NETWORKING UNDER THE ESP STATION

What do People Even Write?

In 1978, the state of New York completed the Empire State Plaza (ESP), a hundred-acre government complex dominating the skyline of the capital city, Albany. The Plaza's forty-four-story Tower Building—seemingly named in the grand, bland tradition of Soviet architecture—loomed over the nearby Mansion Hill like a conquering spaceship. When I moved to the neighborhood that same year, it was still an enclave of old Italian families, remnants of the Little Italy obliterated to make room for the gleaming new behemoth. Klieg lights kept the Tower Building luminous after dark. When it snowed, the night sky glowed with power.

The Plaza's multilevel concourse served as a vast playground for my kid self, a Hundred Acre Woods of concrete, marble, and glass I was allowed to roam alone. With its colossal corridors and brutalist architecture, the Plaza looked like the kind of place one would go to receive further instructions. Which is what it became; opening a mailbox in its tiny post office, the ESP Station, was one of my first grown-up acts.

After getting dumped in eleventh grade, I washed dishes seven days a week and somehow saved enough to buy a pea green 1974 Chevy Impala with vinyl bench seats the size of church pews. My high school was off the highway and the highway cut through the ESP parking levels. After school, I would park underground, grab my mail upstairs, then read letters and listen to tapes in the Empire State Plaza's upper parking level.

It was here, in the diving bell privacy of the Impala, using my massive car dashboard as a desktop, that I first reached out into the wider world. I had nothing to sell, no persona to advance, no grudges to stoke. I just liked getting mail. I perused pamphlets from the Karen Carpenter fan club, and Wiccans, and Church of the Subgenius, and Satanists. For a while, I fielded replies from a bunch of teen girls who'd written to *Archie* comics as kids in 1975 and were thus roughly my age. My best friend Jason and I had written each one that we were doing some sort of "ten-year follow-up study" (to meet girls?), although I have no idea how we got their home addresses.

The *Archie* girls were, surprise, totally boring lamers who did not like my favorite band, the Cro-Mags. But I did snag a pen pal who liked the Cro-Mags, a college girl from Sarah Lawrence I met in the personal ads of *Flipside* fanzine. I wrote a lot of people from fanzines. I didn't know it at the time, but I was entering something new and breathtakingly potent: the network of hardcore punk.[5]

Those two words weren't synonymous, but became entwined in ways that flattened them to outsiders.[6] Punk tried to crack the code of the music industry; hardcore never had that option. It would have been absurd for any major label to sign—or any radio station to play—loud, violent bands made up of loud, mentally ill people who gleefully "sang" about every possible taboo.

The extremism of hardcore forced its fans to do everything themselves. The opportunity of hardcore was the same opportunity once offered by running off to join the circus: horizontal ambition, not vertical. This was the chance to bypass the music industry altogether, to tour, release records, and network—to make music for its own sake, to have adventures for their own sake.

The self-reliance of hardcore had American fingerprints all over it. The earliest versions of these networks, painstakingly built by just a handful of bands, channeled the energy of past spurts of American ingenuity, both cultural (Chautauqua, the Chitlin Circuit, 1960s underground media) and industrial (the sheer endurance required to clear and pave wilderness). The global success of hardcore punk has masked its identity as an American art form, one as homegrown as vaudeville, jazz, or rap.[7]

Oddly, the people who still pay reverence to this art form do so, I think, for largely personal reasons. Many people who submerge themselves in this subgenre describe it as the most positive experience of their lives. Not many people recognize the rarity of a self-generated, self-reliant network, which is probably a tribute to the power of the art form and its sprawling network of music and literature and ideas, rapidly spreading to every corner of western civilization.

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I CAN PINPOINT THE moment I entered this network as a participant. For a homework assignment, I'd copied a chapter from *The Federalist Papers* in my school library. I included the cover because I liked the art: cartoony figures of three founding fathers, loitering on the street like people outside a show.[8] Its awkwardness, its *offness*, resembled the Raymond Pettibon drawings I had only recently learned to appreciate. All it needed was a creepy caption.

I folded the pages and smiled in realization. I was holding what looked like a small

photocopied magazine. What if I made my own small photocopied magazine? I'd done lots of little projects and cartoons and calendars as a child, including several copied comic books I forced on my relatives. I had no idea yet that fanzines were already an existing thing (in issue one, I used the word as a joke, although I didn't quite get its meaning). Thus, Jason and I launched *Wretched* fanzine.

Wretched bypassed the burden of content by being mostly graphics. Jason drew comics, I made collages. Although the first issues were 80 percent him (he was a far better artist and writer[9]), each slender fanzine provides a tiny ice core sample of our shared tastes: Bible tracts and Book of Revelations quotes, drawings of skeletons and skateboarders,[10] *Archie* comics,[11] absurdist newspaper clippings, jokes about the Contras and the Challenger explosion, and CPR line art of boys performing mouth-to-mouth on each other with little cartoon hearts drawn around them, which, for the anti-gay 1980s, seems oddly ballsy.

My mom bought a Canon PC-14 to use for her own art. One of the first personal copiers (eight pages a minute!), it was too small and fragile for print runs, but perfect for making layouts and degrading the quality of graphics. By issue four, I was seventeen and driving, the PO box was open for business, and we were ready to start writing about things like a real fanzine.[12]

This point was a micro-crisis, as I had no idea what people wrote in real fanzines. The twin mediums of hardcore journalism—review and interview—seemed completely beyond me. I didn't know how to review records, and the idea of interviewing people from actual bands seemed as realistic as interviewing astronauts. I remember asking Jason the question aloud: "What do people even write?"[13]

I'd penned a few other bits for *Wretched*, but it didn't feel like these bits conformed to real zine standards. And as I got deeper into the scene, I wanted to make something more accessible to that scene. Issue four finally featured my first record review:

> *CRO-MAGS "Age of Quarrel" LP*
>
> *"Blazing" NYHC sound, combined with the best apocalyptic lyrics ever thought of, make this the greatest record ever recorded. In fact, you WILL buy it. I'm not offering you a choice…*[14]

I vaguely recall not being thrilled with this review, or any other piece of writing I did for a long time after.[15] It took even longer to grasp that I was going to be doing a lot of bad writing, and that most of this writing would be done in public formats (it took a quarter century for me to realize I could just write things and not show them to anyone). This wasn't what we now think of as a readership, the infinity of online eyeballs that sees everything, but

only stripped of context. This was an actual audience, tiny but engaged, and one that could be coaxed to grow through nothing more than persistence. As I slowly learned how to write, I did so in a self-consciously public manner.

Wretched begat *Plain Truth*, a real fanzine that interviewed real bands. *Plain Truth* begat *Dear Jesus*, the fanzine where I started to push a persona, that of an obnoxious, mentally ill hardcore band guy.[16] After a bandmate expressed frustration with inaccuracies in a tour diary, I moved toward conspicuously falsified personal histories; impossible shows, fake backstories, dialogue with real-world celebrities I clearly did not know.

In hindsight, these experiments were my first fumbling toward writing fiction, the same general path I'm on today.

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Back to the Empire State Plaza. One detail from those days glints with significance. Most correspondents would leave off the "ESP Station" part of my new address. It took me a while to understand that many of the people I communicated with thought I was being needlessly weird. This became a theme of my adult life. The acute constraints of hardcore punk, in all its formats—zines, bands, records, record labels—always struck me as challenges. The price of experimentation is failure, so I frequently missed the mark in my output and developed a reputation as someone being needlessly weird.

This isn't a complaint, just an observation. There are worse reputations to get. The intensity of wrestling with ideas in public can often look ridiculous to those outside the process. At a certain point, I realized I was getting my mail anyway, so I simply ceased caring.