

## The Pit at The Sad Band Show

Ethan Custer — AIID-201-03 — 25 April 2023

On April 5th, 2023, I saw the slowcore band Duster perform at the Union Transfer venue in Philadelphia, PA. I was offered the opportunity to attend three months prior by a good friend of mine from high school, and the concept of a show put on by this band was an interesting one to me. Predating the 2010s, Duster was a band largely lost to time, releasing a handful of EPs and two full-length projects through the mid-late 90s to the year 2000. The band, as they write on their official website, then “took a brief break until 2018,”<sup>1</sup> when archival record label Numero Group officially reissued their previous works on physical and digital mediums, skyrocketing their material past the indie rock circles that indulged it and into mainstream popularity. The band is known for their unmistakable timbre—downcast, low-fidelity atmospheres that blanket their music, adjacent to other acts of their time (Red House Painters and Low, for example) but with a unique melancholy and warmth that sets them firmly apart from their peers. Users of one of the largest music forums online, Rate Your Music, selected terms such as “bittersweet,” “lethargic,” “lonely,” “depressive,” and “alienation” to describe much of Duster’s output.<sup>2</sup> All this considered, it may then be rather shocking to some to read that, at this show, my friend and I witnessed a crowd of fifty-odd people form a mosh pit (hereafter referred to as simply a “pit” for brevity) for more than one song that the band performed.

We had discussed the prospect of such a happening previously during the drive to the venue, commenting on how ridiculous such an act might be. Duster, in their newfound fame, had become a figurehead among young music foragers for “depressing music,” with many songs of theirs having been retroactively placed in Spotify editorial playlists (one in particular titled “gloomcore”) meant to evoke such emotion.<sup>3</sup> Yet, on that Wednesday evening, two groups of people came to exist—those who formed the pit, and those who recorded them with their cellphones. I witnessed more than one person in front of me open Snapchat and caption their video with a one-liner along the lines of “not the moshpit at the duster show 🤔”; the finest historians of the present day, documenting the sheer absurdity of the event. My friend tapped me on the shoulder not long after the pit began; “they’re actually doing it!” he said, incredulous. After the show, I searched social media for those posting about the show to see what people thought, and plenty had their own opinions on the pit: some harbored plenty of vitriol toward those who participated, labeling it “corny,” “childish,” and even “disrespectful”.

Walking out of the venue (of course with criminally overpriced merchandise in hand), however, I thought that, even though the idea of a pit at the concert of a band so well known for their low-key sound and nonchalant presence in their scene was a ludicrous one, it was very much justified. For one, the often-recycled tale of early shoegaze bands standing motionless on stage did not apply to the performance that Duster put on; all the members of the band carried themselves with an electric energy that lit up the performance hall, especially during their louder songs (examples from the show include Echo, Bravo and Orbitron). It was only during these tracks that the pits formed; during softer periods of the performance, the crowd remained relatively still and attentive to the band. Besides this more practical defense, though, I believe firmly that those participating had every right to mosh.

<sup>1</sup> “duster.” Accessed April 25, 2023, <https://unrecovery.org/>.

<sup>2</sup> “Stratosphere by Duster (Album, Slowcore) - Rate Your Music.” Rate Your Music. Sonemic. Accessed April 25, 2023. <https://rateyourmusic.com/release/album/duster/stratosphere/>.

<sup>3</sup> “Duster.” Spotify. Accessed April 25, 2023. <https://open.spotify.com/artist/5AyEXCtu3xnnsTGCo4RVZh>.

With these kinds of bands—those that gained popularity through eccentric music-oriented message boards—it is very common for an “elitist” culture to form. These fans that follow the band predating a boost in popularity gain a sort of superiority complex over newer fans, and view their enjoyment of the group’s output invalid, ingenuine, and shallow. In a similar manner, these kinds of fans often engage in “gatekeeping”: acting defensively over a band and their work to display their devout fandom. This phenomenon manifested in days of yore with the infamous “name three songs” challenge, wherein these ardent fans interrogate casual listeners wearing a given band’s merchandise with such an inquiry, anticipating an inability to answer the question. Likewise, gatekeeping persists in the present day on the message boards that brought the band fame to begin with, where users bemoan the band’s presence within social media spaces populated by new, often younger fans (in the case of Duster among many other bands, on TikTok).

It goes without saying that I believe this culture ought to be dismantled. The fact of the matter—barring any one person’s rationale for attending a concert put on by a band with a career story like Duster’s—is that people are attending the concert to begin with. Regardless of whether a fan bought an original copy of *Stratosphere* in 1999 through the former Up Records, or a Numero Group re-pressing the night of the show, and regardless of whether a fan is standing quietly in the back, letting the guitars and bass wash over them in full stereo, or within arms reach of the stage, thrashing viscerally with best friends they’ve only just met and will never see again, they are fulfilling the goal of any “indie”-adjacent band with their very presence at the venue. That the amount of people that listen to Duster in a given month on Spotify is a seven-figure number—that a wider demographic than ever is enjoying their works, past and present—should be looked upon universally with a sense of pride, and not with scorn. Music is naught than a medium through which art—abstract, creative self-expression—is conveyed. This is the foundation upon which these paradigms of subculture are built; it is destructive to rebuke one’s participation and enjoyment of the art based on some unsteadily founded sense of superiority for being “first”.

I ran into one of the founding members of Duster, Clay Parton, with my friend after the show as we were walking back to his car. He stood, leaned against the brick wall of the Union Transfer, smoking a cigarette and chatting with a friend of his own. We didn’t know whether or not to approach him—we didn’t want to be a bother, but we also didn’t know if it was truly him. We decided to, anyway. My friend opened, tongue-in-cheek: “Excuse me, but are you *the* Duster?”

Parton responded softly, with a smile: “Nah.” His friend elaborated further: “He’s actually my uncle. I took him here to see the show.”

My friend and I looked at each other. He had a build and a beard spitting images to those which we had just seen on stage. What are the odds of someone being at a Duster show who looks *exactly* like one of the band’s members? Even still, neither of us felt it right to insist that it *was* him if he claimed otherwise; maybe it actually wasn’t, or maybe he just didn’t feel up to a conversation. Our interaction ended with a quick apology for the trouble, and wishing each other a good night as we continued on to the car.

Bands and crowds both comprise *people*. Some may observe a sort of power dynamic between a band and the crowd—I believe that if one exists at all, those are not the parties involved. Both entities interact with self-expression in a concert setting with music the equalizer. Music does not gatekeep—why should we?