

PREFACE

FOR TWENTY YEARS, I immersed myself in aggressive underground music. I never considered myself a punk rocker, or even a “punk,” although this was obviously the turf on which I operated. Even now, I’m still trying to make sense of the nuances and mutations of this subculture. It hasn’t gotten simpler with hindsight. “Punk” isn’t a porous subject; it’s completely fluid. Writing about it in any meaningful way is like trying to document one particular part of a lake.

For example, the word itself has no set definition. Depending on who and where you are, “punk” can be a lifestyle; cosplay; design element; powerful ideal; lazy cliché; magical realism; badge of authenticity; pantomime social movement; withering mockery; ironclad conviction; lucrative career; vow of slovenly poverty; incubator of brilliance and/or mediocrity; rite of passage; riot of violence; ferocious hokeyness; suicide hotline; sales category; community glue; license to wallow; mass catharsis; a refuge for smart people and/or playground for dumb people; boisterous escapism; marketable nostalgia¹; belligerent incompetence; self-satire (intentional or otherwise); assault on falseness; or adult-sized, psychic diapers that can be worn until death. And if someone has a strong belief about what it is, odds are they have an even stronger opinion about what it is not. How can so many people pledge allegiance to something with no fixed meaning?²

And yet pledge they do, generation after generation identifying with a musical subgenre so powerful *that it has the ability to change listeners’ identities*.

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I INTERSECTED THIS WORLD through hardcore (the “hardcore” version of punk rock³). Starting with the Dead Kennedys tape I bought in 1984 and ending with the last show I played live in 2004, I tried to sample every possible expressive outlet within this subculture. I fronted three bands, one (Born Against) that got a lot of attention within its circuit, and two more (Men’s Recovery Project, Wrangler Brutes) that did not. Between one bungled night as a college radio DJ and fifteen years of touring, I also made fanzines, booked shows, ran a record label, co-owned a record store, and designed my fair share of merchandise and ephemera.

For years, hardcore punk was the best game in town, despite the consensus that its golden age lasted from 1980 to 1986. So I never outran the feeling that the scene's finest days had ended just as I'd gotten in.⁴ Entering this subculture in the wrong year, however, gave me an odd bird's-eye view of its central players. Many of them had moved on by the time I'd signed up, but they were never that far away. I had access to most of the people who'd immediately preceded me, a bit of fortunate timing for which I will always be grateful.

I've now spent as much time outside this world as I did as a touring band member. Many of punk's battles—against white supremacy, or the eternal churn of leftist infighting—have migrated to the national stage. A much larger, less defined battle against the forces of mass insanity also looks increasingly familiar. The more time passes, the less the whole thing feels like nostalgia than it does a prelude. But to what, exactly?

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QUESTIONS