

FROZEN PITS

Why be in a Band?

NOT LONG AFTER I'D called it quits as a performer, I drove into LA to catch a band I liked. My former band had played the same venue a few months earlier, spurring an onstage panic attack. I'd managed to bluff my way through the set, but my confidence had taken a hit. Returning to this room felt like trying to resume a relationship after the kind of screaming blowout no relationship ever really recovers from.

The headlining band played loud, aggressive music. At some point during their set, I shifted my gaze from stage to crowd. No one moved. No one did anything. I found myself surrounded by blank faces. Now it was the audience who were bluffing, and bluffing badly. I found myself wondering if music fans had always been so disengaged, if my own emotional investment in bands had blinded me to this mass disinterest. It was spooky.

A week later, flipping through TV channels, I paused on a Foo Fighters concert. I'd arrived mid-song to find frontman Dave Grohl rocking out, one foot up on a monitor, wild mane of hair swooshing as he soloed with virile abandon. The entire spectacle was self-evidently absurd. Why wasn't he laughed off stage? The thought became a loose thread that, when tugged, led to an unraveling. Had I ever looked this piously pompous when performing?

And if I could no longer summon faith in my own live music, how could I muster interest in anyone else's live music? I'd already known that I wouldn't be in any more bands. Now I realized I wouldn't even be able to watch other bands. This change was so bizarre, so abrupt, it felt like a brain injury. Something that had overwhelmed my life for twenty years no longer made sense. I can remember those earlier emotions, the way live music was like fresh-squeezed juice to the canned concentrate of a recording. But I can no longer feel them.¹⁷

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THERE WAS A TIME when music made me submerge myself in mobs. Bands and songs were the drivers, but photography was the lure. Audiences were (and are) part of punk's sales pitch. The big visuals from this era are of stagedivers. Photographer Ed Colver set the template with one infamous photo taken at a LA show in the early eighties. In Colver's picture, a

stagediver in Vans and a sleeveless tee hovers four or five feet over the crowd, curled upside down like a human pill bug. Although the landing is clearly going to hurt (at least for the people below), the instant captured is strangely serene. A man floats, bystanders watch. Even today, the best stagediving photography follows Colver's template—people leaping from dangerous heights, visually isolated from the waiting throng.

In *Loud 3D*, stagedivers plunge *into* crowds. As the title suggests, this slender, long out-of-print book of photography (self-published by Mike Arredondo, Rob Kulakofsky, and Gary Robert in 1984) comes with a pair of cheap cardboard glasses that convert each red and blue photo into a mesmerizing little still life.¹⁸ Every picture showcases that peculiar contradiction of pre-digital black-and-white 3-D, pairing the distance of sepia with the immediacy of depth. A small glossary of visual info lost in traditional photography—texture, sweat, hollows of shadow—lends the photos a fascinating density.¹⁹

This collection of photos chronicles hardcore punk concerts (“hardcore rock’n’roll,” according to the book’s cover) in San Francisco between 1982–1984. Meaning, the book covers the very best years of hardcore punk in a national hub for local and touring groups. Blue chip bands (Black Flag, Minor Threat, Dead Kennedys) share space with forgotten acts (Sado-Nation, Black Athletes, Stranglehold). Few books of music photography can match its urgency.²⁰ Singers shriek and launch themselves at audiences, creating bizarre dioramas of feigned violence. In one picture, a stream of beer hangs in mid-air, connecting the hand of Fuck-Ups singer Bob Noxious to the gaping mouth of a fan. In another photo, Dead Kennedys’ frontman Jello Biafra bestows water on outstretched arms, the droplets neatly suspended in zero gravity. Viewed without glasses, the guitarist of NYC’s Cause For Alarm is apparently getting punched in the face. In 3-D, the fist is shown jovially punching the air in front of him as he body slams his own instrument.

Audience shots take up more than a third of the book. Slam dancers pose, halted in time, the billows of their plaid shirts suspended like puffs of smoke in an old stereoscope. One man seems to register shock that he has just been leapt upon. Another man puffs his cheeks out, as if a trap door had dumped him into a pit of writhing bodies. These hurtling, plunging, stampeding masses say more about the era than even the band shots. There is none of the indifference of modern concert-goers. These people seem involved in an epic struggle with an eternally off-screen antagonist, their efforts closer to news footage than concert photography.²¹

On one page, the singer of Deadly Reign has been shot mid-mosh, high stepping, arms swinging, his *Rollerball* T-shirt ripped on both sides to expose strong, bare shoulders. The

pose resembles Eugène Delacroix's "Liberty Leading The People." It is martial yet joyous, and oddly sensual. It looks like sexy propaganda. This book is full of good-looking young men striking poses for each other's enjoyment. Although bare male torsos were staples of early eighties hardcore photography, a certain amount of sexual energy evaporates in the physics of two dimensions. In the depths of these photos, men strut and flex and glisten in physical space. It's a sales pitch for a lifestyle brand.

On the opposite page, we see Keith Brammer, bassist of Die Kreuzen, frozen in the throes of performance. This is early in the band's career; he must be playing very fast. Viewed flat, he is clearly a handsome young man. Seen in 3-D, the viewer can discern the jut of his chin, the fullness of his lips, the distinct knob of his Adam's apple. He peers upward, over the photographer, through a mane of slick wet hair. The look on his face could easily be mistaken for private adult sexy times.

It's a theme. Sothira Pheng from Crucifix, lithe and feline, arches backward in his black tank top. Henry Rollins—half naked, but not yet in his short shorts phase—bends toward the viewer like a randy Stanley Kowalski.²² Fear's Lee Ving mugs for the camera, looking like a bare-chested wrestler. The camera even catches Jello Biafra shirtless and horizontal, exposing an upside-down cross shaved into the fur of a surprisingly taut stomach (the clear indentations of a six-pack are visible with the glasses).²³

Where do the ladies stand with all this sexy stuff? There are so few it's hard to know. Women are vastly outnumbered in the world chronicled by *Loud 3D*.²⁴ Halfway through the book, there is one nicely worded block of text from Mordam Records' Ruth Schwartz, who defends the scene from accusations of chauvinism with a level of maturity that is slightly jarring in its context. "The generation of women in punk (13–30, mostly) are the hardest working, most ardent feminists/humanists I've ever met," writes Schwartz. "Most women I know are not just dealing with their oppression as females, but also as people. This is a step beyond the liberation and feminism our mothers (bless them) fought for."

Perhaps to punctuate this quote, Lewd bassist Olga deVolga appears on the opposite page decked out in a bondage harness and wrist spikes.²⁵ Her costume muddies the book's chronology. These aren't the freewheeling days of late seventies American punk, when audiences dressed up like *Rocky Horror* enthusiasts.²⁶ It's the eighties. There are dress codes. Crowds wear flannel shirts or leather jackets. The only facial hair belongs to two of the Dead Kennedys (who all sported silly mustaches and goatees for their second tour, a rebuke of the rigid new styles).²⁷ Toward the middle of the book, writer Jennifer Blowdryer nicely sums the slippery conformity of nonconformity: "Those gorgeous young creatures are not wearing

casually slapped together outfits. Fashion exists even—especially—for the roughest, toughest skinhead.”²⁸

Fashions date this book, but so do the faces. This was an age when band members recognized their role as visual performers. Singers work their mics with the facial expressiveness of silent movie stars,²⁹ and the full-body physicality of Japanese actor Toshiro Mifune, leaping and yelling like samurais, like people engaged in combat.³⁰ In 1952, French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson coined the concept of “the decisive moment,” a combination of timing, intuition, skill, and patience. But for Arredondo, Kulakofsky, and Robert (and Joe Rees, of Target video, who makes a cameo filming the Circle Jerks), decisive moments were there for the taking, song after song. These pictures were my propellant, an ideal of performance that I referred back to for years.

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IN THE DECADES SINCE *Loud 3D* came and went, fans of hardcore punk found other motives. The tangible lures of eighties hardcore (photography, fashions) gave way to fuzzier bait, things like “community” and “communication” and “release,” all concepts peripheral to the theatrical art at the heart of the music.

Once, in one of those immense airport corridors, I saw a group of young men walking toward me from a great distance away. As they approached, I could make out their shirts and patches, and hear them exuberantly discussing bands I knew. I watched them pass, a stationary tracking shot where only the camera swivels. They were a group—a band—high on camaraderie and headed for adventure. No amount of money would have made me switch places, but I envied their drive.

Sometimes motives aren’t so clear. There was the night, years ago, on a long solo drive down the coast, when I stopped for gas on a lonely highway in Oregon. I started the pump, then saw a young guy fueling up a Ford Econoline van at the pump opposite. Through the van’s back window, I could just make out a sleeping body slumped up against the glass. I’d intersected someone else’s tour.

I remembered this part of touring. This was the moment when I would stand with a gas pump at three in the morning, staring off into the cold darkness of an unknown state, mentally curating the sense-memory into a much larger narrative about something important I was doing with my life. For the briefest of moments, I had the sensation of being a time traveler, of viewing my younger self, of seeing those gorgeous blue and red *Loud 3D* photos in the cartoon thought balloon floating over my younger self’s head.

The pump clicked. I got back in my car and drove off.