

## Abstract

Title of Dissertation: **POLITICS AS UNUSUAL: WASHINGTON, D.C. HARDCORE PUNK 1979-1983 AND THE POLITICS OF SOUND**

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During the creative and influential years between 1979 and 1983, hardcore punk was not only born — a mutated sonic stepchild of rock n' roll, British and American punk — but also evolved into a uncompromising and resounding paradigm of and for DC youth. Through the revelatory music of DC hardcore bands like Bad Brains, Teen Idles, Minor Threat, State of Alert, Government Issue and Faith a new formulation of sound, and a new articulation of youth, arose: one that was angry, loud, fast, and minimalistic. With a total of only ten albums between all five bands in a mere five years, DC hardcore cemented a small yet significant subculture and scene.

This project considers two major components of this music: aesthetics and the social politics that stem from those aesthetics. By examining the way music communicates — facets like timbre, melody, rhythm, pitch, volume and dissonance — while simultaneously incorporating an analysis of hardcore's social context — including the history of music's cultural canons, as well as the specific socioeconomic, racial and gendered milieu in which music is generated, communicated and responded to — this dissertation attempts to understand how hardcore punk conveys messages of social and cultural politics, expressly representations of race, class and gender. In doing so, this

project looks at how DC hardcore (re)contextualizes and (re)imagines the social and political meanings created by and from sound.

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by

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### **Chapter One: Introduction**

Me and Music. Me and Punk: Positioning Myself in the Dissertation	1
What is Punk? What is Politics? Research Questions and Theoretical Frameworks	2
Sources, Methods and Methodologies	10
What I Mean Is: Defining Terms and Constructing Parameters	20
The Field: Scholarly Positioning within Popular Music Studies	23
The Road Map: Chapter Outline	26

### **Chapter Two: Punk Rock Evolving and the Scene in Washington, DC**

Before There Was Hardcore: Punk's Musical Predecessors	33
Before There was Punk in DC: Music in Washington pre-1978	51
The Sound of Hardcore	53
Washington D.C.: Politics, Place, Race and Space	69

### **Chapter Three: Bad Brains and the Musical Aesthetics of Race in *Bad Brains***

The Sound of <i>Bad Brains</i>	79
Instrument(s) of Race: The (Re) Racing of Punk	97
The Performance of Blackness in DC Hardcore Punk Identity	108

### **Chapter Four: The Sounds of Stratification: Teen Idles, Minor Threat and the Contradictions of Class**

The Sound of Hardcore Punk as a (Paradoxical) Performance of Class	125
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### **Chapter Five: Music as Masculinity: State of Alert, Government Issue, and Faith and the Implications of Gender**

State Of Alert, Government Issue and Faith: Hardcore's Sonic Masculinity	177
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### **Chapter Six: The Transformation of Hardcore: DC Punk post-1983**

Hardcore Unraveled: The Times, They Were A'Changin'	227
Hardcore, Revisited: The (Sociopolitical) Evolution of Sound	232
The Last Days of Summer: The Remnants of DC Hardcore	278

### **Chapter Seven: Play it Again, Sam: Conclusion(s)**

<b>Primary Sources</b>	297
<b>Secondary Sources</b>	305
<b>Appendix A</b>	312
<b>Appendix B</b>	317

## Chapter One: Introduction

### **Me and Music. Me and Punk: Positioning Myself in the Dissertation**

I was already 25 when I saw my first hardcore punk show. Old, I know. But an hour outside of Los Angeles, there they were — the Dead Kennedys, *sans* Jello Biafra — shredding their instruments, shouting for Nazi punks to fuck off, bouncing, slamming, swaying across the stage, and catapulting into the audience. By the end of the two-hour sweat-soaked, debauch of a concert I had bruised ribs, a possibly-broken toe, ringing eardrums, and a stomach full of enthrallment. I'd been to innumerable concerts and festivals — as any good white, upper-middle class music fanatic had — so I was familiar with the poignant merging of crowd and musician, the sense of unity and the unnamable temporal release and rush of consolation, hope and exhilaration that comes with the performance. It was the same at the Dead Kennedys show. But it was also different. It was men. Lots and lots of men. White men. And it was barking, hollering, smashing, blasting, praying, pommeling, stamping, vibrating and singing. It was anger, frustration, joy, umbrage, euphoria, pain, possibility and solidarity. It was hardcore.

As old as I was, though, I was still too young to have been involved in the hardcore scene growing up in the suburbs of Washington, D.C. I missed Bad Brains being banned from the 9:30 club; I was still teething when Minor Threat first shrieked that they had better things to do than snort white shit up their noses, thereby igniting a straightedge lifestyle; I never did see John Stabb shave his head on stage at a Government Issue show; and by the time I had entered elementary school, Faith and State of Alert had already broken up. That didn't mean, however, that I didn't know all about it. Ian

MacKaye's name was treasured in my high school music circles and proximity to the famed Dischord House was translated into subcultural coolness points. I didn't think of us as a music town. DC wasn't Nashville or Detroit or New York. But, oh, we wouldn't want such mainstream popular genres. No, we had hardcore, an underground punk legacy.

And even before I knew what hardcore was, even before I had heard the name HR or Henry Rollins, even before I understood with an "X" tattooed on a neck or a rib or a hand meant, there was always my music. Twirling in my bedroom to Dire Straits, laboriously crafting mix tapes for boyfriends of Lou Reed and David Bowie, spinning records of Diana Ross and Otis Redding, falling asleep to the harmonies of Peter, Paul and Mary, sitting front row at Elvis Costello — music was how I identified myself and the world around me. Music crafted, and still crafts, a sense of time, of place, and of myself and of others.

It is this power, and this pleasure, that music affords, which spurred the concept of this project. In exploring the explosive, subversive, but still somewhat unfamiliar, music of DC hardcore, I want to link the sound of this punk with the politics of this punk. My dissertation surveys the definitive bands and albums of DC hardcore's halcyon days (1978-1983) in order to understand how sound creates, limits and reimagines political and cultural meaning within this city. Moreover, I look to how these sonic meanings not only connect to the politics of the past but also act as a gendered, raced and classed identity, both individual and collective, for the members of the DC's hardcore scene.

### **What is Punk? What is Politics? Research Questions and Theoretical Frameworks**

This project aims to delineate, describe, explore and examine the hardcore punk scene in Washington, DC during its zenith of both impact and innovation, 1978-1983. During these indispensably creative and influential years in DC music, hardcore punk was not only simply born — a mutated sonic stepchild of rock n’ roll, British and American punk — but also evolved into a uncompromising and resounding paradigm of and for DC youth. Through the revelatory music of DC hardcore bands Bad Brains, Teen Idles, Minor Threat, State of Alert, Government Issue and Faith, a new formulation of sound, and a new articulation of youth, arose: one that was angry, loud, fast, and minimalistic. With a total of only ten albums between all five bands in a mere five years, DC hardcore cemented a small yet significant subculture and scene. More specifically, my analysis considers two major components inherent, yet frequently overlooked, in any genre of popular music: aesthetics and the social politics that stem from those aesthetics.

This project considers, then, the way music communicates, its structure — facets like timbre, melody, rhythm, pitch, volume, dissonance — while simultaneously dissecting how these features communicate messages of social and cultural politics, expressly representations of race, class and gender. Attending to sound, therefore, is attending to self; this dissertation intends to challenge and understand how the performance of music is also a performance of self, constructing distinctive, though frequently complicated and contradictory, representations of race, gender and class. Moreover, essential to the investigation and evaluation of aesthetics, and the accompanying (or, more precisely, consequential) cultural politics is an assessment of the unique sociohistorical circumstances of place. That is, how the particulars of the city — including racial and socioeconomic histories and current demographics, political

predilections both locally and nationally, the musical milieu, and individual upbringing — work to (re)contextualize and (re)imagine the meanings created by and from sound. Therefore, my major research questions fall within three explicit, though unmistakably intersecting and contingent, categories: musical aesthetics, sociocultural politics, and place.

### *Musical Aesthetics*

The first overarching question is how, if at all, can or does music act as a deliberate, intentional expression? While there is little debate as to the expressiveness of music, its ability to make listeners feel (and feel specific sorts of emotions), (how) can music these sentimental evocations be a medium of and for personal expression? Concomitantly, how is music's intentionality articulated? More explicitly, how has the cultural history of music worked to construct specific meanings of expression — which sonic aesthetics, socioculturally speaking, have come to represent which social qualities? And, given those sociohistorical constructions of sound and meaning, how has sound become a tool of either hegemony or subversion? Delving more intensively into the genre of hardcore punk, I look at how the aesthetics of hardcore are different than traditional rock n' roll (or mainstream punk) and how this affects who listens and how they listen to the music.

### *Sociocultural Politics*

Within the framework of sonic aesthetics, my main sociopolitical research question is how, if at all, are sounds (as organized music) political? Part of this query



involves a parenthetical consideration of what constitutes politics. Within a city that not only maintains but also prides itself on a branding of traditional politics — that is, the two-party representative democratic system — how can we reformulate a definition of politics to include the everyday and the subcultural act? And how, more explicitly, does this redefinition involve music (and hardcore, as a new genre of sound) as a social and political tool? In this way I am looking at how hardcore attempts to reconfigure the boundaries of these two fields — music and politics — differently than previous musical genres and social or political movements. In part, this relies on an interrogation (and intersection with the previous section) of music's sociopolitical power. In what ways has sound, in general, and music, more specifically, been deployed as an instrument of social control and order? And, contradictorily, how has the disruption of the social rules and regulations of sound and music, in genres including DC hardcore punk, been used as a destabilizing and subversive tool of social rebellion? Music as a form of politics also necessitates an inquiry into how this unique form of cultural production itself creates new political considerations. For instance, what political/cultural codes are embedded in the musical symbols of DC punk? Within the sociopolitical paradigms of race, class and gender, in what ways does hardcore punk reproduce or contradict the social hierarchies of dominant society? What strategies do hardcore employ in these struggles? And how do these representations of self — of race, of class and of gender — as well as formations of collective identity, exclude other marginalized communities?

*Place*

As indicated in the opening section, neither music nor politics can exist in a vacuum; their meanings are fundamentally contingent on the particulars of time and place. Given that inevitability, I also probe the possibilities and limitations of place. This includes asking how social conditions — including racial and socioeconomic composition, prevailing political positions, cultural expectations, and spatial and geographic realities — in Washington DC from 1978 to 1983 could alter, influence, form and help construct both the sound of hardcore punk and its concurrent sociopolitical meanings. At the same time, how did these spatial, physical, and cultural experiences, mold, limit or free up the reception of hardcore and its politics? That is, how did the economic, political and social changes of the particular urban space of Washington DC get reproduced and transmogrified in the landscape of sound? On a more individual level, how did these social conditions, or as Bourdieu calls it, the *habitus* of these hardcore teens, affect why and how they were involved in the scene? How did their *habitus* —their social position, familial upbringing, lifestyle dispositions, possibilities and limitations, and cultural expectations — influence the creation and reception of music itself?

### *Theoretical Frameworks*

Given my three main areas of inquiry — music, politics and place — it will be no surprise that these function as my principal theoretical frameworks, as well. Much like my research questions, there tends to be a large amount of crossover between these categories, allowing for a more dynamic and fluid analysis of the ways in which music, and its accompanying theories, augment and transform personal and cultural politics,

while also creating — and performing as a creation of — the sociohistorical realities of time and place.

Popular Music Studies has, as a subdivision of Cultural Studies, always held, in one form or another, the belief that popular music can act as both a force for socialization (with its coexisting, albeit nefarious, undertones of hegemony) and of marginalization, thereby concretely linking music to self and the collective.<sup>1</sup> The ideological power of popular music comes from both its origins in and representation of human agency (intentionality) and in its function as art (symbolic meaning). From Immanuel Kant, who in *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* claims that we must understand art as purposefully produced, deliberately allowing for interpretation to Plato, who believed music could be a way of harmonizing the soul but also warned that breaking conventional aesthetic modes of music was dangerous to the social and political fabric, theories of popular music insist on the social meaning constructed by music, as well as the sociopolitical implications of such meanings. Music acts as a purposeful expression of individual thought;<sup>2</sup> that expression, that sonic representation of idea, is then interpreted, read so to speak, by consent and mutual understanding of cultural and social norms, thereby conferring publically accepted and (nearly) universally recognized

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<sup>1</sup> See Theodor Adorno, *On Popular Music* (1941); Theodore Gracyk, *Listening to Popular Music: Or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Led Zeppelin* (2007), *I Wanna Be Me: Rock Music and the Politics of Identity* (2001), *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock* (1996); Lawrence Grossberg, "Another Boring Day in Paradise: Rock and Roll and the Empowerment of Everyday Life," (1984), "If Rock and Roll Communicates, Then Why Is It So Noisy?" (1985), "Is There Rock After Punk?" (1986); Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979) and David Reisman, "Listening to Popular Music," (1950) for just a few instances.

<sup>2</sup> See Aaron Copeland, *Music and Imagination* (1952); Julian Johnson, *Who Needs Classical Music? Cultural Choice and Musical Value* (2002); Theodore Gracyk, *Listening to Popular Music: Or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Led Zeppelin* (2007).

meaning.<sup>3</sup> Such meaning is nearly always political, reinforcing culturally stringent hegemonic norms<sup>4</sup> such as definitions of gender, race, class and age, or, alternatively, emphasizing dissent and defiance, using noise — that is, the subversion of what proper aesthetics are in music — to upset the conventional social order.<sup>5</sup> This dissertation situates itself firmly amidst that fertile sociopolitical framework; my project's academic foundation rests on these theoretical tenets of music's intentionality, expressive symbolism, and subsequent political potential.

Moreover, the *way* this musical expressive intentionality, meaning and political implications, is communicated is essential to this project's analysis. Using the scholarly framework of music theory, this dissertation will use the discrete and collective elements of sound, such as texture, melody, timbre, pitch, style and performance, to understand how meaning is conveyed through music. Crucial to this dissertation, though, is not simply the identification and description of musical fundamentals, but more so the theoretical tendon, the tangible link, between these musical structures and how they create social meaning. That academic yoke is the cultural construction of sound. Through a sociohistorical lens, music scholars have assessed the evolutionary path of sound and meaning; this province includes the development and continuation of gender, race and class ideologies embedded within particular musical elements (such as race and rhythm, instruments and class, and volume and gender), formulated not through some sort of

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<sup>3</sup> See David Brackett, *Interpreting Popular Music* (1995); Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure and the Politics of Rock n' Roll* (1981); Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings* (1991); Keith Negus, *Popular Music in Theory* (1996).

<sup>4</sup> See Theodore Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock* (1996); Philip Tagg, "Subjectivity and Soundscape, Motorbikes and Music" (2006); Paul G. Woodford, "Music, Reason, Democracy and the Construction of Gender" (2001).

<sup>5</sup> See Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (1985); F.C. Bartlett, *The Problem of Noise* (1934); Theodore Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetic of Rock* (1996).

inherent sonic quality, but through the intersection of sociopolitical history, power dynamics and sound.<sup>6</sup> In this way, structures of oppression and domination, cultural roles and stereotypes, social narratives, and collective memory are integral to explaining the culturally constructed meaning of sound and the associated signification of elements of music.

Surveying the political potential and undertones of music's constructed meaning, therefore, demands a fuller theoretical framework of what exactly comprises politics. In the infamous words of Bill Clinton, it depends on what "is" is. This definitional requirement is academically relevant given the historically disciplinary-established separation between subculture and social movement theory. Traditionally, subcultures were not seen as legitimate social movements because their grievances were not mobilized through traditional political channels and because they were primarily made up of young people, who were customarily viewed as ineffective, specious, and capricious. Yet, the distinctions between social movement and subcultural theory are, at a fundamental level, artificially created and unnaturally sustained. The conspicuous boundaries erected between the fields of study are, to a certain extent, more a product of disciplinary anxiety and academic stinginess than of theoretical incompatibility. We can — and should — understand subcultural practices as political despite the lack of an explicit political organization (and lack of a generationally diversified contingent).

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<sup>6</sup> See Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure and the Politics of Rock n' Roll* (1981); Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings* (1991); Anne Dhu McLucas, *The Musical Ear: Oral Tradition in the USA* (2010); Richard Scruton, *Understanding Music: Philosophy and Interpretation* (2009); John Shepherd, *Music as Social Text* (1991); Steve Waksman, *Instruments of Desire: The Electric Guitar and the Shaping of Musical Experience* (1999).

Bridging the theoretical gap between subcultures and social movements is the politics of everyday life. In part, this means expunging the dichotomy between private and public: such strict duality not only necessitates a hierarchy of one identity over the other, it most often perpetuates the white, male, upper class hegemony by defining, and subsequently devaluing, “home” over “work.”<sup>7</sup> This also means expanding the definition of political action into non-institutional arenas, or, said within the language of my framework, merging the idea of cultural opposition in subcultures with the core of political resistance of social movements. Oppositional action, then, can be performed through the commonplace. Building on Raymond William’s notion of “culture as a whole way of life,” this politics of the everyday recognizes the often-hidden power dynamics in our day-to-day interaction while also appreciating the potential for change in these daily routines.<sup>8</sup>

In this framework, resistance is contextual and multi-layered rather than static and uniform. It often centers on individual opposition to domination and the subjective redefinition of societal norms, questioning taken-for-granted assumptions and conventions. For this project, therefore, music — more specifically DC hardcore punk — will be understood and analyzed within that ever-expanding intellectual framework, as a political product of the everyday. In the scene and music’s ability to construct meaning and identity, DC hardcore draws upon both the dominant and residual cultures in creating alternatives to both and does so within the purview of both subcultures and social movements: language, music, dress, print and media, and repertoires of contention.

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<sup>7</sup> See Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (2000); bell hooks, “Homeplace: A Site of Resistance” (1990); Raia Prokhovnik, *Rational Woman: A Feminist Critique of the Dichotomy* (1999).

<sup>8</sup> Such critical conceptions of the everyday come from theorists like Antonio Gramsci, Pierre Bourdieu, Henri Lefebvre, Dorothy Smith, Erving Goffman and Michael de Certeau.

Though not as central as theories of music and politics, the intellectual discourse on place also has a strong foothold amid the arguments of this dissertation. In large part, this project culls from the Urban Studies idea of cities as contested spaces where elites and formidable interest groups struggle to shape representation, manipulate image and wrestle for the power, both financial and cultural, that comes with such control.<sup>9</sup> Much of the politics of the everyday, then, including the production and consumption of music, is an individual reaction to the metanarrative of the collective place. That is, while cultural production (and its evil twin, capitalism) is inexorably linked to the notion of urban life, it is also often a tool of the powerful to brand their city — just think of New York (art), Los Angeles (Hollywood), Detroit (Motown), Austin (indie rock) or Nashville (country music). At the same time, however, cultural production and place is used as a form of counternarrative, offering an alternative articulation of cultural territory.<sup>10</sup> It is the spatial, economic and political realities of place, of a city, that offer the fodder for both hegemony and resistance.

### **Sources, Methods and Methodologies**

I employed a number of methodologies in this project, taking an interdisciplinary approach to understanding, analyzing and inferring the meanings and realities embedded and created in and by the DC hardcore punk scene. In much of popular music literature, scholars frequently use only one methodology to the exclusion of all others: scholars may use socio-historical contextualization independent of the structure of music entirely,

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<sup>9</sup> See Adam Krims, *Music and Urban Geography* (2007); Sharon Zukin, *The Culture of Cities* (1996).

<sup>10</sup> See Andy Bennett and Richard A. Peterson, *Music Scenes: Local, Translocal and Virtual* (2004); Andrew Leyshon et al., *The Place of Music* (1998); George Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism and the Poetics of Place* (1994); Sheila Whiteley et al., *Music, Space and Place: Popular Music and Cultural Identity* (2004).

while others work exclusively within the sphere of music; some academics endeavor to interpret the social significance of musical genres or works while abandoning the critical approach to that music, and still others focus on the production side of musical creation (technologies, paths of distribution and producers) but ignore the consumption process that inform that production. By avoiding totalizing frames, whether in pursuit of a cultural code or of musical autonomy, I can reconfigure my analytical tools to try to capture the material, the sociopolitical, the cultural and the strictly structural experience of popular music, rather than just one.

### *The Music*

This project spans the years between 1978 and 1983, when the DC hardcore scene was first born until it transformed into a different kind of musical genre. During that time, there were a number of hardcore bands that formed; indeed, the Do-It-Yourself ethos of punk, along with the minimalistic nature of music making, allowed for a proliferation of amateur musicians and inexperienced bands. That was, in part, the point of the entire movement. But through the glut of garage-and-basement-based bands, a few became emblematic of DC and hardcore punk: Bad Brains, Teen Idles, Minor Threat, State of Alert, Government Issue and Faith. In part, these bands were so significant to the scene because of the people in them. Ian MacKaye, who co-founded Dischord Records and came to be one of the most influential punk musicians in the country, was in Teen Idles and Minor Threat, while his brother was the front man for Faith. Henry Rollins was the lead singer for State of Alert, the short-lived DC hardcore band that led to his notorious gig as the lead singer for California-based Black Flag (and now, actor, poet and activist). These bands are also notable for the music they produced and the albums they created



and released — genre-twisting, innovative and unimaginably assertive sounds that re-envisioned punk rock.

Every hardcore album produced by these seminal DC punk bands between the years of 1978 and 1983 were analyzed. This includes:

Bad Brains: *Bad Brains*, ROIR Records, 1982.

Teen Idles: *Minor Disturbance*, Dischord Records, 1980.

Minor Threat: *Minor Threat*, 1981; *In My Eyes*, 1981; *Out of Step*, Dischord Records, 1983.

State of Alert: *No Policy*, Dischord Records, 1981.

Government Issue: *Legless Bull*, Dischord Records, 1981; *Make an Effort*, Fountain of Youth, 1982; *Boycott Stabb*, Fountain of Youth and Dischord Records, 1983.

Faith: *Faith/Void Split*, Dischord Records, 1982.

Many of these original recordings are out of print, and so I downloaded the albums digitally, through Dischord Records, including State of Alert's *No Policy*, Government Issue's *Legless Bull*, *Make an Effort*, *Boycott Stabb* and Teen Idle's *Minor Disturbance*. *Bad Brains* and *Faith/Void Split* are on compact disc, while all three Minor Threat albums were listened to on both vinyl record and as digital downloads.

### *The 'Zines*

'Zines are homemade, small-circulation publications, very much within the spirit of the punk Do-It-Yourself ethos. Often in a cut-and-paste style, 'zines were predominantly produced by fans in local or regional settings, bringing together commentary, reviews, interviews and news about punk bands. Since the mode of reproduction was a photocopier, my access to 'zines was unavoidably limited. While there were a few D.C.-centered 'zines at the time, including *Descenes*, *Now What?* and

*Suburban Outcast*, I had access to only one issue of any of these ‘zines (#0 from *Now What?*). However, thanks to two archival ‘zine websites — Operation Phoenix and Dementlieu Punk Archive — I was able to download scanned copies of other national prominent punk ‘zines, including *Thrillseeker*, *Inside View*, *Noise*, *Brand New Age* and *Suburban Punk*. In addition, all the issues of *Touch and Go* were compiled into a coffee table book, which I purchased, giving me access to every publication of theirs between 1979 and 1983. These ‘zines were chosen with two criteria in mind: 1) the issue was produced within the allotted time period of 1979 to 1983 and 2) it contained an interview or music review of an DC hardcore band. With those standards in place, I read the following issues: *Now What?* #0 (1981); *Noise* #3, #4, #5 (1981); *Touch and Go* #15 (1981), #16 (1981), #21 (1983), #22 (1983); *maximumrocknroll* #2, #3 (1982), #7, #8, #9 (1983); *Inside View* #2 (1983); *Thrillseeker* #2 (1983); *Brand New Age* #2 (1983).

### *The Newspapers*

Newspapers are an excellent way to appreciate and gauge the mainstream public opinion and perception of local events. As the primary newspaper of the DC area since 1877, *The Washington Post* serves as the most characteristic depiction of how the arts, and hardcore punk, were represented by the local popular media. The only two other resident newspapers from the 1950s to the 1970s, *The Washington Star* and *The Washington Daily News*, did not have nearly the same circulation numbers of the *Post*, nor are they available electronically. Accessed via LexisNexis, I used articles, reviews and op-eds from the *Post* in a number of different ways. First, I looked at how Washington, D.C. was perceived as a city of culture and arts, through letters to the editor and articles in the Arts section; this research was done in order to establish the cultural

foundation of the city, therefore the time period I looked at was from 1950 to the early 1970s. Secondly, I researched the way in which hardcore punk was perceived, both culturally and sonically, by exploring concert reviews and articles from the *Post*'s lifestyle sections within the framework of 1978-1983.

I also conducted a wider search of the Washington, D.C. cultural arts landscape, its hardcore punk scene, and the more general mainstream idea of punk. While there was no mention of the DC hardcore scene outside of the regional press, there were articles from *The New York Times*, as well as Toronto's *The Globe and Mail*, which discussed D.C. arts and the wider acceptance and commodification of punk rock. For the former topic, the search was limited to 1950-1975, while for the latter topic, I used the years 1975-1985.

### *The Album Reviews*

As yet another tool in the assessment of DC hardcore punk's reception, influence and effect, I combed through album reviews for each of the five hardcore bands and all of their albums from 1978-1983. Such a task, however, did have significant limitations. First, the number of outlets that have reviewed albums by Bad Brains, Teen Idles, Minor Threat, State of Alert, Faith and Government Issue are quite few; this is because of, I imagine, the highly underground nature of these bands and their music. Because there were limited number of original pressings of the LPs and EPs, and because this was already a subcultural music, the audience, much less the critic's crowd, was substantially diminished. Secondly, with the exception of 'zines, there were no of-the-moment reviews of these albums; that is, the majority of DC hardcore album reviews are contemporary, written within the last ten years or so. Clearly, such a time differential has the potential to

alter or re-inform the writer's opinion; the music and the critic's reaction to the albums are, to a certain extent, de- or at least re-contextualized, risking a more studied, less immediate, response.

Within those parameters, however, I was still able to read album reviews from both the mainstream music establishment and from individual fans. The conventional reviews, which tended to cover only the most famous of the DC hardcore bands, Bad Brains and Minor Threat, were from *Rolling Stone*, *Spin*, *Allmusic*, and *Pitchfork*, some of the most popular and established music review sources. For more subjective assessments of the music, I turned to personal music blogs and websites, many of which focused on the specific genre of hardcore punk and its associated musical brethren. Once again, these reviews were written post-mortem; however, they were also written within the perspective of a fan, which tends to shift the focus of the review from pure sonic technical genius and musical fortitude to the music's effect on the writer's personal (almost always adolescent) self. These blogs include *Mark Prindle's Record Reviews*, *Vinyl Mine*, *Sophie's Floorboard*, *Stylus Magazine*, and *This is Albatross*, while the websites include The Vinyl District, Punk News, Gimme Bad Vibes, Day After Day and Sputnik Music.

### *Performances*

Unlike contemporary concerts, there is a substantial dearth of recorded performances from DC hardcore's heyday. This stems principally from three reasons: 1) the insularity and underground nature of the scene, accompanied by the notable lack of mainstream interest or desire to attend performances, prevented much outside access to the shows 2) the prevalence of personal video cameras during that time period was

conspicuously scarce, nearly preposterously so given the utter saturation of personal filming ability in today's society 3) because the hardcore scene was almost exclusively teenagers, these fans lacked the monetary capabilities, much less technical skills, to film the concerts they attended. Despite these limitations, there are a handful of video recordings, acquired through either Youtube or through punk documentary films. These performances include Bad Brains performing "Attitude," State of Alert singing "Draw Blank," Minor Threat at CBGBs and Minor Threat at DC Space/Buff Hall/9:30 Club. The quality of these recordings are moderate to poor across the board but do allow for a visual impression of both the bands and the audience during shows.

#### *Documentary Films*

As indicated in the previous section, there are a few punk documentary films, though none that are exclusively about the Washington, D.C. hardcore scene. (As luck would have it, however, two documentaries are in production right now about this subject — *Salad Days* and *Punk the Capital*.) Notwithstanding the broader scope of these films' subject matter, all of them cover, in some depth, the DC hardcore scene, and provided me access to additional interviews with band members, photographs, and clips from shows, and a contextualization of the sound of DC hardcore in relation to other scenes across the country and around the world. These films include *American Hardcore*, which traces the movement's beginnings in cities like Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., and New York; *Punk: the Early Years*, a British produced film that looks at the meaning and impact of punk rock; *Another State of Mind*, which follows punk bands Youth Brigade and Social Distortion on tour together and focus on youth culture and punk rock; and *Punk: Attitude*,

which tackles the questions "where did the Punk movement come from & where did it go to?"

### *Photographs*

There are two main repositories for photographs taken during the DC hardcore zenith, both of which are books compiled by committed female fans and participants in the scene: *Punk Love*, by Susie J Horgan and *Banned in DC*, by Cynthia Connelly, Leslie Clague and Sharon Cheslow. Horgan's 124-page book is exclusively black and white photographs, nearly all previously unpublished, taken by Horgan herself. These photos range from shots of Minor Threat, State of Alert and Teen Idles performing to fans dancing, moshing, sitting, listening and throwing punches at shows to Ian MacKaye skateboarding to MacKaye and Henry Rollins at their day job at Haagen-Dazs in Georgetown. *Banned in DC* was compiled in 1986, assembled from the personal photographs and flyers of participants from the scene through ads in two free local papers and word of mouth. Over 170 pages, these all black-and-white photographs cover similar terrain as Horgan's — bands (Bad Brains, SOA., Faith, G.I., Minor Threat, Teen Idles, in addition to scads of other bands both before and after 1983) performing, fans loitering before shows, dancing at shows, interacting with the bands, hanging out in the street, as well as handmade flyers for shows.

### *The Interviews*

After obtaining IRB approval, I began my interviews with different subsets of individuals involved in the DC hardcore scene. The only basis for exclusion or inclusion in these interviews was one's participation in the DC punk scene in from anytime

between 1978 and 1985. The level of participation was varied; it could be from simply attending a single hardcore show to being in a hardcore band. However, I did not include individuals who may have listened to DC hardcore but did not live in the area. My criterion was open to males and females, as well as anyone within the greater Washington, D.C. area, including Virginia and Maryland. This inherently limited the ages of the subjects, as well as their geographic locale during those years; however, that was the only limitation. I advertised for participants via Facebook, on a previously established page devoted to the Washington, D.C. hardcore scene called “80’s DC Hardcore Scene Kids,” with my previously established guidelines. From that group, I was able to interview twenty participants, three females and seventeen males. These people were asked to give information on their background growing up (their gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, and where they lived), as well as to reflect on their experiences within the punk rock scene in DC during the aforementioned time period, specifically with regards to the areas of political and social involvement, the intersections of race, class and gender within the scene, the use or incorporation of violence and/or dance, and the development of a personal and group identity. For a full list of interview questions, please see Appendix A. These were administered as open-ended questions, broken up into separate categories, to allow for as much (or as little) as a participant cared to share.

Clearly, such a pool of participants had its limitations. Firstly, it confined my group of interviewees to those who have a Facebook account, which tends towards those more technologically- and social media-savvy people, as well as those who have access to such technology. Secondly, because this is a specific page on Facebook one must join,

the level of commitment to the DC hardcore scene is probably much higher; not only did the participant seek out such a page to join, he or she had to be approved by the moderator to join the page. While this could actually be useful to my research, given such a level of dedication, it also tended to exclude the more casual participant in the scene. Thirdly, these participants had to be willing to spend a significant amount of time answering my questions. In addition, because these questions were done electronically, participants were able to skip the questions they didn't care to answer. However, each person did provide me with an email address for follow-up questions.

Alternatively, using Facebook offered many advantages to my pool of participants. I was able to reach people who no longer lived in the area and those who were dedicated to the hardcore scene. Indeed, through this page I was able to interview some of the most prominent people involved with the scene, including Tom Berard (longtime DC punk, 9:30 club employee, and contributor to nearly every DC hardcore documentary and book), Malcolm Riviera (who sponsored a series of hardcore shows at the Wilson Center between 1982-3), Cynthia Connelly (who worked at Dischord Records, photographed the scene and was one of the authors of *Banned In DC*), Scott Wingo (guitarist in Trenchmouth and Crippled Pilgrims, non-hardcore bands during that time period), and Steve Kiviat (roadie for DC hardcore band Artificial Peace).

In addition, I was able to interview Ian MacKaye, of Teen Idles, Minor Threat, and co-founder of Dischord Records, on multiple occasions. After having him speak to my Contemporary Culture class at the Corcoran College of Art + Design (in conjunction with an exhibit on DC hardcore and go-go), I was able to conduct multiple interviews with MacKaye at the Dischord house, which still stands in Arlington, VA (mere blocks



from my condo). During these three wide-ranging, free-flowing interviews, MacKaye spoke about his family background, his friendship with Henry Rollins, his music and performances, and the DC hardcore scene in general. He allowed me full access to his archive of recordings (which were on tape, not videoed), showed me the basement where Teen Idles and Minor Threat performed, and walked me through the still-active Dischord Records office.

The key limitation with all of these interviews is the opacity, and reimagining, of retrospection. That is, I am asking these individuals to examine their feelings, attitudes and beliefs towards and about a time period over thirty years prior. With such a time differential, perspectives have changed, transformed and perhaps mellowed. Therefore, the responses of all of these participants must be understood within the structure of memory.

#### *Other Primary Sources*

In order to establish the socioeconomic and political climate of Washington D.C. during the selected years, I also used an assortment of government documents, think tank reports and regulations. From the National Institute of Health, I reviewed their report on drug use among racial and ethnic minorities. I used the annual reports from the U.S. Census Bureau between 1978 and 1983 to review D.C. population numbers in terms of race, ethnicity and gender, as well as occupation and income. A Congressional Research Report on “Women in the United States Congress, 1917-2013,” afforded me a glimpse into the gender dynamic on Capitol Hill. Finally, while researching the concept of noise I accessed the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s report on noise

“pollution,” as well as D.C. Law 2-53, the D.C. Noise Control Act of 1977, both of which were available online.

### **What I Mean Is: Defining Terms and Constructing Parameters**

Much of the terminology and phrasing I use throughout my dissertation is often ambivalent; that is, the connotations and interpretations of such vernacular are manifold and porous, given to specific sociohistorical, geographic and other difference dimensions. Therefore, I think it useful to lay out my specific definitions and parameters of some of the major themes of my dissertation.

#### *What is Washington, DC*

I use the term Washington, DC throughout this dissertation to include not only the city proper, but also the greater DC area, which comprises of Northern Virginia as well as the outskirts of Maryland. This is done for two reasons. First, as someone who grew up in this area, the term DC has always been used somewhat loosely, as a way to define the color of a region — with all its accompanying sociopolitical connotations — rather than a precise description of geography. That is, while Virginia often connotes Southernness, along with that label’s associated conservative social and political views, and Maryland brings up images of crabs and the Eastern Shore, DC has a different, more urban, hip, progressive, powerful-laden implication, one that teenagers and adults alike would rather associate with. This melding of geographic identity is also due to the physical closeness of DC, Maryland and Virginia, which are at the most a half-hour drive away and in some instances, less than five minutes.

Secondly, the hardcore bands in this study are a mix of both DC and Virginia and Maryland. This includes where the band members grew up — ranging from Southeast DC to Forestville, Maryland to Falls Church, Virginia, to Georgetown — as well as where these bands recorded music (Arlington, Virginia) and played shows. Unlike some other local punk scenes, there was no line between city punk and suburban punk. Whether you hailed from Virginia, Maryland or DC, you still were a DC hardcore kid.

### *What is Punk*

The term punk, of course, also has a long and varied definition. As I explore more thoroughly in Chapter Two, I differentiate between different subgenres of punk. British punk, as exemplified by the Sex Pistols and Buzzcocks, is a slightly different sound and has a vastly different sociopolitical grounding than American proto-punk. Furthermore, the first wave of American punk, ala The Ramones and The Cramps, were yet again a separate incarnation of what sounded like, who was playing it, and where it was coming from. Yet, like all subgenres of music, punk does have overarching, primary through lines, connecting and defining its sound in contrast to say, progressive rock, New Wave, or even classic rock n' roll. These characteristics include a fast tempo, short composition, minimalism in both instrumentation and composition and a more shouted than sung kind of vocals; technical accessibility is more important than technical skill and while most of the music is based on the traditional rock n' roll verse-chorus form and 4/4 time, the music was louder, harder and shorter. The predominant punk ethos, both musically and socially, both across the United States and the United Kingdom, was rebellion against the

mainstream, against the rules and regulations (again, musically and socially) culture mandated.

### *What is DC Punk*

Of course, punk rock in Washington DC during this dissertation's chosen years is yet another different incarnation of punk, known as hardcore. Much like the subgenres in Britain and the US, hardcore shares the same primary characteristics of punk but adjusts a few key features.

While examined in more depth in Chapter Two, we should understand my use of the term DC hardcore to involve a punk sound that is a retort to the commercialized and progressively more mainstream punk. DC's hardcore is defined primarily through the escalation and slight distortion of punk's original elements: volume, speed, brevity, simplicity and intensity. And while DC hardcore continued the minimalistic ethos of punk in the music's composition, the lack of standards for technical mastery was completely obliterated by the subgenre's founding fathers Bad Brains. Yes, DC hardcore was still chaotic, frenzied, earsplitting, and unbelievably fast, but Bad Brains also made sure that it was played with prowess and dexterity.

It is important to note that when I write about DC hardcore, its label and implications should be understood as distinct from both other city's form of hardcore, as well as what hardcore means during other eras of time. The hardcore of the Dead Kennedys in San Francisco during the late 70s and early 80s has nuanced differences from the hardcore of Southern California at that time, all of which was related to, though independent from, the sound of DC hardcore. Moreover, while DC continued to produce

self-labelled hardcore bands in the late 1980s and early 1990s, their sound was substantially different from what was understood as DC hardcore from 1979-1983.

### **The Field: Scholarly Positioning within Popular Music Studies and Punk Literature**

Within the academic realm, music has generally been consigned to a subcategory of popular culture and viewed as a mere minor facet of youth culture. Its usefulness as a rhetorical and communicative vehicle, specifically in regards to its instrumentality in social and political movements and subcultures, when it has been deliberated, frequently has been a social contextualization of music in sociopolitics, rather than music *as* sociopolitics. Indeed, the discipline of Popular Music Studies is rife with the way that music has intersected with the sociohistorical milieu and its concomitant vectors of difference and identity. However, yet again, such works are primarily a generalized analysis of music's function within those identity-based divergences rather than a theoretical assessment of specific songs and bands; furthermore, there has been no such examination of the Washington, DC hardcore punk scene.

The principal lens through which race, class, and gender are deconstructed and understood in music is, in the majority of the academic literature, through broad strokes of musical epochs — including folk music, blues, punk, and hip-hop — and their associated sociopolitical environments.

#### *Race and Music*

The relationship between race and music is most frequently examined as a way of not only reacting to the sociopolitical circumstances of a particular time but also as a method of racial collective identity. While attempting to avoid totalizing frames of

blackness,<sup>11</sup> most music scholars position African American music within the legacy of slavery and oppression, and white music as a reaction to, and often appropriation of, such sounds.<sup>12</sup> Blues and jazz, therefore, are understood as a function of slavery and post-World War I migration and industrialization of African-Americans, and are linked to a distinct and unique black identity and culture. “Race music,” or Rhythm and Blues, as it is later known, emerged as a product of the African American working class in the post-World War II marketplace, and, for the first time assimilated into the predominantly white airwaves, though the major industry labels saw an opportunity for white capital to exploit black talent.<sup>13</sup> Motown artists were seen as assuming the more white or conventional characteristics in order to appeal to a broader spectrum of listeners,<sup>14</sup> while alternatively, the British Invasion bands (Beatles, Rolling Stones, Animals, Kinks) were analyzed as donning the “authentic” black identity of the R&B bluesmen.<sup>15</sup> The unification of sociopolitical exigencies and raced identity through music is most conspicuous and consistent in the literature of hip-hop and rap. As George Lipsitz and Tricia Rose argue in their seminal works, hip-hop’s sound and meanings helped to create a collective identity for young blacks, based upon two interrelated themes – a resurgence of Black Nationalism and an accent on economic independence. The construction of this new unified identity allowed for the exploration and partial resolution of the

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<sup>11</sup> Paul Gilroy, “Black Music and the Politics of Authenticity,” from *Popular Music Studies Reader* (London: Routledge Press 2006).

<sup>12</sup> See Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, *Music and Social Movements: Mobilizing Traditions in the Twentieth Century* (1998); Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure and the Politics of Rock n’ Roll* (1981); Theodore Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock* (1996).

<sup>13</sup> Reebee Garofalo, *Rockin’ Out: Popular Music in the USA* (Boston: Prentice Hall, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> David Szatmary, *Rockin’ in Time: A Social History of Rock-and-Roll* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1996).

<sup>15</sup> Iain Chambers, *Urban Rhythms Pop Music and Popular Culture* (1986); Michael Coyle, “Hijacked Hits and Antic Authenticity: Cover Songs, Race, and Postwar Marketing,” from *Rock Over the Edge: Transformations in Popular Music Culture*, eds, Roger Beebe, Denise Fulbrook and Ben Saunders, Durham and (2002).

sociopolitical problems that produced the music, although it simultaneously essentialized difference.<sup>16</sup> In all of this literature, then, music is understood as a result of and a tool to critique mainstream white culture while simultaneously affording the possibilities for a distinctive racial identity.

### *Gender and Music*

The literature on music and gender, unlike that of race, is less genre-oriented and more focused on the dichotomy between production and consumption. Indeed, the primary consideration of women's role in music was often cast within the cultural construction of womanhood: passivity and consumption.<sup>17</sup> Women did not sing; instead, they were sung about. As objects of these male lyrics, they were the musical victims of young male rock and roll singers caught between macho bluster and teenage passionate vulnerability. It was not until the mid to late 80s that gender — particularly womanhood — became a major area of scholarship in music studies. Finally, scholars like Simon Frith traced how sexuality and gender was constructed in music,<sup>18</sup> Susan Fast explored how women subversively gained pleasure from male-dominated rock genres,<sup>19</sup> Susan McClary looked at how the seemingly neutral site of music was instead a constructed gendered

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<sup>16</sup> George Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism and the Focus of Place* (1997); George Lipsitz, "We Know What Time it is: Race, Class and Youth Culture in the Nineties," from *Microphone Fiends* (1994); Tricia Rose, "A Style Nobody Can Deal With: Politics, Style and the Postindustrial City in Hip Hop," from *Microphone Fiends*, eds. Andrew Ross and Tricia Rose (1994); Tricia Rose, "Voices from the Margins: Rap Music and Contemporary Cultural Production," from *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (1994).

<sup>17</sup> Mavis Bayton, *Women and the Electric Guitar*. In *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender*, ed. Shelia Whiteley, (1997); Steve Waksman, *Instruments of Desire: The Electric Guitar and the Shaping of Musical Experience* (1999).

<sup>18</sup> Simon Frith, "Afterthoughts," *New Statesmen*, August 23, 1985.

<sup>19</sup> Susan Fast, "Rethinking Issues of Gender and Sexuality in Led Zeppelin: A Women's View of Pleasure and Power in Hard Rock," *American Music*, 17:3 (1999).

body,<sup>20</sup> and Frith and Angela McRobbie delved into how specific genres of music help construct gender roles.<sup>21</sup> The prime concentration of gender and music in these works has been the reclamation of gendered space for women; however, there has not been, assumedly due to its presumed “inherent” gendered past, much academic emphasis on the construction of masculinity in contemporary music.

### *Class and Music*

Perhaps least prolific is the literature on the intersection of class and music. The work that does exist primarily deals with the way that class categorizes and identifies; that is, how specific genres of music acts as signifiers of class. This model was promulgated most notably by Theodor Adorno in his 1941 essay “On Popular Music,” which lambasts popular music as a lowbrow creation, linking its style to the philistine forms of standardization, pseudo-individualization and as a product of consumer culture, and Pierre Bourdieu, whose pioneering book *Distinction*, links taste — that amorphous symbol of class and status — with, among other things, musical preference. Consumption of music, according to Bourdieu, is a marker of social class insofar as it is connected to cultural capital, affording the tools and ability to understand and appreciate certain forms of music, (implying with that an analogous set of economic, social, and educational knowledge) and an assertion of status because of that knowledge and ability.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender & Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991); Susan McClary, “Same As It Ever Was,” in *Microphone Fiends: Youth Culture and Youth Music*, eds. Andrew Ross and Tricia Rose (Routledge, 1994).

<sup>21</sup> Simon Frith, and Angela McRobbie, “Rock and Sexuality,” from *Taking Popular Music Seriously* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing 2007).

<sup>22</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).



Additionally, there is some literature, including essays by Paul Théberge and Veronica Doubleday and fragments of chapters of books by Jacque Attali and Theodore Gracyk, which links class and privilege to the ability to buy and play instruments, obtain a musical education and create and record music.<sup>23</sup> There is, however, a dearth of literature that deals with how music itself constructs ideas of class; that is, how specific aspects of sound perform and represent identities of class and privilege.

### *Punk Music*

In addition, while there is some academic work on punk as a general category of popular music, there is a significant, nearly cavernous gap in the literature surrounding Washington DC hardcore punk. The majority of literature on American punk is separated into specific scenes, and concentrates not necessarily on the music itself, but on the (sub)cultures surrounding it. Daniel Traber looks at the LA punk scene, focusing on the ways in which those youth embraced self-marginalization as a form of resistance, while in his 1994 article, Barry Shank explores the Austin punk scene, highlighting the ways in which the performance of punk is enacted in part by sublimating one's day-to-day identity.<sup>24</sup> There is also some recent work on the more generalized punk ritual of

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<sup>23</sup> See Jacque Attali *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (1985); Veronica Doubleday, "Sounds of Power: An Overview of Musical Instruments and Gender" (2008); Theodore Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock* (1996); Paul Théberge, "Music/Technology/Practice" (2006).

<sup>24</sup> Barry Shank, "Punk Rock at Raul's: The Performance of Contradiction" (1994).

slamdancing<sup>25</sup> and eventual subcultural offshoot of hardcore punk, the straightedge movement,<sup>26</sup> but none as is specifically relates to and is a product of the DC scene.

Finally, there is a small subset of academic articles on DC punk focused on the cultural production of authenticity within the DC scene<sup>27</sup> and the attempt of Dischord to offer an alternative economic model of business,<sup>28</sup> as well as brief, individual chapters about the unique DC hardcore scene in two popular punk cultural histories, *Going Underground: American Punk 1979-1992* (2005) and *American Hardcore: A Tribal History* (2010). However, the former (authenticity and economic models) is decidedly situated in the post-'85 DC punk scene, looking primarily at Fugazi, MacKaye's band formed in 1987, while the latter, which do look at the 1978-1983 DC hardcore scene, have little more than ten pages on the subject each.

Lastly, the most comprehensive and in-depth work on DC punk is not an academic article, but instead a book by two DC punk participants, Mark Andersen and Mark Jenkins, *Dance of Days: Two Decades of Punk in the Nation's Capital* (2001). They give a 450-page social and historical recounting of the DC punk scene, replete with interviews of both musicians and fans. While this is, without a singular doubt, the most comprehensive source of the DC hardcore scene, the book does not venture into an

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<sup>25</sup> Michael Lance, *Identity Maintenance Through Emotional Release and Rejuvenation: A Link between Hardcore Dancing and the Straightedge Collective Identity* (2007); William Tsitsos, "Rules of Rebellion: Slam Dancing, Moshing, and the American Alternative Scene" (1999).

<sup>26</sup> Gabriel Kuhn, *Sober Living for the Revolution: Hardcore Punk, Straightedge and Radical Politics* (2010); Beth Lahickey, *All Ages: Reflections on Straightedge* (1997); Robert T. Wood, *Straightedge Youth: Complexity and Contradictions of a Subculture* (2006); Ross Haenfler, *Straight Edge: The Newest Face of Social Movements* (2006).

<sup>27</sup> Jason Middleton, "DC Punk and the Production of Authenticity" (2002).

<sup>28</sup> Stacey Thompson, "Market Failure: Punk Economics, Early and Late" (2001).

analysis or academic understanding of the meaning of the scene, concentrating instead on a more journalistic-style reporting of what happened, when, and by whom.

### **The Road Map: Chapter Outline**

This dissertation endeavors to understand the ways in which DC-based hardcore punk rock creates, challenges and replicates socio-political meanings, positions and understandings through its music. Through an analysis of sound, combined with an examination of the scene (the people, fashions, dances, performances, and places of DC hardcore), I hope to identify, analyze and emphasize the significance and implications music has as both an art form and a political gesture.

Chapter Two looks at the context in which DC hardcore punk evolved, musically, spatially, and socio-politically. This chapter traces the history of hardcore punk, delving into its genre-based forefathers of proto-punk and British and American punk, locating both the sonic development and the cultural history of those sounds. I also more explicitly examine the musical history of Washington, D.C. as a city, looking at both its broader cultural narrative and the specific kinds of music and types of bands that preceded the creation of hardcore punk. Next, Chapter Two dives into the genre of hardcore punk explicitly, examining its formations in other parts of the country, its unique characteristics within both rock and punk, and then surveys the six DC hardcore bands this dissertation covers: Bad Brains, Teen Idles, Minor Threat, State of Alert, Government Issue and Faith. The final section of the chapter investigates the city of D.C. in the late 1970s and early 1980s, charting the shifting political landscape and mapping the changing, and often dramatic, racial and socioeconomic demographic differences in certain neighborhoods of the District.

Chapter Three focuses exclusively on Bad Brains, their seminal 1982 release of the same name, and how that pivotal album creates and simultaneously deconstructs conventional representations of a black identity. The chapter begins with the band's continuance of a traditional black musical identity through the vocal and musical fusion of elements from blues and jazz. Using the prominent characteristics of jazz in their conception of hardcore, specifically experimentation, technical virtuosity and musical expertise, I analyze how Bad Brains upholds the exclusivity of the jazz bebop tradition. Furthermore, I look at how the symbol of the blues as conventionally black music is incorporated into Bad Brains' sound and identity, using the mind/body dichotomy and the power of noise to disrupt and create a racial, and political, identity. Finally, I consider the inclusion of reggae songs on *Bad Brains*, and the associated Rasta lifestyle of the band, which I examine as a reassertion of blackness and a reaction to the whiteness of the hardcore punk scene in DC. Chapter Three then probes the contradictions and complications of this black identity by examining the use and implications of the electric guitar. This section examines how Bad Brains (re)race the guitar by both reinforcing the traditional constructions of blackness though its emblem of a sonic threat, danger while also destabilizing this racialized representation by their incorporation of the white rock god guitar solo. Finally, the third section considers how Bad Brains performs both an identity of racial sameness — through an insider hardcore collective identity — and of racial difference — primarily through their use of reggae.

My next chapter examines Teen Idles, and the subsequent ground-breaking and probably most famous DC hardcore band, Minor Threat. Exploring the one album from Teen Idles and the three from Minor Threat, Chapter Four dissects the performances, and

contradictions within those performances, of class. The chapter begins by looking at these bands' music is used as a performance of working-class ideology, specifically through the sonic romanticism of their instrument choice, compositional minimalism, lyrics and aesthetic of simplicity, unruliness and brashness. These ideas are considered within the sociocultural milieu of these band members, which is understood as both an incubator for socioeconomic unrest and as a condition, and consequence, of privilege. Chapter Four further complicates these bands' performance of class by studying the paradoxes of this downward class passing, particularly in the bands' technical deftness, their exaltation of the personal in their lyrics, and the privilege of recording. Finally, the chapter examines the intersection between class and race, looking at the influence of Bad Brains and the racial and sociopolitical realities of Washington, DC on Minor Threat's lyrics, composition and sound.

Chapter Five encompasses the three potent, but perhaps less known and prolific, DC hardcore bands State of Alert (SOA.), Government Issue (GI), and Faith, focusing on how their music constructs — and at times, complicates — conventional representations of (white, privileged) masculinity. This chapter looks at the texture, timbre, volume and lyrical content of SOA, GI, and Faith's combined five albums through the lenses of traditionally male characteristics: anger and aggression, emphatic sexuality, and the privilege of power and control. Each of these is explored through certain elements of the bands' music and contextualized within their sociocultural position and their city. Anger and violence is analyzed through the manipulation of their instruments and vocals, as well as their use of tempo and volume; power and privilege is understood through the subjugation of their musical instruments and the demands of their vocals, as well the

recording process in general; finally, (hetero)sexuality is explored as reinforcing traditional male sexuality through their playing of the electric guitar and drums — with the accompanying tempo, timbre and volume — while also subverting the conventional male sexual narrative through their lyrics.

The transformation of the social, cultural and musical landscape of DC hardcore is researched in Chapter Six, investigating how, and why, the sound of hardcore changed post-1983. Covering four key DC so-called emocore (the post-hardcore genre mixing the anger and force of hardcore with an outpouring of emotion and slowed down tempos) — Rites of Spring, Marginal Man, Beefeater, and Embrace — this chapter tracks the modifications and adjustments in sound within the context of the three previous chapters' political lenses: race, class, and gender. These sonic changes are linked to the social, political, and personal changes occurring at the same time, ultimately signifying the demise of DC hardcore.

This dissertation finishes with a reiteration of the ideas explored in the previous chapters and implications of and for future research within the field.

## Chapter Two: Punk Rock Evolving and the Scene in Washington, DC

There is a distinctive relationship between music and the city from which it comes. From Detroit and Motown to Nashville and country to New York and hip-hop, music and cities interact, influence, and transform one another. At the same time, while place is indeed a vital element in the creation of music, providing the socio-cultural backdrop for distinctive musical practices and innovations, the evolving paradigms of music itself are equally as significant and influential. As music theorist Theodore Gracyk states, “as a specifically musical gesture, a guitar riff or a melody or a dissonant voice is strangely mute. It represents nothing all. Its capacity to mean anything, to convey one meaning rather than another or to support one ideology rather than another, rests on its

relationship to previous music.”<sup>29</sup> The Washington, DC hardcore punk scene was no exception. DC’s distinctive qualities —its built environment, its economic structure, its affluence, image, musical history and neighborhoods — all contributed both to the ways in which music was created and the ways in which it was consumed. During the 1970s and 1980s, the dichotomous nature of DC, specifically with regards to race and socioeconomics, along with the transformative sounds of proto-punk, provided the foundation for one of the city’s most unique and symbolic musical sounds: hardcore punk rock.

### **Before There Was Hardcore: Punk’s Musical Predecessors**

#### *Proto-Punk*

By the 1970s the country’s demographics, along with the political, social, cultural, and economic milieu, was rapidly changing and with it, the musical landscape. As the baby boomers began to age so too did their rebellion and their musical touchstones. No longer were musicians and music fans a part of rock n’ roll’s radical revolt: Elvis was fat and drug-addled; the Beatles had broken up long before, Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin were dead, and even Bob Dylan had entered his anomalous Christian rock phase. Reluctant to have faith in either social movements or the people involved with them, having been burned by idealism in the previous decade, and with the signs of a major recession threatening, the popular music of the early 1970s reflected the gloomy, subdued conservative feeling of the country, deserting hard-driving rock for a

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<sup>29</sup> Theodore Gracyk. *I Wanna Be Me: Rock Music and the Politics of Identity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 9.



more soft and serious introspective sound.<sup>30</sup> Highly apolitical and rooted in a deeply personal experience, early 70s music was heavily influenced by both the disintegration of the nuclear family and the breakdown of the counterculture, producing the advent of the singer/songwriter and progressive or “art” rock. The sounds of Carly Simon, Carole King and Joni Mitchell, along with their male counterpoints like James Taylor and Jackson Browne, dominated the pop charts, while bands such as Yes, Emerson Lake and Palmer, and Rush worshiped music as art in progressive rock, venerating the technicalities of musicianship in the forms of interminable solos, classically-imbued compositions and studio technology.<sup>31</sup>

Despite the dominance of singer/songwriter pop and progressive rock, or perhaps more accurately in part *because* of that dominance, an underground, antiestablishment alternative sound was emerging in places like New York and Detroit. With bands like the MC5, the Velvet Underground, and Iggy Pop and the Stooges, this sound would soon to be known as proto-punk, the sonic and philosophical precursor to British and hardcore punk. Its form and content —that is, the lyrics and the music itself— was intentionally and emphatically avant-garde, inaccessible, and bordering on the edge of cacophonous discordance, a reflection and representation of both contemporary sociopolitical conditions and the bands’ feelings towards the contemporary music scene.<sup>32</sup> The Motor City Five (MC5) emerged from the Detroit music scene, where Motown had been born and died, the post-Fordist market had begun to decimate the local economy, and the

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<sup>30</sup> See Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison *Music and Social Movements: Mobilizing Traditions in the Twentieth Century* (1998); Reebee Garofalo, *Rockin’ Out: Popular Music in the USA* (2011).

<sup>31</sup> See Joe Stuessy and Scott Lipscomb’s *Rock and Roll: Its History and Stylistic Development* (2012); David P. Szatmary, *Rockin’ In Time: A Social History of Rock-and-Roll* (1996).

<sup>32</sup> See Legs McNeil and Gillian McCain, *Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk* (1996); John Robb and Lars Fredriksen, *Punk Rock: An Oral History* (2012).

peace-loving ethos of the 60s hippie and folk scene was fading in a cloud of sexism, cynicism and harder drugs. Their sound consciously sprung from free jazz, an innovative, exclusive, and seemingly dissonant genre of music that attempted to recharacterize systems of sound; avowed revolutionaries, the MC5 infused their music with the feelings of their politics — minimalistic, with distorted guitars, a deafening rhythm section and maximum volume.<sup>33</sup> Analogously, their lyrics reflected rage and radicalism, from the incorporation of a sermon that quoted liberally from Black Panther slogans (which opens their 1969 album *Kick Out the Jams*) to their controversial use of the word “motherfucker” in “Kick Out the Jams” (which got them dropped by their label Elektra) to exposing the racial volatility of their city in “Motor City is Burning” (“Ya know, the Motor City is burning people/There ain't a thing that white society can do/Ma home town burning down to the ground/Worser than Vietnam”) to the sex-drugs-rock-n'-roll mantra of “Rocket Reducer No 62” (“After some good tokes and a six pack/We can sock 'em out for you/Till you're flat on your back”).<sup>34</sup> Though they disbanded only a few years later, the MC5 were paramount in instituting both the stripped-down hard-driving approach to rock and the exaltation of sonic expression over any form of commercial success.

Around the same time in the mid- to late-1960s, emerging from the New York beat scene and immersed in the black musical tradition of R&B, bebop, and doo-wop — but fascinated by both classical music and the avant-garde — Lou Reed and John Cale joined together (along with guitarist Sterling Morrison and drummer Maureen Tucker) to form the Velvet Underground. One of the most American influential bands in the punk,

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<sup>33</sup> Clinton Heylin, *From the Velvets to the Voidoids: The Birth of American Punk Rock* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2005), 33.

<sup>34</sup> MC5, *Kick Out the Jams*, Elektra Records, Vinyl, 1969.

new wave and later grunge and alternative music scenes, the band's aesthetic was solidly and emphatically grounded in the ability to shock, including a garage-band fuzzed out, intentionally-savage distorted sound that was "loud, cynical, brutal and frenetic."<sup>35</sup> Deliberately outside the domain of traditional popular music, the Velvet pushed not only an outwardly discordant sound and unconventional song composition, but also an unorthodox approach to song lyrics. "Heroin" clocks in at over seven minutes, opening with the dulcet sounds of Reed's guitar, Tucker's soft, repetitive drumming and Cale's lush electric violin, unembellished in its use of only two chords. But the harmony is fleeting; as Reed's nasal twang chants about his addiction the tempo in each verse quickens, mirroring the effect of the drug. As the narrator descends into the clutches of the drug —

Heroin, be the death of me/  
Heroin, it's my wife and it's my life/  
Because a mainer to my vein/  
Leads to a center in my head/  
And then I'm better off and dead/  
Because when the smack begins to flow/  
I really don't care anymore...  
Ah, when the heroin is in my blood/  
And that blood is in my head/  
Then thank God that I'm as good as dead/  
Then thank your God that I'm not aware/  
And thank God that I just don't care<sup>36</sup>

—so too does the music, reaching a hysterical, atonal crescendo, littered with the squawking of viola, the pulsing thrumming of guitar and the desperate frenzy of drumming, the sonic manifestation of "freaks who roared their anger and their pain in storms of screaming feedback and words spat out like strings of epithets."<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Heylin, 22.

<sup>36</sup> The Velvet Underground, *The Velvet Underground & Nico*, Verve Records, Vinyl, 1967.

<sup>37</sup> Lester Bangs, review of *The Velvet Underground*, *Rolling Stone Magazine*, May 17, 1969.

Their music remained provocative and challenging, and explicitly out of the mainstream, through their four albums: *The Velvet Underground & Nico* (1967), *White Light/White Heat* (1968), *The Velvet Underground* (1969) and *Loaded* (1970). “Sister Ray” is a 17 minute spoken-word-singing style of sexually explicit lyrics over warped rhythmic guitars (the band played a 40-minute version of the song live). “I Heard Her Call My Name” is composed exclusively of distorted feedback, and “Venus in Furs” and “Lady Godiva’s Operation” extols sadomasochism with noise-fueled accompaniment. Indeed, it was this sense of danger, of rebellion-infused aesthetics through discordance, which inspired the subsequent punk sound. The Velvet Underground, like their Detroit brethren, disparaged commercial success and opted instead for artistic freedom and musical abandon, using sound as a visceral assault.

If the MC5 and the Velvet Underground stood as the musical forbearers of primitivism and stood for the eschewal of musical marketability, Iggy Pop and the Stooges stood as the closest musical patriarch in sound and composition to the imminent punk scene. Heirs to the Detroit garage rock scene, Iggy Pop (born James Osterberg) and the Stooges (Ron and Scott Asheton and Dave Alexander) had little experience playing actual instruments and avoided traditional songwriting and chord changes in favor of a more conceptual kind of music, an abstraction that typically involved “a form of terrorist assault resonating deep into witnesses’ psyches.”<sup>38</sup> From Iggy’s legendary self-destructive stage performances — including gyrating around the stage, wearing a dog collar and mounting photographers, provoking the audience with broken bottles and

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<sup>38</sup> Heylin, 36.

spitting, even puking, on them, flashing his genitals on stage<sup>39</sup> — to the thrashing guitars, truncated song lengths, and raw live-like sounds of the music, their first three (at-the-time commercially unsuccessful but later revered as classic proto-punk) albums *The Stooges*, *Fun House* and *Raw Power*<sup>40</sup> set the proverbial stage for what punk rock would become.

The songs were expressions of personal and political angst (a theme connected and ultimately explored through punk rock) and their performances served to heighten or personify these feelings of danger, alienation and disaffection. With only a three chord riff — G, F# and E — “I Wanna Be Your Dog” (1969) uses a one-note piano riff, heavily-distorted guitars and lyrics that evoke self-hatred and estrangement. “Dirt” (1970) is a seven minute down-tempo, highly funky meditation on what it means to be treated like filth; and “Search and Destroy,” in its titular nod to the Vietnam War, is filled with raging, unrelenting drums, aggressive, insistent guitar riffs, low-fi, warped vocals, and a breakneck speed that soon defined hardcore punk.<sup>41</sup>

These songs’ frustration, hostility, and antagonism — executed both lyrically and musically — were also a function of Iggy Pop’s seemingly nihilistic stage performances. The violence — both self-inflicted and perpetrated on audience members, the sexuality — of Iggy allowing fans to perform fellatio on him on stage or of masturbating on a vibrating amp, and the downright weird — smearing peanut butter all over his body or throwing hamburgers into the crowd,<sup>42</sup> all spoke, like his proto-punk music, to the

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<sup>39</sup> Heylin, 37-43; McNeil and McCain, 64-67.

<sup>40</sup> Although technically the first two albums, *The Stooges* and *Fun House*, were credited to The Stooges and the third, *Raw Power*, to Iggy Pop alone, all three were the product of the same band members — Iggy and the Asheton brothers — simply billed under different names.

<sup>41</sup> The Stooges, *The Stooges*, Elektra Records, Vinyl 1969; The Stooges, *Fun House*, Elektra Records, Vinyl 1970; Iggy and the Stooges, *Raw Power*, Columbia Records, Vinyl 1973.

<sup>42</sup> See Heylin 37-43; McNeil and McCain 64-67, 78-81; Stuessy and Lipscomb 359.

confrontational and political perspective this new music was embracing. Erasing the lines between performer and audience, using tactics of shock-and-awe in live performances, and musically pushing volume, chaos, and aggression, an aural assault, Iggy Pop and the Stooges, along with the MC5 and the Velvet Underground, became the template for both American and British punk rock.

### *First Wave U.S. Punk*

In 1970, Alan Vega and Martin Rev branded their band, Suicide, and their music, as punk — the first time that term was self-ascribed.<sup>43</sup> Influenced heavily by the art-rock minimalism of the Velvet Underground and the inflammatory primordial performances of Iggy Pop, Suicide fused the two into America's first incarnation of punk rock. Upping the ante from the mere rock n' roll leather jacket to the Do-It-Yourself (DIY) ethos that punk would embody, Vega added studs, chains, and homemade tears and rips to his clothing, emblazoning "SUICIDE" on his t-shirts and jackets, and jumping into crowds with hunks of plaster or bike chains in hand, creating an exceptionally menacing and intimidating stage presence.<sup>44</sup> The music was equally threatening — and equally as punk. With howling, atonal vocals that relied more on emotion than harmony, and sounds that were intentionally repetitive, cacophonous, and unvaried, this earliest form of punk established the genre's musical tenet of gut sentiment over sonic intricacy.

Running parallel to the austere aggression of Suicide was the showier but likewise bare-boned visceral rock of the New York Dolls. Led by Johnny Thunders (born John

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<sup>43</sup> Vega credits Lester Bangs with the origin of the word punk; he explains, "We didn't invent the word—I probably got it from an article on the Stooges by Lester Bangs—but I think we were the first band to describe our music as punk" (Simon Reynolds, "Suicide Watch," *The Village Voice*, January 29, 2002).

<sup>44</sup> Heylin, 64-66.

Gezale Jr.) and David Johansen, the Dolls merged glam with punk, creating a somewhat ambiguous, but still significant, offshoot of first wave American punk. Coming from a traditional R&B and blues rock background (influences include the Yardbirds, the Stones, the Kinks, James Brown, Bo Diddley, and Otis Redding)<sup>45</sup> the Dolls primarily focused on covers — taking rock songs and making them quicker, harder and dirtier. Never known for their musical prowess, the Dolls embodied the Do-It-Yourself (DIY), populist ethos of creating music, focusing on the instinctual rather than the technical. What made the music connect to the audience was as much their raw emotion and pure spectacle of performance as it was the music. As music producer Marty Thau commented after the Dolls’ show at the Diplomat Hotel, “we’ve either seen the best group or the worst group.”<sup>46</sup>

Indeed, it was the Dolls’ performances that acted as overt challenges to both socio-politically mandated productions of gender and to the strict construct of audience/performer roles, and it was these confrontations, these refusals to bend to the culturally-induced winds of acceptability, that ultimately influenced the culture of punk. Dressed in tutus, eye shadow, fishnets and high heels, the Dolls took glam rock to a new provocative level, mixing genders and reveling in the outrage it caused. And their fans followed suit; the Dolls’ shows were participatory and “the people not onstage were just as much a part of the show as the people onstage,” according to photographer and manager Lee Black Childers.<sup>47</sup> Literally playing in the room next to Suicide at the Mercer Arts Center in New York, these two bands continued the evolution of punk’s

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<sup>45</sup> Heylin, 74.

<sup>46</sup> Heylin, 77.

<sup>47</sup> McNeil and McCain, 118.

combative, crude sound and its commitment to those disaffected, marginalized, and discontented by contemporary society.

Often cited as the first punk album,<sup>48</sup> Patti Smith's *Horses* seems an unlikely torch bearer of the typically male-dominated, pugnacious guitar-driven cacophonous sound punk is known for. Yet, her musical form and her lyrical content serve as the powerful fundamentals of early American punk. After brief stints as a factory worker, a bookstore employee, and a full-time poet, Smith fused her written verse with her love for rock n' roll, engaging in the avant-garde tradition of the Velvet Underground and Iggy Pop by initially performing her poetry in a chanting/singing style accompanied only by the austere guitar strumming of Lenny Kaye.<sup>49</sup> By the time *Horses* was released in 1975, a full band backed Smith, offering up the sort of atonal, jarring and inflammatory sound that came to denote punk. From the emulation of a gender-swapped sexual encounter in the musical composition of "Gloria (In Excelsis Deo)" to the "fitful and noisy"<sup>50</sup> excess of "Birdland" to the nine minute, three part, musical experiment of "Land" that "sought to challenge the hegemony of conventional linear narrative...for the creation of random, aleatory meanings,"<sup>51</sup> *Horses* persists in the punk vein of sonic bedlam, musical dissonance and sociopolitical rebellion. With a sound branded by the mainstream as "obscenity, brutality, and sonic abuse" Smith's music not only raised hackles musically

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<sup>48</sup> See Manhola Dargi Review of *Patti Smith: Dream of Life*, *The New York Times*, 5 August 2008; "The RS 500 Greatest Albums of All Time," *Rolling Stone*. 18 November 2003; William Ruhlman. "Horses Review," Allmusic.com.

<sup>49</sup> See Patti Smith, *Just Kids* (2010).

<sup>50</sup> Chris Dahlen, Review of *Horses* by Patti Smith, *Pitchfork*, 30 November 2005.

<sup>51</sup> Philip Shaw, *Horses* (New York: Continuum, 2008), 130.



but also lyrically.<sup>52</sup> Challenging conventional notions of gender and sexuality (with both *Horses*' androgynous cover art and songs like "Gloria" and "Redondo Beach"), religion ("Kimberly" and "Gloria"), and capitalism and poverty ("Free Money"), Smith presaged the politically-charged defiance of punk's content, as well as its sound.

Rubbing musical elbows with Smith (and sometimes even sharing the same stage), Tom Verlaine and Richard Hell's band Television was renowned for their debut at punk institution Country Blue Grass and Blues (CBGBs), their three minute blasts of nihilistic songs ("I Don't Care," "(I Belong to) The Blank Generation"), and, in their 1973 original inception "absolutely no musical or socially redeeming characteristics," embodying the sainted DIY virtue of simultaneous passion and musical ineptitude.<sup>53</sup> Yet these same elements quickly unraveled the band — Verlaine refused to allow Hell to record his songs on Television's upcoming album and the two fundamentally disagreed about the direction of the music. Verlaine wanted to work on the technical skills of the band members, was tired of three minute songs, longed for jazz-like improvisation, and was sick of Hell's onstage punk antics; he replaced Hell and redirected the band in a more intellectual-garage-rock sound.<sup>54</sup> But Hell rebounded quickly and after a short stint with his new band the Heartbreakers, formed Richard Hell and the Voidoids, releasing one of the most important and influential albums in first wave American punk, *Blank Generation*.

The album's two lead-guitar-playing siege presaged the brute force of punk's rhythm section, introducing an unruly abrasiveness in songs like "Liar's Beware" and

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<sup>52</sup> Martha Bayles, *Hole in Our Soul: The Loss of Beauty and Meaning in American Popular Music* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996), 12.

<sup>53</sup> Josh Feigenbaum, Review of *Television* performance at CBGB. *SoHo Weekly News*, 25 April 1974.

<sup>54</sup> Heylin, 134-141.

“Love Comes and Spurts,” while Hell’s wailing vocals echo the sentiment of nothingness in “Who Says It’s Good To Be Alive?” and “New Pleasures.”<sup>55</sup> Rage drips from every corner of this album — in the dueling guitars with atypically (for punk) complex chord progressions, in the howling moan of Hell’s pleas, demands and complaints, in the crude pessimism of his lyrics, and even in the ripped t-shirts and platinum blond dyed hair of the singer on the album’s cover. Richard Hell and the Voidoids, with *Blank Generation*, helped set the template for the prototypical American punk rock sound: noisy, frenzied, fervent and fractious.

Two other New York bands embodied the sound, the feel, and the attitude of first wave American punk: the Dictators and the Ramones. While less acknowledged, and certainly less acclaimed, in everyday popular music history than the Ramones, the Dictators predated their punk brethren, gigging at CBGBs and Max’s beginning in 1973 and embracing the Stooges-style sloppy, furious type of punk rock playing. Fronted first by Andy Shernoff and later by Handsome Dick Manitoba (an ex-wrestler), the band “literally picked up [their] instruments and started playing,” highlighting bleary almost incoherent guitars and adhering to the punk rule of hard, quick, dumb and loud.<sup>56</sup> None of their three albums — *The Dictators Go Girl Crazy!* (1975), *Manifest Destiny* (1977), and *Bloodbrothers* (1978) — garnered any commercial success, but their style of playing “short, succinct, great hooks” as fast and furiously as they could was the pattern for their musical brothers, and quintessential American punk band, the Ramones.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Richard Hell and the Voidoids, *Blank Generation*, Sire Records, Vinyl, 1977.

<sup>56</sup> Andy Shernoff, quoted in Heylin, 229.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, 230.

The four middle-class Queens kids who adopted the same last punk name popularized (and some would argue, vulgarized) a stripped-down, sped-up rock n' roll with all the elements of protopunk — minimalistic, unpretentious, intentionally defiant, with hammer-like guitars, military-style drums, and barking lyrics. Writing their own lyrics and music — explains Johnny, “We couldn’t figure out how to play anybody else’s songs” — the Ramones kept nearly all their lyrics to fewer than eight lines and nearly all their songs (including some of their most famous ones: “Sheena Is a Punk Rocker,” “I Don’t Want to be Learned, I Don’t Wanna Be Tamed,” “Blitzkrieg Bop,” “I Wanna Be Sedated”) under a brisk two minutes.<sup>58</sup> In an ironic twist, a bit of a happily raised middle finger to the cultural establishment, their lyrics also took on the formulae of traditional R&B and rock — high school, girls and lost love, the American Dream — and turned it on its head, mocking its sentimentality and turning familiar narratives into derisive blusters, a punk specialty. They did this in two ways: one, they perverted the recognizable storylines in the lyrics themselves (the boy-loses-girl motif takes a nasty satirical turn when the girl is lost not to a football star but to the KKK in “The KKK Took My Baby Away”<sup>59</sup>), and even more meaningfully, and extensively throughout their music, two, by using conventional themes and warping their innocuous and guileless undertones with the music, replete with grunted choruses, loud and distorted guitars, and a lashing drum beat on every note (“I Wanna Be Your Boyfriend,” “Listen to My Heart,”<sup>60</sup> “Oh Oh I Love Her So”<sup>61</sup>). Adding to the punk manipulation of mainstream music, the structure of these songs followed the established rock prescription —

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<sup>58</sup> Quoted in Heylin, 172.

<sup>59</sup> The Ramones, *Pleasant Dreams*, Sire Records, Vinyl, 1981.

<sup>60</sup> The Ramones, *The Ramones*, Sire Records, Vinyl, 1976.

<sup>61</sup> The Ramones, *Leave Home*, Sire Records, Vinyl, 1977.

repetitive melodies, sing-along choruses, 4/4 rhythm, and straightforward 12-bar sections, straight out of surf rock and early rock n' roll — lending the air of both respectability and familiarity to the music before pulling the sonic rug from under the listener. The band “glorified [in] their own inadequacy,” and inserted an intentional rawness in their stabbing guitars, abrupt lyrics, and caveman-like drums.<sup>62</sup> While the record industry was befuddled by the Ramones, the media was not, with rave reviews from *Rolling Stone*, the *Village Voice*, the *New York Times*, and *Melody Maker*, making them the first CBGB's band to get signed to a label and setting off a firestorm of punk.<sup>63</sup>

By the time first wave U.S. punk touched the shores across the pond in England, its sound and attitude had been firmly established in the American music scene. Rebellion, confrontation, and emotion over technical skills were vital. Wrenching the production of music from the few and putting it in the (sometimes maladroit) hands of the many, punk refused musical elitism. It also refused the status quo — echoing the fractured, obscene, and intentionally provocative sound of the music, punk performed these qualities onstage and in life as a representation of the culture they saw around them. Their music, and their attitude, was simply a way of holding the proverbial mirror up to an already broken society.

### *British Punk*

The connective thread between American and British punk rock was both unambiguous and premeditated: Malcolm McLaren. A self-ascribed Situationist, one-

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<sup>62</sup> Tom Carson, “Rocket to Russia,” In *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word*, eds. Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990) 442.

<sup>63</sup> See Everett True, *Hey Ho, Let's Go: The Story of the Ramones* (2005); McNeil and McCain, *Please Kill Me*.

time manager of the New York Dolls (in 1975, when the band was already decaying), and co-owner of the bondage-inspired clothes shop Sex, McLaren formed arguably the most famous punk band in the world —the Sex Pistols — in an attempt to combine “the nuances of Richard Hell, the faggy pop side of the New York Dolls, the politics of boredom and mashing it all up to make a statement...to piss off this rock n’ roll scene.”<sup>64</sup> The Sex Pistols were unique and influential to the punk scene in their continued exaltation of an amateurish, aggressive sound and violent and vulgar performances and in the subsequent upsetting of class and culture boundaries and definitions in England.

The music of the Sex Pistols, as McLaren notes, pounces on the jarring, harsh and clumsy sound of proto- and first wave American punk. Their sound was where “the possibility of discussing ‘artistic’ qualities and ‘musicianship’ was brutally mauled.”<sup>65</sup> Which was the point. Punk was populist — anyone could pick up a guitar, a bass and a drum kit and make music, just like the Sex Pistols. Their songs relied mainly on three primary chords in a major key (like many blues and British Invasion blues-rock songs) that were sped up to a frenetic tempo with added guitar distortion, excessive volume, and a propelling drum hit on every beat.<sup>66</sup> Vocalist Johnny Rotten embodied disdainful contempt with his snarls, rage stabbing from every shout and cry. This anger found its way onto the stage, as well; the band was notorious for uttering profanities on television, cutting themselves with razorblades and broken beer bottles on stage and physically

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<sup>64</sup> Malcolm McLaren quoted in McNeil and McCain, 245.

<sup>65</sup> Iain Chambers, *Urban Rhythms: Pop Music and Popular Culture* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1985), 177.

<sup>66</sup> Reebee Garofalo, *Rockin’ Out: Popular Music in the U.S.A.* (Boston: Prentice Hall, 2011), 266.

abusing audience members.<sup>67</sup> Such musical dissonance, and the accompanying acts of violence, self-mutilation, and desperation, was an apt and compelling metaphor for the sociopolitical mood of London in the mid-1970s.

The success of the Sex Pistols — despite their songs being banned on radio, their tour prohibited from playing in most towns, and legal prosecution against the band’s use of the word “bollocks” on an album cover — happened because such anger, outrage and moral and cultural fissure appealed to the youth of a country that was facing social and economic decay. Right-wing politicians, rampant unemployment, the dismantlement of the welfare state, racial tensions — England was in crisis.<sup>68</sup> The Sex Pistols’ music was an expression of the frustration and impotence of youth, of politics they did not embrace and a generation in which they did not belong. The aggression and violence of the Sex Pistol’s lyrics, including the obscene language, were meant to juxtapose the high art of music with the seemingly low class of lewdness, troubling the same lines of class and culture that had been celebrated and protected in England for so long. And its message resonated. “God Saves the Queen” (“God save the queen/The fascist regime/They made you a moron/Potential H-bomb/God save the queen/She ain't no human being/There is no future/In England's dreaming”)<sup>69</sup> is an overt attack on the monarchy, “violating the quiet, everyday script” of British traditional sociopolitical hierarchies.<sup>70</sup> These songs were both a representation of the anger and disassociation with mainstream culture and a deliberate confrontation and challenge to that mainstream culture.

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<sup>67</sup> See McNeil and McCain, *Please Kill Me* (1996); John Savage, *England's Dreaming: Anarchy, Sex Pistols, Punk Rock, and Beyond* (2002).

<sup>68</sup> See David Simonelli, “Anarchy, Pop and Violence: Punk Rock Subculture and the Rhetoric of Class, 1976-78,” (2002).

<sup>69</sup> Sex Pistols. *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here Come the Sex Pistols*. A &M Records, Vinyl, 1977.

<sup>70</sup> Chambers, 185.

Clearly, the Sex Pistols weren't the only British punk band. Punks like the Damned, the Buzzcocks, the Slits, Siouxsie and the Banshees, and the Vibrators emerged around the same time, some inspired by the prominence and sound of the Sex Pistols. Featuring breakneck speeds, piercing musical starkness, raw and raucous guitars and pounding drum beats, these British punk bands continued the anti-stardom, anti-soloing, anti-art rock movement that was so prevalent in the mainstream music industry but did not garner the same commercial success or widespread notoriety as the Sex Pistols.

Somewhat dissimilar in their more-melodic sounding music, but equally as relevant in the development of the musical genre, particularly within the framework of socially conscious lyric-writing, was the other major British punk band — the Clash. With the same punk musical style — recurring, simple harmonies, massive feedback and guitar distortion, rudimentary rhythms, and an anti-singing type of vocals — the Clash were less known for their onstage antics as they were for two significant genre developments, the infusion of reggae in the punk sound and the inclusion of folk-era type protest songs. In fact, these two elements were intertwined. Reggae represented a sense of black community, a musical personification of black daily life and associated pains, agonies, and delights; in England, this included habitual racial tensions and economic disparities.<sup>71</sup> The Clash, then, sought to incorporate this sense of identity, of unity, with the musical force of punk; as they sing, “Black man gotta lot a problems/But they don't mind throwing a brick/White people go to school/Where they teach you how to be thick/An' everybody's doing/Just what they're told to/An' nobody wants/To go to jail/White riot

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<sup>71</sup> See *The Rise and Fall of the Clash*, DVD, directed by Danny Garcia (Shout! Factory 2014).

I wanna riot...a riot of my own.”<sup>72</sup> Their use of reggae acts, to a certain extent, as symbol of the musical unification the band believes whites also need; this type of lyrical interrogative of race, class and economics was a regular theme for the Clash. “London’s Burning” opines on the nihilistic boredom infusing the city, which they liken to a new form of religion; “I’m So Bored with the U.S.A.” takes a similar slant, criticizing America’s obsession with both popular culture and violence (“Yankee detectives/Are always on the TV/Cos killers in America/Work seven days a week”)<sup>73</sup> and their quest for power and subsequent political corruption (“Never mind the stars and stripes/Let’s print the Watergate Tapes/I’ll salute the New Wave/And I hope nobody escapes”).<sup>74</sup> With their overt and pointed lyrics, the Clash brought a deliberate sociopolitical, rather than just cultural/personal, angle to punk, making race, class, poverty and violence acceptable themes on which to shred, thrash, and rock in punk.

The real substance, that is, the crux of meaning, of British punk rock was not, in any way, a radical or decisive evolution in the *sound* of punk. It wasn’t even the shift in lyrical content to more explicit political themes, though this is an important and influential modification. Instead, British punk’s legacy (and why so many laypeople think this particular genre of music originated in England, rather than in the U.S.) is its ability to speak to a vast youth audience, and, given its popularity and attending political, legal, media, and cultural attention, its capacity to rouse fear — fear of the unknown, fear of the unchallenged, fear of the marginalized. In this way, British punk acted as agency for the

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<sup>72</sup> The Clash, *The Clash*, CBS, Vinyl, 1977.

<sup>73</sup> The Clash, *The Clash*.

<sup>74</sup> The Clash, *The Clash*.



ostracized; it illuminated these particular sounds, this particular genre of music, as a capable, menacing and forceful weapon.

### **Before There was Punk in DC: Music in Washington pre-1978**

Washington, DC did not, in any cohesive sense, have a musical identity as a city until the late 1970s, when hardcore punk (and, simultaneously, go-go, though in different areas of the city, a dissimilar audience and a completely separate sound) became that definition. Detroit was home to Motown; Nashville had country; New Orleans got jazz and San Francisco birthed acid rock. But DC was different. While it laid claim as the birthplace of many a famous and diverse musician — including Duke Ellington, Marvin Gaye, Tim Buckley, Shirley Horn, Eva Cassidy and Al Jolson — and boasted some of the most popular music venues — The Bayou, The Cellar Door, the Warner Theater, and the Crazy Horse, just to name a few — the city had not produced a homegrown, consistent, genre of music.

Despite the lack of a definitive city-specific sound, the District did have a thriving African-American based musical community centered around jazz in the U Street area during the 1920s and 30s. Nicknamed the “Black Broadway” by jazz singer Pearl Bailey, U Street was lined with jazz clubs like Bohemian Caverns, Republic Gardens, Lincoln Colonnade, the Jungle Inn and True Reformers Hall, with DC-native Ellington and other jazz greats (including the latter years of Jelly Roll Morton) making frequent performances and even recording albums at the clubs. As racial tensions steadily increased, U Street became a primarily black neighborhood, blossoming with African-American-owned businesses like supper clubs, restaurants, and the aforementioned jazz

clubs, and the neighborhood symbolized the influence and magnitude of the black community in DC, as well as in the jazz scene.<sup>75</sup>

The primary focus of the city's musical ambitions were not, however, entrenched in the jazz-soaked, segregated streets of U, but instead were built both on the assumption of "high" culture's superiority and the city elite's fears of cultural mediocrity. Like much of DC, its musical history is premised on institutions thought to represent the majesty, standing and power of the city, as well as the hand (and financial backing) of government. The United States Marine Band was established by Congress in 1798, and was frequently invited to the White House to play patriotic hymns, originally composed marches, and the National Anthem;<sup>76</sup> since then, a bevy of high-brow musical institutions have been chartered and funded (at least in part) by the federal government, including the National Symphony Orchestra (1931), the Washington National Opera (1956), and the John F. Kennedy Center for Performing Arts (1971).<sup>77</sup> It seems, then, that only a specific *type* of music was understood as culture, and only a certain *genre* of sound was classified as worthy of Congressional monies and acknowledgement.

Indeed, the *New York Times* superciliously declares in their 1980 Arts and Leisure section that "Washington today is a changed city — no longer a cultural backwater but a metropolis where the arts are thriving..." going on to cite the Washington Opera and the National Symphony Orchestra.<sup>78</sup> Not only does this writer devalue any other forms of music in DC before these groups (including the jazz scene of the 20s and 30s) as "cultural

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<sup>75</sup> See Francine Curro Cary, *Urban Odyssey: A Multicultural History of Washington, D.C.* (1996); Kenneth Melder, *A City of Magnificent Intentions: A History of Washington, District of Columbia* (1997).

<sup>76</sup> [www.marineband.marines.mil/](http://www.marineband.marines.mil/)

<sup>77</sup> [www.kennedy-center.org](http://www.kennedy-center.org).

<sup>78</sup> Irvin Molotsky, "Culture Makes a Capital Gain," *The New York Times*, September 6, 1980, 1.

backwater,” along with the racial and economic implications connoted in such a label, but he also reifies one particular form of music as “real” arts, music that, once again, suggests certain socioeconomic and racial standing.

This association between conventionally high-class music and culture has a long history in the city: local citizen J. Hillary Taylor pleads with Congress in a 1948 letter to the editor to fund “this magnificent cultural goal” of a classical music conservatory.<sup>79</sup> Another questions whether “Washington, D.C. [is] a pool of intellectual and cultural stagnation” in his 1954 letter;<sup>80</sup> and columnist Judith Martin bemoans the fact that “concert halls are filled with lower-level culture types who are there to spin little day-dreams into music, rather than to take in sound in its purest form...” in 1973.<sup>81</sup> It seems as if the cultural elites *and* the general public accepted Theodor Adorno’s dichotomous classification between “serious” and “popular music,” categorizing any musical culture in Washington, DC as necessarily high culture — classical, chamber and opera.<sup>82</sup>

### *First Wave Punk in DC*

The avant-garde, proto-punk and first wave punk scene had, by 1976, centered itself in New York, but its influence was slowly spreading, its impact leeching outwards and down towards the District of Columbia. Despite the fact that no punk bands had ever played in DC, and the so-called alternative radio station WHFS played 60s and early 70s classic rock n’ roll, punk’s sound found its way into the city. A handful of punk-inspired bands sprouted in the two years before punk transformed into hardcore, playing at the

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<sup>79</sup> J. Hillary Taylor, letter to the editor, *The Washington Post*, January 26, 1948.

<sup>80</sup> Gino J. Simi, letter to the editor, *The Washington Post*, November 18, 1953.

<sup>81</sup> Judith Martin, “Defining Culture in Advance,” *The Washington Post*, September 9, 1973.

<sup>82</sup> See Theodor Adorno, “On Popular Music,” *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*, (1941); Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (1972).

few bars that would permit them, self-producing tracks in their basement, bonding together against a mainstream that rejected them, and forming the kernel of the first DC punk scene.<sup>83</sup>

In the summer of '76 Overkill was saluted as the city's first punk band, with lead singer Barney Jones scaring away patrons at local bar (and soon-to-be punk band-friendly venue) the Keg with his aggressive heckling of the audience and use of strange props while the band played loud, antagonistic garage rock covers.<sup>84</sup>

One of the longest running DC punk bands was the Kim Kane-led Slickee Boys. Before even playing one live show the band recorded an EP, *Hot and Cool*, including an original song entitled "Manganese Android Puppies," a psychedelic-garage rock sounding mash-up that would sound at home on a later-year Jefferson Airplane album, and four covers: the Hangmen's "What a Boy Can't Be," the Yardbird's "Psycho Daisies," an instrumental version of the theme from "Exodus," and Vince Taylor's "Brand New Cadillac." Channeling the punk DIY spirit, Kane formed his own label with a friend and put out the album on vinyl himself. Two years later, on a local label, run by Rockville native and resident record store owner Skip Groff, the band recorded *Mersey Mersey Me*, an explosive 45 with the straightforward punk-propelled drive of "Put a Bullet Thru the Jukebox," with a rant that declares "disco sucks!/It makes me want to puke."<sup>85</sup> While not strictly a first wave punk album in the Ramones/Dictators/Suicide

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<sup>83</sup> See Andersen and Jenkins, *Dance of Days* (2001).

<sup>84</sup> Mark Jenkins, "The Way We Slammed: Fifteen Years of Punk, Art, and Commerce at the 9:30 Club," *The Washington City Paper*, December 15, 1995.

<sup>85</sup> The Slickee Boys, *Mersey, Mersey Me*, Limp Records, Vinyl, 1978.

strain, the Slickee Boys' pop-punk-acid rock sound, DIY sensibilities, and provocative onstage antics made them one of DC's premier punk bands.<sup>86</sup>

Other pre-'78 DC bands sought their musical muses from around the edges of punk's sound. The Look, featuring New York transplant Howard Wuelfing and Georgetown University Foreign Service student Robert Goldstein, combined the art-rock sounds of Roxy Music with the trash rock energy of Richard Hell and the Dictators.<sup>87</sup> American University students Keith Campbell and Roddy Frantz founded the Controls, playing a Patti Smith-type of poetry-chanting, guitar-slashing, visceral punk. One of perhaps the oddest of the DC punk-style bands was White Boy, the brainchild of 36 year-old James Kowalski who dubbed himself "Mr. Ott" and enlisted his teenage son (called "Jake Whipp") and played a Suicide and Cramps-inspired kind of punk progressive heavy metal, with songs like "I Could Puke;" according to *New Musical Express* their 1977 DIY EP "made Iggy Pop sound like a church warden."<sup>88</sup> As DC residents took up guitars, formed bands, and embraced the DIY spirit, the kernels of punk took root.

## **The Sound of Hardcore**

### *Mainstream Music*

The popular music of the late 1970s stood in stark sonic contrast to that of punk. Indeed, the Billboard Top Songs from 1978 to 1980 almost exclusively included disco (Donna Summers, Le Freak, the Bee Gees, Andy Gibb), soft rock (Debbie Boone, Olivia Newton-John, Captain and Tennille), and pop rock (Rod Stewart, the Knack, Michael

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<sup>86</sup> See Jonathan L. Fischer, "John Hansen—Longtime D.C. Punk Fixture; Roadie, Soundman, Guitarist of The Slickee Boys—Is Dead," *The Washington City Paper*, September 10, 2010; Buzz McClain, Editorial Review of Slickee Boys, *The Washington Post*, December 2005.

<sup>87</sup> Andersen and Jenkins, *Dance of Days*.

<sup>88</sup> Quoted in Andersen and Jenkins, 12.

Jackson).<sup>89</sup> Entering an era of excess, after a drawn out war, disenchantment with politics, and a shift away from radicalism and to materialism, the music of the late 70s reflected this cultural shift. Disco exemplified this ideal of overindulgence and self-centeredness, as musicians took the back seat to audience participation and the sound celebrated the pulsating backbeat, sleek and funky sounds of synthesizers and electronica, rather than guitars and singer-songwriters.<sup>90</sup>

Then there was progressive rock, where musical innovation, elevated to the newly acquired status of art, was the crux of bands like Emerson, Lake and Palmer, and King Crimson. Eschewing the industry aspect of music, that is the marketability of music either financially or culturally, prog rock attempted to position itself outside the realm of most popular music. To them, the *art* of music was more important than the business of music. This sort of positioning, of course, perpetuated a politics of aesthetics, inching towards the modernistic canons of classical music. The intentional construction of progressive rock as art had explicit connotations of class and race. In both its worship of the studio and technology, and its reverence of high-brow classical music, prog rock reeked of upper-class pretension and exclusivity, a hallmark of the late 70s “me” era.<sup>91</sup>

Even rock n’ roll had become softer, less rebellious and more extravagant. Elton John, Fleetwood Mac, Journey, Foreigner, Styx — all fell under the ever-expanding label of rock, but eschewed its hard-driving, blues-based sonic history in favor of power ballads and soft rock-inflected pop rock, with string-arrangements and refined harmonies. At the same time, the record industry was quickly consolidating, with only a few

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<sup>89</sup> Billboard.com, accessed June 6, 2013, [www.billboard.com/charts](http://www.billboard.com/charts).

<sup>90</sup> Richard Dyer, “In Defense of Disco,” *Gay Left* 8 (1978).

<sup>91</sup> Andy Bennett, *Cultures of Popular Music*, (Open University Press, 2001).

companies controlling the entire musical marketplace. By 1973, seven major companies governed the record business — MCA, Capitol, RCA, A&M, CBS, Warner Communication, and Polygram — and accounting for 80 percent of the industry's \$4 billion profit.<sup>92</sup> This musical monopoly spurred an analogous rock star industry, with corporate music spawning corporate musicians raking in millions.<sup>93</sup> Music had become an industry, a business, rather than an outlet of and for rebellion and self-expression.

### *Hardcore: An Explosion of Noise*

Hardcore, a musical evolution of mid-70s American and British punk, developed in one of perhaps the least likely sources: the suburbs. Continuing in the musical tradition of stripping, shredding, and reconstituting rock n' roll for the sociopolitical times,<sup>94</sup> hardcore was a reaction to the commercialized, diluted and increasingly lifeless mainstream punk — as well as the other genres of music punks disdained — offered up to the masses in the form of “New Wave.” By attempting to capitalize on the vigor and brevity of punk and the artsy musicianship of progressive rock, New Wave became both undefinable (or, conversely, omnipresent, labeling everyone from Human League to Elvis Costello to the Dire Straits) and ultimately offensive to punk's particular sensibilities.

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<sup>92</sup> David P. Szatmary, *Rockin' In Time: A Social History of Rock-and-Roll*, (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1996), 219.

<sup>93</sup> According to *Forbes*, at least 50 rock musicians “earned and invested between \$2 and \$6 million a year,” which is three to six times *more* than the top-paid CEOs in the United States.

<sup>94</sup> As R&B reworked the blues, rock continuously transformed what R&B sounded like — Motown, folk, surf rock, to the British Invasion; and so too did first wave punk, modifying those rock genres for its own purposes.

Hardcore was the sonic retort, “an extreme, absolute most punk,”<sup>95</sup> a chaotic, uncontrolled and uncontrollable musical expression.

This new hardcore sound was characterized primarily through the amplification of punk’s original elements: volume, speed, brevity, simplicity and intensity. The instrumentation remains modest and accessible — drums, bass, guitar and vocals — and the level of musicianship proudly persisted as crude. From any objective, purely aesthetic stance, hardcore was noise and, frankly, sounded terrible. Yet the continuation of the populist model of playing, with its associated maladroitness, simply served to reinforce the sociopolitical message of the music: musical dissonance was social dissonance. As hardcore singer Vic Bondi says, “the disruption of normal conventions of music were designed to, sort of by analogy, suggest the disruption...in normal conventions of behavior and politics.”<sup>96</sup>

The electric guitar and bass continued to be one of the most potent and vital aspect of the hardcore sound, but its function noticeably changed. Speed was sovereign. Complexity was dwarfed by pace and the rule was “the faster the better.” While some more technically-advanced hardcore guitars switched up the tempo with a mid-paced beat occasionally thrown in, the general style was “short, powerful bursts of music” with an insistent attack of velocity.<sup>97</sup> In addition, guitar solos were nearly unilaterally eschewed, viewed as “a distraction, something that diluted the streamlined intensity of the form,”<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Steve Blush, *American Hardcore: A Tribal History* (Port Townsend: Feral House, 2010) 18.

<sup>96</sup> Quoted in Blush, 44.

<sup>97</sup> David B. Easley, ““It’s not my imagination, I’ve got a gun on my back!”: Style and Sound in Early American Hardcore Punk, 1978–1983” (PhD diss., Florida State University, 2011).

<sup>98</sup> Steve Waksman, *This Ain’t the Summer of Love: Conflict and Crossover in Heavy Metal and Punk* (Berkeley: University of California Press 2009), 264.



as well as signifier of traditional, art-driven “rock bullshit.”<sup>99</sup> Instead, guitar playing focused on straightforwardness; almost all hardcore bands played the same chord progressions (though, clearly, diverse sounds resulted from these simple chords), with emphasis on the repetition of riffs and the pure physicality — represented by the guitar’s timbre and volume — of sound.

Similarly, the drums in hardcore are premised on speed and repetition. Playing an uncomplicated one-two-one-two, with a fairly basic configuration of the drum kit, hardcore drumming embodies energy and velocity, requiring an enormous amount of stamina. Common punk beats have two eighth notes on the third beat or both the first and third beat (b-s-bb-s or bb-s-bb-s) and mix and match the hi-hat beats on the tom-tom and the crash cymbal, creating the riotous, disorderly sound of hardcore.<sup>100</sup>

The power and aggression of hardcore is also reflected in its vocals, which mirror the debauched, flying feeling of the guitars and drums. “Singing” in the traditional harmonious sense was obfuscated by shouting, growling, bleating, shrieking and yelping. Lyrics are often undecipherable, due to both the vocal style and the intensely fast pace with which they’re being delivered. What the voice expressed — pain, belligerence, injury, threat — was more important than pitch or quality of sound. Much like Bob Dylan was lauded for what his words convey, rather than his vocal quality (which is often criticized as nasal, slurred, and abrasive), hardcore’s vocals cared just as much about form as content; indeed, form — in the shape of vocals — was representative *of* content.

The sound of hardcore was the sound of a new generation. As DC hardcore legend Ian MacKaye notes, “it was the manifestation of youth. It was fast, it was loud, it

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<sup>99</sup> Blush, 43.

<sup>100</sup> Easley, “‘It’s not my imagination, I’ve got a gun on my back!’”

was unpredictable.”<sup>101</sup> Hardcore made good on the original promise of punk — to declare mutiny on mainstream music and use noise, with all its shocking cacophonous and chaotic implications, to represent the cultural and political milieu of youth.

### *West Coast Hardcore Bands*

While Washington D.C. had one of the earliest and most influential hardcore punk scenes in the country there were, emerging nearly concurrently, other pockets of cohesive, meaningful and distinctive hardcore bands around the country, specifically in California. In fact, the scene started, and continued until the late 1980s, to be a regional phenomenon, with each city having geographically-specific derivations and idiosyncrasies in sound, lyrics, and attitude.

Southern California was home to one of the first hardcore scenes, created by suburban kids disillusioned by the middle-class utopian guaranteed to them. Bands like the Germs, who avoided vocals in favor of an anarchic, frenzied, raw atonal assault on the sense, Fear, who perpetuated a hardcore staple of vehement and often vicious sound and physical force with their songs and performances (which often included bloody brawls), and the Circle Jerks, the Angry Samoans and the Dickies, all generated an angry, brutal sound that stood in stark contrast to the sunny, laid-back culture of the beach towns from which they hailed.<sup>102</sup> Most famously, Hermosa Beach-produced hardcore legend Black Flag played hardcore that was “louder, darker, and more desperate...express[ing] the despondency and rage felt by millions of Americans...”<sup>103</sup> Self-taught musicians who

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<sup>101</sup> *American Hardcore*, DVD, directed by Paul Rachman (USA: Sony Classics, 2006).

<sup>102</sup> Blush, *American Hardcore*; George Hurchalla, *Going Underground: American Punk 1979-1992* (2006).

<sup>103</sup> *We Owe You Nothing: Punk Planet, The Collected Interviews*, ed. Daniel Sinker (Chicago: Punk Planet Books, 2008), 79.

valued emotion over technical mastery, distortion, ruthlessness of sound and a stripped-down aesthetic that was loud and abrasive, Black Flag not only became the hardcore vehicle for DC teen Henry Rollins, but also one of the most influential hardcore bands ever.

Up the coast in San Francisco, the Dead Kennedys epitomized the political rage of hardcore. The band's name itself was meant to "symbolize the end of the American Dream and the beginning of the decline and fall of the American empire," according to lead singer Jello Biafra.<sup>104</sup> Their sound was classic hardcore — loud, hostile, fast and hard — but their most significant contribution to the scene was the interminable, blatant and passionate ideological campaign, particularly through the music itself. "California Über Alles" overtly ridicules Governor Jerry Brown; "Holiday in Cambodia" criticizes fascism and American complacency; "Nazi Punks Fuck Off" attacks white supremacists who were using the mantle of punk to propagate their hate; and "Moral Majority" denounces the religious right who claimed the higher moral ground.

Other hardcore scenes popped up beginning in the early 1980s, inspired by the West Coast and DC hardcore scenes. Boston, New York, Vancouver, San Antonio and Austin, all had spinoffs from their hardcore predecessors. Despite the regional differences, though, each scene remained faithful to the musical template of hardcore, using sound to represent the frustration, angst, and antagonism they felt and felt directed towards them as youth in a new morning in America.<sup>105</sup>

California may have been the birthplace of hardcore punk, but DC was where hardcore found its true self. Indeed, still today hardcore "implies a sound, style and

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<sup>104</sup> Quoted in Hurchalla, *Going Underground: American Punk 1979-1992* (Stuart, FL: Zuo Press, 2006), 14.

<sup>105</sup> As Ronald Reagan's 1984 presidential advertisement touted.

aesthetic coming out of early 80s DC.”<sup>106</sup> The two most influential DC hardcore bands were, without a doubt, Bad Brains and Minor Threat — the former an all African-American hardcore punk band who inspired, encouraged and taught the latter, including lead singer and the personification of the DC punk scene still, Ian MacKaye. There were, however, other significant DC hardcore bands, which, while not garnering as much national attention (save Henry Rollins, who left DC-based SOA to be the lead singer for the formidable and famed Black Flag) were significant to the development and continuation of DC’s hardcore identity. While the following exploration of DC hardcore bands is in no way exhaustive it does cover those bands that not only performed and produced hardcore albums but also did so within the heyday of hardcore in DC — 1979-1983.<sup>107</sup>

### *Bad Brains*

Comprised of lead singer HR, drummer Earl Hudson, bassist Darryl Jenifer and guitarist Dr. Know, Bad Brains emerged from Washington, DC in 1978, creating a sound and music that “defined the essence of hardcore.”<sup>108</sup> Jenifer lived in Southeast DC, a predominately African-American district, and in high school befriended neighbor Sid McCray, who eventually introduced Jenifer to British punk rock, via the Sex Pistols and the Damned. Paul Hudson (who would later change his name to HR) and his younger brother, Earl Hudson, were products of a military family, moving all over the world until settling into a Maryland suburb directly across from Southeast DC. After graduating high

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<sup>106</sup> Blush, 149.

<sup>107</sup> This dissertation will explore the musical and cultural transformation of hardcore, including its foray into post-punk and emo, as well as the sociopolitical, economic, generational changes that spurred such a change, in greater detail in Chapter Six.

<sup>108</sup> Blush, 131.

school and flunking out of a pre-med major in college, Paul picked up work as a security guard (as well as a destructive heroin habit). With his son's birth in 1977 and a lack of direction in his professional life except for his love of music, Paul was inspired by his father's copy of Napoleon Hill's *Think and Grow Rich*, a Great Depression-era self-help book that touted a concept known as Positive Mental Attitude – PMA. Harnessing PMA to his musical aspirations, Paul formed a jazz fusion band with friend Gary Miller (soon to be known as Dr. Know), brother Earl, and Jenifer. Modeled off of their musical heroes Return to Forever, one disastrous basement show (including a stage fright-stricken Jenifer, who refused to play, and a cascade of boos and beer bottles raining down on the band) ended the short-lived jazz fusion band. With the assistance of McCray, the band absorbed the sounds and styles of punk rock, connecting to the sense of rebellion, of belligerency, and of shock and awe that punk embraced.<sup>109</sup>

Starting as what could only be called a punk cover band (playing the Sex Pistols, the Damned, and the Saints, amongst others), Bad Brains began performing their own material in live shows across the area — the Atlantis (later to become the 9:30 Club), the Bayou, and Madams Organ, to name a few — and quickly amassed a reputation for mind-numbing speed, flawless technical skill, and nearly interminable power and dynamism. In 1979 they released their first recorded music on a Limp Records DC punk compilation *30 Seconds Over DC* with their song “Don't Bother Me.” The premier hardcore band in DC, Bad Brains played anywhere in the city that would have them, causing mayhem wherever they went — and often being banned at venues, leading to

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<sup>109</sup> Andersen and Jenkins, 26-33; Darryl A. Jenifer “Play Like a White Boy: Hard Dancing in the City of Chocolate” (2011).

their eventual hardcore classic “Banned in DC.”<sup>110</sup> As they refined their sound and their rowdy, musically explosive shows became legendary, Bad Brains took their act on the road, hitting the burgeoning hardcore scene in New York, and attempting a tour in England (which was quickly aborted after an incident with British customs). The group finally recorded their first full-length album in New York during three months in 1981, releasing *Bad Brains* in 1982 as a cassette tape. With cover art featuring the Capitol with a bolt of lightning striking and shattering its dome, the album became the definitive sound of hardcore punk, music that was “monstrously tight and musical and exhilarating and inspirational.”<sup>111</sup> As Adam Yauch of the Beastie Boys claims in the liner notes of the tape, *Bad Brains* is “the best punk/hardcore album of all time.”

That album, however, proved to be not just the pinnacle of Bad Brains’ hardcore career, it was also their only hardcore album. By 1982, the band had fully dedicated themselves to the Rastafarian lifestyle, a religion and way of life HR (and some of the other band members) had been dabbling in during the previous years. They abandoned hardcore in favor of full-time reggae and isolated themselves musically and socially, adopting a patois, a hatred of Babylon (a white- controlled, decaying modern civilization), homophobic views, and an eventual dissolution of their commitment to DC (they moved full-time to New York) and the hardcore punk scene. Their influence, however, continued well past their punk demise, propelling an entirely new generation of DC hardcore bands.<sup>112</sup>

### *Teen Idles and Minor Threat*

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<sup>110</sup> See Andersen and Jenkins, *Dance of Days*; Blush, *American Hardcore*; Hurchella, *Going Underground*.

<sup>111</sup> Jerry Williams, quoted in Blush, 139.

<sup>112</sup> See Andersen and Jenkins, *Dance of Days*; Blush, *American Hardcore*; Hurchella, *Going Underground*.

Before there was Minor Threat there was Teen Idles, and before Teen Idles, there was the Slinkees. Galvanized by a Bad Brains, Cramps and Urban Verbs show, Wilson High School students Ian MacKaye and Jeff Nelson abandoned their long hair and their focus on skateboarding for punk, forming the fleeting punk-inspired band the Slinkees. Adding fellow classmates Mark Sullivan and Geordie Grindle, the teens picked up instruments for the first time in their lives, playing covers of “Louie Louie” and originals like “I Drink Milk” and “Conservative Rock.” When singer Sullivan left for college, the band re-formed as the Teen Idles, this time with MacKaye’s friend and local punk Nathan Strejcek on vocals (despite the fact that he had never sung before); they performed their first show in Strejcek’s basement at the end of 1979.<sup>113</sup>

The Teen Idles emulated the style of their musical heroes Bad Brains, who had befriended the young band members and even had taken to borrowing their equipment and utilizing their practice space. Says Nelson, “Bad Brains influenced us incredibly with their speed and frenzied delivery. We went from sounding like the Sex Pistols to playing every song as fast and hard as we could.”<sup>114</sup> After the boys graduated high school they took a bus to California to play two shows in Los Angeles and San Francisco. The trip cemented the alienation and marginalization they were already experiencing in DC. Thrown out of MacKaye’s uncle house in L.A., beat up at the Greyhound station, turned away from Disneyland (the security guard called them “punk faggots”), the trip also had a positive effect, coalescing a sense of hardcore identity, particularly in its fashion (Doc Martens or work boots, chains and spurs, and bondage straps sewed onto their pants) and

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<sup>113</sup> Andersen and Jenkins, 36-37.

<sup>114</sup> Quoted in Andersen and Jenkins, 55.

an inclination towards violence as a mechanism for self-defense.<sup>115</sup> This estrangement was also developing in the DC scene, with older punks (minus Bad Brains) mockingly labeling them “Georgetown punks” or “teeny-punks” and criticizing their lack of musical aptitude as a laughable novelty. But the band persevered, ultimately adopting the disparaging “Georgetown punks” as a rallying cry and putting out their eight-track *Minor Disturbance* EP in 1981 on the MacKaye and Nelson-formed record label, Dischord, funded by each band member contributing the \$150 they made on the tour to fund the production of the album.<sup>116</sup> Even before the album was released, however, the band dissolved, with Grindle quitting, Strejcek forming Youth Brigade and MacKaye and Nelson remaining and reconstructing anew, creating perhaps the most famous hardcore band of all time — Minor Threat.

MacKaye, who had been unsatisfied with Strejcek’s domination of writing and singing, took over as lead singer, Nelson continued on drums, and they added Lyle Preslar on guitar and Brian Baker on bass. Playing regularly at venues around DC and still modeling their sound off their friends and musical inspiration, Bad Brains, Minor Threat “blew away” crowds playing “extremely fast but with extreme precision.”<sup>117</sup> In 1981 the band put out two landmark albums on their Dischord label, *Minor Threat* and *In My Eyes*, “one of the greatest punk records of all time,”<sup>118</sup> with MacKaye “hiss[ing] out the lyrics like they’re meant to kill.”<sup>119</sup> With these two albums also began

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<sup>115</sup> Blush, 151-3.

<sup>116</sup> Blush, 155.

<sup>117</sup> Howard Wuelfing, quoted in Andersen and Jenkins, 73.

<sup>118</sup> Hurchalla, 63.

<sup>119</sup> Sarah Weatherill, “DC Update,” *Noise* #5.



(unintentionally, according to MacKaye) the straightedge hardcore phenomenon, a no-drinking, drug-free, promiscuous sex-abstinent movement.<sup>120</sup>

After a brief breakup when Preslar went to college, Minor Threat reunited in 1982 when Preslar dropped out of school, and Minor Threat went on tour with fellow DC hardcore bands, moved into the Dischord house (a sort of DC hardcore punk community house where many teen punks lived outside their parents' homes for the first time), and the band dealt with accusations of selling out (given the band's break up and re-formation). By 1983 Minor Threat had begun to morph, in part because of Baker's demand to switch from bass to guitar and in part with the addition of Steve Hansgen on bass. The band released *Out of Step* in 1983, the biggest Dischord release yet, but the chemistry of the band had been irreparably damaged. Minor Threat's demise in 1983 signaled the corresponding passing of hardcore in DC. While punk was still alive in the District, it changed courses, signaling an end to this particular punk subgenre.

### SOA

State of Alert (SOA) was a short-lived hardcore band known less for their music and more for their frontman Henry Garfield (soon to be Henry Rollins, in honor of Bad Brains' H.R) and the violent eruptions that occurred during their performances. Garfield and MacKaye were childhood friends, high school classmates, skateboarders and, in the late 1970s, huge punk enthusiasts.<sup>121</sup> While MacKaye formed the Teen Idles, Garfield, who "couldn't play an instrument but...could damn well carry the cabinets and amps" became their de facto roadie, going to California with the band and recording every live

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<sup>120</sup> For a more in-depth explanation of the straight edge movement, please refer to Chapter Four.

<sup>121</sup> Ian MacKaye, in conversation with the author, March 19, 2013.

show on his stepfather's tape deck.<sup>122</sup> By the time the Teen Idles disbanded and reformulated as Minor Threat, taking with them the Exhorts singer Lyle Preslar, Garfield had decided his lack of musical training shouldn't be a barrier to being in a punk band, and filled Preslar's role in the Exhorts, renaming the band State of Alert.<sup>123</sup> SOA started playing in October of 1980, with hardcore's signature bellicose, uncompromising sound. The music was rudimentary but radical, particularly Rollins himself who became renowned for his provocative, aggressive singing and performing style. Dischord released their 1981 EP *No Policy*, an album about, according to Garfield, "anti-everything I didn't like...it was all about no fun, fear, oppression. My message was 'Kill the World.'"<sup>124</sup> The album was stripped-down, even slipshod, but its energy, DIY-ethos and sound "beats your goddamn face in."<sup>125</sup>

The band never had the opportunity to record another album, however. After jumping on stage at a hardcore show in New York, singing along with friend HR and even sitting in as a guest singer for his favorite Black Flag song "Clocked In," the California-based vocalist Dez Cadena called Garfield in D.C. and asked him to audition for the band (Cadena wanted to play second guitar rather than sing). Garfield nailed it, and after SOA's final, violence-filled performance in Philadelphia, he left D.C., and his last name, and headed for Los Angeles as Henry Rollins.<sup>126</sup>

### *Government Issue*

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<sup>122</sup> Quoted in Blush, 151.

<sup>123</sup> Andersen and Jenkins, *Dance of Days*.

<sup>124</sup> Quoted in Andersen and Jenkins, 81.

<sup>125</sup> Kill From The Heart, Accessed June 12, 2013, [www.Killfromtheheart.com](http://www.Killfromtheheart.com).

<sup>126</sup> *We Owe You Nothing: Punk Planet, The Collected Interviews* (2008).

The longest running (and with the most line-up changes, nearly 12 in all) DC hardcore band, together in one form or another from 1980-1989, Government Issue (GI) began at the Unheard Music Festival at dc space, a Wuelfing-organized two-day punk-style music festival.<sup>127</sup> That evening was the first time the band had ever played together — and it showed. John Stabb, GI's singer and only perpetual member, bounced up and down, screaming out mostly incomprehensible lyrics, while the rest of the newly formed band, all classmates with Stabb from St. Anselm's Abbey School in Northeast DC played their instruments like they had never seen them before. Stimulated by the sounds of SOA, Minor Threat, and Bad Brains, GI took a similar hardcore approach, with an utter lack of musical experience, a hard-driving, aggressive tempo, and many songs under the one minute mark. However, unlike many of the other DC hardcore bands, GI tended towards overtly political lyrics in their first two years, penning "Hey Ronnie," a 1981 diatribe against the newly-elected president, and "No Rights," about the police's abuses of punk teenagers. By 1982, though, Stabb's lyrics were "more on a gut level in the vein of Black Flag...music is an intense therapy session for me."<sup>128</sup> The sound began to transform as well, incorporating more melodies and structure.

During the band's zenith, and hardcore's height, GI "was one of the best bands in the history of American Hardcore," releasing *Legless Bull* in 1981 (on MacKaye and Nelson's Dischord label), *Make an Effort* in '82 and *Boycott Stabb* in '83, before succumbing to a more mainstream heavy rock sound.<sup>129</sup> According to guitarist Tom Lyle (who joined in 1982), the band was never monogamous to the hardcore punk identity:

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<sup>127</sup> *Dischord*, Accessed June 12, 2013, [www.dischord.com/band-government-issue](http://www.dischord.com/band-government-issue).

<sup>128</sup> Quoted in Andersen and Jenkins, 123.

<sup>129</sup> Dave Smalley of Dag Nasty, quoted in Blush. 164.

“We weren’t going to march lock-step either musically, lyrically, or anything else like any other band on the DC scene, or anywhere else.”<sup>130</sup>

### *Faith*

Before the formation of Faith, vocalist Alec MacKaye (Ian’s younger brother) and guitarist Eddie Janney played together in the Untouchables, putting out singles “Nic Fit,” “Rat Patrol,” and “I Hate You” on Dischord’s 1981 hardcore DC punk compilation *Flex Your Head*, before storming the stage at the 9:30 club (after being rejected by the club’s owner) and borrowing Minor Threat’s instruments for their farewell performance of “If the Kids Are United.”<sup>131</sup> Soon after, in November of 1981, Alec and Eddie added SOA guitarist Michael Hampton, bassist Chris Bald and drummer Ivor Hansen and reorganized as Faith, playing their first show at HB Woodlawn High School and quickly making an impact on the hardcore scene. Sonic Youth guitarist Thurston Moore cites Faith as “the most potent distillation” of DC hardcore, with their “refined minimalism...it wasn’t just about the trash and the speed and the sound...it was this raw style of songwriting.”<sup>132</sup> The band put out two releases — a split LP with fellow DC hardcore band Void, 1982’s *Faith/Void* and 1983’s big brother Ian-produced *Subject To Change* — shifting, in a subtle but significant way, the sound of hardcore.

This sonic swing was due, in part, to the use of two guitarists. Though Alec asserts this arrangement was to integrate more “complex guitar ideas,” to avoid guitar malfunctions at live shows and because they “just wanted a fuller sound,” the effect was a

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<sup>130</sup> *Scanner Zine*, Accessed June 13, 2013, [www.scannerzine.com/governmentissue](http://www.scannerzine.com/governmentissue).

<sup>131</sup> Andersen and Jenkins, 79.

<sup>132</sup> *Dischord*, Accessed June 13, 2013, [www.dischord.com/faith-thurston-moore](http://www.dischord.com/faith-thurston-moore).

more melodic, softer hardcore sound.<sup>133</sup> Instead of hardcore's patented wanton, whirlwind chord changes, the guitars are polyrhythmic, with more complex guitar work and, in an almost treasonous move, even some guitar solos.

Alec's singing style had also changed; while in the Untouchables his grueling, demanding shout-singing style often left him "to pass out or hyperventilate," but his vocals in the Faith were well-defined and lucid.<sup>134</sup> As the Hold Steady's lead singer Craig Finn notes, in Faith's brand of hardcore "musicality often trumps their rage," music that is "angry and dangerous without being cartoonish."<sup>135</sup> The lyrics still tend towards the nihilistic (with tracks like "No Choice," "More of the Same," and "Limitations"), and the songs still less refined and more visceral, but Alec's darker, more evocative singing style marked him as "a gravel-throated chronicler of turmoil and tedium."<sup>136</sup>

Before *Subject to Change* was even released, however, the band dissolved due to internal personality clashes, with all the band members dispersing and eventually sprouting into some of the most influential and important new post-hardcore bands in DC.

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Besides the unique and geographically-specific hardcore sound these DC bands all shared, they also had the DIY spirit that exemplifies hardcore punk. Coming from the suburbs of Maryland and Virginia and the far-flung neighborhoods of Washington, D.C.,

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<sup>133</sup> Brent Burton, "Faith Discusses Its New Dischord Reissue: 'History Has Been Kind,'" *Washington City Paper*, September 29, 2011.

<sup>134</sup> Blush, 164.

<sup>135</sup> Craig Finn, "The Faith and Void: the glorious Dischord of 1980s harDCore punk," *The Guardian*, October 27, 2011.

<sup>136</sup> Brent Burton, review of *Subject To Change Plus First Demo* by the Faith, *The Washington City Paper* (September 30, 2011).

these bands were inspired to pick up instruments, sing into microphones, and write lyrics— without any formal musical education. What they did have was passion, angst, and feelings of alienation and isolation, both personally and politically, that found articulation through sound. And, in developing these songs, these albums, and performing where they could whenever they could, DC hardcore bands also found they weren't alone. A small, fiercely dedicated and equally discontented audience related to the music and its message — soon, DC had an entire hardcore punk scene.

### **Washington D.C.: Politics, Place, Race and Space**

Washington, DC has always been a study in dichotomies: a city built physically upon the backs on enslaved African-Americans but symbolically on the notion of freedom and democracy; a town celebrated as the beacon of “we the people” yet thwarted by a federally-imposed inability to self-govern; a place for the elite, powerful and white to gather and yield influence, but also a home for the marginalized, disenfranchised and (primarily) black who are largely ignored. Simultaneously a Southern town and a Northern city, a private symbol for the country and a public symbol for its residents, DC's identity “repeatedly has been contested and redefined...to express and represent [the] interests and values” of whomever inhabits the place.<sup>137</sup>

Chosen by Congress in July of 1790 as the site for the new seat of national government and purchased in 1791, the District of Columbia was selected for both its proximity to the home of George Washington (in Mt. Vernon) and its economic functionality as a waterfront town situated in one of the busiest ports and most well-

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<sup>137</sup> Carl Abbott, *Political Terrain: Washington, DC* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 7.

located rivers. The District soon filled with an overwhelming number of African-Americans, both slaves and free blacks, and, after the Civil War, Washington became known as a “Negro regional city” where black businesses and homes thrived and prospered.<sup>138</sup> Yet there remained an underlying friction between the races, a fact emphasized by the 1875 speech of Frederick Douglass, which criticized the still-remaining racism of white Washingtonians whom Douglass characterized as “masters without slaves, lords without lands.”<sup>139</sup>

The racial strife of the city was not the only problem DC was facing. While the subsequent decades saw an advent of industrialization and modernization projects aimed at building the city’s symbolic and serviceable stature, its inhabitants (both black and white) were stripped of their agency, as the national government removed all voting rights of those in DC. This disenfranchisement didn’t stop the population growth in the city, however, and as the 1900s ushered in the “city beautiful” movement, that (along with parks, train stations, and monuments), filled the city with new citizens. The Northwest neighborhoods in DC were populated with upper-class whites and their accompanying mansions, and the Southwest was populated with rowhouses of working-class folks, leaving the alleyways of these neighborhood packed with the tiny ramshackle homes of thousands of poor, chiefly African-American families.<sup>140</sup> Through the early 1900s, tensions remained between the echelons of the white and powerful in the city and the black and marginalized—the 1919 race riots, the segregated downtown business section, the evolving gentrification of neighborhoods (and subsequent displacement of

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<sup>138</sup> Abbott, *Political Terrain*, 9.

<sup>139</sup> Frederick Douglass, *A Lecture on Our National Capital* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1978), 12.

<sup>140</sup> Keith Melder, *City of Magnificent Intentions*, (Washington, DC: Intac Inc., 1997), 500-508.

blacks), and the onslaught of white, federal workers entering an always-expanding government. By the time of the Civil Rights Movement, the March on Washington, and the Poor People's Campaign in 1968, racial equality had come to the forefront of not only the national consciousness but also the local one too.<sup>141</sup> It was the product of this Washington that the youths of DC, those who created, embraced, played, and produced punk were born into in the 1970s.

### *The Political Landscape*

By the second year of Jimmy Carter's presidency, 1978, the American economy was plummeting: inflation was sky-high, the cost of living had increased exponentially, prices on everyday items were out of control, there was an oil embargo and ensuing energy crisis, and government attempts to battle these economic dangers failed on a grand and public scale. Attitudes towards debt and consumption had also shifted, with the advent and wide dissemination of credit cards, devaluation of savings funds, and continual near-idolization of conspicuous consumption, while at the same time there was an upsurge of international market competition, slowly prying loose the chokehold America had had in the business and manufacturing world.<sup>142</sup> Furthermore, Carter entered office already encumbered by an endemic distrust of government; after the disasters of the Vietnam War and Watergate, the public had lost faith in both the moral compass of their elected officials and in their ability to solve any of the nation's most

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<sup>141</sup> See R. Beauregard, *Gentrification and the City* (1986); Howard Gillette, Jr., *Between Justice and Beauty: Race, Planning, and the Failure of Urban Policy in Washington D.C* (1995); Melder, *City of Magnificent Intentions* (1997).

<sup>142</sup> See Robert M. Collins, *Transforming America: Politics and Culture During the Reagan Years* (2007); Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society and Politics* (2001).



pressing problems. As Carter dubbed it, a “malaise” had beset the country, a condition diagnosed by “a crisis of confidence...that strikes at the very soul and spirit of our national will,” only exacerbated by his administration’s powerlessness to resolve the economic and energy crises.<sup>143</sup> Trust in government, and its adjacent institutions — including the media, the military and even professionals such as doctors and lawyers — was at an all-time low: from 80% in the 1950s down to 33% in 1976.<sup>144</sup>

This portrait of government, and by extension the city of Washington D.C., which had become an easy metaphor, was painted with the patina of incompetence, overreach, and micromanagement — a depiction that set the proverbial stage for a simmering anti-liberalism and the election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency. Campaigning on a softened version of conservative extremism, Reagan played to a so-called “anti-elitism,” as well as a promise of a tax revolution, shoring up all at once class and racial resentments, in addition to social and cultural disparities. Intellectuals (also known as bureaucrats) were portrayed as affirmative-action loving, middle-class hating Democrats, and the big-tax government was splattered with allegations of taking “our” money to fund “them” (social welfare programs that disproportionately affected those of color). Moreover, after the years of women’s liberation and changing social mores, Reagan’s brand of conservatism promised a return to “family values,” abjuring the immorality and wantonness of both expanded sexual and gender roles, as well as its implications towards the government. The California governor’s election, however, seemed not as much an

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<sup>143</sup> “Energy and National Goals: Address to the Nation, July 15, 1979,” in *Public Papers of the Presidents: Jimmy Carter, 1979* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1980) 1235-1241.

<sup>144</sup> Quoted in Seymour Martin Lipset and William Schneider, *The Confidence Gap: Business, Labor, and Government in the Public Mind* (New York: The Free Press, 1983) 15.

unambiguous adoption of the neoconservative ideology but more of a referendum on the country's feelings towards the government.<sup>145</sup>

Yet the nostalgic, near-obsessive romanticization and glorification of Reagan that so often occurs on the Right in contemporary society was nowhere to be seen in the first years of his presidency. By 1982, two years into his first term, a recession loomed large as the manufacturing industry neared insolvency, unemployment rocketed and the economy continued to wither; moreover, after cutting a panoply of social welfare programs, drug abusers and mentally ill patients were kicked out of institutions, causing a surge in homelessness; all this reflected in Reagan's approval rating, which had nosedived to a meager 35%.<sup>146</sup>

#### *Place, Class and Race: A City Divided*

Despite the larger national trends and overarching political undercurrents in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the city of DC cannot be understood as a direct reflection or mirror of the bigger partisan or demographic topography. Undoubtedly influenced by the prevailing political winds (particularly given the government-centric workforce populating the city), Washington was also a unique and dichotomous microcosm of the racial and class-based contradictions and contrasts occurring in the rest of the country.

The end of World War II saw an explosion of urban growth in the city, bolstered in large part to the continued expansion of government and private industry. Such a population boom eventually necessitated sprawl — an expansion of home growth beyond city lines and into the suburbs of Virginia and Maryland. The racial composition of the

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<sup>145</sup> See Collins, *Transforming America* (2007); Craig Shirley, *Reagan's Revolution* (2005).

<sup>146</sup> Schulman, 218-220.

District and the suburbs also fluctuated greatly; in 1950 there were a little over 500,000 whites and only about 280,000 blacks living in the city, but by 1970 those numbers had almost diametrically switched (209,272 whites and 537,712 blacks), and sustained until 1980 (with less than 172,000 whites and almost 450,000 blacks).<sup>147</sup> Nearly all of the expansion in the suburbs was from the settlement of white families from other places in the country, while most of the African American newcomers inhabited DC.<sup>148</sup> This racially divided geography also applied to the city itself, which saw a segregation in housing and neighborhoods based primarily on race and secondarily on class.

### *Anacostia*

Bisected by the river, Anacostia was historically the neglected stepchild of the city, developing as a neighborhood known in the late 1970s as both a cohesive and strong community for blacks and, simultaneously and somewhat contradictory, as a “symbol of urban decay and danger.”<sup>149</sup> Indeed, the Anacostia River served as “the imaginary railroad tracks dividing the city” between Black and White, civilization and ghetto.<sup>150</sup>

Similar to the racial demography of many DC neighborhoods, Anacostia was originally comprised of mainly whites, who made up a whopping 82% of the population in 1950. Largely a rural area, after World War II city housing and zoning policies promoted the building of garden apartments and public housing, causing a deluge of new

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<sup>147</sup> Campbell Gibson and Kay Jung, *Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals By Race, 1790 to 1990, and By Hispanic Origin, 1970 to 1990, For The United States, Regions, Divisions, and State* (U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division, Working paper #56, 2002).

<sup>148</sup> Melder, 505-6.

<sup>149</sup> Eddie Dean, “A Brief History of White People in Southeast,” *Washington City Paper*, October 16, 1998.

<sup>150</sup> Dean, “A Brief History of White People in Southeast.”

residences and families, most of which were African-American. Still, the neighborhood remained severely segregated, with separate housing areas, schools, churches and businesses. By the time the era of civil rights had dawned, and post-1968 riots in DC, blacks in Anacostia had become the majority. In part because of white-flight to the suburbs and in part due to the gentrification of other neighborhoods under the veneer of “urban renewal,” and Southeast continued to be abandoned. Regardless of the sector’s urban growth (most of which was African-American families), city services were scarce and inadequate: public schools were crumbling and overloaded, mass transportation was scanty, and public spaces were woefully missing.<sup>151</sup> This was the neighborhood that helped promulgate the nickname “Chocolate City,” with the lowest per capita income, highest rate of violent crime, and highest percentage of African-Americans in Washington.<sup>152</sup>

### *Capitol Hill, Adams Morgan and Gentrification*

Waving the banner of “restoration” the historically poor and black areas of Washington became objects of upper- and middle-class gentrification in the late 1960s and into the 70s and 80s. Most of these neighborhoods had been decaying, with real estate stagnating and houses that had been “run down by overcrowding and the combined

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<sup>151</sup> It is from this neighborhood and these specific racial and economic factors that the fraternal twin of punk was born: go-go. Unlike punk, the songs of go-go were not laced with overtly political references, and the musical structure was grounded in funk and the notion of groove; but similar to punk, go-go offered agency to a marginalized community. While the two music scenes were developing at nearly the exact same time there was little to no crossover between the two scenes, a division based primarily on issues of race and positions on consumption and capitalism.

<sup>152</sup> Kip Lornell and Charles C. Stephenson, Jr. *The Beat: Go-Go Music from Washington, D.C.*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), x.

neglect of tenants, landlords and cautious bankers.”<sup>153</sup> Buying up inexpensive properties in Capitol Hill, Foggy Bottom, Mt. Pleasant, Logan Circle and Adams Morgan, the trend in these neighborhoods became quickly clear-cut: white, well-off individuals. In some cases, these people were hoping for a real estate boom, attempting to restore and flip these houses, selling them to the increasing influx of back-to-the-city whites; others were simply interested in the multiracial character of the neighborhoods, as well as their suitability for commuting.<sup>154</sup> Either way, however, the end was the same — the displacement of poor and often black and Latino families who were displaced by rising rent and mortgage prices.

#### *Georgetown: Hardcore is Born*

Georgetown, the professed birthplace of the DC punk rock scene, had, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the same restoration and gentrification attitude as other historical neighborhoods. Undoubtedly marked by both its financial and sociocultural disparities with the rest of the city, Georgetown acts as both the literal site of hardcore’s formulation (as most of the DC punk bands formed within this neighborhood and a number of places of scene importance, including a record store, a high school, and show venues, were all located in Georgetown) and a metaphoric site of DC’s class and racial tensions.

With an overall city population of over three million, many of whom were “distinctively affluent and well educated,”<sup>155</sup> Georgetown was the seat of the new bourgeoisie, where there was “a disproportionately high incidence of ‘money and brains’

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<sup>153</sup> Jeffrey R. Henig, *Gentrification in Adams Morgan: Political and Commercial Consequences of Neighborhood Change* (Thesis, George Washington University 1982), 2.

<sup>154</sup> Melder, 510-512.

<sup>155</sup> Paul Knox, “The Restless Urban Landscape: Economic and Sociocultural Change and the Transformation of Metropolitan Washington, DC,” *Association of American Geographers* (1991): 188.

and ‘bohemian mix’ neighborhoods.”<sup>156</sup> During the New Deal years, with a massive influx of college-educated government employees, Georgetown became the symbol of gentrification in DC, and, in the 1970s, finally reached its exalted rank in “the ‘influence industry,’ with its emphasis on the iconography of prestige and image,” when the Waterfront was secured by a national park and rapid development of high-end boutiques.<sup>157</sup> Transforming to fit its moneyed population, Georgetown was marked by “changes in food habits and food-related services... residential (along with commercial) real estate and housing prices, and a proliferation in personal business and services.”<sup>158</sup> Signified within these developments was, of course, not simply the built environment itself, but the connotations that accompanied such expansion. Georgetown was a site of “spectacle and display,”<sup>159</sup> where “implicated in [a] purchase, be it of gourmet ice cream, a nouvelle cuisine meal, or a dance lesson, is the status of being at that shop in that neighborhood and buying that particular brand.”<sup>160</sup> Yet, despite the pageantry of this particular neighborhood, Georgetown was in no way representative of the rest of the city, where enclaves of poor, racially, economically and politically marginalized communities were housed in areas next to upscale shopping centers and decadent government buildings. In fact, the predominantly white, upper-class citizenry of Georgetown was often seen to have “an atmosphere of lingering Jim Crow...especially among older residents and the wealthier older guard.”<sup>161</sup> Georgetown, then, was the privileged, elite

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<sup>156</sup> Knox, 189.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>158</sup> Adam Krimms, *Music and Urban Geography* (New Jersey: Routledge, 2007), xxv.

<sup>159</sup> Knox, 202.

<sup>160</sup> R. Beauregard, *Gentrification and the City* (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1986), 35.

<sup>161</sup> “Georgetown University: A Mostly White Enclave in a Black City,” *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, (Spring 2002), 55.

(and white) corollary to the predominantly black, disempowered underclass that surrounded it. The area was an emblem of what DC wanted to be – powerful, influential, rich – more than a true representation of what it was.

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For many modern geographers, as well as historians, economists, and academics of all disciplines, urban landscape is a sort of code, able to be analyzed as a reflection of a society's culture and economy; in this way, the built environment acts as text, which, as do the writings, films, music and arts of more traditional authors, functions as a product and voice of "oppositional social groups and political relationships."<sup>162</sup> Interpreting this text, then, involves an examination of the economic, political and social changes of a particular urban space and the ways in which it is reproduced in the landscape. It is the particularities of Washington, D.C., then, its history, and its accompanying racial and class-based makeup, that are indispensable to the creation and power of the music of that specific city. Music historically has been used as a mode of self-expression, chiefly for those people marginalized by society, but its development in certain geographies locations are a function of both the place itself and the evolution of rock and roll and its many subgenres. In this way, place serves as a catalyst for the production of music while simultaneously serving as an identity marker for the habitants within that particular place. In fact, one should not be seen as either independent of one another, nor as a linear process; the function of place and identity within the production of music is a dialectic, neither determinative nor exclusive.

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<sup>162</sup> Knox, "The Restless Urban Landscape," 188.

### Chapter Three: Bad Brains and the Musical Aesthetics of Race in *Bad Brains*

Bad Brains is still known today as pioneers of hardcore punk rock, not only for their technical virtuosity and musical innovation, but also as one of the only all-black hardcore bands.

The band and the album, even with the unusual composition of four African American males, was, in many ways, in line with the cultural and musical milieu of the time: punk rock names (HR, Dr. Know, Darryl Cyanide), do-it-yourself fashion sensibilities that combined militancy with shocking design (including half-shaved heads, peroxide-bleached hair, and Johnny Rotten jackets), the sociopolitical inflected lyrics of songs, and the near-abounding energy and rawness of punk sound. Yet, the narrative of Bad Brains, as both social beings within the DC and larger punk rock scene and the music itself, which they generated and played, cannot and should not be disassociated with the production and reinforcement of, and resistance to, how race is constructed. The elements of sound in their album serve as a performance of racial identity in one contested site of



struggle — music. From the maintenance of traditional black musical identity through the incorporation of specific vocal and sonic characteristics of blues, jazz, and reggae into their hardcore sound, to the complicated aesthetics of racialized sound through instrumentation, *Bad Brains* performs multiple, often contradictory, racial identities.

### **The Sound of *Bad Brains***

While Bad Brains, in its various incarnations, released numerous albums on as many labels from 1982 until 2007, it was their 1982 eponymous debut that defined and inspired what DC hardcore was. With fifteen tracks in total, three are fairly straight-ahead reggae (“Jah Calling,” “Leaving Babylon” and “I Luv I Jah”) while the remaining thirteen are the authoritative and innovative chaos that would come to be called hardcore. These tracks are marked primarily by their furious speed, with the nearly impossible velocity of Dr. Know’s guitar, the powerful demolition of Hudson’s drums and the ominous drubbing of Jenifer’s bass. All but one hardcore song clocks in under two minutes and thirty seconds (“Big Take Over” is a longwinded 2:57), making each song not only an explosion of speed, but also a succinct eruption.

These short bursts of force and energy emphasize the power and skill of the band. Hudson’s drums are militaristic, clashing and clattering with the ferocity of the hi-hat, and as forceful as a pummeling of fists. His tempo is astonishing, beating out the menacing tracks’ rhythm with determination and vehemence, inducing a seizure-like pace of toe-tapping and a head-shaking pulse that causes whiplash. The guitar of Dr. Know is equally spectacular. In a genre where technical expertise is eschewed, his playing is not only skillful but also compellingly intoxicating. He rips into guitar solos with exhilarating force and impossible speed; his riffs have a heavy, penetrating distortion that, in

combination with his thrashing tempo, are at once aggressive and enthralling. Jenifer's bass adds considerable heft and antagonism to the sonic assault; his riffs and use of stop-time redefine what bass could be in a punk band, recalling the bebop era of jazz. Pounding and throbbing, the stamina and thrust of Jenifer's bass rounds highlights the sense of menacing possibility in the fury of these tracks. Then there's HR's vocals. A permutation of squeals, shrieks, and maniacal rage, the singer is listed as "The Throat" on the album's credit, emphasizing the guttural, vehement passion his voice brings to every song. While it is virtually impossible to understand his lyrics — he's not so much singing as he is screaming — HR's voice, with yelps and gasps, still conveys the desire, wrath and urgency of the music.

Even the three reggae songs sprinkled throughout the album (track six, track eight, and track fourteen) reinforce the technical skill of the band, as the musicians shift to a slowed down tempo, off-beat accents, and prominent bass line. As Kenny Inouye, hardcore fan and future guitarist for DC band Marginal Man, explains, "Everything was so different about it — the sound, the way they played, the speed, the guitar tones. That just opened up a whole new door."<sup>163</sup> *Bad Brains* was perhaps the most influential and innovative hardcore album of all time.

This hardcore album, with all its innovation, influence and intensity, was also Bad Brains' nuanced (re)creation of the traditionally black music of blues and jazz. By using the musical tools that once stood for racial marginalization and the construction of banal, biased stereotypes, Bad Brains work to resignify blackness in sound; in doing so, the

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<sup>163</sup> Quoted in Steven Blush, *American Hardcore: A Tribal History* (Port Townsend: Feral House, 2010), 139.

band uses music, and more so the accompanying power of subversive sound, as a marker of agency and identity.

One of the groundbreaking hallmarks of Bad Brains' hardcore sound is an overt and crucial parallel to the trademark of the genre of jazz<sup>164</sup> — technical virtuosity. Nowhere are Bad Brains' musical chops more explosively on display than on their first single "Pay to Cum." Frequently recognized as *the* song that jolt-started the hardcore punk sound,<sup>165</sup> "Pay to Cum" interprets and transmutes jazz into punk with its fast tempo, instrumental dexterity and seemingly discordant sound. In doing so, Bad Brains challenges — and to an extent revolutionizes — the white-dominated genre of punk in the same way Parker, Davis and Gillespie did with jazz.

Clocking it at a mere one minute and twenty-five seconds, "Pay to Cum" is so fast "you had to double-check your turntable speed."<sup>166</sup> HR spits out lyrics so quickly it seems as if the words trip over one another, fusing the lines into an almost undecipherable blur of speed, punctuated only by a slightly more enunciated shout of the final word at the end of the verse. It takes HR only four seconds to sing the first verse, a nearly improbable task given the lines: "I make decision with precision/Lost inside this manned collision/Just to see that what is to be/Perfectly my fantasy."<sup>167</sup> These breakneck vocals repeat in the remaining three verses, but are contrasted with the relatively slower and noticeable reverbed articulation of the song's two bridges. Appearing after the first

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<sup>164</sup> Or at least the one that distinguished and differentiated it as an exclusive African-American form of music.

<sup>165</sup> See Mark Fleischmann and Greg Fasolino, "Bad Brains," *Trouser Press*, 2002; Ken Inouye, quoted in *Blush*, 139; Pat MacGuire, "The Blessings of Versatility: MCA Interviews the Bad Brains," *Filter Magazine*, 2007.

<sup>166</sup> *Blush*, 139.

<sup>167</sup> Bad Brains, "Pay to Cum" *Bad Brains* (ROIR 1982).

two verses, the bridge's lyrics are sung at half time — “And all in time/With just our minds/We soon will find/What's left behind”<sup>168</sup> — while the bass, guitar and drums remain at full-speed, offering a juxtaposition of tempos and highlighting HR's vocal abilities within the verses. His velocity is accented by the contrast of the slowdown; in this way, the song tacitly draws attention to the speed and skill of HR's voice.

Yet the vocals seem almost secondary to the velocity of the rhythm section of “Pay to Cum.” The song opens with the “free-fire guitar rage”<sup>169</sup> of Dr. Know's blasting guitar, a mere two second guitar introduction that detonates four riffs within that short span. In this seemingly impossibly fast song, each instrument moves from riff to new riff every few seconds. Hudson's drums erupt soon after the song begins, a torrential combustion of pounding thumps and crashing cymbals. As the punk zine *New Yorker* claims, “the sheer stamina behind the rhythm section of bassist Darryl Jenifer and drummer Earl Hudson pulls listeners in like a riptide [and] guitarist Dr. Know floods the senses with chortled leads....”<sup>170</sup> Bad Brains' pure power to play with that sort of speed speaks to their capabilities as musicians, rather than simply amateur punks.

Speed, then, is complimentary to precision and technique. And one way they highlight their musical aptitude is their variation of chords. Dr. Know's guitar goes from E to B to G to D to A and then back to E in “Pay to Cum,” while Jenifer's bass hits G to D to A to E. While these chords do not necessarily indicate the kind of overt musical complexity often found in jazz (and other rock music of the day), the range is not only

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<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>169</sup> Fleischmann and Fasolino, “Bad Brains.”

<sup>170</sup> Coleman, “Bad Brains Give You a Piece of Their Mind.”

unusual for the heretofore minimalism of punk rock<sup>171</sup> but also in conjunction with their mind-blowing speed and tightness of playing is nearly impossible to replicate. As Dr. Know acknowledges, “we wanted to be known as the fastest band in the world...at the same time, we didn’t want to be doing the same three-chord routine...we had something to prove musically.”<sup>172</sup>

This reclamation of a black musical identity through musical technique performed in Bad Brain’s aesthetic reformulation of punk rock is referenced from and is parallel to the characteristics of jazz, particularly bebop. Historically, black jazz musicians used their exceptional musical skills as a reaction to the homogenization and mainstreaming of their music into conventional white culture.<sup>173</sup> As swing continued to serve as a popular backdrop to dance music, with an integrated audience and composition of musicians in swing bands, many African-American jazz musicians saw a sort of musical appropriation of their genre. What once performed as a marker of race and identity, and as an almost proud acknowledgment of marginalization, soon was diluted by the incorporation of the white middle-class. While black jazz “like black culture generally and even the ghetto

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<sup>171</sup> See Chapter Two and Chapter Four for a more in-depth analysis of the history of minimalism in American proto-punk and punk, and British punk, as well as its veneration within the evolving DC hardcore scene.

<sup>172</sup> Blush, 132.

<sup>173</sup> See Michael Coyle, “Hijacked Hits and Antic Authenticity: Cover Songs, Race, and Postwar Marketing,” from *Rock Over the Edge: Transformations in Popular Music Culture*, eds, Roger Beebe, Denise Fulbrook and Ben Saunders (2002); Francis David, *The History of the Blues: The Roots, the Music, the People* (2003); Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, *Music and Social Movements: Mobilizing Traditions in the Twentieth Century* (1998); Ted Gioia *The History of Jazz* (1997).

itself” had become a function of necessity and concurrently a badge of collective community, “something imposed and something sought after,”<sup>174</sup> the introduction and dissemination of jazz into popular (white) music culture threatened to dilute the racialized identity of the music.

In a conscious effort to demarcate both themselves as black men and black musicians, a small group of jazzmen transformed the popular style of jazz, creating what would be known as bebop. Gone was danceability — bebop was to be listened to, not danced to. Rather than emphasizing the beat, rhythm defined bebop, in addition to advanced harmonic hearing and great technical technique. Virtuoso players such as Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Bud Powell, and Thelonious Monk saw themselves as an elite group of musicians, intentionally using their musical expertise to exclude music critics and those musicians who weren’t talented enough to play bebop. In bebop “the more difficult it was, all the better,”<sup>175</sup> and musicians were known to reharmonize standards on the fly, forcing musicians to prove their musical chops and weeding out those who they deemed less skilled. Indeed, the characteristics of bebop — the irregularly accented fast pulse, the frantic rhythmic sound and asymmetric phrasing, and its hot tone — were a line of delimitation for those “as a matter of *taste* and cultural *stance* were unable to identify with the new assertion of ‘blackness.’”<sup>176</sup>

Like the bebop scene of the 1940s, Bad Brains and their pioneering punk style started as an underground movement in reaction to the streamlined, populist leanings of contemporary music in their respective genres. In its relatively short musical life, punk —

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<sup>174</sup> Eyerman and Jamison, 95.

<sup>175</sup> Ted Gioia, *The History of Jazz* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 205.

<sup>176</sup> Ben Sidran, *Black Talk* (New York: De Capo Press, 1981), 79.

in its British predecessors and American contemporaries — was grounded in the antithesis of musical expertise, much less virtuosity.<sup>177</sup> Simplicity and mere proficiency in instrumental ability were the musical calling cards of punk’s past. Perhaps not coincidentally, the racial makeup of these punk bands was, almost exclusively, white. Bad Brains, then, as black musicians in a white genre, assert their “blackness,” their racialized musical identity, by re-performing the bebop musical tradition — by playing the loudest, the fastest, and the most complex punk yet to arrive on the scene. Jenifer concurs, saying “Bad Brains took the musicianship of Jazz and grafted it onto the I-don’t-give-a-fuck rough-and-ruggedness of Punk Rock.”<sup>178</sup> Their dedication to speed as an ethos started as a credo of beboppers, whose music was “made vibrant by the breathless speed with which [it] was executed,”<sup>179</sup> and to whom individualism and musical brilliance stood as a signifier of intentional marginalization.<sup>180</sup> Bad Brains were the inheritors of that ideology, using their mastery of music to mark themselves as Other — both as African-Americans and as punks — and in doing so, “opened up a whole new door” to what punk could sound like.<sup>181</sup>

While there may be a less obvious and uninterrupted line between Bad Brains’ brand of punk and blues than there is with jazz, given the band’s genesis as the latter,

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<sup>177</sup> Again, this concept is explored more deeply in Chapters Two and Four.

<sup>178</sup> Blush, 134.

<sup>179</sup> Gioia, 204.

<sup>180</sup> Indeed, Bad Brains were not only conscious of jazz’s musical history, but also, in many ways, connected to and engaged with the implications and associations of the genre. As high school students, the band members gathered in a friend’s basement every Tuesday and Thursday to “just kick it – Return to Forever and John McLaughlin. We didn’t have the jobs, we just used to sit around and emulate them guys” (Dr. Know, quoted in Blush, 134). Jenifer recalls bringing in jazz fusion albums to school, eschewing contemporary rock because jazz was “about the chops and the riffs,” the instrumental dexterity and complexity of the music (134). Even before they formed as the punk outfit Bad Brains, HR, Jenifer, Hudson and Dr. Know were Mind Power, a jazz fusion band in the style of Weather Report and Mahavishnu Orchestra.

<sup>181</sup> Blush, 139.

rather than the former, there are palpable, well-defined, and meaningful corollaries between the two genres of music. More specifically, the cultural designation of blues music as an emotional, expressive personification of blackness and the portrayal of the music's subsequent electrification as pure "noise," acts as both racial and musical signifiers that Bad Brains assumes as significant and consistent features of their new hardcore sound.

In part, the association of blues with black emotiveness is intertwined with both the history of African-Americans and the "bodily" construction of blackness as a derivative of that history. Given its origins within slavery, the blues were labeled — by both those involved in the black aesthetic movement and those critics and historians of music — as a manifestation of "something significant about the contemporary black experience."<sup>182</sup> Despite the whiffs of racial essentialism,<sup>183</sup> this categorization by itself is not problematic. However, the sociocultural value of blues, its meaning to the development of R & B, and later, rock n' roll, tend to center around the race-based dichotomy of mind versus body. Without the formal musical training of European-centered music, the blues and those who participated in the creation of it, often incorporated spontaneous, highly improvised performances, with tempos, beats, and

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<sup>182</sup> Eyerman and Jamison, 76.

<sup>183</sup> The blues, along with the genre of jazz, were considered "*the* constitutive element of black American cultural identity," particularly through the retrospective lens of the 60s and 70s Black Aesthetic cultural movement, which attempted to incorporate and highlight overt political sentiments into the artistic sphere in an effort to reshape the representation of and struggle for a collective racial consciousness (Waksman, 173). However, the argument concerning racial essentialism, particularly in regards to music-based raced identities, is not to be ignored nor deemphasized. Avoiding a totalizing representation of any culture, much less one based on a specific form of music and a specific construction of Otherness, is, needless to say, problematic and without nuance. However, it is my assertion that not only must we acknowledge the rich and varied African American-based musical traditions, we must also understand that such a cultural identity was, in many cases, a chosen self-representation and, nearly unilaterally, was never limited to *only* music as a mode of self-identification.



tunes created around emotions, rather than technical compositions. Situated within the realities of blues' foundations, black music — and the blues especially — was consequently labeled as primitive in its expressiveness, too “natural” and “basic,” as differentiated from the deliberate and cerebral (and therefore superior) white created music.<sup>184</sup>

HR, listed on *Bad Brains* not as the singer, but as the “Throat,” embodies this primarily blues-based concentration on bodily-centered emotion. Paralleling the construction of a black music known for its physicality, primitiveness, and feeling, HR asserts his racialized roots in his performance of hardcore punk vocals, more specifically within his constant tension between singing and screaming. The first song on Bad Brain's 1982 album, “Sailin' On,” immediately depicts HR's ability to balance fury, yearning, and sadness through the manipulation of his voice. A song about heartbreak, a somewhat typical trope in blues, though certainly unusual in the realm of punk rock, HR sings the first few lines clearly, elongating the final word of each line as if emphasize the words and the simultaneous feelings of rejection, but with a clarity of enunciation not often found in punk singing generally, nor Bad Brains specifically: “You don't want me anymore/So I walked right out that door/I play the game right from the start.”<sup>185</sup> The last line of the first verse, however, builds swiftly, with HR spitting in rapid-fire staccato — “I trust you, you use me, now my life's all--” — until he reaches the final two words of the line, screeching “torn apart.”<sup>186</sup> The quick rat-a-tat of his rasping vocals evoke the

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<sup>184</sup> See Francis Davis, *The History of the Blues: The Roots, the Music, the People* (2003); Simon Frith *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock 'n' Roll* (1981); Alan Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began* (2002); Robert Palmer, *Deep Blues: A Musical and Cultural History of the Mississippi Delta* (1988).

<sup>185</sup> Bad Brains, 1982.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*

pressing sentiments of accusation, of the fast and pounding charges of heartbreak and betrayal, until HR's pain can't be contained anymore and "morph[ing] from sweetly soulful crooner to fiery banshee wailer," he explodes, screaming "torn apart," and conjuring up the metaphor of his own vocal cords being shredded like his heart.<sup>187</sup>

After a straight-forward chorus sung almost cheerily ("So I'm sailing, yeah I'm sailing on/I'm moving, yeah I'm moving on/Sail on, sail on, sail on, sail on") the façade of matter-of-factness is ripped away by a gut-wrenching screech at the end of the line.<sup>188</sup> It's as if HR has vocally detonated after the seeming peace of sailin' away from this woman, and the juxtaposition of these relatively calm vocals with the almost maniacal shriek acts to reinforce and underscore the mercurial nature of love. This vocal contradiction continues with the second verse, when HR's biting vocals are matched at the end of every line with his band, acting as backup singers, crooning "oh-oh" in classic doo-wop style. The aggression of the lead singer's voice, and its overt performance of the pain that accompanies any lost love, is paired with the connotation of sweet sentimentality that infuses the doo-wop harmonies. Not only does this serve as an enactment of the complexities of feelings (and, of course, love) but also reinforces HR's bond to the racialized musics of his past.<sup>189</sup>

HR's inventive and emotive use of his voice enacts not just the emotions of personal heartbreak and suffering, but also the reactions of and to the complex and often

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<sup>187</sup> Fleischmann and Fasolino, "Bad Brains."

<sup>188</sup> Bad Brains, 1982.

<sup>189</sup> Not only with the blues, which dealt with themes of love lost, misery and heartbreak, but also with doo-wop, a chiefly African-American based genre emerging from the urban centers of Philadelphia, DC, Detroit, Baltimore, New York and Los Angeles. Merging aspects of the blues with jazz, doo-wop focused on leitmotifs of love and relationships. See Todd R. Baptista, *Group Harmony: Echoes of the Rhythm and Blues Era* (2000); Anthony J. Gribin and Matthew M. Shiff, *The Complete Book of Doo-Wop* (2000).

incongruous demands placed on a black man in a white world, an analogous trope to blues, where the tensions, pressures and miseries of everyday life are often performed. “I,” the tenth song on Bad Brains’ 1982 release, sees HR’s vocals once again acting as an aural signifier of confusion and pain, despite the almost indecipherable lyrics he is spewing out. Sung in a lower timbre than the rest of the song, HR seems to physically expel the first few lines of the first verse. And while the words are hard to understand, even upon multiple listenings, his voice mirrors the sentiment: “Not as much but with such intensity/I’d like to be what they would not want me to be/I like to cram their chivalry inside their guts.”<sup>190</sup> Indeed, the words seem to be crammed down the listener’s throat by HR, who pushes the sounds out from his lower register, until, in the final line of the first verse, his voice goes into a higher range as he squeals “I’d like to leave it all behind with the rest of the nuts.”<sup>191</sup> The listener’s inability to fully understand the lyrics without the assistance of liner notes only serves to reinforce the physicality of the sound; much like the construction of blackness in blues, it’s the body that is valued over the mind. HR himself notes “...[it’s] very tribalistic, very physical, going back to the original basics. It’s almost uncivilized.”<sup>192</sup>

This primal nature is underlined by the chorus that directly follows. Made up of merely one word – I – the chorus is half-sung, half-shouted in a discordant nasal tone that suggests testimonial, blame, and perplexed bewilderment all at once. While many a music critic have noted HR’s ever-changing vocal texture, “alternately soul-deep or bile-encrusted wailing, spitting, and sneering,” what they fail to note is how these qualities are

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<sup>190</sup> Bad Brains, 1982.

<sup>191</sup> Bad Brains, 1982.

<sup>192</sup> Coleman, 1982.

often *not* separate, not juxtaposed line by line — as the case is with “Sailin’ On” — but how these two seemingly incompatible characteristics often occur in his voice at the same time.<sup>193</sup> While the “I” is expressed in the simultaneous soulful and self-tortured texture of HR’s voice, the bridge offers a more accusatory sound when singing about the corollary “you.” As HR pants out, “I guess it’s too bad/I guess it’s too bad” the three remaining band members answer in strong unison “for you;” this call-and-response continues for two lines, with Dr. Know, Hudson and Jenifer representing the collective condemnation of the “you,” barking out their answer with a low and resolute tone, echoing the conventional call-and-response construction of blues songs.<sup>194</sup> But such charges turn inward again at the end of the song, when “I” is once again shrieked — and held for five seconds — without any response. HR’s “I” is unanswered but for his own “oh,” which is drawn out in a near-yodeling effect, redolent of “the whirling, possessed vocal[s], snarling, shrieking, and moaning, with the fiery eyes of a preacher.”<sup>195</sup> It is this testimonial — this assertion of self, muddled and confused with both soul and bile — that is reminiscent of the blues, and its musical brethren, gospel. HR’s vocals are “the expression of the church of music,” as he sees it, and his simultaneous rage and desire — delivered in the form of yelps, melodies, cries, grunts and chants — link him to both the style and the history of this uniquely African-American music.<sup>196</sup>

HR’s vocals ground him not only within the racially constructed musical emotiveness of blues but also, more specifically, amid the canonized evocative vocals of blues singers. Like the so-called “shouters” of blues and R&B before him, with a style of

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<sup>193</sup> Eric Carr, Review of “Bad Brains: Banned in DC” in *Pitchfork* (September 2003).

<sup>194</sup> Bad Brains, 1982.

<sup>195</sup> Peter Aaron, “Bad Brains: Re-Ignition.” *Chronogram* (November 2006).

<sup>196</sup> Eric R. Danton, “Bad Brains: ‘Into the Future,’” *Rolling Stone Magazine*, September 26, 2012.

which there was no white equivalent in practice or use,<sup>197</sup> HR's singing merely estimates pitch and is typically comprised of a hard and hoarse sound. The analogous relationship between voice and emotion is grounded in the idea that "the basic mode of expression lies in...the effects of the human larynx," with vocals allowing for the manifestation of amorphous feelings that "communicate reactions to the world in the form of description, analysis [and] evaluation."<sup>198</sup> That is, the sound of the voice has been — from music critics to fans to social psychologists — endowed with the ability to capture emotion, which is linked to an explicit social set of life experiences. More specifically, our basic emotions (sadness, anger, pleasure, disgust, joy) have a parallel vocal acoustic, and the musical performances that parallel those tend to "generate related or identical emotions."<sup>199</sup>

Vocals as carrier signals, however, does not imply a stable or unified perception of meaning, particularly when it comes to indicators such as race, class, gender and sexuality. Indeed, "racialized meanings and associations commonly assigned to vocal color are *not inherent* to the voice," but are instead a product of socialization and cultural construction of difference.<sup>200</sup> The singing style of the blues, then, tends to embody an understanding of blackness, linked not to biologically-based difference in timbre or texture, but instead to the oppression and tyranny of slavery. The emotion expressed by singers of the blues was inextricably tied to "the pain and anguish of three centuries of slavery and tenant farming," which imagined vocal styling as a direct manifestation of a

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<sup>197</sup> See Reebee Garofalo, *Rockin' Out: Popular Music in the USA* (2011).

<sup>198</sup> Ian Hoare, *The Soul Book* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1976), 152.

<sup>199</sup> Graham Welch "Singing as Communication" from *Musical Communication*, eds. Miell, McDonald and Hargreaves (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 247.

<sup>200</sup> Nina Eidsheim, *Voice as a Technology of Selfhood: Towards an Analysis of Racialized Timbre and Vocal Performance* (Dissertation, University of California, San Diego, 2008), 115.

specific social and historical context.<sup>201</sup> Indeed, the blues are exemplified by what music historians label “an expressive sensuality” that directly reflects the “frustration, hurt, and anger that blues singers and their audiences feel.”<sup>202</sup> What’s more, such an association becomes the quintessential feature of blackness:

the value of black music derives...from its emotional impact, its account of the performers’ own feelings...the essence of black music performance is the expression of the performers’ feelings, and the possibilities of such expression depend on the music’s vocal qualities.<sup>203</sup>

For country blues singers, this is embodied by the “agonized screams” of Elmore James, the way that Howlin’ Wolf “sang with his damn soul,” and the “moaning and trembling” of Muddy Waters.<sup>204</sup> These vocalists, like Blind Lemon Jefferson, who shouted his melodies, harken back to the roots of slavery in the form of field shouts and hollers, as well as the expressiveness of spirituals, in combination with the lack of any formal vocal training. By the mid- to late thirties, as the blues made its way to cities, the primary vocal style of the urban blues was shouting, led by men like Joe Turner, Jimmy Rushing and “Hot Lips” Page.<sup>205</sup> In this way, blues singers disregarded the Westernized standards of vocals — with its emphasis on pitch and standardization of vibrato and timbre — in their very inclusion and accentuation on emotions as the benchmark for singing. HR, then, performs as a modern-day incarnation of the blues singer. His vocals — the laborious, enflamed emotional eruptions that share more with shouting than traditional singing — act as a racialized signifier. And such a signifier, grounded in the history of the blues and

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<sup>201</sup> Szatmary, 13.

<sup>202</sup> Frank Tirro, *Jazz: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1993), 48.

<sup>203</sup> Frith, 16-17.

<sup>204</sup> Szatmary, 6-13.

<sup>205</sup> It is important to note that the aforementioned vocal stylings were indeed the purview of almost exclusively *men* who sang the blues. While women were an integral part of the blues – both in African American circles and in the music of the more integrated mainstream – singers like Mamie Smith, Ida Cox, Bessie Smith and Ethel Waters performed in the blues in the more traditional smooth and polished style. In this way, the blues emotiveness is not only associated with blackness, but with black masculinity.

its implications of marginalization, both musically and socially, further establishes the knottiness of a black identity in a white genre of music.

Yet the blues — and Bad Brains' form of punk — cannot be so straightforwardly defined. While lyrical content and singing style were essential components in the evolution of the genre of the blues and its representation of African-Americans' cultural and social positioning, the sound of the music itself — classified first as blues and then as its direct successor R&B — was also fundamental in the marginalization and subsequent social location of blacks. “Because of its insistent rhythms, uncontrolled energy, and suggestive content,” the African American-developed offshoot of blues, R&B, was deemed inappropriate for conventional white audiences.<sup>206</sup> It was the threat — racial, sexual and, consequently, political — of R&B's sound, its noise, that stood as an assertion of self for African-Americans and portended the demise of “traditional” white mainstream values of prudence, conservatism and domination. As Buddy Guy remembers, “they'd always tell me to turn that amplifier down, don't play that, that's *noise*. And I'd say, man, this is my blood, this is *me*.”<sup>207</sup> Indeed, the control of sound, the management of the codes that music symbolizes, are essential in promulgating the established norms of society.<sup>208</sup> Just as the homogenized pop sounds of Tin Pan Alley epitomized the white American ideal<sup>209</sup> and country music personified the white working class, white artists such as Pat Boone, Perry Como and the McGuire sisters figuratively bleached the societally menacing sounds and lyrics of African-American rhythm and

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<sup>206</sup> Garofalo, 67.

<sup>207</sup> Gene Sataro, “The Main Man,” *Guitar World*, (3 April 1987).

<sup>208</sup> See Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (1987).

<sup>209</sup> This is despite the somewhat ironic fact that the most prolific and popular Tin Pan Alley musician was Jewish American Ira Berlin, writing and performing at a time when Jews were not seen as white.

blues. R&B, and its accompanying electrified guitars and strong drum backbeat, embodied aggression, resistance, and uncontrollability.

Similarly, punk rock in general, and Bad Brains specifically, represent the “abrasive, primitive” music that to many critics could barely be designated as music at all.<sup>210</sup> The band’s distorted guitars, the loud volume and the screamed vocals, led institutional authorities like Prince George’s County chief liquor inspector Jerry Kromash to assert that “this type of music draws undesirables” so much so that area citizens were “afraid to cross the street to go to their cars” when a punk show was occurring.<sup>211</sup> Much in the way R&B was thought to sexualize youth, punk’s noise was thought to incite violence. Indeed, Bad Brains shows were often broken up by the police, who thought their “anarchic, aggressive, juvenile, jarring” noise threatened the peace.<sup>212</sup> Like R&B, punk was accused of appealing to “the base in man, bring[ing] out animalism and vulgarity.”<sup>213</sup> These complaints were grounded in the sounds of the music itself—the “impotent rage” expressed in the frenzied buzz-saw guitars, driving drums, and howling raw vocals of Bad Brains indicates a menace, based not solely on race, per se, but also on age and sociocultural ostracism.<sup>214</sup>

Noise acts as a disruption of communication — it interrupts, masks and covers a message — and simultaneously serves as a warning of an actual threat or injury (as in a

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<sup>210</sup> Paul Richard, “Hanging Punk: Décor and Decadence From the Rock Scene.” *The Washington Post*, March 29, 1980, C1.

<sup>211</sup> Carlin Romano, “Punk Hits a Sour Note” *The Washington Post*, August 23, 1979, C1.

<sup>212</sup> Jon Pareles, “Rock Around the Year,” *The Washington Post*, December 17, 1978, Book World, E9.

<sup>213</sup> Szatmary, 22.

<sup>214</sup> Anthony Burgess and John Lombardi, “Plastic Punks,” *Psychology Today* (November 1977), 120.



fire alarm, a home invasion alarm or an ambulance's siren).<sup>215</sup> And volume, the sheer loudness of sound, is often the main characteristic of this offensive noise. Analogously, Bad Brains acts as both a disruptor of the typical flow of communication, particularly as a musical form — with its off-the-charts volume and screamed vocals that eschew enunciation for passion and obfuscate immediate and explicit comprehension of lyrics — and the threat of physical harm — implicit in the loudness and the distorted, simplistic, repetitive and sometimes atonal sounds of the guitar, bass and drums. Their music evokes “strident militancy, [an] anger and [a] physical and musical grossness” that refuses to be ignored in its uncompromising noise.<sup>216</sup> This energy, this so-called violence, is the epitome of those who played punk, just as R&B's noise represented African-American bluesmen. Henry Rollins, a DC punk fan who would go on to be the lead singer of DC's State of Alert (SOA) and later legendary Southern Californian punk band Black Flag, remembers his first Bad Brains show as “scary and incredible...HR had me pinned to the floor and was screaming in my face. It was one of the biggest moments in my life.”<sup>217</sup>

The noise of punk rock serves as a representation of subversion, just as the blues did. Breaking from the established and valued aesthetic norms of rock music, destabilizing and manipulating the proscribed sounds of harmony and pitch by privileging rhythm and loudness, Bad Brains disrupts not only listeners' aesthetic expectations, but also their cultural ones. By embracing their marginalization, as both

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<sup>215</sup> Theodore Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 103-5.

<sup>216</sup> Harry, Sumrall, “DC Punk: Blasting Away at Artistic Pretention,” *The Washington Post*, March 14, 1979, B4.

<sup>217</sup> Andersen and Jenkins, 43.

African-Americans and as punk rockers, their music serves a comparable function to R&B, offering agency through dissonance, noise as power.

### **Instrument(s) of Race: The (Re) Racing of Punk**

*Bad Brains* however, unlike the blues and jazz albums referenced in its sound, was patently grounded within and as a reaction to the musical tradition of rock n' roll. And the sound of rock n' roll was originally understood as a contemporary form of the electrified blues — in part a function of that fuzzy, distorted, loud pop of energy, power and noise when a guitar is plugged in. It's no surprise, then, that the guitar is, and has been, the foremost symbol of rock n' roll and all of its culturally rebellious, powerful and menacing accoutrements. Yet the guitar, within its representational rock paradigm, is and also has been a source of racial construction, its sound and use frequently paralleled with the problematic, interwoven, and often contradictory racialized history of rock n' roll itself. *Bad Brains'* 1982 album enters amid that sonic conversation. At once buttressing the traditional constructions of blackness through the guitar and its culturally-composed auditory assertion of threat, danger and sexuality while simultaneously subverting this racialized representations by their incorporation of the “white” rock god guitar solo, *Bad Brains* reimagine and reinscribe the way that the seemingly neutral classification of instruments — particularly that of the electric guitar — creates and complicates notions of race and identity in sound.

In the opening notes of “The Regulator,” the sound of lurking danger is personified by the low and ominous bass line. The insistent repetition of G to D to A to E acts functionally as an introduction to the song, but representationally as a warning. The

metaphors are nearly boundless — the lull before the storm, the slow drumbeat towards war, the writing on the wall — all analogous to the steady yet portentous cultural milieu of sounds predicting what dangers lay ahead. The bass line pulsates for only five seconds until the electric guitar attacks, slashing in over the bass line, one power chord at a time, with vibrating distortion, signaling the storm that is upon the listener. After this four-chord burst, the electric guitar joins the bass line for nearly the rest of the song (from :10 to 1:00), and in doing so reiterates and reinforces the menacing augury with its parallel wailing. Indeed, the bass and guitar resonate like the titular regulator — a watchdog of sound, a sonic control of violence — until the guitar, the song, the band, cannot be contained anymore: at the one minute mark of the song, Dr. Know’s guitar erupts in a frenzied onslaught of noise, abandoning the measured cadence of a warning into the fully realized conflagration of sound. The bass and guitar in this song stand in for the cultural threat of blackness — restraint is sublimated by chaos. In the social construction of race, African-Americans are historically resigned to their “primitive” or “bodily” impulses, whether that be violent tendencies (fears of a cultural coup shouldered since slavery) or sexual propensities. Bad Brains’ song embodies this anxiety sonically, at first representing merely the looming threat implied by their race, but eventually actualizing their brutal potential by “play[ing] with frightening intensity and speed.”<sup>218</sup>

This juxtaposition of moderation and madness is a hallmark of the album’s sound. The materialization of the guitar’s antagonism and its accompanying intimations of danger remains central, but always contrasted with the constraint of tempo. The dizzying, unrelenting guitar riffs of “Banned in DC” are interrupted halfway through the song by a

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<sup>218</sup> George Hurchella, 34.

breakdown — the slowing of tempo (at times to almost half time of the original) and the establishment of a new groove. This new tone seems to soften the guitar assault of the song's first minute but nevertheless has undercurrents of contained bellicosity in its jagged bass line and piercing guitar solo (not to mention HR's agonizing vocals). "Right Brigade," with its military-inflected guitar introduction, followed by the raucous unrelenting brashness of lightning-quick guitar riffs, is also injected with and fragmented by a breakdown in the middle of the song, trading guitar speed for guitar solo and emphasizing repetition of phrasing over velocity.

The guitar behaves as both a signifier of the traditional, though sonically reconstituted, threat posed by African-Americans — politically, socially, sexually, musically — and as the actualization of that violent promise. Placid opening bass lines and innocuous guitar phrasing, brief breakdowns that revert to more conventional tempos, all act as a tease, a possibility of docility. Yet such sonic submissiveness is continuously toppled by the searing, juddering and conventionally dissonant sounds of Dr. Know's volatile guitar, reminding the listener that there is nothing safe about being black in a punk world, much less a 20<sup>th</sup> century America.

This signification of the guitar, as violent threat and deliverance, is in part a function of the sociopolitical history of the instrument. We understand music as interpreted sound, and that interpretation, similar to the shared comprehension of language or any other system of signs, is constructed in and by society at large.<sup>219</sup> Indeed, any analysis of sound (including, of course, my own in this dissertation) has its

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<sup>219</sup> See Simon Frith *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock 'n' Roll* (1981); Theodore Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock* (1996); Albin Zak III, *The Poetics of Rock: Cutting Tracks, Making Records* (2001).

foundation not in some inherent or biological reaction to specific sounds, but instead in the “conferring of social meaning” wherein groups of people “agree collectively that their signs serve as valid currency.”<sup>220</sup> Rather than a reflection of society, music constructs society, infusing sounds with socially-constructed meanings and readings. The guitar’s signified-ness of blackness, then, comes from both the historical relationship between the instrument itself and African-Americans (the acoustic guitar) and the culturally constructed meaning (specifically, black hypersexuality and the supposed disturbance and a menace to the supposed calm of mainstream society) derived from its electrified sound.

Arriving in America via the slave trade, the acoustic guitar (and its musical comrade, the banjo) was integral to the music of African slaves, and, consequently, was central to the establishment of the blues, in large part because its “flexibility in terms of tuning made it ideal...for the non-tempered, microtonal melodic language” of the blues.<sup>221</sup> As the country blues sound made its way into the urban centers, blossoming into city blues and its progeny, R&B, and jazz, the electric guitar rose in instrumental celebrity along with its players — Charlie Christian, Muddy Waters, and Chuck Berry (to name just a few) — whose playing had adapted to the ongoing amplification technology.<sup>222</sup> Yet it was at this juncture that the historical narrative of African-Americans and the guitar collided with the cultural construct of blackness in America. While the electric guitar and its accompanying slide techniques offered the bending and distorting of traditional Euro-American notes towards a more traditional African sound,

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<sup>220</sup> Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender & Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 21.

<sup>221</sup> Robert Palmer “The Church of the Sonic Guitar,” *Present Tense: Rock & Roll and Culture*, ed. Anthony DeCurtis. Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), 15.

<sup>222</sup> Waksman, 113-16.

the prominent association of this type of playing by African Americans was “a dangerous sort of creativity, stretching musical limits by twisting amplified sounds into all manner of permutations, following paths of musical excess that were paralleled by lifestyles that often bordered on or crossed the lines of criminality.”<sup>223</sup> The sound of the blues-based rock guitar — distorted, rough, loud — came to stand for blacks themselves, at least to mainstream culture. While the reading of the same sounds can and will be altered based upon differences in class, race, and geography (for instance, the sound of a motorcycle rumbling may be read as a disturbance in an affluent neighborhood while it might be understood as freedom, or simply a mode of transportation, in a working class neighborhood),<sup>224</sup> in a nation where African-Americans were deemed a threat, both politically and sexually, the electric guitar epitomized that menace.

This cultural discourse of blackness as a sexual threat, and the electric guitar as a symbol of that racialized and sexualized hazard, was personified by the next generation of black guitarist — Jimi Hendrix. Licking, playing, flicking, manipulating his ax, Hendrix’s guitar became a part of his body, or as music scholar Steve Waksman calls it, a “technophallus.”<sup>225</sup> Acting within the already-pronounced construction of black male hypersexuality, Hendrix linked his explosive sonic innovations with his sexual performance, often times squatting down with his guitar jutting from his groin, or arching back, coaxing timbral distortion and jolting notes, the guitar’s neck bulging from his legs.

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<sup>223</sup> Waksman, 117.

<sup>224</sup> Philip Tagg, “Subjectivity and Soundscape, Motorbikes and Music,” from *The Popular Music Studies Reader*, eds. Andy Bennett, Barry Shank, and Jason Toynbee (London: Routledge, 2006), 46.

<sup>225</sup> See Steve Waksman, *Instruments of Desire: The Electric Guitar and the Shaping of Musical Experience* (1999).

The manipulation and sound of guitars in Bad Brains' 1982 album, therefore, acts as a signifier of not only race, but also the complicit sexual and violent threat that designation implies. In the most fundamental sense, the electrified, warped loudness of the band's guitar serves as a yoke to the instrument's racialized past and its relationship to rock itself. Bad Brains' guitar sound acts to ground them within the framework of black rock n' roll. As music theorist Albin Zak III argues, "the symbolism attached to sounds in rock is a source of identity for artists, styles, and audiences...sounds carry with them entire stylistic legacies".<sup>226</sup> Given the electric guitar's function and metaphor in black musical history, Bad Brains — whether intentionally or not — ally their black selves (and the concurrent identity of musical innovators and dangers to traditional cultural norms) in the world of punk.

Yet, as our cultural narrative has borne out time and time again, the most threatening elements of society tend to be first appropriated, then diluted, and ultimately popularized by the mainstream, neutering the risk to hegemony.<sup>227</sup> Consequently, the guitars of *Bad Brains* did more than simply fortify the racial and musical connection to the electric guitar. Sonically, they reimagined the cultural meaning of that sound, recoupling the instrument to the danger and menace still culturally associated with blackness. Like the blues players of the 1950s and the rock n' rollers of the early 1960s, Bad Brains used the electric guitar and bass to create sounds that ran contrary to

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<sup>226</sup> Albin J. Zak III, *The Poetics of Rock: Cutting Tracks, Making Records* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 64.

<sup>227</sup> This narrative is key to the lifecycle of nearly every threatening subculture and social movement: the civil rights and feminist movements were eventually folded into the Democratic Party while the Tea Party has been integrated into the Republican Party. Subcultures' ideologies are also frequently watered down, often reconstructed in an innocuous cultural way, frequently as a caricature in fashion (punk, BDSM, Teddy Boys) or as a tool to make the mainstream "cooler" while having none of the political implications (Riot Grrrl, hipsters, steampunk).

conventional musical norms, conveying with it the aggression and simmering threat of political and sexual violence much of society feared from African-Americans. Bad Brains' guitar-based racial aesthetics, consequently, (re) perform our cultural expectations and representations of blackness within the white punk scene.

This contemporary representation of blacks as violent menaces was, even in the late 1970s and early 1980s, prominent in the media and in the personal lives of Bad Brains. Dr. Know remembers his high school as “a prison,” with narrow slits of window allowing a slim view into the outside world and the doors locked from the outside.<sup>228</sup> *The Washington Post* printed a mass of articles “reporting” the spate of black violence across the nation between 1980-1981, including a riot in Kansas that “sent an angry mob of 250 people into the streets hurling rocks and bottles and setting fire to automobiles;”<sup>229</sup> the “bloody race riots” of Miami provoked by “the alleged failure of local black leadership;”<sup>230</sup> and “gangs of black youths hurl[ing] rocks, smash[ing] windows and set[ting] fire to four buildings”<sup>231</sup> in Orlando. The DC paper also covered the “real anger, real resentment” of blacks in Chicago,<sup>232</sup> “the violence-plagued neighborhoods” of Chattanooga, Tennessee,<sup>233</sup> as well as a myriad of articles on instances of black violence in Alexandria, Virginia, Birmingham, Atlanta, Washington, D.C. and other cities across the country, in addition to the confederate flag being flown in a high school in Loudoun County, Virginia. It is these narratives of blackness that Bad Brains'

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<sup>228</sup> “Washington, DC,” *Sonic Highways*, HBO, October 24, 2014.

<sup>229</sup> “60 Hurt in Violence,” *The Washington Post*, A17, April 24, 1980.

<sup>230</sup> Warren Brown, “Weather Helps National Guard Keep Peace in Miami,” *The Washington Post*, A11, May 26, 1980.

<sup>231</sup> “New Black Violence Erupts in Orlando,” *The Washington Post*, A15, July 31, 1980.

<sup>232</sup> Thomas O’Toole, “Blacks Says Chicago is a Racial Tinderbox,” *The Washington Post*, A2, August 8, 1980.

<sup>233</sup> “Curfew Lifted as Chattanooga Calms,” *The Washington Post*, A2, July 29, 1980.



guitars parallel and react to; if society continued to construct blackness as dangerous, intimidating and violent, Dr. Know and Jenifer's guitars both embodied and responded to such a representation.

Along with the racialized aesthetics of speed, loudness and timbre of the guitar and bass, Bad Brains incorporate another unique piece to their sound: the guitar solo. An integral part of *Bad Brains*, the guitar solo functions as a seeming contradiction to both the punk and black representation of the electric guitar. Indeed, punk originated in large part due to hostility towards the prog and art rock ethos that tried to elevate music to a high-brow standard, including its near-ubiquitous emphasis on soloing. Despite this genre-espousing disdain, and its connections to a deliberate and (outwardly) racially divergent type of guitar focus, Bad Brains frequently and consistently features guitar solos in their songs.

Out of the eleven hardcore punk songs on *Bad Brains*, seven of them feature guitar solos. When one includes the reggae songs, the number of guitar solo songs still sits at an incredible fifty percent. The length of the solos vary — eleven seconds each in “Sailin’ On” (0:55 – 1:06) and “Don’t Need It” (0:44 – 0:55), fifteen and seventeen seconds respectively in “I” (1:21-1:36), “Big Takeover” (2:13-2:30), nearly thirty seconds during “Banned in DC” (1:27-1:53) and over two guitar solos in “Supertouch/Shitfit” (0:40-0:51 and 2:00-2:13) and finally, a nine-second and then twenty-seven second solo in “Right Brigade” (0:45-0:54 and 1:41-2:08). In addition, while “Attitude,” “The Regulator” and “Fearless Vampire Killers” don’t contain guitar solos, per se, the use and prominence of the guitar are still accentuated.

What's more, Dr. Know's guitar solos sound similar to those found in early heavy metal and 70s hard rock. The shredding guitars of "Right Brigade" would be just as at home in the trenches of Deep Purple's "Smoke on the Water" or Van Halen's "Eruption" solos. Showcasing the warped chaos of feedback and the savage mincing of chords, Dr. Know's solos possess a near supernatural ability for speed with an unmistakable metallic sharpness. Indeed, the sound of the guitar solo in Bad Brains is in no way uniquely punk, nor particularly hardcore. The use of the ear-splitting, strong-slicing guitar solo had, until this point, been the purview of heavy metal.

These guitar solo glorifications can be understood as complex reactions to and recreations of the racialized understanding of the electric guitar. In one way, Bad Brains is bolstering, or at least reestablishing, technical virtuosity as a mainstay of African-American musicians in the vein of jazz greats Parker, Coleman, Davis and Monk. This (re)assertion of black musical identity primarily stems from the metamorphosis of cultural/racial associations of the electric guitar by white musicians. That is, the guitar, once an emblem of black masculinity and sexuality, and with it the connotations of danger and aggression, had been converted to a symbol in the white man's purview, in both an attempt to assume the sexual power of that symbol and to transform its power into a sign of technical (white) mastery.

Legions of white British bands were influenced by the bluesy R&B styles of African-Americans, which included not only the emulation of black guitarists of the 50s and 60s, but also the contemporary symbol of both black sexuality and musical virtuosity in Hendrix. In this way, white rockers were able to reproduce or assume a particular kind of blackness, mainly one that co-opted the race-based sexuality and aggression

constructed into the electrified sound.<sup>234</sup> And while both the blues and R&B guitarists and the white British guitarists were accomplished musically, the bifurcation between the generations and races tended to be cast into the conventional racially biased binary of emotion and intellect. The primal nature of the electric guitar's sound was linked to the emotiveness (sexual and otherwise) of African-Americans, whereas the technological and technique-driven advances of the guitar and its sound were attributed to white's contribution. In this way, regardless of the "overwhelming influence of African-American musical practices, the electric guitar is today cast as an overwhelmingly white instrument"<sup>235</sup> and has become "the symbol for a highly gendered and racialized form of virtuosity."<sup>236</sup> Rather than sexuality and the threat of noise as the defining characteristic of the (black) electric guitar sound, soloing and technical skills, leading to the "heroization" of guitar players, became the identifiable (white) sound of the electric guitar. So while the cult of "guitar gods" was a direct result of the white, blues-based guitar virtuosos like Eric Clapton, Jimmy Page, and Duane Allman attempting to emulate the performance and skills of such black guitarist idols as Jimi Hendrix, B.B. King and Charlie Christian, the musical identity of the electric guitar was reworked to deemphasize black sexuality and accentuate white technical ability. In fact, Eric Clapton attributes this new focus on guitar skills and long, intense solos on the deviation from traditional black

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<sup>234</sup> See Iain Chambers, *Urban Rhythms Pop Music and Popular Culture* (1986); Coyle, "Hijacked Hits and Antic Authenticity," (2002); Frith, *Sound Effects* (1981); Garofalo, *Rockin' Out*, (2011), Waksman, *Instruments of Desire* (1999).

<sup>235</sup> Waksman, 13.

<sup>236</sup> Waksman, 203.

blues guitar. After constructing his career around B.B. King riffs, he said, “my whole attitude has changed...I’m no longer trying to play anything but like a white man.”<sup>237</sup>

The subsequent musical march towards progressive rock, with bands such as Yes, Genesis, and Emerson, Lake and Palmer, saw the complete absence of black sounds. This shortage was, to a large extent, intentional. It was as if “black musicians are now implicitly regarded as precursors who, having taught the white men all they know, must gradually recede into the distance as white progressive music, the simple lessons learned, advances irresistibly into the future.”<sup>238</sup> With the focus on ornate orchestration, prog rock idolizes the technical aspects of musicianship over all else, and with that, seemingly reconstructs the culturally-understood sounds of the electric guitar. In this way, the guitar as a sexualized and violent symbol of blackness was convoluted and ultimately reconstructed by the onslaught of white blues-based rockers (in the form of British Invasion bands) and the ensuing rock spin-offs of the white-dominated progressive rock of the 1970s, changing from a sign of black sexual prowess and aggression to a symbol of white dominant technical expertise.

This casts Dr. Know’s guitar solos, then, in a new light. That his “flawlessly tight...guitar playing was light years beyond his peers”<sup>239</sup> can be understood as a reflection of the band’s attempts to reinscribe the boundaries of racially represented musical skills, particularly insofar as guitar expertise. Rather than ceding the guitar solo to white rock musicians, Dr. Know asserts his musical talent and dexterity through elaborate and repeated solos, serving as both a contemporary challenge to the glut of

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<sup>237</sup> John Pidgeon, *Eric Clapton* (London: Panther, 1976), 65.

<sup>238</sup> David Morse, *Motown* (London: Vista, 1971), 108.

<sup>239</sup> Hurchalla, 34.

white guitarists and as a reminder of the guitar's racialized history and representation. At the same time, the album's featuring of multiple guitar solos functions as a confrontation of the white-dominated genre of punk, a way of circumscribing their black selves from the white punk ranks. If punk despises guitar solos, then Bad Brains' embrace of them can signify their Otherness within this nearly all-white musical landscape. Solos act as a way to intentionally mark difference.

The guitar has always been essential to the signature sound of rock. What that sound has represented, however, has evolved and transformed within the cultural margins. Initially typified as the musical incarnation of socially constructed blackness, the electric guitar connoted danger, sexuality, controlled aggression and a threat against the reigning social order. In part because of this racially-undertoned aesthetic, the electric guitar became the instrument of choice for white blues-based musicians, who sought to channel the power created through this socially-constructed meaning of sound, and in doing so, reinscribe the culturally connoted resonance through the exultation of the guitar solo. Bad Brains fully engage in these racially complex and contested sound meanings throughout their 1982 album — through traditionally black guitar implications of anger and attack to the veiled threat of breakdowns to the highlighting of the white rock appropriation of the guitar solo — and in doing infuse the complicated and sometimes contradictory notions of race in their sonic aesthetic.

### **The Performance of Blackness in DC Hardcore Punk Identity**

In many ways, Bad Brains references, pays homage to, and reconstructs the musical representations of blackness within the historical canon of sound. Yet, ultimately,

the band still exists within the musical genre of punk. And it is from within this position, from within the parameters of punk, that the band struggles in and complicates the performance of their racial and musical identities. Contained in the punk culture is an implicit performance of whiteness, a whiteness that Bad Brains accepts and participates in through the collective identity of punk. The band, however, is clearly quite conflicted over their belonging in and to a white identity, leading to a sonic repositioning in their 1982 album — the introduction of four reggae tracks on their otherwise-exclusively hardcore album, which acts as a performance of blackness. Thus, Bad Brains enacts both an identity of sameness and an identity of difference through their performance of blackness and simultaneous inclusivity and reliance on a white, outsider-insider identity, ultimately reaffirming the artificial, culturally-mandated dichotomy and definition of race as whiteness or blackness.

When considering the band's performance of race through its music, we must consider the social and political circumstances that contributed to the development of such identity politics. More specifically, we must analyze the realities of Bad Brains as black bodies performing for and within the white-dominated scene of punk rock, as well as black bodies within the black community.

The history of the punk scene is, by and large, a history of whiteness. Indeed, it may be startling to fully appreciate how singularly *white* this music and its accompanying scene was. Unilaterally, across every punk rock scene in every part of the country (much less the world) punk has been, nearly exclusively, white, so much so that many music

writers argue that “punk was the first white music since the 60’s psychedelic stuff.”<sup>240</sup>

The proto-punk scene in America, with bands like the Velvet Underground, Iggy Pop, the Ramones, the Dictators, and the Voidoids, were all white. The British punk scene, with the Sex Pistols, the Damned, Generation X and the Clash — also, all white. Even as hardcore punk emerged in the late 1970s, whiteness continued to dominate the racial makeup of the bands: Southern California’s SST, Black Flag, X, and the Dickies; San Francisco’s Dead Kennedys, the Avengers, and Flipper — white. Even after Bad Brain’s entrance to the near-singularly white topography, their own direct hardcore descendants — D.C.’s SOA and Minor Threat — as well as Bad Brains-influenced hardcore bands — Boston’s SS Decontrol and DYS, New York’s Murphy’s Law, Warzone, and Agnostic Front — were consistently and uniformly comprised of white males. As Greg Tate, music writer for the *Village Voice* (and black himself) notes, “hardcore is white...no matter how much Hendrix and Berry they ripped, it still ain’t nothing but some whiteboy *sounding* shit now.”<sup>241</sup>

The DC punk scene was no different. Not only were the early punk bands uniformly white, including the Slickee Boys, Overkill, the Razz, the Urban Verbs, and the aptly named White Boy, but also the accompanying audience was primarily white. In fact, two of the most comprehensive photographic histories of the DC punk scene, Susie Horgan’s *Punk Love* and Cynthia Connolly, Leslie Clague and Sharon Cheslow’s *Banned in DC* exhibit this dearth of black participation. A mere twelve of 450 black and white photographs in *Banned in DC* and only five of 100 black-and-whites in *Punk Love* reveal

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<sup>240</sup> Mykel Board, *Maximumrocknroll* Magazine, Issue 34, 1986.

<sup>241</sup> “Hardcore of Darkness: Bad Brains,” from Duncombe and Trembley, 216.

any African-American punk fans.<sup>242</sup> Covering six years, and countless concerts around the DC area, less than one-third of the photographs have just one black face amongst the sea of white punk rockers.

Despite this monolithic whiteness, however, the members of Bad Brains were drawn to the sound and substance of punk rock. In part, this was because of the sociopolitical appeal of the rebellious, vulgar, ostracized and despised genre of punk. To Bad Brains, punk wasn't white; it was Other, just like them.<sup>243</sup> Sid McCray, Jenifer's neighbor and friend, is credited with introducing punk rock to the band members after seeing a 1977 TV report on British punk. Immediately, Bad Brains were drawn to the music of the Sex Pistols, the Ramones, the Dickies and the Damned.<sup>244</sup> More specifically, the volume, speed, urgency, and anger of punk reflected their own sociopolitical and cultural racialized selves.

In a city marred only years earlier by race riots, where African-Americans were hurting from drug problems, economic decline, poverty, and crime, as well as the active threat of gentrification and neighborhood destabilization, Washington, DC continued to suffer from flagrant racism and less overt forms of marginalization during the 1970s.<sup>245</sup> Punk, to the members of Bad Brains, offered a reprieve from these social realities. Acting as a kind of rebellion against the social and cultural norms of the day, punk gave

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<sup>242</sup> This count excludes any black punk musicians, including a significant number of photographs of Bad Brains, as well as two each of Toni Young and David Byers of Peer Pressure, and Skeeter Thompson of Scream, a DC punk band of the mid-1980s that will be explored in Chapter Six.

<sup>243</sup> See Peter Aaron, "Bad Brains: Re-Ignition," (2006); Coleman, "Bad Brains Give You a Piece of Their Mind," (1982); Darryl Jenifer, "Play Like a White Boy: Hard Dancing in the City of Chocolate," (2011); "Sonic Highways" (2014).

<sup>244</sup> See Andersen and Jenkins, *Dance of Days*, (2001); Blush, *American Hardcore*, (2010); Darryl Jenifer, "Play Like a White Boy," (2011).

<sup>245</sup> Melder, *City of Magnificent Intentions*, 593-4.



expression to the indignation and frustration borne from the death of prominent black leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, and its “uninhibited sounds...seemed to be the perfect deflection from everyday DC existence.”<sup>246</sup> Promoting the rejection of establishment-generated truth, punk urged listeners to think for themselves, a message not lost on Bad Brains, who struggled with employment, drugs, and even a life trajectory. While other music was “just ‘party music,’...the old cliché of ‘sex, drugs and rock n’ roll,’” punk rock’s absolute speed and ability to push the limitations of good taste and social acceptability attracted Bad Brains.<sup>247</sup> As Jenifer notes, “we dug the militancy happening in punk rock.”<sup>248</sup>

With the ideology of violence dominating the landscape of Washington DC, the violence of punk’s sound acted as a sort of reclamation of violence as representation for Bad Brains. This overarching tenet of force and violence was a dogma of the sociopolitical times both figuratively and literally — against other countries, against minorities, and against Washington D.C. Fresh from the somewhat-recently concluded years-long slog of the Vietnam War, the government’s policy of war as a tool of democracy and the death and disillusionment that went with that failed strategy still loomed over the country’s zeitgeist. In addition, the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and the ensuing race riots across the United States, including in Washington, D.C., shone a light on the socioeconomic fissures and rage felt by the city’s minority population. Sparked by the assassination of MLK and culminating in looting, violence, the destruction of many black neighborhoods, and the use of federal troops to quell the

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<sup>246</sup> Jenifer, 210.

<sup>247</sup> Andersen and Jenkins, 27.

<sup>248</sup> Andersen and Jenkins, 32.

uprising, the city suffered a near-decade long economic and social recovery. With over 800 fires, twelve deaths and over a thousand more injured, a number of consequences, beyond the fiscal, surfaced, including the rapid protraction of self-selected segregation and the flight of middle-class African-Americans from the once-flourishing U Street and Cordoza neighborhood.<sup>249</sup> As a consequence of the rapidly shifting city demographics, the fracture between races and classes became both conflated and more pronounced: “...with residents who have sought refuge from wards across the world, in a city with a huge gap between rich and poor, the connection between the local and the global becomes crystal clear when you’re 16 blocks away from the White House where social welfare cuts are proposed...”<sup>250</sup>

Rather than violence on behalf of authority, punk was violence in reaction to authority, violence *instead* and *as* their own authority. In this way, hardcore was disassociated with its cultural construction of whiteness and reconstructed by its ideology of frustration, rebellion and intentional ostracism. The sonic aesthetic that captivated Bad Brains was one of anger, strength, defiance and passion; that it was performed as a function of this particular sociohistorical moment’s performance of whiteness was of little consequence.

Yet, the conformity of punk sound *was* a performance of sameness. And that sameness cannot be disentangled from the construction of race and the bodies who perform that music.

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<sup>249</sup> Denise Kersten Wills, “‘People Were Out of Control’: Remembering the 1968 Riots,” *Washingtonian Magazine*, (April 1, 2008).

<sup>250</sup> Gabriella Gahlia Modan, *Turf Wars: Discourse, Diversity, and the Politics of Place* (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 38.

In their earliest formation, in fact, Bad Brains performed as a cover band, playing music from Sex Pistols, The Damned, Eater, The Dickies, The Viletones and The Saints — all white punk bands. What all these bands had in common with Bad Brains was their disillusionment and alienation from mainstream society. While, in part, Bad Brains' estrangement can and should be understood as a product of racial marginalization and discrimination, the connection between The Dickies, Sex Pistols, The Damned and Bad Brains is of a more generalized disaffection with and by conventional culture. This difference is not performed as a function of race, but as a function of punk. The punk ethos is one premised on difference; punks want to be seen as Others, as disconnected from the hegemonic forces of society. Despite the racial differentiation, the Otherness of punk stood as the foundation on which the band and their audience could construct an understanding of themselves as individuals and as a punk community. As black punks, then, Bad Brains had even more markers of difference.

This difference of race, however, was not just palpable but nearly deafening amidst the sameness of hardcore punk. Such dissonance emerged primarily as racism, by both the hardcore crowd and the larger community institutions. In an interview to *Pitchfork* magazine bass guitarist Darryl Jenifer “noticed that if a lot of rock bands or white bands do shit that’s awkward or weird...they take it as lore; when the Bad Brains do some shit, some motherfucker is like, ‘Aw, them niggers man. See how they do’ and shit.”<sup>251</sup> At clubs in DC, “they were harassed and called ‘nigger’ by some in the crowd... [and] in a Baltimore suburb the band was greeted by racial epithets and threats.”<sup>252</sup>

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<sup>251</sup> Maher, “Interview: Bad Brains.”

<sup>252</sup> Andersen and Jenkins, 37.

Additionally, lead singer HR mentions — and even more significantly is asked about — race in nearly every interview, claiming that music venues were “racist, racist, racist.”<sup>253</sup>

The racial divide was even more prominent, given their home in the District. Says Jenifer, “Living in D.C. on certain levels can be very tribal when you’re black, because you are constantly surrounded by...the government, the monuments, even the alleged so-called leaders of the so-called free world reside there.”<sup>254</sup> The marginalization of their blackness was amplified by the conservative city’s stereotyping of African-Americans, who were often viewed as criminals.<sup>255</sup> Indeed, Bad Brains was often described in language of fear and anxiety, which has, at the very least, whiffs of racial meanings attached to them. Yesterday and Today record label head Skip Groff asserts, “I never worked with them because they scared the hell out of me,”<sup>256</sup> and police and K-9 units showed up at Bad Brains shows, worried about so-called race-riots.<sup>257</sup> Teen Idle and Minor Threat lead singer Ian MacKaye describes the band as “the scariest motherfuckers you ever saw,”<sup>258</sup> and SOA and future Black Flag singer Henry Rollins remembers them as “scary and incredible.”<sup>259</sup> Even black music critic Greg Tate doubted Bad Brains because he had only heard the accounts of “spike-headed hordes of mild-mannered caucasoids” who were “easily intimidated, easily titillated” by what he calls “white primitivism.”<sup>260</sup> Being black in the punk world carried with it, to a certain degree, the

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<sup>253</sup> Coleman, “Bad Brains Give You a Piece of Their Mind.”

<sup>254</sup> Jenifer, 208.

<sup>255</sup> As the previously discussed coverage of *The Washington Post* and black violence makes clear.

<sup>256</sup> *Dementlieu Punk Archive*, [www.dementlieu.com](http://www.dementlieu.com), [www.30underdc.com](http://www.30underdc.com).

<sup>257</sup> Blush, 33.

<sup>258</sup> Andersen and Jenkins. 35.

<sup>259</sup> Andersen and Jenkins, 43.

<sup>260</sup> Tate, 214.

same racial constructions as it did in the larger culture and in DC, specifically. Blackness was Otherness, to be feared and admired. Dealing with racist venue managers, sometimes hostile audiences, and the predominating political ideology that race was somehow mitigated with Nixon and Reagan's policy distancing of affirmative action, Bad Brains were clearly situated within a contradictory and complex social and political racial time.

Bad Brains' sense of racial identity was further complicated by the construction of the punk identity within the black community. What was considered "black" music fell within a very specific, though still wide-ranging, purview: blues and jazz, as was explored in this chapter's previous sections, soul, through the lens of James Brown and DC native Marvin Gaye, funk like Sly Stone and Parliament Funk, pop rock like Stevie Wonder and Earth, Wind, and Fire, and the DC-created go-go, combining funk, R&B and jazz.<sup>261</sup> Such genres were seen as congruent with the contemporaneous black pride movement, which, much like the Harlem Renaissance, sought to equate the creative production of African Americans with a sense of pride and dignity in a collective black identity or consciousness. Not included in that list of black music or coexisting identity — punk. As Rob Kennedy of the early DC punk band The Chumps recalls, "I guarantee you that there were only four Black Punks...in all of DC...the local Black kids looked at them

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<sup>261</sup> Indeed, go-go was considered *the* music of black DC at the same time hardcore punk was emerging in the city. Go-go was born in Southeast, a neighborhood that helped promulgate the nickname "Chocolate City," with the lowest per capita income, highest rate of violent crime, and highest percentage of African-Americans in Washington. Go-go was an underground music, not played on many radio stations, and rarely venturing outside the confines of DC. Yet within the District, go-go popped up all over — at high schools (such as Oxen Hill and Potomac), at clubs (like Atlas Disco and Black Hole), and at recreation centers and restaurants — all of which had the common denominator of being either owned or patronized by nearly 100% African-Americans. For a detailed and thorough analysis and history of the DC go-go scene, see Kip Lornell and Charles C. Stephenson, Jr.'s *The Beat: Go-Go Music from Washington, D.C.*, (2009).

as wild freaks.”<sup>262</sup> In fact, in the black community, the word “punk” was commonly used as a pejorative for a homosexual. Tate, *Village Voice* music critic, who as an African American was dubious of punk rock asserts, “I mean, when I was coming up, you could get your ass kicked for calling another brother a *punk*.”<sup>263</sup>

Clearly, punk stood outside of this tightly constructed black musical identity. Bad Brains was, understandably, affected by this outsider status. Jenifer tried defending hardcore punk saying that “it’s black expression, but it’s at the end of the spectrum where some black people, maybe they don’t want to go there...and I don’t care if black people ever get Bad Brains.”<sup>264</sup> At the same, HR sees the lack of black audience as an expression of oppression, a political statement as to the racist political and cultural system. In an interview with *Flipside* magazine, HR argues that “black people ain’t gonna find out about it until white people find out about it...white people get in on TV, then black people pick it up.”<sup>265</sup> There is a concomitant need to both valorize the band’s music and the band members themselves as blacks within a primarily white scene and to justify the whiteness of their audience within the black community.

Race, despite its socially constructed basis, is often assigned performative cultural value (in part) by music. And while blackness (and whiteness) is no more a biological imperative than any other form of difference, its cultural formation is linked to the presentation of specific, and historically contingent, signifiers.<sup>266</sup> Bad Brains, then,

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<sup>262</sup> Blush, 135.

<sup>263</sup> Tate, 214.

<sup>264</sup> Maher, “Interview: Bad Brains.”

<sup>265</sup> *Flipside* #31, April 1982.

<sup>266</sup> See Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967); bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, (1992); Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, (1993); Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, (1986).

unquestionably felt the weight of how race is often intertwined — however messily, arbitrarily and unevenly — with the production of music.<sup>267</sup> And hardcore punk, specifically, embodied the outcome of this convoluted race + music construction, offering the contradictory collective identity of punk/insider black/outsider.

It was within, and because of, this racial environment that Bad Brains embraced their raced-tinged sonic aesthetic within hardcore punk. And while such a race-based aesthetic was less overt with their sonic parallels to blues and jazz (though no less present), Bad Brains is less subtle with their incorporation of reggae on their 1982 album. Juxtaposing straight-ahead reggae songs within the (primarily) hardcore tracks, Bad Brains performs blackness in a white genre. Reacting to the physical and emotional realities of their black selves within a hardcore scene that frequently subjugated their identities to the communal white hardcore identity, these reggae tracks — along with the

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<sup>267</sup> This includes the storied (raced) history of rock n' roll. Most of the first rock styles were variations on African-American musical forms that had taken shape before white audiences took note and, consequently, almost all of rock's most influential and formative innovators were black. Singers such as Chuck Berry and Little Richard, black artists who sang a hard-driving version of R&B that would bridge the gap between rhythm and blues and rock n' roll, were musicians with whom young people — both black and white — could identify. These musicians were younger and wilder than the traditional R&B artists, and despite the difference in skin color, they expressed a freedom and a lack of inhibition for which adolescents yearned. While rock was critical to bridging the sociocultural relationship between blacks and whites, it also conjured up arguments about leisure, work, and freedom, as whites have been entertained by blacks since the time of slavery. Rock n' roll music — this expression of human freedom and desire — is always necessarily complicated by the problematical historical relationship between the two races. Early rock n' roll's integration of black and white also elicited a racist response from some white adults, who criticized the overt sexual overtones of rock and dreaded the possibility of sex between the two races. (Indeed, the term "rock-and-roll" was originally an African-American euphemism for sex). In reaction to these racial tensions, record labels continued the white-washing tradition seen in blues and jazz, creating a Caucasian-based genre known as rockabilly. It is, of course, common knowledge that rockabilly's progenitor (and, to some imprudent people, rock's originator) Elvis Presley, seized upon the black *sound* of rock n' roll (including its construction of masculinity and sexuality) while remaining less threatening performing in his white body. The history of 1950s rock is littered with the appropriation of black music by white musicians. For record labels, such musical commandeering became the preferred way for white wealth to exploit black talent; in doing so, countless black R&B and rock musicians lost money—and credit — to lesser remakes of their most successful songs.

band's performance of self through style, speech and beliefs — enacted a blatant, and pointed, manifestation and assertion of blackness.

Given their vacillating and sometimes contradictory identities, it is not surprising that the band's racial construction within hardcore songs frequently sought to redefine societally-constructed images of race. The band, on one hand, condemns the essentialization of blackness, singing in "Don't Need It" that "We don't need Ivory Liquid/Don't want no Afro-Sheen..." and, in "The Regulator," "You control what I'll be/You control who I see/And if I let you/You control me."<sup>268</sup> These lyrics attempt to buck both the more general concept of social controls and, more specifically, the constructed physicality of blackness through consumer products and assimilation into a white bodily ideology. Even more blatantly, "Big Takeover" warns "all throughout this so-called nation prepare yourself for the final quest/your world is doomed with our own integration/Just another Nazi test."<sup>269</sup> Regarding race relations as a mere experiment, the band imagines a future contemplated by the Nazis — one of ostensible racial purity, which eliminates minorities and obliterates resistance.

Yet these songs do more than simply assert an alternative black identity lyrically; even more importantly, they do so musically, within the context of (white) hardcore punk. That is, the space Bad Brains creates for a marginal black identity in these songs is created inside an already-white dominated identity; their construction of blackness in hardcore is a reaction to and should be understood within the context of an already-established white terrain, rather than a racially mixed "outside" world. In doing so, these songs acknowledge and juxtapose both racial identities — the rejection of stereotypical

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<sup>268</sup> "The Regulator," Bad Brains, 1982.

<sup>269</sup> "Big Takeover," Bad Brains, 1982.



blackness and the creation of a contrary black self lyrically, and the perpetuation of a white hardcore punk self.

Outside the (white) structure of hardcore, however, and perhaps in reaction to such a white-washed identity, Bad Brains engage in palpable and deliberate performance of blackness within their personal and musical aesthetic, most clearly with their utilization of reggae in their 1982 album and their concurrent conversion to the Rasta lifestyle.

In 1978, the members of Bad Brains (who were then still Mindpower) went to see Stanley Clarke and Chick Corea, the jazz fusion masters, and happened upon Bob Marley, who was also playing that evening.<sup>270</sup> The band's, and, more precisely HR's, identification with reggae and the Rasta religion and ethos started that summer night. Their affinity for the Jamaican-based music and the lifestyle had elements of both the aesthetic and the spiritual; describing reggae as "so incredible, so beautiful," HR's vision of the music fit the idealized principles of Rastafarianism and offered a spirituality that he claims helped him kick his heroin habit.<sup>271</sup> Even more importantly, the music and theology offered a choice in how the band and its members represented their selves, specifically their black selves. As bassist Jenifer explains, "Rasta was a way of life we chose to recognize. I was raised Catholic but that was a white man's religion and that's not my heritage."<sup>272</sup> The decision to embrace and embody reggae and Rasta was a conscious effort to, at once, resist the collective white identity of hardcore punk and

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<sup>270</sup> Andersen and Jenkins, 58.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>272</sup> Andersen and Jenkins, 67.

assert their blackness to a community who did not accept punk as a black musical identity.

Whether this assumption of Rastafarianism was a spiritual awakening, a historical and religious narrative that offered agency and power in a culture where blacks were typically marginalized, or an attempt to redefine their performance of race within a chiefly white hardcore scene, this new Rasta philosophy was crucial to the musical dynamics of their landmark hardcore album. In addition to the alternative black identity Bad Brains establishes lyrically and sonically in their hardcore songs, they also include three unadulterated reggae songs on 1982's *Bad Brains*.

“Jah Calling,” which references the Rasta term for God, is the sixth song and the first reggae tune on the album. An all-instrumental song, “Jah Calling” is an abrupt and somewhat shocking fissure in a hardcore album, given its massive slowdown in tempo and juxtaposition against the previous five lightning-fast, raging hardcore punk songs that opened *Bad Brains*. Following the traditional reggae musical structure — with an emphasis on the off-beat, simple harmony, and temperate tempo — the song acts as a disruptor to the assumption of a specific (white punk) identity. This acts, in part, as a deconstruction of the hegemony of sound parallel to the deconstruction of the hegemony of whiteness in punk. As philosopher Jacques Attali argues, “Subversive noise...betokens demands for cultural autonomy, support for differences or marginality.”<sup>273</sup> Indeed, reggae has had a historically subversive status since “the preservation of African traditions...has in the past been construed by the authorities (the Church, the colonial and even some ‘post-colonial’ governments) as being intrinsically subversive, posing a symbolic threat

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<sup>273</sup> Attali, 7.

to law and order... hint[ing] at that darkest rebellions: a celebration of Negritude.”<sup>274</sup> The inclusion and contrast of reggae in a hardcore punk album, therefore, forces the listener to decelerate — both in the music itself and in the construction of Bad Brains’ musical identity; the song’s brazen performance of difference (sonically and, through it, racially) demands a more complicated understanding of the band’s race and concurrent character.

Two tracks later is “Leaving Babylon,” whose reggae sound is overlaid with lyrics straight out of Rastafarian principles of class and racial equality, as well as its emphasis on the evils of a Babylon typified by America:

Say I'm leaving this Babylon/It will not be too long/It will not be too long now/ Said my people are starvin' but your money's runnin'/ Your dollar, dollar drop down real low/You ain't got no gold to show/We gonna step right through that door/Not gonna come back no more. (1982)

The placement and content of “Leaving Babylon” acts to reiterate the band’s performance of blackness, while still allowing for a connection with its white audience. As the eighth song on the album, only one hardcore song stands between the bookends of reggae — “Jah Calling” is followed by “Supertouch/Shitfit,” which is immediately followed by “Leaving Babylon.” In doing so, the band reaffirms that the first interruption of the sound and attending consciousness (in “Jah Calling”) was neither fluke nor caprice; it was an intentional and expressive proclamation of sound and meaning. The lyrics themselves, while sung in a conventionally reggae style (which could be off-putting to the ears of punks more accustomed to the shrieking singing of hardcore), offered a relatable theme of disillusion and alienation, albeit in the language of Rasta rather than punk. But it was successful in its merging of the white punk and black reggae/Rasta ethos of anti-capitalism and disaffection for the hegemonic structures sustaining the system.

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<sup>274</sup> Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1979), 31.

The final song of the album is also the third and last reggae track, “I Luv I Jah.” Despite the same reggae musical styles as the previous two songs, these lyrics are a pointed effort to assert their racial identity amidst both a primarily white hardcore audience and a primarily hostile black community.<sup>275</sup> Describing how “two young men call me not their brother/they try to make I feel ashamed” and “my lovely sister, judge me by my clothes, yeah/only to learn her mistake, not everyone's alike,” Bad Brains continues to affirm their faith, both in Jah, and in themselves and their hardcore punk black selves.<sup>276</sup> While the other two reggae songs seem to be a declaration of blackness to the white audience of hardcore punk, “I Love I Jah” seems to offer a defense of that blackness to their racial peers. Clearly, this is a task that remains important to the band, both musically and culturally. As Jenifer reveals, “‘I Love I Jah’ was the first reggae song ever to bring hope and humility into our lives and we would perform it every show like some special request sent down from the king himself.”<sup>277</sup>

Reggae, as a continuation and new growth of and from historically-raced black musical identities, arrived sonically also as a derivation of those black musical genres, and ultimately, as another potent musical symbol of blackness. Emerging from Jamaica, reggae, much like American rock n’ roll before it, borrowed and reconstructed R&B and the blues, reinterpreting the sounds with an idiosyncratic local flavor.<sup>278</sup> It is this amalgamation of sound, with the concomitant sonic birthplace of Africa, which helped

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<sup>275</sup> Of course, it is important to note that while these three songs were indeed overt attempts to construct a black identity by the performance of reggae and disruption of the white hardcore punk identity, the majority of the songs on the album are, in fact, hardcore. That is, the blackness, or racial marginalization, performed by Bad Brains is, to a certain extent, eclipsed by the more pronounced white hardcore identity, at least sonically.

<sup>276</sup> Bad Brains, 1982.

<sup>277</sup> Jenifer, 211.

<sup>278</sup> Andy Bennett, *Cultures of Popular Music* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2001), 75.

lionize reggae as a representation of blackness through music. Characterizing the literal and musical African diaspora, reggae harkened back to a nostalgic, if not overly idealized, symbol of blackness. In a country that consistently and continuously tried to marginalize, if not assimilate, blacks, reggae stood as “a precious inner sanctum, uncontaminated by alien influences, a black heart beating back to Africa.”<sup>279</sup> In this way, reggae acted as a way to perform and maintain a black identity, one that was linked not to an America that remained hostile to blacks, but to an Africa where blackness was not only the norm but also was celebrated and venerated.

Connected nearly inextricably to reggae is Rastafarianism, the Jamaica-based religion founded, like reggae, on the combination of African and European influences, in this case the white Bible and black Africa.<sup>280</sup> Espousing a revolutionary theology that spurns capitalism (epitomized by the concept of Babylon, which refers to the entire raced, classed system of capitalist oppression), Rastafarianism demands race and class equality, which will ultimately result from the destruction of Babylon.<sup>281</sup> Such a dogma had already been explicitly expressed in the reggae of Jimmy Cliff, Bob Marley and the Wailers, and other artists, making the relationship between the music and the theology explicit. This potent combination of black musical expression and the religious tenets of racial egalitarianism (with its tacit promise of the downfall of white hegemony) became an appealing, if not idyllic, interpretation of black identity, “draw[ing] strength from the ideal of a black community working in harmony.”<sup>282</sup> Much like the performance and

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<sup>279</sup> Dick Hebdige, 38.

<sup>280</sup> Dick Hebdige, 32.

<sup>281</sup> Brock Ruggles, *Not So Quiet on the Western Front: Punk Politics During the Conservative Ascendancy in the United States, 1980-2000* (Dissertation, Arizona State University, 2008), 107-8.

<sup>282</sup> Tate, 216.

consumption of jazz and blues (before its transformation and appropriation into white mainstream society), reggae and the accompanying Rasta lifestyle acted as a deliberate sign of Otherness, as a contemporary mark of musical blackness. It delineated African from black or Other from assimilated and compliant American. In other words, it symbolized a proud and strong blackness. In this way, Bad Brains' use of reggae, and the genre's shocking departure from the sound of hardcore, acts as a way to (re)claim a blackness constructed both as Other (in the hardcore scene) and as mainstream, in the historically-specific political and social meaning of late 1970s Washington, DC.

Performing this black identity within the chiefly white punk scene necessitated an overlap of the two racialized musical identities, the crux of Bad Brains' transformative and pioneering hardcore sound. As HR says, "Reggae music is punk and punk music is American...[and] here I am in this predicament, here I am African in a European environment, so I find myself with two likenesses...."<sup>283</sup> But there was a kindred spirit in both punk and reggae — a rebellious, revolutionary attitude. Like its musical predecessors of R&B and rock, reggae's music explored the tension between African roots and European hegemony. Retaining influences from its history as a former British colony and sounds from its musical position in Jamaica, reggae acted as a representation of the African diaspora.<sup>284</sup> As with punk, reggae acts as both a cultural representation of marginalized identity and rebellion to the dominant white hegemony. And, both musics offered a devotion to self and to something larger than the individual. "When the Brains

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<sup>283</sup> *Flipside* #31, April 1982.

<sup>284</sup> Bennett, 76.

play hardcore it is with a sense of mission and possession...locked into the form by faith and rebellion,” with the same sense of religiosity and devotion they have with Rasta.<sup>285</sup>

The sonic aesthetics of blackness interlacing, underscoring and, at times, dwarfing Bad Brains’ hardcore sound sprung from the sociopolitical contingencies of the DC punk scene and the greater city. Entering a musical genre historically dominated by whiteness, and more specifically a scene filled with racism and nearly no other black bodies, Bad Brains used sound to represent, complicate and subvert the performance of blackness in hardcore. By referencing the musical underpinnings, and cultural taboos, of blues and jazz Bad Brains rearticulates blackness in hardcore punk. By addressing the banal constructions of blackness by mainstream society in their lyrics, the band refutes and challenges hardcore listeners to reconceive blackness. And by integrating reggae, *Bad Brains* asserts a reimagined blackness, one aligned with, not necessarily paradoxical too, a hardcore identity.

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With the release of their 1982 *Bad Brains*, the titular band has acted as a lightning rod within overlapping, and sometimes conflicting, musical and racial worlds. They began their careers in music in an attempt to surrogate for the great African American musicians of the past, and ended up replacing the racially knotted confusion of rock and punk with their own brand of music, hardcore punk.

Within this burgeoning punk scene, the band and their music forged complex racial identities. Following in the historically-constructed racially-based musical identity

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<sup>285</sup> Tate, 215.

of blues and jazz, Bad Brains' music sought to connect to and replicate the blackness performed in those genres. This association was palpable not only in the band's musical influences (particularly that of jazz fusion) but also in the innovations they produced in punk rock. Paralleling the attempts at musical exclusivity sought as a reclamation of black jazz, Bad Brain's musical expertise and technical dexterity — including their sheer frenzied speed, chord changes, and precision — acted to mark the band and its members as Others, a part of the bebop tradition of black musical expertise and ownership.

In addition, the construction of race through the understanding of the blues as an authentic black music also influences the aesthetics of Bad Brain's sound. Premised on the mind/body dichotomy, blacks were frequently viewed as excessively emotional, or more in touch with the body — the physicality of sentiment, rather than the intellectual; the blues were a symbol of this, acting as a metaphor for the pain, misery, hope, and struggle of not just African-American sociopolitical history but also of their identity in culture. HR's use and abuse of his voice throughout their 1982 album connects to that understanding of the blues, performing his rage, agony, and frustration as a continuation of a racialized musical past and as a marker of race in the punk contemporary present. In the same way, Bad Brain's brand of hardcore punk acts as noise, a crude and coarse disruption of sound, a quality often identified as an aspect of black R&B, with its implicit threat of social and political violence. By integrating the aesthetics of sound from blues and jazz, musics conventionally correlated with black sociocultural history, *Bad Brains* performs a blackness that connects them to, and ultimately transforms, their musical and racial past.



This musical performance of blackness is reworked through the bands' use and meaning of the electric guitar. At once a symbol of black sexuality and masculinity and the tacit threat these traits pose, the electric guitar as a symbol soon changed to one of white dominance and skill in the form of "guitar gods" and the advent of the guitar solo. Bad Brains accepts both of these socially constructed connotations of sound. Using the guitar as a warning (with all of the accompanying racial implications) and as a sign of power (in its nontraditional punk use of the guitar solo), Bad Brains' use of guitar reasserts a new sonic aesthetic of blackness.

These identities being wrought within Bad Brains were, however, in no way monolithic, nor were they unproblematic. Bad Brains, as black individuals in a nearly-uniform white DC punk scene, were both highly aware of their difference and acutely apprehensive of how that difference was understood in the white and black communities. As a result, their music tended to enact sonic blackness as a defense of their blackness in a white-dominated scene, and as a reaction to the physical and emotional realities of their black bodies interacting, performing, and influencing their audiences. The performance of reggae songs on *Bad Brains*, and the accompanying lifestyle of Rasta by the band, acted as a reassertion of blackness. As a symbol of real African-ness, the three reggae tracks on the band's album reaffirmed Bad Brains' blackness to both the white punk community and the outside black community.

While it is clear that music contains no inherent racial identity, no essence that brands it black, white, Asian or Indian, it is equally obvious that sound contains meaning. This meaning is, of course, social constructed and historically-contingent, and it carries with it the norms, values and cultural constructions of its people. The music of Bad

Brains' 1982 album, *Bad Brains*, allows for an intricate, involved, and frequently ambiguous, understanding of how race is performed through sound, and, more specifically, through the band's particular version of punk rock.

#### Chapter Four: The Sounds of Stratification: Teen Idles, Minor Threat and the Contradictions of Class

Minor Threat, and its earlier incarnation Teen Idles, is perhaps the most recognized and celebrated hardcore band from D.C. As teenagers from Northwest Washington, Teen Idles (Ian MacKaye, Jeff Nelson, Nathan Strejcek and Georgie Grindle) and Minor Threat (MacKaye, Nelson, Brian Baker and Lyle Preslar) went from skateboarding outsiders to hardcore punk gurus, exploding into one of the most influential punk bands of the early 1980s. Influenced by friends and local hardcore innovators, Bad Brains, Teen Idles and Minor Threat drew on and amplified their ferocious, frantic sound and technical prowess, becoming the standard bearer for hardcore punk. Embedded in their music — in its composition, its instrumentation, its lyrics and its texture — is the construction and performance of class. However, such representations are by no means monolithic or consistent. By analyzing the ways in which class is embodied in the bands' music both lyrically and sonically we can see how these contradictions in class, including downward class passing and the advantages of invisible privilege, mirror, challenge and reimagine class in the reality of Washington D.C.'s socioeconomic milieu.

## The Sound of Hardcore Punk as a (Paradoxical) Performance of Class

Teen Idles' *Minor Disturbance* (1981) very much exemplifies the spirit of punk rock — raw, minimalistic, loud and fast. The sound is basic, with only the fundamental use of chords played by teens still learning their instruments. The album is not known for its technical prowess, but it still mirrors the hardcore template first etched by Bad Brains. The tempo is reckless; Grindle's guitar, while sloppy, is still charged, and he plays simple riffs like they're all-out assaults; MacKaye grinds out his bass; Nelson's drumming combines a coiled tautness with debauched abandon; and Strejcek's indistinct, bark-like singing evokes a martial insistence. Whatever these young musicians lack in technical skill they make up for in furor and force. Grindle's guitar shoves its distorted, frantic riffs in your ear, MacKaye's bass lays down a thick, unobtrusive rhythm, and Nelson's drums bang and thump unrelentingly. The overwhelming feeling of these songs is visceral strength, a sort of bullying by sound. Unpolished and proudly unprofessional, Teen Idle's only album crashes over the listener like a tidal wave of loud, unruly sound. It's a fleeting flood of noise; there are only eight tracks on *Minor Disturbance* and the entire album clocks in at a mere nine minutes and nine seconds. The album personifies the teens who created it — a loud, blistering indictment of all that was authority, while, at the same time, a rough, rudimentary stab at discovery who they are, sonically and personally.

Minor Threat's three legendary hardcore albums, *Minor Threat* (1981), *In Your Eyes* (1981) and *Out of Step* (1983), are a giant leap forward in technical mastery and, along with their friends and mentors Bad Brains, were the blueprints for the DC hardcore sound. The band's first two EPs, *Minor Threat* and *In Your Eyes*, up the ante on speed, skill, and volume. With precision and technical tightness, the albums combine the

rebellion of traditional rock n' roll with a heretofore unknown velocity and intensity of sound. Bassist Baker batters his instrument, bashing out a rhythmic backbeat, while the uncompromising, beefy guitar of Preslar screeches and thrashes under a veil of distortion, speed and volume. Nelson's drumming is like an unending fistfight, pummeling, pounding and walloping at hyper-speed, until the listener feels pulverized by his sheer force and momentum. And MacKaye's vocals are the gold standard of hardcore, expressing outrage, disdain, disbelief, wrath and righteousness through his hoarse, throat-popping screaming, sarcastic spoken asides, and acidic bursts of verses with barely discernable lyrics. Like *Bad Brains*, these songs are violent ruptures, with all but two ("Stepping Stone" and "In My Eyes") spanning less than two minutes. These abrupt blurs of sonic eruption zip by and transmogrify what rock, not to mention punk, meant. Their rebellion sounded different: it was angry, loud, dissonant, warped and a bit out of control.

By their 1983 *Out of Step* (Minor Threat's only studio album) the band had slightly altered their hardcore sound. Moving Baker to second guitarist, and adding bassist Hansgen, the double-barrel offensive of guitar boosts and develops the texture and color of their sound. While the whirlwind speed is still there, too, it does decelerate in a couple of songs ("Look Back and Laugh" and "Cashing In") and has even been ornamented ever-so-slightly with a sprinkling of melody in tunes like "Little Friend" and "Betray." Their hectic energy and vibrant intensity still froths and foams throughout the album, with the aggressive drive augmented by more complex chord changes and more diversity of song structure. The hardcore sonic model, though, is still dominant; with only nine songs and a total of under twenty-one minutes, this album takes the formula of hard + fast + loud and adds a splash of harmony and a splatter of complexity. If their previous

two EPs were hardcore undiluted, the unadulterated expression of teenage angst and anger, *Out of Step* is the college years, still raging, but with a bit more nuance and refinement.

These four albums — their sound, their use of instruments, their composition and their lyrics — act as a nuanced and often paradoxical performance of class, at once a presentation of downward class passing in a gesture of solidarity with the working class and a rebuff of the implicit elitism of the upper class and simultaneously a demonstration of middle class, white privilege afforded to these band members.

#### *Hardcore Punk as (Working) Class Ethos*

By intentionally assuming a lower classed musical identity — in the composition of their music, their use of instruments, and in their deliberate lack of musical complexity — Teen Idles and Minor Threat perform a form of sonically-based working class ideology, eschewing the idolatry of conventional aesthetics associated with the cultivation of upper class taste. Using the repetition of chord progressions, minimalism as a compositional and recording aesthetic, and the continuous practice of screaming as vocal styling, the albums of these bands operate as a deliberate demonstration of anti-exclusivity, a gesture of working class camaraderie. Moreover, through an aural exploration of music as noise and copious amounts of profanity and lyrics that subvert upper class ideals of success, Teen Idles and Minor Threat reveal the socially constructed dichotomies of class. These musical performances of a working-class ethos, however, cannot be bifurcated from the sociopolitical and personal context of these bands, their backgrounds and their city. Through this positioning lens, then, the music and sound of Teen Idles and Minor Threat simultaneously, and often paradoxically, perform downward

class passing (as the band members come from a primarily professional, middle-class or even privileged upbringing) and a representation of a capitol city rife with economic inequalities.

Instruments have always functioned, in part, as a material representation of social status, as both an indicator of race (as indicated by the previous chapter's discussion on the evolution of the guitar as a symbol of blackness) and of class. To some extent, these class-based instrumental categorizations have to do with pragmatic financial means; but even more interestingly, sonic classifications are often defined by the culturally constructed relationship between sound and class.<sup>286</sup> Instruments that produce delicate, polished, soft sounds are associated with refinement, gracefulness and civility: strings (violas, violins, lutes or harps) and woodwinds (flute, oboe and clarinet) are foremost in this category. Even within the category of traditional symphonic instruments, which, due to their already monetary and socially exclusive nature<sup>287</sup> seem to value the upper class over the others, there is a sliding scale of class-based status. Prestige is often assigned to specific categories of instruments based on timbre; those with a higher-pitched sound indicate a feminine, cultured connotation, whereas those instruments that produce a lower sound imply a gruffer, lower class. In this way, the flute suggests a higher status than the saxophone, though both are woodwinds, and the French horn intimates more class than

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<sup>286</sup> See Susan McClary *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender & Sexuality* (1991); Philip Tagg, "Subjectivity and Soundscape, Motorbikes and Music," from *The Popular Music Studies Reader*, eds. Andy Bennett, Barry Shank, and Jason Toynbee (2006); William Weber, *Music and the Middle Class* (2003).

<sup>287</sup> The fiscal costs associated with symphony-based instruments include the high price of the instrument itself, the maintenance of the instrument, and the money spent on lessons and music education. Socially, the playing of these instruments indicate either a vaster amount of leisure time (that is, the privilege of not working as a child or adolescent and having the time to practice an instrument) and/or a traditionally-upper class emphasis on the valuation of classical music.

the trombone.<sup>288</sup> The guitar, however, has been continuously associated with the lower class. Its “sharp, rough timbre of plucked strings” was reminiscent of travelling gypsies, ranchers, and African-Americans —those people without a large income or the traditional patina of sophistication.<sup>289</sup> Playing guitar symbolizes a certain coarseness and vulgarity (making it a perfect symbol for class rebellion in the 1960s and 70s). In this way, musical instruments act as a tool of and symbol for social control, establishing an emblematic and exclusive relationship between strata of class and echelons of instruments.

Punk in general, and Teen Idles and Minor Threat more specifically, internalize these culturally prescribed socio-musical relationships and enact these binary assignments. These two hardcore bands exclusively played instruments that were sonically associated with the uncouthness and primitiveness of the lower class: the jagged, strident sound of the electric guitar, the rumbling, menacing resonance of the bass, and the booming, undomesticated din of drums. These instruments, and their accompanying sound, carry with them a legacy of marginalization and exclusion from the idealized mainstream culture (with a capital “C”), and Teen Idles and Minor Threat assume these sounds, and their social connotations, exclusively through their four albums.

The adoption of these lower-classed instruments was not a product of necessity or hardship, however, but was instead a deliberate rejection of the cultural implications of instruments the band members were privileged enough to both learn and listen to. As MacKaye admits, “Music was never a choice for me. The instruments and the approach

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<sup>288</sup> See Paul Fussell, *Class: A Guide Through the American Status System* (New York: Touchstone, 1992).

<sup>289</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 19.

— that I will say is a choice.”<sup>290</sup> Drummer Nelson played the tympani in the school orchestra, an instrument typically associated with the elitism of classical music;<sup>291</sup> MacKaye’s mother played the piano and he received lessons when he was a child;<sup>292</sup> even bassist/guitarist Baker’s first instrument was an acoustic guitar,<sup>293</sup> an instrument whose softer sounds of string-plucking, rather than the harsh distortion of amplification in the electric, connected to the Renaissance-era lute guitar, Baroque court music, and the folk songs of the Romantic period, as well as to the classical guitar, used in orchestration and classical music.<sup>294</sup> The conscious use of these culturally-demoted instruments (guitar, bass and drums) and the unrefined, abrasive sounds that attended them, was then, the bands’ attempt at “the most spectacular way to shock the bourgeois...by conferring aesthetic status on objects or ways of representing them that are excluded by the dominant aesthetic of the time.”<sup>295</sup>

Of course, the bands’ incorporation of these downwardly classed instruments can only be fully understood in context and conjunction with the composition of the music they made; if the guitar, bass and drums are the form, Teen Idles and Minor Threat songs are the content — and their content continues their assertion of a working class-based musical identity, chiefly through the simplicity of their songs, the exultation of emotion over artistry in the way they play their instruments, and the production of “noise” as music.

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<sup>290</sup> Interview with Ian MacKaye, markprindle.com, 2009.

<sup>291</sup> Interview with Jeff Nelson, absolutepunk.net, March 27, 2009.

<sup>292</sup> Mark Andersen and Mark Jenkins (2002).

<sup>293</sup> Interview with Brian Baker, [www.dayafterday.com](http://www.dayafterday.com), March 30, 2010.

<sup>294</sup> See Tom and Mary Anne Evans, *Guitars: From the Renaissance to Rock* (1977); Dr. Michael Kasha, "A New Look at The History of the Classic Guitar," *Guitar Review* Vol. 30, (August 1968).

<sup>295</sup> Bourdieu, 47.



The least overt but perhaps most consistent way Teen Idles and Minor Threat create downwardly classed music is the composition of the songs themselves. Incorporating the punk rock credo of a “three-chord democracy,” the bands uses the same guitar chords — in the same order — nearly exclusively. Teen Idles’ *Minor Disturbance* has six songs on it, all of which have the same chord progression: E/B/G/D/A/E. Minor Threat’s *Minor Threat* is virtually identical, with seven of the eight songs using the exact same progression;<sup>296</sup> and every single one of the eight songs in *Out of Step* also follow suit. The only small deviation comes in *In My Eyes*, where two of the four songs cut the chord progression in half (G/D/A/E) and the other two use the fully elongated version.

This simplification process, and the bands’ attendant veneration of such minimalism through its repetition in nearly every single song, acts as a repudiation of the traditional aesthetics of high-cultured music. By streamlining the way a band can craft music, Teen Idles and Minor Threat demystify the musical creation process and, to a certain extent, purge the sanctity of the musician as an all-powerful creator of truth. These punks’ abstention from such musical idolatry, with its whiffs of elitism and dependence on the cult of professionalism, was a direct reaction to the musical landscape of the 1970s in the form of progressive rock. Staidly in the corner of musical orthodoxy, progressive rock extolled musical innovation, worshiped musical expertise through its reverence to and obsession with lengthy musical solos and, in doing so, attempted to elevate its sounds to the status of art. Without the perceived need (either market-wise or cultural-wise) for politically or socially relevant messages, art rock positioned music as a

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<sup>296</sup> The only exception is “I Don’t Want to Hear About It,” which goes F#/E/F#/B/E.

privileged place, seeking to partition commercial success from artistry.<sup>297</sup> In doing so, prog rock artists advanced a politics of aesthetics, moving towards the modernistic canons of classical music, where the “demand [for] an investment of cultural capital...reinforces social distinctions and class barriers by encoding messages that alienate, confuse, or bore less-educated viewers.”<sup>298</sup> That is to say, inextricably linked to this “politics of aesthetics,” and progressive rock’s intentional construction as art, were explicit class-based political and social complexities. In its devotion to the studio and technology and its approbation for high-brow classical music, prog rock reeked of upper-class pretension and exclusivity. Even its admitted disdain for commercial success pointed to the position of economic privilege imbued in art rock, a stance that musicians from Motown, the blues, or soul could scant afford. In this way, prog rock reinforced the traditional class-based taste divide that esteemed artistic merit over economic necessity. The music, in its insistence on a cerebral and introspective aesthetic, dictated both an appreciation for and knowledge of musical history and the luxury of focus on the conceptual rather than the physical.

Teen Idles and Minor Threat, with their repetitive, straight-forward chord progressions, eviscerate this progressive rock sense of classed sonic complexity. If any teenage kid with a guitar and nominal knowledge of music could produce music, there could be no cult of the star, no distance between fan and performer. These four albums could be played by anyone who learned these basic chord progressions; twenty-five

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<sup>297</sup> See Garofalo, *Rockin’ Out*, (2011); Bill Martin, *Listening to the Future: The Time of Progressive Rock 1968-1978* (1997); Szatmary (1996); *Yes is the Answer and Other Prog Rock Tales*, eds. Marc Weingarten and Tyson Cornell (2013).

<sup>298</sup> Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise*, 213.

songs, all at the grasp of nearly everybody of any class. This reproducibility flies in the face of the complex, intentionally exclusionary music of the social elite. Classical music had no such ability to be easily or straightforwardly recreated, nor did its rock contemporary, progressive rock. But Teen Idles and Minor Threat's musically political statement — E/B/G/D/A/E — spoke of egalitarianism and communalism. Not only did one not have to have the cultural capital to learn socially-privileged instruments, but also one only needed to learn six basic guitar chords to create and play music.

Even more so, the *way* Teen Idles and Minor Threat play these six basic chords speaks to how their music depicts a working class, amateur identity. Unlike the conventionally constructed definition of musical talent, which includes artistry as technical prowess, these bands' brand of punk happily elevated passion over expertise. Musical education was analogous with the cerebral highbrow form of culture, whereas the band esteemed the so-called philistine value of natural artlessness or emotional candor. As MacKaye admits, "I'm a brutally emotional music person...I refuse to take lessons because I'm scared that the way I play will become warped if I learn the technical aspects and will take away my personal approach and my totally emotional way of playing."<sup>299</sup>

This intentional emphasis on feeling rather than procedural skill was again, in part, a reaction to the professionalization of music and the band members' parallel feelings of musical ineptitude. Preslar remembers his "really awful"<sup>300</sup> guitar playing as a kid, and MacKaye almost gave up on music because all he saw were professionals

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<sup>299</sup> "Rap Session!" *maximumrocknroll*, #8 September 1983.

<sup>300</sup> "Lyle Preslar of Minor Threat answers the Questions of Doom," [gimmebadvibes.com](http://gimmebadvibes.com).

doing it.<sup>301</sup> Yet these ostensible deficiencies were transformed into badges of pride in the space that punk rock provided. A lack of formal education — typically a sign of a lower class identity — was metamorphosed into cultural rebellion. Unprofessional playing, that is, playing with one’s emotions rather than with one’s culturally-mandated “talent,” was a mindful restructuring of musical value. As the Teen Idles sing in “Get Up and Go” — “You keep talking about talent/Talent?/What do you know?/Instead of studying theory/We’re going to get up and go!”<sup>302</sup> The bands’ “limited ability,”<sup>303</sup> which HR of Bad Brains characterized as “very enthusiastic”<sup>304</sup> but not technically skilled when they first began, was a refusal to be held to a class-based musical standard and a symbol of identification with those who were marginalized by mainstream cultural paradigms.

This dedication to the working class aesthetic in the hardcore punk sound of Minor Threat and Teen Idles can be understood, to some extent, not only as an abjuration of mainstream culture’s obsession with social status and refinement, but also as a representation of the often-marginalized substratum of their city. Applying a minimalistic, distorted and antagonistic approach, as well as an emphasis on musical realism, these bands’ music signifies the building frustration and overlooked disconnect between the upper-class façade of DC and the disparate reality of those not as privileged. Just as their Detroit proto-punk predecessors MC5 and the Stooges used discordant repetition and standardization of sound to at once repudiate and reappropriate the

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<sup>301</sup> *We Owe You Nothing: Punk Planet, the Collected Interviews*, Daniel Sinker, ed. (Chicago: Punk Planet Books) 2008, 13.

<sup>302</sup> Teen Idles, “Get Up and Go” in *Minor Disturbance*, Dischord Records, 1981.

<sup>303</sup> Blush, 151.

<sup>304</sup> *American Hardcore*, directed by Paul Rachman, (USA: Sony Pictures, 2007).

ideology of mechanization of a Fordist-society,<sup>305</sup> the music of Teen Idles and Minor Threat embraces the burdens of the working class and, at the same time, uses these sonic metaphors to disrupt and upset the high-cultured patina of mainstream society.

Repetition and monotony in the bands' music act as a symbol of the sameness and ennui of working-class tedium. In part, this is done by the aforementioned duplication of the same chord progression; the recurrence of E/B/G/D/A/E operates as routine and ritual — not only the accessibility of basic chords as classlessness but also the repetition as the slog of everyday life. Indeed, over 70% of people employed in DC in 1979 worked blue collar jobs: in manufacturing, transportation and public utilities, retail trade, repair services and nondurable goods.<sup>306</sup> The day-in, day-out sequence of wage-earning work is reflected and represented in the streamlined automation of the chords in Minor Threat and Teen Idles' songs. In this way, the commonplace is elevated; refuting the scholarly cataloguing of standardization as low-brow<sup>307</sup> and a cultural fondness for shiny, brass-driven pop music, lovelorn power ballads and industry's classification of complexity as art,<sup>308</sup> these two bands used unvaried standardization and mechanization as a prized aesthetic of the workingperson. There is a comfort, a security and an understated strength in the consistency — even monotony — of (musical and labor) routine.

This musical reminder of the realism of the everyday is consistently represented in the sound of Teen Idles and Minor Threat. Created as a musical opposition to the gloss and polish of mainstream music and a concurrent political opposition to the values that

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<sup>305</sup> See Waksman, *Instruments of Desire: The Electric Guitar and the Shaping of Musical Experience*.

<sup>306</sup> *U.S. Census, Washington DC: Industry of Employed Persons*, 1980.

<sup>307</sup> See Adorno, *On Popular Music*, 1941.

<sup>308</sup> As exemplified by the city's emphasis on classical music, the Billboard charts of 1979, 1980 and 1981 (including Hall and Oates, Kool and the Gang, Captain and Tennille, Peaches and Herb and Gloria Gaynor), and the explosion of progressive rock bands like Rush, Genesis, Yes and Jethro Tull.

sort of music embodied —luxury, pretense, romance, and a sunniness bordering on denial of material problems — the bands’ hardcore punk sound stands as a stark contrast. For their music “the real/unreal distinction depended on a series of musical connotations — ugly versus pretty, harsh versus soothing, energy versus art, the ‘raw’ . . . versus the ‘cooked.’”<sup>309</sup> This rawness is achieved in a number of ways. First, is the minimalism of sound: not only do Teen Idles’ and Minor Threat’s songs rely on just three instruments,<sup>310</sup> but also their songs nearly exclusively use a simple verse-and-refrain structure. This simplicity is an aural declaration of restraint; if intros, bridges and codas were musically illustrative of the excess of the upper class, than a basic verse-chorus-versus-chorus arrangement typified working-class austerity.

Secondly, the band’s raw “realism” continues in the punk tradition of brief, powerful bursts of songs. On Teen Idles’ *Minor Disturbance*, no song is longer than one minute and thirty seconds and the shortest clocks in at forty-four seconds. Minor Threat’s self-titled album is a total of nine minutes and twenty seconds; the two longest songs are a minute and forty-two seconds, and the shortest is forty-six seconds. While *In My Eyes* and *Out of Step* have augmented song lengths (the former’s “In My Eyes” is two minutes and fifty-nine seconds, while the latter has three songs over three minutes: “Betray,” “Look Back and Laugh” and “Cashing In”), the vast majority of these four albums are still notable for their persistent brevity.

This succinctness speaks to the repudiation of glut and to the ideals of asceticism and frugality. As MacKaye explains, “I will say what is exactly on my mind, and do it in

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<sup>309</sup> Simon Frith, *Sound Effects* (New York: Pantheon Books) 1981, 158-9.

<sup>310</sup> Four instruments by the time of 1983’s *Out of Step*, which incorporates two guitars for the first time.

32 seconds.”<sup>311</sup> Trimming the fat of decadence, the bands’ minimalism of lyrics and sound serve as a class statement against excess. Most DC residents had to make do with what they had; efficiency and efficacy was more representative of the everyday inhabitants of the city, rather than the intemperance and extravagance of DC’s elite. In fact, according to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, the median income in Washington DC in 1979 was \$16, 183,<sup>312</sup> and multiple neighborhoods in DC, including Columbia Heights, Edgewood, LeDroit Park, Petworth, Bloomingdale, Parkview and “most neighborhoods east of the Anacostia River”<sup>313</sup> had been designated “distressed” by the Department of Housing and Community development.<sup>314</sup> The succinctness, the deliberate frugality of Minor Threat and Teen Idles’ songs, then, speak to and parallel the economics of the city’s workers and tenants.

Finally, the recording of Minor Threat and Teen Idles’ albums engage in realism by disregarding repeated takes, track mixing and studio manipulation in favor of the unfiltered, unprocessed sounds of their instruments, their voices, and the procedural aspects of how their music is created. The bands’ instruments are clearly separate in their recordings — you can hear each one individually and can spatially locate them. For instance, in “Filler” the guitar is plainly placed on the left, while the bass and drums is on the right, while a thin texture is also evident in “Straightedge,” where the horizontal structure of the instruments’ set-up reflects more of a live performance than a studio

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<sup>311</sup> *American Hardcore*, 2007.

<sup>312</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, “Money Income for Households in the United States: 1979,” Series P-60, no. 126, June 1981.

<sup>313</sup> Department of Housing and Community Development, “Housing Problems, Conditions & Trends in the District of Columbia,” June 1979.

<sup>314</sup> This categorization was based ownership patterns, yearly income of residents, real estate sales and prices, welfare assistance and the condition of housing.

recording. The studio itself — Inner Ear — was simply a homemade getup of local engineer Don Zientara, including a reel-to-reel four-track recorder and a mixing board set up on the porch and running down to the basement.<sup>315</sup> Teen Idles and Minor Threat’s sound reflects this shoestring set-up. You can hear the verbal cues and studio chatter on a number of tracks: MacKaye mumbles “play it faster” over the opening riff of “Minor Threat” and assures the listener “that’s a promise” with a laugh at the end of the same song. You can hear Preslar’s guitar being tuned at the start of “Steppin’ Stone;” the beginning of “12XU” has MacKaye saying, “This goes out to everybody. Ready?” and he asks “is that good enough?” answering himself “I think so,” at the end of “Stumped.” The inclusion of these unremarkable-yet-typically-absent aspects of studio recording highlights the work, the reality, of creating music. Rather than expunging traces of band members as fallible mortals — needing to tune their instruments, requiring more than one take, chatting amongst themselves and with the producer — these additions make the tracks “uglier” in contrast to the pretty polish of pop and prog rock songs by stressing, and therefore elevating, the place of the producer instead of simply the product.

More than the deliberate minimalism and “unpretty” realism of their music as a replication of class aesthetics, Teen Idles and Minor Threat’s hardcore uses noise, a cacophony of sound, as class commentary. A considerable part of this emotive noise was the vocal delivery of both Strojcek (with Teen Idles) and MacKaye (with Minor Threat). Both vocalists had no previous experience singing and employ the punk vocal tradition of shouting, rather than harmonic, singing. This effect evokes more of an emotional appeal

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<sup>315</sup> See Michael Azerrad, *Our Band Could Be Your Life: Scenes from the American Indie Underground, 1981-1991* (2002).



than anything else, in part because the volume and speed of the shouting tends to obscure any easy comprehension of the lyrics.

On songs like Teen Idles' "Getting in My Way," the only recognizable lyrics are often punctuated at the end of a sentence, when the titular "way" is rhymed with "stay," "day," and "gray." What *is* easily decipherable is the urgency, fury and ruggedness of Strejcek's voice, which is only augmented by the distortion of the microphones and low-budget recording process. Strejcek seems to be throwing out lyrics like challenges — quick, harsh deliveries that taunt the listener, even without the full understanding of what he's saying. The discordance, the vocalization itself, is as, if not more, important as the words that are being spit out.

MacKaye takes vocal intensity and dissonance to another level, using his voice as a weapon to inflict feelings of pain, frustration, and sheer primitiveness. In "Filler," he howls out the first line "What happened to you?" drawing out the last word over three seconds, before flinging out the last word of the chorus — "filler" — in a fully-enunciated two-syllable punch of a yelp. Indeed, this vocal style was a signature of MacKaye who "spouted his lyrics like a frantic drill sergeant, halfway between a holler and a bark."<sup>316</sup> In "Seeing Red," the chorus is yelled with such resolve and exigency MacKaye's voice sounds nearly gone; when he expels the line "Red/I'm seeing red" the listener can almost visualize the strain on his throat and envision the snapping of his vocal chords. His guttural roughness demands attention and invokes alarm — in the connotative tone and texture of his voice but also in the tangible bodily harm it could cause. And when MacKaye roars "you built that wall up around you/And now you can't

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<sup>316</sup> Azerrad, 129.

see out/And you can't hear my words/No matter how loud I shout”<sup>317</sup> in “Screaming at a Wall” his jarring, strident yelps embody the lyrics he is singing; his earsplitting shouts are a plea to listen and the volume of the sound, the intensity and texture of his voice, are the aural demand for the listener’s attention.

Even more striking is MacKaye’s vocal juxtaposition of spoken word and yelling, which highlights and comments on the conventional civilized/primitive, low-class/high-class binary. “In My Eyes” opens with MacKaye speaking in a cartoonish, buoyant deep voice, intoning “You tell me you like the taste,” which is immediately followed by the unforgiving scream of “You just need an excuse,” with each word skewered and enunciated separately, every bellowed syllable an accusation. This pattern repeats in rest of the first verse:

You tell me it calms your nerves (*spoken*)/You just think it looks cool (*screamed*)  
You tell me you want to be different (*spoken*)/You just change for the same (*screamed*)  
You tell me it’s only natural (*spoken*)/You just need the proof (*screamed*)<sup>318</sup>

The last line of the first verse ends in a half-scream, half-spoken exhortation, without any musical accompaniment: “Did you fucking get it?” The contrast between the caricatured civility of the spoken word, which is linked to markedly facetious logic and mainstream justification — I like the taste, it calms my nerves, it’s natural — and the so-called primeval screaming, which is linked to the act of truth-telling, of a nakedness in the emperor-has-no-clothes ilk, is not only evident, it’s meant to be shocking. The niceties of a proper society, including a way of speaking and of thinking, are revealed as ridiculous next to rude reality. If yelling is low-brow it’s also shown to be more genuine and

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<sup>317</sup> Minor Threat, *Minor Threat*.

<sup>318</sup> Minor Threat, *In My Eyes*.

truthful; the relationship between values and aesthetics (beauty truth, truth beauty) is inverted and subverted. This vocal tactic is used a number of times in Minor Threat songs, with the calm spoken word as a symbol for “polite society,” which is continuously set against the seething wails of unrefined plebeians: the voice of political correctness in “Guilty of Being White,” a declaration of human sameness in “Straightedge,” and as the “humanity” in “Out of Step (With the World).” In a truly postmodernist bent, Minor Threat blurs the sonic high/low boundaries of singing versus yelling, paralleling and ultimately exposing the false binary of vulgar/sophisticated, primitive/advanced aesthetics.

In addition to the chaos of MacKaye and Strejcek’s vocal delivery the tempo, volume and timbre of the guitar, bass and drums in Minor Threat and Teen Idles also serve to create an atonal attack of noise that produces not only a feeling of speed and energy, but also a sense of an unbounded assault on conformity itself. For instance, the forty-four second offensive that is the opening track of Teen Idles’ *Minor Disturbance* begins with a sneering guitar riff played with furious disarray and as the hammering drums kick in a few seconds later Strejcek’s voice blasts indecipherably through. This guitar-bass-and-drum strike reprises over and over again, with the same riffs being played repeatedly, evoking a feeling of being continually thrashed. The onslaught continues in the next track, “Sneakers,” where a menacing drum roll is succeeded by ominously-strummed bass power chords that conjure a dark heavy metal sound before the tempo picks up and a shredding guitar solo intercedes a minute into the song. Each of the remaining songs on the album, “Get Up and Go,” “Deadhead,” “Fleeting Fury,” “Fiorucci Nightmare,” and “Getting in My Way,” use the same combination of nonstop speed, a

rhythmic blitz in the form of crashing drums, and the repetitive, abrasive riffs of piercing electric guitar and a booming bass, and impenetrable lyrical shouting that produced, as MacKaye admits, “total noise – not like bullshit noise – but songs with a really rough edge.”<sup>319</sup>

Minor Threat was similarly inclined. Their riffs are sinewy — powerful, muscular and lean — with a nonstop blitz of velocity, volume and aggression. Their sound is jagged and distorted, like a serrated blade trudging through bone. Nelson’s drums are a violent sledgehammer, at one turn a brutal military-style death march and at another a tornado of crashing cymbals and improbable speed. Each song is a visceral eruption, a blur of sound that, compiled into an entire album, is an uninhibited and concerted assault of unbroken noise, an aural confrontation that even to MacKaye “...at first it didn’t sound like music to me. It was very weird, kind of jarring.”<sup>320</sup>

And that was the point. This weird, jarring noise that was called hardcore punk music was, in part, an answer to the conservative, traditional cultural mores of Washington, DC’s prim and proper cultural and economic ladder-climbing society. Musical virtuosity and harmonic melodies were for a different population of the city — the elite. The city that Minor Threat and Teen Idles sang about, the *way* that these bands sang about the city, established a narrative that spoke to anger, danger, and pain. Their frenzied feel and sound of disorder and turmoil, the noise of hardcore, served as a proclamation against the regulations, intellectualism, and claims to propriety — the

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<sup>319</sup> *Touch and Go*, #15 July 1981.

<sup>320</sup> Joe Mageary, “‘Rise Above/We’re Gonna Rise Above’: A Qualitative Inquiry into the Use of Hardcore Punk Culture as Context for the Development of Preferred Identities,” (PhD diss., California Institute for Integral Studies, 2012), 135.

vener of cultured refinement — that were the hallmark of DC’s cultural milieu.<sup>321</sup> And they did so intentionally. As DC punk authors Mark Andersen and Mark Jenkins contend, “the songs raged, but not blindly or inarticulately.”<sup>322</sup> The form and sound of their music, the noise of Minor Threat and Teen Idles, was designed specifically as a threat, as a warning, as a representation of the way they felt about the state of culture.

Rather than just reproducing an aural representation of class, however, the noise of hardcore serves to bring attention to its cause. Noise bewilders and grates, intentionally so, lifting the humdrum of musical routine to a chaotic and feverish extreme. Noise captures your attention; it startles you, pulls you from the predictability of your surroundings, and makes you eager to seek out the source. For Teen Idles and Minor Threat, then, noise = disruption and disruption = attention. The uproarious disorder and loudness of these bands, therefore, both connotes a rebellious working class aesthetic and simultaneously draws attention to the fact of economic and cultural differentiation.

Their use of noise as music was also a deliberate repudiation of the cultural impetus of class as an equivalent to taste. Taste, as “one of the most vital stakes in the struggles fought in the field of the dominant class and the field of cultural production,” can be understood as a way to categorize, assess and offer consistency to one’s sense of self and at the same time serve as a symbolic delineation of social boundaries.<sup>323</sup> In this way, preference for specific cultural goods often reproduces the larger social structure, including both the consumption choices by certain segments of society (frequently based on differences such as race, gender and, for our purposes, class) and the subsequent

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<sup>321</sup> Particularly in Georgetown, the recently appointed seat of the new bourgeoisie. Refer back to Chapter Two for a more in-depth discussion of Georgetown’s changing sociocultural face.

<sup>322</sup> Andersen and Jenkins, 91.

<sup>323</sup> Bourdieu, 11.

hierarchy assigned on those choices. And, within the realm of cultural production, “nothing more clearly affirms one’s ‘class,’ nothing more infallibly classifies, than taste in music.”<sup>324</sup> This is because, in part, musical culture is understood to be more than simply an accumulation of knowledge, but instead acts as metonymy for spirituality, a symbol of the soul in its interiority, separate from the material vulgarity of the physical.<sup>325</sup>

Following the same theoretical vein, musical preference denotes a separation between the practicality and necessities of everyday life and the privilege of understanding and appreciating aesthetics — primary factors indicative of class division. That is, a person reared in relative wealth, unencumbered by the functional needs of everyday survival, retains the freedom to nurture a taste for the purely aesthetic or ornamental; artistic merit is a feasible and reasonable goal of the affluent rather than consumption of cultural goods that are pragmatic or functional. By differentiating taste in music, one is able to reaffirm one’s status in the hierarchy of social order, and, at the same time, perpetuate the hegemony associated with the dominant preference. Musical preference, then, is an indicator of class because of its association with a specified set of cultural knowledge (implying with that an analogous set of economic, social, and educational knowledge) and an assertion of status because of that class.

Minor Threat and Teen Idles use the equation of music as taste and taste as class to perform an intentionally “tasteless” — and thereby working class — musical aesthetic. Following the American proto-punk tradition, these two hardcore bands made music that,

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<sup>324</sup> Bourdieu, 18.

<sup>325</sup> Bourdieu, 19.

to their comfortable middle- to upper-middle class contemporaries, sounded “raunchy and devastating” and, like the Velvet Underground and Stooges before them, was “totally inaccessible.”<sup>326</sup> Indeed, Iggy Pop’s first reaction to the Velvet Underground — “how could anybody make a record that sounds like such a piece of shit?...This just sounds like trash!” — was the same response most listeners had to Teen Idles and Minor Threat.<sup>327</sup> For these two DC punk bands, their seemingly sloppy, chaotic unprofessional sound was actually an initiation into music that used noise as a statement of rebellion. This rejection of middle-class values included the definition of “real” or “good” music as harmonious, melodic and traditional. By eschewing formal musical training and the corresponding class-based appreciation of traditional tonality and harmony in their devotion to an aesthetic of dissonant noise, these bands deliberately undercut the conventional construction of aesthetics in music, therefore also undercutting the performance of taste.

Similarly, these bands’ lyrics function as a retort to the mainstream upper-class ideology, including the culturally-constructed fantasy of true love, social fluidity, refined behavior and the storybook happy endings associated with the upper crust American Dream. Most noticeably, this is accomplished through Teen Idles and Minor Threat’s unrestrained use of profanity in their songs, a categorically “low-brow” form of communication. The list of expletives in the songs of Teen Idles and Minor Threat is fairly extensive — fuck, shit, crap, pissed off, asshole — second only to the number of songs in which these swearwords appear. In *Minor Disturbance* expletives are found in “Fleeting Fury,” “Teen Idles,” and “Fiorucci Nightmare,” and in the three Minor Threat albums they appear in “Filler,” “I Don’t Wanna Hear it” (sample lyric: “I don’t wanna

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<sup>326</sup> McNeil and McCain, 5.

<sup>327</sup> McNeil and McCain, 18.

hear it/Know that you're full of shit/Shut your fucking mouth/I don't care what you say"<sup>328</sup>), "Small Man Big Mouth," "Minor Threat," "In My Eyes," "Out of Step," "Betray," "It Follows," "Think Again," "Look Back and Laugh," "Sob Story," and "No Reason."

Considered obscene, and by some even blasphemous, swearing, particularly publicly, has a strong historical and cultural association with social class. Indeed, the word vulgar literally means "common," and most often, profanity emerged from lower-class transliterations of words.<sup>329</sup> To a certain extent, of course, the depth and breadth of these words is merely a reflection of the anger and frustration these band members were feeling; but more significantly, and more complicated, is what that anger is directed at and how it's directed. The repeated use of profanity, particularly in the recorded, public forum of music, is a literal and figurative "fuck you" to conventional, upper-class linguistic and social values, which cherish public propriety, verbal cleverness, and adherence to their constructed version of proper behaviors, and look down upon open displays of anger, coarse language and an ignorance or outright spurning of what is deemed common decency. Aligning themselves linguistically with the working class, Minor Threat and Teen Idles' joyous, continuous, and liberal use of expletives in their songs acts as a performance of a "tasteless" class identity.

In a somewhat less confrontational manner, the bands incorporate alternative thematic narratives in their lyrics to counteract the quixotic fictions of mainstream romance. Popular culture, music included, paints an idealistic and clearly unrealistic

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<sup>328</sup> Minor Threat, *Minor Threat*.

<sup>329</sup> Melissa Mohr, *Holy Sh\*t: A Brief History of Swearing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).



picture of love conquering all, of the redemptive, uplifting power of relationships.<sup>330</sup> And those picture-perfect loves — in couples, in families, in friendships — are habitually correlated to class; part of achieving the American Dream is, of course, the house, the yard and car, but it is also the smiling beautiful spouse and children, the chummy neighbors and the firm group of faithful friends. Minor Threat contests these ivory-tower, starry-eyed visions of love, both romantically and platonically. In “Look Back and Laugh,” MacKaye writes about the destruction of friendship:

I want to tell you a little story/'Cause it makes me warm inside/It's about some friends growing up/And all the things they tried/ I'm not talking about staple shit/They went for something more/I guess it was too much dreaming/Too much to hope for.

One day something funny happened/But it scared the shit out of me/Their heads went in different directions/And their friendship ceased to be.

Mr. Present, go away/Come back and fuck with us some other day/Mr. Feelings, run and hide/You have no right to what you feel inside.<sup>331</sup>

In the same album, two other songs document the treachery of ideals lost and a relationship disintegrating. “Betray” both laments the end of a friendship and acts as an accusation, both to himself and to the person he thought was his friend —

Maybe it was no one's fault/I know it wasn't mine/But now that you've moved along/I guess I'm next in line/I thought we had the same ideas/But you, you proved me wrong/I've been played the fool before/But never for quite so long/BETRAY<sup>332</sup>

— while “No Reason” portrays the pain that accompanies the dissolution of a relationship, with the attending recriminations, doubts, feelings of pain, anger and helplessness:

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<sup>330</sup> In the 1960s and 1970s see songs like Blood, Sweat and Tears “You Make Me So Very Happy,” The Hollies “The Air That I Breathe,” Lou Rawls “You’ll Never Find Another Love Like Mine,” The Turtles “Happy Together,” Gladys Knight and the Pips “You’re the Best Thing,” Styx “Lady,” Air Supply “Lost in Love,” Starship “Nothing’s Gonna Stop Us Now,” just to name a few.

<sup>331</sup> Minor Threat, in *Out of Step*, Dischord Records, 1983.

<sup>332</sup> *Ibid.*

So you hate me/That's the way it goes/What the fuck?/I guess I'll never know...Sit in the same room/We look the other way/Fuck conversation/We've got nothing to say.<sup>333</sup>

And while MacKaye routinely treats friendship as important and meaningful (and heartrending and disillusioning) as a romantic relationship typically is lyrically portrayed in popular music, his view of heterosexual love affairs is less than lionized. “Filler,” from Minor Threat’s self-titled first EP, derides the conventional ideal of giving all of yourself to another person, scoffing at the way the concept of love allows a person to lose himself: “Was she really worth it?/She cost you your life/You'll never leave her side/She's gonna be your wife... You call it romance/You're full of shit.”<sup>334</sup> Similarly, “In My Eyes” questions love as an excuse for sex —“You tell me that you like her/You just wish you did”<sup>335</sup> — and “It Follows” decries the tumultuous mess that passes as romance —“All the stupid thinking/Stupid people thought... In the shape of floating friends/The young ladies and their secrets/In the soap that never ends.”<sup>336</sup>

Cumulatively, these songs act to break from the popular musical cookie-cutter model of boy-loves-girl-boy-loses-girl, and attempt to dissipate the constructed fantasy of perfect love. While no relationship — not one developed within the moneyed cocoon of upper-classdom nor one produced in the less affluent circumstances of the working-class — is flawless or without a problem, the carefully constructed relationships of the privileged is projected as an impenetrable facade. Plastered-on smiles, fairy tale courtships, and hand-holding lovebirds seem to pair effortlessly with pearl necklaces, diamond earrings, and power couples. Minor Threat deconstructs these romantic,

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<sup>333</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>334</sup> Minor Threat, *Minor Threat*, Dischord Records, 1981.

<sup>335</sup> Minor Threat, *In My Eyes*, Dischord Records, 1981.

<sup>336</sup> Minor Threat, *Out of Step*, Dischord Records, 1983.

socially-classed platitudes; by lyrically depicting the pragmatic realities that arise in normal relationships, the band shines a light on the hairline fractures spidering through the idealized representation of upper-class attainment.

It becomes evident, then, that in many aspects of the performance of class within their music — from the selection and use of instruments, to the hardcore sound and musical composition, to their lyrical content — Minor Threat and Teen Idles engage in a form of downward class-passing. Most frequently, class passing is associated with upward mobility, the naturalized assumption being that wealth and cultural capital are the desired end. As feminist cultural and film theorist Gwendolyn Audrey Foster explains, there is a “...fixation with class mobility because it insists on the social negotiation of desire...into the capitalist fantasies of the American Dream, including fantasies of upward mobility.”<sup>337</sup> Yet, it is precisely this cultural supposition — that money, power and fame are compulsory — as seen through the promotion of the American Dream, that Teen Idles and Minor Threat seek to rebuff. Downward passing then becomes not emulation but an alteration of power.

By denying the tacit desirability of being rich, these punks repudiate what sociologists Karen Bettez Halnon and Sandra Cohen describe as “gentrification” of the body, instead using downward passing to “renegotiate authority, and indeed the right to author” their own bodies.<sup>338</sup> While gentrification, as Halnon and Cohen describe it, implies the “invasion” and the appropriation of working class aesthetics and material goods by the middle class, with the consequences being the eradication of the working

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<sup>337</sup> Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, *Class-Passing: Social Mobility in Film and Popular Culture* (Southern Illinois University Press: 2005), 2.

<sup>338</sup> Peter Hitchcock, “Passing: Henry Green and Working-Class Identity,” *Modern Fiction Studies*. Vol. 40. (Spring, 1994): 4.

class' power,<sup>339</sup> these bands both reject material goods as a distinction of class and simultaneously attempt to achieve a balance of power they see missing in the city's power-laden, white, upper-class system. Rather than using consumption as a tool for "playing" lower-class — that is, borrowing and sporting symbols of the working class for fun, as Halnon and Cohen define aesthetic gentrification<sup>340</sup>— Minor Threat and Teen Idles embrace the performance of downward class passing through sound as a celebration of working class values, or at least a repudiation of the dictates of upper-class ones. Their downward passing is used to "express an ambivalence towards the self-identity of a class structured in dominance [and] highlight the colonizing moment of a ruling class" by exposing, and discarding, the sociocultural necessity of achieving the American Dream in one particular way.<sup>341</sup>

Throughout four years and four albums the hardcore punk sounds and words of Teen Idles and Minor Threat perform a classed identity, one that specifically struggled to thwart the cultural assumptions of upper-class privilege. From the choice of instruments they played to the intentional eschewal of formal musical training, the bands' creation of music speaks to a minimalistic distorted reality mirroring and exaggerating that of the DC working-class. MacKaye and Strejcek's raw, emotional vocals, in combination with noise produced by the chaotic mixture of tempo, timbre and volume, act as a disordered aural representation of the fear and dissonance that is the day-to-day experience of the common person. Furthermore, MacKaye lyrically disrupts the romantic narrative that accompanies

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<sup>339</sup> Karen Bettez Hanlon and Sandra Cohen, "Muscles, Motorcycles and Tattoos: Gentrification in a New Frontier," *Journal of Consumer Culture*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2006.

<sup>340</sup> This includes the fashion styles of trucker hats, "wife beater" tank tops and Timberland shoes, as well as Halnon and Cohen's focus, the reappropriation of the working class symbols of motorcycles, muscles and tattoos.

<sup>341</sup> Hitchcock, 4.

the cultural compulsion of highbrow achievement, using music as a dirge rather than a hymn. Amid the creation of hardcore punk, Teen Idles and Minor Threat enact a countercultural representation of class, albeit one that is, in many instances, intentionally assumed.

*The (Contradictory) Performance of Privilege*

Despite the purposefully performed lower-classed musical identity Minor Threat and Teen Idles don, there are aspects of their music — their playing, their lyrics, and the act of recording itself — that contradict, or at least complicate, the appearance of a working-class character and point toward a performance of privilege, rather than class-based marginalization. Having honed their technical musical skills, Minor Threat emulate their punk role models and predecessors Bad Brains by becoming one of the most admired musical hardcore talents, undermining their early amateur, naturally emotive musical ethos. In addition, the physical recording of their music, and its dissemination, afford the bands a unique form of privilege — offering a space to voice and chronicle their perspectives, which in turn provides a specific method of agency in a town where such representation of the marginalized was scarce. Finally, with lyrics primarily focused on the personal, rather than the blatantly political, privilege is performed as distance from necessity.

While the inception of Teen Idles and Minor Threat certainly arose from an emotional compulsion, rather than as a logical outcome of a musically-base childhood, and their sound consistently incorporates a minimalistic, noise-centered aesthetic, the early deficiencies in the bands' practical musical skill quickly dissolved in a drive for and emphasis on precision and prowess. Minor Threat's line-up, particularly, transformed the

amateur spirit into a more rigorous musical attitude. As guitarist Baker notes, this was due in part to the influence of their heroes and mentors, Bad Brains, who “were incredible musicians...they taught us that just because it’s punk rock, it doesn’t mean you have to play shitty. They were really, really accomplished musicians.”<sup>342</sup> Following in Bad Brains’ footsteps, and, to a certain extent, sanitizing the coarseness of crude musicianship and its accompanying connotations of a classed approach, each of the band members developed, in his own right, into a widely admired performer.

Drummer Nelson (who is, along with MacKaye, one the only two members of both Teen Idles and Minor Threat) is revered for his speed and skill. He “played like a machine – with his wiry arms moving at a blur, they looked like piston rods on a locomotive; his stamina was mind-boggling,”<sup>343</sup> and was viewed as “the best drummer in town.”<sup>344</sup> Guitarist Preslar played six-string bar chords “lightning-fast with incredible precision... playing full-position bar chords at that speed”<sup>345</sup> with a “strength, speed and accuracy that are extremely difficult to duplicate”<sup>346</sup> and “set the standard for all hardcore to come.”<sup>347</sup> Baker, who was first a bassist and later switched to electric guitar, had been a child prodigy, jamming with Santana at age twelve on stage at a show in Detroit.<sup>348</sup> Called a “hot-shot guitar player,”<sup>349</sup> Baker’s bass playing was characterized as “downright pummeling,”<sup>350</sup> and his rhythms produced a robust and vigorous sound.

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<sup>342</sup> Interview with Brian Baker, [www.dayafterday.com](http://www.dayafterday.com), March 30, 2010.

<sup>343</sup> Azerrad, 128.

<sup>344</sup> [www.dayafterday.com](http://www.dayafterday.com).

<sup>345</sup> Ian MacKaye in [www.markprindle.com](http://www.markprindle.com).

<sup>346</sup> Azerrad, 128.

<sup>347</sup> Ernesto Catalan in [www.markprindle.com](http://www.markprindle.com).

<sup>348</sup> Blush, 161.

<sup>349</sup> Blush, 161.

<sup>350</sup> Catalan in [www.markprindle.com](http://www.markprindle.com).

Together with vocals from MacKaye, Minor Threat's music was lauded for its "speed, power, and precision of a jackhammer...with flat-out sprints that had the band playing as fast as they humanly could."<sup>351</sup>

Indeed, the public accolades — albeit primarily within the confines of the punk scene — were mounting for the D.C. hardcore musicians: L.A.-based punk fanzine *Flipside*'s readers voted Minor Threat "band of the year" and their show with the Dead Kennedys "the best gig" of all of 1982,<sup>352</sup> while their sound was heralded in fanzine *Noise* as "cleaner and more polished...but just as fast."<sup>353</sup> Producer Skip Groff claims *In My Eyes* is "one of the greatest punk records of all time, from start to finish."<sup>354</sup> *Spin* rates Minor Threat's Complete Discography one of the 50 most essential punk albums and "Out of Step" as one of the 20 best punk songs,<sup>355</sup> while *Out of Step* rounds out Pitchfork's Top 100 albums of the 1980s, asking "How were Minor Threat this fast and this tight, this judgmental and this inviting, this minimal and this expansive?"<sup>356</sup> Even Teen Idles, whose musical ineptitude was not only widely known but also was a badge of pride, was honored for their chops: their single "Get Up and Go" was called "this year's best single" by Michigan's popular fanzine *Touch and Go* and San Francisco punk show *Maximum RockNRoll* made the song its number one for several weeks in a row.<sup>357</sup>

This praise expanded beyond the purview of their recorded music into the arena of their live performances. Village Voice writer Tom Carson was impressed by how

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<sup>351</sup> Azzerad, 128.

<sup>352</sup> *Flipside*, No. 34, 1982.

<sup>353</sup> Bob Moore in *Noise* #5, from [www.dementlieu.com](http://www.dementlieu.com).

<sup>354</sup> Hurachella, 63.

<sup>355</sup> "Spin Record Guide," *Spin Magazine*, December 1995.

<sup>356</sup> "Top 100 Albums of the 1980s," [www.pitchfork.com](http://www.pitchfork.com), November 20, 2002.

<sup>357</sup> Andersen and Jenkins, 80.

professional and tight the band was, which Baker says was deliberate: “Yeah, we strove for that. We rehearsed constantly. Those little bursts of 35 second songs became a lot more effective if it’s more of a precision thing.”<sup>358</sup> And *Washington Post* reviewer Howard Wuelfing called Minor Threat shows an “irresistible force meeting implacable beauty at impossible velocity,” as they “displayed the sort of style and strength associated with a class act.”<sup>359</sup>

What’s so simultaneously fascinating and paradoxical is the language and system of valuation their music engendered. While attempting to escape the hierarchal system of conventional culture and the accompanying industry of music, Minor Threat ends up ensnared in, and elevated by, that same hierarchy — partially *because* of their mold-breaking sound and style. The seemingly infallible American values of ladder-climbing — economically and socially — and a never-ceasing zeal for fame and fortune (the modern American dream) was the core of what Minor Threat and Teen Idles were raging against. The irony is that their musical reactionary response brought about the glorification and adulation the band was trying to subvert. Even the vocabulary used to describe their playing — “precision,” “accuracy,” “best” — conjures images of a level of fastidiousness and achievement that seem to correspond more closely to upper-class values. Indeed, the irony is almost laughable when Wuelfing describes the band as “a class act” in his review, ostensibly linking their showmanship and technical skills with an “upper-class act” rather than the “working-class act” the band so frequently attempted to represent.

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<sup>358</sup> Interview with Baker, [www.dayafterday.com](http://www.dayafterday.com).

<sup>359</sup> Andersen and Jenkins, 112.



Beyond the complications of class performed by the technical skill and musical impact of Teen Idles and Minor Threat, there is an inherent, if often times invisible, privilege simply in these bands' ability to and the act of recording sound — of producing music for mass consumption. The phonograph itself was “conceived as a privileged vector for the dominant speech, as a tool reinforcing representative power and the entirety of its logic... to preserve a representation of power, to preserve itself.”<sup>360</sup> Despite this attempt at hegemonic control, recordings, from political speeches to telephone conversations, the phonograph, and its competitor, the gramophone, offered a revolutionary reimagining of cultural and public space. By virtue of its function — the capacity for reproduction and repetition — the recording of sound, specifically that of music, brought about significant alterations in the perpetuation of cultural systems of power.

First, individuals who possess the ability to record are endowed with a unique form of power and control. The fact that their words, ideas, speeches, sounds, are considered — by those seemingly omniscient and omnipotent cultural forces — important enough to be recorded necessarily creates a power differential, a hierarchy based on those who are recorded and those who are not. The act of memorialization that is integral in recording, with its implicit value judgment, elevates, if not idolizes, both the content of the sound, whether it is music, comedy, or speeches, and the producers of that sound. Recorded sound becomes an “essential symbol of a privileged relation to power... [of] social status, and order, a sign of one's relation to others.”<sup>361</sup>

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<sup>360</sup> Attali, 92.

<sup>361</sup> Attali, 100.

Secondly, and correspondingly, this hierarchy is also a function of the other radical aspect of recording, mass distribution. Recording artists, as they would come to be known, draw significant portions of their power from their sheer ability to reach and influence huge swathes of society. Of course, this dissemination process also affects the consumers in profound, and interrelated, ways. The sharp lines of social class, particularly in terms of musical consumption, which had previously been limited to price- and class- exclusive concerts and performances, were blurred and rearranged. One who could not afford the expensive luxury of attending the symphony could now purchase that same performance for a fraction of the price. In this way, the recording of music helps democratize the consumption of sound. This democratization, then, leads to a flattening of disparities in cultural capital, whereby musical knowledge and experience is, to a certain extent, not wholly contingent on class. In turn, this acts as a part of the function of the collective experience of listening to recorded music; no matter where in the country — or city or town or world — one is, no matter what gender, race, sexuality or age one is, she is hearing the exact same sounds, the exact same tempos, timbres, pitches and phrasings.<sup>362</sup> This communality serves as a way of constructing a musically-based collective identity, which simultaneously links disparate fragments of society together and imbues those producers of these shared identities with an enormous amount of cultural power. The recording process, therefore, is a necessarily cyclical and paradoxical process: it broadens the culturally constructed social class of musical consumers but also

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<sup>362</sup> This is not to say, of course, that those differences in identity don't affect the interpretation or appreciation of the music. Clearly, divergences in social and personal histories shape not only what genres of music one is more likely to consume but also *how* one will consume and use said music; however, this doesn't nullify the fact that the music itself never varies.

concentrates the number of people able to and responsible for the formation and content of this cultural capital.

Teen Idles and Minor Threat's ability to record and success with recording albums are, then, a sign of privilege and a meaningful expression of agency. Their combined four hardcore punk albums from 1979-1983 behave as their interpretation, their vision, of what DC is. In such a construction of the city these punks are implicitly granted a certain "degree of freedom, agency, and self-realization," that comes with the power to produce any representation (particularly a mass-produced representation).<sup>363</sup> This ability and opportunity to create a counternarrative allows these particular punks, at least on a basic level, to vocalize their own views, their own construction, of what DC is and what it should be. They are able to comment on the ways in which the city is open to possibility, as the relative success of hardcore punk attests to, while simultaneously noting the ways in which DC constrains its people and denies them admittance into the symbolic and literal DC world.

Certainly, the bands' reconstruction of Washington's narrative is simply one in "...a series of competing local narratives," a semi-marginalized effort in a sea of adversaries.<sup>364</sup> However, it is still a pointed avenue of and for personal expression and agency, giving (recorded, memorialized and distributable) voice — and the accompanying social power — to the band and its members. In one way, then, Minor Threat and Teen Idles reclaim recording from the "institutionalization of bourgeois

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<sup>363</sup> Adam Krims, *Music and Urban Geography* (New Jersey: Routledge, 2007), 13.

<sup>364</sup> Shiela Whiteley, Andy Bennett, and Stan Hawkins. *Music, Space, and Place: Popular Music and Cultural Identity* (Ashgate: Burlington, 2005), 3.

culture and its claim of universality, which includes taking possession of history.”<sup>365</sup> Yet in another way, they perpetuate this control, simply shifting the pattern of power. In their effort to subvert the elite’s narrative command, their albums serve, albeit perhaps unintentionally, to merely reallocate the power, rather than upend it, bequeathing that control and privilege on the band and their music.

Music-making as a simultaneous form of privilege and rebellion is, to some degree, a function of these bands’ *habitus*.<sup>366</sup> That is, through these band members’ background and upbringing, along with their concurrent consumption of specific forms of music, privilege and rebellion through sound was both modeled and, to a certain extent, expected. Teen Idles and Minor Threat’s shared *habitus* translated into the music the band grew up listening to. More so, those musical tastes — specifically, classic rock — represented the band members’ specific social position, and, later, the social location they would reject. Preslar was raised by musically-focused parents who “fed [him] a steady diet of Beatles, Stones, and singer/songwriters from a young age;”<sup>367</sup> Nelson listened to the Beatles and Ted Nugent. MacKaye discloses that “rock music changed me. Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin blew my mind,” so much that he says he was “obsessed with

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<sup>365</sup>Michael Chanan, *Repeated Takes: A Short History of Recording and Its Effects on Music* (London: Verso, 1995), 13.

<sup>366</sup>According to Bourdieu, *habitus* is “a system and schemes of perception and appreciation ‘taste,’” which derives from how, and in which social stratum, one was raised (171). The cultural capital one accrues must stem from, to a certain extent, one’s own *habitus*, as this form of capital includes the assemblage of particular dispositions that emphasize specific schemes of valuation and comprehension; that is, to “consume” a certain type of good, one must appreciate and understand its meaning. Thus, consumption of distinctive forms of culture is a direct result of one’s socialized inclination and ability. Furthermore, these *habitus*-based cultural consumption choices act as both an inclusionary and exclusionary measure, delineating one’s belonging to a certain social stratum and necessarily barring others. Unmistakably, this system of categorization is socially constructed; but through its repeated reinforcement the matrix of *habitus* acts as “simultaneously a model *for*, as well as a model *of*, reality...” (Carrie Coward Bucher, 385).

<sup>367</sup>Lyle Preslar of Minor Threat answers the Questions of Doom,” [gimmebadvibes.com](http://gimmebadvibes.com).

[Joplin]. As a singer, I believed her. I wanted to emulate that.”<sup>368</sup> This music was a part of the band members’ communal consciousness, a way to “come together over music.”<sup>369</sup>

Even more so, these shared musical experiences act as a product of the particular sociohistorical, economic and political moment in which it was created. In this way, the bands’ musical consumption as teens represented a symbolic identity, and analogous boundary, attached to taste, and therefore, of class. The ubiquity and adoration of the Beatles, for instance, indicates a solidly white, middle-class discernment, born from both the aesthetics of sound and of the Fab Four themselves. Well-groomed, in tailored suits and a hit of rebellion in their shaggy mop tops, the Beatles introduced the traditional African-American (and lower-class) sound of R&B and blues to a “generation of white, middle-class Americans.”<sup>370</sup> They were, in both their appearance and their music, nonthreatening, appealing to, and eventually symbolizing, the vast generation of white, middle-class baby boomers.<sup>371</sup>

In a different way, Janis Joplin was also an emblem of white middle-classdom; this time, an emblem of white middle-classdom rebellion. Her voice — raw, screaming, pleading — and her band’s sound — a white revival of black blues — gave a voice to a portion of a generation who sought to align themselves against their own *habitus*. Her reinterpretation of a predominantly black, male genre offered the counterculture new meanings, and consequently, new identities. Hers was the blues of the affluent, franchised majority rather than the poor, disenfranchised minority, creating a voice for the counterculture’s alienation from mainstream America. Joplin represented the rejection of

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<sup>368</sup> MacKaye, interview with author, March 4, 2013.

<sup>369</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>370</sup> Garofalo, 167.

<sup>371</sup> Garofalo, *Rockin’ Out*, (2011); Szatmary, *Rockin’ In Time*, (1996).

bourgeois, middle-class values (symbolized by the Vietnam War and conspicuous consumption) but did so safely within the confines — and privilege — of the white middle-class.<sup>372</sup>

Similarly, Jimi Hendrix acted as a nonthreatening symbol of rebellion, despite the cultural connotations his blackness evoked. Hendrix's Chicago-based electric blues were loud and angry, and his innovative use of the wah-wah pedal, the fuzz box and feedback at a nearly earsplitting volume, reflected the desperate mood of the late 60s youth, as well as the violence and confusion of the era. His music, for a predominantly white, middle-class hippie audience, offered an innocuous form of militancy.<sup>373</sup>

These musicians, and their sounds, were not only representative of the *habitus* from which Teen Idles and Minor Threat came — one grounded in a Caucasian, white collar, middle-class ethos inside of a chiefly black, lower-class city — but also acted as the musically and politically classed springboard from which they created punk. This is in no way to argue that MacKaye, Nelson, and Baker were explicitly conscious or aware of the class-based undertones of the music they grew up with; nevertheless, implicit understandings infused both the music and the bands' narratives. The Beatles, Joplin and Hendrix were benign iconoclasts. They, and their music, rebelled against and, at the same time, reinforced, the culturally designed lines of class and its associated principles and values. Their rock revealed and articulated the sentiment and the spirit of the post-WWII children that were raised in relative affluence but under an unremitting threat of social

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<sup>372</sup> See Alice Echols, *Scars of Sweet Paradise: The Life and Times of Janis Joplin* (2000); Myra Friedman, *Buried Alive: The Biography of Janis Joplin* (1992); Paul Hendrickson, "Janis Joplin: A Cry Cutting Through Time," (1998).

<sup>373</sup> See Szatmary, *Rockin' In Time* (1996); Waksman, *Instruments of Desire* (1999).

alienation, anomie, and anxiety.<sup>374</sup> As musical influences, these musicians transmitted the philosophy that music could not only representationally cross lines of class, but also reinforced that those who were able to do such class-passing were those deemed culturally safe enough to do so — that is, middle-class. Music and sound were tacitly understood to be a space for rebellion, but that rebellion was specifically coded by class. This *habitus*-produced reading of music's power — both as a form of class insurgence and as a representation of an entire generation's passions and fears — coupled with Teen Idles and Minor Threat's positioning within the center of the social stratum, set the stage for how these bands' punk rock acts as both a privileged form of expression and a performance of class rebellion.

The privilege of recording is even further complicated by the fact that every single Teen Idle and Minor Threat album (as well as fellow DC hardcore bands' records like State of Alert, Faith and Government Issue) was released on Dischord Records, a label created by Ian MacKaye and Jeff Nelson. The label started as so much of the DC hardcore punk scene did — under cultural and economic duress. As MacKaye recalls, “In L.A. you hear ‘record label’ and ‘getting signed.’ You don’t hear that in Washington.”<sup>375</sup> Without a label to put out their music, Teen Idles pooled together their funds from playing shows from the last year to produce *Minor Disturbance* and create Dischord. And while the record label was born of necessity, it quickly became MacKaye and Nelson's<sup>376</sup> sociopolitical and musical mouthpiece, a way to release DC hardcore albums that no

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<sup>374</sup> See Lawrence Grossberg, "The Politics of Youth Culture: Some Observations on Rock and Roll in American Culture," *Social Text*, 8 (Winter 1983/84).

<sup>375</sup> Andersen and Jenkins, 113.

<sup>376</sup> Teen Idles' Nathan Strejcek was also a part of the creation of Dischord; however, by the time the label moved to its still-permanent address in Arlington in 1981, he was more and more disillusioned with the label, ultimately retreating completely.

other label would touch while, at the same time, deemphasizing the monetary aspects of the music industry.

Dischord embraced<sup>377</sup> music as a de-commodified form of art. With the consolidation of the music industry into only a handful of firms, and musical diversification permissible only at the whim of these companies, innovation was hamstrung by concerns about money and “sellability.”<sup>378</sup> Standardization and appropriation ran rampant in the industry, and “commercialization [wa]s seen to make it impossible to sustain authenticity and mean[t] that resistance is no sooner expressed than sold back to young people.”<sup>379</sup> Like the music and the culture of the 1960s, which began with the promise of revolution and upheaval, sonically and socially, and transformed into a fashionable depoliticized trademark to sell nearly everything, MacKaye and Nelson were wary of mainstream society absorbing, commodifying and ultimate neutering the oppositional sting of punk. Their label, then, was a personal, though ultimately political, tactic in the valuation of music over the valuation of profit. As MacKaye says, “we set up Dischord so we could put out music we liked by people we liked, and put it out cheap. Our goal was not to make lots of money, but rather to help out as many of our friends’ bands as we could.”<sup>380</sup>

MacKaye and Nelson’s struggle to extricate the creation of music from the necessity of money with the establishment of Dischord, however, should not be

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<sup>377</sup> And still does — Dischord Records continues to be the premier independent label in and for Washington, DC, releasing only local bands, and shipping their vinyl worldwide.

<sup>378</sup> Paul Lopes, “Innovation and Diversity in Popular Music, 1969-1990,” *American Sociological Review* 57 (1992):56-71.

<sup>379</sup> Stacy Thompson, “Market Failure: Punk Economics, Early and Late,” *College Literature*, 48.

<sup>380</sup> Ian MacKaye and Jeff Nelson. Linear notes. *Four Old 7”s on a 12”*. Dischord Records, 1984, LP.



understood as merely a principled statement about society's obsession with wealth and the sad state of the music industry. Contained in their self-created label was the implicit acknowledgement of and respect for the consumption-based tenet of ownership and the corollary privilege of agency. Proprietorship has always been a precept of the traditional American Dream — owning the house, the car, and the appropriate accoutrements. To own is to progress into a higher social status. Possessions, both tangible and as cultural capital,<sup>381</sup> act as not only as symbol of one's class, but also of one's worth.

This ownership equation had a particularly unpleasant history with musicians and the music industry. Black artists, particularly those early ones in the blues and R&B genre, were not only never paid for their original compositions and their subsequent records, but white record executives also frequently hijacked their songs, employing white musicians to cover them. In this way, these musicians were denied ownership both financially (often tragically leaving them in financial ruin) *and* culturally.<sup>382</sup>

Dischord, in an attempt to nullify the insidious effects of ownership industry practices, refused to either market its bands or sign contracts that would create intellectual property. Certainly, this was an admirable and important approach, given the industry's history of commandeering. However, it should also be understood within the context of social control — of power fashioned from freedom and the privilege of agency. MacKaye puts it this way:

I think the reason we take the approach to music that we do is that then we ultimately have complete control over how we do our music and operate the band. We don't feel compelled by *anyone* to do *anything* that we don't want to do. We're not indebted to anyone. When a band signs to a major label, no matter how good a contract they think they have, no matter how much control

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<sup>381</sup> See Bourdieu, *Distinction* (1984). A more thorough examination of cultural capital occurs in Chapter Six.

<sup>382</sup> See Coyle, *Hijacked Hits Antic Authenticity* (2002); Garofalo, *Rockin' Out* (2011); Szatmary, *Rockin' In Time* (1996).

they think their contract provides, it's unavoidable that you are conscious of being an investment. Somebody puts money into you and you have to pay off somehow. And you *want* to pay off.<sup>383</sup>

Dischord, then, acts as a tool of emancipation from the strict monetary and creative confines of the music industry. Yet, that emancipation, that ability to control the creation, production and distribution of one's own self and music, is in itself a privilege. As discussed in the previous chapter, regulation is nearly ubiquitously used as a function of social control. Therefore, Dischord's assumption of the creative and financial processes of their own bands is a seizure of that privileged instrument of control. In doing so, the label, and the bands that it represents, enacts a curious paradox of the class-and-status formula. By destabilizing the conventional music industry practices, including the financial motive for music and the perilous battle for proprietary rights, Dischord actually reinforces the traditional capitalistic and consumption-driven ethos of ownership and with it, the attending virtues of agency and control. Perhaps ironically, these qualities acted to propel MacKaye and Nelson, and all of Dischord, into an upper social echelon, one where ownership, the ability for self-representation and freedom of creative control necessarily indicate a privilege the label was in no way seeking.

If the act of recording music was itself a complicated and convoluted performance of both privilege and an attempt to subvert such privilege, so too were the topics about which Teen Idles and Minor Threat sang. The content of these albums, in the form of their lyrical subject matter, also involves a certain amount of class-based contradiction. On the one hand, Minor Threat and Teen Idles engage in a lyrical protest against the

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<sup>383</sup> *We Owe You Nothing: Punk Planet, the Collected Interviews*, Daniel Sinker, ed., 8.

bourgeois ideals of money, status and materialism. In this way, the bands perform a working class solidarity parallel to the one described in the previous section. On the other hand, the primarily personal-based lyrics these bands wrote gesture to the more overt privilege of class that allows for the somewhat narcissistic inward focus rather than the outward necessities of day to day subsistence or engagement with the current sociopolitical moment.

Despite the frequently personal nature of the bands' lyrics, Teen Idles and Minor Threat also do overtly condemn the consumer-obsessed culture they saw occurring in their peers. "Fiorucci Nightmare," the sixth song on Teen Idles' *Minor Disturbance* EP, specifically addresses the pretentious privilege of Washington in a mocking ode to the high-stylings of their Georgetown peers: "Fiorucci nightmare/asshole's dream/spend all your money on the fashion machine/spots and stripes and spandex pants/pay a hundred dollars to learn how to dance/...Down in Georgetown in a fashion race/For the guys to see how high you rate."<sup>384</sup> MacKaye himself had two afterschool jobs in Georgetown, working at the movie theater as well as the Haagen-Dazs ice cream shop, where he was familiar with the quickly-gentrifying neighborhood.<sup>385</sup> Once a mainstay of African-American culture, Georgetown had priced out its original inhabitants and remade its streets into a primarily white, upper-class bastion of consumerism and capitalism. "Fiorucci Nightmare," while not a direct attack on the gentrification of formerly black neighborhoods, still is a personal censure of the outcomes that urban redevelopment

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<sup>384</sup> Teen Idles, *Minor Disturbance*, Dischord Records, 1981.

<sup>385</sup> Ian MacKaye, Interview with the author, March 4, 2013.

produced. Material goods, in this song represented as clothing, are castigated as privileged trappings void of any meaning but that of economic spectacle.

In a similar way, Minor Threat addresses, and ultimately reviles, the theoretical consumption-based mainstay of outward appearance as a representation of identity in “Seeing Red.” The lyrics bemoan their peers’ fixation on conformity, particularly one based on looking and wearing the same items as everyone else: “You see me and you laugh out loud/You taunt me from safe inside your crowd/My looks, they must threaten you/To make you act the way you do... You see me and you think I’m a jerk/First impressions without a word.”<sup>386</sup> The band clearly acknowledges the culturally-mandated routine of identification and subsequent classification by appearance. Continuing in the vein of Teen Idles’ “Fiorucci Nightmare,” Minor Threat scorns not just those who buy into (literally and figuratively) the consumption-based model of class identity but also those who use that system to belittle, berate and isolate those who do not conform to those standards. The band understands their unwillingness to participate in such a class- and consumption-based identification system is a threat (albeit, given their name, only a minor one) to the accepted cultural paradigm.

Part of and parcel to this lyrical concept of the performance of consumption as a performance of a classed identity was the concomitant ideal of upward class mobility. While Teen Idles and Minor Threat habitually and intentionally participated in the contrary act of downward passing, mainstream culture and their DC peers, who often times were the children of rich and powerful Senators, lobbyists, and assorted political glitterati, partook in the new American Dream of cultural ascendancy. “Stepping Stone,”

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<sup>386</sup> Minor Threat, *Minor Threat*, Dischord Records, Vinyl, 1981.

from Minor Threat's 1981 *In My Eyes*, addresses these interwoven desires for consumption and celebrity: "You're trying to make your mark in society/Using all the tricks that you used on me/You're reading all those high fashion magazines/The clothes you're wearin' girl are causing public scenes/I said/I'm not your stepping stone/I'm not your stepping stone."<sup>387</sup> This song acts as a statement against class-based mobility in two ways. First, it continues the band's disparagement of people — or, in this case, a specific girl — who believe that blindly following the demands of the culture industry (fashion magazines, advertising, the commodification of the body as sexual object) will elicit fame and acclamation. Secondly, this song acts as an anti-commodification statement about the band itself. MacKaye is demanding that he and his band are not a stepping stone — ostensibly to that sought-after acclaim and social mobility. This is not simply a condemnation of being used, as love-gone-wrong songs often evoke (though, clearly, there are undertones of this as well) but is also a denunciation of the way music itself has been commodified and, subsequently, deified.

Despite these songs' searing denunciations of class-based worth and consumption-based fantasy, social politics are not the primary focus of Teen Idles and Minor Threat. Often times even when the band does touch on sociopolitical concerns — drug culture in "Deadhead," youth culture in "Teen Idles" and "Sneakers" — most of these references are specifically constructed around how and why they affect the band and its members, rather than the outward-looking political implications. The band bemoans the hippie music scene in "Deadhead" — "riding that train high on cocaine/the

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<sup>387</sup> Minor Threat, *In My Eyes*, Dischord Records, Vinyl, 1981.

music is really lousy, the fans are a pain”<sup>388</sup> — not for the way the social justice idealism of the 1960s was sublimated by drugs, but instead for the aesthetics of the music itself and the fans who are “a lousy joke.”<sup>389</sup> Similarly, “Teen Idles” and “Sneakers” scorn contemporary youth culture for “teenage ignorance,”<sup>390</sup> and youths (including themselves) who are “fuckin’ bored to tears...with nothing to do.”<sup>391</sup> This contempt is not for the ennui of youth as an institutional crisis or for the class-based leisure system that perpetuates class inequality. Instead, it is a complaint about their own lives and the lives of their friends. In these instances, the personal dictates the political rather than the reverse.

The same is true of Minor Threat’s three ’79-’83 albums, which, as the previous section has explored, focuses on the dystopian reality of relationships.<sup>392</sup> From a lamentation about friends who are no longer the same person they used to be — “Filler,” “Screaming at a Wall,” “Look Back and Laugh,” “No Reason” — to rages about betrayal — “I Don’t Wanna Hear It,” “Betray,” “Stepping Stone” — to painful eruptions of feeling misjudged by the outside world — “Seeing Red,” “Minor Threat,” “Guilty of Being White,” “It Follows” — Minor Threat seemingly ignores explicit politics in favor

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<sup>388</sup> Teen Idles, “Deadhead,” *Minor Disturbance*.

<sup>389</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>390</sup> Teen Idles, “Sneakers,” *Minor Disturbance*.

<sup>391</sup> Teen Idles, “Teen Idles,” *Minor Disturbance*.

<sup>392</sup> While one would argue, rightfully so, that these albums were the impetus for a highly politicized straightedge social movement, my contention is that the purpose, the motivation, for writing these songs was not an attempt to make a political statement but instead was an outlet for personal, emotional catharsis. As with Minor Threat’s other songs, which are positioned as an anti-consumption, anti-capitalist, manifesto of sorts, the personal *always* precedes the political. Straightedge will be analyzed in more detail in the subsequent sections of this chapter.

of personal politics. As MacKaye explains, “every song I’ve written is about me and you. Every song...it was me. First person.”<sup>393</sup>

This absorption with the personal rather than the political is once again due, in part, to the sociopolitical and class-steeped milieu the band members grew up in. According to drummer Nelson, coming from “generally intellectual households...meant that the things [we] were going to be complaining about and the way in which [we] were going to be complaining about them...was different than that of many other cities.”<sup>394</sup> As Minor Threat guitarist Preslar notes the band members were, nearly uniformly, “solidly mid- to upper-middle class. We had relatively stable homes, with the occasional divorce thrown in. We were city kids, not suburban.”<sup>395</sup> Teen Idles and Minor Threat’s drummer Nelson was the son of a State Department father, growing up overseas, while Minor Threat’s Baker attended the private Georgetown Day School, a “hippie school” where shoes were optional, dogs were allowed, and you addressed your teachers by their first name.”<sup>396</sup> Indeed growing up in DC, where the economy was based primarily around the intellectual industry, the band members were children of relative privilege and power. As Baker recounts:

Who are your parents when you’re living in Washington in 1980 and you’re a teenager? Why are your parents here? What do they do? Well, there’s a good chance that they are involved with the current administration or perhaps they’re involved with one of the major colleges here or they’re involved in the news media in some way.<sup>397</sup>

MacKaye, a fifth generation Washingtonian, moved from the racially volatile neighborhood of Capital Hill to the working-class, Italian and Irish-dominated

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<sup>393</sup> “Rap Session!” *maximumrocknroll*, #8, September 1983.

<sup>394</sup> Interview with Jeff Nelson, *absolutepunk.net*, March 27, 2009.

<sup>395</sup> “Lyle Preslar of Minor Threat answers the Questions of Doom,” *gimmebadvibes.com*.

<sup>396</sup> *American Hardcore*, DVD, Paul Rachman, Sony Pictures Entertainment, 2007.

<sup>397</sup> *American Hardcore*.

neighborhood of Glover Park in 1962 when he was six months old.<sup>398</sup> MacKaye came from a family of writers and recorders: his father worked as a freelance editor at *The Washington Post*, his grandmother wrote marriage advice columns in a magazine and his mother was also a writer.<sup>399</sup> He, along with Nelson, Grindle and Strejcek, attended Woodrow Wilson High School, which was a demographically diverse school, with students who were “60 percent were black, 20 percent were white, with the remainder mainly Asian-American or Latino,”<sup>400</sup> as well as academically productive, with almost 80 percent of its 1500 students attending college, including Ivy League universities. This privilege granted the band space to explore the politics of the personal, rather than the politics of the many. Not encumbered with the more blue-collar burdens other DC families shouldered, Teen Idles were free to express their own problems.

Yet growing up in DC also meant that politics were nearly inescapable. They dominated the news, the streets, and the occupations of their parents. To MacKaye, the machinery of politics seemed like “the same story, it’s the same fucking plot lines,” which led to what MacKaye calls a “desensitize[ation] to politics to the point where I don’t have any interest in politics.”<sup>401</sup> This disgust with the interminable and unchanging nature of politics, coupled with the advantaged ability to disconnect from the material realities such policies and politics often necessitated, guided MacKaye to writing and creating music that spoke to the self. As he explains, “If you want to keep an eye on what’s going on, that’s cool, but you are not as capable of changing politics as you are

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<sup>398</sup> Ian MacKaye, Interview with author, March 19, 2013.

<sup>399</sup> Ian MacKaye, Interview with author, March 3, 2013.

<sup>400</sup> Andersen and Jenkins, 20.

<sup>401</sup> *Ibid.*



capable of changing yourself.”<sup>402</sup> Unmistakably, the power to circumvent politics in favor of the private was a function of a specific form of class- and place- based privilege. The lyrics of Teen Idles and Minor Threat, thus, performed an often conflicting class purpose — acting to at once to subvert the conventional, middle-class narrative of love but also reinforcing that same class privilege in its emphasis on the personal rather than the political.

Complicating Teen Idles and Minor Threat’s performance of a working classed identity through the composition, aesthetics and sound of their hardcore punk was their often-times incongruous displays of upper classdom. While the bands’ rough and unsophisticated sound evoked minimalism, the band members evolved into dedicated and talented musicians who took pride in technical skill and tight performances. Critics also agreed; while the majority of mainstream musical culture disdained and feared the sounds of hardcore, the more insulated realm of punk (the ‘zines, the music writers, and the fans) saw Minor Threat as one of the finest most elite specimen of hardcore. Their speed, precision, volume and passion, while a symbol of depravity to conventional aesthetics, were a sign of superiority to punk aesthetics, creating an outwardly superficial paradox of elitism. This contradiction continued with the act of recording music; at once an inherently privileged act, in its exclusivity and promises of legacy, it also expands and democratizes the listener. Teen Idles and Minor Threat’s ability to record bestowed on them the power of documentation and representation — an agency that is neither guaranteed nor equally granted. Their records acted as a counter-narrative to the classed expectations of society as a whole and the specific class demands of Washington, D.C.

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<sup>402</sup> Andersen and Jenkins, 80.

By shunning the conventional storyline of the American Dream, as well as avoiding the overtly political to focus on the personal, the bands engaged in a still-political act of downward class passing. Attempting to valorize, rather than appropriate, symbols of the working class, these bands and their music perform an elaborate, albeit conflicting, representation of class.

### *Class and Race in Teen Idles and Minor Threat*

Of course, any discussion of class as a category of self or cultural identification cannot, and should not, be extricated from an understanding of its intersection with race. This is even more particularly the case in Washington, DC, whose label as the “Chocolate City” not just co-existed with, but was often parallel to, its massive class stratification. As discussed in Chapter Two, the origins of DC hardcore punk sprouted up amidst these racial and class-based divides. MacKaye, a fifth generation Washingtonian, lived in the primarily black neighborhood of Capitol Hill until he was a young boy, when a break-in and devastating assault on a family relative spurred the family to move to the working-class Irish and Italian neighborhood of Glover Park.<sup>403</sup> He and Nelson both attended Woodrow Wilson High School, which, despite its affluent surroundings and high rate of college-bound graduates, was racially diverse, with Caucasians being in the minority. Wilson provided the breeding ground for MacKaye and his punk brethren in its encapsulation of the contradictions found within Washington DC. The high school was itself a seeming paradox – its racially mixed population was avidly achievement-oriented

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<sup>403</sup> Ian MacKaye, Interview with author, March 3, 2013.

but also heavily involved in drugs and drinking. Like the lower-class students attending the wealthy high school, the punks felt as if they did not quite belong.

MacKaye and Nelson, along with their fellow Teen Idles, and later, Minor Threat band members, found their place within the burgeoning hardcore punk scene, which was being led by Bad Brains. It was this friendship, between the fledging punk band Teen Idles (and afterward Minor Threat) and the relatively elder statesmen Bad Brains, which greatly influenced the playing style and emotive aesthetics of the former, prompting a noteworthy, if merely subconscious, identification of a white punk band with African-American musical identity. The tutorship and influence of Bad Brains on Teen Idles and Minor Threat is well-documented. After Bad Brains had returned from New York broke, the Teen Idles invited the band to use their equipment and practice space; their musical power was an instant inspiration. Baker notes that the band's influence was "absolutely enormous," particularly on the somewhat antithetical hardcore aesthetic of technical prowess.<sup>404</sup> As MacKaye recalls, "Here we are making this racket and complaining how shitty our equipment is, and then they would pick up our very same shit and play this amazing music. It was like another world."<sup>405</sup>

As musical descendants of Bad Brains, Teen Idles and Minor Threat continue the African-American tradition of musical exceptionalism in the face of white musical appropriation. Without reiterating the previous chapter's arguments, suffice to say that the bebop-inspired technical exclusivity that Bad Brains sustained and recreated in punk rock acted as a template for their all-white disciples. The technical skills of Minor Threat were, according to *Washington Post* music critic Howard Wulfing, "a quantum leap...I

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<sup>404</sup> Interview with Brian Baker, *Dayafterday.com*.

<sup>405</sup> Andersen and Jenkins, 55.

was blown away to see that they could play with such speed and not have the structure of the song melt underneath. The difference... was Bad Brains. They set the example of how to play extremely fast but with extreme precision.”<sup>406</sup> Nelson agrees, noting how the band “influenced us incredibly with their speed and frenzied delivery.”<sup>407</sup>

Similarly, Minor Threat and Teen Idles emulate Bad Brain’s musically racial undertones with their incorporation of breakdowns in their songs, a musical interlude virtually unheard of in any other form of hardcore. Teen Idles’ “Deadhead” (:33-:53) and Minor Threat’s “Screaming at a Wall” (:50-1:05), “Betray” (2:03-2:35) and “Little Friend” (1:13-2:05) all include breakdowns, which, in conjunction with Bad Brains’ original use, sets these two hardcore bands apart from every other punk sound. As discussed previously, Bad Brains does this in order to demarcate their black selves from the white punk scene. Minor Threat and Teen Idles, then, take on this particular form of “blackness” with their performance of this racially-tinged musical segment.<sup>408</sup>

Furthermore, Teen Idles and Minor Threat connect to the feelings of ostracization and marginalization that compelled the African-American music of the blues. MacKaye recounts how being a punk in the sociocultural context of Washington D.C. “meant you were a magnet for getting shit. You saw how people acted. You kind of understood what it was like to be a black in America, to be just judged by the way you looked.”<sup>409</sup> Just as Bad Brains channeled that prejudice, and the accompanying anger and frustration, into

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<sup>406</sup> Andersen and Jenkins, 73.

<sup>407</sup> Andersen and Jenkins, 55.

<sup>408</sup> This is not to suggest that the bands intentionally or consciously attempted to perform blackness. However, that does not exclude them from still borrowing this form of Otherness. Just as Elvis and other early rock n’ rollers, as well as blues-based revivalist white artists, did not deliberately appropriate a black sound, and with it, a cultural legacy, the link between race and sound, and the concurrent cultural connotations, still exists.

<sup>409</sup> Andersen and Jenkins, 63.

their hardcore punk in the same musical tradition of the blues, so too did Teen Idles and Minor Threat. Says MacKaye, “For me it’s a total emotional outlet. I think the function of music is...the blues.”<sup>410</sup> To be black was to be consigned to a lower social status; the same was true, to a significantly lesser extent, of being punk. The black “blues” of punk offered Teen Idles and Minor Threat a vehicle to express that pain.

At the same time, however, it is undeniable that the whiteness of the band members offered a form of privilege not granted to their Bad Brains colleagues. While their status as punks conferred a considerable psychological, and sometimes physical, burden to the band members, their skin color still allowed for the privilege of invisibility. Clearly, we are unable to gauge what affect the bands’ race had on the reception and influence of their music. However, just as plainly, we must consider the historical freedom granted to whites, particularly within the field of music — to criticize, to challenge, to evoke passion rather than fear. This whiteness also acted as permission, or at least conventionality, to enter an already-white punk scene.

However, this whiteness also provoked one of Minor Threat’s most controversial songs, “Guilty of Being White.” The lyrics seek to distance the white band members from the racist oppressive and horrific tragedies of our past, while also decrying what MacKaye sees as reverse racism: “I’m sorry/For something I didn’t do/Lynched somebody/But I don’t know who/You blame me for slavery/ A hundred years before I was born... I’m a convict/GUILTY/Of a racist crime/GUILTY/I’ve only

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<sup>410</sup> “Rap Session!” *maximumrocknroll* #8 September 1983.

served/GUILTY/19 years of my time.”<sup>411</sup> MacKaye has strenuously argued he wrote this as an anti-racist song,<sup>412</sup> a reflection of his direct experience:

I live in Washington DC, which is 75% black. My junior high was 90% black, my high school was 80% black, and throughout my entire life, I’ve been brought up in this whole thing where the white man was shit because of slavery. So I got to class and we do history and for 3/4 of the year slavery is all we hear about... I mean, I’m white, fine. A hundred years ago, I was not alive...so whatever happened a hundred years ago, I am not responsible for...people have to get off the guilt wagon. And I’m just saying I’m guilty of being white – it’s my one big crime.<sup>413</sup>

Despite Teen Idles and Minor Threat’s racial musical traits, absorbed and performed in part because their friendship with Bad Brains, this “blackness” is merely an aural veneer. Difference cannot be elided by music. And, in fact, racial difference permits a different form of music. While Bad Brains do partially construct their black identity by the composition and sound of their music as explored in the previous chapter, their lyrical content strays from any overt critique or assessment of race relations. This could be, in part, due to their already-outsider position as black men within a nearly-exclusively white punk scene. Minor Threat, however, already being part of the racial majority of punk — though clearly they felt like the racial minority in school and city — facilitated their ability, their privilege, to not only discuss race, but also to sing about it in a way that was outside the typical sociopolitical realm.

Class is, unambiguously, inexorably linked to race. And, similarly to how Teen Idles and Minor Threat perform sometimes-clashing representations of class, so too do

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<sup>411</sup> Minor Threat, *In My Eyes*, Dischord Records, 1982.

<sup>412</sup> This song, despite MacKaye’s protestations, was adopted by the white supremacist wing of the punk movement. The band asserts these readings are a complete misinterpretation of their intent. Whether or not this is so is, to some extent, moot to my research. The ability and audacity to speak about issues of (white) race already indicates a level of privilege afforded to these band members in a way not given to say, Bad Brains.

<sup>413</sup> “Rap Session!” *maximumrocknroll* #8 September 1983.

they have a complicated musical relationship to race. In one way, the bands' music assumes a Bad Brain-correlated black musical identity, particularly in regards to their desire to, and the exclusivity associated with, play with technical skill and dexterity, as well as their stated parallel between the emotiveness of blues and the expressiveness of punk. In another way, however, Teen Idles and Minor Threat should be understood as a band performing whiteness, with all of the accompanying entrees, acceptances and privileges that evokes. While class, to a certain degree, necessitates a performance or a demonstration, race, as it has been socially constructed, does not; it speaks for itself. Furthermore, race and class have become interconnected. Often times when one is discussing whiteness, they are implicitly inferring middle- or upper- classdom as well, whereas blackness has been tied to a lower socioeconomic status. Therefore, the performance of race by Teen Idles and Minor Threat always-already carries with it the insinuations of class.

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The consumption and production of music has always contained weighty cultural implications, particularly in the construction of taste and its associated status of social class. While classical music, and its contemporary progressive rock, indicated an upper-class sensibility, punk rock — in both its earliest protopunk form and its later American and British punk form — intentionally and unambiguously represented a working class status. Indeed, specific musical knowledge — of particular genres of music, of certain instruments, of express musicians or bands — has continuously acted as a form of cultural capital, a way of defining oneself in relation to another. More specifically, the band members of Teen Idles and Minor Threat often perform contradictory class-based

musical identities. The music and social environment these bands grew up in reinforce the concept of music as rebellion, while, at the same time, underpin the privilege that is inherent in such sonic protest. These paradoxes continue in the sound specific to hardcore and to Minor Threat and Teen Idles. In one way, the bands explicitly resist the social and musical expectations of upper-class privilege by embracing a sonic idealization of working class (in their instrument choice, compositional simplicity, lyrics and aesthetic of minimalism, chaos and profanity). At the same time, many facets of their music — including their technical prowess, their personal lyrics and the DIY aspect of recording — undermine their working-class performance and indicate a more methodical practice of downward class-passing. This performance of class was augmented by Teen Idles and Minor Threat's anti-consumption, DIY approach to music making, which included a lyrical approach, as well as a production-based tactic with the creation of their own label, Dischord Records. Through four albums and four years, Teen Idles and Minor Threat epitomized DC's hardcore punk scene — the passion, the chaos, the sound and the politics. Infused in their music, and their performance of self, was the ever-present contradiction of class. Hardcore allowed for an exploration of the rocky terrain of not only self-identity, but also the often hidden implications of class.



## Chapter Five: Music as Masculinity: State of Alert, Government Issue, and Faith and the Implications of Gender

While Bad Brains and Minor Threat were the two most definitive DC hardcore bands, there were three other highly influential and emblematic though less well-known hardcore bands: State of Alert (SOA), Government Issue (GI) and Faith. State of Alert was short-lived, starting in October of 1980 and disbanded by July of 1981. Fronted by Ian MacKaye's childhood friend and roadie for Teen Idles, Henry Rollins (nee Garfield), the band had Michael Hampton on guitar, Wendel Blow on bass and Simon Jacobsen (1980-1981) and then Ivor Hanson (1981) on drums. Performing in only nine shows in their incarnation, State of Alert was technically sloppy but emotionally brutal. Their music was messy and intense, and their shows were known to be among the most violent at the time.<sup>414</sup>

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<sup>414</sup> See *Banned in DC*; Andersen and Jenkins, *Dance of Days* (2001); Connelly, Clague and Cheslow,(1988); Harrington, "Slamdancing in the Big City."

Government Issue, the brain child of John Stabb, went through numerous line-up changes in the years during their three Dischord releases. Starting in 1980, Stabb was on vocals, with John Barry on guitar, Brian Gay on bass and Marc Alberstadt on drums. By fall of 1981 Brian Baker (of Minor Threat) had taken over on bass, but quickly changed to guitar as Tom Lyle started on bass. The line-up changed again in the spring of 1982, as Baker went back to Minor Threat, Lyle moved to guitar and Mitch Parker became the bassist; Parker was replaced by Rob Moss in the summer of 1983. One of the top hardcore bands in DC, Government Issue melded punk with near-circus like showmanship, and, with its ever-revolving door, acted as an incubator for a huge number DC hardcore musicians. After leaving the Dischord label, Government Issue went on to release eight other albums on different labels, straying from the traditional hardcore sound into more psychedelic, hard rock and heavy metal sonic territory.<sup>415</sup>

Finally, Faith formed in the summer of 1981, picking up the pieces of hardcore bands' past: from SOA came Michael Hampton on guitar and Ivor Hanson on drums, along with Chris Bald on bass and Ian MacKaye's brother, Alec, on vocals. Much like DC's other hardcore bands, Faith was ephemeral, staying together for less than two years, but their music combined the conventional hardcore ideal of speed and strength with more subtle nuances of metal and melody.

All three of these emblematic hardcore bands, even with their slight derivations in sound, lyrics, and style, perform a very specific construction of masculinity. Through these bands' music — the texture, timbre, volume and lyrical content — SOA, GI, and Faith establish a (white and privileged) masculinity that is definite and delineated by the

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<sup>415</sup> See Andersen and Jenkins, *Dance of Days* (2001); Blush, *American Hardcore* (2010); Hurchella, *Going Underground* (2006).

traditional masculine traits of anger and resentment, assertive sexuality, and the privilege of agency and control.

### **State Of Alert, Government Issue and Faith: Hardcore's Sonic Masculinity**

The music of GI, SOA and Faith continued and embellished on the DC hardcore sonic template, although in slightly different ways. State of Alert was the exemplar for minimalistic, musical ineptitude, substituting passion for ability. Indeed, the so-called godfather of punk rock journalism Jack Rabid classifies its album *No Policy* as “toneless garbage.”<sup>416</sup> With ten tracks and a grand total of eight minutes and twenty seconds, the album embodies the hard, fast, and angry trifecta. The playing is jerky but vehement, with Hampton's thick, blunt guitar-playing of simple yet still destructively fervent riffs and Jacobsen's pugnacious, throttling drums crashing and scorching through the smog of snare and hi-hat. Blow's no-frills bass line underscores the severe, threatening tone of the songs, while Rollins' singing is more akin to a barking military commander, spitting and snapping out lyrics like gunshots. With low production value and assertive, aggressive rhythms and riffs, *No Policy* is a passing hurricane of fury.

Government Issue's three Dischord releases continue the conventional hardcore sound, particularly in their 1981 album *Legless Bull*. Of the ten tracks, only two are more than a minute (“Sheer Terror” at 1:28 and “Rock ‘N’ Roll Bullshit” at 1:13), so each track pillages and plunders the chaotic depths of punk for mere moments, functioning as detonating bombs of noise. Stabb wails and bellows over the amazingly fast guitar and bass riffs of Barry and Gay and the punishing stomp of Alberstadt's drums. More than

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<sup>416</sup> Quoted in Blush, 156.

any of their other albums, *Legless Bull* represents the purest form of hardcore punk — potent, brash and reckless.

The band's next album, *Make an Effort* (1982), was a four-song EP, still primarily within the traditional hardcore purview but with creeping influences from other genres. Minor Threat's Baker adds a heavy metal crunch to the mix, and his technical mastery and otherworldly playing speed evokes the specter of his old band's sound (particularly on "Twisted Views"). This heavy metal resonance resounds throughout the short album, with Stabb's gravelly and gruff vocals, Baker's loud and bawdy guitar, and the prominence of echo-soaked bass reverb in tunes like "Sheer Terror" and "No Way Out." By 1983's full-length album, *Boycott Stabb*, the hardcore sound had become adulterated by repetition and routine, a fact that somewhat permeates this LP. With Baker gone back to Minor Threat, Lyle is on guitar and often merges, not very successfully, hardcore and heavy metal, with tuneless guitar solos and finger slides. The speed has been tempered considerably, though there is still consistent use of distortion and fuzz tone. This album is clearly the link between GI's hardcore past and its more rock/pop future.

Even more so than GI, Faith infuses their brand of hardcore with considerable loads of heavy metal on their split LP *Faith/Void*. Still in the vein of high velocity, brutal, powerful hardcore, their twelve songs on this album add a new dynamic to the hardcore sound. Though the band's sound is repeatedly compared to Minor Threat (not only because the singer is Ian MacKaye's brother, but because the band is directly inspired by their sonic ethos, particularly on songs like "Face to Face"), the album also introduces a certain element of melody into their songs and the occasional atmospheric, slowed-down tempo. The combination of these two elements, along with the well-placed feedback and

use of distortion, help construct their metal/hardcore sound. Alec MacKaye's voice is a bit more restrained than the typical hardcore vocalist. Yes, he still partakes in the hardcore vocal ritual of screaming lyrics, but his voice contains a certain control, his huskiness promising a fury contained. Hansen's drumming is frenzied and frequently seems almost accidental — using fairly simple beats but exploding into a feverish fill just before returning to his previous pattern. Overall, the album unites the primitive viciousness of hardcore with the dark murk of metal, both reaffirming and redirecting the genre.

This music of D.C. hardcore, including all five of the previously discussed albums as well as the physical makeup of the band members themselves, perpetuate not only the masculine musical history of rock but also amplify and reimagine the sonic representation of manhood, performing a music-based hypermasculinity. In exploring the sonic color of SOA, GI, and Faith's music — by investigating their songs' musical texture, the accumulation of timbres, ambience, amplitudes, and rhythms — we can discover how this masculinity is constructed and communicated. In addition to the technical aspects of sound — physical qualities like pitch, rhythm or timbre — this chapter will consider the rhetorical aspects of sound, that is, “how the conventional associations that sounds have...allow them to stand as symbols suggesting dialogues and resonances beyond the boundaries of the track.”<sup>417</sup> The technical and rhetorical properties of GI, SOA and Faith's songs and albums demonstrate a masculinity that is sonically defined by anger and resentment, insistent sexuality, and the privilege of agency and control.

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<sup>417</sup> Albin Zak III, *The Poetics of Rock: Cutting Tracks, Making Records* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 62.

## *Aggression*

Hardcore punk, generally, and DC's Government Issue, Faith and State of Alert specifically, are known perhaps most distinctively for their "brutally fast...ferocious blur" of sound, a description that underscores and lionizes these bands' emphasis on extreme aggression.<sup>418</sup> This belligerence is sonically represented by the bands' manipulation of their instruments — the electric guitar, bass, drums, and vocals — as well as their reliance on breakneck tempos and excessive loudness. Furthermore, these antagonistic emotions — and their coexisting sonic representation — become a symbol of masculinity, both culturally and personally for these band members.

The electric guitar has, to a certain extent, always been understood as part of a binary, a contrast to the acoustic guitar. If the acoustic guitar is mellow, warm, earnest, and refined — as its associated sound in both classical and folk music have implicitly and culturally decreed that sound stands for<sup>419</sup> — the electric guitar is just the opposite: distorted, vulgar, raucous and uncultured. Indeed, it is, in part, the method of amplification — that is, the deliberate manipulation of sound — that acts as this expression, "so when Neil Young straps on an electric guitar, it is because he has something to say that cannot be said with an acoustic...Young recognizes that his electric playing is the vehicle for his feelings of anger, violence and frustration."<sup>420</sup> These expressive emotions are able to be understood by the audience mainly because of the two guitars' timbral differences, which immediately indicates to the listener the genre and effect. Because of the aforementioned musical history of the acoustic versus electric

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<sup>418</sup> J.D. Considine, "New Paths for Punk," *The Washington Post*, August 16, 1984.

<sup>419</sup> See Michael Kasha, "A New Look at The History of the Classic Guitar", *Guitar Review* 30, August 1968; Palmer, "The Church of the Sonic Guitar."

<sup>420</sup> Gracyk, *Aesthetics of Sound*, 120-22.

guitar, timbre — before lyrics, melody or harmony — acts as an emotional weathervane.<sup>421</sup> This is especially true of punk rock, and of SOA, Faith and GI more explicitly. The bands' recurrent use of the eighth-note pulse in both their guitars and basses generate the overwhelming feeling of force and momentum, and, with and because of that, hostility and anger.

SOA's Michael Hampton is crucial in achieving this sonic electric guitar assault with his "aggressive flair on guitar" and ferocious tempo.<sup>422</sup> "Draw Blank," the second song from SOA's *No Policy*, exemplifies the blitzkrieg that is Hampton's playing. Opening with only a two-second guitar riff, the mind-boggling speed and distorted reverberation of the guitar portends the dark pounding attack of Hampton's solo 18 seconds into the 36-second song. The solo itself is a mere five seconds, but it explodes with a high-pitched, atonal offensive, like shuddering, unsteady nails on a chalkboard, demanding attention. While the tempo alone suggests "staccato bursts of aggressive black noise that come and go like machine gun bursts," the intensely high pitch of the screeching guitar solo also connotes warning, a cautionary sound that conjures associations of police sirens, ambulances and fire alarms, a premonition of the danger, chaos and oftentimes savagery, to come.<sup>423</sup>

Indeed, the socially understood construction of a high pitched tone regularly designates panic, agitation and distress; and while this sound is sometimes connected to our cultural comprehension of femininity (the hysterical, overwrought woman screeching is often an overused cliché in popular culture) Wendel Blow's accompanying bass line

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<sup>421</sup> Robert Walser, *Running With the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music*, (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1993).

<sup>422</sup> Andersen and Jenkins, 73.

<sup>423</sup> Richard Harrington, "Slamdancing in the Big City," *The Washington Post*, July 19, 1981.

(E/B/G/D/A/E) offers a low, hammering counterpoint riff indicating authority and control. It is the combination of this song's two stringed instruments — Hampton's maniacal speed, fuzzed-out distortion and high-pitched, discordant electric guitar solo and Blow's steady, regimented gruff riffs of the electric bass — that simultaneously suggest agitation, a cause for alarm, which can be understood as a masculinized threat of the typically feminized hysteria, and a promise of militant authority. In both cases, the guitar and bass work to typify dread and underscore the risk of violence.

Similarly, Hampton's use and punctuation of guitar slides in "Gang Fight" and "Warzone" (whose overt lyrical expression of anger will be explored in subsequent paragraphs), perform as a symbol of disorder and a promise of uncontrollability. "Warzone" begins with an onslaught of electric guitar, a breakneck riff of E/B/C#m/A asserting menace with its frenetic tempo and combative tone, and "Gang Fight" opens with ominous plucking of chords before churning into a similar rough and reckless guitar and bass line, affirming a foreboding and sinister sound. Certainly, this arrangement of "uncivilized" speed and brutish, angry timbre is archetypal, indeed emblematic, of hardcore punk and of SOA. Frustration, aggression and anger were a product of both youth and the sociopolitical milieu of DC.<sup>424</sup> Yet this overt expression of belligerence is interrupted, and even augmented, by the jarring, startling guitar slides in the middle of these seemingly hostile riffs. Bursting through "Warzone" at :16 and :32 (of a 52 second song) and at :05 and :40 in "Gang Fight" (clocking in at a lengthy 59 seconds) these slides function as another type of sonic warning — the inability to anticipate or control.

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<sup>424</sup> These arguments will be further examined at the end of this section.



Hampton's guitar slides themselves are discordant, feverish, almost shrill sounding; by appearing in quick, unexpected torrents in between the steady militancy of bass and guitar lines, they lend a wild unpredictability to the already-formed sonic bellicosity. These slides perform as a different kind of threat: you may think you know us, our music and our anger, but you don't. This rage can explode at any moment; it can be messy and overpowering; it is disobedient and unmanageable, and it is *in addition* to the pugnacity already promised by the guitar and bass riffs. "Noise is violence: it disturbs. To make noise is to interrupt a transmission, to disconnect, to kill,"<sup>425</sup> and in the case of "Warzone" and "Gang Fight" it is noise upon noise — a doubly assertive dose of disruptive sound. By supplementing the aggression of the guitar and bass' speed and tone, and surprising the listener, SOA intensifies their sonic expression of rage, adding to it the menace of randomness and abandon.

Unsurprisingly, given Hampton's status as guitarist in Faith directly after the dissolution of SOA, the sonically extreme expressions of antagonism continue in his second band. Still revered as "a hard-edged guitarist," Hampton exploits and worships the use of guitar distortion — in addition to his distinctive excessive speed and uncompromisingly brutal style — as a symbol of and for unruly and anarchic mutiny.<sup>426</sup> "It's Time," Faith's first song on their Faith/Void Split LP, uses fuzzed out guitars throughout the track, giving the guitar riff — the prototypical hardcore progression E/B/G/D/A/E — and Chris Bald's parallel bass line, a heavy, sinister effect. This muddy, blurred sound garbles the rich and well-defined sound of the electric guitar, an effect that is intensified in the last six seconds of the song, when Hampton peels into a three-second

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<sup>425</sup> Attali, 26.

<sup>426</sup> Andersen and Jenkins, 131.

distortion-free, high-pitched solo, which peters out into a cloud of guitar feedback and sonic haze. This menacing ambiance is replicated in “You’re X’ed,” this time with Bald’s “relentless bass line” underscoring the murky distortion of Hampton’s guitar.<sup>427</sup> Opening with a full three second detonation of piercing guitar feedback, the bass sneaks in a shuddering, dejected progression, offering a steadfast counterpoint to the dirty sound of the electric guitar.

Faith’s use of sonic manipulation continues throughout the album, particularly as a disquieting intro and outro to their songs, punctuating the already-vicious guitar shredding and bass lines with an added dose of cacophonous auditory aggression. The last nine seconds of “Confusion” is simply the shrill shriek of guitar distortion and feedback, a complete tonal reversal from the rest of the song, which slogs through a dark, heavy, low texture, while the opening strains of the LP’s final track, “In the Black” launches into a twelve-second slow-motion interlude of distortion, with Alec MacKaye’s vocals indecipherably slurred through the sliced-up discordant sound of guitar, until the ominous bass line kicks in at :13, an ominous prelude to the rest of the song.

The band’s emphasis on, and sheer pleasure in, the manipulation of guitar sound performs as both musical and social insurrection, an act of aggression and defiance. Musically, the act of distortion itself is a measure of extremism — distortion occurs when the guitar’s volume goes beyond its capacity, or if the amplifier itself is slightly damaged.<sup>428</sup> Traditionally, tube guitar amplifiers were intended to provide the utmost in

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<sup>427</sup> Andersen and Jenkins, 97.

<sup>428</sup> Or did, historically. While manual distortion was a mainstay of early rock n’ roll (including Howlin’ Wolf, Chuck Berry and Guitar Slim), the British Invasion bands (the Kinks, the Rolling Stones), and early heavy metal bands (Deep Purple, Led Zeppelin), the effect has become the purview of technology — power amplifiers, rackmounts, pedals, and speaker software all produce the same sound.

clean sound; if there was a woolly or fuzzed out sound, it was considered a mistake and engineers endeavored to eliminate any such imperfections from the final tracks.<sup>429</sup> But by the early 1950s and into the 1960s musicians began intentionally pushing their instruments past their normal, or socially acceptable, sonic boundaries, and in doing so, they began to achieve a meaner, louder, and more dissonant sound.

This, of course, was — and remained for Faith — not simply an aesthetic choice but an expression of cultural distortion, as well. Just as the Chicago electric bluesmen intentionally used loudness and distortion as a statement of racial independence and musical originality,<sup>430</sup> Dave Davies of the Kinks intentionally slashed his amps to realize the gritty, muddled sound that signified the British youth revolt of the 1960s, and Jimi Hendrix famously used guitar feedback as the foundation of his Woodstock performance of the Star-Spangled Banner as a commentary on the warped and grotesque, almost unrecognizable, sociopolitical state of affairs in the U.S., so too does Faith's use of guitar feedback and distortion work as an expression of wrath and repudiation. Their purposeful use of distortion and feedback is both a literal and musical rebellion.

In the more literal sense, distortion — of any kind, whether it be visual, verbal, or physical — functions as a commentary on what one, or society, perceives as normal. In order for something to be *distorted*, it must, of course, deviate from what is considered the standard. And, indeed, Hampton and Bald's guitar and bass playing — from their hard-driving style to their lightning-fast tempo to their deafening volume and their actual use of distortion — is an intentional aberration. Their distorted sound, their aesthetic of

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<sup>429</sup> William Weir, "50 Years of Making Fuzz, the Sound that Defines Rock n' Roll," *The Atlantic*, March 3, 2011.

<sup>430</sup> Please refer to Chapter Three for a more in-depth discussion of this topic.

confusion, haziness and pure discordant noise, is their statement about the world around them. It's not their music that's distorted; it's the world around them.

Faith uses feedback in the same way. Most simply, we understand feedback as a response to a particular situation, process or activity, often with a component of assessment or appraisal inherent in those reactions. With that straightforward definition, Faith's musical use of guitar feedback can be recognized as, well, literal feedback. They are responding, with an earsplitting, antagonistic, sustained, stream of guitar feedback, to their particular circumstances. The underlying emotions then, the implicit attitudes, in both these cases — Faith's use of guitar distortion to represent the distortion of reality and their atonal musical feedback — are clearly ones of antagonism, manifestations of aggression. Hampton does not use his guitar to capture a psychedelic distorted haze of love, calmness and peace; Bald does not pluck his bass in a strong, supportive way. Instead, Faith's guitar and bassist acts as instruments of hostility, attacks on the musical and social world from which they feel marginalized.

The ferocious guitars and foreboding bass lines, however, are not the only instrumental expression of masculine aggression in DC hardcore; drums, with their speed, volume and beat, also work to connote a kind of vehement danger, with undercurrents of combativeness. Certainly, the underlying sensation of Simon Jacobsen's drumming in the entirety of SOA's *No Policy* is a menacing defiance, coupled with the implied threat of violence. This is partially achieved by the use of the drum roll, used in four of the EP's ten tracks: "Girl Problems," "Gang Fight," "Gonna Hafta Fight," and "Gate Crashers." In two of these — "Girl Problems" and "Gonna Hafta Fight" — Hampton's blistering electric guitar riffs actually open the first few seconds of the songs

before Jacobsen's assertive, militant-like roll explodes, acting as palpable partner, a musical two of a one-two punch, with the previously discussed antagonism of the guitar. In these two tracks, the speed and aggression of the electric guitar, with its high-pitched metallic sound, is compounded and magnified by the deep, ominous and equally as fast drumroll. The striking timbral contrast of the guitar and drums, particularly since they are first played independently of each other, heightens the sonic spectacle of assault.

"Gang Fight" and "Gate Crashers" use Jacobsen's drum roll simultaneously with Hampton's guitar to open the songs, suggesting an equally aggressive two-pronged attack. Unlike the previous two songs, "Gang Fight" and "Gate Crashers" have a prolonged intro; while "Girl Problems" begins with just three seconds of guitar before Jacobsen's drumroll kicks in, and "Gonna Hafta Fight" has just one scorching second of guitar before the drums, the combined guitar-and-drumroll attack of "Gang Fight" is a full five seconds, and "Gate Crashers" is an extended eleven seconds.<sup>431</sup> These protracted introductions have a comparably hard-hitting, antagonistic effect as the previous two songs, but lacking the timbral contrast the result is more immediate and, given their length, more extensive.

In part, the violent undertones of Jacobsen's drumrolls stem from the physicality of the actual technique, which demands a near-continuous right-left-right-left thumping, with added force to the fulcrum on impact, allowing the drum stick to bounce multiple times on the drum head.<sup>432</sup> The material force of the drumroll sonically translates into

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<sup>431</sup> While these seemingly minuscule differences in time may seem insignificant to a typical piece of music, given the average length of a SOA song (which ranges from 36 seconds to 1:16) these variances have a greater importance relative to their length.

<sup>432</sup> See Joe Morello, *Master Studies* (1986); Gary Chaffee, *Patterns* (2000).

metaphorical force. Jacobsen's ability for sustained pounding signifies his masculine ability for corporeal pounding — just imagine the muscles it takes to maintain that kind of drumming, and then imagine those drums as your face. The material/physical equivalence of the drumroll performs as a threat, and one that exaggerates the menace already posed by the electric guitar.

But Jacobsen's violent drumming is also a function of the instrument's sociohistorical context as an international indicator of masculine belligerence and potency. Historically, men played drums in preparation for battle and contemporaneously men battle in drum contests to prove their manliness, advancing the culturally constructed male characteristics of competitiveness and aggression.<sup>433</sup> Sonically, the deep, pounding backbeat of the drums evokes an aesthetics of command, and its rhythmic tension and anticipation suggest an undertone of a strike about to occur. Indeed, how the drums are played are habitually referred to as an attack, with the bite or snap of the cymbal, tom-tom or snare — further symbols for traditional masculinity. At the same time, these properties are strengthened and reimagined through the bodies of such rock drummers as Keith Moon, Ginger Baker and John Bonham, whose sweaty, often-shirtless explosive, vigorous, sometimes violent performance on the drums reaffirms this threatening masculinity.<sup>434</sup>

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<sup>433</sup> Margaret Kartomi, *On Concepts and Classifications of Musical Instruments* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

<sup>434</sup>The Who's Keith Moon regularly destroyed his drum kit on stage, kicking it over and often needing to replace his stands and pedals. Cream's Ginger Baker is frequently described as a drummer/madman by the press and depicted as annihilating his drums, while John Bonham of Led Zeppelin played with so much force that roadies actually screwed his drum kit into the stage so it wouldn't go flying.

Moreover, the uncompromising, emphatic use of the cymbals, in conjunction with the drums, acts as a vehement co-declaration of force, most acutely exemplified by Government Issue's 1981 *Legless Bull* EP. Drummer Mark Alberstadt's punishing abuse of his hi-hat is unrelenting throughout the album, with seven of the ten tracks ("Religious Ripoff," "Fashionite," "Rock 'N' Roll Bullshit," "Asshole," "Bored to Death," "No Rights," "Cowboy Fashion") featuring an aural double-barreled assault of drums and prominent hi-hat, maintaining a viciously aggressive eighth note beat.<sup>435</sup> Even on GI's other three tracks — "Anarchy is Dead," "Sheer Terror," and "I'm James Dean" — the crashing cymbals are present, but simply are neither as heavily prolonged nor as domineering as the previous seven. Similar to the collaboration between electric guitar and drumroll in SOA's tracks, the relationship between drums and cymbals in *Legless Bull* poses a sonic, textural juxtaposition, and in doing so, asserts an assault based on a full range of pitch and multiple timbres. The sound of the hi-hat is a rapid, brusque and brassy, with a clanging noise that sounds like, and is known as, a "chick;" in conjunction with the low, dark sound of the drums, this arrangement behaves like an attack on both sides of the pitch and timbre spectrum. If the drumbeat serves as a strident portent of future aggression, its rhythm echoing the metaphorical drumbeat towards war, the hi-hat cymbals perform as the promised outcome of that sign — a crashing, deafening denouement, scattering sound in a higher-pitched frenzy.

This dual effect is also contingent upon Alberstadt's stunning technical speed. His fever-pitched tempo connotes a sense of wild fractiousness. The speed at which he pounds the drums and hi-hat reeks of an out-of-control impulsiveness, a power that can

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<sup>435</sup> Because of the tempo of GI's songs, and indeed, most hardcore punk songs, sustaining any smaller of a rhythmic subdivision on the cymbals is nearly impossible.

be neither reined in nor contained. What's more, this unrestrained speed is seemingly never-ending; it's sustained not only throughout the length of a song (which average a tad longer than SOA's at around one minute) but also throughout every song on the album. While Alberstadt's percussive danger may seem like merely a rapid blasting burst, a passing storm, given the short duration of the songs, in its totality, over the album's ten songs, each of these quick-fire incursions adds up and together perform as an unremitting assault. By showcasing the cymbals alongside of the drums, with Alberstadt's searing speed and dexterous hands, GI's album endorses another kind of offensive, with the intimidating peril of drums reinforcing the sonic eruption of the hi-hat.

Yet the most perceptible and perhaps the most well-known sonic expression of anger in DC hardcore punk clearly comes from the vocal timbre and style of the bands' singers. By eschewing the conventional melodic singing style, and refocusing their vocal efforts on the expression of emotion rather than pitch, Rollins, Stabb and Alec MacKaye manipulate their voices as another form of instrumentation, and as a focal point for their manifestation of rage. In small part, this vocal connotation can be attributed to the singers' use of the natural minor scale in their singing, which tends to have a bleaker, heavier sound, with a more dissonant and melancholy quality. More noticeably, however, to both the casual listener and the music critic, is the hardcore singers' "impassioned but rough-hewn, almost amelodic vocals," which produce a shouted, rather than harmonic, form of singing.<sup>436</sup>

SOA's Rollins does this by blending his already-husky tone with a pugnacious pace to deliver his lyrics. His voice is naturally gruff and semi-hoarse, and in each song

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<sup>436</sup> Richard Harrington, "Recent Releases from D.C. Rockers."



on *No Policy* he sounds as if he has popped a vocal cord, or has at least already been shouting for hours on end. This grainy vocal quality, in part a function of his lack of formal vocal training, in part a consequence of his inherent tone, and to some extent because he is in fact yelling over a sustained period of time, contains a coarseness, a crudeness that acts as a symbol for the brutality he is attempting to convey. Just as the smooth and intimate vocal tone of the crooners of the 1940's and 50's suggested seduction and tenderness, and the girl groups of the 60's sang in a calculatingly girlish tone to indicate naivety and acquiescence, Rollins' grating, rasping vocal quality denotes fury, ache, and strain.

Furthermore, his vocal speed and cadence perform as yet another indication of militant rebellion. Expelling words in a near-blur of sound, Rollins crams verses into a mind-numbingly short amount of time. In the opening track "Lost In Space" he shouts the first two verses —

Up in smoke, I laugh in your face/  
Fucked on drugs, lost in space/  
See your friends, they laugh at you/  
But don't get mad , 'cause they're drugged too.

Spend your time on the floor/  
Go throw up, come back for more —

in a mere ten seconds.<sup>437</sup> "Blackout" squeezes in two full verses and two choruses in less than 45 seconds, while Rollins expels the first verse of "Riot" in just four seconds. His speed, particularly in conjunction with his harsh vocal quality, communicates a frenzied, outraged need. The tempo speaks specifically to this need; the pace one talks at is an indicator of exigency — a slow drawl suggests easygoingness, a fast-talking rhythm,

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<sup>437</sup> State of Alert, "Lost in Space," in *No Policy*, Dischord Records, Vinyl, 1981.

urgency. Compounded by Rollins' vocal tone, this urgency becomes hostile and demanding.

Moreover, this vocally antagonistic exigency is intensified by Rollins' martial-like modulation, which creates the vocal image of a blaring drill sergeant or a "bellicose auctioneer."<sup>438</sup> In "Public Defender," Rollins trades his typically excessively speedy vocal delivery for a more measured, deliberate expectoration of lyrics. With a clarity not often associated with hardcore punk singing, he spits out each line with purposeful, yet commandingly intimidating, enunciation, his voice rising on the last word of each line, and more authoritatively and protractedly, on the last word of each verse:

"See 'em coming/  
You'd better move quick/  
He's gonna hit you with a stick."<sup>439</sup>

Each of these words is punctuated by Rollins' aggressive intonation and articulation, and "stick" is drawn out in an extended growl, emphasizing the violence of the line with the violence of his voice and cadence.

In a similar fashion, Rollins relies on a rising intonation, albeit with less of a formal elocution, in "Warzone." Using his characteristically brisk delivery, with its accompanying muddling of words, Rollins uses the last word of each line to punctuate and skewer. These words — "beware," "care," "apart," "start," — are barked like commands, demanding not only attention but also no small measure of fear. Though the majority of SOA's lyrics are, to be sure, jumbled by the speed and yowl of Rollins, his regulated and controlled phrasing, in combination with his obviously vicious tone and articulation of a few key words, embodies the ire and wrath he is trying to convey.

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<sup>438</sup> Azerrad, 13.

<sup>439</sup> State of Alert, "Public Defender," *No Policy*, Dischord Records, Vinyl, 1981.

In a related, though slightly modified, way Government Issue's John Stabb uses his vocal tone, as well as his penchant for screaming, to communicate rage. Unlike Rollins, Stabb has a more refined, higher-pitched voice. There's no gritty coarseness to convey turbulence, no deep-sounding pitch to suggest a threat; yet, his reedy, piercing tone still speaks to alarm and danger. Like sirens erupting in an air raid, Stabb's voice stabs (pun intended) the listener, impaling his wrath with his pitch. As previously mentioned, this high pitch has been frequently associated with women, so it may seem contradictory to argue that such a tone suggests an explicitly masculine form of aggression. Yet, there are two factors that transform the feminized pitch into an overtly masculinized type of anger. First is the most obvious explanation: while Stabb's voice is indeed higher-pitched than Rollins, and lacks the socially-constructed archetype of a low, deep tone representing masculinity, his pitch is still considerably lower than that of female and we as listeners instantly understand this sound to be of and from a man. Stabb's not employing a falsetto; therefore, while his vocal timbre may suggest a higher, sharper sound, it is still clearly identifiable as masculine, with all its accompanying cultural privileges and connotations.

Second, and perhaps even more crucially, Stabb's pitch cannot be extricated from his vocal delivery, which can only be described as squawking shout, a sonic amalgamation of jeering and baying. Indeed, GI's lyrics are "virtually unintelligible...but their meaning is quite clear."<sup>440</sup> Vocal emotion trumps lyrical comprehension. Besides the spoken word opening of "Rock 'N' Roll Bullshit," the listener is effectively unable to understand any other lyrics of this song on first or second listen; what comes through,

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<sup>440</sup> Richard Harrington, "Recent Releases from D.C. Rockers."

however, is Stabb's resentment. The same can be said of "Anarchy Is Dead," which is indecipherable except for the chorus, which is the song's title, or "Bored To Death," where one or two errant words can be untangled, but otherwise becomes a miasma of Stabb's sneering shouts. What is principal in these songs, and how his anger is transmitted, is not simply through the lyrics, but viscerally through his tonal quality and delivery. The attitude of Stabb's singing — flippant, scornful, and inscrutable — along with the vocal quality — the high-pitched intensity — performs as aggression, "constitut[ing] violence to established decorum" of conventional music and conventional manners.<sup>441</sup> Obliterating the concept of harmony or melody, and with it the corollary implications of peacefulness, accord, and mainstream acceptance, Stabb's vocal styling is loud, dissonant, and ultimately a "screw you" to the established norms of music and society.

Faith's Alec MacKaye, on the other hand, fuses many of the vocal stylings of both Stabb and Rollins, as well as inserting his own heavy metal-esque technique of merging spoken word with singing, to establish his vocal belligerence. Like Rollins, Alec's tone is low and harsh — though without the distinctive hoarseness of the SOA singer — announcing his maleness and its attending forcefulness. Similar to Stabb, Alec uses a curt, snappish delivery, manipulating his inflection to suggest contemptuousness and a lack of care for the traditional forms of singing.

Yet, unlike both Rollins and Stabb, Alec's delivery is nearly entirely comprehensible. He sings with precision and clarity and he's easier to understand in part because the album's mixing allows his voice to be separated out from the instruments and

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<sup>441</sup> Gracyk, *Aesthetics of Rock*, 102.

in part because his articulation is not obfuscated by a growl or yelp. His lyrics are enunciated lucidly, but no less vehemently. In fact, Alec relies quite often on the elongated shout of a word to emphasis not only the violence inherent in his diction but also in his tone. In “In Control” he stretches out his vocal screaming/articulation of specific words — “control” and “know” are extendedly screeched twice in two verses. “You’re X’ed” starts each line with Alec’s biting yelp, but ends in a protracted yowl, with the chorus beginning in a terse shout “you’re X’ed, you’re X’ed, you’re out of my...” and ends with the raucous howl of “liiiiiifffe.”<sup>442</sup> And the final word is lengthened in a guttural bawl in the repeated chorus line of “Nightmare,” “suffering in agony,” as if to vocally represent the agony of which he speaks. These vocal expansions, with the quavering discomfort of Alec’s strained voice, express the intensity and extent of the singer’s pain and anger.

In addition, Alec’s use of echo and spoken word underscore the insistent onslaught of his tone and attitude. “Don’t Tell Me” features Alec speaking, with rigidity and his typical derision, all the song’s lyrics. This stylistic choice works to emphasize the rant-like nature of this song; despite the decidedly unharmonious singing on the other tracks, this song doesn’t even participate in the patina of conventional singing. Alec accuses the listener with his spoken word. Furthermore, his lead vocals are augmented by the backup vocals of the rest of the band, who shout in unison at the end of every line “don’t tell me!” In a way, these vocals represent a musical one-sided argument — an antagonistic outburst of anger, replete with bluster and bellowing.

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<sup>442</sup> Faith, “You’re X’ed,” from *Faith/Void*, Dischord Records, 1982.

Relatedly, “In the Black” uses a combination of spoken word, singing, reverberation and distortion to accentuate the dark aggression of Alec’s voice, echoing the vocal techniques of the heavy metal genre. The opening strains of the song are heavily distorted, with Alec’s voice completely unrecognizable and his words indecipherable, as if the tape has been slowed down and then sped up. Immediately, this has a disorienting effect, challenging both the listener to readjust their auditory expectations and conventional musical norms, which had seen a great deal of guitar distortion but a near-dearth of vocal distortion. After the beginning 11 seconds of distortion, Alec enters with his spoken-word verse, awash in booming reverberation in each word, lending a sinister, ominous tenor to his voice. Each of these spoken verses is then followed by a prototypically hardcore-sung chorus — spat out with a cutting, slightly discordant singing style. The overall effect is similar to that of the electric guitar and drumroll sequence found in SOA’s instrumentation — the promise of a threat (in the form of Alec’s spoken word, echoed in reverb) and the fulfillment of that threat (in the biting aggression of the sung chorus).

Rollins, Stabb and Alec MacKaye all use their voices — their pitch, their delivery, their tempo, and their sound effects — to communicate rage. What’s more, they sing, blurt, yelp, and bark deafeningly. Indeed, it was this volume, this irrepressible noise, which worked in concert with their voices to express their fury since “*loud* meant passion, *loud* meant the pent up anger of the age, and loud rock n’ roll thus became an acting out of that anger...”<sup>443</sup>

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<sup>443</sup> Robert Duncan, *The Noise: Notes from a Rock ‘n roll Era* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1984), 46.

When examining the expression of aggression in DC hardcore music it would be impossible to ignore the most literal and most verbal communication of these feelings: lyrics. Despite the aforementioned obfuscation of many, if not most, of the words from SOA, GI, and Faith's songs, there are a number of compelling reasons to explore these songs. First, the words, despite their unintelligibility, are a central aspect of the sound of DC hardcore. Much like instrumentation and vocals, verbalized language performs an emotional and political function in their sonic interpretation. For instance, plosives (/b/ /p/ /t/ /d/) have a harsh, abrupt and sharp sound, sibilants (/s/ /c/ /ss/) create a more sinister, hissing or even soft sound, while fricatives (/f/ /v/ /th/) can produce an light, buoyant sound.<sup>444</sup> These sounds, and their attending expressive nuances, become meaningful in context with the constructed denotations and connotations of the actual words, as well as the other forms of musical implications.<sup>445</sup>

Second, lyrics are a direct product of the band members themselves, and as such stand as the most explicit, translucent documentation of what feelings, ideas, and beliefs these musicians are attempting to share. Unlike an analysis of musical structure or instrumentation, which depends heavily on the privileged position of the academic superimposing her own sociopolitical interpretation (even with the rigors of evidentiary demands and thoroughness of argumentation), lyrics serve as *prima facie* attestation to the writers' sentiments. Clearly, this line of interpretation has its own limitations: postmodernism demands the ascendancy of the audience as arbiter of meaning, relegating

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<sup>444</sup> See Melanie Kendry, "Sounds in Poetry: Sibilant, Plosive, Liquids, Fricatives, Nasals," April 2013.

<sup>445</sup> This is not to argue that any of the band members were aware of the linguistic implications of their word choices; nor do I mean to contend that a strict syntactical analysis of their lyrics is a productive or meaningful way to understand their resonance. However, this argument is meant to discuss the unconscious, socially-constructed sonic meanings the verbalization of language has.

the author to the less direct and less central creator of meaning, and, relatedly, audience members may interpret the writer's meaning in a highly subjective way, skewing the "intentions" of the writer to fit her own social schema.<sup>446</sup> In addition, there is no assurance that what is written — whether it be a poem, book, or song — represents the unmitigated, all-inclusive feelings of the author.<sup>447</sup> However, as subsequent sections will explore, the members of SOA, GI and Faith themselves saw their music as a form of personal expression, and their songs became a form of agency in a town in which power was at a premium. In that way, we can and should understand their lyrics as a type of — though certainly not the only form of — personal and musical communication.

Third, though these bands' lyrics, for the most part, are quite difficult to discern, even after multiple listenings, this did not necessarily preclude their ardent and loyal fans from learning them. Lyric sheets, 'zines, live shows, incessant playing of the albums, friends' assistance, and live shows, are only some of the ways that fans discovered, and frequently memorized every word of, their favorite hardcore bands' songs. Indeed, most interviewees listed the lyrics of hardcore as just as important as the sound, if not more.<sup>448</sup> Mike A. says, "Most of the bands frankly were not great musicians, but they had something to say." Cynthia C. agrees, saying it was "lyrics, then sound." The audience's reception of these lyrics, and their subsequent recitation of them (at shows, in bedrooms, at record shops) offers yet another component of meaning of how words matter.

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<sup>446</sup> See Roland Barthes, *Death of the Author* (1967); Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (1976); Michel Foucault, *What is an Author?* (1969).

<sup>447</sup> As the school of New Criticism contends, arguing that we are unable to reconstruct the author's intention or use sociohistorical context of the author, but can only glean meaning from one source — the text itself.

<sup>448</sup> Six thought sound was more important, while the rest — 14 — saw them as equally relevant despite the indecipherability.



And, even with the possibility of mis- or re-interpretation of meaning, almost every single one of the songs from SOA, GI, and Faith are, as *Washington Post* music critic Richard Harrington notes in 1981, “baldly aggressive, self-centered, a bit paranoid and certainly hard to put up with if you’re not in agreement with the philosophy.”<sup>449</sup> While it might be more efficient (not to mention quicker) to simply list the songs that *don’t* deal with feelings of aggression, hostility and rage, I’ll instead categorize the songs by the object of their wrath: their peers, those in authority, and themselves.

The most prolific of these subject matters, which perhaps aligns quite well with Harrington’s disparaging assessment of the band members’ paranoia and self-centeredness, is resentment, contempt and outright anger towards their peers. These bands’ lyrical loathing is, within their peer group, reserved primarily for three groups of people — those who are not straightedge<sup>450</sup> or those who are disapproving of that lifestyle, their friends, and those who fall outside the punk purview, but are still their peers. Given that the straightedge lifestyle is so much a part of the construction of self, while it was simultaneously a relatively marginalized way of life for high schoolers in the late ‘70s and ‘80s, it is understandable that so many of SOA, GI and Faith’s songs are not only defensive of their consumption choices but also offensive in criticizing others. Faith bemoans those choices in “Another Victim:” “It’s not too late to make a change/Who cares if they don’t understand/It’s better if they think you’re strange/Than dying to prove

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<sup>449</sup> Harrington, “Recent Releases by D.C. Rockers.”

<sup>450</sup> Straightedge is an individual philosophy that eschews drinking, drugs and unrestrained sex, which became not only an emblem of the city’s punk scene, but also a national subcultural social movement. Borne from Ian MacKaye’s 1981 song of the same name, straightedge rebelled against the youth-based and music-centric culture grounded in the consumption of drugs and alcohol, where sexual conquests were badges of honor and getting wasted was a nightly occurrence. While this clean living ideology was meant by MacKaye as a declaration of personal ethos, rather than a directive, it became a part of DC hardcore’s communal identity.

you're a real man/Live fast, die young, you're full of shit."<sup>451</sup> They are even more overtly hostile in "You're X'ed" — "You drink, you fuck behind my back/You're not my friend, I don't you're your crap"<sup>452</sup> — and they aggressively defend their own choices in "What You Think:" "You don't understand me/You don't see where I stand/It doesn't matter what you think."<sup>453</sup>

Government Issue is even less subtle in their 1981 track "Asshole," charging "Asshole, Asshole/look at me I'm as drugged as I can be/ Asshole, Asshole/ Can't you see I'm so drugged that I can't see,"<sup>454</sup> and making a more grisly pronouncement on their 1982 "Teenager in a Box:" "Doing drugs and booze everyday/driving your car in a psychotic rage/you don't hear what anyone says/I'll read about you in the obituary page."<sup>455</sup> SOA dedicates one of their ten songs to slamming those who drink and use drugs, offering a similarly gruesome prognostication for those peers:

Up in smoke, I laugh in your face/Fucked on drugs, lost in space/  
See your friends they laugh at you/But don't get mad 'cause they're drugged too/  
You spend your time on the floor/Go throw up, come back for more/  
Eat those pills, take those thrills/Who's gonna wind up dead? You!/  
Snort that coke, what a joke/Who's gonna wind up dead? You!<sup>456</sup>

Unmistakably, part of this enmity is directed at the larger society, which, despite the nascent War on Drugs,<sup>457</sup> still constructed a culture of consumption that included

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<sup>451</sup> Faith, "Another Victim" from *Faith/Void* EP, Dischord Records, 1981.

<sup>452</sup> Faith, "You're X'ed," from *Faith/Void* EP.

<sup>453</sup> Faith, "What You Think," from *Faith/Void* EP.

<sup>454</sup> Government Issue, "Asshole," from *Legless Bull*, Dischord Records, 1981.

<sup>455</sup> Government Issue, "Teenager in a Box," from *Make An Effort*, Dischord Records, 1982.

<sup>456</sup> State of Alert, "Lost in Space," from *No Policy*, Dischord Records, 1981.

<sup>457</sup> While the War on Drugs was officially commenced under the purview of President Nixon, it was President Reagan who ramped up this war. His wife, Nancy, began the "Just Say No" campaign in early 1981, which quickly led to zero tolerance policies by law enforcement and, subsequently, skyrocketing number of arrests and incarcerations of often-times minor offense drug users.

drugs, drinking, and promiscuous sex.<sup>458</sup> However, the majority of Faith, GI, and SOA's wrath is assigned to their peers, friends and acquaintances who are not the faceless evil of "Society" but young people who these musicians see throwing their potential away. What's of note is not simply these lyrics' stance — the straightedge movement in DC hardcore has been well-documented<sup>459</sup> — but that this position is one embedded in rancor, rather than, say, disillusionment, resignation, or even proactive encouragement. The overwhelming emotion is that of anger.

This personal antipathy is also present, though in fewer songs, in these bands' lyrics about the betrayal of and by their friends. Government Issue rages against friends' manipulations in "Twisted View" (1982) and the destructive toxicity of rumor-mongering in "Partyline" (1983). Remarkably, this is the same subject matter of Faith's "In Control" and "Trapped," the latter of which warns "You sit around and talk/Behind each other's backs... You think you'll be safe/Hiding behind your friends/Remember nothing's real/About the way they feel."<sup>460</sup> Finally, this intense contempt is widened to the bands' peer group at large, from those who criticize and defame hardcore punk rockers (GI's 1982 "Sheer Terror," SOA's "Gang Fight") to those enraptured by popular culture ("Fashionite," "Rock 'N' Roll Bullshit" from GI's *Legless Bull*) and the fame monster of the music industry (SOA's "Gate Crashers" and GI's "Anarchy is Dead"), or even to the generalizable, anonymous masses (SOA's "I Hate the Kids," Faith's "Face to Face," and

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<sup>458</sup> Particularly within the popular music scene. Bands such as Led Zeppelin, the Rolling Stones, Alice Cooper, David Bowie and the Doors (to name a few) were legendary for their antics including group sex, rampant drug use and unchecked amounts of drinking.

<sup>459</sup> See Ross Haenfler, *Straightedge: Hardcore Punk, Clean Living Youth, and Social Change* (2006); Gabriel Kuhn, *Sober Living for the Revolution: Hardcore Punk, Straight Edge, and Radical Politics* (2010); Beth Lahickey, *All Ages: Reflections of Straight Edge* (1997); Robert T. Wood, *Straightedge Youth: Complexity and Contradictions of a Subculture* (2006).

<sup>460</sup> Faith, "Trapped," *Faith/Void EP*, Dischord Records, Vinyl, 1981.

GI's "Here's the Rope"). Unsurprisingly, these lyrical themes — betrayal, ostracization, and the disappointment and unraveling of friendships — are near-universal to teenagers and to the subject matter of popular music of virtually any decade. There's nothing particularly unique about these themes, per se. Once again, however, it is form, rather than content, that sets apart DC hardcore. Rather than addressing these tribulations with nostalgia, heartache, yearning or even despair, GI, SOA and Faith use militancy, fury and disparagement.

This lyrical violence is also directed more outwardly, towards society and, more specifically, towards the hegemonic institutions of authority that these DC bands see as oppressive. Religion is the object of ridicule in GI's "Religious Rip-off" ("T.V. evangelists put on a show/Trying to tell me what they know/Just send us money and you'll be saved/Pretty soon you'll be our slave"<sup>461</sup>) as are the cops in "No Rights" ("Cops say shut-up or you'll get hit/I'm sick and tired of taking their shit"<sup>462</sup>), while SOA focuses on the many faces of authority, from club owners ("Warzone") to the local government ("Riot") to the police ("Public Defender"). Each of these songs plays a dual function in the expression of anger and brutality: they all communicate the savagery of the institution ("Destroy the city, smash it bits/They won't stop, they don't give a shit;"<sup>463</sup> "See 'em coming/You better move quick/he's gonna hit you with a stick"<sup>464</sup>) but they also reflect and redirect this violence towards the institution itself ("Sticks and stones – Riot/Break your bones – Riot/Stores in Flame – Riot;"<sup>465</sup> "Here they come, club owners

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<sup>461</sup> Government Issue, "Religious Rip-off," *Legless Bull*, Dischord Records, 1981.

<sup>462</sup> Government Issue, "No Rights," *Legless Bull*.

<sup>463</sup> State of Alert, "Riot," *No Policy*, Dischord Records, 1981.

<sup>464</sup> State of Alert, "Public Defender," *No Policy*.

<sup>465</sup> State of Alert, "Riot," *No Policy*.

beware...they're gonna rip this place apart/Trash to the finish, trash from the start;”<sup>466</sup>  
“Somebody better kill ‘em [cops] quick/Somebody hit ‘em with their own stick”<sup>467</sup>).

Ironically, in this way the destructiveness that these punks embrace and use as a warning towards a society that does not accept them is concurrently a product of that same society.

The final prong in this triad of aggression is, perhaps, unsurprising: the self. After directing a large dose of anger at friends and contemporaries who have disappointed and enraged them, along with the society who helped construct those expectations and the violent reactions they induce, SOA, Faith and GI turn the anger inward, an emotional accumulation of the other two realms’ perceived dissatisfactions. Faith’s “What’s Wrong with Me?” (“How come it’s me that’s always hurt/How come it’s me that feels like shit?”<sup>468</sup>), “Nightmare” (“Can’t get no sleep/I can’t close my eyes...Twist and turn/cringe and burn/Feel the pain inside of me/Suffering in agony”<sup>469</sup>), “Confusion,” and “In the Black” all articulate the pain and acrimony that come from the attempt to reconcile one’s perception of self with the expectations of others, and the failure to do so.

This violent despair is echoed in two of SOA’s ten songs, “Draw Blank,” in which Rollins obstinately refuses to show any straightforward emotion (“You’ll never know/I’ll never show/I’m not a book/You can’t read me”<sup>470</sup>) and “Blackout,” where this self/society congruence takes a self-destructive bent (“War going on inside my head/I

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<sup>466</sup> State of Alert, “Warzone,” *No Policy*.

<sup>467</sup> Government Issue, “No Rights,” *Legless Bull*.

<sup>468</sup> Faith, “What’s Wrong with Me,” from *Faith/Void*, Dischord Records, 1982.

<sup>469</sup> Faith, “Nightmare,” *Faith/Void*.

<sup>470</sup> State of Alert, “Draw Blank,” *No Policy*.

can't get to sleep, I'd rather be dead... I don't know what to say, I don't know what to do/Everyday seems the same, I might as well die...<sup>471</sup>).

Government Issue's Stabb goes from manic boredom on his 1981 *Legless Bull* ("My life's a drag/I'm just a waste/Put me in a bag... When boredom sets in/I just wanna die/I can't move/No matter how I try"<sup>472</sup>) to a more explicit and personal form of resentment in his 1983 *Boycott Stabb*, including "Puppet on a String," "Hour of One" and "Insomniac." Much like the marginalization from and by friends and peers, the underlying emotion of these self-directed lyrics is pain, uncertainty and isolation; however, also much like the bands' response to that marginalization, their primary lyrical emotion towards their own chaos of self-perception is a primitive, male-approved outward reaction of anger and violence, rather than the feminine emotion of hurt, to these feelings.

Accordingly, we can understand these musical declarations of rage — through instrumentation, vocal delivery, and lyrics — as a performance of gender, and, in this instance, the culturally-constructed and accepted (white, upper class) masculine attribute of anger. These violent emotions were molded and reinforced by the specific realities of these young males living in Washington, D.C. in the late 1970's and early 1980's, as well as the cultural mandate of masculine expression. The city, as a national symbol of government and power, had an even more overt and explicit effect on the people who lived there. So while the Watergate scandal and the never-ending Vietnam War were fuel to the disillusionment flame of Americans generally, who had exhausted the 1960s idealism of people power, peace, and a government who worked for good, this suspicion

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<sup>471</sup> State of Alert, "Blackout," *No Policy*.

<sup>472</sup> Government Issue, "Bored to Death," *Legless Bull*.

and cynicism was more acute for those whom DC called home. Any sort of distancing that occurred with the nation as a whole — both geographical and emotional — was much more difficult if not impossible when living in the city that represented such angst.<sup>473</sup> The ascent of Reagan and his particular brand of conservatism intensified the ossification of anger and distrust of the government, as the revolutionary air of social equality wrought by the late sixties and early seventies was tempered, and nearly eradicated, by the “bootstraps” mentality, anti-affirmative action policies and fiscal conservatism of the new Republican faction in town.

Though only teenagers, these DC punks were highly aware of, and reactionary to, the sociopolitical quagmire surrounding them. As Rollins himself notes, “I was an angry kid, an angry adolescent... Washington DC was an intense place to be a young person in the 70’s and 80’s... In my opinion, to be a conscientious American, you should be pretty damn angry.”<sup>474</sup> My interviewees reinforce this view of DC as a sociopolitical morass. Tim D. says, “We saw Reagan creating a poor class in America so there was a lot to protest,” while Malcom R. comments, “Marion Barry and Reagan being in town stirred up a lot of anger.” Mike A. adds, “the politics of the time – Ronald Reagan, for example – naturally fed our anger and our sense of rebellion.” As Drew B. encapsulates, D.C. “needed a swift kick in the ass.”

But more than simply open political hostility, the rage contained in and expressed by DC hardcore was also a musical manifestation of the physical violent realities these

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<sup>473</sup> See Howard Gillette Jr., *Between Justice and Beauty: Race, Planning, and the Failure of Urban Policy in Washington D.C* (1995); Harry Jaffe, *Dream City: Race, Power, and the Decline of Washington, D.C.* (1994); Kenneth Melder, *City of Magnificent Intentions: A History of Washington* (1997).

<sup>474</sup> Henry Rollins, live online discussion, *The Washington Post*, January 11, 2006.

teens faced on the streets, which itself can be, in part, attributed to the social consequences of the city's escalating conservatism. Along with the influx of money and the city's gentrification efforts in Georgetown,<sup>475</sup> as well as DC's lowered drinking age, came an arrival of an entire collection new youth: suburban teens, children of the new administration, Georgetown University students, and Marines from the local bases, "a veritable rogues gallery of punk archenemies."<sup>476</sup> Violence against the punks, who were detested for their rebellious, defiant appearance, cocksure attitude, and for being different, being freaks, became a daily occurrence and while punks "often took side streets to avoid confrontations...[they] also started wearing a chain for protection."<sup>477</sup> The re-entrenched traditionalism of the federal government trickled down to the community, merging with the already-violent history of both the city<sup>478</sup> and the government and acting as an impetus for aggression both towards, and by, these punks. In this way, the antagonism and aggression towards the punks was appropriated and re-expressed as their own rage. As performance scholar Joseph Roach explains, violence should be understood not as merely pointless, but instead as a meaning-laden act, which "...exist[s] as a form of cultural expression that goes beyond the utilitarian practices necessary to physical survival."<sup>479</sup> For the music and lyrics of SOA, GI and Faith, violence was meaningful in both its symbolism and practicality, articulating a message of Rollins calls "Kill the World."<sup>480</sup>

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<sup>475</sup> Refer back to Chapter Two for a more in-depth analysis of Georgetown's physical and demographic transformation.

<sup>476</sup> Andersen and Jenkins, 63.

<sup>477</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>478</sup> Including the 1968 riots and the escalating murder race.

<sup>479</sup> Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 41.

<sup>480</sup> Andersen and Jenkins, 81.



Of course, connected to these punks' particular performance of violent masculinity is the more overarching sociocultural expectations of emotional expression. That is, their masculinized sonic and physical expression of anger is always-already joined to the cultural construction of manhood. While gender ideals, and the accompanying performance of gender, vary from decade to decade, contingent in part on the shifting economic, political and social transformations of the day, the normative masculine model of the 1970s seemed to remain squarely within the archetypal hegemonic model of manliness. Perhaps in reaction to the feminist movement of the 1960s, which threatened to destabilize, and in the view of some, undermine, the traditional role (and, accordingly, the implicit hierarchy and complementary benefits of power and influence) of men, the prevailing construction of masculinity in the 70s was established as an explicit binary to womanhood. As social scientist Robert Brannon notes, this production of masculinity had four principal themes: No Sissy Stuff, which demands that physically, emotionally, and behaviorally men reject any typically female-related characteristics (which includes having a low voice, ignoring cares for personal hygiene and clothes, and eschewing public displays of emotions); the Big Wheel, which values a man for his status and wealth; the Sturdy Oak, which stresses self-confidence, self-reliance and self-assurance; and Give 'Em Hell, which endorses violence and aggression.<sup>481</sup> While these gender ideals were undoubtedly affected and possibly altered by intersecting values asserted by divergent vectors of race, class, ethnicity, religion and age, this four-pronged conceptualization of superlative masculinity — strength, status,

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<sup>481</sup> Robert Brannon, "The Male Sex Role: Our Culture's Blueprint of Manhood and What It's Done for Us Lately," in *The Forty-nine Percent Majority: The Male Sex Role*, eds. Deborah S. David and Robert Brannon (New York: Random House, 1976), 1-14.

self-possession, and pugnacity — was the overwhelming model of manhood in popular culture.<sup>482</sup>

Underlying nearly all of these masculine tropes, of course, is aggression. Indeed, “anger in men is often viewed as ‘masculine’ — it is seen as ‘manly’ when men engage in fistfights or act their anger out physically,” a sentiment that is reiterated and validated not just by the traditional social and familial model but also by the inundation of this representation by popular culture.<sup>483</sup> Leading men in the movies like James Bond, Clint Eastwood’s array of cowboys, and Steve McQueen’s on- and off-screen tough guy persona, as well as television’s representation of aggressive males in the form of *Magnum P.I.*, *Starsky and Hutch*, *Michael Knight*, reproduced the stereotype of the aggressive male, whose violence is not only an unquestioned day-to-day reality (and is often simultaneously linked to their sexual prowess, which will be discussed in the subsequent section) but also an effective method of getting the job done, and is consequently glorified. These societal constructions are necessary in recognizing the collective climate of gender, one which permeated and indubitably impacted the representation of violent masculinity assumed and enacted by the male DC hardcore bands.

The sound of DC hardcore, specifically through the albums of *State of Alert*, *Government Issue*, and *Faith*, reflects and amplifies the fury of being a male adolescent in DC, ostracized by his peers, disenchanted with his city and disappointed by the values and norms of his government and society as a whole. This musical aggression is ignited

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<sup>482</sup> These idealizations can be seen in the movies of the decade, (*The Godfather*, *The Deer Hunter*, *Dirty Harry*, *Taxi Driver*, *Rocky*), television shows (*The Brady Bunch*, *Perry Mason*, *M\*A\*S\*H*, *Bonanza*) and books (including bestsellers by Stephen King, S.E. Hinton, and Philip K. Dick).

<sup>483</sup> Melissa Dittman, “Anger Across the Gender Divide,” *Monitor on Psychology*, 34 (2003): 52.

by the bands' manipulation of the electric guitar, with its excessive loudness, dizzying tempos, and techniques of distortion, reverb, and sonic texture, their use of the drums to mimic the threat and explosion of anger through breakneck drumrolls and crashing hi-hats, and the raw, throat-straining, nearly unintelligible yelling vocals of Rollins, Stabb and Alec MacKaye. Such sonic volatility is compounded by the bands' explicitly antagonistic lyrics, which detail their anger towards themselves, their peers and the authority figures who fuel their rage. What's more, this anger is clearly masculine. Not only are all the band members male (a descriptor for *all* DC hardcore bands, not just SOA, GI and Faith) but the particular day-to-day realities, in conjunction of the culturally constructed image of manliness, formed and necessitated this sort of emotional response by the male gender. The rage-tinged music of these bands, powered by age, sociopolitical events, and the obligations of gender construction, bolsters and emphasizes how sound can signify gender.

### *Power and Privilege*

Such expression of violent emotion, both musically and physically, can clearly be recognized as a distinctive form of power, which itself stems from the ability — and the associated privilege — to act and express these sentiments in a shared, public forum. However, not all such configurations of power are aggressive or destructive. While it might be argued that the connotation of power, control and agency has inherent in it the characterization of some form of domination, and with that an asymmetrical articulation of force, these concepts, and their corollary expression in music, need not be overtly

hostile.<sup>484</sup> Indeed, as Gramsci's discussion of hegemony clarifies, a considerable aspect of and reason for the perpetuation and invisibility of these authoritative forces of power is due precisely to this lack of explicit coercion; the consent of the governed is given obliquely and dominion is maintained nearly imperceptibly.<sup>485</sup> The naturalization of power to and for a certain group (or institution or ideology), because of the cultural assumptions of neutrality, historical detachment, or evolutionary essentialism, allows for the continuation, and unquestioning conviction in, imbalanced structures of power.<sup>486</sup>

The same is true of music. Just as this chapter has attempted to unravel the concealed structures of gender in the performance of aggression in DC hardcore, so too must we endeavor to disentangle other covert forms of gender coding in punk, including one of the primary forms of patriarchal hegemony — the privilege of power, or the freedom of expression. State of Alert, Faith and Government Issue propagate this privilege of masculine control in both the form and content of their recordings. From the subjugation of their musical instruments (and the attendant personification of those instruments) to the loudness, urgency and demands of their vocals, these bands flex their

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<sup>484</sup>In social psychology, power is primarily understood as the ability to persuade, which is seen as a function of social influence processes. This model is based on the dependency between people that allows them to impact and ultimately to produce desired changes in their psychological and behavioral actions. However, within this model, there is a difference between influence and control and coercion. See Deutsch & Gerard (1955); Festinger (1950, 1953, 1954); French & Raven (1959); Kelman (1958).

<sup>485</sup>According to Gramsci, hegemony is not only the power that one social group holds over others but is also an unremitting process of gaining and keeping power. Dominance is maintained in a number of ways, including economic disparities and the ideological influence of government, education, mass media and other institutions. These ideologies are embedded through messages and images that we take for granted; that is, hegemony is implanted in the conceptual framework that we all assume is natural, just "the way things are." But even more so, Gramsci notes that by complicit acceptance of these dominant ideologies we allow ourselves to be governed by these ideas. See Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* (1971).

<sup>486</sup>See John Fiske, "British Cultural Studies and Television" (1992); Stuart Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing the Popular" (1981); Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991); T.J. Lears, "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities" (1985); Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (1977).

sonic power; furthermore, their performances, both onstage and in the recording studio, despite their lack of technical talent, complicate, though still perpetuate, the masculinized ideal of power and control.

In the most basic sense, instruments themselves are frequently endowed with anthropomorphic qualities, elevating a mere cultural object and bestowing it with agency, or what social anthropologist Alfred Gell categorizes as the ability to function as social actors in human culture, including the concomitant gender ideologies.<sup>487</sup> Even our basic descriptions of instruments suggest personhood; we label the “body” of the instrument and its associated human-like parts: the “neck,” the “head,” and the “belly,” indicating human identity, and, necessarily, a gendered identity.<sup>488</sup> The instrument itself can be, and often is, associated with a different gender than both the musician who plays it and the sounds that emerge from it.

Take the quintessential punk instrument — the electric guitar. In its anthropomorphic form, the electric guitar, with a curved hourglass-shaped body and a well-rounded bottom, has been constructed as feminine.<sup>489</sup> Indeed, musicians often refer to their guitar as “she” or “her.” Albert King named his “Lucy,” Jimi Hendrix’s was “Betty Jean” and B.B. King had “Lucille.” In this view, the guitar as woman would seemingly afford at least some scintilla of power to females, as instruments (both literally and figuratively) of noise, containing within its form the capacity to inspire, disrupt,

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<sup>487</sup> Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: an Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 7-17.

<sup>488</sup> Doubleday, 12.

<sup>489</sup> Or at least partially female; Steve Waksman’s convincing analysis argues the electric guitar should be understood as a technophallus, with its long neck symbolizing the phallus and its technological power quelled and re-appropriated by masculine prowess. Indeed, I utilized this claim in analyzing the racialized hypersexualization of Bad Brains in Chapter Two. However, much of Waksman’s argument still dovetails with my own, particularly when we detach the physical instrument from the musician who plays it.

arouse, warn, and thrill. Yet, it is the male musician — in both the history of nearly all popular music up to DC hardcore<sup>490</sup> and in the actual composition of every DC hardcore punk band, including Faith, SOA and GI — who has dominion over this instrument and its potential power. Like ships, which are given women's names and referred to as female, but are navigated and controlled by males (who traditionally even believe women aboard such ships were bad luck), the electric guitar is conquered and appropriated by men's indomitable potency.<sup>491</sup> In this way, the potential for female power is subsumed by and ultimately recast as male.

This contrast between instrument and musician is further complicated by the culturally-conferred perception of the instrument's value. In the genre of rock n' roll, the electric guitar is king, recognized as not just the most technically demanding of instruments but also as the personification of the entire band itself, where "the star status of the guitar is conflated with its gendered character."<sup>492</sup> This male-dominated, guitar-centric understanding of rock was magnified in the 1960s and 70s with the formulation of the guitar god concept, elevating the playing of guitar to a near-religious fervor (many a Cream fan proclaimed "Clapton is God"), a hierarchy that was (and still is) perpetuated by music magazine's obsessive ranking of the top guitarists of all time. What qualifies as guitar god-worthy is the highly masculinized, and implicitly control-based, quality of

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<sup>490</sup> Even the females who were in popular music in the 50s, 60s, and 70s – of which there are a number – did not go near the electric guitar. From the girl groups (Shirelles, Supremes, Crystals, Shangri-las) to the rockers (Janis Joplin, Grace Slick) to the singer-songwriters (Carole King, Carly Simon, Joni Mitchell) these women were either singing or playing the acoustic guitar. The electric guitar was decidedly in the purview of men in popular music through these decades.

<sup>491</sup> Such metaphorical and bodily domination and subjugation also clearly have strong and meaningful implications of (hetero)sexuality. These connotations will be more broadly examined in the subsequent section on sexuality.

<sup>492</sup> Mary Clawson, "When Women Play the Bass: Instrument Specialization and Gender Interpretation in Alternative Rock Music," *Gender and Society* 13 (1999): 201.

technical prowess: “to be in command of the very latest technology signifies being involved in directing the future, so it is a highly valued mythologized activity.”<sup>493</sup> Thus, idealized models of masculinity, particularly within the subcategory of music, were based on technical dexterity, while, on the other hand, femininity was associated with “non-competence and, therefore, dependence on men’s skills and knowledge.”<sup>494</sup>

SOA, Faith, and GI, however, intriguingly cloud this masculine ideal of the fetishization of technical mastery, and, with it, the implications of gender. Despite the more obvious relationship of male musician commanding both a semi-feminized instrument and its capacity for power (which should not be ignored or automatically discounted), these bands assert an anti-gendered stance in their veneration of lack of technical musical skills. Musical simplicity and the celebration of emotion over professional skill as a mainstay of punk rock has been examined in all three of the previous chapters, particularly in reference to its performance — or upheaval — of race and class. This guitar-based minimalism, also found throughout the albums of SOA, Faith, and GI, was no different and can likewise be understood through the lens of gender.

Almost identical to the chord progression of nearly every Teen Idles and Minor Threat song, the B/G/D/E/A sequence is virtually invariable in SOA’s *No Policy*, Faith’s *Faith/Void Split*, and Government Issue’s *Legless Bull* and *Make an Effort*. Their reliance on and respect for only the most basic of chords (and even those not needing to be technically proficient) seems to indicate a nod towards gender parity. If “non-

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<sup>493</sup> Judy Wajcman, “Reflections on Gender and Technology Studies: In what State is the Art?” *Social Studies of Science* 30, no. 3 (2000): 454.

<sup>494</sup> Jennifer M. Brown, “De-gendering the Electronic Soundscape: Women, Power and Technology in Contemporary Music” (Masters Thesis, Southern Cross University, 1995).

competence” was classified as decidedly feminine and technical mastery was categorized as not only masculine but also as an aspiration that would ultimately generate accolades and musical glory, then Faith, SOA and GI perform a sort of gender reversal, interrogating the naturalized assumptions of gendered guitar playing.

Of course, despite this seeming semi-renunciation of strictly gendered playing, the constructed masculinity of guitar godliness was still decidedly evident in hardcore guitarists’ frenetic tempo, which frequently was both mind-boggling and exceptional, and their instruments’ remarkable loudness. Through the skill of speed and the authority of noise the guitar “is meant to sound like a spontaneous eruption of maverick psychic energy manifested in musical expression.”<sup>495</sup> Thus, while the albums’ rudimentary guitar composition may speak to a fairly non-gendered assumption, the technical virtuosity of pure speed, along with the sheer force of sound, acts as affirmation of the trope of hypermasculinized guitar sacredness.

Beyond the personification and subsequent gendering of instruments, the vocals of hardcore punk — in their techniques and textures, as well as the associated dearth of traditional aesthetic pulchritude — enact another form of power, reinforcing it as a masculinized ideal. Similar to the way timbre helps to immediately identify an individual instrument, even if multiple ones have the same loudness and pitch, a person’s voice is both unique and emblematic;

the voice “*is* the person, it is our means of representing our ‘selves’ to other people.”<sup>496</sup>

We understand the voice as a representation of the person from whom it comes. Even if

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<sup>495</sup> Albin, *Poetics of Rock*, 65.

<sup>496</sup> Frith, *Sound Effects*, 161.



we cannot physically see the person, we know it is Mom, our professor or our best friend, just by their voice. Not only that, the voice is the person; the voice acts as our agent.

As surveyed in the previous section, the vocal stylings of Rollins, Stabb, and Alec MacKaye represent a bellicose violence, “an inarticulateness, a muttered, hunched distance...startling in aural terms...”<sup>497</sup> It is this vehemence, this technique of screaming as voice-and-self, that contains the power of control by containing the power to disrupt. We can parallel the desperate yowling of these punk singers to the effects of babies’ wailing:

Babies are endowed with...inordinate lung power and vocal chords of steel, it seems, capable of producing high decibel and transient values, cutting timbres and irregular phrase lengths...a baby’s yell is always upfront, foreground, urgent, of varying periodicity and quite clearly designed to shatter whatever else mother, father, big sister or big brother is doing...desires and needs must be fulfilled *now*, they cannot wait....<sup>498</sup>

If we simply replace the noun “baby” with “Rollins,” “Stabb” or “Alec” we can understand how their vocals can act as sonic statements of urgency, and that this urgency is a function of power and control. Of course, these hardcore singers use this method deliberately; a baby lacks intentionality. But the effect is the same. Just as a drill sergeant, a sports coach, or an emergency worker yells to gain responsiveness, emphasize authority and command compliance, so too does the roughshod vocal gymnastics of these singers demolish tranquility and demand attention.<sup>499</sup>

Connected to this disruption/control model of singing, there is a power in the rebellion associated with, and indeed validation of, this untraditional singing style. When the top musicians of 1980-1983 included Hall and Oates, Rick Springfield, Air Supply,

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<sup>497</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>498</sup> Tagg, 44-5.

<sup>499</sup> It is not a coincidence that these professions where yelling is not only allowed but also a requirement of the job is nearly exclusively a male-occupied realm.

and Foreigner, and the ostensibly nonconformist Billboard chart toppers are John Cougar Mellencamp, Blondie and Joan Jett,<sup>500</sup> it takes an enormous amount of chutzpah to reject the mainstream mandate of vocal melody. Rollins' "rudimentary"<sup>501</sup> singing style, Stabb's "incoherent, incomprehensible vocals"<sup>502</sup> and the way Alec MacKaye "sang so hard he'd pass out or hyperventilate"<sup>503</sup> was, then, an assertion of power, a refusal to be silenced, literally and figuratively, by the cultural/musical directive of what singing should, *must*, sound like. Agency, and the power that it allows for, emerges from this deliberate eschewal of musical norms. Rejecting the musical dictates of the majority offered SOA, Faith, and GI the ability to act independently, to self-represent. At the same time, the structural paradigm in which this agency was enacted — more specifically, the institutionalized gender coding — was the very foundation opaquely in place to make possible such agency.

In the same way, the recording and performance of hardcore reveals not just the ability to musically represent one's self and viewpoints but also the presumption of value of such representations. Despite the general musical/cultural rejection of hardcore punk, the creation, production and performance of the music still acted as a form of male agency. In a rather Nietzschean way, these albums are a form of the philosopher's concept of "will to power," a tactic of asserting one's self and dominating others as a form of life-affirming self-realization.<sup>504</sup> As Rollins himself says, "All I had was attitude

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<sup>500</sup> Billboard.com, accessed January 21, 2014, <http://www.billboard.com/>

<sup>501</sup> Andersen and Jenkins, 73.

<sup>502</sup> Andersen and Jenkins, 72.

<sup>503</sup> Blush, 164.

<sup>504</sup> See Friedrich Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil, Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future* (1886).

and a very intense need to be seen, a real I-need-attention thing.”<sup>505</sup> Talent was subjugated to vehemence, aesthetics to agency. The noise of hardcore, the intensity of vocals, the utter force of guitars and drums, the quashing of conventional musical aesthetics and the exaltation of fervidness over technical aptitude expresses a power that was essential to maintaining the sonically-coded male space of both music and society.<sup>506</sup>

As suggested in the preceding paragraph, this sonic agency performed by SOA, Faith and GI is inexorably entangled with the extensive sociocultural models of masculinity and their local manifestations in the space of Washington, D.C. The religious, familial, cultural, and professional domination of males has a well-recorded and near-universally recognized history: from kings, prophets, and deities to dowry-receivers, breadwinners, and fathers-know-best, to CEOs, scientists, politicians and military personnel, men have traditionally been “socialized to think of themselves as all mighty and powerful, and, consequently, to feel entitled....”<sup>507</sup> Even in the late 70s and early 80s, when feminism had begun to shift the sociocultural landscape and slowly alter the conventional markers and idealizations of gender, positions of authority and influence were still teeming virtually exclusively with men, affecting merely superficial fissures in

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<sup>505</sup> Azerrad, 13.

<sup>506</sup> The music industry — the producers, studio engineers, executives, business managers, musicians and performers, as well as many other involved in the composition, production and dissemination of music — has long been understood as a field predominantly occupied by men. From early R&B (Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Elvis Presley, Chess Records) to Motown (Berry Gordy’s label, Stevie Wonder, The Temptations, The Four Tops) to folk (Arlo Guthrie, Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan) to British blues-rock (the Animals, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones) to heavy metal (Led Zeppelin, Deep Purple, Black Sabbath) and glam rock (Kiss, T. Rex, Bowie), the creation and performance of music has been near unilaterally associated with and ruled by males. Though there are clearly exceptions to these male-dominated genres (including the girl groups of Motown, Joan Baez and Mary Travers of folk, and Janis Joplin of blues-based rock) these women were not only rare instances of female performers but also were frequently managed and overshadowed by their male managers and counterparts, or relegated to mere mouthpieces for the male-written tunes, once again reinforcing the masculinized trait of power and control.

<sup>507</sup> Andreas G. Philaretou and Katherine R. Allen, “Reconstructing Masculinity and Sexuality,” *The Journal of Men Studies* 9, No. 3 (2001): 309.

the patriarchal hegemony. Notwithstanding the cultural advent of the so-called sensitive male, masculinity primarily still “hinge[d] on a man’s capacity to exercise power and control.”<sup>508</sup>

Such nationwide fetishized masculine traits were not simply mirrored in Washington, D.C., they were exaggerated and lionized amid the government-based economy, culture, and subsequent hierarchy of power and control. As the seat of national and global power, D.C. epitomizes influence and control, as do the people who make up the three branches of government. And from 1978-1983, these exclusive and commanding positions were the near-sole purview of men. The executive branch, including the most power-laden offices of the President and Vice President, was, obviously, occupied by men,<sup>509</sup> while the Supreme Court had all-male appointees until Sandra Day O’Conner’s somewhat contentious nomination in 1981, tipping the male-to-female ratio to a lopsided 8:1. Congress was similarly disproportionate in its gender distribution: the 95<sup>th</sup> Congress (1977-1978) had 18 women in the House and 3 in the Senate; the 96<sup>th</sup> (1979-1980) even fewer with 16 Congresswomen and 2 female Senators. There was a slight increase in the House of Representatives in the 97<sup>th</sup> (1981-1982) and the 98<sup>th</sup> (1982-1983) with 21 and 22, respectively, though the number in the Senate

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<sup>508</sup> Michael Kaufman, “Men, Feminism and Men’s Contradictory Experiences of Power,” from Joseph A. Kuypers, ed. *Men and Power* (Halifax: Fernwood Books, 1999), 59.

<sup>509</sup> There were a select few women with Cabinet positions during this time: In 1979, Patricia Roberts Harris was Secretary of Health and Human Services and Shirley Hufstедler was the Secretary of Education under Carter; Elizabeth Dole was Secretary of Transportation and Margaret Heckler was Secretary of Health and Human Services in 1983 under Reagan. However, considering there were 13 possible Cabinet positions, having a mere two women appointed is an egregious ratio.

remained the same.<sup>510</sup> At most, then, there were scant 22 out of 435 members of the House of Representatives (5%) and 3 of 50 in the Senate (6%).

Power, as demonstrated and flexed by Washingtonians, was decidedly male. Those who were allowed to speak for the American public, who made decisions premised on the betterment of society, whose moral and social beliefs were openly broadcasted and frequently memorialized through speeches, legislation and monuments were male. So too were the fathers of the band members and the DC hardcore community: military men, journalists, World Bank workers, professors, government employees, and, in one case, a U.S. Senator. Contained in these exemplars of male power, in both the microcosm of DC and in the band members' own families, was a tacit message of male privilege via male agency.<sup>511</sup> Music, then, became the mode of power for Faith, GI and SOA, an age-accessible form of agency that was, like their city's powerful, overtly male.

This power was also, in part, a function of the much-noted gender disparity of the hardcore scene. While the proto-punk bands in DC had women in them — including the Slickee Boys, Tru Fac, the Urban Verbs, Tiny Desk Unit, and the Nurses — there were none in the hardcore bands. And the hardcore audience scene was also disproportionately populated by males. As one interviewee, Drew B., remembers, there were “not many women [and] those who were involved seemed to stay more to the sidelines. I don't think the scene appealed to many women.” Indeed, nearly all the male interviewees recall very few females involved in the scene and those who were participating were often were

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<sup>510</sup> Congressional Research Service, “Women in the United States Congress, 1917-2013,” by Jennifer E. Manning and Ida A. Brudnick, RL30261 (Washington, D.C., Congressional Research Service, 2013), 99.

<sup>511</sup> *American Hardcore*, DVD, Paul Rachman, Sony Pictures Entertainment, 2007; Interview with Jeff Nelson, [absolutepunk.net](http://absolutepunk.net), March 27, 2009; Ian MacKaye, Interview with the author, March 19, 2013; Lyle Preslar of Minor Threat answers the Questions of Doom,” [gimmebadvibes.com](http://gimmebadvibes.com).

relegated to subordinate roles. These supporting positions included the traditional female attributes, fashion — Bernie F. says, “there weren’t a whole lot of women, but I dug their fashion. You weren’t going to see a skinhead chick in Bumfuck Nowhere, PA.” — friends — as Dan M. remembers, “My best friends were punk women from Baltimore and Columbia, so I was rarely at a show without one or more women. But there was a significant gender imbalance, and it always had an overbearingly ‘male’ vibe,” — or a sexual object — Lars K. recalls there were “not many women, and, like in most social groups, they were embraced in direct proportion to their 1) attractiveness and 2) ability to fit in...women were scarce.” Within this sphere of DC hardcore music then, the ability and privilege of the male voice was both a function and byproduct of the already-uneven gender presence. Power and control was in the musical hands of men in part because there were primarily men listening to and playing hardcore, while, at the same time, the decidedly male scene reinforced and preserved this male dominance.

This is not to argue that the male-dominated DC hardcore scene was overtly hostile towards women; in fact, both male and female interviewees refute that representation. Tim D. remembers the scene as “sorta a men’s club...[but] girls seemed welcome” and another says while he “would guess 20% women TOPS on a good night, often 10% or less...The women that were there seemed accepted and appreciated. There was the usual ignorant misogyny you would expect with a bunch of teenage boys in a clubhouse, but I never noticed anything approaching abuse or non-acceptance of the girls who wanted to hang around.” Of the few<sup>512</sup> female interviewees, that sentiment was echoed. Christi W. said, “I always felt safe...” while another acknowledged there were

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<sup>512</sup> Three women out of twenty respondents.

“not many other women [but] I didn’t feel [I was] treated differently and I felt safe....”

The question of safety and inadvertent antagonism aside, the sheer disproportion of male-to-female ratio cannot be refuted nor should it be overlooked as a contributing factor to the privilege of male agency within the scene. The commanding male voice was a reflection of the overpowering male presence.

There is a power inherent in music: to provoke, to soothe, to enchant, to reminisce. But there is also a power in the production and performance of music, the power of representation, of self-and societal-definition. This puissance is magnified and complicated by gender standards, particularly for the members of State of Alert, Government Issue, and Faith. While the musicians helped muddle the constructed gender hierarchies of the electric guitar by abjuring melodic complexity, they buttressed the male power paradigm in their speed, volume and intensity, as well as their defiant vocal stylings. Enacting the masculinities performed by the potent, influential men of Washington D.C.’s politic elite, as well as their own fathers, these bands used music as agency, a way to voice their own (often aggressive and recalcitrant) influence.

### *Male (Hetero)Sexuality*

Much like the nearly three decades of music that preceded it, DC hardcore punk continued the socially-constructed equation of rock n’ roll = male heterosexuality. In part, this sexual and musical narrative is premised on the assignation to males the role of producers and performers of rock, transferring onto their gender the cultural associations of that location: forcefulness, sexual power, creativity, and autonomy. But this equation was also based on fear. As discussed in previous chapters, this relationship is one premised both on culture’s racialized fears, which coupled rock’s African American roots

with the stereotype of black male hypersexuality, and on its alarm about the uncontrollability of rock, which suggested a rebellion that was not just sonic but also social. The burgeoning rock rebellion, while guaranteeing a confrontation to the conventional meaning of race in both music and popular society, had no such influence on gender roles. The sexual energy so dreaded by adults was a *male* sexuality. SOA, Faith and GI reinforce this construction of masculinized (hetero)sexuality in their music with their use of and techniques with the electric guitar and drums, including tempo, timbre and volume. At the same time, however, these bands seem to undercut the predominance of male (hetero)sexuality with the content of their lyrics, which boast little to no references to the typical musical trope of male/female love and relationships.

A significant aspect of punk/rock's suggestive sexuality is, once again, a kind of anthropomorphic function of their instruments mingled with their aural affectivity. The electric guitar and bass are central to this sonic sexualization: the fleeting, squealing guitar solo of SOA's "Draw Blank" and Hampton's shuddering opening guitar riffs of "Blackout" and "Girl Problems;" the jagged, short bursts of guitar spray in GI's "Rock 'N' Roll Bullshit" and the assertive screeching of discordant guitar slides in their "No Rights;" and the booming, lurching, insistent combination of guitar and bass in Faith's "It's Time," "You're X'ed" and "In Control" perform both as an act of sexual control and of sexual wantonness. In one way, the guitars function as a sonic display of male domination over the female; this is, as the prior section explores, in part due to the feminine personification of the electric guitar. If the guitar can, at least partially, be understood as the female body, then the male command over it (her), his ability to play her, fold and bend her notes to his will, make her wail and quiver, all in front of an



audience, or recorded in perpetuity, cast the male as sexual aggressor and the female as his submissive instrument.<sup>513</sup> The physical reality of the male lead and bass guitar players in SOA, Faith and GI, and their attendant grating, grinding, and manipulation on that instrument, links back to, and thus already-always performs, an engrained male sexuality based on the female/male submissive/dominant paradigm constructed by society and perpetuated by cultural institutions.<sup>514</sup>

At the same time, the sounds of these punk guitarists also connote an uncontrollably wild sexuality. The scorching speed of SOA and Faith's Hampton and GI's John Barry and Tom Lyle, the heretofore-unknown brevity of their explosive guitar solos, the abrasive, mutinous loudness, and almost defiant simplicity of composition, all raised the bar on rock's rebellious, uncontrollable streak. If parents were concerned about the inflamed abandon that Chuck Berry, the Beatles or even Elvis Presley would arouse, then the hard-driving, feverish guitar-based hedonism of Faith, SOA and GI would seem to presage the return of the chastity belt. The *way* these male, hardcore guitarists play — renouncing musical moderation or attention to the “rules” of sonic aesthetics — speaks to their aversion to, and rejection of, those same corresponding cultural rules. Their guitar playing, as detailed in previous sections, was aggressive, powerful and out-of-control,

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<sup>513</sup> This analysis is, I believe, still consistent with Waksman's cogent evaluation of the electric guitar as technophallus which I employed in previous chapters. In part, Waksman does contend that the elongated, phallic neck is a symbol of male sexuality; however, the majority of his argument suggests that this gendered sexuality emerges from men's supremacy over technology, as well as its use in the performance of overt male sexuality (a la Jimi Hendrix and Robert Plant).

<sup>514</sup> These paradigms were also previously constructed by the history of rock n' roll, particularly by the hyper-heterosexuality of such rock icons as Jimi Hendrix, Keith Richards, Elvis Presley and Jimmy Page. In addition, this sexuality was, in part, based on these musicians' ability to play the guitar. For instance, in *Rolling Stone Magazine's* 100 Greatest Guitarist music critics and analysts list merely two women — Bonnie Raitt and Joni Mitchell, both of whom are known for their acoustic guitar playing, once again emphasizing the relationship between mastery over the electric guitar and masculinity (November 23, 2011).

adjectives that can, and often are, similarly applied to males and their sexuality. As Rollins asserts, “Guitars with politics bore me. I relate to music on the level of sex and death – sweat, blood, cum, sleepless nights, insecurity.”<sup>515</sup> While this may appear to be inconsistent with the previous assertion of male control as a form of sexuality, this licentiousness is still in line with the culturally-composed male sexuality. Certainly, the notion of control has somewhat dissolved, but this is only indicative of a lost authority over the two-person male/female, dominator/submissive model. This loss of personal control has been sublimated into permission to be sexually uninhibited and unrestricted; the frenzied recklessness of guitar sound parallels, or at least represents, the frenzied recklessness men’s sexuality is allowed to enact.

This same sort of commanding sound of male sexuality is performed by these hardcore bands’ drummers. Just as GI, Faith and SOA’s guitars function within an already-existent framework of rock’s sonic male sexuality, so too does its drums. Indeed, it is rhythm —the persistent, strong and regular pounding beat thumped out by the drum — which is often cited as the primary representation of this male-centric sexuality, in its sonic physicality and emotive ability.<sup>516</sup> Once again, the sound of DC hardcore augments and intensifies rock’s baseline male sexuality with its drum-based assertion of force, volume, and frenzied thrashing.

In “Blackout,” from SOA’s *No Policy*, the insistent rhythmic throbbing of Jacobsen’s drums engulf nearly every other recorded instrument and his fierce, muscular thudding evoke a pulsing carnality. Accompanying this pounding physicality is the

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<sup>515</sup> Andersen and Jenkins, 80.

<sup>516</sup> See Simon Frith, *Sound Effects* (1981); Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings*, (1991); Raymond William, *The Long Revolution* (1961).

shimmering attack and penetration of Jacobsen's hi-hat, which is sometimes juxtaposed with the drums (:03-:11 and :23-29), other times is used to punctuate the end of a drum pattern (:12-:17), or is absent all together, letting the drums themselves dominant (:18-:22 and :30-:42). If Jacobsen's drums exemplify the male proclamation of sexual prowess — the unchecked physical aggression and grinding backbeat paralleling the phallic penetration — the cymbals, with their jittery, glassy, high-pitched cut, connote femininity, or the submissiveness of female sexuality. "Blackout," then, performs a form of male-dominated sexuality; the male-infused drums overtake, direct, or simply exclude the feminine sounds of the hi-hat.

Ivor Hanson's drumming in Faith performs male sexuality in slightly different way, using tempo and meter. "Face to Face" is rife with Hanson's unrestrained, frenzied speed and pugnacious pummeling on the drums. Completely free from any use of hi-hat, the walloping blows of his drums are absolute — persistent, unadorned and wickedly fast. And while the recording of the song tends to somewhat undercut the prominence of Hanson's sound (as Hampton's electric guitar is sonically overbearing), the drums' physicality is no less diminished; in fact, the snaking coil of noise blurring from Hampton's guitar offers a musical counterpoint to Hanson's feverish, lightning-quick drums. It is this speed and rhythm that suggest a latent masculine (and racial) stereotype of unchecked male sexuality tied to the constructed image of sexual savagery and tribal primitivism. In the cultural production of musical history, the drums have been nearly exclusively relegated to the purview of African, Native American and Other tribes. And while their use in these communities was primarily ceremonial or communication-

based,<sup>517</sup> the Westernized designation of those countries and tribes as uncivilized and savage (in binary contrast to and construction of the West as civilized and refined) produced with it implications of irrepressible and uncontainable sexuality. Thus, Hanson's feral, relentless thudding arouses cultural memories of both tribal abandon and the associated sexual depravity.

Yet, the construction of male potency and sexual preponderancy constructed by mainstream culture and performed by the guitars and drums of Faith, SOA and GI is virtually nonexistent in the lyrics of these bands. Indeed, every single song on SOA's *No Policy*, Faith's *Faith/Void*, and GI's 1981 *Legless Bull*, 1982 *Make An Effort* or 1983 *Boycott Stabb* is lyrically devoid of references to sexuality or sexual acts. In fact, through the span of three years, five albums, three bands, and forty-nine songs, (hetero)sexuality is merely hinted about just *three* times, once by each band. Government Issue references the opposite sex in 1983's "Puppet on a String" — "I can't help thinking about you...I don't know how I'll live without you /Now I find myself so sad/Hard to deal with all the pain/I say I'll never do it again/but I keep on searching for my dream girl,"<sup>518</sup> while Faith does so even more obliquely in "What's Wrong with Me?": "Why do I care when you don't/Why can't I see you don't want me?"<sup>519</sup> Yet both of these instances are clearly about love gone wrong, relationships that have failed, rather than the sex, desire or unadulterated lust. SOA's brush with sexuality is even less sexual; Rollins blatantly rejects women and the ensuing relationship woes they bring in "Girl Problems":

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<sup>517</sup> See Matt Dean *The Drum: A History* (Scarecrow Press, 2012), Kofi Agawu *African Rhythm* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), Veronica Doubleday, "Sounds of Power: An Overview of Musical Instruments and Gender," *Ethnomusicology Forum* (2008).

<sup>518</sup> Government Issue, "Puppet on a String" *Boycott Stabb*, Dischord Records, Vinyl, 1983.

<sup>519</sup> Faith, "Why Don't You Want Me?" *Faith/Void* EP, Dischord Records, Vinyl, 1983.

“You lower your fuckin’ pride ‘cause you think she’s what you need/You don’t mind the pain or the way you always feel/It’s just a fuckin’ game, she’s got you on a line...I don’t need no girl problems/I got troubles as it is/I don’t need to waste my time/I don’t need more shit.”<sup>520</sup>

Of course, this lyrical elimination of sex, or any insinuations of carnal yearning and desire, can and should be seen in part as a manifestation of these bands’ adoption of the straightedge lifestyle.<sup>521</sup> Their eschewal of rampant (and therefore, in their eyes, meaningless) sex is on prominent display in their lyrics. Such a positioning, which like the straightedge tenets of no drinking, smoking or drugs, finds its motivation in a deep-seated respect for the body; in this way, SOA, Faith and GI subvert the cultural mandate of aggressive and ubiquitous male sexuality. Of course, this subversion exists side-by-side with the sonic sexuality of their music. And, given the frequent distorted indecipherability of these band’s lyrics, this lyrical destabilization of male sexuality is somewhat undercut by the overpowering force of the traditional, instrumental performance of potent, commanding male sexuality.

In a similar way that hardcore punk’s violence-as-music acts as a form of culturally constructed white, privileged masculinity, particularly as a physical manifestation of power and control, so too does this male heteronormative assertion of sexuality perform as a function of patriarchy. In fact, the two are often related; as Rollins noted in his preference for guitars-as-sex-and-death, sex for men often becomes “an act of power, dominance and an opportunity for the release of deep seated aggressive

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<sup>520</sup> State of Alert, “Girl Problems,” *No Policy*.

<sup>521</sup> It is important to note, however, that even with the scarcity of relationship- or sex- themed lyrics, the songs that do touch on such subjects are always heterosexual-based, reinforcing the assumption of heteronormativity both in both mainstream culture and the subculture of DC hardcore punk rock.

feelings.”<sup>522</sup> In certain ways, specifically through sonic amplification and intensification of guitar and drums, SOA, Faith and GI participate in the reinforcement and perpetuation of these sexualized sounds. Their physical and musical dominance over the guitar, as well as their zealous, breakneck guitar playing, evokes an uncontrollable sexuality, and simultaneously, a control over the female body. Likewise, the bands’ use of drums, with its inscribed rhythmic sexuality and connotations of a savage sexual ferality, maintains and enhances this conventional masculine construction. Yet, lyrically these bands challenge and subvert not only the constructed image of male dominant sexuality but also the musical canon that has valorized the male singer as a sexual being, who uses his music to woo and seduce and is himself an object of sexual power. In multiple, often conflicting, ways Faith, GI and SOA perform and destabilize the traditional paradigm of masculinity as a heteronormative sexual dominance.

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While music was often historically understood as a “neutral enterprise... because of the desire not to acknowledge its mediation through actual people with gendered bodies,”<sup>523</sup> we cannot separate our conception of music from our experience of that music. When we do so, we recognize that the body acts as a contested terrain,<sup>524</sup> a space in which cultural expectations and emotions are confronted and processed. *What* these expectations and emotions are and *why* they are created, recognized and felt is in no way

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<sup>522</sup> Andreas G. Philaretou and Katherine R. Allen, “Reconstructing Masculinity and Sexuality” *Journal of Men’s Studies* (March 1, 2001): 303.

<sup>523</sup> Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender & Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991) 139.

<sup>524</sup> Susan McClary, “Same As It Ever Was,” in *Microphone Fiends: Youth Culture and Youth Music*, eds. Andrew Ross and Tricia Rose (Routledge 1994), 33.

a natural or essentialized explanation. That is, there is no biological or physiological reason why a certain pitch, timbre, volume or frequency evokes sentiments of alarm, excitement or tenderness; nor is there an *a priori* set of innate identity markers in sound indicating a feminine or masculine (or for that matter, racial, sexual or geographic) constitution. This lack of intrinsic social meaning in music is, in part, its most formidable and influential aspect. Much like the institutionalized assumptions that form sociopolitical hegemony, these gendered structures are taken for granted, working “below the level of deliberate signification and...thus usually reproduced and transmitted without conscious interventions.”<sup>525</sup>

This chapter aimed to briefly trace the culturally constructed gender of sound and subsequently explore how DC hardcore music works to reinforce, replicate, and sometimes refute, these socially-formed understandings of masculinity. The construction of masculinity in DC hardcore was an intricate and sometimes ambiguous process. Sonically, the music of State of Alert, Faith and Government Issue often performed a traditional form of masculinity, signifying the conventional manly characteristics of aggression, power, and a controlling sexuality through their instruments, voices, and lyrics. At the same time, however, these musical representations were often muddied by these same signifiers, blurring the artificially fabricated lines between genders and suggesting a more convoluted understanding of what manhood means. Such paradoxical depictions of masculinity — both in the old-fashioned trope of the angry, powerful, sexually domineering male, and in the subversion of this model — were decidedly contingent on the sociopolitical currents of Washington, D.C. Through their music, DC

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<sup>525</sup> McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 16.

hardcore continually creates, reforms, and destroys what it means to be male, using sound and to (re)construct and complicate self and politics.

### Chapter Six: The Transformation of Hardcore: DC Punk post-1983

By 1984, the landscape of DC hardcore punk had shifted in vividly clear ways. As certain members of pivotal, genre-defining hardcore bands abandoned the scene — for college, for New York, for San Francisco, for steady income and a 9-5 job — the remaining musicians grappled with how to create new music in their altered city. DC was spiraling further into the clutches of a wave of conservative fervor with the re-election of Ronald Reagan; at the same time, the audience for punk had expanded dramatically, due in part to the interminable media coverage and skewed portrayal of DC hardcore, and in part to the renewed anger of young teens discovering an outlet for their rage. Within this milieu, these newly formed DC hardcore bands found themselves in a battle to redefine what it meant to be, and to sound, punk. As Rites of Spring's Guy Picciotto puts it, “who represents the ideal of punk more?”<sup>526</sup> Entrenched in this redefinition of sound was a redefinition of self. As established hardcore band members grew older, their understanding and demarcation of identity also matured; unavoidably, this growth — and

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<sup>526</sup> Andersen and Jenkins, 181.



the inevitable tensions and ambiguities that remained — were reflected and projected in the changing music of DC hardcore.

### **Hardcore Unraveled: The Times, They Were A'Changin'**

The collapse of the original DC hardcore scene was the outcome of a number of interrelated personal, sociopolitical, media-induced, and cultural changes. Some band members grew out of adolescence and went to college while others moved away to other states and other bands. At the same time, the local and national media coverage of punk had reached a boiling point; no longer was punk seen as a threatening act of deviance by an underground few. Punk's representation in the public eye, primarily as a function of style, neutered the revolutionary foundations it had been built on. To still others, hardcore had become simply an outlet for violence, rather than for music and rebellion. Kids flocked to DC shows for the express purpose of getting into fights. And in their city, these original hardcore punks saw politics becoming both more relevant and more untenable as Reagan took office for the second term. The original DC hardcore scene was crumbling. As MacKaye himself notes, "By 1984, DC was in a depressing situation. There was intense friction within the Dischord scene, the shows sucked and violence was so prevalent."<sup>527</sup> Brain Baker, of Minor Threat (and of late, Government Issue), agreed: "a lot of the people who had started this local music scene in 1979 and '80 had become a little bit disillusioned; the baby was no longer cute."<sup>528</sup>

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<sup>527</sup> Blush, 175.

<sup>528</sup> *American Hardcore*, 2007.

By 1984, the original DC hardcore bands had dissolved. Minor Threat had broken up due to creative differences.<sup>529</sup> So had Faith. Henry Rollins had left State of Alert for Southern California's iconic punk band Black Flag. Government Issue was still kicking, but had, by 1984, already changed line-ups multiple times, changed labels multiple times, and changed their sound and core audience. Bad Brains was in splinters. After joining with strange bedfellow Ric Ocasek of the Cars and producing a flop album, *Rock for Light*, HR formed the all-reggae Zion Train, and then a self-titled band, HR, while the remaining members unsuccessfully tried to carry on as Bad Brains, *sans* their front man. After briefly reuniting for *I Against I*, a primarily reggae album with notes of punk and metal on a new Texas-based label, the band's financial troubles and loud Rastafarian belief system (including a quite public and offensive vendetta against homosexuality) Bad Brains' zenith had already been in rapid descent.<sup>530</sup>

Before these paradigmatic DC hardcore bands had dissolved, however, they had begun to receive a significant amount of media coverage. *The Washington Tribune* put John Stabb and GI on its front page in a cover story;<sup>531</sup> *The Washington Post* consistently covered DC hardcore shows and wrote album reviews; so did *The Washington City Paper*; even *Playboy* covered the DC hardcore scene.<sup>532</sup> In part, this coverage of the scene led to the commodification of one element of hardcore — fashion. Boutique shops started copping up selling “punk fashion” in DC, like Georgetown's Commander

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<sup>529</sup> Andersen and Jenkins, 133-141.

<sup>530</sup> See Aaron, “Bad Brains: Re-Ignition” (2006); Carr, “Bad Brains: Banned in DC” (2003); Danton, “Bad Brains ‘Into the Future’” (2012); Fleischmann and Fasolino, “Bad Brains Give You a Piece of Their Mind” (2002); Maher, “Interview: Bad Brains” (2007).

<sup>531</sup> Andersen and Jenkins, 124.

<sup>532</sup> Andersen and Jenkins, 142.

Salamander. DC punk was starting to turn into a distinct product, defined by a specific sound and visual aesthetic, allowing anyone to copy it. As William Dagher, a part of the original DC scene, argues, hardcore had become “an establishment. It consists of conformists conforming to a nonconformist movement.”<sup>533</sup>

At the same time as the local media was covering the DC hardcore scene, so too were the national zines. Articles, interviews, scene reports and record reviews for, on and about Faith, Minor Threat, Bad Brains, GI, SOA and other DC hardcore bands appeared in *Touch and Go* (Lansing, Michigan),<sup>534</sup> *Forced Exposure* (Boston),<sup>535</sup> *Ripper* (San Francisco),<sup>536</sup> *Brand New Age* (Arlington, Virginia),<sup>537</sup> *Suburban Voice* (Boston),<sup>538</sup> *Inside View* (Detroit),<sup>539</sup> *Maximum Rock and Roll* (San Francisco)<sup>540</sup> and *Damaged Goods* (New York).<sup>541</sup> This national attention triggered not only more exposure of these bands but also a wider and larger audience. And while most bands would welcome such an increase in fans, the *type* of fans who began flocking to the DC shows was quite different than those in the original scene. Vandalism and random bloodshed were rampant and there was a deluge of these violence-prone outsiders, so-called “drunk punks” who were more interested in fighting than listening to hardcore music.<sup>542</sup> As Dischord house member Alec Bourgeois remembers hardcore shows had “degenerated

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<sup>533</sup> Andersen and Jenkins, 124.

<sup>534</sup> #15 (1981), #17, #20 (1982), #21, #22 (1983).

<sup>535</sup> #2 (1982).

<sup>536</sup> #7 (1982).

<sup>537</sup> #2 (1983).

<sup>538</sup> #21 (1982).

<sup>539</sup> #2 (1983).

<sup>540</sup> #11 (1984).

<sup>541</sup> #7 (1981).

<sup>542</sup> Ian MacKaye in Blush, 175.

into huge mosh pits of mostly ex-jocks and skinheads.”<sup>543</sup> Converting the violent undertones of hardcore into an excuse for violence under any circumstances, these new fans “were becoming increasingly, moronically violent and a lot of people were like: ‘fuck it, I’ll drop out, I don’t want to be a part of this anymore,’” according to Ian MacKaye.<sup>544</sup> The close-knit community of DC hardcore had devolved into a free-for-all. As Henry Rollins notes, “today’s music [scene] is not responsible, people aren’t saying the real thing. It was do or die then. Now it’s a casual attitude — casual youth casually shitting where they live because there’s always some kind of Mom to clean up for them.”<sup>545</sup>

These changes within the DC hardcore scene, of course, cannot be bifurcated from the changes that were occurring within the scene’s city itself. The so-called Reagan Revolution was in full effect as the Gipper took his second term in 1985, and with it a myriad of national policy changes under the riptide of conservatism. Already amidst a recession due to Reagan’s tax policies, unemployment skyrocketed to 10%,<sup>546</sup> even as the President pursued his four pillars of Reaganomics: shrinking the marginal tax rates on income from capital and labor; cutting regulation; controlling the money supply to reduce inflation; and slashing the growth of government spending.<sup>547</sup> The effects were clear, both socially and economically. Poverty increased with the number of Americans below the poverty level jumping from 29.272 million in 1980 to 31.745 million in 1988; at the

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<sup>543</sup> Quoted in Dugan, “End of End: Rites of Spring.”

<sup>544</sup> Quoted in Pattison, “Rites of Spring and the Summer That Changed Punk Rock.”

<sup>545</sup> Quoted in Andersen and Jenkins, 153.

<sup>546</sup> Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, “A Guide to Statistics on Historical Trends in Income Inequality,” by Chad Stone, Danilo Trisi, Arloc Sherman, and William Chen, April 17, 2004.

<sup>547</sup> See Collins, *Transforming America* (2007).

same time, however, the share of total income received by the 5% highest-income households grew from 16.5% to 18.3%.<sup>548</sup> Reagan cut funding for the Environmental Protection Agency, engorged the military's budget, and ramped up the War on Drugs. He also opposed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, initially resisted a holiday for Martin Luther King Jr., supported prayer in school, and had a hardline foreign policy, advocating for anti-communism coups in Central America, Angola and Afghanistan.<sup>549</sup>

And the participants of the original DC hardcore scene took note. As one of my interviewees said, "We were rebelling against our government employee parents and the values of the people in DC...when I told my mother about some of the horrible things our government has done or is doing she would reply, 'Michael, we don't want to know that.'" Bernie F. saw DC as a socioeconomic contrast: "Government, monuments, museums, universities and a huge ghetto;" and Tim D. "saw Reagan creating a poor class in America and so there was a lot to protest." According to Lars K. the Reagan "establishment definitely prized financial gain over integrity," and Mike A. agrees saying that "the politics of the time — Ronald Reagan for example — naturally fed into our anger and sense of rebellion."

The turning point was the summer of 1985, when the DC hardcore scene consciously and conscientiously re-imagined what DC, and its punk community, could and should be. They called it Revolution Summer. Named by hardcore fan and Dischord House regular, Amy Pickering, during her internship at the Neighborhood Planning

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<sup>548</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, Historical Poverty Tables, [census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/data/historical/people.html](https://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/data/historical/people.html).

<sup>549</sup> See Collins, *Transforming America* (2007).

office,<sup>550</sup> this concept embodied the initial rebellious spirit of punk, but was redirected towards a more overtly political center. In a scene that once disdained politics, by Revolution Summer “art and politics suddenly made sense to us and we ran with it,”<sup>551</sup> according to MacKaye. Apartheid, homelessness, and women’s issues became just as important as espousing a straight-edge lifestyle. Says Thomas Squib of the next generation DC hardcore band Beefeater, “The original punk philosophy was ‘fight bullshit’ and ‘do something real.’ The punk scene was doing neither of those things. Revolution Summer was about getting back into fighting bullshit again.”<sup>552</sup> What’s more, this reinvigoration and revisualization of politics were instilled and suffused into the new sound of hardcore. As the sociopolitical and cultural context of Washington, DC shifted, so too did the music.

### **Hardcore, Revisited: The (Sociopolitical) Evolution of Sound**

Despite the many fragmentations, dissolutions, implosions, and sonic makeovers of the early DC hardcore scene, new bands and new music were constantly emerging from the city’s musical miasma of punk. Fusing the hallmark elements of DC hardcore these bands grew up with as fans with a burgeoning sense of political and personal epiphany and urgency, this handful of hardcore punks challenged the musical status quo

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<sup>550</sup> According to Andersen and Jenkins, Pickering began sending out Xerox letters (thanks to the free copy machine and stamps at her internship) to members of the first-wave hardcore scene that read “Be on your toes. This is...REVOLUTION SUMMER,” inspiring the name (173).

<sup>551</sup> Blush, 175.

<sup>552</sup> Quoted in Andersen and Jenkins, 173.

and unwittingly creating a new genre: emocore.<sup>553</sup> This sound revamped the two major foundations (some would argue rules or regulations) of DC hardcore — form and content.

Compositionally, these new bands tweaked the hard, loud, fast, minimalistic dogma of the previous years, incorporating slowed down tempos, frequent melodic riffs, varying rhythms, multiple guitars and the reintegration of solos. Certainly, the traditional DC hardcore underpinning remained. Lyrics were shouted, shrieked and squawked. The music's tone was hard-driving, strident, and raucous. The guitars, bass and drums crashed, seethed and wailed. But the roiling temperament of the new crop of DC hardcore was more restrained in its monolithic resentment and rage and more uninhibited in its compositional expression. This sonic freedom correlated with the new music's content. Indeed, the oft-disparaged label emocore that arose from this innovative era of DC hardcore stems principally from the contemplative, introspective lyrics and the purgative, emotionally-charged singing style (that diverged with the virtually uniform emotion of anger in previous hardcore) this music displays. And within this new iteration of hardcore in DC were five noteworthy bands: Scream, Marginal Man, Rites of Spring, Beefeater, and Embrace.

Hailing from Bailey's Crossroads, a Virginia suburb straddling the line between Arlington and Falls Church, Scream also straddle the line between DC hardcore in its heyday and its subsequent emocore germination, first playing shows together in 1982 and putting out their two seminal albums in the years following. Comprised of brothers Franz

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<sup>553</sup> This label "emocore" is nearly unilaterally rebuffed by every single bands given that label. Despite that, the genre label has stuck and, like many musical categories, has widened so much in the past thirty years as to make it nearly unrecognizable. In DC, emocore was a necessary shorthand to distinguish between hardcore punk and post-hardcore punk.

(vocals) and Pete (guitar) Stahl, drummer Kent Stax and bassist Skeeter Thompson, Scream was eventually signed to Ian MacKaye's Dischord label, releasing *Still Screaming* in 1983 and *This End Up* in 1985. Even in their origins, Scream deviate from the prototypical DC hardcore sound, mixing heavy metal tonality, reggae beats, a tinge of New Wave influence and garage rock/classic rock/blues rock riffs with the burning speed, fury and raw intensity of hardcore punk. From the beginning, the band eschewed the chaotic discordancy of hardcore, saying that "we've always tried to be more melodic and tried to put more harmony in,"<sup>554</sup> intentionally "shooting for different styles and a variety of audiences."<sup>555</sup> Their lyrics also veer from the more overtly political on *Still Screaming* (with songs about the atomic bomb, war, freedom, jingoism and justice in America) to the more emo-inflected personal on *This Side Up* (including themes of daily ennui, ageing, friendship and self-destruction), bridging the gap between the bubbling resentment of DC youth and the diversification of feeling that came with getting older.

Credited as the first DC hardcore band to incorporate two guitars in their sound, Marginal Man emerged as a patchwork group stitched together from the remaining yards of the pre-1983 DC hardcore scene. Mike Manos (drums), Pete Murray (guitar) and Steve Polcari (vocals) came from the short-lived, though extremely popular, band Artificial Peace, while Andre Lee (bass) played in Toasterheads, a one-off hardcore band with Kenny Inouye (guitar), who also happened to be the son of Hawaii Senator Daniel Inouye. They released only one album with Dischord Records, 1984's *Identity*, before switching to a California-based label, but their debut nine song LP instigated the shift towards the new simple, melodious hardcore of later DC hardcore. Embracing a softer,

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<sup>554</sup> *Flipside* zine #36, Interview with Scream, December 1982.

<sup>555</sup> *Ibid.*



slower sound, Marginal Man's more melodic British punk-inflected music infuses mottled bits of other genres, including heavy metal and pop while also deviating in its composition, with instrumental intros and alternate song structures. The album is still clearly entrenched in the most central of hardcore musical tenets of passion, force, and unruliness, while still inculcating the changing music scene with the delights of changing tempos, a double barrel assault of guitars, and peppering in melodic riffs. At the same time, *Identity* lyrically exemplifies the growing emphasis on balancing the personal and the political, addressing Reagan's nuclear plan ("Pandora's Box") and issues of the American class system ("Missing Rungs") as well as contemplating the self in relation to the world around you ("Marginal Man") and unabashed vulnerability ("Emotional Catharsis").

More than any other band, in Washington DC or anywhere else in the country, Rites of Spring is known as the paradigmatic emocore innovators. Playing only 15 shows as band, the band's influence greatly outlasted its time together. With Guy Picciotto on vocals and guitar, Mike Fellows on bass, Eddie Janney on guitar and Brendan Canty on drums, Rites of Spring infuse conventional hardcore with nuanced emotion. The band's only release, 1985's *Rites of Spring* "emulated the verve of Faith and Minor Threat, [but] musically it was a progression...inspired at the time by the Buzzcocks and MC5...add[ing] emotional and musical nuance to harDCore's bristling intensity."<sup>556</sup> Drenched in the hardcore sweat of aggressive, fast, and intense sound, Rites of Spring temper their aesthetic with highly personal and emotional lyrics, matched by the emotive wunderkind Picciotto. With a voice crammed with cracks, croaks, gasps and yelps,

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<sup>556</sup> Andersen and Jenkins, 164.

Picciotto made public his “more private language.”<sup>557</sup> Incorporating melodies and musical experimentation, Rites of Spring’s album fuses hardcore’s chaos with singer/songwriter sensitivity, expanding the emotional purview of hardcore beyond anger and aggression into the expanse of longing, sadness and regret. In their short-lived tenure, Rites of Spring was also known for their explosive, powerful and passionate (and infrequent) live performances, with the band playing so hard they frequently destroyed their instruments, the audience breaking out into spontaneous bouts of tears, and Picciotto treating each show “like religious occasions.”<sup>558</sup>

Beefeater, who played their first show in 1984, was truly the post-’83 hardcore vanguard, pioneering a funk-infused sound into DC punk and pushing an explicit liberal (some would argue, radical) political agenda through their music. Another multi-racial band, Beefeater boasted Thomas Squib on vocals, a Caucasian male who sometimes would play nude and had a “hippy-rasta vibe,” bassist Dug Birdezell, an “owl-glassed floppy funky bass player with the v[ery] serious studious respect-all-life PETA attitude,” African-American guitarist Fred Smith, who brought the funk and metal sound to the group, and drummer Bruce Taylor, previously from minor DC hardcore bands Hate From Ignorance and Subtle Oppression.<sup>559</sup> Releasing two albums, *Plays For Lovers* (1985) and *House Burning Down* (1986), Beefeater’s music has “all the angry energy of its hardcore labelmates” but channel it through the groove-heavy, melodic, bass-centric feel of funk and jazz.<sup>560</sup> Indeed, their sound pushes the outer limits of what hardcore is, with their songs featuring spoken word, guest cellists and vocalists from the scene (including Alec

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<sup>557</sup> Quoted by Guy Picciotto in “End on End: Rites of Spring,” *Stop Smiling Magazine*, Issue 37, 2008.

<sup>558</sup> Andersen and Jenkins, 166.

<sup>559</sup> Jim H. “Beefeater,” *Vinyl Mine Blog*, August 27, 2004. [www.vinyljourney.blogspot.com](http://www.vinyljourney.blogspot.com)

<sup>560</sup> Allmusic.com.

MacKaye of Faith and poet M'wile Yaw Askari). Beefeater's lyrics are just as polemical and act as the bridge between personal and social politics; their songs focus on issues like peaceful social activism, vegetarianism, apartheid, the sins of Ronald Reagan and race and class relations in the United States. While frontman Squib, and the band's blatant political ideals, frequently rubbed some audience members the wrong way, their integration of lyrical liberal dogma, along with their expansion of the definition of hardcore sound, paved the way for new understandings of hardcore could, and should, be.

Antithetical to what one might assume, it was Ian MacKaye's new band that was the last on the new hardcore scene. Embrace, formed in 1985, only released one record, the eponymous 1987 album, which also breaks the mold from traditional hardcore. Singer MacKaye and three former members of Faith — bassist Chris Bald, drummer Ivor Hanson and guitarist Mike Hampton — fuse the tight, loud, and technically-adept aesthetic of their original hardcore sound with slowed-down tempos, metal-steeped timbres, jangly pop melodies and emotionally diverse lyrics of the new scene. While the band, like many in this new scene, was short-lived (and frequently criticized as MacKaye's least popular bands), Embrace was integral to the sonic revolution happening in DC. With (relatively) long-time members of the hardcore scene, Embrace advanced and enhanced the music's focus on technical prowess, with Bald's dynamic and distinctive bass lines, Hanson's more complex, intense drumming, and Hampton's complicated, unorthodox guitar melodies. The album has many hardcore stalwarts, with songs that epitomize the hardcore trifecta of speed, noise, and simplicity, but it also concentrates on expanding the sonic landscape. MacKaye himself grows significantly as a vocalist, moving from the raw anger of Minor Threat to the fervent, and still powerful,

spectrum of emotions in his voice — from acerbity to melancholia to cool self-assurance. Their lyrics also speak to the progression of the hardcore scene, noting its past mistakes (“Dance of Days,” “Give Me Back,” “Building”), leading the way to more introspection (“Spoke,” “No More Pain,” “You Should Be Ashamed”) while also connecting the personal to the political (“Do Not Consider Yourself Free,” “Money”). More than any other band, Embrace act as the link — both sonically and lyrically — from hardcore’s past to its present.

These five post-hardcore, or emocore, bands, represent not only the sonic evolution of the DC hardcore scene but also how and why that sonic evolution happened. That is, this new music reflects the new sociopolitical milieu of Washington, DC and the band members themselves. While the undercurrents of hardcore’s political aesthetics discussed in the previous chapters no doubt still exist within the sound and content of emocore, its meanings and connotations have changed. For these bands masculinity, race and class have been redefined socio-politically — and therefore sonically as well.

### *Masculinity*

The sonically signified masculinity of DC hardcore, as discussed in the previous chapter, was delineated by the traditional, hypermasculinized model of cultural manhood: force, control, and power. These elements, represented by tempo, timbre, words and voices, defined both hardcore’s noise and its masculinized nature: scorching speed, distorted sound, piercing vocals, and aggressive lyrics. Yet, such musical masculinized representations were reflective, in part, of a masculinity rooted in not just a specific sociopolitical and geographic context but also one characterized by age. This feverish and

furious sound of hardcore, then, denoted the brash, uncontrollable ferocity of the male teenager; it follows, therefore, that as the male-dominated genre of DC punk grew older, their interpretation of manhood — along with its attending sonic depiction — changed. Tempering the musical violence of hardcore from '78-'83, this new incarnation of DC punk complicates the straight-forward anger of previous years by way of decelerated tempos and the incorporation of melody. In addition, these bands' emphasis on emotional vulnerability — through their vocal stylings and lyrics — widen and re-circumscribe the parameters of manhood. In doing so, DC hardcore music reacts to and sonically represents the internal and external vicissitudes of their city and their scene.

Perhaps the most conspicuous and comprehensive development in hardcore's musical transformation was the nearly-ubiquitous slowdown of tempo. Unlike the trademark chaotic, mind-dizzying speed of Bad Brains, Minor Threat and their brethren, post '83 hardcore moderates the pace, and, in doing so, mitigate the aggression and violence of the previous years. Embrace, Ian MacKaye's new band, exemplify this tempo switch in their eponymous 1985 album. "Abandon[ing] the fast-past chainsaw-like assault of outward anger"<sup>561</sup> that defined Teen Ides and Minor Threat, the album's 16 songs have a significantly slower tempo. The album opener, "Give Me Back," sets the pace for the majority of the songs, with Hampton's guitar playing crisper, and pointedly gentler, than nearly any song on his previous Faith album in the eight-second intro. Following the twice-played guitar riff, Hanson's drums crash in, along with MacKaye's singing, just as loudly as years past but without any of the amphetamine-like velocity. Void of any drumrolls, Hanson trades speed for volume, focusing on a steady backbeat

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<sup>561</sup> Sophie, *Sophie's Floorboard Blog*, June 18, 2012.

and even an almost ten second drum break (1:50-1:59), where his contribution is simply a constant pitter-patter of hi-hat shimmy.

This opening track is emblematic of the tempo change of the rest of the album. As MacKaye sings in the second track, “Dance of Days,” “Maybe we went a little too fast.”<sup>562</sup> Surely, he is referring to the meteoric rise of the DC hardcore scene, but this notion of speed must also be understood as a parallel to the nonstop, insanely wild tempo of the music in that scene. The same speed that defined the sound of hardcore also portended the haste with which the scene burned out. The music of *Embrace*, then, aims to slow down. The decelerated, nearly drowned-out guitar lines in “I Wish I,” the flickering guitar whammy of “Do Not Consider Yourself Free,” Bald’s leisurely bass line of “Spoke” and the ominous, almost sluggish bass in “No More Pain,” the jangly midtempo drums of “Said Gun,” embody this downturn of tempo. This is not to say, of course, that *Embrace* completely reject high velocity tempo altogether. The interspersed bursts of guitar riffs of “Building,” the undulating drumroll intro of “Past” and the erupting guitar solo of “If I Never Thought About It” all allude to the power and force the blistering tempos of Faith and Minor Threat displayed, but these songs merely hint, sniff at, the underlying rage that was so prominently previously. Tempo changed from a blunt hammer of destruction to a thoughtful and moderated instrument of explanation.

As the only band that had direct sonic lineage (not to mention hardcore-royal bloodlines in the form of Ian MacKaye) to the hardcore scene, *Embrace*’s album was by the far the most conspicuous, and most consistent, in its use of slackened tempo; however, such decelerated velocity was also quickly becoming a tool in the arsenal of

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<sup>562</sup> *Embrace*, “Dance of Days,” *Embrace*, Dischord Records, Vinyl, 1987.

other more recent hardcore bands, including Beefeater and Marginal Man. By mixing songs with more measured, relaxed tempos in with the more traditional ferociously fast cadences, these bands at once consciously diverge from the Bible of Hardcore's 1<sup>st</sup> Commandment (thou shalt play as fast as humanly possible) while simultaneously drawing flagrant attention to such a deviation. That is, the juxtaposition of these two tempos make the discrepancy — and what that discrepancy means — even clearer.

For instance, Beefeater's *Play for Lovers/House* opens with the upbeat, funk-imbued "Trash Funk," with midtempo guitar and drums, a slap bass and an onbeat/offbeat structure while the next song, "Reaganomix," displays the more archetypal hardcore tempo with a hard driving drum beat, high-speed guitar riffs and a steady bass line. Interestingly, "Reaganomix" is actually not that fast, comparatively speaking; in fact, the song is nowhere in the vicinity of the brutally aggressive, staggeringly blurry speed of bands like Minor Threat and Bad Brains. Yet, contrasted with the almost placid "Trash Funk," the song sounds like a locomotive. By highlighting how slow they can go, Beefeater is also emphasizing their speed.

This effect is compressed in the third track, "Song for Lucky," where the first 36 seconds are nothing but a blissed out finger slapped bass line, followed by Smith's warm, midtempo interlude of guitar and Taylor's drums for another 13 seconds. After a bass and guitar call-and-answer riff, the song shatters into the traditional hardcore speed at 1:05, with feverish, catapulting drums, bright, biting guitar riffs and a slinky bass that continues to make its presence known through Bird's reverberating plucking.

In a similar way "A Dog Day" pairs together a short easygoing chugging of a guitar and bass riff with the practically lackadaisical spoken word lyrics of Squib; one

song later “Red Carpet” continues the mellow-fest with a bass line groove that sounds like it was lifted from “Jungle Boogie,” and a pop-happy guitar riff akin to Talking Heads, until, at 1:02 a drum break erupts, swallowing the rest of the song in hammering drums and trashing guitars, with the bass line transformed into a flogging, ominous undercurrent.

Marginal Man’s *Identity* performs the same high-wire act of offsetting tempos. Songs like “Pandora’s Box” and “Emotional Scars” continue the hardcore mantle of earnest speed and underlying urgency (albeit, like Beefeater, in a different league than their musical forefathers Minor Threat and Bad Brains) while the tempo is significantly slowed down in “Fallen Pieces” and is flat-out sluggish in “Torn Apart,” which with its slow burning guitars and gradually crescendoing drums and hi-hat could be understandably mistaken for the opening of nearly any Metallica song. Two of their songs synthesize speeds as well. The seventh track, “Identity,” starts with 43 seconds of an unhurried, twisting river of dueling guitars and the intermittent shimmering tremble of the hi-hat until it abruptly shifts into the customarily quick and dirty hardcore tempo. “Missing Rungs,” the album’s first song, mimics the partial structure of a Bad Brain song, beginning the song with a hard-driving pace with domineering drums and sustained, dynamic guitar riffs, until 1:25 when the pace stops on a dime, changing into a breakdown that lasts until the end of the song.

These modifications of tempo in hardcore represent, if not the dilution of than at least the complication of, the explicit and unvarying representation of aggression and violence that typified not only DC hardcore but also masculinity. In no way was this sonic alteration a complete repudiation of such bellicosity, nor its culturally mandated



connection to manhood. Speed did not go away; instead, it was tempered, opening up the possibilities for multiple, sometimes simultaneous and sometimes seemingly contradictory forms of masculinity. Power need not be absolute, exploding in a two minute hailstorm of ungodly speed and proving its dominance, its overwhelming hegemony, second after second, song after song. Yes, it *could* and often *was* a furious, violent barrage of velocity, but this new hardcore sound promised that manhood could also be soft and slow, thoughtful and measured.

More than just a near-tectonic shift in tempo, this post-‘83 hardcore music instigated a discrete sonic color, influenced heavily by melody and a turning away from the strictly minimalistic, severely strident sound of previous years. These harmonic musical expansions, with their more pop-heavy and fuller tones, also acted as a form of repudiation against the violent masculinity of hardcore’s musical past, opening up the musical-cultural spectrum of manhood. Rather than an antagonistic distortion of sound, the drubbing bass line, trashing guitar and possessed drumming, which signaled the sociocultural epitome of manhood, these new songs — with their combination of aggression and melody — suggest a more nuanced and less restrictive mode of masculinity.

Rites of Spring and their eponymous album encompasses the seeming contradiction of melody and violence. There is still speed and there is still a kind of fervid thirst, an urgency, present on these 17 songs, but the songs are not only softened but also made more meaningful by the “starling melody [and] stark expressions of

vulnerability.”<sup>563</sup> “For Want Of” opens with a choppy guitar line and jittery drum beat that blend together for an unwavering, high-speed yet still harmonious, upbeat riff. Throughout this song, Janney and Picciotto trade guitar lines, interlacing their sound until it’s impossible to distinguish which is a lead and which is a rhythm guitar, giving the song a warmer, fuller tone. Clocking in at 3:10 (a near feat of impossibility for previous hardcore songs), “For Want Of” avoids the confining rigidity of preceding song structure, releasing their guitars and drums in an 22 second instrumental harmony (2:15-2:37), and then ending the last thirty seconds with a recurring call-and-answer catchy guitar/ bass and drum riff, with the final seconds mellifluously shifting into an ornamental guitar riff.

Even when Rites of Spring is fully engaged with the fury and sonic onslaught of hardcore convention, they merge this assault of sound with earnest, catchy melodies to augment and alter the character of the music. While “Deeper Than Inside” has intense speed, blazing guitars and aggressive, smashing drums, it still retains a unshakable melodic quality, with hummable refrains that “recall the more polished-yet-volatile, pop-savvy cousin of Minor Threat.”<sup>564</sup> Similarly, “Theme” contains the roiling exigency of hardcore imbued with melodious flights of guitar riffs, producing a sound that was, somewhat paradoxically “simultaneously pulverizing and delicate.”<sup>565</sup> “Remainder” loops in pop-friendly background singers at first crooning “ohhhs” and “ahhhs” and then shouting almost indistinct echoes of Picciotto, while the hard-driving drums and piercing guitars radically shift in the last thirty seconds of the song, metamorphosing from a

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<sup>563</sup> Louis Pattison, “Rites of Spring and the Summer that Changed Punk Rock,” *The Guardian*, November 27, 2012, [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com).

<sup>564</sup> Chris Smith, “Caught at a Distance,” *Stylus Magazine Blog*, August 12, 2002, [www.stylusmagazine.com](http://www.stylusmagazine.com).

<sup>565</sup> Ian McCaleb, review of “Rites of Spring,” by Rites of Spring, [trouserpress.com](http://trouserpress.com).

seismic eruption to a funk-inflected jam session, with bass slapping and jerky guitar rhythms, backed by a decidedly rock n' roll thumping of tom-tom and snares on the drums.

This heavy and hard, light and poppy sonic color persists throughout the album: “Nudes” marries a distorted tone and thickly dense guitars with jubilant start/stop phrasing and shockingly buoyant tambourines; “Drink Deep” joins forceful, martial-like drums and hazy guitar feedback with soaring background vocals, undulating tuneful guitar riffs, and a waltz-time tempo; and “All There Is” emphasizes Rites of Spring’s lushness of sound with a pulsating bass and the bubbly quiver of electric guitar while the drums rage with a sense of both urgency and melody. Indeed, *Rites of Spring* shifts the sonic color of hardcore by continuing the hardcore tradition of distortion, speed and vehemence while concurrently adopting the warm, cheerful sounds of jangly pop melody. As one fan explains, “one second they were screaming and thrashing through furious power chords ...and then — bang — they would stop on a dime and launch into a melodic run so perfect you couldn’t fathom how on earth two guitars, a bass and drums could create such a beautiful sound.”<sup>566</sup>

Marginal Man’s *Identity*, while frequently also adhering to the hard/fast/loud trifecta, noticeably modifies the conventional hardcore sound as well, particularly through their use of heavier, thicker sonic color, instrumental introductions and catchy melodic phrasing. The album’s second track, “Friend” predates the enormous pop-punk movement of the 1990s with an immediate launch into the song’s punchy, energetic melody, which with its pitch movement climbing and descending, provides a vacillating

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<sup>566</sup> John Dugan, “End on End: Rites of Spring,” *Stop Smiling Magazine*, Issue 37: The DC Issue, November 3, 2008.

contour. With short, bright melodic phrases, the sing-a-long tune maintains and repeats its motif for nearly 45 seconds, when a three-second drum fill leads into an ornamental guitar solo before returning back to the original melody. A bit fuzzy, a bit raw, and utterly hummable, “Friend” is reminiscent of a 60s garage rock jewel of a song, contextualized within a post-hardcore musical context.

Muddying this crystalline pop sound with undertones of heavy metal and a wallop of hardcore’s noisy chaos is “Mental Picture” and “Identity.” The former, the album’s fourth song, opens with three seconds of sonic distortion before the portentous sound of the bass enters; seven seconds later, the drums pound out a backbeat, and six seconds after that, guitars rip out a jagged riff as hand claps erupt in a percussive backup to the drums. This propulsive 53 second musical introduction is a *mélange* of genres: the bass and drums threaten in the troubled vein of heavy metal, the guitar shreds in streak of hardcore and rock n’ roll, and the handclaps twinkle and shine a la the Cars’ “Best Friend’s Girl” or Queen’s “Another Bites the Dust.” With an abrupt shift, the song breaks into the song’s melody motif, with a rollicking, vivid guitar trill and accompanying vocals that induce involuntarily foot-tapping, until once again, the song descends back to a moody, slow tempo with just the drums and bass for the last 22 seconds.

The latter, “Identity,” has a similar sonic construction, with 43 seconds of a menacing, dark introduction, featuring a dense bass and drum sound and a lurching, crunchy guitar before breaking into the zippy, feverish melody. Part pop, part hardcore, the song teeters between conventional DC punk — a screaming breakdown, furious drumming — and pop-leaning rock — with an earworm of a melody and juddering guitar solos.

This penchant for extended instrumental introductions continues throughout the album, epitomized by “Marginal Man,” which boasts a one minute and seven second intro of a two-guitar riff and vigorous drumming before breaking into a faster, more traditional hardcore sound, (though still with a clear melody and accompanying guitar trills), while the heavy metal sound, with its slower, cleaner motifs and the loud, constant detonation of drums and rhythmic interplay between the bass and guitars, is explored for the full length of “Torn Apart” and “Fallen Pieces” (the latter of which also has a 49 second instrumental introduction). Breaking free from the unwritten laws of the hardcore sound, Marginal Man explores how melody, genre-shifting sonic texture and instrumental intros alters and unwraps a range of musical emotion beyond simple aggression and anger.

As the most transformed of hardcore bands, Embrace perhaps most uniformly and markedly revolutionized the hardcore sound with their infusion of creative melodies and complex sounds. Indeed, but for Ian MacKaye’s recognizable voice, one might never know this band’s sound was a direct descendant of Teen Idles and Minor Threat. Combining “D.C. hardcore with a ‘brit pop’ feel”<sup>567</sup> *Embrace* adopts a guitar-driven, hook-happy, somewhat more commercially acceptable sound, picking up sonic traces of bands like Joy Division<sup>568</sup> and The Smiths.<sup>569</sup> With a “very tight, studio-clear sound,”<sup>570</sup> the album’s 16 songs feature Bald’s melodic bass lines, Hampton’s rejection of power chords in favor of (hardcore) heretical complex and unique melodies in near-ubiquitous

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<sup>567</sup> Dishcord.com.

<sup>568</sup> Like in the abrasive guitars, earnest raggedness of vocals and the marriage of pop and darkness of the drums in “Dance of Days.”

<sup>569</sup> As seen in the pop gloom of guitar and bass and start/stop rhythm of songs like “Building.”

<sup>570</sup> www.markprindle.com.

guitar solos,<sup>571</sup> and Hanson's lithe, powerful "taut, melodic sprint[s]"<sup>572</sup> and erupting drumrolls in songs like "Past" and "Can't Forgive." Merging the tensions of perky pop melodies with the harsher coarseness of hardcore and the darker undertones of Britpop, Embrace, like their musical counterparts Marginal Man and Rites of Spring, widen and re-imagine hardcore's musical space, upending the straight-ahead definition of masculinity by tempering the sonic violence and allowing for a softer, more buoyant lightness.

Unlike previous hardcore, which typically sacrificed melody in order to emphasize intensity or rhythm, this post-'83 sound complicated and convoluted the unswerving aggression of sound. This sonic deviation was a direct expression of the specific context of DC hardcore. Reacting to the violent transformation of the hardcore scene, this new sound was a refutation of unchecked aggression and unquestioned machismo. As newer, younger fans started to congregate in Georgetown, Dupont Circle and other hardcore spots, these newbies seemed more interested in the assumed violence of the scene, rather than the music. As previously discussed this representation of punk violence was partially a construction of the media. Locally, hardcore punk was advertised as a bastion of anger and assault. In 1981, *The Washington Post* described the hardcore punks as "apolitical, atypical and seemingly amoral...they literally dress to kill -- or at least to maim"<sup>573</sup> while two years later a '83 piece continues this depiction, arguing they "feel that society is kicking them in the face, they don't call the orthodontist. They spit

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<sup>571</sup> He explodes in the opening intro riff of "Give Me Back" and wails like a hair metal soloist in "Dance of Days."

<sup>572</sup> Smith, "Caught at a Distance."

<sup>573</sup> Kathleen Ennis, "Punks: Bored, Bold & Hanging Out," *The Washington Post*, DC1, January 22, 1981.

the broken teeth right back at their antagonists, then smile broadly.<sup>574</sup> Even nationally and internationally, punk was painted as a brutal and bellicose subgroup.<sup>575</sup> Perhaps enticed by the media's promise of destruction and bloodshed, this young crop of DC youth used the hardcore scene as an excuse, or, at least, an outlet, for their aggression. Decidedly *not* a part of the straightedge scene, these kids frequently got drunk and high and committed themselves to violence — whether it be fights with passerbys, vandalism, or attacking follow concert goers under the guise of slamdancing.<sup>576</sup> As MacKaye explains, “the violence became stupid...I felt like the violence had become too central and it was clearly alienating to most people. It was ridiculous.”<sup>577</sup> Unfortunately, at least to the first wave of hardcore fans and musicians, the music of DC hardcore “seemed increasingly to be merely providing a soundtrack for mayhem.”<sup>578</sup> Rather than acting as a sonic expression of sociocultural identity, hardcore's “negative subcultural legacy” was “violent ‘loud fast’ rules...[and] moronic punk-metal, skinhead gangs...”<sup>579</sup>

Post '83 hardcore, then, was a musical disavowal of this violence and a sonic reclamation of what hardcore meant. MacKaye, particularly, was unambiguous about what this new scene was about: “We fought for our community...Revolution Summer was to reinvolve everybody and remove the parade of macho behavior.”<sup>580</sup> The transformation of sound, consequently, acted as a transformation of self and scene. Using

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<sup>574</sup> Howard Wuelfing, “Punk Rock with a Punch,” *The Washington Post*, May 13, 1983.

<sup>575</sup> See Canada's *The Globe and Mail's* “Prairie Punk's Toe the Line,” November 17, 1983 ; *The New York Times's* “The Pop Life,” June 9, 1982.

<sup>576</sup> See Andersen and Jenkins, 150-154; Blush, 174-6,

<sup>577</sup> *American Hardcore*, 2007.

<sup>578</sup> Andersen and Jenkins, 156-7.

<sup>579</sup> Smith, “Caught at a Distance.”

<sup>580</sup> Blush, *American Hardcore*, 175.

melody, which is typically associated with the expression of emotion,<sup>581</sup> bands like Rites of Spring and Embrace sidelined the sonic and material place of violence, “revitalize[ing] and extend[ing] the music by rescuing it from codification.”<sup>582</sup> By incorporating poppier melodies — one might dare say catchy hooks — the post-’83 hardcore sound inserted an emotional spectrum into their music, decentralizing the monochromatic sentiment of anger, hostility or pugnaciousness. That is not to say, of course, that these new bands pushed tuneful rainbows, sunshine and puppy dogs; undeniably, the underlying — and sometimes outright — feeling of violence was still there in the composition of the music. However, it was purposeful and less encompassing. As one reviewer notes of Rites of Spring, “...they t[ake] the fury and anger and harshness of the movement and attempt to make it craft.”<sup>583</sup> Unlike the existing scene’s penchant for indiscriminate and prolific violence, the aggression of these new bands was more frequently directly inward, a personal rather than public display.

More than simply rejecting violence as the primary mode of masculine expression, this new hardcore sound opened and expanded the definition of manhood to include the heretofore feminine characteristic of emotional vulnerability. Primarily through the expressive shifts in vocal delivery and the lyrical content of songs, post ’83 hardcore redefines itself as emotionally multidimensional, establishing pain, sensitivity, longing and sadness as legitimate forms of masculine communication. Doing so reflected the particular changes in these musicians’ sociocultural and personal spaces.

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<sup>581</sup> Indeed, neuroscientists have discovered that the part of our brain that tracks and processes melody, the rostromedial prefrontal cortex, is the same area of the brain that stores emotion, as well as short and long term melody.

<sup>582</sup> Joseph Neff, “(Re)Graded on a Curve: Rites of Spring, *Six Song Demo*,” review of *Six Song Demo*, by Rites of Spring, thevinyldistrict.com, November 18, 2013.

<sup>583</sup> Erik Gamlem, “Rites of Spring: End on End.”



Ian MacKaye's voice has always been distinctive. Even when he was shouting at nearly indecipherable levels in *Minor Threat*, his roughhewn and impassioned vocals were pivotal — the only difference being that in *Minor Threat* his vocals emoted anger and frustration, while his singing style in *Embrace* is one that contains a near-full gamut of feelings. Yes, the album opening “Give Me Back” starts with MacKaye's characteristic barking style of vocals, but by the end of the first verse — ten seconds after he begins singing — his voice is transformed into an almost croon. Pleading “What can I do?” his voice is imbued with weariness and a lick of confusion; this sadly sung rhetorical question follows every verse, each which enumerates the ways that MacKaye is depressed and disappointed. And while the pain in those first chorus lines is disgusted with the standard hardcore anger via shouted vocals, MacKaye lets his emotional guard down in the “answer” portion of this song's call and answer. How does one react to the anger of disenchantment and disillusionment? According to MacKaye's vocals, with feeling those actual emotions and letting the melancholy seep in.

This revelation of hurt rather than undeviating anger emerges in “Building” as well, where the song begins with MacKaye's slightly distant, resonant sounding lilt, singing in the traditional sense, but chock full of resignation and defeat. In his low, reverberating delivery MacKaye intones “I'm a failure” throughout the song's chorus. His bandmates join him in background vocals, singing slightly off-key in the bridge “nothing seems to work out right,” at once expressing that something is emotional amiss (it is off-key, after all) but also hopeful, in the harmonious voices coming together and reaching the higher, tougher notes.

“No More Pain,” the album’s seventh track, begins with more of a chant than melodic singing but quickly descends into a raw throated thundering style similar to his Minor Threat days. Yet, this style is different. While the volume and pitch are quite similar, MacKaye wails more than screams. It’s sadness that creates the roughness in his voice, rather than rage. In each of these tracks the “passion and power in his voice is undeniable”<sup>584</sup>; however, passion and power are recircumscribed. Surely, these attributes are still in the purview of manhood, but the definition of passion and of power no longer mean rage, frustration and aggression, exclusively. MacKaye’s vocal stylings suggest sorrow, uncertainty, and regret are also acceptable, even valuable, forms of male emotion.

Rites of Spring’s Guy Picciotto is often cited as the patriarch of emo singing, not because he reinvented an innovative melodic singing style, but because he merged the traditional hardcore vocal delivery of inflamed shouting with an authentic-feeling outpouring of varied emotion. That is, yelling became a vehicle for Picciotto’s feelings, rather than merely an end in and of itself; volume and timbre articulated the intensity with which he felt. *Rites of Spring*’s opener, “Spring,” displays this unification of hardcore and soft rock sentiment. His vocals rage with speed and fervor, but there’s a lightness to his tone, as the last word of every line lilts upward, signaling a buoyancy that undercuts his howls. By :24, a desperation has entered his voice as he growls “What could I do?/What could I do?” Much like MacKaye, Picciotto isn’t angrily spitting out a facetious rhetorical; he’s exposing his vulnerability. His voice, gravely and damaged, aches; he really wants to know what he could have done.

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<sup>584</sup> Hamish, review of *Embrace* by Embrace, punknews.org, January 17, 2003.

Even when his singing verges on a near-perfect reproduction of hardcore's vicious vocals a la Henry Rollins from SOA., the wild, high-speed strained delivery deviates from hardcore's playbook of anger and hostility. "Hain's Point," the album's fourth track, has Picciotto squawking and baying, his voice nearly hoarse with his effort and force. But those yelps and cries are not of attack but of anguish and fear with "certainly something cathartic to them... creat[ing] a beautiful, chaotic sound."<sup>585</sup> When Picciotto drones "I'm not who I thought I was," followed immediately by a grunting, grating moan of "And I can't explain" with "ain" drawn out as if it were being hung in the gallows, the pain you feel is pangs of empathy and of identification. The juxtaposition of hardness (of speed and tone) with softness (of emotional rawness) of his voice produce a jumbled, unruly feel — mirroring the disorder and confusion the singer is emoting.

Picciotto's ululations and sinewy snarls dominate the album: saturated in nearly syllable of "Other Way Around;" dripping alternatively with angst and antipathy in "Theme;" matter-of-factly, urgently, and then, frantically and persistently in "Remainder," indignantly and confusedly in "End on End." Equally parts detonation, cathartic release, and supplication, Picciotto's voice is "shouting out to the heavens for true feeling and love in this cold world of shit called Washington DC."<sup>586</sup>

Yet it is clear that vocals alone could not be, and were not, solely responsible for widening and deepening the emotional continuum that came to signify and break with conventional hardcore and a swing towards so-called emocore. Form cannot, and should not, be separated from content. That is, vocals are only one-half of the equation. Lyrics

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<sup>585</sup> "Rites of Spring," *Sophie's Floorboard Blog*.

<sup>586</sup> [www.markprindle.com](http://www.markprindle.com).

illustrate and amplify the emotions expressed by vocal delivery. The individual, and his subjective understanding of self and others, was the fodder for this demonstrative songwriting. From disavowing violence to self-discovery to love and relationships, these bands' words attempted to encapsulate emotion in a new way and inspire empathy in their listeners. As Marginal Man's Lee explicates, "we're trying to say something that's pertinent and interesting that everyone can relate to, something where people will say 'Hey, I've felt that way before.'"<sup>587</sup>

While many of these new bands were predominately and proudly politically conscious (the songs of which will be explored in subsequent sections), they also surveyed the emotional landscape of themselves and DC.<sup>588</sup> Considering themes of violence and death, love and sex, and introspection and friendship, post '83 hardcore went beyond the basic emotion of rage and widened its reflective gaze. Doing so reconstituted the moral and emotional purview of these bands, and, consequently, of masculinity and sound.

Aligned with the alteration in sound, these songs' lyrical subject matter also shifted towards a non-violent, life-affirming perspective. Overtly rejecting the machismo pose rampant in the contemporary scene, Embrace pleads for "no more tough guy stance"<sup>589</sup> in their "No More Pain," and rails against suicide in the same song ("no more

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<sup>587</sup> *Inside View*, #2, 1983.

<sup>588</sup> I do not mean to artificially bifurcate the personal from the political. As I argued in Chapter 4, we can and do understand the personal *as* political. Additionally, the political content of any song, and particularly those of *Scream*, is not written and performed in an emotional vacuum. Indeed, much emotion is expressed because of and through political issues. However, for the purposes of this chapter, I am defining the personal by an overt and self-aware exploration of feelings. That is, political issues are not a vehicle for this emotional examination.

<sup>589</sup> Embrace, *Embrace*.

suicide/it kills everyone”<sup>590</sup>), as well as in “Past” (“I suppose I’m naïve/But I find it hard to believe/A person could make/Life so cheap”<sup>591</sup>). And while MacKaye’s anger bleeds through in “Said Gun” — “Sometimes I’d like to/kick your fucking head in” — the next line adds nuance to that explosive assertion, saying, “But I guess/you’re just a human too.” By a subsequent verse MacKaye is even more conciliatory, proclaiming “there is no courage in hatred/only in love.”<sup>592</sup> He challenges the issue even more directly in this same song when he writes, “You’re looking for a reason to hate so you can fuck somebody up...If you have to fight/Then fight the violence that rules your life.”<sup>593</sup> Again, it is not that the intensity or anger has completely dissipated from either these bands’ lyrics or sense of masculinity, but that these emotions are counterbalanced, diminished, or re-recognized by other sentiments.

Love, and its less romantic sibling, lust, was, for nearly the first time in DC hardcore lyrical history, discussed and considered in emocore. Scream spotlights the joys of the one-night stand in “Piece of Her Time” (“Don’t know her name, she don’t know mine/All I want is a piece of her time/I know what I want/You know they all need it too”<sup>594</sup>), while simultaneously reassigning the prototypically exclusive male trait of desire to women as well. This yearning, both physical and emotional, is also in Scream’s “Human Behavior,” where Peter asks “Why is it every time I see you, I can’t help myself/There’s something inside me that draws my stares on you...An impulse, instinct,

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<sup>590</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>591</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>592</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>593</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>594</sup> Scream, *Still Screaming*, Dischord Records, Vinyl, 1983.

reaction behavior.”<sup>595</sup> In “Emotional Scars” Marginal Man shows the vulnerability of heartbreak declaring, “I’ll never open my heart again like I did with you/I’ve been hurt once before/it won’t happen again”<sup>596</sup> and the memory of love gone in another song: “Your mental picture I try to recall/But the more you’re away the hazier it gets... I never forget your face at night/I stood in shadows and you in the light...”<sup>597</sup> Even Beefeater, after declaring in the opening line of “Trash Funk,” that “This aint a love song/just singing the blues/this aint a romance” he’s actually bewailing romance gone bad, when his lady “when the morning begins/slips through my arms like a mannequin” and out the door.<sup>598</sup>

Unlike most hardcore lyricists, Rites of Spring’s Picciotto wrote extensively about love, though often in oblique and somewhat opaque ways that allowed and even encouraged wider interpretation. While Faith, State of Alert and Government Issue had perhaps two songs that even *mentioned* the opposite sex, “in place of unfocused anger, [Rites of Spring] had a soulful passion that suggested that any given song could be about the end of a relationship – or the beginning of a new world.”<sup>599</sup> Picciotto voices the wonder of love in “All There Is” (“It’s more than love...It’s what I give to you/All there is in the knowing that this never had to end”<sup>600</sup>), but also the aching hurt of love lost in “Spring” (“Caught in a time so far away from where our hearts really wanted to be/reaching out to find a way back to where we’d been”<sup>601</sup>). He opines how the pain of a

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<sup>595</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>596</sup> Marginal Man, *Identity*, Dischord Records, Vinyl, 1984.

<sup>597</sup> Marginal Man, “Mental Picture,” *Identity*.

<sup>598</sup> Beefeater, *Plays for Lovers/House*, Dischord Records, Vinyl, 1985.

<sup>599</sup> Andersen and Jenkins, 167.

<sup>600</sup> Rites of Spring, *Rites of Spring*, Dischord Records, Vinyl, 1985.

<sup>601</sup> *Ibid.*

broken heart leaks into any new relationship in “For Want Of” (“I bled/I tried to hide the heart from the head/And I/I said I bled/In the arms of a girl I’d barely met”<sup>602</sup>) and laments the inconsolability of the love in “Hain’s Point” (“But it feels like I’m falling through a hole in my heart...I could walk around fall in love with a face or two/but it wouldn’t be you/no it wouldn’t be you”<sup>603</sup>).

While these bands’ lyrics on lust and love more explicitly and compellingly demonstrate and perpetuate the heteronormativity of masculinity that was merely hinted at in hardcore, they also reinforce the dominant stereotype of not only manhood but also of male pop and rock singers. By readjusting the DC hardcore representation of masculinity, particularly by controlling and renouncing aggression and introducing themes of love and sex, these lyrics, somewhat paradoxically, act to preserve archetypes of men.

However, by focusing their emotional lyrics on more than simply the opposite sex, bands like Marginal Man, Embrace, Rites of Spring, and Screaming Trees broaden both the emotional and masculine spectrum. Sometimes this emotion is empathy is directed towards friends, in the soft rock vein of James Taylor, Carole King or Ben E. King as when Marginal Man avers “I’m here to help you when things go wrong/Lean on my shoulder my friend”<sup>604</sup> or when Screaming Trees declares “Don’t hide alone/in the unknown,”<sup>605</sup> while other times the sentiment is self-reflection and emotional authenticity, like Marginal Man’s “Identity” (“I don’t regret/who I am and what I’ve done...but now things have changed/it’s just not the same/there’s a part of me that just can’t let go/it’s

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<sup>602</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>603</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>604</sup> Marginal Man, “Friend,” *Identity*.

<sup>605</sup> Screaming Trees, “Who Knows? Who Cares?” *Still Screaming*, Dischord Records, Vinyl, 1983.

from my heart, these things that I feel/nothing is fake, it's all for real"<sup>606</sup>) or Embrace's "Building" ("I can't get what I want/I'm a failure/nothing seems to work/the way I plan/I can't express the way I feel/without fucking up something else"<sup>607</sup>). Sadness and regret is not off limits, and one of the chief male taboos — crying — is shattered by both Rites of Spring ("And if I started crying, would you start crying?/Now I started crying, why are you not crying?"<sup>608</sup>) and Embrace ("You know I thought that my eyes they would be dry"<sup>609</sup>). What's more, the monolithic screen of despair is lifted with the promise of transcendence and ephemerality in Rites of Spring's "Drink Deep" ("Drink deep it's just a taste and it might not come this way again/I believe in moments, transparent moment, moments in grace when you've got to stake your faith"<sup>610</sup>) and hope in the face of hopelessness in "Remainder" ("Believe me, I know it's so easy to despair/but don't...And I've found things in this life/that still are real/a remainder refusing to be concealed"<sup>611</sup>) and Embrace's "Spoke" ("Life goes on/Life goes on/Life goes on and on/what's right, what's wrong, I cannot say/life seems hopeless and yet I stay"<sup>612</sup>).

Similar to the sonic color and vocal stylings of these new bands, these new kind of DC hardcore lyrics act as a reaction to the violence of the scene and the re-figuration of what hardcore punk was supposed to mean. Conceiving music as "a play of mirrors in which every activity is reflected, defined, [and] recorded," the sound and content of this new hardcore balanced the anger and aggression of the scene and the progressing

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<sup>606</sup> Marginal Man, *Identity*.

<sup>607</sup> Embrace, *Embrace*.

<sup>608</sup> Rites of Spring, "Theme," *Rites of Spring*.

<sup>609</sup> Embrace, "Dance of Days," *Embrace*.

<sup>610</sup> Rites of Spring, *Rites of Spring*.

<sup>611</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>612</sup> Embrace, *Embrace*.



vulnerability and openness of this new form of masculinity.<sup>613</sup> Beefeater's Squib explains this new punk as "a heartfelt thing. This is a movement where the whole emotional aspect is brought in, which I don't think punk ever had."<sup>614</sup> Picciotto agrees: "It wasn't spikes and bloody meat and skulls with hammers in the head and the violent bloody macho thing. It was more open-ended."<sup>615</sup> And that open-endedness, that sociocultural opening for an evolution and revolution of masculinity and identity unlocked the ability to "re-create a *musical* version of that struggle for survival."<sup>616</sup>

### *Class*

A more complex, and perhaps even more contradictory, trigger of the transformation of DC hardcore's sound, scene and substance is the thorny concept of class. Of course, the definitive hardcore punk model of Minor Threat and Teen Idles had already had a complicated relationship with class. On the one hand, these two bands typified privilege, coming from comfortable, sometimes affluent, backgrounds, with bountiful cultural resources, musical education, and sociocultural positioning. Moreover, those aforementioned opportunities afforded Teen Idles and Minor Threat an even greater privilege: to record and to be heard. Yet, at the same time, these quintessential hardcore bands also engaged in downward class-passing, showing solidarity with punk's proletariat roots and rebuffing the cultural and political excesses of the day. Using minimalism, amateur and atonal sonic aesthetics, and undercutting the upper-class

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<sup>613</sup> Attali, 5.

<sup>614</sup> Andersen and Jenkins, 191.

<sup>615</sup> Andersen and Jenkins, 166.

<sup>616</sup> Tagg, 48.

American Dream ideals, first wave DC hardcore thwarted easy or simplistic class categorization.

The alteration of class as both a musical aesthetic and a marker of identity in post-'83 hardcore was equally as knotty and complex. While still abjuring the glut of economic capital that was rampant in the music industry, as well as the capitalistic wet dream of unending wealth in the private sector, these new bands found themselves with an overabundance of another form of affluence — cultural capital. The effect of this accumulation of cultural capital took unique forms: from increased musical complexity and richness of sound (and subsequent de-emphasis on minimalism) to the names of the bands themselves, class was sonically and materially re-represented. Yet, this upward mobility in status was concurrently undercut, or at least muddied, by these new bands' consistent and unwavering lyrical focus on anti-capitalistic, anti-consumeristic beliefs.

Whereas the definitive DC hardcore of bands like Minor Threat, State of Alert and even Bad Brains was a celebration of minimalism, a nod to punk's highly egalitarian form of music, this new, post-'83 sound was different. By combining genres and adding musical complexity, “an interesting friction developed over how to tweak the template without losing touch with the elements of the music that were considered truly essential.”<sup>617</sup> Perhaps the most genre-crossing of these bands was Beefeater, who fused elements of hair metal, funk, and heavy metal in their sound. Songs like “Mourning” unites the thrashing speed of hardcore with the previously detested blazing guitar solo, a key feature of the emerging hair metal genre, while “Red Carpet” and “Trash Funk” exemplify the funk-infusion of their sound, using mellow grooves and a strong bass slap.

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<sup>617</sup> Neff, “(Re)Graded on a Curve: Rites of Spring, *Six Song Demo*.”

There are also traces of heavy metal. “Assholes Among Us” uses the crusty, dense guitar riffs emblematic of the genre; “I Miss You” opens with the distorted fuzzy guitar licks of metal before breaking into a more hardcore-like tempo; and “Out of the Woods” ends the last 35 seconds with chaotic, furious drumming and squealing, distorted guitar feedback, and the prominent use of and interplay between the bass and guitar gives their sound a decidedly metal timbre, achieving the “heavy” sound.

With influences as varied as TSOL, Motörhead, DOA, the Yardbirds, Social Distortion and even Paul Revere and the Raiders,<sup>618</sup> it’s almost no surprise that Marginal Man incorporates consistent melodic undertones and mingling of genres. As previously discussed, their use of melody verged on a pure, sugar-high pop sound, particularly in tracks like “Friend,” whose mid-tempo beat, strong melodic contour, and easy-going guitar solo with a gentle “whoa-whoa” overlay makes it nearly impossible not to tap your feet; “Mental Picture” with its pop-friendly hand-clapping opening instrumental; and “Identity,” whose bubblegum pop, smooth melody recalls the more radio-friendly Ramones. But Marginal Man also integrates clear-cut heavy metal influences. “Torn Apart” starts with Manos’ drums, emphatic but agonizingly slow, shadowed by Lee’s bass with its low, dense throbbing, and finally followed by Murray and Inouye’s guitars with jerky, brusque riffs, while “Fallen Pieces,” with its militaristic drum beat, accented by the wah-wah pedaled one-note distorted guitar licks, and the chugging, gloomy drive of the bass evokes the classic heavy metal sound in the vein of Iron Maiden and Motörhead.

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<sup>618</sup> *Truly Needy*, vol. 2, #2, 1983.

This interplay of genres speak to a larger, and possibly more significant change in the hardcore sound — musical complexity. Whereas the previous standard of punk had proudly been its simplicity, advocating for a kind of musical democracy, DC’s evolving sound proudly paraded not only musical chops (which had differentiated Bad Brains, and, later, Minor Threat, from every other punk band) but also musical intricacy, merging technical prowess with a decadence of sound. Rites of Spring’s Fellows executes striking, almost delicate bass lines in songs like “Theme” and “All There Is” while Janney’s guitar is blistering in “Hain’s Point,” and Canty rockets past the more one-dimensional bass-snare-bass-snare-end rhythm into more expert terrain throughout the album. With precisely fashioned nuggets of song craft, and two rapid-fire guitar players, Rites of Spring creates a lush, denser wall of sound in their album, and while the guitars and bass often interact, each instrument is also distinct, adding a thickness of jangle and throb to the songs. Adding to the richness of sound is the frequent use of background vocals, particularly those in songs like “Drink Deep,” “Deeper Than Inside,” and “The Other Way Around,” which act not as an echo of Picciotto but almost as another instrument, deepening and strengthening the viscosity of sound.

The two guitar sound is also vital to the fullness of Marginal Man’s sonic color. As Inouye says, “the D.C. hardcore thing was very straightforward... about the most complex or technical it would get was the Bad Brains. But even then, in all those configurations, you’re talking about one guitar.”<sup>619</sup> More than simply adding to the texture (although the two guitars did do so), Marginal Man focused on the arrangement of their songs, imbuing them with melodic and catchy guitar lines and also adding a

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<sup>619</sup> Gunnston, *This Is Albatross: Reunions, Breakups, and Interviews Blog*, January 28, 2012. [www.thisisalbatross.com](http://www.thisisalbatross.com).

sprinkling of surf rock backup vocals. The tracks are varied, intentionally so,<sup>620</sup> often dramatically shifting tempo, genre, and mood, making each song quite discernable from one another, as opposed to the more conventional hardcore's formula of power chords, speed and volume in every song. In addition, Marginal Man tweaks the conventional hardcore song structure. "Mainstream" has only two verses and no chorus, highly unusual not just for punk but nearly any kind of music, while songs like "Torn Apart," "Fallen Pieces," and "Marginal Man" employ genre-bending extended instrumentals.

While neither challenging the conventional song structure nor revealing a dramatic shift in genre sound, Embrace also clearly ups the ante on technical ability. Hanson peppers the tracks with skillful and commanding drum fills ("Dance of Days," "Past") and a continuous powerful, robust backbeat, while Bald's bass playing is not only a clear and distinct separate bass line, deviating from the typical ricochet of the guitar line (see "End of a Year," "Spoke," "Do Not Consider Yourself Free," and "Building") but also his "bass work is a lot more complicated and interesting than you're going to hear in the average punk/hardcore record."<sup>621</sup> And Hampton's guitar work is simply phenomenal, with slicing arpeggios and howling, shimmering guitar solos in songs like "Dance of Days" and "Said Gun;" even when he's playing more traditional punk power chords ("No More Pain," "I Wish I") he does so in a dominant lead guitar type of playing normally verboten in hardcore.

Finally, Beefeater adds to the new gold standard of technical expertise, particularly in the form of guitarist Fred Smith who rips and shreds solos and riffs alike. The opening of "Mr. Silverbird" has Smith burning through a whammy-bar happy solo,

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<sup>620</sup> See Kenny Inouye and Andre Lee's comments in *End Times*, #1, 1983.

<sup>621</sup> Hamish, review of *Embrace* by Embrace.

while his incendiary, thrusting riffs cut and slash in “Red Carpet” and pierce, rumble and ricochet in the blaze of “Out of the Woods” until, in a chaotic distorted frenzy, his guitar (along with the furious drumming of Taylor) closes out the last thirty seconds of the song. But Smith isn’t the only stringed specialist; Bird’s bass adds both a depth of sound and a distinctive vibration to Beefeater’s musical texture. Using his slap bass technique, Bird mixes in a jazz and funk staple, intensifying the downbeat and contributing the band’s strong percussive sound. His technique, highlighted in the bass solo of “Just Things” and “One Soul Down,” contributes to a louder and more distinct sound of the bass, highlighting a typically obfuscated instrument and snapping and popping the strings to provide a lower, denser, reverb-soaked sound. The band is also unafraid to change the sonic landscape with snippets of other instruments — a short sax blast makes its way into “War In Space” with a longer tenor sax solo in “Song For Lucky;” bells chime in “Just Things,” and African drums dominate in “Bedlam Rainforest.”

Interestingly, this more bourgeois sound is supplemented by a seemingly innocuous, and somewhat paradoxical, class-based accessory — the name of these bands. Take *Marginal Man*, an academic term that guitarist Kenny Inouye learned in his college sociology class.<sup>622</sup> Introduced by sociologist Robert E. Park in his 1928 article “Human Migration and the Marginal Man” the phrase refers to

“a personality type that arises at the time and place where, out of the conflict of races and cultures, new societies, new peoples and cultures are coming into existence. The fate that condemns him to live, at the same time, in two worlds is the same which compels him to assume, in relation to the worlds in which he lives, the role of a cosmopolitan and a stranger.”<sup>623</sup>

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<sup>622</sup> See *Inside View #2; Truly Needy #2; Blush, American Hardcore*.

<sup>623</sup> Robert E. Park, *Human Migration and the Marginal Man*, *American Journal of Sociology* 33: 881-893 (1928).

Of course, this name, and its origin, involves somewhat of a contrasting class connotation. On the one hand, Inouye's college education, and the symbolic capital he gains from it, acts as a representation of the upper class. Not only does a university education involve a good deal of money and confer upon its recipient a patina of privilege, but also the specialized knowledge that comes from a discipline-based vernacular speaks to a certain amount of class exclusivity. On the other hand, the use of the term also points to the conflicting, and demonstrative, incongruity of that class privilege. As Inouye tells punk zine *Truly Needy*, "A marginal man is a person who belongs to two conflicting groups...he may go around with these two conflicting groups but he doesn't really belong. As a result, he's constantly finding himself in conflicting situations."<sup>624</sup> Despite the cultural status these band members undoubtedly have, they also are uncomfortable with such privilege. Much like Minor Threat and Teen Idles, Marginal Man is straddling the two worlds of upper-classdom and working-classdom, fitting in with neither.

Similarly, Rites of Spring clouds class categorization with its moniker. The band name was lifted from the title of a 1912 Igor Stravinsky piece, which, with its experimental meter, tone, and use of dissonance, as well as its use in the avant-garde 1913 Paris ballet, almost caused a riot.<sup>625</sup> It is this clash — of classical music and its mutinous effect — that encapsulates the class paradox. Picciotto took the name intentionally, having heard the record played by his parents growing up, which demonstrates an ample amount of cultural capital, both in his access to musical history

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<sup>624</sup> *Truly Needy*, vol. 2, #2, 1983.

<sup>625</sup> Pattison, "Rites of Spring and the Summer that Changed Punk Rock."

and in the high-brow choice of classical music.<sup>626</sup> Yet, this sophisticated music also incited outrage, fear and disapproval. As Picciotto says, it was that riot that inspired them: “we wanted that to be the vision.”<sup>627</sup> *Rites of Spring*, then, acts as a marker for the tension between classes, at once signifying privilege and rebellion against such privilege.

In a slightly different manner, *Beefeater* likewise captures the friction between classes. Historically, *Beefeaters*<sup>628</sup> were part of England’s royal guard, assigned to guarding the Tower of London and the crown jewels. As former military men, *Beefeaters* were at once a symbol of the highest class in England, the royalty, and a functioning member of the yeoman class.<sup>629</sup> Using this name for their band allowed the musicians to both reference an overt class-based system of status (since the United States, in a fit of either wild optimism or intentional blindness, touted itself as a classless country) and suggest the vast chasm between classes — with the underclass protecting the assets, both financial and symbolic, of the upper class.

Despite the seeming digression from the working-class spirit of minimalism and maladroitness of the conventional DC hardcore sound, the muddied class waters revealed by the post-’83 hardcore band names played out more explicitly in their lyrics. Advocating an anti-commercialism, anti-capitalistic stance, these bands continued *Minor Threat*’s lyrical battle of class warfare. Indeed, MacKaye revisits his anti-

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<sup>626</sup> Andersen and Jenkins, *Dance of Days* (2001).

<sup>627</sup> John Dugan, “End on End: Rites of Spring.”

<sup>628</sup> While the derivation of the term is unknown, according to some historians the name comes from the guards’ freedom to eat as much beef as they wanted, a significant benefit in times of meat rationing. This compensation, then, was an indicator of their position and value.

<sup>629</sup> In fact, the technical name for *Beefeaters* is Yeomen Warders of Her Majesty’s Royal Palace and Fortress the Tower of London, and Members of the Sovereign’s Body Guard of the Yeoman Guard Extraordinary. This class was traditionally above that of the laborers and tradesmen, but decidedly lower than the gentry, knights, or peerage class.



commercialist concept clearly in “Money” (“I can truly say/I don’t give a fuck about your money...why does it mean it so much to you...money has nothing to do with the value of life/but that’s just commonsense”<sup>630</sup>) and his anti-consumption position more indirectly in “If I Never Thought About It” (“I did my shopping alone this year/It revealed my loneliness”<sup>631</sup>).

In “Missing Rungs” Marginal Man continues the same theme of class division, speaking to the loaded dice that is the American class system and the inevitable failure of anyone to climb any higher — “The social ladder/Is incomplete/It’s missing rungs/To protect the elite/So why is that they’ll stand in line/To try that ladder one more time”<sup>632</sup> — before the song slows down considerably and condemns the entire system, in unison and distorted, reverb-soaked echo chanting “Rat race.” Even in a song primarily about a broken heart, “Torn Apart” asserts that “The two most important things in life can’t be bought,”<sup>633</sup> reinforcing the anti-consumption message before finishing the album with the outsiders anthem, “Marginal Man,” which expresses the feeling of never quite fitting into the rules and expectations of society: “Allergic to the outside world/On the outside looking in...Out in the cold/Ain’t life grand?”<sup>634</sup>

This condemnation for society, particularly as a function of a distorted sense of the American Dream, is addressed bluntly and harshly in two of Scream’s songs. In “Bedlam,” Peter Stahl sings, “Looking through the headlines/Sheltered from what’s real/There’s a heat in the street/that you can’t feel/You think we got the great society/The

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<sup>630</sup> Embrace, *Embrace*.

<sup>631</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>632</sup> Marginal Man, *Identity*.

<sup>633</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>634</sup> *Ibid.*

cities will snap before they bury me...Social disintegration is paving the way/The next generation, just like yesterday,”<sup>635</sup> while “U. Suck A./We’re Fed Up” seethes “Oh, say can you see/Through intellectual poverty/At your suburban luxuries/From slimy sea to sea,”<sup>636</sup> correlating the country with the glut, excess, and machinations that are required to acquire such extravagance.

And Beefeater takes direct aim at Reagan and his so-called trickle-down economics in “Reaganomix” fuming, “we get poor while the rich get fatter/Reaganomix, isn’t it wonderful?”<sup>637</sup> and accusing the president of not caring about war because he’s “too busy worrying” about “national profit”<sup>638</sup> in “Wars in Space.”

What underpins this tension in class expression, whether it’s through sound or content of post ’83 DC hardcore, is somewhat different than the paradoxes of hardcore’s heyday. Obviously, these bands have not changed demographically. That is, they remain embedded within a middle- to upper-middle class echelon bestowed upon them by their childhood and family, in a city still replete with power and influence. And, despite the cultural acclaim and popularity of DC hardcore, their economic situation had scarcely shifted either. Even MacKaye, with the recognition and fame that came with Minor Threat and then with Dischord Records, was barely making any money.<sup>639</sup> Certainly, the limited pressings of Rites of Spring, Marginal Man, Beefeater and Scream were not

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<sup>635</sup> Scream, *Still Screaming*.

<sup>636</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>637</sup> Beefeater, *Plays for Lovers*.

<sup>638</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>639</sup> Dischord prided itself on a few core principles that effectively dried up any commercial wells: they refused to write contracts, instead using a handshake to sign new artists; they gave complete creative control to the bands; they set an obscenely low selling price for their LPs and cassettes to allow for a wider swathe of individuals to get this music; they offered nearly no merchandising or publicity, and they only signed bands who were from the Washington, D.C. area.

helping rake in the cash. What *did* change, however, was these musicians' cultural capital. This swelling of cultural capital primarily stemmed from the subcultural value of authenticity within the punk scene. These post-'83 hardcore bands earned their symbolic profit by acting as purveyors of "authentic" punk as the genre was quickly becoming commercialized and mainstreamed by virtue of their standing as the original, old school innovators of DC hardcore. With this accumulation of symbolic capital came an elevation in social status, or symbolic class; and it is this shift can be understood as contributing to the class-based struggle in sound and substance.

From a social constructivist perspective, authenticity acts as a specific ideal for members of a subculture, an accumulation of marginalized identity markers that confer upon those who have them an insider status.<sup>640</sup> For the DC punk scene, and the greater punk landscape in general, authenticity became an essential indicator as the music, and its lifestyle accoutrements, diffused into mainstream society. The mainstream media, as well as the business world, sanitized and de-teethed punk rock in order to make it less threatening to the public and to capitalize on the countercultural whiff of rebellion to sell products. In Canada, business men created and sold the "punk rock," a pet rock with a mohawk hairdo,<sup>641</sup> while the press cranked out articles explaining the "new" genre of punk rock in such radical newspapers as the Sunday Edition of the New York Times.<sup>642</sup> In D.C., punk couture lined the racks of Georgetown boutiques like Commander Salamander and punk shows were jam-packed with kids who liked the idea of punk (i.e.

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<sup>640</sup> See Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979); David Muggleton, *Inside Subculture: The Postmodern Meaning of Style* (2000); J. Patrick Williams, *Subcultural Theories* (2011).

<sup>641</sup> See Ellen Roseman, "The Consumer Game: Pet Goes Punk," *The Globe and Mail*, Toronto, Canada, November 19, 1983.

<sup>642</sup> See Robert Palmer, "New Rock From the Suburbs," *The New York Times*, New York, September 23, 1984.

rebellion, autonomy and unfettered aggression) but had no interest in the music. As Marginal Man bassist Lee said in a 1983 fanzine interview, “Punk has come to the point where it’s just a weekend activity.”<sup>643</sup>

As a reaction to this defenestration, the delineation of authenticity in the post-’83 scene became commitment — to the music and to the pre-sanctioned ideals of the original hardcore scene, including the DIY ethos, independent thought and the unspoken tenet of social marginality. As the old guard in the DC hardcore scene, the musicians of these new bands retained, and prided themselves on, this authenticity. Most of the band members had previously been in hardcore bands — Embrace’s MacKaye was in Teen Idles, Minor Threat and ran Dischord Records; Bald, Hampton and Hansen were in Faith, and Hampton and Hansen had also been in State of Alert, while three of the members of Marginal Man had been in Artificial Peace, and the other two had been in the short-lived hardcore band Toasterhead. For band members who hadn’t been in a DC band, they had already put years into the hardcore scene, and knew the music and the history. As Marginal Man’s Pete Murray, complains, “it bothers me that people who jump right into this HC music don’t even want to listen to the early bands who made punk what it is.”<sup>644</sup> Knowing where this music came from, that is, commitment to its sound and its history, imparted both authenticity and the associated privilege of status.

This cultural capital, in Bourdieu’s terms, like the authenticity that antedates it, is of course, arbitrary, but more importantly, its main effect (and purpose) is to perpetuate the dominant/dominated binary, and act as a weapon of political and social power.<sup>645</sup>

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<sup>643</sup> *End Times*, #1, 1983.

<sup>644</sup> *End Times*, #1, 1983.

<sup>645</sup> See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction* (1984).

Indeed, this symbolic system operates as an instrument of domination insofar as it creates hierarchies and rankings between those who accept, embrace and reproduce those symbolic forms (including those who have access to it) and those who do not. The creation of these ingroup/outgroup bifurcations is not, then, solely a function of the dominant culture that the punks were so keen to subvert, but also became hallmarks of their own symbolic subcultural system.

Despite these hardcore bands' theoretical objections to a sort of cultural hierarchy, such a social ladder made it possible for these bands to transform the hardcore sound. As music theorist Theodor Gracyk argues, "no music is of aesthetic value except in light of appropriate cultural capital. The phrasing intonation, instrumentation, and aesthetic properties of a musical performance are meaningful only to those for whom such features *matter*."<sup>646</sup> By acquiring the necessary cultural capital with the punk scene — or, said differently, by elevating their class status — these new bands had enough influence and authority to experiment and ultimately modify the DC hardcore sound. Class, to a large extent, became a defining element to the transformation of what hardcore was.

It's no surprise, then, that post-'83 hardcore music is rife with class-entrenched contradictions. While the sound of DC hardcore shifted to a more decadent, skilled sound — including the mixing of new genres, a focus on technical dexterity, and a lush, fuller sonic texture — the lyrics and names of bands such as Embrace, Rites of Spring, Scream and Beefeater remained committed to the recognition of class inequities and the inherent inconsistencies of our capitalistic society. Spending the cultural capital they had accrued

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<sup>646</sup> Gracyk, *Listening to Popular Music*, 126.

as committed, authentic members of the original hardcore scene, these bands had the sway, and the privilege of agency, to formulate and disseminate this new sound.

### *Race*

Although the racial makeup of the hardcore scene remained predominantly white in the years following the first wave of DC hardcore, there was a noticeable segment of this new music, and its band members, that represented blackness in both a historical and contemporary cultural way. Continuing in the vein of Bad Brains, whose interpretation of blues and jazz, straightforward incorporation of reggae and associated sociocultural connotations of these two genres characterized a modern transformation of traditional black music, bands like Scream and Beefeater also absorbed and reimagined the conventional black sounds of funk, soul, blues, jazz and reggae. Moreover, unlike hardcore's early days when Bad Brains was the only band to even mention race in their lyrics, this new dawn of DC hardcore saw lyrics not about the personal struggle of racial marginalization but the political struggle of racial inequality. As hardcore "grew up," expanding not only its sound but also its world view, empathy and unity became just as important as, or even a part of, hardcore rebellion. The hallmarks of hardcore —teenage frustration, rancor and disdain — widened its purview to include race.

Sonically, one of the greatest influences on these new bands was the epitome of not just technical genius but also racial blending — Jimi Hendrix. In Scream's "Your Wars/Killer," Franz's guitar is faster and more frenetic than Hendrix, but the gut-wrenching, loud, wah-wah pedal thrashing playing evokes the mind-blowing electric blues of Jimi. The last eleven seconds of "Piece of Her Time" is another throwback to the

Hendrix-heavy mid-60s electric blues and jazz revival, with a piercing, hard-driving but clearly still rock n' roll riff — almost like a sped-up version of Hendrix's guitar in "Fire" — while the guitar solo, and subsequent phrasing, in "New Song" could have been an outtake from "Crosstown Traffic." Even the explosive-but-short-lived burst of guitar in "Total Mash" (1:20-1:30) and "Who Knows? Who Cares?" (1:44-1:52) is conspicuous for its Hendrix-like twisted, flamboyant, outlandishly long-held, guitar notes.

For Beefeater, the connection is even more obvious — they cover Hendrix's "Manic Depression" on the original pressing of *Plays for Lovers*. Interestingly, it's a fairly straight-ahead cover, copying the 3/4 tempo, reverberating psychedelic energy, and even the mid-song guitar solo; however, Beefeater's version is clearly more stripped down, with an added sheen of distortion over the guitars and nearly a full bonus minute of music at the end, replete with squealing guitar feedback, whammy bar warping and an overlay of a female singing "Amazing Grace" over the last thirty seconds. This version acts in two different, though interrelated ways. First as homage to Hendrix, a half black, half Native American guitar genius, whose violent, searing interpretation of the blues brought black music to the highest echelons of white hippies. In this way, Hendrix performs a duality of race, an enactment always-already occurring with the mixed-race musicians of Beefeater.

While Hendrix's racial dichotomy was a function of his own blended heritage, along with its expression in music, Beefeater performs this duality in the multiple bodies of the band — Franz, who is white, on guitar, mimicking Hendrix while his (white) brother Pete sings in an eerily faithful rendering of Hendrix's voice and Smith, who is

black and the “black leather potential Jimi [Hendrix]”<sup>647</sup> on bass — as well as through their sound. This racial comingling of sound is the second implication of Beefeater’s cover. By recording “Manic Depression” without any significant deviations from the original, and putting it on their hardcore punk album, Hendrix serves as a de facto punk. That is, the sound of Hendrix, unaltered, was already punk; therefore, Beefeater’s version becomes another racial bridge of sound — the black blues-rock with the white punk rock. This is the same racial and sonic hinterlands where Scream lived. Bassist Skeeter Thompson acknowledges the huge impact of Jimi Hendrix on their sound,<sup>648</sup> but recognizes “the hippies didn’t like us because we were too fast and the punks didn’t like us because...we weren’t total thrash we were like melodic trash [sic].”<sup>649</sup> Like Beefeater, Scream’s Hendrix influence acts as a racial channel between musics and races, reinforcing the hippie punk motif and its accompanying racial undertones.

It is this same duality of race and music that impels Scream’s inclusion of reggae on a number of their tracks. Much like the Hendrix effect, however, reggae is offset, or perhaps complimented, by a hardcore and metal sound, diffusing or distilling the racially representative sound. A minute and fifteen seconds into “Fight/American Justice,” which starts out as a traditional hardcore song with speed, vicious guitars and a raging chorus of “fight,” a reggae breakdown intercedes, with a staccato guitar, slower tempo and a heavy, dense bass. So while the anger and force is sonically represented in the first half of the song (“Fight”) with hardcore, the second half of the song, concerned with the justice system, is signified by reggae. In this sonic way Scream aptly suggests the tension and

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<sup>647</sup> Jim H. “Beefeater,” *Vinyl Mine Blog*, August 27, 2004. [www.vinyljourney.blogspot.com](http://www.vinyljourney.blogspot.com).

<sup>648</sup> *Touch and Go*, #21, 1983.

<sup>649</sup> *Touch and Go*, #21, 1983.



fusion of not only racial dynamics, but also of the concomitant cultural view of blackness and whiteness. Aggressive white hardcore is welded with mellow black reggae; the combination of the two is a struggle, both sonically and politically.

A similar musical vibe happens in “Hygiene” and “Amerarockers,” though on these two tracks the sound is reggae inflected with a side of heavy metal. “Hygiene” begins with the propulsive kick and snarl of a repeated guitar-and-drum riff, before breaking into hand-clapping 15 seconds in and introducing the slow, relaxed ambiance of reggae, with the clipped guitar chords and dominant bass line. By the time the chorus arrives, though, the traces of heavy metal come with it — the onerous, dark bass line kicks in, along with the low, fuzzed out guitar licks, speed metal solos, and the drubbing thump of drums. The instrumental after the chorus reverts back to the reggae feel, with the addition of bongo drums and the repetitive but catchy bass groove and a sweltering guitar solo.

The straightforward reggae texture grabs the listener from the opening chords of “Amerarockers,” with the guitar plucking out chords swiftly and sharply and the hi-hat flickering and shaking in the background until the bass line and drums drop in (at :13). Indeed, most of the song is mainly characterized by its reggae elements — the amplified bass riffs, the reverberation of vocals, and the emphasis on the off-beat; the metal influences seem to intrude only in the heavy distortion of vocals and guitar, as well as the driving bass line, which was a characteristic of both reggae and heavy metal. In large part, this reggae/metal/hardcore permutation was a direct result of “the legacy of Bad Brains,”<sup>650</sup> a band that drummer Stax, as well as bassist Thompson, often spoke of as

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<sup>650</sup> Andersen and Jenkins, 132.

massive influences. As Thompson recalls, "...if I was not the only black person at the show I was one of the few. So that sat in the back of my head and I would pick at it, I always stepped over boundaries by myself...when I saw Bad Brains, I said that's definitely where I want to be. Not like the Bad Brains, but they let me relax."<sup>651</sup> For Thompson, then, and Scream as a band, the melding of reggae with hardcore and metal was less a declaration of blackness (as I contend it is for Bad Brains in Chapter 3) but more an affirmation and acknowledgement of blackness and whiteness within the punk scene. With Bad Brains as racial and sonic forefathers Scream need only reference their sound, and consequently, their blackness, rather than create a separate or complimentary identity. In part, of course, this is also because Scream was still a chiefly white band, with Skeeter Thompson as the only black man. So, unlike Bad Brains, which was entirely African American, Scream need only create a partial racial identity, and in this case, one premised on an identity pre-formed by their black, hardcore antecedents.

This partial recreation of a racial and sonic identity was also an important aspect to the sound of *Beefeater*; however, rather than relying on blending two genres already associated with a black hardcore identity, *Beefeater* reimagined blackness and whiteness in punk by incorporating and reimagining funk music. Much like Bad Brains did with jazz and blues, *Beefeater* reconceived these traditional black genres as products of white and black punk. As discussed in previous sections, funk was an omnipresent and quite unique feature of this DC hardcore band. With its insistent syncopated rhythm and outrageous groove of base line, as well as the unrelenting guitar riffs and demolishing drums "Trash Funk," the first track on *Beefeater* sounds like Parliament Funkadelics

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<sup>651</sup> *Thrillseeker*, #2, 1983.

dosed with a heavy prescription of Minor Threat, funk and hardcore at its finest. The same sonic union is glorified in the twenty second instrumental opening of “Mr. Silverbird,” with funk’s interlocking rhythmic drums and hardcore’s squealing, squawking guitar solo, and while the rest of the song is predominantly funk-tinged, built around one primary riff and featuring the “fast-paced bass slap drives”<sup>652</sup> of Bird, hardcore rears its head again a minute and twelve seconds in, with the tempo zipping and zooming, guitars wailing, and drums hammering until 1:47, when the song backslides into funk territory, the bass reemerging and the tempo slowing to groove time.

“A Dog Day” is a distinctive song — completely spoken-word, backed by the funk-driven groove of the bass, the jazz-tinged jangle of the hi-hat and percussive drums, and the blues-soaked impulsion of the rhythm guitar. Repeating the same riff over and over again, the music blends the aggressive rhythms of funk and the simple and heartfelt texture of soul music and the blues. Shading even closer to the blues is “Fred’s Song,” an acoustic ditty that is simply guitar and vocals drolly relating the woes of slamdancing. While completely sonically disparate from hardcore, “Fred’s Song” merges the form of the blues with the content of hardcore — singing the blues about hardcore. Even in songs that tend towards the more pure hardcore sound, like “Mourning,” the sixth track on *Plays for Lovers*, infuses some funk elements, with the wah wah pedal to up the groove factor and the slap-bass technique, and “One Soul Down,” which opens with the indisputable funk glow of the bass, with its clean, foot-tappable propulsion.

This funk-hardcore musical partnership was an outgrowth of the sociomusical marriages first championed by Bad Brains. In many ways, Bad Brains were the

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<sup>652</sup> Allmusic.com.

innovators of hardcore musical cross-pollination, particularly in a purposeful recreation of jazz and blues in an effort to assert their construction of blackness in a scene inundated by whiteness. Interestingly, Bad Brains' primary repurposed jazz technique — technical prowess — was not only incorporated but also became the standard baseline of DC hardcore. As this sonic declaration of blackness, then, was diluted, it was reimagined in different ways.

For Beefeater, it was the yoking of funk and hardcore. As a descendent of blues and gospel, funk is credited originally to James Brown, one of the leading black pride musicians (“Say It Loud (I’m Black and I’m Proud)”) who fused his soul music with funk, but by the 1970s funk had become the purview of rock n’ roll’s convoluted racial miasma, as Sly and the Family Stone, an interracial group, steeped psychedelica with funk and addressed racial tensions head-on with songs like “Don’t Call Me Nigger, Whitey (Don’t Call Me Whitey, Nigger)” and “You Can Make It If You Try.” Sly paved the way for George Clinton’s version of funk, in the form of the Parliament Funkadelics, who combined the soul of James Brown (included his ex-sidemen Maceo Parker, Fred Welsey and Bootsy Collins), the rock n’ roll audacity of Jimi Hendrix and the theatrics of glam rockers such as Kiss and David Bowie.<sup>653</sup> Beefeater played on these same seeming racial and musical contradictions; just as James Brown, Sly and George Clinton balanced, complicated and revealed the racial tensions integral to the creation, performance and reception of music, so too did Beefeater. Not only did Beefeater sonically refer back to such a social history, but they also recreated a contemporary version of it by reimagining

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<sup>653</sup> Szatmary, *Rockin’ In Time* (1996); Garofalo, *Rockin’ Out* (2011).

hardcore and/as funk. The band's own multifaceted racial makeup and outlook was represented by their sound, merging the cultural histories of music and race.

In addition to the sonic influence of blackness on this new sound, there was a tangible influence on the written content of these hardcore bands in the form of lyrics. Scream was perhaps the most prolific in their lyrical political awareness, particularly when discussing the issue of racial injustice. Their song "Solidarity" could almost be mistaken for folk lyrics of the 1960s, pledging their commitment to the struggle of freedom: "We don't know what it's like not to be free/Like when you've lost your sight you cannot see...Do you know what this song's about? It's just a love story/About a people just trying to break out/Solidarity."<sup>654</sup> Similarly, "Stand" challenges their audience to think about the social issues that were occurring in the world around them and join the band in their sociopolitical fight: "It's time to take a stand, are you there?/Or if you see a change now will you stare?/Or if I ask you to use your mind, do you dare?...Listen to what we got to say/Here are the screams of today/We're not telling you what to do/We're just asking questions of you."<sup>655</sup> Scream even evokes the cultural capital of Bad Brains in "Amerarockers" to persuade listeners of the need for social justice ("We must look to the other side/So we can tell what's wrong from what is right...And when I look around/I see all wearing frowns/I know HR would say this is a real shame"<sup>656</sup>), while arousing disgust for the hypocrisy of the American ideals of equality in "American Justice"("No matter

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<sup>654</sup> Scream, *Still Screaming*.

<sup>655</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>656</sup> *Ibid.*

what's the truth, they're gonna put you away/Push you around, no matter just what you say...And it's called American justice/but we know the truth."<sup>657</sup>

Beefeater also emphasizes race, but does so in an array of ways. In "Fred's Song," a ditty primarily about the violence of slamdancing, it's as an ironic aside, as Squib sardonically warbles about how "skinhead guys just turn me on,"<sup>658</sup> a phrase that gains even more satirical bite given the song's name, which is for the band's black guitarist, Fred Smith. Race moves beyond the black/white dichotomy into the historical injustice imparted on Native Americans in "Red Carpet," which opens with a spoken word monologue: "White men made many promises, more than I can remember, never kept but one/promised to take our land/and he took it."<sup>659</sup> Squib then launches into the vocals, singing "Just so you never think you walk alone/Just so never feel at ease/So you never call this country home/Just don't let our history be forgot/How much was stolen, how much was bought?"<sup>660</sup> This spoken word technique occurs again in the sermon-like opening of "Move Me Strong," when a preacher-type voice emotes, "Echoes and screams always returning, shadowing of long-forgotten folks reminding us that the struggle must continue if we are to be free. We are/we are/we are to be free. Oh Lord, can't give in now,"<sup>661</sup> which conjures shades of Martin Luther King's "I Have A Dream" speech. Indeed, another song, "Satyagraha," directly references the civil rights leader, saying, "Heard the words of MLK/tell me what's your conscious say?"<sup>662</sup> Even the name of the song itself, Satyagraha, is a reference to the toil for racial and social justice; the term

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<sup>657</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>658</sup> Beefeater, *Plays for Lovers*.

<sup>659</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>660</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>661</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>662</sup> *Ibid.*

means “insistence on truth” or “soul force,” a concept that was widely used in both Mahatma Ghandi and MLK’s fight for civil rights.<sup>663</sup>

Even Embrace, whose lyrics primarily focused on nonviolence in the hardcore scene, rather than on the larger political scale, called for solidarity in the fight for racial justice with their song “Do Not Consider Yourself Free:” “So you can stay cool behind/Your window and choose the view you want to see/But as long as there are others held captive/Do not consider yourself free.”<sup>664</sup>

This lyrical pivot was a function of the many changes occurring in the local, national and international stage. In the local scene, as discussed previously, the rebellious origins of DC hardcore had patently shifted from insurgence against the mainstream to revolt against anything and everybody. As the originators of DC hardcore saw the mantle of rebellion being flown as a justification for meaningless violence, they sought to refocus their struggle, and, as (relatively) older members of the punk scene, this focus shifted to the politics that were occurring all around them in DC.

And with Ronald Reagan finishing his first term and starting his second, race and social inequality was an unavoidable issue. As Reagan attempted to curtail landmark civil rights legislation like affirmative action and anti-discriminatory business regulations the national trends for blacks were also disturbing, with unemployment sky-rocketing, a housing crisis, smaller college population rates, and a vast reduction in healthy and social services.<sup>665</sup> At the same time, South Africa was experiencing a groundswell of anti-

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<sup>663</sup> See John P. McKay, Bennett D. Hill, et al.. *A History of World Societies: From 1775 to Present* (2009).

<sup>664</sup> Embrace, *Embrace*.

<sup>665</sup> See Randy Albelda et al., *Mink Coats Don't Trickle Down* (1988); James Blackwell, *The Black Community: Diversity and Unity* (1985); John Palmer and Isabel Sawhill, *The Reagan Record* (1984).

apartheid activism, a large portion of which was led by people the same age as these hardcore punks. This racial crossroads — of discrimination within their own city and in countries far away — offered a rallying point for some of the hardcore bands. Addressing this racial inequality, through lyrics as well as more overt activism like a drum protest outside the South African embassy on Embassy Row, was that impetus. Of course, such attention was by no means unilateral in the new DC hardcore scene, nor was it exclusive; many of the hardcore bands tackled personal rather than political agendas. However, it is important to note that the hardcore ethos did, in fact, change. Rather than simply looking inward, this new music demanded the listener to look outward as well.

### **The Last Days of Summer: The Remnants of DC Hardcore**

Much like the first wave of DC hardcore, this newer, second-wave so-called “emocore” genre soon found itself splintered and, by 1987, completely transformed. Nearly all of the post-’83 hardcore bands had split up. In January 1986, Rites of Spring disbanded after Mike Fellows quit. Embrace also separated in 1986, amid tensions between Chris Bald and Mike Hampton. 1986 was also the year Beefeater broke up, following disagreements about the political nature of the music, as well as personal politics. Scream went through line-up changes, as drummer Kent Stax left in 1986 (replaced by the now-famous Dave Grohl, of Nirvana and Foo Fighters fame), Thompson battled a drug habit and the group added and subtracted musicians and altered their sound to a more. By 1987, none of the post-’83 hardcore bands remained in their original form. Revolution Summer had truly ended. This hardcore implosion was not just local; the



scene was pronounced dead nationwide in 1986.<sup>666</sup> The reasons were nearly identical: the original members of the scene dispersed without any one to take their place; the musical straightjacket of hardcore limited bands who wanted to expand musically; the rebellious, revolutionary ethos of hardcore lost its target objective; and the sound transformed into something only tangentially related to the original hardcore music.

Despite the dissolution of these new hardcore bands, many of its members remained, forming new bands and, as the sociopolitical and cultural landscape of DC shifted, creating an even more altered and reimagined (punk) sound. Most famous was the union of punk royalty Ian Mackaye with Rites of Spring's Guy Picciotto and Brendan Canty in the band Fugazi. Perhaps the most iconic DC band (despite the influence of MacKaye in the hardcore scene), Fugazi transmogrified hardcore into a more palatable, mainstream sound, springing from the emocore sound — with slower tempos and more emphasis on heavy metal-like aesthetic underpinnings. Remaining true to the DIY hardcore ethos, Fugazi released eight albums between 1989 and 2001, with four albums — *In on the Kill Taker* (1993), *Red Medicine* (1995), *End Hits* (1998) and *The Argument* (2001) — even entering the Billboard 200. The DC post-hardcore sound was also the breeding ground for proto-indie rock bands, including the influential-though-underground Q and Not U, The Dismemberment Plan, Jawbox and Shudder to Think in the early 1990s. Drawing on the hardcore sound, these bands fused dissonant punk with art, dance, and a sprinkling of 90s irony and slacker detachment.

Another direct descendent of DC hardcore was, Riot Grrrl, the female-centric punk movement that began in the District, as well as the other Washington – Olympia. In

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<sup>666</sup> See Blush, *American Hardcore* (2010).

the early 1990s a group of girls set out to abolish the males-only club of the punk rock scene, using the punk rock sound to demand attention and point out the hypocrisies present in our social norms, particularly in exposing the social and personal concerns of girls that were habitually excluded from the mainstream – notions of sexual abuse, anorexia, and body image.

So while hardcore punk, as it was originally conceived in the late 1970s, gasped its last breath by the mid-1980s, its demise was inevitable. As a product of the particular time and place it was formed, it is no wonder that as the politics, culture and social context changed, so too did the aesthetics of sound. Yet, the kernels of hardcore remained throughout the long thread of DC music, shifting, mutating, and reemerging as discrete sonic and social signifiers in an always-evolving but never-new musical landscape. Just as DC hardcore referred back to the cultural and musical past, representing a specific understanding of place, race, class and gender, so too did its musical descendants.

In this dissertation I have sought to understand how music acts as both a form of individual expression and a performance of collective sociopolitical action within the Washington, DC hardcore punk scene between the years of 1978 and 1983. Through an interdisciplinary analysis of the music, bands, and subculture of DC hardcore, I have come to appreciate and understand the relationship between music and politics as a complex, often contradictory, dialectic whereby hardcore both constructed and created a specific sociopolitical identity, and, at the same time, was forged and fashioned by cultural politics. By understanding music as a creation of specific human intent (though not necessarily a precise or conscious political creation) I was able to query the ways in which culturally engrained meanings that seem “natural” or “un-meaningful” still carry a coded implication in sound. By asserting the dependency of music’s social context — including the history of music’s cultural canons, as well as the specific socioeconomic, racial and gendered milieu in which music is generated, communicated and responded to — this dissertation attempts to reposition DC hardcore punk, and its accompanying scene, as political statement(s). Such statements, this project contends, were both a challenge to the traditional modes of politics of this city and a function of this city’s political identity, despite the music’s often paradoxical and sometimes conventional affirmation of the personal politics of race, gender and class.

In a DC scene conspicuously composed of white, young, upper middle-class men, the music of hardcore punk acted as a political expression that at once reinforced the traditional understandings of those cultural vectors of difference and sought to contest and reshape those representations of identity. Though this dissertation separates bands by

chapter, focusing on how their sound specifically works to articulate a political gesture of identity, such a division is, if structurally necessarily, theoretically artificial. In no way is Bad Brains *exclusively* enunciating a racial identity, just like Minor Threat and Teen Idles are not strictly formulating a classed political statement or State of Alert, Government Issue and Faith merely crafting a masculine construction of self and community; these bands are always also (re)forming and (re)exploring their intersecting selves. However, as intersectionality theory states, these vectors of self are unavoidably hierarchal; each person inevitably privileges one part of his or her identity over another.<sup>667</sup> Therefore, the analyses of these bands and their music is grounded in that privileged sense of personal and collective self while recognizing, at the same time, that such selves are never isolated nor discrete from the other.

For Bad Brains, an all-African American band within a nearly-ubiquitous white hardcore punk scene, this privileged vector was race; this project, then, looked to how, within the historically-constructed musical identities of blackness and whiteness, the band sonically fashioned a complex racial identity. To do so I first analyzed how Bad Brains' construction of blackness was a function of musical history, including the culturally constructed racialized identities of jazz, blues, rock n' roll and reggae, through a spectrum of musical techniques: their musical expertise, technical dexterity, and those traits' corollary exclusivity harkened back to bebop; the passionate emotion in HR's vocals and the disruptive power of chaotic noise joined the band's sound to the blues; and

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<sup>667</sup> See Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990); Kimberle Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" (1989)

their inclusion of three reggae songs in an otherwise all-hardcore album acted as a blatant signal of and pride in a traditional form of blackness. But I also endeavored to understand how this sociopolitical identity was altered, upheld and complicated by the specific context of Washington, D.C. in the late 1970s and early 1980s. By linking the contradictions of DC's racial past and present, including demographics, social and economic inequities, and representation in the political landscape, I aimed to show how Bad Brains' music performs as a political act of racial unity (in its intentional Othering of sound) and a signal of racial differentiation (in its sonic brotherhood with the white punk sound and the murky racial waters of rock's past). In this way, I sought to answer the question as to how Bad Brains use sound as political power — a disruptor of conventional racial and political paradigms and simultaneously a fortification of a specific, historically marginalized, racialized identity.

Given their purposeful and forceful stance on anti-consumption and Do-It-Yourself ethos, this dissertation explored the how and why of Teen Idles' and Minor Threat's musical and political (and musical-as-political) representation of class. Much like the murky and often contradictory representations of race with Bad Brains, these bands' music performed both conventional class constructions of middle- to upper- class mobility and the American Dream while simultaneously exalting, and performing, downward class passing. In part, the whys and hows and their contradictions were a product of the bands' specific backgrounds, their *habitus*. In one way, the socioeconomic, and accompanying musical, environment of these musicians reinforced the concept of music as rebellion, a more working class ethos; cutting their teeth on folk rock and classic rock n' roll, music was already contextualized as a way to combat privilege. In another

way, however, this musical education, and the agency taught to be a function of it, was an upper-class privilege. That is, to have a voice was a particular advantage, and to have one within the echelons of music, an added layer of entitlement. Their music itself, spanning four albums during the years of 1978-1983, continued the paradoxes of class. At once spurning upper-class ideals with the sonic aesthetic of noise, minimalism, compositional simplicity, and lyrical profanity, Teen Idles and Minor Threat complicated this musical performance of downward class passing with their irrefutable technical skills, their advancing personal, rather than overtly political, lyrics, and their ability to record music. More than any other band, though, Minor Threat and its members pursued musical enterprises that, while not traditionally political, within the cultural negotiation of everyday politics, were unambiguous in their sociopolitical intent and had to be examined as gestures of class performance. Primarily, this was accomplished through a commitment to an anti-consumption ethos, emblemized by Teen Idles and Minor Threat's anti-consumption, DIY approach to music making, which included a lyrical approach, as well as a production-based tactic with the creation of their own label, Dischord Records. Of course, these manifold, sometimes conflicting, performances of class did not take place in a vacuum. Indeed, the dichotomous nature of D.C. — racially, economically and politically — was motivation, if not an outright model, for their sound and actions. This dissertation explored how the city's bisected complexion in the late 70s and early 80s, particularly in terms of social class, influenced and was represented by the sounds of DC hardcore.

Most consistently, however, I found that the sounds of hardcore — as performed by State of Alert, Faith and Government Issue — tended to uphold and reinforce

traditional constructions of masculinity. The bands' breakneck tempos, excessive loudness, brutal vocals, and use of electric guitar and drums presented the stereotypical image of the aggressive male, dominating by force and might and destroying whatever is in his path. Similarly, there is a propagation of the established male domain of power and privilege in these bands' music, from the subjugation of their (feminized) musical instruments to the intensity and exigency of their vocals to the sheer power of music production and performance. Interestingly, these three bands' straightforward sonic strengthening of traditional male roles is subverted slightly in their performance of sexuality. In one way, Faith, GI and SOA uphold the age-old paradigm of masculinity as heteronormative sexual control, particularly in the throbbing carnality of the drums and the rough sexual ferocity of speed, volume and domination of and over the feminized electric guitar. On the other hand, the nearly-ubiquitous musical construct of the male as sexual predator, as seducer, lover and womanizer — an image endemic to the history of popular music — is practically nonexistent in the lyrics of these bands. Women are almost completely absent from the songs of these three bands; masculine heteronormative sexuality is performed sonically, rather than lyrically. I linked these bands' creations of masculinity through sound to local and national embodiments of masculinity — from the cultural mandate of the strong, stoic male to the nearly all-male Congress to the substantial gender disparity with the DC hardcore scene itself. These conclusions could be perceived as somewhat incongruous; that is, the intentionally abrasive and revolutionary sounds of these bands *seem* like a blatant gesture of rebellion against the sociocultural standards of the day, a sonic middle finger. Yet, while the music is indeed

sonically disruptive of the social order I found its connotations of masculinity were anything but subversive.

*“Music expresses that which cannot be put into words and that which cannot remain silent”*

- Victor Hugo

So who cares? Why does it matter that I have spent the last five years and three hundred pages examining, analyzing, considering, listening, listening, listening, goading and dissecting?

In part, the significance of this dissertation is its contribution to the interdisciplinary goal of de-naturalizing meaning, poking holes in the hegemonic chokehold of conventional, power-laden representations of difference that continues to cuckold cultural consent and perpetuate asymmetrical balances of influence and control. This project, specifically, attempts to include music, as a form of organized sound — a seemingly neutral, apolitical emission of deliberate, continuous vibrations — within that category of hegemonic tools, and, concurrently, understand how sound as music constructs and reinforces this hegemony, particularly the propagation of constructions of difference, without our collective conscious knowledge.

Indeed, part of the potency of music is its ostensible impartiality. Music appears to create its effects directly, without any intervention whatsoever. Listeners are not usually aware of any interpretation on their part; the sounds are thought to evoke a “natural” or “instinctual” emotional or physical response, devoid of any cultural mandates.<sup>668</sup> This (false) patina of objectivity creates, instead, a collective subjectivity

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<sup>668</sup> See Susan McClary and Robert Walser, “Start Making Sense!: Musicology Wrestles with Rock,” from *On Record* (1990).



that is, in conjunction with sociohistorical context, the basis for understanding and decoding reality. Music's ability to conceal its processes and to communicate both nothing and everything is largely responsible for its peculiar power and prestige in society, and its necessity to be studied as a tool of both resistance and control.

Making conscious (and oftentimes problematic) the taken-for-granted frameworks of evaluation and judgment through experimentation with new aesthetic principals, music and its concomitant participants help generate new identities and new conventions, and thereby can re(politicize) popular culture and entertainment. This implies, of course, that music operates as both knowledge-bearing and identity-giving. Indeed, this dissertation hopes to contribute to the academic analyses of how music acts as both ideology and identity. Music, with its rich social and cultural traditions and specificities of time and place, becomes one mode of understanding one's self and one's society, which, though perhaps ephemeral and situational, can be recorded and reproduced, entering the individual and collective memory as reality. In this way, then, music begins to resemble ideology, providing a means to explain why things are as they are, complete with images and symbols that provoke an emotional response.<sup>669</sup>

Identity is integral to both the process and product of music, and the creation and consumption of sound is where "we discover and play with identifications of ourselves, where we are imagined, [and] where we are represented."<sup>670</sup> What music we choose — to produce and to listen to — says much about both our constraints and our idealized representations of self and society. Music allows for, and often even encourages, the

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<sup>669</sup> See Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, *Music and Social Movements* (1998).

<sup>670</sup> Stuart Hall, "What is this 'Black' in Black Popular Culture," from *Black Popular Culture* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 32.

intersection of modes of difference, the creation of (multiple) identity(ies), and the representations of individuals both independently- and mass culture-created. As Judith Butler, among other scholars of note, have conclusively shown, much of the work of producing an identity is a presentation of the self to others, as well as the presentation of self to self. Both of these performances involve the act of remembering and the cultivation of images of one's self, processes that music can play an active role in creating.<sup>671</sup> By linking music to "reliving" a past event or crucial time or relationship, one can remember who they were at a certain time. In doing so, one is able to recapture the aesthetic agency she possessed (or that possessed them) at the time, and by retelling these stories and memories, a coherent self-identity is formed.<sup>672</sup>

Music making, as well as music consumption, is also a site for the creation of collective cultural identity.<sup>673</sup> Discrete and overlapping cultures of music provide and have provided crucial sites within which marginalized people, whether they are black, lower-class, women or disaffected youth, can negotiate their own representations in varying degrees of opposition to, or collaboration with, hegemonic narratives. Indeed, each history that is created and disseminated within US rock music culture (from jazz and blues to Motown to folk to heavy metal) has been formed within the terms of very particular struggles for social and cultural agency. Through these narratives, and the construction of sociopolitical and historical-specific identities, music "comes to stand for the specificity of social experience in identifiable communities...captur[ing] the

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<sup>671</sup> "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 4. (Dec., 1988), pp. 519-531.

<sup>672</sup> See Tia DeNora, "Music and Self-Identity," from *Music in Everyday Life* (2000).

<sup>673</sup> See Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, *Music and Social Movements* (1998); George Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads* (1997).

attention, engagement, and even allegiance of people.”<sup>674</sup> Music, then, provides space for people to negotiate their historical, social, and emotional relations to the world; the way fans define and understand themselves — what they believe and value — is intertwined with the varying codes and desires claimed by a taste culture associated with a specific genre of music.<sup>675</sup> Using performance and sound as a political form to interrogate issues of gender, sexuality, race and class, music has created a praxis based on the transformation of the private into the public, consumption into production, and in doing so, has not only reflected popular culture through the years, but has had a hand in changing how we understand and how we define what popular culture is.

Essential to this practice, however, should be a focus not just on these marginalized communities’ identification with *popular* music, but also their, and those mainstream communities’, identification with and as *marginalized* music. While much scholarly attention has been paid to the ways in which (now) mainstream genres of music — jazz, blues, R&B, folk, rock n’ roll, heavy metal — have been crucial in the dialectical relationship between the creation of self and (re)imaging of society, there is less research

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<sup>674</sup> George Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads*, 127.

<sup>675</sup> Integral to the analysis of self- and shared- identities is the underlying premise in popular music studies that music and self must be contextualized by sociological and historical variables. Simply because certain types of music may have specific roots tied to class or race, does not necessarily determine its treatment or effects; instead, one must look at the conditions of possibility and constraint in the specific historical moment. Determining the meaning of music, both in the broad cultural sense and the more specific personal way, necessitates the examination of its place within the perspective of everyday life, including social relationships, cultural practices, institutional politics and vectors of class, race, gender, sexuality, place and space. Any agency that music possesses is organized and continuously reproduced within a distinct social context. Identity through music is as much a construction of local circumstances as it is of larger sociocultural demands.

as to these subcultural genres of sound and the process of identity-building.<sup>676</sup> For DC hardcore, in fact, this is exactly the case; a group of moderately mainstream individuals — white, male, middle- to upper-class — felt marginalized in their society, spurring the creation of a marginalized, if not stigmatized, subgenre of sound: hardcore punk rock. And unlike the previous lifecycles of marginalized music — which, with their connotations of difference (whether it be race or class or gender) frequently acted as a threat to mainstream society and eventually was forcibly assimilated and appropriated by mainstream society to neuter any social peril — hardcore punk never was. Perhaps because the subculture was itself nonthreatening, being comprised of the hegemonic norms of class, race and gender, or perhaps because the sounds themselves, while threatening, insubordinate, and chaotic, ultimately tended to reinforce these hegemonic norms, hardcore punk remained, and still remains, a marginalized genre and a marginalized identity.

It is these self-created, music-based identities, particularly those grounded in difference, formulated within the framework of resistance, that act as an intentional performance of difference, and carve out a boundary on the exterior of social reality between “us” and “them.” These oppositional identities established through and in sound

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<sup>676</sup> See Simon Frith, *Sound Effects* (1981); Bruce K. Friesen and Warren Helfrich, “Social Justice and Sexism for Adolescents: A Content Analysis of Lyrical Themes and Gender Presentations in Canadian Heavy Metal Music, 1985-1991,” (1988); Sheryl Garratt, “Teenage Dreams” (1984); Lawrence Grossberg “The Politics of Youth Culture: Some Observations on Rock and Roll in American Culture” (1984); Lawrence Levine, “Jazz and American Culture” (1989); Richard A. Peterson, “Why 1955? Explaining the Advent of Rock Music,” (1990); Sheinbaum, John J. “Think About What You’re Trying to do to Me: Rock Histiography and the Construction of a Race-Based Dialectic” (2002); Will Straw, “Characterizing Rock Music Culture: The Case of Heavy Metal” (1990); David P. Szatmary, *Rockin’ in Time* (1996).

are also the link between self-representation and the practice of ideology.<sup>677</sup> Indeed, it is often these resistant identities that provide the context for the reworking of cultural materials into a legacy of ideas, symbols and images. The construction of these conflicting identities often necessitates a form of bricolage, a detachment of signs and objects and sounds from the meaning assigned to them by hegemonic culture and a relocation of them within a musical and cultural alliance of opposition and differentiation. Such patchwork, then, creates subversive constructions of race, gender and sexuality that confront mainstream modes of cultural understanding. From that, music provides spaces for these social opportunities of experimentation to later diffuse into larger society. In this way, music acts as a cultural laboratory, where the blending of musical and other artistic genres provides for the infusion of new kinds of meaning into both music and culture.<sup>678</sup>

Both the culture of everyday life — the values, mores, and habits that form the basis of social behavior — and the high art worlds of cultural expression are deeply affected by the innovative activities and cultural actions that happen in music. By combining culture and politics, music reconstitutes both, providing a broader political and historical context for cultural expression and giving the resources of culture to the repertoires of contention of political and personal struggle. That is, music offers an ideological voice. What's at work in so much music, or at least the music in this project, is an active reworking of cultural resources, both an inventive, creative work of artistic experimentation and a critical reflective work of evaluation; it is the cultural effects that

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<sup>677</sup> I do not indeed to claim, however, that identification is an absolute function to either the empowerment or disempowerment, but instead mean to suggest self-representation through music offers the possibility of both.

<sup>678</sup> See Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, *Music and Social Movements* (1998).

often live on through songs. By reimagining images and symbols in music, this helps frame our present reality, explaining why things are as they are and offering up systems of interpretation. Music and song have helped shape the imagery and the meaning of identity for many Americans, and in return, questions of meaning, belief, value, and identity have seemingly become more important than the political pursuit of power.

These ideological processes resemble structures of feeling that are more than merely emotive — they contain a rational or logical core, a truth-bearing significance. Songs and music give us access to both feelings and thoughts that are shared by larger collectivities and that make better claims for cultural representation. The ideological power of popular music, then, is identity and difference, conformity and confrontation. Indeed, this ideological power of creation is why governments often attempt to repress or censor art. Such subjugation is, according to cultural theorist George Lipsitz, “out of recognition of the complex connections linking ‘the nation’ with the imagi-nation.”<sup>679</sup>

This ideological weapon in the arsenal of culture, however, has rarely been explored through the music of hardcore punk. Somewhat ironically, in a city that boasts, rightfully so, to be the political heart of the country, hardcore’s form of social action has been chiefly ignored. In part, this may actually be a function of D.C.’s occupational and cultural myopia; in a town where boycotts, protests, sit-ins, congressional hearings and streets dotted with embassies, lobbying organizations and non-profit groups, it is easy to forget that the realm of sociopolitical action exceeds the parameters of traditional democratic behaviors. Indeed, the music of hardcore stands primarily on the covert,

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<sup>679</sup> Lipsitz, 137.

rather than overt, border of the scale of resistance;<sup>680</sup> however, that should not undercut our understanding of their music as a source of ideological defiance. The music and lyrics of DC hardcore — the common themes of alienation, rejection of unfettered consumption, combined with the cacophonous, chaotic, and abrasive sound of punk — act as an intentional and assertive eschewal of the values proclaimed by their city and this society and an attempt to reimagine the narrative of both DC and conventional politics. Such an understanding is not only translatable but also essential in acknowledging and studying the expansion of political agency to and through other marginalized musics and cultural forms. The re-aestheticization of cultural norms — through sound or clothing or dance — involves the power to (re)create a marginalized representation of reality, a counternarrative. Such counternarratives use the seemingly safe space of culture (i.e. the ostensibly non-political realm) to questions dominant discourses and prevailing ideologies.

### *Where Do We Go Now?*

The scope of this project does leave space for panoply of further avenues of research, both within the timeframe of my own study and the years following. Firstly, this dissertation does not attempt to assess the degree of success DC hardcore had as a sociopolitical music and cultural movement. And while surely the notion of “success” is inherently a subjective, amorphous term, there is still ample opportunity to understand the ways in which the DC hardcore music and scene affected the social and political topography in the immediate wake of the music — in the mid to late 80s — as well as its

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<sup>680</sup> See J. Patrick Williams, *Subcultural Theory: Traditions and Concepts* (2013).

resonances in the contemporary musical and cultural ideologies of and in the city. Further research could focus on the extent to which the identities created by hardcore were efficacious in altering the cultural landscape, both in the field of music and in the field of politics with the post-hardcore scene. These sets of questions would involve, once again, an intersection between identity, music, and politics, querying how, if at all, the construction of difference through hardcore altered or transformed the music succeeding it. Given the preponderance of music in DC after hardcore remained entrenched within the Dischord Records/independent/alternative rock genre, there is fertile ground to consider how the maturation and evolution of sound reflected, challenged or eschewed the iterations of gender, race, and class from hardcore's heyday. Of course, such analysis would also need to consider the relationship of the music to the malleable character of the city; that is, how has the transformation of DC interacted and influenced the creation and reception of music, both in sound itself and the way the sounds are processed commercially and culturally?

In addition, the primary focus of this dissertation has been on the producers of DC hardcore and the sounds that they have produced; while I did interview many members of the hardcore scene, it was largely to assess the cultural landscape of hardcore, rather than their engagement with and reaction to the music. This emphasis, then, leaves an opening to more extensively explore the audience of and for this music. For many music scholars, including Lawrence Grossberg and Simon Frith, music should primarily be viewed through fans, that is, how music offers possibilities for empowerment and



appropriation.<sup>681</sup> The line of inquiry for this area is extensive. Some research could reflect on the personal, political and aesthetic reasons for audience participation in the scene, gauging if, and why, there is any disconnect between the structural issues impelling the music producers and the audience members. Other areas could answer Grossberg's concerns about affectivity: how did DC hardcore offer possibilities of surprise, pleasure, release, shock or liberation? How, if at all, did participants use hardcore music as a way to alter, reinforce or remake their personal identity? In what way did hardcore consciously or subconsciously influence participants' self-representation and their concepts of race, gender, and class? In a similar way, do audience members conceive of sonic cues in a different way? And how are these sonic representations interwoven and applied in personal narratives of self, city, and community?

Stemming from this field of inquiry about audience, identity and ideology, there is a significant opportunity to explore the idea of memory in the construction and maintenance of identity. As I mentioned in the introduction of this project, one limitation of my research was the opacity of memory; that is, my interviewees were asked to recollect how they felt, what they saw, and what they did through the tinted lens of over thirty years gone by. Clearly, such a temporal gap will produce some alteration of memories. What is not so clear is what those alterations are and why such alterations occurred. To that end, research can be conducted to see how these hardcore kids see their identity and ideology today. More specifically, do they still identify as hardcore? If so, what does that mean to them? How was that specific identity, and its accompanying

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<sup>681</sup> See Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure and the Politics of Rock n' Roll* (1981); Lawrence Grossberg, "Is There Rock After Punk?" (1986), "The Politics of Youth Culture: Some Observations on Rock and Roll in American Culture," (1984).

ideologies shifted? If not, why and how have these self-representations changed? In addition to memory as a transformer of identity, there is also the concept of how we represent memory. For DC hardcore, the area is rife. Besides the Facebook page from which I culled participants from the scene, there are two new documentaries about to be released about DC hardcore, as well as a popular book, Mark Andersen and Mark Jenkins' *Dance of Days*. How do these representations of the DC scene reimagine the past? In what ways do they mobilize and recombine various stereotypes to recreate an idealized image? And to what end?

Finally, while this project touches on both the process of cultural production and the outcome and accompanying terrain of that process — material culture — particularly within the context of class (in Chapter Four), there is still a considerable field to be explored. This is particularly true with the area of music, which acts as one of the main modes of peer-training for consumption and consumer preferences. Indeed, as the academic landscape has shifted from a concentration on production to consumers, inquiries into how DC hardcore as a product is used by audience members is relevant. Yes, these questions include how products help construct self, how they are part of the performative aspect of self-representation, but also how hardcore-as-product incites imagination, how it is incorporated into everyday life, and how personal meanings become public. These questions become even more curious given the DC hardcore ethos of anti-consumption and Do-It-Yourself. How do these two principles create tension? That is, in what ways does material culture get subverted or reinforced by the margin/center spectrum of consumption and conservation?

Moreover, the city is a meaningful backdrop for the exploration of music and cultural production, as urban regions often exist primarily (or at least, they originally existed) *as* fulcrums of production; their infrastructure is dependent on the capital accumulated from such production. Likewise, cities are frequently the center of cultural regeneration, a place where tourism is premised on cultural production or culture as product.<sup>682</sup> Further research could explore the ways in which DC hardcore acted as both a manufacturer and a demolisher of culture as a product. As the city changed post-hardcore, how did cultural production in the independent music scene also change? In what ways did this (re)form notions of authenticity, economic success, and the music industry?

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DC hardcore punk was a reflection of, a creation of, and a challenge to the culture of its time. Its sound, influenced by the racialized, gendered and classed musics of the past and the sociopolitical and economic conditions of the present, acted as both a subversion of the dominant paradigms of the day and a reinforcement of some of those frameworks. These marginalized youth — not marginalized by their race or class or gender, but because of their values, their opposition to the prevailing mores — reimagined what political agency looked like and retread what music should sound like, ultimately re-envisioning both. But even more so, given the smallness of the scene, the brevity of its popularity, and the insularity of its members, DC hardcore expands our understanding of how sound matters. Hardcore reveals the way in which self and others,

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<sup>682</sup> See Adam Krims, *Music and Urban Geography* (2007); Sharon Zukin, *The Culture of Cities* (1996).

the way we see the world, can be constructed and reinforced by music. As music theorist Theodore Gracyk says, “We grasp central tenets of culture *by* grasping its music.”<sup>683</sup>

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<sup>683</sup> Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise*, 217.

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## Appendix A Discography

### Bad Brains

#### *Bad Brains*, 1982

1. "Sailin' On"
2. "Don't Need It"
3. "Attitude"
4. "The Regulator"
5. "Banned in D.C."
6. "Jah Calling"
7. "Supertouch/Shitfit"
8. "Leaving Babylon"
9. "Fearless Vampire Killers"
10. "I"
11. "Big Take Over"
12. "Pay to Cum"
13. "Right Brigade"
14. "I Luv I Jah"
15. "Intro"

### Beefeater

#### *Plays for Lovers/House*, 1985

1. "Trash Funk"
2. "Reaganomix"
3. "Song for Lucky"
4. "4 3 2 1"
5. "Mr. Silverbird"
6. "Mourning"
7. "Satyagraha"

8. "A Dog Day"
9. "Red Carpet"
10. "Assholes"
11. "Beefeater"
12. "Fred's Song"
13. "I Miss You"
14. "Out of the Woods"
15. "Wars in Space"
16. "Just Things"
17. "Bedlam"
18. "Rainforest"
19. "Move Me Strong"
20. "One Soul Down"
21. "Ain't Got No Time"
22. "Sinking Me"
23. "Dover Beach"
24. "Insurrection Chant"
25. "40 Sonnets on Plants"
26. "With You Always"
27. "Freditude"
28. "Live the Life"
29. "Blind Leads Blind"

Embrace

*Embrace*, 1987

1. "Give Me Back"
2. "Dance of Days"
3. "Building"
4. "Past"
5. "Spoke"
6. "Do Not Consider Yourself Free"
7. "No More Pain"
8. "I Wish I"
9. "Said Gun"
10. "Can't Forgive"
11. "Money"
12. "If I Never Thought About It"
13. "End of a Year"
14. "Last Song"

Faith

*Faith/Void*, 1982

1. "It's Time"
2. "Face to Face"
3. "Trapped"
4. "In Control"

5. "Another Victim"
6. "What's Wrong with Me?"
7. "What You Think"
8. "Confusion"
9. "You're X'd"
10. "Nightmare"
11. "Don't Tell Me"
12. "In the Black"

Government Issue

*Legless Bull* (1981)

1. "Religious Ripoff"
2. "Fashionite"
3. "Rock & Roll Bullshit"
4. "Anarchy is Dead"
5. "Sheer Terror"
6. "Asshole"
7. "Bored to Death"
8. "No Rights"
9. "I'm James Dean"
10. "Cowboy Fashion"

*Make an Effort* (1982)

1. "Teenager in a Box"
2. "No Way Out"
3. "Twisted Views"
4. "Sheer Terror"

*Boycott Stabb* (1983)

1. "Hall of Fame"
2. "Hour of 1"
3. "G.I."
4. "Puppet on a String"
5. "Sheer Terror"
6. "Happy People"
7. "Lost in Limbo"
8. "Plain to See"
9. "Partyline"
10. "Here's the Rope"
11. "Insomniac"

Marginal Man

*Identity*, 1984

1. "Missing Rungs"
2. "Friend"

3. "Torn Apart"
4. "Mental Picture"
5. "Pandora's Box"
6. "Fallen Pieces"
7. "Identity"
8. "Emotional Scars"
9. "Marginal Man"

Minor Threat

*Minor Threat*, 1981

1. "Filler"
2. "I Don't Wanna Hear It"
3. "Seeing Red"
4. "Straight Edge"
5. "Small Man, Big Mouth"
6. "Screaming at a Wall"
7. "Bottled Violence"
8. "Minor Threat"

*In My Eyes*, 1981

1. "In My Eyes"
2. "Out of Step (With the World)"
3. "Guilty of Being White"
4. "Steppin' Stone"

*Out of Step*, 1983

1. "Betray"
2. "It Follows"
3. "Think Again"
4. "Look Back and Laugh"
5. "Sob Story"
6. "No Reason"
7. "Little Friend"
8. "Out of Step"
9. "Cashing In"

Rites of Spring

*Rites of Spring*, 1985

Side one

1. "Spring"
2. "Deeper Than Inside"
3. "For Want Of"
4. "Hain's Point"

5. "All There Is"
6. "Drink Deep"

Side two

1. "Theme"
2. "By Design"
3. "Remainder"
4. "Persistent Vision"
5. "Nudes"
6. "End On End"

Scream

*Still Screaming*, 1983

1. "Came Without Warning"
2. "Bedlam"
3. "Solidarity"
4. "Your Wars/Killer"
5. "Piece of Her Time"
6. "Human Behavior"
7. "Stand"
8. "Fight/American Justice"
9. "New Song"
10. "Laissez-Faire"
11. "Influenced"
12. "Hygiene"
13. "Cry Wolf"
14. "Total Mash"
15. "Who Knows? Who Cares?"
16. "Amerarockers"
17. "U. Suck A./We're Fed Up"
18. "Ultraviolence/Screamin'"
19. "Violent Youth"

State Of Alert

*No Policy*, 1981

1. "Lost in Space"
2. "Draw Blank"
3. "Girl Problems"
4. "Black Out"
5. "Gatecrashers"
6. "Warzone"
7. "Riot"
8. "Gang Fight"



9. "Public Defender"
10. "Gonna Hafta Fight"

#### Teen Idles

##### *Minor Disturbance*, 1980

1. "Teen Idles"
2. "Sneakers"
3. "Get Up and Go"
4. "Deadhead"
5. "Fleeting Fury"
6. "Fiorucci Nightmare"
7. "Getting in my Way"
8. "Too Young to Rock"

## Appendix B

### HarDCore 1978-1983 Participation Questionnaire

#### *Demographics*

- a) **Male or Female?**
- b) **Ethnicity?**
- c) **Would you classify your family (when you were involved in DC hardcore) as working-class, middle-class, upper-middle class or upper class?**
- d) **Where in DMV did you and your family live?**

#### *The music*

- a) **When did you get into punk in dc?**
- b) **What drew you to it all?**
- c) **What kind of music did you listen to before punk? How did (or didn't) punk fit into those genres?**
- d) **Who was your favorite DC hardcore band and why?**
- e) **What was more important – the *sound* or the *lyrics*? Why?**
- f) **Why do you think DC's hardcore music became so important in the punk genre?**
- g) **Any other comments/feelings/rants/odes to harDCore?**

#### *The Scene*

- a) What was your perception of DC as a place? Of its culture? Its values?
- b) Where did you watch punk shows? Were where the shows were (neighborhood, type of venue) affect if you could/would want to attend? How/not?
- c) How would you characterize the other people in the punk scene? Was it a communal identity (and if so, in what ways) or were there a lot of disparate people and personalities?
- d) Any interesting stories regarding DC hardcore shows?
- e) (*For women*) How many other women were in the scene? How, if at all, did you feel you were treated differently as a woman? When did you feel the difference of being a woman? Did you feel safe in the DC punk scene? Were your parents more restrictive because you were a girl, (i.e. didn't let you go to shows etc.)?
- f) (*For men*) What was your perception of how many women were in the scene and how involved/embraced they were? (How) /Did it change the dynamic of the scene?
- g) Were you conscious of any racial differences? When, if ever, did race become an issue in the DC scene?

Your Name (Optional) \_\_\_\_\_

