

“We Sing For Change”



NS SXE

Straight Edge Punk & Social Change

By: Francis Stewart

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With hope in our hearts and bricks in our hands, we sing for change.

With genuine feeling and as loud as possible almost 1,000 people sang this together in Glasgow's Garage in 2006. Strangers leaning on one another, arms wrapped around shoulders and fists raised high singing in a united voice. Underneath this impromptu display of solidarity lies the key to understanding the power and potency of hardcore punk both as a musical genre and as a subculture. This song, *Bricks*, is not one of Rise Against's singles from their latest album, it has not been played on MTV or radio stations and it was not listed in music magazines as a hit song, yet it is the song that elicited the greatest response that evening.

The reason for this response? These lyrics outline both the purpose and concern of hardcore punk: change, social change of one sort or another. Social change that is largely wrought and / or articulated through musical expression. Understanding this statement requires insight into punk as a

musical genre and as a social movement. The research presented within this paper is based on field work which took place in San Francisco and the Bay Area in 2009, throughout the UK in 2010, and in Chicago in 2011. It also draws on the experiences and insights of the researcher, a long time adherent to a subculture within the punk scene known as Straight Edge. The interviewees, informants and participants for this study ranged in age from 25 to 58. In

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total 83 interviews² and extended conversations³ were carried out: 29 in San Francisco and the Bay Area, seven in Chicago, and 47 in the UK (specifically, in Glasgow, Durham, Newcastle, Dundee, Edinburgh, Belfast, Liverpool, Leeds and Manchester).

What is punk?

Punk is essentially an umbrella term for a



music-based oppositional subculture characterised by expressions of estrangement, frustration and disenchantment, as a form of resistance that has evoked a sense of identity, authenticity and community for its followers and adherents. Within the subculture of punk there exists a myriad of

musical approaches such as classic or '77 punk, Oi, anarcho-punk, garage-punk, psychobilly, pop-punk, hardcore and straight edge. Each musical styling has its own sound, style of playing, aesthetic presentation and dance moves, yet they commonly unite under the banner of punk on issues

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such as politics, activism, animal rights, social issues or human rights.

Punk as a social movement is very much characterised by the qualities of its emergent era. In the United Kingdom punk burst into public consciousness at the end of the 1970s, although it had existed prior to that in the USA, particularly in the Bowery district of New York City. Early punk performances in the US by bands such as The Ramones and The Talking Heads were raw, unpolished, crude, politically charged and often filled with bickering which would occasionally become violent.

The United Kingdom of the mid to late 1970s was a time, much like today, of recession and hardship.. During the 1970s this tough situation was exacerbated by an international oil crisis, numerous workers strikes for improved pay and conditions, rolling blackouts (fuel supplies are cut off resulting in no electricity for lights etc) and the government mandated three day work week.

As a consequence, young people were among the hardest hit both in terms of un-

employment , future prospects and home life. Combined with a rapidly increasing divorce rate amongst their parents and the first generation raised as ‘latch-key kids⁴’ who spent more time with the television than they did their parents⁵, this was a generation who had to radically redefine their notion of family. Unsurprisingly, many youth were angry and willing to loudly express it, they were out of work and had a lot of free time to indulge their rebellious natures and to present what they saw as the main causes of the problems they faced.

Billy, a 50 year old undergraduate student of philosophy and politics, from Blantyre near Glasgow, describes the UK as he experienced in his teenage years of the late 1970s;

At that time, at 17, I think there was a lot of angst and a lot of anger you know, because things were dismal and you look back now and yeah, they were dismal. You’d a right to protest, you’d a right to say, I’m no taking this shit, I want something better, you know. And it really, eh, punk evolved because of that.⁶

Thus within punk music we find a refusal to conform to the norms of performance department, a fierce do it yourself (DIY) attitude and approach, a sense that anyone can do it regardless of gender, age, instrument quality or ability. There is also a pervading camaraderie or 'brothers in arms' mentality, seeing the punk community being your family and a refusal to be co-opted, particularly by major music labels.⁷ Overall, and as a general comment, the qualities most sought within all aspects of punk are that of authenticity, integrity and non-conformity.

What is of significance about punk is not the aesthetic or the loud music per se, but rather that 'the music today has now become a doorway to additional learning not simply an endpoint in and of itself.'⁸ However, this is not to idealise punk or to portray it as a misunderstood passive, intellectual movement. Punk has undergone its difficulties, factions and attacks from within. During the 1980s some punks felt that the music had become 'watered down' and too media friendly and controlled, which

led to the developed hardcore punk to get back to the true meaning of punk. However this itself became a rigid form and constrictive approach in which 'bands found themselves under the ruthless scrutiny of their peers and realized too late that they were trapped in a scene.'⁹

Perhaps the most long running and significant problem punk has had to face from within is the frequent overindulgence with both alcohol and drugs. At times this sadly led to an early death, probably the most well known was that of Sid Vicious (John Beverley) in 1979 at the age of 21. Others who followed the same tragic path include Malcolm Owen (The Ruts), Darby Crash (The Germs), El Duce (The Mentors) and Will Shatter (Flipper) among many others.

Autobiographies such as those by Eater singer Andy Blade reveal the easy access to drugs and alcohol that existed within punk circles, particularly for anyone close to or involved with bands.¹⁰ This was in no way limited to band members, some audience members were also engaged in similar

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pursuits and behaviors. Alcohol consumption amongst audience members was particularly pervasive and indeed the cause of numerous conflicts between punks and authority figures.¹¹ The normative behavior and attitudes displayed by those punks came to be known by the phrase 'drunk punks'.

During the early 1980s a variety of reactions arose to the 'drunk punk', although separate, they were still related and interdependent. In the UK anarcho punk, amongst others, arose within punk circles as an attempt to bring serious political and social issues to the fore. This was led by bands such as Crass, Poison Girls, Flux of Pink Indians, and Conflict. These bands utilized sonics, lyrics, aesthetics / appearance (for example Crass wore all black on stage), visual backdrops on stage, while in their own lives as they existed in co-

ops (communes) and squats. In the USA the most sustained reaction to the 'drunk punk' began as a small collection of songs and spawned a worldwide movement known as Straight Edge. The remainder of this paper will focus on straight edge and the social changes found within it.

Straight Edge

Tito, a 47 year old drummer and photographer living in the Bay Area of San Francisco summarizes the impetus behind the different approaches to punk that led to the creation of straight edge;



UK punk was largely based on anger at monarchy rule and what that not only entails, but also represents and it was very politically charged. The US on the other hand did not have monarchy rule to rebel against, and the Vietnam War had already been protested at by the hippies, so American punks turned to their own lives, environment and what they perceived as governmental brain-washing and a cultural insular perspective.¹²

Straight edge began in 1981 as a song by then teenage lyricist Ian MacKaye from the hardcore band Minor Threat. Although this was not the first time that MacKaye had addressed similar issues, these lyrics were the most direct.¹³ The 50 second song 'Straight Edge' claims that MacKaye does not need to drink, take drugs or engage in casual sex because they are simply "a crutch" and he has "the straight edge".¹⁴ The song was only intended as his own personal life statement as well as an indictment of the drug and alcohol fueled behavior of the punks he was surrounded by, not a rallying cry or a call to

arms. Upon hearing the lyrics, many young punks recognized their own lifestyle philosophy or the lifestyle they wanted to adopt and began to self-identify as straight edge. This spread to bands using it as an identifying moniker, and the spread continued through extensive touring and the practice of making and swapping tapes for friends or buying music through fanzines. Eventually it became known within the hardcore punk scene world-wide and has since developed into a community within a community. It now has adherents in the estimated tens of thousands throughout the world, although it is impossible to get precise numbers due to the flexibility and anonymity of self-identification, self-regulation and the deliberate lack of a leader around whom all adherents rally around¹⁵

Adherents follow three guidelines: abstinence from alcohol, drugs (including tobacco) and casual sex. These rules are self-enforced or self-regulated, with those who choose to follow them describing themselves as 'claiming edge'. This is a commitment that is undertaken once

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and for life, and to break it is irrevocable, although it will seldom result in ostracism from the community unless the ex-straight edger persistently ridicules or violently attacks those who remain edge. This quote from Karl, a 28 year old straight edge adherent and tattoo artist from Durham, demonstrates the depth of feeling with regards to claiming edge;

*Yeah basically, ya know, it's not fashion, you've either gotta make the commitment or you're not true.*¹⁶

There is room for personalizing one's straight edge lifestyle. Some adherents will interpret no casual sex as complete abstinence from sex before marriage, while others will simply restrict sex to committed relationships regardless of marital status. Some will interpret no drugs as including caffeine while others will not. An increasing number of adherents will voluntarily include additional abstinence to their straight edge identity, the most common is adopting a vegetarian or vegan diet.

The above paragraph reveals some ways in which social issues are so important to

the straight edge individuals that they alter their lifestyle choices to ensure compatibility between value and action. The significant aspect is that these are not purely individual rebellions but rather, as Haenfler notes, 'symbolic of a larger, collective, oppositional consciousness.'¹⁷ The connection between a collective consciousness and social change in relation to straight edge should not be understated as those collective meanings are key to understanding the identity of the group.¹⁸

Social change and collective identity in straight edge

'We are the voice of revolution, we are the force of evolution. And we gather our strength from an underground movement, and it's all fueled by hardcore music.'¹⁹

In addition to the dismay felt at the destruction caused by drugs and alcohol, many who were either involved with the creation and formation of straight edge or were later attracted to it were also frustrated at age restrictions which kept underage fans from shows. This was due to shows

Bleeding Through



taking place in bars where the drinking age is strictly enforced. Inspired by west coast practices, the wearing of a large X on the hands to prevent the acquisition of alcohol, became standard practice as a means of identifying those who are underage and not allowed to buy alcohol. This became the symbol of straight edge, as members

wore it both as a sign that they choose not to drink (if they were of legal age) and as a symbol of solidarity, that punk, hardcore and straight edge is for all regardless of age.

The importance of gaining access to live music performances is paramount as that is the setting in which the community

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thrives, the values are promoted and social change is formulated. As one straight edge band member from Berkeley explained during his bands performance;

*There will be no change or improvement unless it happens here, with us at the grass roots level. We are the future of this country. We are our own community.*²⁰

In addition to band members, audience members would also sometimes make speeches on certain issues, as being on stage alongside the band provided a good opportunity to interact with the community. For example, when religion began to enter into hardcore through Krishnacore in the 1990s, huge discussions arose at shows with a wide variety of opinions regarding faith. It forced impressionable youth and older adults to formulate ideas and opinions based on reason, and to listen to the ideas and beliefs of others. In essence, it helped, “individuals develop their own position on issues relating to religion, philosophy, and one’s place in the world.”²¹

In places such as Northern Ireland, where huge social division and vio-

lence existed on the grounds of religion (amongst other serious issues) this forcing of a space in which religion could be discussed openly was revolutionary. It actually led to punk shows being one of a very small number of arenas in which Catholics and Protestants could intermingle and interact. One Northern Irish interviewee, Caroline a 33 year old mother of two and a straight edge adherent explained the social impact as;

*You couldn’t escape religion here, it was bloody everywhere, in all aspects of culture. But then punk arrived and smacked the hate out of us and stuck two fingers up to it. You could go to a show and there would be Catholics, Protestants, and everything in between and no-one cared. No one was a taig or a Hun or a Jaffa.*²² *It just wasn’t an issue in there, we were just punks. I quickly learnt that there could be an alternative to religious bigotry ... I guess it was like a filter for religious bullshit ... I suppose in a way, cause we stepped over the religion thing we did create a form of social change. We showed that there was*

*another way, seems a waste that no-one else saw it!*²³

Although an important aspect of any live performance for a subcultural affiliate, the live hardcore and straight edge shows were significant for much more than the social experience of finding people who look and think in a manner similar to oneself. In addition to the safety and emotional acceptance, the political dimension of these shows ensures that they become an integral influence on adherents. That is, they are presented with opportunities to act with the goal of changing society into their perceived notion of good.

Through the music the individual is able to gain a sense of themselves as a part of something much larger, while standing outside of oneself through interactions also integrates the self into the larger whole. S.G., a 30 year old woman who works with teenagers in after school programs and has been straight edge since her teens, explains; *I still love Minor Threat and am so thankful that Ian wrote that song. I remember hearing Earth Crisis for the first time and*



thinking how perfect a fit their music was for me - their lyrics are so positive and the music so hard, it ironic. I remember feeling

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*such a release when listening to them ... I remember seeing Path of Resistance in 1997 and feeling the same thing.*²⁴

Similarly Anna, a 31 year old bookshop worker, artist and straight edge adherent notes; *I love that part, like the music has grabbed you and is shaking you with the urgency of what it has to say, that's what music should be, that's what art should be and that's what punk does best.*²⁵

To effect social change such as that desired by many straight edge adherents is inherently tied to the music they create and partake in. This is not just because of the lyrical content or the additional discourse that surrounds it, but because of the music itself, that is the effect of music on our emotions and the communal nature of music.²⁶

The communal dimension of music has a different impact on our emotions that when we listen to it in isolation. In fact it would not be a stretch to argue that music is inherently social rather than individual. Bicknell argues that '(t)he recognition of music as a human (rather than a natural or supernatural) product goes hand-in-hand with its

fundamentally social character.'²⁷ DeNora aptly demonstrates how considering and utilizing music as social enables a social ordering to take place, particularly amongst those who could be potentially disparate.²⁸ Essentially this is because music in a social or communal setting evokes strong feelings of companionship, camaraderie, solidarity and the ability to understand one's self within a larger whole.

The type of music being played is also significant, to utilize Thomas Turino's terms; to become a part of the larger whole and be swept up in the desire for change towards a common good requires music that is participatory.²⁹ That is, music in which the audience member is not merely a passive receiver but is fundamental in the creation of the whole performance. In straight edge terms, the audience has to react through call backs, sing-a-longs, dancing, stage diving and singing into the mike. Their energy is equally a part of the performance as that of the band on stage. In this way music may serve as a 'referent for the formulation of such diverse matters as how to move,

how to imagine one's self-identity, how to browse, how to mould one's appearance and how to think, feel and act'³⁰ and finally how to enact social change.

Conclusion

Within the context of straight edge, and indeed hardcore and punk in general, there exists a significant number of people who are struggling to comprehend and transcend reality, to find their place in the world, as well as their community.. They are seeking social change on both a micro and a macro level and music is the means by which they achieve this, as Nate, a 32 year old author and straight edge adherent, demonstrates;

Straight edge is definitely part of my identity, sXe (Straight Edge) shaped my views of the world. I was hanging out with a lot of people who were racist, sexist, homophobic idiots. It really started to bleed over into my life without me even knowing it. My family moved to (name removed for the purposes of anonymity) I got into straight edge there and all the politics that came with it.

*If that hadn't happened, I don't know who I'd be today, I certainly wouldn't be as open minded.*³¹

It is because of the power of music which influences human emotion and its communal nature that an aggressive form of music such as hardcore punk can enable or legitimately be offered as a means to achieving real social change. It truly is a rhythm of rebellion that has played on through generations.

Endnotes

1 'Bricks' by Rise Against, from the album *The Sufferer and The Witness*, 2006, Geffen Records.

2 Each participant was explicitly asked to take part in an interview and gave their consent. Typically, the interview took place immediately following consent and lasted between one and two hours. On 9 occasions a pre-arranged date and venue was chosen, with the participant knowing they were arriving for an in-depth interview which would last over four hours. Two interviews in the UK were conducted over a number of meetings with the participant, each totaling over 9 hours of interview material. 5 individuals in total were interviewed via email, due to issues such as band tours and inaccessibility of location within the time scale.

All interviewees were given a choice as to how they wanted to be named within the research: they could use their first name, their initials, or a pseudonym of my choice (which I based on names within my family). Pseudonyms are indicated through the use of single quotation marks. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, then shown to the interviewee for final consensus before being utilised in written form for research.

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3 Typically, and not unusually within the subculture, I would be approached, due to the clothes I was wearing or my tattoos. A conversation would ensue and as it developed I would explain my research. In a number of instances the individual or group would then want to contribute their ideas as a natural part of the conversation, but they did not want to give a formal interview. In these instances, the conversations were not digitally recorded, but I did ask and receive permission to make notes on them, and had each of the participants sign the notes to acknowledge that they had seen them and gave permission for me to use them for research purposes. On average these conversations would last between 20 minutes and an hour. (In Berkeley it was not uncommon for the conversation to continue when I next encountered the same people, either on the street or at shows.) All written and signed notes have been retained by the researcher.

4 A derogatory term used to describe the children and teenagers who arrived home from school with no parents present. The children had their own key to the house and had to amuse and supervise themselves, and their siblings, until their parent(s) returned from work. They could be left unsupervised in this manner for three or four hours. Some interviewees, in describing their childhood would discuss this with the researcher as a major influence on their lives. One interviewee, Ian, stated that he only saw his mother in the morning for breakfast and as she left for work. He only knew she had returned from work when he heard the television being switched off after the 10 o'clock news, having gone to bed or at least to his room earlier.

5 T Beaudoin; *Virtual Faith*; Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, 1998, p5

6 Billy, in interview with researcher 04.03.10 in Stirling, UK

7 This is not the case for all punk bands, some have chosen to sign with major labels such as Green Day, AFI and Against Me. Their reasons for doing so are varied from greater exposure to fans, greater resources to create and better remuneration for their efforts, but all have faced sustained accusations of being 'sell outs'

by punk fans and the community in general.

8 C O'Hara; *The Philosophy of Punk*; AK Press: San Francisco, 1999, p10

9 I Glasper; *Trapped In A Scene*; Cherry Red Books: London, 2009, p9

10 A Blade; *The Secret Life of a Teenage Punk Rocker*; Cherry Red Books: London, 2005. See also B Mullen; *Lexicon Devil*; Feral House: Los Angeles, 2002. T Underwood; *So This Is Readin? Life on the road with The Unseen*; Hopeless Records: Van Nuys, Ca 2006.

11 O'Hara 1999 p10 I Glasper: *The Day The Country Died* Cherry Red Books: London, 2006. H Rollins; *Get In The Van*; 2.13.61: Los Angeles, 1994

12 Tito, in interview with researcher, 31.10.09 Bay Area, ca

13 See for example, his songs from his previous band The Teen Idles, songs such as '*I drink Milk*'

14 'Straight Edge', Minor Threat, Complete Discography, Washington DC: Dischord Records, 1981.

15 R Haenfler; *Straight Edge*; Rutgers University Press: New Brunswick; 2006 p43 – 46. R Wood; *Straight Edge*; Syracuse University Press: Syracuse New York; 2006 p72 – 73

16 Karl, in interview with researcher, 07.05.10, Durham, UK

17 Haenfler 2006 p190

18 It would be misleading to represent straight edge as a unified community whose adherents always function within the constraints imposed upon them by the community or scene. Refusal to accept the imposition of the community can be evidenced in the deplorable actions of the US straight edge hardline gangs who enforce their beliefs through violence that has resulted in bombings and even murder, as reported in local Newspapers such as The Denver Post in 2006 and in the documentary by National Geographic in 2009 entitled 'Straight Edge Army'. However as my research is currently moving in the direction of these gangs and the nature of violence, and so as yet do not have enough material to represent term fairly or in enough depth so they have not been examined or scrutinised within this article, but their existence required acknowledging

within the wider picture.

19 *Start Living* Wisdom in Chains, 2009 from the album Everything You Know, I Scream Records

20 16.10.09 Berkeley, ca

21 B Peterson; *Burning Fight: The Nineties Hardcore Revolution*; Revelation Records Publishing: Huntington Beach, 2009 p122

22 The term taig is a derogatory term for a Catholic, while the terms Hun and Jaffa were the Protestant counterparts. They are considered sectarian phrases but are in everyday usage still. Taig comes from the Gaelic word for the average man which is *Tadhg*. The term Hun derives from the term applied to German soldiers during the Second World War and has connotations of barbaric inhuman treatment of others. Jaffa is literally the name of an orange and is used in reference to the Orange order, a protestant fraternal organisation who are strongly unionist.

23 Caroline, in interview with researcher 12.07.10 Belfast

24 S.G. email interview with researcher 30.04.10

25 Anna in interview with researcher 12.11.09 Santa Cruz

26 There is a vast body of excellent work and research being conducted on the connections between music and emotion, however the scope of it is beyond the focus of this article and so is not dealt with in detail but it is significant to understanding the role of music in creating social and personal change.

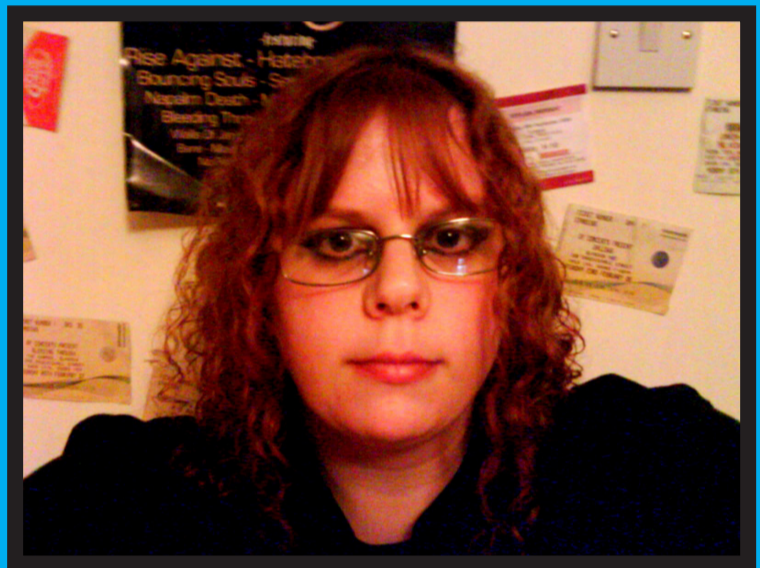
27 J Bicknell *Why Music Moves Us* Palgrave MacMillan: London 2009 p90

28 T DeNora *Music in Everyday Life* Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2000 p109

29 T Turino *Music as Social Life* Chicago University Press: Chicago 2008

30 DeNora 2000 p141

31 Nate in email interview with researcher 05.04.10



FRANCIS STEWART completed her doctorate in religious studies during the summer of 2011 and graduated in nov 2011. Her thesis was an examination of straight edge punk as a surrogate for religion, it was an ethnographic study with field work taking place throughout the UK and in San Francisco's Bay Area and Chicago. Currently she is applying for jobs within academia and keeping herself out of trouble by attending as many punk gigs as I can find and working on various fanzines.