A CONVERSATION WITH AARON COMETBUS

What is all This Stuff?

My earliest memory of Aaron Cometbus is of arriving home in Richmond, VA, to find a body lying face down on my living room floor. I remember understanding that this was a corpse and thinking, *okay, this is it, it's finally happened.* But the body was Aaron, and Aaron was alive. He'd arrived exhausted from somewhere else, and needed a floor to crash on.

How long did Aaron stay at that house? How long did he live in Richmond? My life as a Virginian had a strange purgatory vibe—I'd freed myself from the expense and stress of New York, but at the cost of a chronic aimlessness that stretched the lazy days into years. My memories from that time are jumbled. Surely I must've met him years earlier, on one of my many visits to the Bay Area, either at the Gilman Street club, or in one of the apartments or houses or lofts I tromped through, hunting for similar corners of similar living rooms in which to fling my own sleeping bag.

Although only a year older than me, Aaron made a name for himself at a much younger age and in a much larger scene than I, and he appears to have never slowed. He's published *Cometbus* (with a few name changes) for over thirty-five years, performed with Crimpshrine and Pinhead Gunpowder, toured with Green Day, and labored on Gilman Street. One of his countless printed projects includes a 608-page collection of fanzine highlights. In our many conversations and occasional collaborations, it's never been entirely possible for me to separate Aaron the charming person from Aaron the dauntingly prolific institution. And yet Aaron has always treated me as a peer, not a poseur. I have no intention of ever correcting his mistake.

•••

Sam: Every year or so, you and I meet up and have long, weirdly complex conversations about all this stuff. But I can't quite figure out what *all this stuff* actually is. You seem comfortable with the word "underground," which for me has always had the ring of a placeholder. In the era of omnipresent social media, can anything actually *be* underground

anymore? I've been using "hardcore punk," which is equally constricting, but in the opposite way: it's far too small a term. It's like we're a couple of mob goombahs, talking in hushed tones about *our thing*. So, I'm curious, how would you define all this stuff? Where are the fence posts?

Aaron: Underground has always been an exciting word for me, just like "downtown." It gives a sense of secrecy, but also the feeling of exploring subterranean worlds. It never meant that something was inaccessible, just that it wasn't shoved down your throat. But I'm surprised to hear you talking about hardcore. It seemed like you fled from that scene decades ago. Why return to the subject now?

S: I only fled New York City, not hardcore. When we met—in '93?—I'd recently moved to the South after having been kicked out of the NYC scene. It was a painful time in my life, and I probably gave you the impression that I was starting over. But I still had another decade of label work, touring, and zines ahead of me.

A: Yes, we were both escaping monsters we'd helped create, but we didn't know each other's monsters except in a passing way. That made for a nice bond. Yet you seemed so full of shame about everything you'd been part of. I didn't hear you mention hardcore except to mock it for another twenty years.

S: I think you're confusing how I felt about my own output with how I felt about the genre. I get this a lot. Even when I was in Wrangler Brutes, I was frequently accused of somehow mocking hardcore by touring in a hardcore band. It was weird. From my perspective, I don't see how anyone could look at my deep level of immersion and think, "There goes a guy who hates underground music."

People don't know what to make of artists who don't like their own past art. For me, the right to regret mistakes is fundamental. This subgenre—underground, hardcore, whatever name we're using—is saturated in self-congratulations. There aren't many people in my position. I've always loved hardcore. I just don't love my own contributions to it.

A: That makes sense. But you're sarcastic both in person and in print. I've never heard you say you loved anything before.

S: My reputation for sarcasm has been hard to shed. An old Albany pal once called me to complain about not having been thanked on a record I released. At a certain point in the conversation, I realized he wasn't going to accept my heartfelt apology. He'd convinced himself that everything I said was sarcastic. It was like being trapped in a *Twilight Zone*. That

was twenty years ago. I'm hoping I'll have made some progress on this front before another twenty years are up. I'm really not that sarcastic anymore. But I'm wondering if the subculture we're discussing is old enough that some of its sensibilities no longer translate. I've read blog posts trying to "explain" to Millennials why eighties punk bands wanted to offend people. Is this something you've encountered? Meaning, do you find yourself having to explain more and more of your past, or the larger past you were part of?[35]

A: I think of it as a challenge, but mostly a pleasurable one, because explaining is telling a story. But my audience isn't mostly Millennials, so a generation gap isn't the issue. I think it just takes a long time to understand people's motivations, including your own.

S: But I'm not talking about a generation gap—I'm talking about a shift in sensibility, one of those slight twists of zeitgeist that sneaks up on everyone all at once. For example, I spent a summer in the late eighties working at a small-town newspaper. One day, combing through their archives, I discovered that the paper had referred to DUIs as "tipsy driving" only ten years earlier. Some of the "tipsy driving" arrest notices came with funny little cartoons of cross-eyed drunks. I'd come of age in the world of MADD. Up until then, I'd assumed that drunk driving had always been considered one rung above pedophilia. But this was a misconception, an error based on a very recent change in sensibility.

A: I think it's silly to look at mainstream media as an accurate gauge of values from any particular time. I mean, how much do the TV shows and movies of the eighties and nineties reflect the values and aspirations you had then?

S: This is an interesting difference between me and you. I've always felt a deep sense of continuity between the mass media of my childhood and the underground media of my teens. Monty Python, The Muppets, Looney Tunes… all these zany bits of culture were mirrored by the wacky characters I read about in *Maximumrocknroll*. Band members wearing their own band T-shirts onstage has always reminded me of the old Ben Cooper Halloween costumes (the cheap plastic mask of the Hulk matched by a picture of the Hulk on the cheap plastic tunic). When I saw *Repo Man* at fourteen, the film perfectly bridged the realms of sci-fi and hardcore. I know you got into the underground at a much younger age than me. So are you saying that you completely forsook pop culture once you found punk?

A: Remember how you'd slag bands in *Dear Jesus*, including mine, who you'd never heard? I'm not even giving you grief—just saying that being proud of what you've steered clear of is a normal human trait. So is holding yourself a step above everyone else. For me, that came

even before punk. What everyone else calls popular culture, we called “death culture” where I’m from. So I avoided Saturday Night Fever. I’ve still never seen MTV. It’s a little ridiculous, but other people avoided drugs, and mainstream culture was like drugs to me. I never understood the appeal. It’s not all garbage, but mostly.

S: Wait a minute, what band of yours did I slag? And how do you know I never heard them? Maybe it was terrible!

A: Actually, you bragged to me about slagging it without ever hearing it. And since I’m fairly sure you’ve never heard a record I’ve played on, it doesn’t matter which band it was. But you hit the nail on the head with what you said about *MRR*. You could find an excess of personality there that rivaled animation’s golden age or comedy from the UK, at a time when American culture was either bland or sickening.

S: God, I wish I could go back in time and pants that man who was me. Since we’re discussing *MRR*, this feels like the right spot to revisit a conversation from a few years back. I mentioned I’d once had a plan to save that magazine, and you groaned and said you had one too. But neither of us divulged the details. Care to share yours?[36]

A: You first.

S: Well, I always admired the fact that Tim Yohannan published *MRR*’s finances every year. But when it became clear that the magazine would stubbornly refuse to improve in the years after his death, the yearly surplus became something frustrating. Even today, the magazine still obeys the will of Tim. But this set of guidelines is obviously interpretational, and on one of Tim’s strongest stances, *MRR* completely disregarded its founder’s playbook. As soon as the magazine adopted bar codes, his corpse started doing cartwheels in its casket.[37] There is no reason to continue the Tim Would Have Wanted It This Way game. Why not take the magazine in a bold new direction?

A: Tim was stubborn, but he wasn’t adverse to change. Ever since he died, *Maximum*’s been like the old friend at the party who’s a boor. It’s judgmental. It never has anything nice to say. And no matter how much you give, it always wants more.

S: It was jarring when I visited the *MRR* house and realized the computers were the same ones I’d used the last time I’d visited, twenty years earlier. There wasn’t even a copier. (A kindly volunteer donated her camera’s memory card so I could photograph old columns, like a spy.) The set-up seemed needlessly masochistic. I have no idea if *MRR* still runs a surplus, but I do know they’re sitting on two huge assets. They could digitize and sell off that massive

record collection.[38] And they could digitize and sell their first hundred issues. Conservatively, either project could bring in $100,000. Imagine what could be done with that kind of capital. They could hire freelancers, get new equipment, fund quality investigative journalism. Imagine ProPublica's AC Thompson writing *MRR* cover stories.[39]

A: I was on them for years to sell the records to a university or cultural institution that would allow them steady access. We're talking a *million* dollars, which was enough to put the down payment on a house and print the mag for years to come. Instead of bailing out the ship every month with benefits and funding campaigns, we should be looking at *MRR* and our other institutions the same way we look at ourselves: How can we have the longest, most fulfilling life, and what resources do we have to ensure that? Like my other old friends, *MRR* probably has what it takes to thrive without anyone's help, if only they would put their best foot forward and change.

But there's a larger issue here: Clubs like Gilman and ABC No Rio are our community centers. As such, they should meet the community's needs, which have changed considerably since we were teenagers. Probably they'd serve us better now as daycare and rehab centers. Flea markets. Funeral parlors.

MRR is supposed to be a community mouthpiece, but its content and format barely reflect what people actually care about. Even folks interested in the latest hardcore band from Burundi want reports that are passionate and informed.

S: This use of "we" and "us" gets to another major difference between you and me. I might have felt that kinship in high school, but by the mid-nineties I'm not sure I felt part of any "we" or "us," any more than I could feel that about people in a grocery store on any given day. Scenes are huge kinetic sculptures made out of people. Turnover is rapid. It seems doubtful there's ever been any two major urban shows with the exact same attendees at both, although statistically it must have happened.

I'm envious of anyone who can feel connected to a community over the long haul. It's caused me some serious grief over the years to not share this feeling. To me, the word "community" is something I've gotten burned on over and over again since childhood. Maybe this is too huge a question, but how do you see yourself as part of something so huge and unfixed, and constantly evolving?

A: Sooner or later it becomes a typesetting question, because you simply can't live with everything in quotes. It's annoying to read and even worse in person, constantly making bunny ears in the air like a crazy person. So far you've put qualifiers on punk, hardcore, the

underground, explaining things, community, and now even us and we. Of course all these terms are loaded, but it's better to use them and hope that the complicated feelings are something we all share. At any rate, I try to include myself these days instead of feeling left out.

Funny you should mention the supermarket, though. That's where I feel a sense of community the most. I'm part of a members-only food co-op, which isn't only highly functional, its the sweetest place I know. It makes sense to aim for the same result from institutions like *MRR*, Gilman, and ABC No Rio, which we've put sweat equity into—and maybe even from punk itself. What's the alternative, anyway? Disappointment is crushing, but isolation is probably worse.

S: That seems too black and white. Isn't there any terrain between disappointment and isolation?

A: That's what everyone wants to know!

S: But this sweat equity argument gets to another question I've always meant to ask you. When I was sixteen and made my first fanzine, a collaboration with my best friend, I spent several months thinking we had invented something entirely new. Over the years, I've met other zine nerds who made the same mistake. So when you made your absolute first fanzine, were you aware of other fanzines? Or were you already plugged into this world?

A: I also started out collaborating with my best friend. We'd seen *Ripper* and *Creep*, which were two of the coolest magazines ever made, but there wasn't any question about imitating them, even if we'd wanted to. In a tiny way, by doing it our way, I think we did invent something new. Probably you did too. You may not realize that my coeditor was Jesse Michaels, who you did a split book with yourself not long ago. What became of the kid you did your first fanzine with?

S: He and I roomed together in college and eventually we drifted apart. It took me a long time, years, to figure out that I was completely capable of making a fanzine all by myself. Even then, I was always the guy on tour who tried to fill downtime by getting bandmates to make weird little one-off zines with me. It never worked.

A: I did end up making fanzines all by myself, which I kind of regret. I always thought someone would come along to replace Jesse, but it never happened. Those early collaborative relationships are crazy, because you don't know how to work with people at all. They can be amazing, but also spectacularly painful, and either way, they're foundational—you spend

your life either avoiding that dynamic or trying to replicate it. Thankfully, me and Jesse are still friends. But I'm curious about your other collaborations. Can we talk about Adam and Neil?

S: All those Lifesblood guys hazed me by humiliating themselves. They'd pants each other and run around my co-ed dorm, hurl my food out the fifth-floor window, and follow me into crowded ATM foyers to loudly announce their plans for recircumcision ("It keeps growing back, guys!"). I was the straight man for their comedy troupe. Since I was a cringing ninny when I moved to NYC, this was probably a good thing.

A: So how did a comedy troupe turn into Born Against?

S: Only a year before we formed, Adam and I were both functionally apolitical. I followed the news carefully and owned a filing cabinet for clippings, but disliked "political" punk bands. He furiously protested, but only at shows of punk bands he thought had sold out. In hindsight, the Tompkins Square Park riot in the summer of 1988 probably accelerated our turns toward radicalization—the artistic version of radicalization—even though neither of us was actually present.

Once me and Adam clicked, we really clicked. There was a sense of mission I've never experienced since. It was an intense four-year partnership. Some parts no longer compute. For example, how were we able to collaborate so effortlessly on lyrics? It seems crazy now, like trying to write a diary with another person. I do remember we squabbled a lot. Sometimes there was shouting. Once, on tour, we both confessed that we'd dreamed about beating each other with pipes or baseball bats. At the time, I considered simmering mutual hostility the price of a successful partnership. I was too young to know any better. There is no way I'd ever collaborate like that again.

A: And with Neil?

S: My work with Neil substituted range for mission. We've labored together on dozens of projects—music, artwork, fanzines, shirt designs, short films, two different record labels—but none done with the intensity of those Adam collaborations.

I have a lot of respect for both those guys. Enough so that I'm willing to admit it in print, overriding my aversion to the backslapping self-congratulations that so permeate this world. They had to put up with a spectacular amount of my babyman baloney. I should probably get them both gift cards to Applebee's.

A: I love these stories. It's telling that you didn't talk about the music itself, which is the result of a band but not necessarily the point. Writing about music, as you're doing now, how do you reconcile the fact that the records and shows—the parts the public sees and hears—are just a tiny part of a band's life?

S: Well, I'm not a musician. The entire experience of being in a band has always been completely different for me. And tour got a lot less fun once I figured out I was spending twenty-three and a half hours a day to support thirty minutes of performance.

A: I never understood what bands were about until the people I'd played music with started dying. Then I was so grateful for the intensity we'd shared. Not the shows so much as the recording sessions, the fights, the all-night drives. Besides their lovers, no one had been that intimate with them, or sweated and screamed together in as many dark rooms. Now when I listen to the records we made, it's more telling than the Nixon tapes. It might as well be a recording of a conversation at the family dinner table growing up, or an argument with my girlfriend. It's that personal.

S: I'm grateful that none of my ex-bandmates have died yet. But that kind of passion was never part of my musical career. I never had cathartic moments. Instead it was constant crises of faith: in parking lots, dressing rooms, strangers' houses, onstage. So many moments where it was like a cartoon soap bubble popping over my head and I came out of a trance thinking, "Why am I doing this?"

Professional musicians are easy to mock for all the rules and restrictions placed on them by managers and labels, but it must be nice to have the through line of a paycheck, one unwavering motive, to propel them through the grind of touring. I do remember one instant—and only one—when I thought, "Hey! I'm the lead singer of a popular hardcore band! This is exciting!" February 12, 1992. Oakland. That was it.

A: I was there. That must have been right before your drummer impaled himself on the cymbal stand in an ill-advised acrobatic leap, and had to be taken to the hospital. Everyone in the audience was trying hard not to laugh.

S: Ouch. That was a serious injury! Although once he went into shock, our drummer seemed to find the whole thing just as funny as our loyal audience.

A: Can we talk about sentimentality in music? Obviously, it can be sickening. But it also takes guts to risk seeming cheesy, singing about something like love.

S: Knowing what you know about me, this feels like a set-up question. It takes a lot of guts to act on love. It takes zero guts to sing about it. Hitching your music to compulsory emotions—expressing feelings experienced by every human who has ever lived—is the cheapest of cheap shots. And I say this as someone whose best recorded track was a love song, although one written by a non-band member.

A: But those sappy sentiments seem to come with a wink and a nod, at least in the music I've been listening to lately. Like, "I want to slit my wrists, but instead I'm going to find one ray of hope, no matter how dim, and cling to it." As much as I like honest music, I think there's something noble about that denial, and the desire to see the bright side.

S: You know the hardcore group Uniform Choice? Their first LP finished with a track called "Silenced." It is nothing more than two men reading a Hallmark card. Literally. That level of pure cheese is how I hear all love songs. If I had to, I suppose I could come up with a half-dozen ones by bands I like. But still: gross.

A: But schmaltz is a real part of life. No one can deny how touching it is when your cat presents you with a dead mouse as a gift, even if it makes you sick. On me, the Bee Gees have the same effect. Besides, there's new wave playing at every wedding I go to, which makes me wonder if punks didn't fail at making the soundtrack to our own lives.

S: My beef is with the laziness. I like music that isn't lazy. In high school, I learned about Tom Waits (through *MRR*!) and completely fell in love with the storytelling craftsmanship of his *Rain Dogs* LP. Even then, the cornball sappiness of the track "Downtown Train" struck me as a clumsy fit with the rest of the record, the "TV Party" of the LP.

A: A novelty tune?

S: The wrong song on the right record. Different conversation. But at the risk of flipping this back on you, cop-style, what's the most aggressive music you listen to? I have a hard time picturing you enjoying the first Crumbsuckers LP.

A: I love hardcore, too—at least the early Bay Area version of it, like Society Dog and Social Unrest, music that's aggressive and vulnerable at the same time. Or maybe I'll listen to a thirty second blast of Midwestern thrash to gather strength to face the day. Unfortunately, where I live is really loud, so noise is something I mostly try to avoid.

S: Aaaaaand this is the part where I thank you for saying the most old-mannish thing in a book I am the author of. This reminds me, have you ever heard of the "Reminiscence bump"? This is the idea that a disproportionate amount of your memories come from high

school/college age, meaning, among other things, that your musical tastes get locked in from this age. I've noticed that the music I keep returning to is all the same stuff I listened to in eleventh and twelfth grade (early Dischord, Schoolly D, Slayer). Is this the case with you?

A: The music I like is mostly old, but a lot of it is new to me. Quintessential California records like Joni Mitchell's *Blue* or the last Mamas and Papas LP I've heard for the first time only recently, because I didn't grow up with music around. But I'm fine with having a handful of records that I listen to over and over. I'm a voracious reader but not a voracious listener.

I worry, though, about people putting too much emphasis on their formative years. They say it's impossible to make friends as an adult the way you did as a kid, but I haven't found that to be the case. I think it's that same laziness you spoke of.

S: Yeah, I'm the same way. Open as a reader, closed as a listener. I worry a lot about creeping laziness. Last month I got bored during a movie in Hollywood, so I left the theater and walked next door to Amoeba Records. But the endless rows of music disgusted me—it felt like the time my band visited a twenty-four-hour porno shop in Omaha and I wound up staring at the floor or ceiling in prudish distaste. I felt no connection to any of the records, or even genres. Only the books section interested me.

A: Bands are like families for me, so going to a porn store together is bound to be awkward. On the other hand, bands are used to being awkward in public. When my guitarist was in prison and the rest of us came to visit, we were more comfortable than the other families in the waiting room, since we were used to embarrassing ourselves onstage.

S: Certainly the comedy of it all is a hoot. I've seen so many insane onstage meltdowns, and participated in a few. I've heard so many outrageous justifications for irrational behavior, glimpsed so many simmering bandmate resentments exploding into rage over artistic direction, or perceived slights, or the Case Of The Missing $14. A hundred years ago, people had careers or families or military service. None of those human experiences are perfect, but at least they do a great job of providing motivation.

The healthiest definition I ever read was attributed to Tobi Vail from Bikini Kill: "A band is any song you ever played with anybody, even if only once." In that single sentence, one can view all sorts of new models for band life in the future. But in the here and now, musicians have to constantly justify what they do, to themselves and others. Since I'm no longer part of that mass suspension of belief, I can just relax and enjoy it as an amused bystander.

A: It's interesting that you quote a drummer, but all your collaborators were guitarists. I tend to see the world as a war between guitarists and drummers, with bassists as collateral damage and singers mostly just oblivious. The drummers in the audience would like to know your position on drummers, in case a battle breaks out.

S: But singers are almost always the face of any band. Which means we're the ones getting blamed for everyone else's behavior. Even now, I'm the guy who gets blamed and credited for everything Born Against ever did, as if I'd driven myself from town to town, performing onstage with a kazoo, bass drum, and cymbals strapped between my knees.

A: Which would make drummers the ass of the band. We get it. We can read between the lines. But writing about bands besides your own, what interests you most—the intentions and conflicts? The records and art?

S: The only thing that doesn't interest me is the act of making music itself. It's not just that I don't know how to play any instruments. It's that even the applied science part of being in a band never made sense. I still can't name all the parts of a drum kit, even though I've carried them hundreds of times. I don't know how to operate a PA system. I have no idea what a "power chord" is. I've never heard any difference between analog and digital recordings. Musical notation might as well be Arabic.

A: Now you sound like a drummer yourself.

S: That ignorance made me the world's worst record label owner, and probably a pain to share a band with. But it gave me a better appreciation of everything surrounding the music — enough of an appreciation to fill a book, apparently.