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AMERICAN HARDCORE PUNK: A FRAGMENTED MOVEMENT

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

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Abstract

This paper covers the topic of American hardcore punk music and culture from its beginning in 1980 to 1986 when many bands moved away from hardcore, which was increasingly focused on style rather than ideology. This paper argues that this movement away from hardcore is a result of the fractured nature of hardcore as well as external influences on hardcore. Sources used include primary sources in the form of song lyrics and oral histories as well as a number of secondary sources.

Introduction

Since its beginning in the 1970s, punk has been characterized by resistance to the mainstream. In the 1980s, the hardcore punk movement in America was largely focused on music, and the music, in the process of creation, was focused on resisting the mainstream corporatization of music while the content of the music often focused on other social and political issues. However, hardcore punks were hardly a unified entity, and while many of the musicians addressed social issues and injustices in their music, these issues were not a concern to all who identified as punk, and the movement itself had its own internal social issues. Issues of racism and sexism were fairly common in the white male dominated hardcore punk scene. In addition to internal issues faced by hardcore punks, they also faced issues of misunderstanding and misrepresentation by those outside of the movement. In time, the importance of self-sufficiency and an anti-corporate mentality waned, and hardcore became more of a style than a mindset. This paper will argue that it was due to a combination of hardcore's fragmented nature and external interactions that hardcore came to favor style over ideology.

In order to fully understand the place of hardcore punk in music, it is necessary to understand the punk music that came before hardcore punk in the 80s. British punk in 1976 arose out of a context of economic failure above all else. Extremely high unemployment rates and inflation rates during a terrible recession occurred in England, and this economic situation laid the foundation for punk ideals.[1] Bands like the Clash, the members of which were not content with the state of the socio-economic system, formed in this time. Punk bands also came out of a time when the music industry was struggling, and these bands gained much appeal due to the state of music at the time. Rock had lost much of its appeal among the youth, having

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[1] Kenneth J. Bindas, "'The Future is Unwritten': The Clash, Punk and America, 1977-1982," *American Studies* 34, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 69-70.

changed its emphasis away from rebellion and protest.[2] In relation to the music industry itself, record sales had lessened due to a lack of innovation in music as well as the economic issues of the time.[3] Punk emerged as a sort of rebellion against the stagnant music that was contributing to the lessened sales in the music industry. Punks saw rock of the sixties as a failure and condemned the rockers' abandonment of countercultural ideals in favor of capitalistic business practices and a focus on wealth.[4] In this way, punks effectively became the new counterculture rebelling against those whom they saw as abandoning ideals. By 1978, however, many punk bands had sold out to larger markets, and the Clash saw themselves as the true punks who were left.[5] Even the Clash eventually fell prey to the music industry and began to drift from the original punk ideology of the band.[6] The Clash unintentionally became what it was rebelling against in the first place. In America, the ideals originally held by the Clash did not even catch on in any significant way. American audiences adopted a punk aesthetic, but the political views of the Clash were not embraced in the same way.[7]

Hardcore punk developed in 1980 in the United States similarly to the development of punk in response to sixties rockers. After the transformation of much of the punk of the seventies into the watered down and popularized new wave which did not put the same focus on ideals such as those held by the Clash, hardcore emerged as a rejection of new wave.[8] Hardcore did not only reject new wave but also brought somewhat of a return to punk ideals held by the Clash and other punk bands of the seventies. Political and social issues were common topics in

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[2] Bindas, "'The Future is Unwritten,'" 70.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid., 70-72.
[5] Ibid., 79.
[6] Ibid., 82.
[7] Ibid., 84.
[8] Steven Blush, *American Hardcore: A Tribal History* (Los Angeles: Feral House, 2010), 14-15.

hardcore, among them, war, social inequality, and capitalism.[9] Hardcore was in many ways to punk of the seventies what punk of the seventies was to rock of the sixties.

Scholarship on the topic of hardcore punk is relatively sparse, being out of the mainstream and also being rather recent, but there are a number of scholars writing about hardcore. Perry Grossman's article, "Identity Crisis: The Dialectics of Rock, Punk, and Grunge," looks at hardcore as part of the eventual development of grunge. Grossman emphasizes the development of hardcore punk over the course of the eighties. Especially important in the discussion are the stagnation of hardcore in the late eighties and the changes that hardcore bands went through in search of increased exposure to mainstream audiences.[10] Grossman argues that the changes in punk music and culture are key to understanding the grunge culture that developed in the 1990s.[11]

William Tsitsos's article, "Rules of Rebellion: Slamdancing, Moshing, and the American Alternative Scene," focuses on hardcore through the dance behaviors it developed. Tsitsos looks at how three sub-groups of the American alternative scene, political punks, apolitical punks, and straight edgers, view slamdancing and moshing. Of political punks, Tsitsos concludes that they reject slamdancing and moshing because such activities are symbolic of a breakdown of the order they desire.[12] Apolitical punks, however, Tsitsos concludes, see slamdancing as symbolic of their own rebellious ideology and also of their individualism.[13] Finally, Tsitsos concludes that

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[9] Perry Grossman, "Identity Crisis: The dialectics of Rock, Punk, and Grunge," *Berkeley Journal of* Sociology 41 (1996-1997): 21

[10] Ibid., 28.

[11] Ibid., 35.

[12] William Tsitsos, "Rules of Rebellion: Slamdancing, Moshing, and the American Alternative." *Popular Music* 18, no. 3 (Oct., 1999): 413.

[13] Ibid.

straight edgers developed moshing as an outgrowth of slamdancing and, like apolitical punks, also value individual rebellion but, unlike them, place an importance on control and strength.[14]

Kevin Mattson's article, "Did Punk Matter?: Analyzing the Practices of a Youth Subculture During the 1980s," as the title suggests sets out to answer the question of whether punk mattered. While the title says "punk," the content of the article is clearly about hardcore, making mentions specifically of the 1980s and American politics. By the end of the article, Mattson answers the question asked by saying that he believes the answer to the question would be yes, punk did matter. However, Mattson also adds a number of qualifications. Mattson recognizes that punks showed that "the pleasure of culture comes from its production and communal sharing," but he also recognizes that these punks could not alter the corporate domination of culture that they resisted.[15] Mattson concludes by saying these punks did leave behind a hope that…America could be changed for the better."[16]

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[14] Tsitsos, "Rules of Rebellion," 413.
[15] Kevin Mattson, "Did Punk Matter?: Analyzing the Practices of a Youth Subculture During the 1980s." *American Studies* 42, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 92.
[16] Ibid., 93.

What is Hardcore?

Hardcore punk in the 1980s, at its core, is characterized by resistance to the mainstream. Among musicians in the hardcore punk scene in America, resistance to mainstream society was shown in a wide variety of ways using a wide variety of topics. One common element in hardcore punk music was resistance to the music industry in general. This is clearly evident in the unpolished "garage band" sound of many hardcore bands, especially in their early days. This unpolished sound not only challenges popular perceptions of music but also challenges the corporate structure of the music industry in its accessibility. A lack of reliance on large corporate entities gave the impression that anyone could make music if they would choose to do so, and it also fed into the larger do-it-yourself aesthetic of the hardcore scene. Additionally, the typical short fast, and loud style of hardcore songs separated punk further from mainstream music, and hardcore's aggressive style and lack of emphasis on formal musical training and expertise made it off-putting to the general public.

While the punk sound had been popularized in the United States, the political ideals of British punk bands such as The Clash and The Sex Pistols were not picked up on a large scale by American audiences. Punk was popular, but in its popularity it ceased being strictly punk and became something more similar to pop music with punk influence in the form of new wave. Just as the original development of punk rebelled against the established culture of rock music, hardcore punk rebelled against the popularization of punk by distancing itself from previous forms of punk as well as other offshoots of punk, especially new wave musicians, who were viewed as sellouts by hardcore punks. Hardcore, unlike previous American punk, had a focus on politics in the case of many involved, and it also offered social criticism, looking at many aspects

of society with pessimism or anger.[17] Essentially, hardcore punk was, in many ways, a return to the ideals of socially and politically aware British punks while also differentiating itself from the prior developments of punk. As punk increasingly influenced the wider musical culture, the wider musical culture also, in a way, influenced hardcore punk, not because hardcore punk adopted aspects of popularized punk offshoots, but because they specifically avoided and criticized the practices of these musicians, preferring messages of social and political change for what they saw as the better in favor of what they saw as a greedy, capitalistic music industry, seeing new wave bands as sellouts who abandoned punk ideals for money.

Hardcore punk was a rebellion against established punk music and culture in a number of ways beyond the simple rejection of punk influence in popular music. While hardcore certainly borrowed and built upon prior punk culture, it also rejected certain aspects of it. Among these rejected aspects was punk attire and appearance. Typical hardcore attire maintained basic aspects of punk appearance, such as dark clothing, jeans, and leather jackets, but many of the more extravagant aspects of typical punk appearance, such as Mohawks and colored hair, preferring a simpler appearance that was easier to maintain and made individuals less immediately identifiable as punks by sight.[18]

Lyrics in hardcore music very often show a very heavy resistance to mainstream culture. Depending on which band created a song and what the topic of a song is, this may be conveyed in a serious, straightforward tone or a humorous, mocking tone which often makes use of satire to illustrate the musicians' opinions without directly saying what the musicians' views are. Whatever method a musician uses, resistance to mainstream culture, whether in reference to

[17] Grossman, "Identity Crisis," 21-22.
[18] Ibid., 24-25.

economic culture and corporatization, common cultural practices in a social context, or something else entirely, is an essential part of the music of most hardcore musicians.

Resistance to corporatization, not only in the music industry but also in other areas, was conveyed in lyrics to songs in addition to general style and behavior. The Dead Kennedys' "Terminal Preppie" is one example, criticizing the idea that an individual can put in minimal effort in college and, having done nothing of much substance, receive a business degree and go on to be rich and powerful. As the song states of a hypothetical individual doing exactly this, "My ambition in life is to look good on paper. All I want is a slot in some big corporation."[19] The song continues to describe a college lifestyle centered on a party mentality, concerned more with alcohol and sex than actual education and taking opportunities to join clubs for the sole purpose of making a good impression with potential employers with the ultimate goal of money and influence.[20] In this song, a satirical telling of a hypothetical individual's goal of economic success with as little effort as possible, a theme of opposition to large corporations is clearly visible along with a criticism of those who would go to college not to get an education but to party and get ahead in the business world. Another song emphasizing corporatization, specifically as it pertains to the music industry in this example, is Minor Threat's "Cashing In." This song criticizes the practice of "selling out" in the music industry, viewing it as a point where money begins to matter more than the artistic process and the fans. As the song states, "The problem with money is that I want more. Let's raise the price at the door," and later, "My mind and body are the only things that I've sold. I need a little money 'cause I'm getting old."[21] Again, like "Terminal Preppie," the song is a satirical hypothetical story, telling of the band's supposed greed, charging absurdly high prices just to see them perform and emphasizing the

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[19] Dead Kennedys, "Terminal Preppie," *Plastic Surgery Disasters*, Alternative Tentacles, 1982.
[20] Dead Kennedys, "Terminal Preppie."
[21] Minor Threat, "Cashing In," *Out of Step*, Dischord Records, 1983.

importance of money above all else. Punk bands like the Dead Kennedys and Minor Threat resist corporatization and commercialization in music by making it into a joke, using satire and absurd examples to illustrate their beliefs rather than simply saying them outright.

Expanding on the party mentality aspect of "Terminal Preppie," with its criticisms of its criticisms of going to college to, as the song puts it, "get drunk and major in business and be taught how to fuck," a number of punk artists emphasized resistance of popular notions of recreational drug use and sex.[22] Perhaps most notably, Minor threat's Ian MacKaye's personal philosophy which turned into a movement of its own, known as "straight edge," emphasizing clean living through opposition to substance abuse and reckless behavior, was written about in a number of Minor Threat's songs. In one song, "Out of Step," MacKaye states, "I don't smoke. I don't drink. I don't fuck. At least I can fucking think," nicely summing up his views.[23] Also focusing on this philosophy is the song that it takes its name from, "straight edge," which states, "I'm a person just like you, but I've got better things to do than sit around and fuck my head, hang out with the living dead, snort white shit up my nose, pass out at the shows."[24] The song clearly shows that MacKaye feels that drugs aren't worth doing and that there are things he feels are more important that he could be doing instead. While Minor Threat may be most prominent in this line of thinking due to MacKaye's views of abstaining entirely, others criticize drug abuse and excessive drinking as well. Black Flag's "Six Pack" focuses extensively on excessive consumption of alcohol, stating in the beginning of the song, "I've got a six pack and nothing to do. I've got a six pack and I don't need you," and later, "My girlfriend asks me which one I like better. I hope the answer won't upset her."[25] The song paints a picture of an individual who

[22] Dead Kennedys, "Terminal Preppie."
[23] Minor Threat, "Out of Step," *Out of Step*, Dischord Records, 1983.
[24] Minor Threat, "Straight Edge," *First Two 7"s on a 12"*, Dischord Records, 1984.
[25] Black Flag, "Six Pack," *Damaged*, SST Records, 1981.

focuses on alcohol over all else, preferring it even over other people and implying he would even choose alcohol over his girlfriend if it came to that. While punk may be associated with rebellion, this association did not necessarily extend to the supposedly rebellious behaviors of drug abuse and excessive alcohol consumption. Instead, in many cases, punk artists rebelled against popular ideas of excessive drug use and drinking as cool.

Punk has also clashed with religious beliefs, especially where Christian beliefs are firmly ingrained in American culture and in regard to certain practices viewed as greedy or exploitative by punk artists. The Dead Kennedy's "Religious Vomit" shows a view of the latter. The song takes a very negative view of religions saying, "They all claim that they have the answer when they don't even know the question. They're just a bunch of liars. They just want your money. They just want your consciousness."[26] This paints a clear picture of religions as exploitative, caring more about a person's money than giving spiritual guidance. Bad Religion's "Voice of God is Government also shows a similar pessimistic view of religion, specifically Christianity in this case rather than religion in general. The song states, "Love for God is shown in cash, the love they send is mailbox trash. With every pamphlet we receive, more money asked for Godly needs."[27] In this song's view Christianity is constantly asking for more money, giving in return junk mail and pamphlets. An example addressing Christian morals as American culture is Bad Religion's "White Trash (Second Generation)," which lumps Christian morals together with fascism and white supremacy. As the song states, "Christian ethic, right extremes, shoved down out throat as the American Dream."[28] This song takes a stance not against Christianity as such but rather against Christian beliefs that find their way into American right-wing political beliefs.

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[26] Dead Kennedys, "Religious Vomit," *In God We Trust, Inc.* Alternative Tentacles, 1981.
[27] Bad Religion, "Voice of God is Government," *How Could Hell Be Any Worse?* Epitaph Records, 1982.
[28] Bad Religion, "White Trash (Second Generation)," *How Could Hell Be Any Worse?* Epitaph Records, 1982.

Many punk songs address real problems that the artists see in society, but that is not always the case. There are also many songs that simply intend to mock practices that are seen by the punks writing the songs as laughable. Among songs of this variety is Black Flag's "TV Party," mocking the importance placed on television as an activity used to spend free time. Satirically telling the story of a plan to do nothing but watch television and drink all night, the song continually states, "We've got nothing better to do than watch TV and have a couple of brews."[29] These continually repeated lines demonstrate not only a lack of willingness to do anything else instead of watch television but also a failure to recognize the existence of other options. At the end of the song it is revealed that the television is broken and all the plans that were made can no longer be carried out, and in this final section of the song the repeated lines are changed to, "We've got nothing left to do with no TV and just a couple of brews."[30] The song clearly mocks this idea that without television there is nothing to do for these individuals to occupy themselves. Other activities mocked by punk artists include modern ideas of spending time in the wilderness, as seen in the Dead Kennedys' "Winnebago Warrior," named for Winnebago recreational vehicles. The song paints a picture of an individual who sees himself as a real pioneer, spending time in the wilderness, away from civilization, the song using the sarcastic description, "Brave as old John Wayne."[31] The song mocks this hypothetical individual for thinking his activities could possibly resemble actually spending time in the wilderness. Among descriptions of this individual's activities, the song includes, "Littered campgrounds, folding chairs, feed Doritos to the bears."[32] This description falls far short of the wild, untamed wilderness that might be suggested by the hypothetical individual in question, providing instead

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[29] Black Flag, "TV Party," *Damaged*, SST Records, 1981.
[30] Black Flag, "TV Party."
[31] Dead Kennedys, "Winnebago Warrior," *Plastic Surgery Disasters*, 1982.
[32] Dead Kennedys, "Winnebago Warrior."

an image of a lack of respect for the environment, as well as a skewed idea of what camping in the great outdoors should consist of.

Overall, especially in the early days of the movement, hardcore punk did its best to distance itself from mainstream music, avoiding the corporatized music industry, and mainstream music likewise did not want anything to do with the hardcore punks. Although some bands, such as the Dead Kennedys, were commercially successful to some degree, the vast majority of hardcore bands were unknown to those outside of the hardcore scene. A do-it-yourself mentality rose out of this unwillingness and inability to succeed in economic terms, and the hardcore scene was very self-sufficient because of this mentality. Although music was at the heart of the hardcore scene, hardcore was also largely driven by non-musicians making use of whatever talents they had. As Jack Rabid says of the hardcore scene, "It was such a fresh scene, anybody who stumbled upon it was encouraged to use their talents. Even those who were somewhat talentless were inspired to develop one."[33] In the hardcore mentality, it did not necessarily matter how skilled individuals were, just that they contributed to the hardcore scene in some way. The scene was successful enough in this way to develop a national hardcore scene rather than only staying local. Driven by some of the better known bands, an unofficial touring network developed, and hardcore bands travelled the country despite a lack of funds and no promise of making any significant amount of money from the shows they played at. Explaining the networking that occurred, specifically between Black Flag, D.O.A., and his own band, Jello Biafra of the Dead Kennedys says, "We were all sharing information. Whenever somebody cracked open a new town, the other two bands found out about it."[34] For touring hardcore bands, earning money was important mostly for survival, and in many cases, they did not even earn

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[33] Oral history with Jack Rabid in Steven Blush, *American Hardcore: A Tribal History* (Los Angeles: Feral House, 2010), 319.
[34] Oral history with Jello Biafra in Blush, 322.

enough for that, forcing them to get creative to make the most of their situation. Speaking of the financial situation on tour, Dr. Know of the Bad Brains says, "The gigs rarely paid for the van and the gas. You slept on somebody's floor or in the van. You just did what you had to do."[35] However, for these bands it was not so much the money they cared about but being heard and delivering their music to an audience.[36] In this process of hardcore touring, bands challenged the corporate structure of mainstream music by creating its own system that was more about willingness to participate rather than the possibility of earning money from what they did. Distribution of hardcore music was a similarly anti-corporate process of the participants accomplishing what they could with whatever they could use. Cassette tapes were a very cheap and accessible and made the production and distribution of music fairly easy for bands that wished to do so.[37] This process also eventually led to the creation of independent record labels that resisted the corporatized music industry. Labels such as Dischord and Alternative Tentacles were born out of a desire to maintain independence, and such independent record labels also experimented with different methods of distribution, such as selling at shows, working with small record stores, and using mail to reach those who could not access shows or record stores, in order to avoid corporate music companies and retain some control over their products.[38] Hardcore punks recorded their own music, but due to the low budget nature of hardcore, production values were poor. As Tony Cadena of the Adolescents says, "It's amazing there were any good recordings."[39] These methods bands used to get the music heard, whether it was live or recorded reinforced the self-sufficient and anti-corporate mentality, bypassing large

[35] Oral history with Dr. Know in Blush, *American Hardcore,* 323.
[36] Mattson, "Did Punk Matter?" 75.
[37] Ibid., 75.
[38] Ibid., 76.
[39] Oral history with Tony Cadena in Blush, *American Hardcore,* 326-327.

companies and managing to be heard by audiences all around the country with support only from others within the hardcore movement.

Within hardcore, a dismissive mindset toward art was fairly common, but even so, hardcore had its own art that was a major part of the movement. Hardcore developed its own style of art that differentiated itself from varieties of art that those in the hardcore scene did not care for. Winston Smith, an artist who worked with the Dead Kennedys, says, "There was a drive to get away from fine, finished-looking work that looked like it came out of a record company art department. Instead of creating overblown work that makes the individual feel smaller, Hardcore made the individual feel included. It was not a glamour trip; the artwork was chaotic and spontaneous."[40] It seems it was not art as a whole that was what hardcore was dismissive of but specifically typical popular varieties of art. It was certainly not complete aversion to art that was the cause of hostility within the hardcore scene since hardcore had its own art with its own distinct style. Indeed, as Glenn Danzig of the Misfits says of hardcore art, "It had a definite look and style — there's an art to brutality. That's why certain boxers are better than others — there's an art."[41] Hardcore's aversion to art was more because of connotations that the word "art" itself carried. To many in hardcore, the word "art" implied some degree of pseudo-intellectualism and snobbery.[42] In the hardcore mindset, there was a separation of "art school" art and the sorts of works that were created in the hardcore scene.

Toward the end of the 1980s, hardcore punk as a mentality was waning in favor of hardcore punk as a style. While those who were interested in political activism and independence in resistance to mainstream music still existed in the movement, there were many

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[40] Oral history with Winston Smith in Blush, *American Hardcore*, 335.
[41] Oral history with Glenn Danzig in Blush, *American Hardcore*, 335.
[42] Blush, *American Hardcore*, 335.

who were mostly interested in punk appearance and musical style.[43] In many ways, hardcore became more concerned with conformity and exclusion of those who did not conform to the norms of punk style. Appearance with no meaning behind it became the norm in favor of punk ideals and activism.[44] Similar to the popularity of British punk among American audiences but an unwillingness to latch onto its political ideals in the late 70s and early 80s, the ideals that developed around American hardcore punk were now being abandoned by individuals who only cared for the punk style. Those who still cared about maintaining punk ideals focused less on music, and in 1987 many independent bands connected to punk culture either broke up or became more popular through corporate contracts.[45]

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[43] Mattson, "Did Punk Matter?" 86.
[44] Ibid., 87.
[45] Ibid., 88.

Internal Conflict

Hardcore as a whole was not a unified movement, but for many involved there was peaceful coexistence. Many others, however, were largely hostile to other sub-groups of hardcore punks, which resulted in further fracturing of the movement. Hostilities between various sub-groups of hardcore only increased the differences in a movement that had very little in common overall other than an emphasis on self-sufficiency.

Drug use was a large part of the hardcore scene, and while this was an acceptable form of rebellion for most, the previously mentioned straight edge individuals rebelled in their own way by avoiding common behaviors of excessive drug use. Straight edge and the wider hardcore culture did not always peacefully coexist, however, and despite being part of the same overall movement, there was often hostility between individuals with differing methods of rebellion. Speaking of his experience, Ian MacKaye, singer for Minor Threat and writer of the song that inspired the movement, says, "The reaction we got for being straight was so contemptuous, we couldn't believe it. We thought being straight was just like being another type of deviant in this community, just like junkies. I didn't realize it was gonna upset the applecart so much — the reaction we got made us up the ante."[46] While MacKaye may have been content with coexistence between individuals of differing methods of rebellion, clearly there were others who did not agree with his own method. Hostility was not exclusive to non-straight edge individuals, however, and some among the movement were hostile to those who did not choose to have the same straight edge lifestyle. Speaking of this hostility toward those who chose not to be straight edge, Dave Smalley of DYS and Dag Nasty says, "We were pretty violent. In hindsight, that's one thing I regret about the past — we were aggressive towards non-Straight Edge people. We

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[46] Oral history with Ian MacKaye in Blush, *American Hardcore*, 28.

hated the stoners and the drinkers in high school so much."[47] Although he came to regret it, hostility to non-Straight Edge individuals was a regular part of straight edge for Smalley. For some in the Straight Edge movement, the focus was not necessarily on outright rejection of what straight edge opposed but rejection specifically of excess. As Pat Dubar of Uniform Choice says, "I was never anti-sex or anti-booze. We were really anti-obsession because that's all I saw from people around me — obsession with god, religion, money, drugs, alcohol. All this shit to me was meaningless. It's what pissed me off the most."[48] Dubar's views show that straight edge was not always violently against general drug use and drinking but more focused on instances of excess and preoccupation with such things. However, while some sought peaceful coexistence, there were always those who rejected a differing view and served to further fragment the hardcore movement.

In some cases disagreement and conflict came from misunderstanding between musicians and their audience. East Bay Ray, guitarist for the Dead Kennedys spoke of such misunderstandings saying, "…the problem with some in the punk audience, is they thought we were writing the Bible," and also, "We weren't trying to tell people what to do. We all have our own political beliefs. Our thing was to try to get people to think."[49] As is evident from Ray's words, punk in his mind was less about a particular political leaning, although many punks had similar political beliefs, and more about deciding for one's self what to believe rather than blindly following what someone else says. Dead Kennedys bassist, Klaus Flouride, also spoke of misunderstandings by their audiences, saying, "There were people in places where English isn't their first language, like Portugal. 'Kill the Poor' went to number four, something like that.

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[47] Oral history with Dave Smalley in Blush, *American Hardcore*, 29.
[48] Oral history with Pat Dubar in Blush, *American Hardcore*, 29.
[49] Oral history with East Bay Ray in Jack Boulware and Silke Tudor, *Gimme Something Better*, (Penguin, 2009), 80.

Taking it literally."[50] While not speaking of American audiences, Flouride also illustrates a problem of audiences misunderstanding the band's intent, mistaking the band's often satirical tone for genuine beliefs. Dead Kennedys lead singer, Jello Biafra, took issue with the band's audience in another way, specifically referring to the behavior of their live audiences. Speaking of violence occurring at shows Biafra says, "People out of the crowd said to me, 'Is anybody gonna do something about this?' I thought, well, if I don't say something then nobody will. So I wrote 'Nazi Punks Fuck Off.'"[51] The song, speaking out against the violence that occurred, also had the effect of redirecting that violence toward Biafra himself. Speaking of the show at which the band debuted the song, Biafra says, "Sure enough some dude got up onstage afterwards wanting to argue with me, and he had on a swastika shirt that said 'White Power' on the, and 'Niggers Beware' on the back. I couldn't have asked for a better example of what it was we were trying to fight."[52] While hardcore punks were often content with coexistence, the splintered hardcore audience, in this case separated further due to the internal conflict that arose from those who were violent and those who had had enough of the violence and wanted something done about it.

The lyrics to various songs by the Dead Kennedys further drive home the point that there were those who went against the violence that occurred for nothing more than the thrill of it, dismissing those among the punks who took part in such activities as not being true punks and not belonging. The previously mentioned "Nazi Punks Fuck Off" shows this line of thinking, not only denouncing the violence that occurs but also dismissing those among the punks using Nazi symbolism or holding neo-Nazi beliefs as part of the problem. The song, despite its very short length has much to say to the Nazi punks it addresses, saying first, in regard to the violent

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[50] Oral history with Klaus Flouride in Boulware, *Gimme Something Better*, 80.
[51] Oral history with Jello Biafra in Boulware, *Gimme Something Better*, 83.
[52] Ibid.

individuals, "If you've come to fight, get outta here. You ain't no better than the bouncers."[53] The song then says, "You fight each other, the police state wins," and challenges the individuals in question to "trash a bank if you've got real balls."[54] The song then ends by telling these Nazi punks, "In a real fourth Reich you'll be first to go."[55] The Dead Kennedys, in this song, attempt to stop behavior that they see as particularly unhelpful to punk as a whole by pointing out that although characterizations of punks are commonly violent that not all in the punk scene are like that. The Dead Kennedys also get at a similar idea in "Riot," pointing out the foolishness of rebellion without purpose. The song tells a story of a riot in which the rioters destroy their own neighborhoods, after being turned away from the "real slave drivers" by the riot squad, for no other reason than it provides them with an "unbeatable high".[56] The song ends by steadily slowing down to the repeating lines, "Tomorrow you're homeless. Tonight it's a blast."[57] The song emphasizes that rebellion for the sake of rebellion rather than being directed at something that should be rebelled against only ends up hurting those rebelling. The ideas presented in these songs show that while punk may oftentimes be characterized by anarchist ideals, anarchy, in the punk mindset, does not necessarily mean chaos. By presenting these ideas of being against violence for the sake of violence and rebellion for the sake of rebellion, the Dead Kennedys separated themselves from the individuals who did participate in the hardcore scene for purposeless violence and rebellion.

Along with violence for the sake of it was the problem of racism in hardcore. Initially the problem was with the violent, but not racist, skinheads. As Jeff Bale says, "There was a period in the mid-'80s where it was really unpleasant going to a punk show because there'd be a face-

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[53] Dead Kennedys, "Nazi Punks Fuck Off," *In God We Trust, Inc.* Alternative Tentacles, 1981.
[54] Dead Kennedys, "Nazi Punks Fuck Off."
[55] Dead Kennedys, "Nazi Punks Fuck Off."
[56] Dead Kennedys, "Riot," *Plastic Surgery Disasters*, Alternative Tentacles, 1982.
[57] Dead Kennedys, "Riot."

off between factions of skins and punks."[58] This was simply the same concern that came with violence for the sake of violence. However, it did not stay that way. Many skinheads later exhibited white supremacist behavior. As Dave Dictor says, "By late '83 and '84, there were cracks. Skinheads who had been our good friends and buddies, all of a sudden were talking about white power and niggers and fags."[59] These skinheads ceased being simply violent and embraced an ideology that others could not agree with. Not all skinheads accepted this ideology, and those who didn't simply had to part ways with those who did. As Sara Cohen, Jewish skinhead, says, "There'd be skinheads at every show, and more and more of them would be Sieg Heiling. Those of us who didn't want to take part in that scene, because of ethnicity or because it was just so fuckin' retarded, we had to go our separate ways."[60] While violence was already a problem causing hardcore to become more fractured adding Nazi skinheads with white supremacist ideals into the mix only made things worse.

Women never had a very large presence within the hardcore movement, and while they were accepted in many cases, they had to work harder for that acceptance. In other cases, perhaps the majority of cases, women were relegated to a sideline role. As Laura Albert, a participant in the New York hardcore scene, says, "The role of women in the scene was as the sexual outlet or as something that hung on the arm and stood to the side."[61] In some cases it was a matter of behavior rather than overtly of sex. Maria Ma, a participant in the Raleigh hardcore scene, makes this clear when she says, "If you were a girl and acted a certain way that the guys could deal with — like you were asexual and you got in the pit and stagedived and knew the

[58] Oral history with Jeff Bale in Boulware, *Gimme Something Better*, 142.
[59] Oral history with Dave Dictor in Boulware, *Gimme Something Better,* 142.
[60] Oral history with Sara Cohen in Boulware, *Gimme Something Better*, 142-143.
[61] Oral history with Laura Albert in Blush, *American Hardcore*, 36.

music — they could accept you."[62] Some of those who did not want to participate in this way voluntarily left the hardcore scene. Cynthia Connelly, an author who was involved in hardcore, being one of these individuals who chose to leave for this reason, explains her thinking, saying, "I hated going to shows when it became so violent and insane. As it got more and more Hardcore I got more and more disinterested. By 1983, I was 100% disinterested."[63] However, while many women felt they did not belong in a movement that they saw as overly masculine, and while women who remained were often not involved in a very visible way, it would be a mistake to say that all women in hardcore were marginalized. One of the best examples of this is Kira Roessler of Black Flag. While women largely were not involved with the bands, Roessler was part of one of the most well known bands at one point in its existence, and the other members of the band respected her and recognized her talent. As Henry Rollins of Black Flag says, "Kira was infinitely more talented than anyone who ever walked onstage at an L7 gig," and, "I gave her 110 percent respect but she came in when Black Flag was up against a wall, financially and culturally."[64] The stories of women like Roessler show that while hardcore was male-dominated and many of those involved did not readily accept women as a part of the movement, there were those who not only accepted women but also fully respected them and allowed them to be major parts of the movement. These differing perspectives, however, only contributed to the fragmentation of hardcore, and the marginalization of women not only contributed to the fragmentation of hardcore but also drove them away entirely in many cases.

While hardcore did not come to a clear end, it certainly reached a point where many started to drift away from it as a result of how the culture around hardcore developed, as well as the changes in and breakups of the bands that the movement formed around. By 1986, hardcore

[62] Oral history with Maria Ma in Blush, *American Hardcore*, 37.
[63] Oral history with Cynthia Connelly in Blush, *American Hardcore*, 37.
[64] Oral history with Henry Rollins in Blush, *American Hardcore*, 74.

was no longer what it once was. As Pat Dubar says, "Around 1986, everything died. It was weird because things were so strong, then suddenly there was nothing — no substance. Hardcore had become fashionable. To me, the risk was that breath of fire in the beginning — and it was gone."[65] To many, the danger inherent to hardcore that had initially attracted them was simply no longer there. There were plenty of other reasons for hardcore's decline as well. A major reason was the increasingly codified nature of hardcore. As Jesse Malin of Heart Attack says, "I felt really confined by Hardcore. Everything it set out to be in terms of independence and freedom quickly became such a formula and book of rules — how to dress, to sound, to act — it wasn't fun anymore. It was over and it was time to do something new."[66] Hardcore, having previously resisted such codification was now being defined by it. Along with this codification came intolerance for anything that deviated from the formula. As Jello Biafra of the Dead Kennedys says, "There's nothing I like less than intolerant people, especially conservative Punks. Originally every band sounded totally different. Nowadays it's been put into all these narrow parameters. A band picks a style, plays in nothing but that style, and puts the intelligent members of their audience to sleep."[67] Bands had no room to develop their styles or try anything new because it would not be accepted as hardcore by many in their audience. As hardcore stagnated, newcomers also did not have much to influence them aside from hardcore, while early hardcore musicians had wider variety of influences. As Pat Dubar says, "As a twelve-year-old Punk, it was in some ways good and some ways bad. That was it — Hardcore was my music."[68] With newer punks learning mostly from hardcore, there was more room for stagnation and less room for experimentation, since they were not bringing in the wide variety of influences that

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[65] Oral history with Pat Dubar in Blush, *American Hardcore*, 348.
[66] Oral history with Jesse Malin in Blush, *American Hardcore*, 348.
[67] Oral history with Jello Biafra in Blush, *American Hardcore*, 349.
[68] Oral history with Pat Dubar in Blush, *American Hardcore*, 349.

hardcore's originators did. With no room for experimentation those who were sick of the typical hardcore formula had no reason to stick around. The movement was not necessarily becoming more fractured at this point, but instead people simply moved on from hardcore.

External Influence

Hardcore punks were hardly a unified entity, and many groups existed within the overall movement across America, often disagreeing on what exactly constituted punk and in many cases sharing little more than a common musical style. To the mass media, however, punks could all be put together in the same unified category as violent, nihilistic youths, committing crimes, abusing drugs, and being a danger to themselves and others.[69] TV shows painted an inaccurate but accessible picture of hardcore, and such representations only caused unnecessary fear. As Laura Albert says, "No one knew what Hardcore was, and the media showed stereotypically horrible things about it. A girl in combat boots was enough to be called a Nazi. That *Quincy* — my friend's parents sent him to a hospital after that. It was classic 50s-style hysteria."[70] It is possible that these media representations themselves may be the root cause of some of the violence, giving violent individuals the wrong idea about what hardcore really is. As Tony Cadena says, "I was standing in front of The Starwood one night — Mike Ness was being interviewed by *2 On the Town*, a local LA show. They were talking about Hardcore violence; Mike was saying the media creates it. As he said that, a guy walks from behind, takes out a razor and slashes Mike's arm open."[71] Much of the mass media cultivated fear based on misunderstanding, but there were also those who made an effort to portray hardcore punks as they really were rather than what people thought they were. Penelope Spheeris's documentary, *The Decline of Western Civilization*, is one example of this, filming actual hardcore punks and interviewing them without prior planning, producing a fairly accurate portrayal.[72] As Lee Ving of Fear says about the documentary, "That movie speaks for itself. There were some reasonably

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[69] Mattson, "Did Punk Matter?" 70.
[70] Oral history with Laura Albert in Blush, *American Hardcore*, 330.
[71] Oral history with Tony Cadena in Blush, *American Hardcore*, 331.
[72] Blush, *American Hardcore*, 332-333.

candid interviews with people on the scene. No one was told what to do," and, "That was an accurate portrayal of the time and the issues people were speaking about."[73] Spheeris's documentary, however, seems to be in the minority as far as media representations of hardcore go.

Hardcore was not only misunderstood in the relatively harmless way of media representations but also in real life, which got hardcore punks in trouble with the police for no good reason. Speaking of hardcore's relationship with the police. Dez Cadena of Black Flag says, "The police, especially in LA, have always been pretty fascism. The cops thought Punk was a rebellion that threatened them, the American Family, and society in general — and they wanted to stomp it out."[74] What made the police especially threatening for the hardcore movement was the violence that came with it. Not only was it worse than hardcore's internal violence but there was also nothing that could be done to fight back in any effective way. As George Anthony of Battalion of Saints says, "You'd have riots; people were getting maced and arrested. These poor kids would go to see a show and come out with their nose in their ear, and the cops did it."[75] Whether hardcore posed an actual threat or not, the police seemed to think it did, and people who just happened to go see a show got caught in the crossfire.

Within the music industry, hardcore was mostly ignored, and where it wasn't ignored, it certainly was not treated well. As Mike Watt of Minutemen says, "In *Rolling Stone*, I remember them writing about us and a Hüsker Dü record and mixing us up. They didn't know who the fuck we were and they didn't wanna know. They truly wanted to kill that music."[76] Hardcore was not taken seriously and was largely dismissed, and while some hardcore music videos were

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[73] Oral history with Lee Ving in Blush, *American Hardcore*, 332

[74] Oral history with Dez Cadena in Blush, *American Hardcore*, 41.

[75] Oral history with George Anthony in Blush, *American Hardcore*, 42.

[76] Oral history with Mike Watt in Blush, *American Hardcore*, 333.

aired on MTV, it was very few and in some cases merely presented as a novelty as in the case of Suicidal Tendencies' "Institutionalized" video.[77]

Hardcore punk ended up adopting more than perhaps originally intended from more mainstream music. Although hardcore punk's appeal early on was its relative self-sufficiency and rejection of what was seen as a greedy music industry, some punk bands eventually saw the musical culture of hardcore punk, focusing on fast, loud, and short songs that were fairly simple in nature, as stagnant and experimented with influences from other genres in their own music as they got tired of the usual hardcore style and also aimed to reach a wider audience.[78] A wider audience also itself played a part in hardcore punk's involuntary adoption of more negative aspects that it had specifically avoided. A wider audience meant that individuals who were not typical punks would become involved, and with the face of the punk audience changing, many traditional punks resisted these newcomers. The result of this was a punk scene that became exclusionary, developing its own brand of elitism and taking part in the same negative behaviors that individuals within had actively criticized.[79] In some cases, appealing to a wider audience caused issues due to the crossover between genres. Many punks took issue with a macho attitude that developed in the hardcore scene due to the influence of heavy metal, a consequence of this wider audience not sharing the same values that existed in the punk community.[80] Hardcore and metal were even originally hostile to each other, as seen when Steve Harris of Iron Maiden says, "In the early days of Iron Maiden there was a few things written about us saying we had this Punk attitude, which was bullshit. We hated Punks. We hated their attitude."[81] Metal did not get along with hardcore, and to hardcore, metal was part of the mainstream rock culture that it

[77] Blush, *American Hardcore*, 333-334.
[78] Grossman, "The Dialectics of Rock, Punk, and Grunge," 25-26.
[79] Grossman, "The Dialectics of Rock, Punk, and Grunge," 27.
[80] Grossman, "The Dialectics of Rock, Punk, and Grunge." 25.
[81] Oral history with Steve Harris in Blush, *American Hardcore*, 349.

sought to avoid. Because of the ideological differences between both metal and hardcore, in addition to those who experimented with new sounds there were those who left because hardcore was not always exclusively hardcore anymore. As Paul Mahern of Zero Boys says, "Early Hardcore and Punk was a positive experience, but at some point in the mid-80s, I felt like it had attracted a negative element so I removed myself from it. The whole Metal influence I didn't get at all, because to me Hardcore was so not about Metal, there could be no symbiotic relationship between the two camps at all."[82]

Further going against traditional hardcore values, as time went on some bands ended up rethinking their stance of opposition to big business because a total boycott of big business would be unrealistic, and a number of bands, realizing they needed a source of income to get by, turned to major record labels, though they accepted that they must be careful to retain creative control, finding a compromise between strict hardcore ideals and the realities of a society that requires money to effectively meet one's needs.[83] The days of hardcore's self-sufficiency were clearly over. The corporate dominance of the music industry was not going to end, and if bands were going to make a living off their music, they would have to turn to major record labels.

Hardcore dealt with plenty of external influence that likely would have deterred some individuals from taking part in the hardcore movement. Between self-imposed financial restrictions, being largely rejected by the music industry, violence by the police, and fear based on media representations, there were not many reasons for an individual to be part of the hardcore movement and stay in it. In addition, it's not unheard of that a hardcore band might be influenced by another genre and experiment with something new only to be rejected by the hardcore audience. External influence on hardcore could easily and likely play a part in the

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[82] Oral history with Paul Mahern in Blush, *American Hardcore*, 350.
[83] Grossman, "The Dialectics of Rock, Punk, and Grunge." 29.

stagnation and decline of hardcore as there would be plenty of reasons to drift away from hardcore in order to try something else.

Conclusion

Hardcore was a fragmented movement to begin with. It brought many people with differing opinions together with no organization. Two of the only things in common between two different hardcore punks might be an anti-corporate ideology and a similar but not necessarily identical style. The unorganized, fragmented nature of hardcore meant internal conflict within the movement was fairly common. Sometimes simple violence was an issue, while other times individuals were being driven away by the often sexist or racist behavior of the white male majority that made up the movement, despite the supposed inclusionary nature of the movement, allowing anyone to take part with whatever skills they had. When people stayed with the movement, they eventually drifted away anyway because of the way the movement developed, becoming increasingly stagnant and increasingly codified. In the stagnant codified form of hardcore, exclusion became the new norm and many musicians drifted away to focus on ideology over style or to experiment with different types of music.

In addition to the unorganized nature of hardcore making it unappealing, there were also external influences to convince people to drift away. Police violence that occurred for no good reason was a very significant deterrent for those in the movement, and fear cultivated by the media making hardcore punks look self-destructive and dangerous, if it had no effect on the hardcore punks themselves, it would at least give family members a reason to worry about them, or it might attract actual violent, dangerous individuals to the movement. The music industry's near total rejection of hardcore would also be a good reason to get out of hardcore because musicians would not be able to make a living off of their music if they remained strictly hardcore.

Between all of these internal and external issues, there would not be much room left for anyone to stay in the movement. Eventually there was not much more than the hardcore style holding the movement together. However, many drifted away at this point or had already drifted away due to being marginalized and excluded or because they sought to spread their message to a wider audience or because they wanted to experiment with different genres. Hardcore had little holding it together, and the internal and external issues the movement faced only served to further fragment it rather than bring any sub-groups within hardcore closer together.

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