.'s slice of the feminist punk Riot Grrrl movement in the early '90s, brought their own values but still needed accessible spaces to work and perform. Forced to the margins by bars that were wary of booking punk acts and wouldn't let in underage musicians or fans, bands and promoters built up relationships with community spaces like the Wilson Center in Columbia Heights (now the site of a public charter school) and churches like St. Stephen's a few blocks away, which still hosts shows today. "A lot of these churches were more genuinely open to community participation and less open to the almighty dollar," Andersen says. "These churches had this sense of a broader mission and they could tuck the punk stuff under that big tent—as long as the punks weren't wrecking the joint." Many of those shows were and still are booked by Positive Force, which celebrated its thirtieth anniversary last year. Larger "real" venues like the 9:30 Club and the Black Cat agreed to keep shows open to all ages, giving bands who got too big for houses and church basements places to play without compromising their values. The Fort Reno concert series, held every summer in the titular park, has been going for more than forty years now.

Hardcore history: The Wilson Center in Columbia Heights was one of many all-ages venues in the city.

Why are lasting all-ages spaces important? Without them, the rock scene revolves around bars. The money isn't in the music itself; much like how newspapers are really advertising bulletins with news articles, live music in this case is just liquor sales with guitars. Kids younger than twenty-one, often the lifeblood of a thriving music scene, can't attend shows or play them. And if you are old enough to perform, you might not get asked back to venues if your fans don't drink enough.

courtesy Matt Connolly

This dynamic makes it difficult for bands to find their footing. A common way to compensate performers is for a bar employee to sit at the door and ask each fan who they've come to see. Every answer is tallied, and the bands get a percentage of the payout based on how many people they brought in. This puts bands that are playing a show together in competition for their share of the money at the end of the night, and puts anyone who's a fan of multiple acts in a tough spot, since they have to pick one. (Ideally they pick whoever they think needs gas money the most.) And that's if the bar is being totally aboveboard—if you're certain your band got thirty fans but the manager's magic sheet only has twenty tallies, there's not much you can do.

As you can imagine, this isn't exactly a path to profitability. The first time Jet Jaguar ever made money on a show, we played a bar in Chicago that offered $5 for every fan we brought in. We left with $95, which, after the $85 on equipment and car rental, was exactly enough for the fifty chicken nuggets we split at Burger King that night. And those tallies are far from the worst system out there—I remember going to see my friends' band at a dingy club in Chicago that would book as many as eight acts for one show and then give each group a few weeks to sell their own tickets, with the length and placement of each band's set contingent on how many tickets got sold. This led to a conveyor belt of acts whose fans would show up right before their set and leave as soon as it was done. When my friends' group had finished playing, a metal band came on to replace them. The lead singer, whose long hair covered up most of his Scottie Pippen Bulls jersey, audibly sighed into the microphone as he saw how few people were in the crowd before limping into a dispirited rendition of Rage Against the Machine's "Killing in the Name."

On that drive to my first D.C. show I was excited at the prospect of never having to play or attend a show like that ever again. But I soon discovered that it takes more than an all-ages policy to make a good show. That night the bar's microphones kept cutting out, and to make matters worse the sound guy would yell questions and inexplicably try to make conversation with us literally in the middle of our songs. Undeterred, I ended up taking a volunteer gig booking and hosting a monthly show there. The bar only paid artists in crowd donations, though, and most audience members were either barflies who weren't expecting music or artists' friends who didn't think they had to pay. I often found myself sneaking my own money into the tip jar so performers would get a measly double-digit payout, or inviting my own friends who I knew I could guilt into giving (sorry!). After a year I gave it up—I had found local music, but had yet to discover the institutions that made it thrive.

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For musicians outside the punk scene, it can be hard to find such institutions. I booked the rapper Stef Luva, née Stephan Nolan, at one of my shows two years ago. He says D.C. hip-hop has yet to embrace the all-ages mentality the way punk shows did back in the '80s, since most of the scene revolves around showcases at bars and clubs. "There's usually no place for underage artists, and there are a lot of artists eighteen and younger who are actually good," he says. "It'd be nice to get them early so they can hone their skills. Otherwise by the time you get everything, you're almost pushing thirty." That's not to say there are no local institutions; Nolan says it's "all love" at Hip-Hop Yoga, a weekly all-ages showcase at the University of Maryland that is exactly what it sounds like. But with two singles planned for this year and a mixtape on the way, he thinks leaving the District to play shows in cities like Atlanta and New York can lead to better local exposure: "Everybody from your hometown starts hearing word of mouth. People give you respect and props when you've gained fans elsewhere."

And when you want to branch out and play shows that aren't just hip-hop focused, you don't always feel welcome. There were some bad moments in my short-lived hosting career. The drummer of the first band I ever booked quit ten minutes before they were supposed to go onstage, and a few months later a band cut the power to half the bar when they plugged all their equipment into a power strip plugged into another power strip plugged into a single outlet. But the worst came right before Stef's set: I was fiddling with the sound as he got ready to go onstage, and when I looked up a group of young-looking, white-looking patrons were lined up talking to him and taking their wallets out. I naively thought we were going to get donations before the show even started—but it turned out they had assumed Stef was a bouncer and were trying to show him their IDs. They later left without leaving a tip.

While Stef says the hip-hop scene is on the rise, the punk scene that still carries so much from thirty years ago is entering a new phase, with new challenges. David Combs, whose band the Max Levine Ensemble released a new album in November (he has also performed as Spoonboy and recently started a new band called Bad Moves), is from the area and has been playing music in and around D.C. for more than fifteen years. Despite the scene's roots in protest, he says, things have gotten less political since he started playing. "We had a lot of the same people who were organiz-

ing protests and playing in bands, putting on shows and distributing literature," he says. "That political movement kinda waned off in a crushing of the spirit during the Bush administration."

Julie Yoder, drummer for the feminist punk band Hemlines, says the climate has shifted for bands like hers over the past decade. Her first band, Mess Up the Mess, had to work a lot harder to find shows—especially when leaving the District to go on tour. "I just remember playing shows ten or eleven years ago where the sound guy would just be shitty to us—we were picking up on the fact that he was dismissing us," she says. "With Hemlines it seemed like people responded almost immediately to what we put out there. And we're not just the one band on the bill that's mostly women." Yoder helped bring a Girls Rock! camp, which gives girls ages eight to seventeen a week to learn an instrument, join a band, and write an original song to be performed in a big showcase at the 9:30 Club, to D.C. (There's also We Rock!, a version for adults.) The camp, now in its eighth year, has become its own musical institution, engaging and reengaging volunteers. "What often happens is a lot more adult women get inspired to start playing music or go back to playing music," Yoder says. Shira Mario, who plays in the pop punk band the Maneuvers and grew up going to and organizing shows in D.C., volunteers with Girls Rock! and carried some of that spirit over to a project called Hat Band, in which new bands are formed by drawing participants' names out of a hat. New musicians and learning new instruments are encouraged, and the whole thing ends with a show at St. Stephen's. When lasting bands come out of Hat Band or Girls Rock!, it refreshes a music scene that might otherwise devolve into the same group of people rotating between bands. "It was so exciting that people were doing this and breaking out of their comfort zone," Shira says. "I want to see some new faces. I want to see some of these people that are in the audience get up there and play."

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The most acutely felt change, though, is a challenge facing artists in cities across the country: rapid redevelopment. "You just can't understate gentrification and the continual growth of the price of living in this city when it comes to the impact that has on a music scene," Combs says. "You see a lot of people moving away if their focus is on art and trying to live somewhere that's more affordable." While any artist you talk to is quick to point out that they're far from the biggest victims of gentrification, it's a big blow to the scene when houses that once hosted shows disappear overnight to be flipped by the landlord and musicians pack up and move to Philadelphia or Baltimore, where the rent's cheaper. Shockwaves went through the community when the warehouse that houses the arts collective Union Arts—which hosted practice and performance space for many District musicians—along with other artists was sold to a developer with plans to turn it into a "boutique hotel." To add insult to eviction, the developer tried to allay fears by making room for eight art studios—a small fraction of the original space—and no room for musicians.

A February zoning hearing on the issue was literally overflowing with punks and other artists who wanted to voice their complaints: a second meeting had to be scheduled just so everyone who had signed up to comment could do so. The unease between the scene and local government may not come as a surprise—you're saying the punks have a problem with authority?—but the city's aggressive pro-redevelopment policies have a way of making things testier. And it's not just punk musicians who are affected. January saw a "Muriel's Gotta Go-Go" protest, in which activists rallied against Mayor Muriel Bowser with a go-go soundtrack. The protest was held outside the Reeves Center, a government office building that housed the go-go venue Club U until the city shut it down in 2005 following a stabbing. (Even the most dedicated local hardcore fan will acknowledge that go-go, the homegrown genre that blends funk and R&B into nonstop live shows, is the city's musical heritage, and a protester told *Washington City Paper* that the city and its police force have largely pushed go-go performances out of D.C. proper.) Similarly, a shooting in 2007 at a bar a few blocks from Club U led to a proposal in the city council to bar minors from businesses that serve liquor, essentially banning all-ages shows at clubs. Ian MacKaye showed up to give an impassioned speech against the measure, which didn't pass.

What may be surprising is that local government resources are going toward preserving and honoring the city's punk culture. The D.C. Public Library is collecting and digitizing materials as part of its new D.C. Punk Archive, set to house everything from music recordings and show videos to flyers and handmade zines. "I grew up around here and went to shows and stuff a lot as a young person," says librarian Bobbie Dougherty. "When I started working in the library world I started thinking about this differently—I started to realize it should be something that is being saved and preserved and talked about." Dougherty and others solicit donations from scene veterans—Andersen donated multiple huge filing cabinets full of materials—and count some younger punks as volunteers, entering metadata and obtaining bands' permission to make their songs available to play online. (The library is

hoping to build on the Punk Archive's success by using many of the same tactics to strengthen its go-go collection.)

The library has even gone a step further to institutionalize itself in the scene by hosting free punk shows in the main branch's basement. "Historically it was just this dark scary room," Dougherty says. "The first time I went in there I thought, 'This would be great for shows.' Because it's a terrible room in a basement." Hemlines was part of the first show, and Yoder credits it with kick-starting the band's success. As a music venue in general it's an amazing addition—free, for all ages, and extremely accessible, especially for younger fans. Mom and Dad in Silver Spring might be wary of their little punk going to a stranger's house to see a show, but how can they argue with a trip to the library?

Despite anger over Union Arts and similar issues, no one I've talked to sees any cognitive dissonance about criticizing the current administration while praising the Punk Archive—after all, the library is far and away the most punk-rock branch of local government. (Garbage collection is probably a distant second.) And given the organization around the challenges they're facing, there's an opportunity for musicians working to preserve affordable places to live, practice, and play to fight for more disadvantaged communities who are being displaced. "I was definitely impressed by the showing at the [Union Arts] planning meeting, but equally, if not worse, stuff has been happening to people in the city for years," Dougherty says. "Hopefully that kind of energy and that kind of support can continue, not just for art spaces."

New institutions like the Punk Archive and decades-old ones like St. Stephen's, Fort Reno, and Positive Force mean the music scene is uniquely situated to potentially weather the current storm. In terms of pure space to perform, churches and libraries are much harder to gentrify away. While it remains to be seen what happens to Union Arts, the spirit of protest and participation is at least alive on a local level. And thanks to how ingrained all-ages shows are in the fabric of the city, all the way up to some of the city's biggest rock venues, a band in D.C. can go from just starting out to pretty famous without compromising on those values from 1985.

Naki / Contributor

Everybody's moving: Fugazi broke out of the D.C. punk scene, bringing their high-energy live shows around the globe.

Veterans like MacKaye and Andersen are part of those institutions too. "People who grew up in D.C. and were engaged in that culture kept a part of it—it wasn't just some party they went to," Combs says. "They show more investment in what you're doing with music and whether the music scene is maintaining values like that." That history also attracts people (like me) who grew up listening to D.C. punk and want to get involved. "What happened here was particularly powerful and long-lasting," Andersen says. "There's a mythology, but there's an actual reality behind it, that D.C. stands for something that inspires and challenges people still."

Eight hours before my most recent show in the District, I was doing some serious interior redecorating. My new band, Hooky, was having its first show that night, and we decided to do it ourselves at our singer's house rather than try and get booked somewhere. That meant carrying couches and clearing out space for the forty or so sweaty people who ended up crammed into the living room on an unseasonably warm December night.

It was my first time onstage since I had quit my hosting gig a year earlier, and during that span I had started going to Positive Force meetings and occasionally volunteering with the D.C. Punk Archive project. I had also spent most of that time desperately searching for a drummer, eventually resorting to taking a Sharpie to a blank T-shirt and wearing my plea out to shows. Even in a storied scene like this one, a drummer with free time remains the rarest of breeds.

The band came together over the summer, though, and six months later our first show went off without a hitch (depending on whether you count screaming so loud that you come close to passing out mid-song a hitch). We had friends in attendance who were in bands themselves, and afterward made a few vague plans for shows together soon. It was just a six-song set in a living room, but it made me feel like a part of this thing, this scene, that could be traced back thirty years to some of my favorite bands. If I were to stick around another thirty years, I bet a lot of it would still feel the same—though I'm a better guitarist than gambler. WM

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