

## CONTRIBUTOR BIO

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## **THIS SMALL WORLD: THE LEGACY AND IMPACT OF NEW YORK CITY HARDCORE PUNK AND STRAIGHT EDGE IN THE 1980S**

*By Alan Parkes*

Punk rock is known for its raw energy and archaic simplicity, overlooking a history of complexity, diversity, and evolution by an almost constant and uniform perception from outside sources as the essence of the mantra, “sex, drugs, and rock & roll.” With this, a spirit of social change in hardcore punk is generally unaccounted for in the media’s perception of nihilism and violence in the music and subculture. The aim of my research is to examine punk and hardcore subculture in a holistic manner and to identify how this group of bands, promoters, and fans was an anomaly in youth culture that has largely been overlooked and replaced by the media’s portrayal. This has been particularly true of the scene in New York City. In the 1980s, the City revealed itself to be a bastion of unique hardcore punk rock that attempted to tackle the problems of inner-city life and soon after embraced much larger social and ethical issues. My research is focused on New York’s inner city, bands, venues, promoters, and the “kids” who created a radical and socially conscious hardcore punk scene in New York City from 1980 to 1991 with an emphasis on straight edge.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> To be straight edge is to refrain from drugs, alcohol, and promiscuous sex.

The crux of a study on such a unique subculture is determining why it existed, understanding what its value was to participants, and clarifying how New York's hardcore and straight edge scene transcended beyond the city both physically and ideologically to perpetuate its existence.

In the early 1970s, a small music venue on 315 Bowery Street in Manhattan opened its doors to a new style and sound. This relatively small venue, CBGB, became synonymous with the origin and development of punk rock, watching it grow into a unique and diverse community. It was here that Patti Smith, Ramones, The Misfits, and numerous other bands and musicians played some of their first performances and took their place as originators of punk rock. The term "punk" was first used to describe music in 1970 by *Creem Magazine* in an article written about Iggy Pop and the Stooges to characterize their high energy and primitive sound.<sup>122</sup> However, what became distinctively punk did not come to fruition until a few years later, forming out of a garage rock sound, a more aggressive and distorted rock & roll. As it had in New York, a punk sound and style sprouted in London almost simultaneously, introducing bands such as The Police and The Clash. Diverging from the modernist style of their peers, British punk band, Sex Pistols, took on an intimidating appearance that consisted of ripped clothes, studs, leather, and often Nazi imagery. This was fused with less structured song writing and discordant vocals. This gave punk a cultural identity that further set it apart from social norms and encouraged youth in search of a unique identity to take part. From there, punk as a form of youth rebellion spread rapidly through America, ushering in a new dynamic subculture of diverse principles and ideologies. This was merely a start to a complex, contradictory, and evolving new subculture.

In New York City, at the start of the 1980s, the kids would make hardcore punk their own. While it faced the same problems as the subculture in Los Angeles—and almost any other city—violence and condemnation, in New York City, hardcore punk formed out of the ruins of the City, making it unique amongst all other scenes. Thus, for its members, its value was in its escape from larger society. The scene sought independence through a do-it-yourself ethic, rebellion at its core by choosing not to adhere to the social structures in society. This caused the music and its members to not only dissociate with cultural norms, but also to begin to question them and even the scene to which they

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<sup>122</sup> Lester Bangs, "Of Pop and Pies and Fun," *Creem Magazine*, November 1970, 39.

were a part. Critical of the hardcore punk scene to which it was born into, by the mid-decade, straight edge hardcore members gave rise to a new emphasis on self-analysis. While the growth of straight edge and its expansion into militant forms would challenge and contradict its original intent, for early New York straight edge members, it often created a foundation for the rest of their lives. Thus, while members moved on from the scene, the thoughts and ideals of it transcended through them, and the music continues on acknowledging New York City's contribution to a misunderstood and misrepresented subculture.

### Historiography

While there have been a few sociological researchers examining hardcore punk through a contemporary ethnographical lens, little scholarship has been conducted on hardcore punk. Historians have tended to focus on larger events and have overlooked this relatively young phenomenon with few exceptions.<sup>123</sup> What has been written about early hardcore punk is almost all personal accounts or dialogue from interviews with members of bands after the 1980s. The understanding of both the sociological studies and the words of participants from the early 1980s hardcore movement reveal the complexities of the scene but also help to establish a foundation from which to examine New York City's hardcore punk scene from a historical perspective.

Early hardcore punk in America is generally classified by one of two waves, the first being the late-1970s to 1986 and second being 1986 to 1991. Forming in 1976, Black Flag in Los Angeles, and in 1977, Bad Brains in Washington D.C., ushered in a new form to the genre of punk, characterized by an increase in tempo and more aggressive vocals, often yelling. This new form became known as hardcore punk, or simply "hardcore."<sup>124</sup> Both of these bands peaked in popularity in the early 1980s and influenced a new generation of hardcore punk. As Steven Blush writes in his book, *American Hardcore: A Tribal History*, "hardcore generated a lifestyle stripped down to the bare bones. Its intensity

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<sup>123</sup> Notable exceptions include Dewar Macleod's writing on LA's early punk scene and James Ward's writing on NYC punk, both referred to here. There are numerous histories on punk that are not written by historians with a focus generally on the 1970s. See Tricia Henry, *Break All Rules: Punk Rock and the Making of a Style* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989); Legs McNeil and Gillian McCain, *Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk* (New York: Grove Press, 2006).

<sup>124</sup> Hardcore is often used synonymously with punk. To determine the distinctions between each is a precarious task, as those within the subculture may not agree. For the sake of clarity, this paper uses "hardcore" and "hardcore punk" synonymously as distinct from "punk."

exposed raw nerves. Everyone was edgy and aggressive.”<sup>125</sup> Hardcore introduced a physical and emotional energy that added a new dynamic to the music. Often this was conveyed through more serious lyrical content and anger. Described by Blush as something that alienated punks adopted by necessity, hardcore was “an infectious blend of ultra-fast music, thought provoking lyrics, and fuck-you attitude.”<sup>126</sup> He describes the first wave of hardcore as an era of rebellion created by “irrational kids with an unfocused rage.”<sup>127</sup> However, by 1986, Blush argues that hardcore ended. He writes, “several things marked ’86 as the end. Black Flag, DK’s and The Misfits had all fallen apart. Minutemen’s D Boon died in a December ’85 car crash. Hüsker Dü signed to mainstream Warner Bros. Minor Threat evolved into the less-visceral Fugazi. Circle Jerks and TSOL were ‘going metal.’”<sup>128</sup> He asserts that the end of hardcore came with the end or change of its most influential bands and members. As a book compiled of interviews with the individuals who had the biggest impact on the first wave of hardcore, his assertion seems to suggest that new members to the scene would not perpetuate its existence. Not only were bands and scenes changing, the people within the individual scenes were dropping out. However, this proved not to be the case in some cities and amongst a younger crowd who were still being introduced to the hardcore subculture and carrying on its ideals. Thus, the conclusion of Blush’s book and description of the *end* of hardcore overlooks the new scenes and bands that broke new ground quickly while still adhering to the underground and rebellious ethos of the first wave.

Craig O’Hara links the ethos of the two early waves of hardcore in his book, *The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!* O’Hara primarily dedicates his writing to the assertion that hardcore and punk should be classified as a movement. He also dismisses earlier books for their lack of content outside of photographs. O’Hara’s argument is primarily supported by personal experience and analysis. As O’Hara writes, “No books have tried to capture the philosophy of the ever changing... punk scenes.”<sup>129</sup> Thus, O’Hara writes on the prevalence of anarchism, environmental concern, skinheads, and straight edge in hardcore as diverse and evolving components. His book explains that hardcore is “not

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<sup>125</sup> Steven Blush, *American Hardcore: A Tribal History* (Los Angeles: Feral House, 2001), 9.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 296.

<sup>129</sup> Craig O’Hara, *The Philosophy of Punk: More than Noise* (San Francisco: AK Press, 1999), 17.

something that fits neatly into a box or category.”<sup>130</sup> As he contends, there is an ever-presence of revolutionary ideas that make punk and hardcore a movement. O’Hara’s broad look at punk and hardcore presents a good understanding of the self-significance of a subculture throughout its existence in the United States. However, O’Hara’s writing overlooks the detail of examining specific scenes in exchange for an overview approach, paying little attention to New York City’s impact on punk and hardcore.

Focusing on New York City, James Ward’s article, “‘This is Germany! It’s 1933!’ Appropriations and Constructions of ‘Fascism’ in New York Punk/Hardcore in the 1980s,” explores early New York punk’s use of Nazi imagery and predisposition to leftist political ideologies.<sup>131</sup> By the time hardcore punk took root in New York City in 1981, the seeming endorsement of racist and fascist ideology through imagery was replaced by the call for unity within the scene. Ward specifically mentions Agnostic Front and WarZone, two skinhead hardcore punk bands that scolded their peers for ignoring the real problem—class war—to which race hostilities were merely a distraction.<sup>132</sup> Ward notes that the early punk’s use of Nazi symbols as an endorsement of chaos transitioned toward opposition to local government. The punks compared local leaders to Nazi leaders and began to portray the city as being controlled and destroyed by fascism. No band made a point of this more than Missing Foundation. As they asserted about New York in 1988, “This is Germany. It’s 1933!”<sup>133</sup> This exclamation was made amidst increasing conflict between police and hardcore punks.

Contrary to Ward’s assertion that New York City hardcore punk was primarily leftist, Blush argues that just prior to the *death* of hardcore in 1986, New York’s hardcore punks “more likely embraced seemingly Right-Wing philosophies—overrun with Skinhead gangs and Straight Edge zealots.”<sup>134</sup> Declaring that hardcore punk died in 1986, Blush has little interest in examining New York hardcore’s “Right-Wing philosophies” beyond its *death*. Instead, Blush merely makes a distinction between hardcore in the rest of America, generally

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<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>131</sup> James Ward, “‘This is Germany! It’s 1933!’ Appropriations and Constructions of ‘Fascism’ in New York Punk/Hardcore in the 1980s,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 30 (Winter 1996): 161.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>134</sup> Blush, *American Hardcore*, 173.

left leaning, and New York's hardcore community. He writes, "just as New York differed from any other place in America, [New York hardcore] differed from all other regional experiences."<sup>135</sup> One difference was the City's embrace of skinhead culture. Though the skinheads of New York were generally vocally non-racist, they were easily lumped into the category of right wing. This could often be attributed to their national pride, which they represented through imagery that displayed the American flag and patriotic symbolism. Moreover, by the time of the second wave, an athletic and jock-like appearance that developed simultaneously with an increase of straight edge members on the scene. Like skinheads, this appearance was often used as a basis for a conservative characterization, whereas New York hardcore's more punk looking counterparts from other regions were recognized as clearly more leftist. Straight edge itself had the same effect by contributing to New York hardcore's conservative image. Each of these factors further pushed New York to the political right in the eyes of many participants in hardcore scenes throughout America, including Blush.

Whether New York's hardcore scene was thought to be politically right or politically left, there was something more localized and social that made it significant as a part of New York City's culture. Bri Hurley argues for this in her book *Making A Scene: New York Hardcore in Photos, Lyrics & Commentary*. As a photographer, Hurley displays the social relationships, style, and demeanor that characterized New York hardcore. Hurley conveys the community at the core of the scene as one that was formed by members who were "unhappy with what they [saw] around them."<sup>136</sup> The lyrics included in her book reflect this unhappiness as well as a demand for change. Such demands are evidence of O'Hara's assessment of hardcore punk as a movement. Conflicting with Blush's claim that New York hardcore began to embrace right-wing ideologies in its second wave, declarations from bands and the scene's most influential members often, though not exclusively, represented leftist ideals even though the members retained a conservative appearance. This diversity, compiled with social concern, in itself could be characterized as an anomaly in hardcore, but it was an anomaly that extended to all youth subcultures. One conviction, seemingly conservative but in actuality liberal, was straight edge.

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<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>136</sup> Bri Hurley, *Making A Scene: New York Hardcore in Photos, Lyrics, & Commentary* (Harrisburg: Butter Goose Press, 2011), 7.

Whether straight edge had a positive or negative impact on hardcore is up for contentious debate. Both O'Hara and Blush are critical of straight edge participants. O'Hara considers straight edge members conformists in opposition to punk rebellion, writing that straight edge "went from being a minor threat to a conservative, conformist no threat."<sup>137</sup> Though this is his analysis of straight edge in general, not exclusive to New York, it is relative to Blush's perception of mid-1980s New York hardcore as being conservative. Nonetheless, Blush does not make the association between conservative ideology and straight edge. Basing his criticism of straight edge on different grounds, Blush contends that "Little difference existed between Straight Edge dogma and drugged buffoonery. But to define oneself exclusively in such terms [was] totally passé. Somewhere along the way, Straight Edge evolved into a mean-spirited, super-strict form of morality in Hardcore's temple of doom."<sup>138</sup> While a morality definitely played a role in straight edge, not all who have written on the movement have shared Blush's negative opinion. Sociologist Ross Haenfler described the same era that Blush writes about as having "a certain lightheartedness" in his book *Straight Edge: Clean-Living Youth, Hardcore Punk, and Social Change*.<sup>139</sup> By all accounts, straight edge brought more to hardcore than the three rules it was formed under: "don't smoke, don't drink, don't fuck," as band Minor Threat stated.<sup>140</sup> As a contemporary ethnographical researcher on Colorado's straight edge scene, Haenfler recognizes the negative aspects in individual scenes where violence has persisted, but his primary argument is that straight edge was and remains to be a positive form of youth subculture.

Sociologist Robert Wood suggests that straight edge is not homogeneous; thus, it cannot be simply categorized as a positive or negative form of youth subculture.<sup>141</sup> Wood makes the case that the only value that persists throughout straight edge is refraining from the use of drugs. While Blush condemns straight edge for its moralistic militancy, Haenfler acknowledges the many negative

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<sup>137</sup> O'Hara, *The Philosophy of Punk*, 142. This quote is a reference to seminal straight edge band Minor Threat.

<sup>138</sup> Blush, *American Hardcore*, 28.

<sup>139</sup> Ross Haenfler, *Straight Edge: Clean-Living Youth, Hardcore Punk, and Social Change* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 14.

<sup>140</sup> Minor Threat, *Out of Step* "Out Of Step," Dischord Records, 45 RPM vinyl, 1983.

<sup>141</sup> Robert Wood, *Straight Edge Youth: Complexity and Contradictions of a Subculture* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2006).

aspects of straight edge and its complexity, but ultimately argues that the positive aspects, generally ignored by outsiders, overshadow the negative aspects. Wood, like Haenfler, recognizes how broad straight edge is. Thus, he suggests characterizing it is better done on a small scale to account for individual scenes.

In New York City, particularly during hardcore's second wave, the straight edge philosophy took flight in a manner that could not have been foreseen at its inception. While straight edge had spread nationally, sometimes taking on the negative form described by Blush, New York welcomed a form mirroring the positive aspects outlined by Haenfler. Other writers and researchers have laid a groundwork for understanding the background of hardcore punk and straight edge on a broad scale, but none have focused on the anomaly of New York City's cultural phenomenon in its underground music venues, DIY record labels, DIY zines, and kids that made New York City hardcore and straight edge a scene unlike any other, thus ensuring its lasting existence and impact. The following sets out to answer how and why such a unique form of youth subculture took root in New York City.

### **Social Structures of Hardcore: The Pit, DIY Ethic, and Community**

In the early 1980s, hardcore punk had constructed itself around dissociation with cultural norms, and, for that, it seemingly welcomed opposition and criticism. In addition to appearance and attitude, there were other less visible aspects of hardcore's oppositional structure. These would have only been noticeable in the social settings in which hardcore punk took place. It was the sporadic intense dancing known as slam dancing, 'do-it-yourself' (DIY) ethic, and the relationships that formed individual scenes that were centered on a hardcore lifestyle. Though hardcore was never exclusive, it was a distinct subculture in which few associated. While negative perceptions from outside came naturally, what produced these perceptions were the same factors that constructed and solidified a hardcore identity and community.

One aspect of hardcore specific to the subculture was slam dancing. Slam dancing formed out of the characteristic punk dance, the pogo. While pogoing was generally to the beat of the music, slam dancing was more sporadic and violent. Though it seemingly had no structure, members of hardcore scenes recognized an order to slam dancing on the dance floor or in the pit. As anthropologist Bradford Scott Simon asserts, "the slam-pit expresses the potential

for attaining uneasy unity.”<sup>142</sup> As a result, Simon contends, “The punk and hardcore club environment stand in opposition to that outside, in the world. Slam-dancing allows people to interact not as role-players in a structured and continuously structuring society... but as equals bonded together in a group.”<sup>143</sup> This was certainly the case in New York, where slam dancing in the pit may have been violent, but members recognized it as unifying and unique to their community. Moreover, members did not make violence the purpose of entering the pit. If a member fell, others were quick to pick that member up; if a member got hurt, others would make sure the hurt member made it out of the pit. Members viewed the dance as a form of expression and physical release of emotion rather than just violence. Undoubtedly, the media used the chaos of the pit as evidence of punk and hardcore’s violence in its negative characterization of the subculture.<sup>144</sup> Witnessing the pit firsthand likely would not have changed these perceptions. Though the media did not portray it, etiquette and purpose permeated the pit, further defined punk and hardcore as distinct from social norms, and solidified a sense of community through a common practice.

As much as slam dancing was essential to hardcore, a DIY ethos was the heart of the subculture. In producing music, recordings, writing, and putting on performances, DIY was necessary in maintaining the distinction of the subculture as unique and separate from cultural norms. While punk had established commercial success in the 1970s, hardcore in the 1980s sought independence from conventional music structures. The result was the creation of record labels by bands and local members of the scene themselves. While Bad Brain released their debut single, “Pay To Cum,” themselves, Black Flag released music on their guitarist Greg Ginn’s label, SST records. Likewise, Washington D.C.’s The Teen Idles posthumously released their e.p. and formed a record label with the money that they had made while in the band. This label, Dischord Records, would become the template for DIY hardcore punk labels, releasing fundamental hardcore records from bands such as State of Alert and

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<sup>142</sup> Bradford Scott Simon, “Entering the Pit: Slam-Dancing and Modernity,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 31, no. 1 (Summer 1997): 159.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>144</sup> Anthony Civarelli, interview by Denise Richardson, *Good Day New York*, Fox, May 6, 1992.

Minor Threat.<sup>145</sup> In New York, the DIY ethic was instrumental in the scene. Jordan Cooper and Ray Cappo from the hardcore band Youth of Today formed Revelation Records and began putting out seminal New York hardcore albums from bands such as WarZone, Sick Of It All, Side By Side, Gorilla Biscuits, Youth of Today, and Judge.

Not only was the DIY ethic central to hardcore, it was also a learning experience. Jordan Cooper recalls, "I just learned about everything as it was being done."<sup>146</sup> Likewise, artists and writers created "zines," self-published fanzines compiled of art and written articles, to display their work. Furthermore, shows were held in makeshift venues, basements, and anywhere a band could play, and promoters were often just fans doing whatever they could to help a band play a show. Thus, the structure of hardcore depended on its DIY form. As Mark Stern of L.A.'s Youth Brigade put it, "We were about doing it yourself, thinking for yourself, believing that no matter how fucked up the world is and how fucked up the situation around you, that you can make a difference and can affect change and inspire people."<sup>147</sup> This was as true in New York as it was anywhere.

Both slam dancing and the DIY ethic characterized hardcore because they solidified a sense of community in the scene. These were things that set hardcore apart from cultural norms; thus, they were things that only members could identify with. This simple truth held true for hardcore scenes throughout the country. This was community that could not be recognized by outside observers. While this was particularly true in New York City, there was more to this community that formed around the City itself.

### **The Emergence of New York Hard Core**

The New York City hardcore punk scene of the 1980s reshaped what it meant to identify with the hardcore subculture. The punk scene of the mid and late 1970s that spawned the Ramones seemed to have been replaced by the emergence of bands with a harder edge. By the early 1980s, those involved in the

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<sup>145</sup> Kevin Dunn, "If It Ain't Cheap, It Ain't Punk': Walter Benjamin's Progressive Cultural Production and DIY Punk Record Label," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 24, no. 2 (June 2012): 219.

<sup>146</sup> Beth Lahickey, *All Ages: Reflections on Straight Edge* (Huntington Beach: Revelation Books, 1997), 52.

<sup>147</sup> Blush, *American Hardcore*, 275.

punk scene of New York City felt that they could not relate to the aimless direction of their local predecessors and sought the harder sound and more relevant content of bands that sprung up in California, Washington D.C., and Boston. While Black Flag and Bad Brains had introduced a faster, more aggressive, and much angrier sound than the punk that predated it, such bands as The Teen Idles, from Washington D.C., and Society System Decontrol, from Boston, began to promote ideas that seemed relevant to the social issues faced by the attendants of their shows. There was something that needed to be said on a more personal level for the hardcore punks who were truly influenced by living in New York City when racial tensions, poverty, and urban neglect were problems they witnessed daily. The New York City kids, who often found themselves squatting in abandoned buildings or in brawls on the street, found an affinity for punk's harder side. Hardcore, as a divergence from punk rock, was in its infancy in 1980 but was soon to be adopted and transformed by the venues and streets of New York City.

Distinct from punk, hardcore at the start of the 1980s set out to further establish itself as a phenomenon that was fundamentally different than any other youth subculture. As historian Dewar Macleod writes, "Hardcore took the stripped-down music of punk and stripped it down further."<sup>148</sup> Perhaps ironically, those that identified with hardcore particularly wished to distance themselves from what they witnessed in the punk scene. According to the singer of one of the original New York City hardcore bands, Roger Miret of Agnostic Front, "we started using the term 'hardcore' because we wanted to separate ourselves from the druggy... [punk] scene that was happening in New York at the time."<sup>149</sup> Hardcore kids, as they generally considered themselves, hoped to find camaraderie in New York City's Lower East Side. Freddy Cricien, brother to one of the members of Agnostic Front, writes that in New York hardcore "there was a family vibe amongst most of [the] rebellious and disenfranchised kids."<sup>150</sup> The relationships these hardcore kids formed were part of a process of identity-construction dependent on the realities of life in New York's inner

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<sup>148</sup> Dewar Macleod, *Kids of the Black Hole: Punk Rock in Postsuburban California* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010), 3.

<sup>149</sup> Jason Buhrmester, "Agnostic Front's *Victim in Pain* at 25," *VillageVoice.com*, December 1, 2009, accessed November 1, 2013. <http://www.villagevoice.com/2009-12-01/music/agnostic-front-s-victim-in-pain-at-25/>.

<sup>150</sup> Hurley, *Making A Scene*, 4.

city. As put by one member of the early New York hardcore scene, “it was this club where no one ever took membership and there was no barrier to entry. The fact of your being there meant you were accepted.”<sup>151</sup> Harley Flanagan, founding member of influential New York hardcore band Cro-Mags, considered the scene to be very inclusive, claiming “you [could] relate to the people and the bands.”<sup>152</sup> Inclusion was fundamental for the growth and survival of hardcore in New York. As put by John Porcelly, member of multiple New York hardcore bands, “Being a hardcore punk during the heyday of the CBGB’s era meant it was you against the world. Cops, hip-hop kids and drug dealers basically wanted you out and you had to be hard to survive those days. It influenced the sound and also brought the scene together because we just had each other back then.”<sup>153</sup> The acceptance within encouraged a drive for change beyond the walls of such venues as Max’s Kansas City, A7, and CBGB.

The role of New York’s social and structural environment in hardcore had just as much, if not more, influence as did hardcore bands from outside the City that were lighting the way through the uncharted ground of hardcore music. That is to say, New York hardcore was its own breed. The Lower East Side displayed the corrosion of a long neglected urban area nestled between high rent properties, a textbook image of gentrification in the 1980s.<sup>154</sup> The area was “infested with drugs and despairs, sadness, decimation and extreme unrest and trepidation.”<sup>155</sup> And as racial tension grew, hardcore found a rallying cry for unity and community to combat it. Fueled by the working class pride and hard-style look of skinheads, WarZone, a Lower East Side band founded in 1982, called for an end to what they classified as “the war between races.” In their song by the same title they declared, “Your prejudiced ways / are so fucked up/ Your mind’s so dense,” and demanded, “look inside yourself!”<sup>156</sup> Racial tension in the inner-city gave hardcore singers an issue that their fans could identify with. Though it was primarily dominated by white males, hardcore’s

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<sup>151</sup> Blush, *American Hardcore*, 174.

<sup>152</sup> *New York Hardcore*, In Effect (New York: In Effect Records, 1991) VHS.

<sup>153</sup> John Porcelly, interview by author, Santa Ana, CA, November 5, 2013.

<sup>154</sup> Caitlin Cahill, “Street Literacy: Urban Teenagers’ Strategies for Negotiating Their Neighbourhood,” *Journal of Youth Studies* 3, no. 3 (September, 2000): 251-277.

<sup>155</sup> Joel Rose, “Lower East Side: Directors Love It To A Fault,” *New York Times*, May 7, 1989.

<sup>156</sup> WarZone, *Lower East Side crew* “War Between Races,” Revelation Records, 45 RPM, 1987.

natural critical reaction to external factors attempted to construct an inclusive platform in comparison to the streets of the Lower East Side.

The community that grew from hardcore was one that flourished in the streets colored by graffiti, poverty, and drugs. The hardcore kids often lived as squatters or in low rent “punk houses” where multiple people shared crammed living spaces. The area was vital for the small venues that hardcore bands called home. As put by John Porcelly,

The lower east side of Manhattan in the 80’s was basically a wasteland, nothing like it is now. It was all lower income Spanish and Puerto Rican families, many homeless people, and drugs, especially crack, was widespread. The upside to this was that although it was dangerous, the rents were super cheap and attracted a lot of artists and musicians. It was a very creative time in NY.<sup>157</sup>

Thus, New York’s inner city gave hardcore members not only lyrical content, but it provided space that allowed for the music to grow without restriction. In essence, hardcore made the space its own, beholden to no one other than the kids. This was the necessary environment for hardcore members to form their scene. The deterioration that encouraged artistic expression and the gang and drug related violence that encouraged camaraderie produced the two necessary ingredients for a burgeoning hardcore scene.

Any space that would allow for a show to be held brought outside inspiration from touring hardcore bands and created a foundation for locals. For example, A7, a 200 square foot venue in New York City’s East Village has been labeled by Steve Blush as both a “shithole” and New York hardcore’s “spiritual home when hardcore was introduced to New York in 1981.”<sup>158</sup> Both labels characterized an ideal space for shows. It took 75 people to fill A7, but more well-known bands, such as Bad Brains or Black Flag, would fill the room beyond capacity. Parris Mayhew of the band Cro-Mags recalls, “There’d be ten bands a night for three bucks. There’d be a sheet of loose-leaf paper with the bands’ names. You’d knock on the door and enter this little world where there were 70-100 kids.”<sup>159</sup> The construction of “this little world” by and for hardcore kids made

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<sup>157</sup> John Porcelly, interview by author.

<sup>158</sup> Blush, *American Hardcore*, 177.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*

it a unique subculture that was completely independent. The music had no intention or interest in expansion beyond venues such as A7 or the basement on 171 Avenue A, which doubled as a record store.

While New York's first wave of hardcore introduced quintessential bands and venues, after the establishment of a vibrant scene, the focus on its creation and unity were lost. By 1985, older members felt that new kids entered the subculture taking it for granted. Pete Steele of the New York band Carnivore recalls, "The scene started to attract so much attention that the hardcore kids got out of it and bowed out. You'd have kids showing up that looked like Skinheads but weren't really skinheads. It was just style... it got exploited."<sup>160</sup> Early New York bands created a precedent for second wave bands, but by 1985, the scene had changed and seemed to be self-destructing. Nonetheless, while some members may have become disillusioned with the scene, the second wave would introduce a new sense of urgency that would advance many of the fundamental ideals established in the first wave.

### **Youth Crew: New York Hardcore 85-90**

Unfortunately, by 1985, hardcore in New York resembled what it had first intended to escape: a drug infested and aimless scene. John Porcelly describes the condition of hardcore in 1985 as a mirror image of the things he despised outside the scene that had first led him to hardcore. Hoping he would escape social norms through hardcore, Porcelly ironically found that in New York hardcore "the clothes were dirtier and people had weirder haircuts, but basically they were doing the same things that every burnout in my high school was doing – listening to music, getting drunk, and getting in fights."<sup>161</sup> As original New York hardcore members had wanted to dissociate from what they saw in the punk scene at the start of the decade, Porcelly and other younger members of the scene sought to establish themselves with new sound, content, and style that was distinct from what was already taking place in hardcore.

By mid-decade, the early bands that had formed New York's hardcore scene had seemingly begun to cross over into a more metal and commercial sound. This meant a broader audience and the necessary shift of lyrical content to cater to a wider range of fans. For Agnostic Front, this meant that their earlier cries

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<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>161</sup> Lahickey, *All Ages*, 130.

for local unity were overshadowed by a growing national audience and lyrics critical of the inhabitants of the low-income neighborhoods from which they came. For example, their song, "Public Assistance," was an attack on public welfare programs: "Uncle Sam takes half my pay/ so you can live for free/ I got a family and bills to pay/ No one hands money to me."<sup>162</sup> The song received much criticism from within the scene on a national level. While this conservative shift inspired some New York bands and helped to categorize New York's scene politically, a growing subgroup of hardcore kids wanted to reestablish what they believed to be the inherent nature of the music.

Porcelly's band, Youth of Today, ushered in the second wave of hardcore in New York City that once again set out to establish an identity for hardcore punk that was distinct from cultural norms. Porcelly and charismatic front man Ray Cappo wanted to bring a positive message to the hardcore scene that would challenge the prevailing norms of the mid-1980s. Like Porcelly, Cappo began associating with hardcore in the hopes of escaping the drug and party-centered lifestyle of his peers. Cappo attended his first hardcore show in New York City at age fifteen. Seeing English band UK Subs and New York locals The Young and The Useless, Cappo recalls, "was a show that served as a spring board for me to dive head first into American Hardcore... I fell in love with hardcore." However, Cappo was unsure about the direction the scene was headed in the mid-1980s. He was unique amongst hardcore members. He writes, "I was athletic. That wasn't [hardcore]. I always despised lethargy, violence and intoxication. I was vexed and confused how these things were such a dominating force in my alternative scene. That shit was happening in the regular scenes of the suburbs. I wanted an alternative."<sup>163</sup>

Cappo, Porcelly, and Youth of Today took it upon themselves to create an alternative in the New York hardcore scene. They were heavily influenced by Nevada's 7 Seconds, an early hardcore band that preached the importance of including women in hardcore, peace, sobriety, and an intrinsic value of youth as a state of questioning social construction. Cappo and Porcelly felt that these points were necessary characteristics of hardcore; without them there would be little distinction between what existed beyond and within the four cramped walls

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<sup>162</sup> Agnostic Front, *Cause for Alarm* "Public Assistance," Combat/Relativity Records, 45 RPM, 1986.

<sup>163</sup> Lahickey, *All Ages*, x-xi.

of CBGB's Sunday matinees. Thus, with the heavy-hitting sound of ultra-fast drumbeats, heavily distorted guitar tones, and vocals that generally sounded like chaotic shouting and growling, Youth of Today was formed.

While the music's staccato structure was important, the most significant departure was not the sound; it was the message. Their first release on a hardcore colleague's record label, Positive Force Records, made this clear. Amid calls to end conflict within the scene, and messages of faith and trust in peoples' capacity to do good, Cappo spawned a rallying cry for hardcore kids. He declared, "to the positive youth my heart I pledge / X on my hand now take the oath/ to positive youth to positive growth / to positive minds, to pure clean souls / these will be all my goals" and encouraged those who listened to "walk with me and my crew."<sup>164</sup> Youth crew was thus formed and took on questions of ethical significance while adhering to optimistic perspectives. Furthermore, Youth of Today, and youth crew was characterized by a new appearance and style.

In 1985, hardcore bands in the city and its surrounding area began to embrace an image that simply was *not* hardcore as it was known in New York. Similar to members in Boston's Society System Decontrol and Southern California's Uniform Choice, Youth of Today mirrored the image of high school jocks that they despised more than drugged-out hardcore kids they associated with. In running shoes, Champion brand pullovers, collegiate sweatshirts, and sportswear, there was a new intensity in their appearance that expressed a sense of urgency to the scene. Many young participants chose to follow Cappo and his crew, and new youth crew bands sprang up quickly. Bands such as Bold, Side By Side, and Gorilla Biscuits embraced the new form of hardcore that spread throughout New York City. Each of these had one common thread: promotion of straight edge ideology.

Straight edge was in many ways the nucleus of New York City's youth crew scene and second wave of punk, but it was also a contentious and complex topic. Washington D.C. Band Minor Threat first established straight edge. Beyond the intentions of Minor Threat's singer, Ian Mackaye, straight edge became something of a movement within hardcore. When Mackaye had first written the words to "Out of Step" and "Straight Edge," two straight edge anthems critical

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<sup>164</sup> Youth of Today, *Can't Close My Eyes* "Youth Crew," Revelation Records, 45 RPM, 1988.

of conventional uses of drugs, alcohol, and an overemphasis on sex among his peers, he did so out of personal reflection. He did not believe his words would grow into the movement that would come of it. Straight edge would not reach New York in any influential form until hardcore's second wave. Ray Cappo recalls being brushed aside by a local show promoter who told him, "If you think you're going to start a straight edge scene in New York, you're a joke.... There's too many drugs,"<sup>165</sup> The fact remained that New York had in many ways closed its doors to new ideas by the mid-1980s and had largely returned to a state of complacency similar to the 1970s, only with a harder sound. However, just as the scene had been ripe for a drive against racial inequities and urban strife at the start of the 1980s, it was now the perfect opportunity for young bands to reform the apathetic scene. Moreover, straight edge became a tool for reflection on issues that did not directly impact the scene and inner city culture. It cultivated distinct concern for issues relative but beyond the immediate interest of New York hardcore. Its distinction was solidified by its style, imagery, and symbolism.

From inception, straight edge members chose the symbol of an X to represent them. If a club held a show, the club often refused to admit fans under drinking age.<sup>166</sup> Some clubs, however, let these kids in but marked their hands with an X; straight edge members soon adopted this symbol as their own. Ian Mackaye recounts that being marked by an X "[was] just what kids... had to deal with just to see music, to be free."<sup>167</sup> Reallocating its purpose, band members or fans would willingly draw X's on their own hands in an intended defiant manner. The symbol represented that whether they were of legal age to drink or not, they were proud to be sober. The stigma of being underage was thus turned into a source of pride and source of defining grounds for solidarity, as suggested by Youth of Today. The symbol eventually evolved into XXX. The three X's represented the three components of straight edge. As Haenlfer writes, "The basic tenets of [straight edge] are quite simple: members abstain,

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<sup>165</sup> Lahickey, *All Ages*, 24.

<sup>166</sup> In both Washington D.C., where straight edge originated, and New York, the legal drinking age was eighteen at the start of the 1980s. Joshua Barbanel, "Issue and Debate: Raising New York Drinking Age to 21," *New York Times*, May 28, 1984.

<sup>167</sup> Lahickey, *All Ages*, 100.

completely, from drug, alcohol, and tobacco use and usually reserve sexual activity for caring relationships, rejecting casual sex.”<sup>168</sup> Ian Mackaye stated the rules of straight edge more bluntly: again, “[1] don’t drink, [2] don’t smoke, [3] don’t fuck.”<sup>169</sup>

The style, symbols, and tenets of straight edge represented a new rebellion. As New York hardcore member Beth Lahickey writes, straight edge was “an untraditional form of rebellion... rebelling against the traditional forms of rebellion.”<sup>170</sup> It was a rebellion against New York’s drug culture, as well as hippy counterculture; thus, recognizing the value of counterculture by rejecting one aspect of one counterculture to form another. As Haenfler suggests, straight edge formed as a sort of culmination in skinhead, punk, and hippy ideals, all embracing rebellion.<sup>171</sup> While drug use had seemingly been synonymous with rebelliousness, straight edge members contended that mind-altering drugs, alcohol, and overemphasis on sex inhibited true rebellion. As New York show promoter Dave Stein recalls, “the rebellion, the angst, the being fed up with the status quo – lost all of its validity when people were doing all these things that destroyed themselves.”<sup>172</sup> Those that adopted straight edge did not want to inhibit their rebellion by obscuring reality through mind-altering drugs and addictions. Expressed in Minor Threat’s “Straight Edge,” such inhibitors merely constituted a crutch.

Nevertheless, reasons for becoming straight edge were as complex as hardcore itself. Along with a sense of defiance against the status quo within and beyond the hardcore scene and camaraderie, many straight edge members identified it with a sense of freedom from larger cultural values. Nonetheless, many straight edge members did not identify as straight edge with the pretense of rebellion or freedom at all. These members, just lacked interest in what straight edge opposed. Many straight edge members, perhaps validly, were accused of simply following a hardcore trend or of being attracted to the label and identity that being straight edge brought with it. Of course, no one would admit this, as hardcore members were particularly critical of trends. Whatever the case, reasons behind membership did not divide the members; following the three

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<sup>168</sup> Haenfler, *Straight Edge*, 10.

<sup>169</sup> Minor Threat, *Out of Step*.

<sup>170</sup> Lahickey, *All Ages*, xviii.

<sup>171</sup> Haenfler, *Straight Edge*, 174.

<sup>172</sup> Lahickey, *All Ages*, 27.

tenets were the essence of straight edge solidarity. According to John Porcelly, "People became [straight edge] for many different reasons. Some wanted to get off drugs, some wanted to be cool, some wanted to live a healthy lifestyle. Whatever the reason, straight edge helped them navigate their adolescence in a much clearer way and had a far reaching, positive impact on the scene."<sup>173</sup>

This attitude reflected the complexity of straight edge and the national climate into which it was born. Associating straight edge with the conservative political ideology in hardcore was easy on face value; however, the diversity of its members and issues straight edge bands addressed proved it to not be so easily classified. As Haenfeler acknowledges, straight edge's "emphasis on clean living, sexual purity, lifetime commitment, and meaningful community was reminiscent of youth evangelical movements, while the focus on self-control suggested Puritanical roots."<sup>174</sup> Moreover, a more contemporary and immediate association could be made between Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No" campaign during the 1980s and straight edge. As sociologists Patrick Williams and Heith Copes recognize, "straightedge came to be viewed by many pundits (including some punks) as a perverse form of Ronald Reagan's neoconservative politics."<sup>175</sup> However, perhaps more appropriately in New York, straight edge also represented New Left radicalism on moral and humanitarian grounds. This opposition resulted in emotional satisfaction from members that derived from expressing personal values in action.<sup>176</sup> The action was hardcore.

While straight edge was diverse and not exclusive beyond its three tenets, in New York City, as in many other cities, the hardcore scene did not accept it. As straight edge began to grow from 1986 onward, resentment boiled in those who had been a part of the scene since its inception. To them, it seemed as though the scene had been taken over by kids that were ignorant of its past. Many others felt that straight edge members maintained too much pride in such a minor and personal choice to be straight edge. In 1988, Steve Martin of Agnostic Front in 1988 said "Everyday there is like a new straight edge band

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<sup>173</sup> John Porcelly, interview by author.

<sup>174</sup> Ross Haenfeler, "Rethinking Subcultural Resistance: Core Values of the Straight Edge Movement," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 33 (2004): 416.

<sup>175</sup> Patrick Williams and Heith Copes, "How Edge Are You? Constructing Authentic Identities and Subcultural Boundaries in a Straightedge Internet Forum," *Symbolic Interaction* 28 (2005): 70.

<sup>176</sup> Frank Parkin, *Middle Class Radicalism; The Social Bases of the British Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament* (New York: F.A. Praeger, 1968), 41.

playing. Their songs are just retreads of what has been said before a million times better back in 1983 when straight edge wasn't so fashionable."<sup>177</sup> Martin represents many within the scenes who dismissed straight edge as a fad, and again criticized any type of fashion forming out of hardcore. He asserted, "A lot of these kids just jumped on the band wagon, that's the best way of putting it. I really don't like the way a lot of these kids will turn their nose up at a band if they don't have the straight edge look, or if they don't sing songs about straight edge."<sup>178</sup> Undoubtedly, some straight edge members took on the label with a perception of moral high ground, and many who were not straight edge attacked its perceived narcissistic badge of honor. However, its critics were generally dissociated from, and ignorant of, the individual character of each member of straight edge. What would come out of straight edge in New York would prove to be in line with the fundamental ethos of hardcore.

Regardless of its critics, straight edge took New York hardcore by storm, adhering to hardcore punk ideals at its core. Youth of Today emphasized this connection through lyrics that expressed the need for unity and community inside and outside of the scene. In their song, "Break Down the Walls," they urged whoever listened to "Look beyond the fashion or crowd that they're in/ Look beyond their riches or the color of their skin/ Look beyond appearance and the truth you will find/ Look for what's inside before you make up your mind."<sup>179</sup> As Youth of Today suggested, Straight edge had in no way broken off from the ideals that Minor Threat had advocated and had in no way split from the ethos of social change that had spirited the birth of New York hardcore. While New York's scene had in many ways become stagnant by 1985, straight edge showed that rebellion remained the true nature of hardcore. This rebellion was wrapped in a cloak of positivity during the second wave. Along with being labeled as youth crew bands, many of the same bands began to be characterized as 'positive bands.' As members of the growing straight edge, youth crew, and positive scene began to take on an identity distinct from their peers, they nevertheless embraced their value within hardcore. Straight edge

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<sup>177</sup> Roger Miret and Vinny Stigma, interview by Kent, "Agnostic Front interview," *No Answers*, 1988, 4.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>179</sup> Youth of Today, *Break Down the Walls* "Break Down the Walls," Revelation Records, 45 RPM, 1986.

simply expanded on hardcore, and many recognized that its tenets did not ban hardcore's rebellion.

Diverging from the problems within the City and in the scene itself, animal rights became a pressing issue for many straight edge members. This had some precedent in British anarchistic punk bands, most notably Conflict and Oi Polloi, both of which took the questions of animal liberation head-on by advocating direct action against the livestock farming industry. New York's own anarchist punks, Nausea, would follow suit in their 1990 song, "Butchers." However, Youth of Today first brought this issue to the attention of New York's hardcore scene. The lyrical content in punk that gave the issue precedent in hardcore was generally not recognized by hardcore members. Unlike the obscure relationship between punk and early hardcore as it diverged from the former, by the mid-1980s, hardcore was distinct with few members recognizing the parallels of the punk that coexisted with its hardcore counterpart of the mid and late 1980s. Though, not ignoring the problems they saw in front of them, animal welfare became an issue of new concern for many New York hardcore members, embracing external concerns the movement had failed to acknowledge at its outset.

Reaching beyond hardcore's scene into animal rights was a natural progression. By resisting alcohol and drugs, straight edge members had already felt a significant distinction between themselves and society as a whole. For them, vegetarianism did not constitute a major development. As Mackaye explained, "I think that vegetarianism was a logical step... The idea in my life, of the process that is, is re-examining things given to me and seeing if they work and constantly working to try and make myself better – do a better job in the world."<sup>180</sup> Members of straight edge had two primary reasons to combat animal cruelty; veganism and vegetarian dietary choices correlated easily to their existing convictions. The first was bodily intake. Undoubtedly, those involved in straight edge had a predisposition to question what they consumed; meat was no exception. For some straight edge members, this meant adopting a vegan or vegetarian diet for reasons relative to their health; however, this was not the case for most members. Most members concluded from their questioning of consumption that there were reasons beyond their own bodies to adopt a new diet.

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<sup>180</sup> Lahickey, *All Ages*, 103.

Mackaye's reasoning dealt with more than consumption; he focused on ethics. More than extending straight edge ideals, embracing ethical dietary choices represented interests beyond that of the individual tenets of straight edge. The relationship between ethics and straight edge was often seen by its members in the significance in soberness as a form of clarity. Members felt that refraining from addictive behaviors allowed them to focus on matters of more significance, such as animal welfare. Youth of Today recorded their animal rights anthem, "No More," in 1988: "Meat eating, flesh eating, think about it / So callous to this crime we commit / Always Stuffing our face with no sympathy / What a selfish, hardened society so / No More / Just looking out for myself / When the price paid is the life of something else / No More / I won't participate." Though the band was unaware and concerned about the reaction they would get over song content foreign to hardcore, members of the scene quickly adopted Youth of Today's message. According to Porcelly, after the release of "No More," "practically the whole scene went vegetarian. When we wrote that song we weren't sure if kids would be into the idea or completely turned off by it. But we didn't care. It was such an urgent message."<sup>181</sup> Soon after, vocalist Anthony Civarelli of New York's straight edge band Gorilla Biscuits followed suit in their song, "Cats and Dogs." He exclaimed, "My true compassion is for all living things and not just the ones who are cute so I do what I can / I want to save lives and I've got a plan."<sup>182</sup>

The message of animal rights had a huge impact on hardcore and straight edge throughout the country. Bands such as Insted, emulated the youth crew sound and concern for animal rights in their songs "Maybe Tomorrow" and "Feel Their Pain." Insted asserted, "It's my philosophy / To take life is criminal / From the smiling clown / To the billions served / Represents to me bloodshed undeserved / Hear my words / Feel their pain / Eating their flesh / You have nothing to gain."<sup>183</sup> The message also influenced first wave hardcore bands in the late 1980s. Early New York band Cro-Mags advocated animal rights in their 1989 song, "Death Camps," asserting that meat eating is a product of being conditioned to eat meat since birth, but it is not ethically justifiable.<sup>184</sup> Karl

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<sup>181</sup> Lahickey, *All Ages*, 131.

<sup>182</sup> Gorilla Biscuits, *Start Today* "Cats and Dogs," Revelation Records, 45 RPM, 1989.

<sup>183</sup> Insted, *We'll Make the Difference* "Feel Their Pain," Nemesis Record, 331/3 RPM, 1989.

<sup>184</sup> Cro-Mags, *Best Wishes* "Death Camps," Profile Records, 45 RPM, 1989.

Buechner formed his band, Earth Crisis, in 1989 with both straight edge and veganism as primary focuses for lyrical content, endorsing direct action from such groups as the Animal Liberation Front and Earth Liberation Front. The ideas expressed by bands such as Earth Crisis would ultimately form a distinct social circle in hardcore known for militancy: hardline. Hardline and its strict vegan message developed a national following in the mid-1990s.

Though vegetarianism and veganism were not necessary tenets of straight edge, such dietary choices morphed into the straight edge identity. By the 1990s, vegetarianism and veganism were so closely identified with straight edge that many considered vegetarianism another tenet. A 1995 *New York Times* article stated “The Straight Edge rules: no liquor, drugs, or meat.”<sup>185</sup> However, straight edge members still recognized that the *fourth X* was not absolutely necessary. As the straight edge movement reached beyond the original tenets and beyond the immediate interests of the scene, members did some introspection. Many later bands would become adamant about including veganism’s in straight edge. While the ethic of animal welfare was not a necessary tenet, its popularity in the scene conveyed that the movement valued ethics and self-reflection.

While hardcore began taking on issues larger than those that were immediate to the scene, members seemingly overlooked one crucial element within. Hardcore generally idealized an egalitarian scene in which each member was as vital as the next whether they be a show promoter, band member, or just a fan. However, attitudes towards women reflected more of the mainstream culture than an environment of equality. Women in hardcore and straight edge faced the broader social difficulty of negotiating their identity in a scene that promoted acceptance while being male dominated. More males seemed to be drawn to the aggressive and angry nature of New York hardcore at its inception, particularly slam dancing. Early members often adopted a favorable view of masculinity as a seemingly natural reaction to their disenfranchisement, which supports the sociological theory that subcultures are generally male-dominate as a result of limited upward mobility.<sup>186</sup> Many New York bands, such as Rest in Pieces and Break Down, used imagery that idealized a masculine appearance and physical strength. As hardcore continued into the mid and late 1980s, reflection caused

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<sup>185</sup> Jennifer Steinhauer “Clean Living’s New Look,” *New York Times*, July 16, 1995.

<sup>186</sup> Albert Cohen, *Delinquent Boys: The Culture of the Gang* (London: Collier-Macmillan, 1955), 55.

members to reevaluate the scene, resulting in a unique expansion toward issues like animal rights and ethical concerns. For women, however, their place in hardcore was often the back of CBGBs and other small venues where they could avoid the violence of “the pit.”

Nonetheless, women participated in the scene and took many unique, as well as shared, experiences from it. Many saw hardcore as at least a small improvement to society’s hegemonic masculinity. Attitudes towards women were almost never outwardly negative in the scene. In fact, men often welcomed women and encouraged them to take part in hardcore. Most members within hardcore embraced the punk ideal that women’s involvement should allow them to “move from backup singers to musicians and from groupies to participants with an accompanying fashion style that blew away traditional ideas about women’s appearance.”<sup>187</sup> Hurley, for one, writes about being welcomed into hardcore as an outsider who had first come to the scene as a photographer. Bands such as Reno’s 7 Seconds attempted to bring the issue to the attention of all those involved in hardcore. Their song, “Not Just Boys’ Fun,” acknowledged the disparity between men and women in hardcore and recognized the value and importance of participation by women: “There’s girls who put out fanzines, and others put on shows / Yet they’re not allowed to get out on the floor / Some make music, well that you can accept / Hell, maybe live you’ll get some tits and ass / You fucking moron, your brains have run amuck / A girl’s only lot in life is not to fuck!” Doubtless, hardcore during the 1980s was a clear medium for advocating gender equality. In many cases, women within the scene took advantage of this. However, in New York, while women actively participated in the scene, no notable effort was made within the scene to reestablish gender roles in the interest of equality. As New York hardcore member Susan Martinez recalls, “being a girl at shows was extremely alienating at times. Girl bands or even girls in bands were so rare, and even then, mocked by boys.”<sup>188</sup> Ultimately, whether or not people made an effort to subvert gender norms in hardcore and whether or not they welcomed women into the scene, women were severely under-represented.

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<sup>187</sup> Jamie Mullaney, “‘Unity Admirable But Not Necessarily Headed’: Going Rates and Gender Boundaries in the Straight Edge Hardcore Music Scene,” *Gender & Society* 21 (2007): 385.

<sup>188</sup> Lahickey, *All Ages*, 112.

Straight edge both rejected hegemonic masculinity while also recreating it.<sup>189</sup> This replication of gender norms was not overt, but a subconscious byproduct of the masculine identity that hardcore valued. Thus, hardcore quickly adopted and perpetuated hegemonic masculinity. Coupled with the established interest in masculinity by hardcore participants, straight edge associated abstinence with a mental strength that transcended into physical strength, helping to perpetuate hegemonic masculinity. One New York straight edge band in particular, Project X, made the association between mental and physical strength clear through their lyrics: "I'm as straight as the line that you sniff up your nose / I'm as hard as the booze that you swill down your throat / I'm as bad as the shit you breath into your lungs / And I'll fuck you up as fast as the pill on your tongue." Project X frontman John Porcelly had originally written these lyrics with the intention of using them for Youth of Today, but Ray Cappo declared them too militant. Nonetheless, the very short lived Project X had a significant impact on New York hardcore and strengthened the relationship between masculinity and straight edge.

Beyond idealized virility, straight edge members' views on sex often encouraged involuntary rejection of women. Some men, rather than recognizing women's own interest in the scene for reasons as diverse as their own, associated female participation with common stereotypes of women in leisurely social settings; in a most simplistic suggestion, women were there to be approached by men. Though this was not a view delegated to all women by all male hardcore members, it very likely was present enough to have had the potential to encourage a female member's dissociation. This certainly had precedent in hardcore. Non-straight edge band, Adolescents, from Los Angeles, called attention to a certain *type* of hardcore girl in their song, "L.A. Girl:" "You'd fuck any guy in town / Your life's a total mess up / Why the hell do you hang around?"<sup>190</sup> Likewise, negative stereotypes could have been perpetuated by other women. Early New York City scene member Laura Albert contends about the first wave, "The role of women in the scene was as the sexual outlet or as something that hung on the arm and stood on the side. Women weren't welcome in the mosh

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<sup>189</sup> Haenfler, *Straight Edge*, 95.

<sup>190</sup> Adolescence, *Adolescence* "LA Girl," Frontier Records, 45 RPM, 1981.

pit... [women] weren't welcome in the bands. Girls didn't welcome each other, either; there was no camaraderie. The only thing you could really offer was sex."<sup>191</sup> While the second wave seemed significantly more open for women's participation beyond sex, a stigma remained. Though not exclusive to straight edge, it was this stigma and the tenets of straight edge that led to the questioning of the motives of female members. This again resulted in the replication and perpetuation of larger societies structures of gender.

Ultimately, women involved in hardcore and straight edge faced the issue of self-construction. Many women came to hardcore with the intention of escaping the passive, quiet, and ladylike ideal of them projected by larger society. However, it was not easy to adopt the aggressive manners associated with hardcore when the perception by many men in the scene was still more in line with the norms women hoped to avoid. According to Laura Albert, "I was always aware of this very male sexual energy going on, and since I wasn't a boy, I couldn't be part of it. I wanted something from these people but I knew I didn't want to actually have sex with them. I had this feeling that I would've gotten more if I was a boy."<sup>192</sup> However, bands, such as the all-male 7 Seconds, attempted to defy social norms for women through their music. As sociologist Jamie Mullaney asserts, "Music subcultures that aim not only to embrace women as participants and musicians but also to consciously subvert dominant conceptualizations of femininity often end up reproducing the structures of inequality they purport to defy."<sup>193</sup> Hardcore during the latter half of the 1980s exemplified this. Perceptions of what it meant to be hardcore conflicted with societal norms of femininity. Thus, women within hardcore were restricted by new structures of gender within the scene. In a 1987 interview on New York University radio, all-male New York hardcore band WarZone discussed the importance of having the "WarZone women" behind the band. They commented that "there is a good woman behind every man," and thus, it was the case that there were *good women* behind their band.<sup>194</sup> This attitude perpetuated gender roles in the scene. If women were to take on roles generally associated with men, they could have very well faced being mocked, as Susan Martinez

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<sup>191</sup> Blush, *American Hardcore*, 34.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>193</sup> Mullaney, "Unity Admirable," 387.

<sup>194</sup> WarZone, interview by Spermicide, *Crucial Chaos Radio Show*, WNYU 89.1 New York, 1987.

recounts. Thus, women in hardcore were often left to find a balance between hardcore and ladylike characteristics to solidify their place in the scene.

While hardcore and straight edge would ultimately adhere to larger society's cultural perspectives of gender, most women within the scene still saw hardcore as a better alternative and may have never even recognized any problems. Dawn, a late 1980s New York City female member of the scene, suggests that women in the scene were little different than men and all played an important role. Speaking about the entire scene and individual ownership of it, Dawn asserted, "We're building something that's completely new and different and, you know, it's going to be a real alternative and a real way for people like us to exist in this world."<sup>195</sup> Another member of New York's scene recalls, "I never felt any different about being a girl at straight edge shows, and I think that point perfectly illustrates the beauty and personality, aside from the physical, between girls and guys in the hardcore scene."<sup>196</sup> These different attitudes reveal that all members likely had different perspectives. The complexity of the issue extends even further when considering the different settings of hardcore. Masculinity seemed an essential part of participating in slam dancing; however, men involved in hardcore often purported to promote equality between the sexes. This may have often been easier to recognize outside CBGB's before a show began, a much different setting than "the pit." Summing up the boundaries and structure of gender in hardcore, Ian Mackaye, acknowledging gender inequality in hardcore but suggesting it gradually diminished, proclaims, "You can say it was total misogyny, or that here were these boys who forced an issue and made it possible for an era where more women are in bands than ever before. If you walk into a show now and see a band with three women and a boy, do you even think twice about it? No! So shoot some props out to the hardcore kids."<sup>197</sup> Of course, Ian was a male member of the scene, perhaps rendering his opinion biased. Nonetheless, many women recognized the value of being members of hardcore regardless of gender.

Likewise, gay members of the scene faced many of the same obstacles that some female members faced, particularly in New York. During the first half of the decade while the popularity of skinhead culture reached an apex, gay

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<sup>195</sup> Wood, *Straight Edge Youth*, 43.

<sup>196</sup> Lahickey, *All Ages*, 193.

<sup>197</sup> Blush, *American Hardcore*, 35.

members of the scene were not accepted. Representing a popular and contradictory view among skinheads in New York, Roger Miret of Agnostic Front declared in 1985, "I don't beat up gay guys, but let them stay on the West Side. If I see a guy rubbing his crotch and licking his lips, I'll put him out. I have friends who are, but I don't want to know what they do."<sup>198</sup> This statement expresses the idealized masculine social structure that characterized hardcore. As Steven Blush writes, "In NYC, starving young Skinheads would make 20 bucks blowing old men in the West Village – then, to 'right themselves,' would return to the East Village to fag-bash."<sup>199</sup> Blush reveals the complexity of masculinity as expressed in hardcore settings.

As hardcore merged into its second wave and straight edge took its place as a major force behind New York City hardcore, violent attitudes towards homosexuality dwindled. Straight edge did not have the same impact on homosexuality as it on women. Furthermore, many bands outside of New York embraced homosexuality, which set an example for New York bands. Hardcore bands such as the Dicks, Big Boys, and Meatmen all had at least one gay member and made their homosexuality a lyrical theme. Nonetheless, no gay New York bands emerged, though there were certainly gay members of the scene. Thus, just like women, gay members had to formulate an identity that fit both the structures of hardcore and homosexuality, a hard balance to find particularly in New York.

Hardcore in New York and around the country in the 1980s was a white male dominated scene. Escaping this dominance in exchange for an egalitarian community was clearly a challenge to a scene that hardly recognized its restrictions. However, hardcore proved itself capable of transforming again and again. Hardcore grew out of the complacent punk rock, and underwent another transformation with the birth of straight edge. However, New York hardcore never truly addressed the issues of gender and sexuality to improve the scene for all of its members. As the scene grew, it in large part lost sight of its inclusive nature by further embracing masculinity and militancy that many original straight edge members felt caused it to regress. As Lahickey writes, "Unfortunately as the straight edge scene progressed, it became hauntingly reminiscent of all the narrow-mindedness that hardcore had given me refuge

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<sup>198</sup> Roger Miret, interview by *Flipside* #45, 1985.

<sup>199</sup> Blush, *American Hardcore*, 37.

from.... It all began to make me feel uncomfortable. I fell in love with hardcore for the freedom I felt from others' expectations. Straight edge became just a different set of rules."<sup>200</sup>

### **Straight Edge Militancy and Fragmentation**

By the end of the decade, the dramatic explosion of straight edge had dwindled. In fact, there was growing criticism from new members to the scene, similar to the older members who had at first been apprehensive of straight edge's message. As fewer hardcore members began adopting the straight edge label, more straight edge members began "dropping the label" or "selling out," which meant denouncing any of the tenets of straight edge. As straight edge's popularity began to diminish, becoming more contentious than ever before, some members felt unsettled by the criticism of straight edge. Mike Judge, most notably of the band Judge, but playing briefly for Youth of Today recalls, "in New York I could see how the whole straight edge seemed to be taking a beating from all sides, especially Youth of Today. I don't know whether it was because Youth of Today was more outspoken than the rest of the straight edge bands were... I thought it was really weird because Youth of Today was always about trying to be good to yourself and good to other people around you."<sup>201</sup> Many critics of straight edge again began to assert that it was a supercilious identity. Mike Judge continues, "I was mad at these people who were saying we were these elitist, Nazi-type straight edge guys."<sup>202</sup>

For Mike Judge and John Porcelly, it seemed necessary to react to the critics of straight edge. While Mike Judge was in Youth of Today, he began writing lyrics for a new project that would become the band Judge. With Porcelly on guitar, the idea behind the band was to give critics of straight edge "a little bit of what they thought we were about."<sup>203</sup> The opening song from their first release was an overt attack: "Smoking that butt / It makes you mature / A slave to sex / And you tell me you're pure / You slam that beer / It makes you a man / I'll try to keep my cool / But you better understand / UNDERSTAND!"<sup>204</sup> The following song, "In My Way," pushed the point even further, declaring, "Those

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<sup>200</sup> Lahickey, *All Ages*, xviii.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>203</sup> Lahickey, *All Ages*, 79.

<sup>204</sup> Judge, *New York Crew* "Fed Up," Schism Records, 33 1/3 RPM, 1988.

drugs are gonna kill you / If I don't get to you first."<sup>205</sup> Far from a general condemnation of all drug users, Mike Judge would later claim these words were written about his cousin.<sup>206</sup> Nonetheless, critics did understand the story behind the song, and the attack seemed broad to any listener. Project X released their EP, *Straight Edge Revenge*, in the same militant vein.

The militant lyrical content did nothing to resolve criticism of straight edge. What's more, it was in many ways a contradiction to the ideals put forth by Mackaye in *Minor Threat* and Cappo in *Youth of Today*, along with a slew of other straight edge bands that identified with positivity. Mackaye became disillusioned with straight edge and in many ways tried to dissociate with it, particularly the more militant side. Mackaye declared "It was always, in my mind, a celebration of an individual's right to choose his or her way of living... people who pushed a movement, particularly a militant movement, really lost sight of human beings."<sup>207</sup> Furthermore, he clarified what he had not intended when he had written the words that made straight edge its own movement within hardcore: "I don't want people to ever use my words ever to hurt anybody ever!"<sup>208</sup> Nonetheless, militancy in straight edge seemed to become more and more prevalent, resulting in violence at shows between straight edge and non-straight edge hardcore members with straight edge members often being the antagonists.

For Mike Judge and John Porcelly, it did not take long for their words to catch up to them. They had at first written militant lyrics as a reaction to critics who they felt were ignorant of what straight edge truly was. They saw it as a positive, but as Judge suggested, he and Porcelly twisted the original theme of positivity to give critics what they wanted to hear. This was largely due to frustration and disillusion in a hardcore scene in which they felt straight edge had merit. To their dismay, the frustration resulted in lyrical content that would ultimately tear down straight edge as a symbol of positivity and growth. While Judge and Porcelly perhaps should have foreseen straight edge members reacting violently towards opposition, as their lyrics suggested, they did not. In fact, they recognized their lyrics as independent expression, not advocating violence amongst straight edge members. Porcelly recounts, "I can't even count how many

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<sup>205</sup> Judge, *New York Crew* "In my way," Schism Records, 33 1/3 RPM, 1988

<sup>206</sup> Mike Judge, interview by Double Cross Zine, August 27, 2013.

<sup>207</sup> Ian Mackaye, interview in *Edge The Movie* (Munster: Compassion Media, 2009), DVD.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*

times these jerks would come up to us and brag about how they kicked some guy's teeth in and wait for a sign of approval from me or Mike Judge... Judge had this real violent image. It was weird. It wasn't a good feeling to know that indirectly we were responsible... if that was the result, it wasn't worth being in a band. So Judge broke up."<sup>209</sup> Similarly, speaking about Project X, Porcelly asserts, "I've regretted it because of all the violence and intolerance caused by that one record. That's not what I was about at all, so it was a lesson learned. If I have some influence on someone, I sure want it to be a good influence."<sup>210</sup> Militancy welcomed hardcore into its third wave. Beyond just violence in the scene, hardcore in New York, as well as throughout much of the country, began to change. As the decade turned, hardcore's positive message seemingly began to be lost on new members coming into the scene. The sense of unity that was once strongly stressed had dwindled as the scene grew to a capacity in which factions formed. The rise in factionalism, along with the loss of unity as a central theme behind the music, resulted in bands and those involved in the scene losing sight of the importance of hardcore's locality. Hardcore had continued to grow nationally throughout the 1980s. Moreover, by the end of the decade, New York was recognized for its role in the development of hardcore and straight edge by scenes throughout the country. Thus, the music and scene dissociated from the City as its source livelihood and from an inclusive environment that encouraged social change. Likewise, the sound also began to change. New bands introduced a harder sound with a slowed down tempo and more aggressive, darker guitar riffs.

The changes represented by the introduction of the third wave of hardcore were one more schism in the long list that prevented hardcore's stagnancy. As hardcore had originally diverged from punk rock in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and as straight edge diverged from the complacency and drug-plagued New York scene of the mid-1980s, by the end of the decade new members felt less akin to predecessors who attempted to make straight edge synonymous with positivity. Of course, Judge and Project X had lashed out at criticism of the positive message, ironically only fueling the fire of militancy, causing new members who had been predisposed to militant opposition to drug and alcohol use to perpetuate hardcore straight edge's new form. As Wood, points out,

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<sup>209</sup> Lahickey, *All Ages*, 132.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

Upon initial contact with straightedge culture, the recruit already might be grappling with a fear or discontent about alcohol and drugs. In turn, the straightedge frame of reference articulates the potential recruit's discontent, delineating its source, construing it as a threat, and proscribing an appropriate set of norms, values, and beliefs for overcoming it. As long as the subcultural frame of reference properly articulates the individual's discontent, he or she will remain affiliated with the subculture.<sup>211</sup>

For straight edge members, the appropriate set of norms became less relevant as a personal choice because they began thinking of straight edge tenets as representing a worldview, making members feel as if their philosophy was a standard by which everybody should live. Straight edge militants expanded on the idea of ethical concerns such as animal rights to include straight edge itself. Whereas early straight members often associated their membership with individuality, later militant members often expressed the idea that straight edge was an objective moral issue. Fiercely articulated in Earth Crisis' "Firestorm:" "Street by street. Block by block. Taking it all back / The youth's immersed in poison--turn the tide counterattack / Violence against violence, let the roundups begin / A firestorm to purify the bane that society drowns in / No mercy, no exceptions, a declaration of total war."<sup>212</sup> While this attracted new members, it did not properly articulate the discontent of early straight edge members to the scene.

This sense of militant morality led people to wonder how far straight edge militants would go in their pursuit of objective morality. Beyond merely straight edge, some militants strongly advocated extreme ecological ideologies, veganism, heterosexuality, and an anti-abortion philosophy. Hardline, as this became known, was its own sub-group within straight edge and hardcore. Moreover, straight edge militancy grew out of the selectivity of membership. Hardline and militant attitudes resulted in more inclusive membership and thus signified a greater resistance to social norms. Sociologically, this meant a greater benefit to members of this small, collective identity.<sup>213</sup> The seeming irony of exclusiveness

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<sup>211</sup> Wood, *Straight Edge Youth*, 132.

<sup>212</sup> Earth Crisis, *Firestorm* "Firestorm," Victory Records, 33 1/3 RPM, 1993.

<sup>213</sup> Scott Hunt, Robert Benford, and David Snow, "Identity Fields: Framing Processes and the Social Construction of Movement Identities," in *New Social Movements: From Ideology to Identity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 173.

being more appealing to members of a subculture was overshadowed by its benefits. For members of straight edge this meant more defined identity in a hardcore scene that was expanding and forming factions. Of course not all militant members adhered to hardline principles, and many were even critical of them, such as Boston straight edge band Slapshot. Nonetheless, militant enforcement of the three basic tenets of straight edge still ensured exclusivity and a sense of moral objectivity and righteousness. As Ian Mackaye contends, "My concern with where straight edge started to go was that it appeared to become much more of a factioned thing. I started to perceive those factions as communities defined by exclusion – in other words carving out what they are by cutting other people off."<sup>214</sup>

During the 1990s, it would be this militancy and selectivity that caught the attention of mainstream culture, particularly in Salt Lake City and Reno. In these cities, an attack on non-straight edge members by straight edge members made the national news; the local police then classified straight edge as a violent gang in both cities. Violence was particularly severe in Salt Lake City. On October 31, 1998, seventeen-year-old straight edge member Colin Reesor fatally stabbed fifteen-year-old Bernardo Repreza, who was not straight edge. Reesor was reportedly motivated by his involvement in straight edge. Though he affiliated with the straight edge movement, there is no way to ascertain if straight edge ideology motivated the attack. As he claimed, "I heard someone yell, 'Gun! Gun!' There was a car driving around hitting people. I had all these emotions running around in my head. I released it all at once and stabbed him."<sup>215</sup> This incident of course reinforced the media's negative perception of the subculture. After the attack, Karl Buechner of Earth Crisis declared, "The media only wants to report on these types of incidents that involve some straight edge people."<sup>216</sup> Buechner became frustrated that the media only reported on the negative aspects of the subculture. However, the scene had become more violent and the actions of Reesor demonstrated this simple fact, whether or not

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<sup>214</sup> Brian Peterson, *Burning Fight: The Nineties Hardcore Revolution in Ethics, Politics, Spirit, and Sound* (Huntington Beach: Revelation Records Publishing, 2009), 58.

<sup>215</sup> Stephen Hunt, "Straight Edge Slayer Recounts Chaos of Fatal Halloween Night," *The Salt Lake Tribune* March 21, 2007.

<sup>216</sup> Karl Buechner, interview by Geraldo Rivera, *At Large with Geraldo Rivera*, Fox News, June 5, 2005.

straight edge motivated his actions. The violence in the movement ultimately attracted new members that were predisposed to ferocity. All these factors perpetuated violence among straight edge members.

Hardline, as distinct from just militant straight edge, with its inclusion of militant ecological views, was largely overlooked by the media but disrupted the scene as much as the straight edge militancy that Reesor was identified by. The lyrics of hardliners represented the severity of their convictions. Southern California's Vegan Reich addressed their contempt for abortion, meat eating, and the use of drugs in their song "I, The Jury." With a sense of moral superiority they declared, "I won't hesitate... To infringe on your rights, to take them away, to be judge and jury, and make you fucking pay, for the crimes you commit day after day, 'cause only with you stopped will our lives be truly free!"<sup>217</sup> This encouraged more factionalism and exclusivity. While hardline never formed any significant following in New York City, like it had in surrounding scenes and on the West Coast, it grew out of the reestablishment of straight edge and militancy in New York City's scene.

While many newer members of straight edge adopted the militant attitude, it faced severe criticism from not just older straight edge members but from the larger hardcore population. In 1989, Grudge, a band created with the sole purpose of mocking straight edge bands, released a 10 song album titled *Project-Ex*. They not only mocked Judge and Project X in their name and album title, they also facetiously recorded a WarZone and Youth of Today parody song while touting their love for alcohol.<sup>218</sup> While there was a certain light heartedness to Grudge, it also represented a popular perception of straight edge: a faction within hardcore that had become overly self-righteous and diverged from the inclusive nature of hardcore. New York's Uppercut expressed this feeling in their song "Am I Clear?" The song made the case that straight edge possessed no advantages; rather, it suggested that addiction to drugs and alcohol is of course detrimental, but that consumption with moderation is not problematic. The song also contended that with age straight edge became less meaningful. Uppercut claimed that the song was not an attack on straight edge, but a reflection on the hardcore scene at large.<sup>219</sup> Whatever the intent, Uppercut raised issues that straight edge members had to grapple with.

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<sup>217</sup> Vegan Reich, *Vanguard* "I, The Jury," Uprising Records, CD, 1995.

<sup>218</sup> Grudge, *Project-Ex*, Jism Records, 33 1/3 RPM, 1989.

<sup>219</sup> Stephen Murphy, interview by *Mad World Zine*, January 30, 2008.

After recognizing militancy as a pitfall, many of the early New York straight edge band members became disillusioned with the hardcore scene and found avenues to exit. With a considerably softer and more commercial sound than that of their hardcore roots, Gorilla Biscuits would ultimately form into Civ. Likewise, Ray Cappo of Youth of Today formed Shelter, which featured songs that had a pop influence and centered on a Hare Krishna. Some straight edge members “sold out” while others, such as Cappo, began to simply distance themselves from straight edge. Similarly, Mike Judge recalls, “there was so much violence at all the shows... emotionally I couldn’t deal with it anymore... I came back to Jersey and I hid out for a couple years, didn’t talk to anybody, didn’t look anybody up, just tried to get my shit together.”<sup>220</sup> While Judge disconnected with the hardcore scene in a particularly emotional form, most of those who identified with straight edge left the scene in a seemingly natural manner. As meaning and content began to change, they could no longer relate. As Ray Cappo proclaims,

I felt straight edge became very gang-ish in the nineties, and I lost the taste for that scene. I couldn’t relate to the music because it was all metal, and there was a lot of hate involved with it too. I always came from a more positive perspective. I never wanted to ‘exterminate’ those who were drinking... When movements get motivated by hate then it sort of defeats the purpose especially if they are in the name of enlightening other people.”<sup>221</sup>

Regardless of why straight edge members left the scene, what had occurred during New York’s second wave of hardcore had a huge impact on its participants. For some it marked formative years of perceived and actual youth rebellion, laying a foundation for the rest of their lives. Cappo and JPorcelly saw it as such. Both became Hare Krishna devotees, drawing a direct correlation between Krishna Consciousness and straight edge. According to the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Krishna devotees should abide by four principles: no eating of meat, fish, or eggs, no gambling, no sex other than for procreation within marriage, and no intoxication through recreational drugs, alcohol, tobacco, tea, or coffee.<sup>222</sup> As Porcelly asserts, “To me it

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<sup>220</sup> Lahickey, *All Ages*, 80.

<sup>221</sup> Peterson, *Burning Fight*, 71.

<sup>222</sup> A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, *The Hare Krsna Challenge* (Los Angeles: The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1977).

was like a natural progression of straightedge... all the basic tenets of Krishna Consciousness I was already following... To me it's sort of like the culmination of what straightedge really should be."<sup>223</sup> Porcelly contends that straight edge was never a moral end in itself but was always a means to it. It led him to vegetarianism, and ultimately the end became Krishna Consciousness. Thus, as Porcelly saw it, militant straight edge ideology was wrong for the mere fact that it assumed straight edge as an end result as a movement. Both Hare Krishna and youth crew shared core tenets of straight edge ideology, but these movements utilized alternative ways of advocating these tenants. Porcelly articulates the result of this schism and the impact Krishna had on straight edge members who belonged to the second wave: "it seems that the people from back in the whole youth-crew days who managed to stay straightedge, I'd say most of them are devotees."<sup>224</sup> Cappo's band, Shelter, New York's Cro-Mags, and nationally acclaimed Strongarm and 108, also adopted Krishna in the mid-1990s. While earlier straight edge members identified with Hare Krishna and disassociated with hardcore, hardcore eventually adopted Krishna Consciousness.

Ultimately, whether the tenets persisted or not, the original members of New York City's straight edge scene have discarded their straight edge identity. The dissociation and different pursuits of members marked the end of hardcore's second wave and solidified classification of straight edge as a youth subculture. Moreover, the opposition to, and questioning of, larger cultural values in the movement ultimately opened the door to critical self-analysis that generally led to revelation of inconsistencies between ideals and action.<sup>225</sup> For members of New York hardcore and straight edge, a highly idealist subculture, this often meant new pursuits beyond the realm of the scene.

### **What It Meant: Legacy and Impact of 1980s New York City Hardcore and Straight Edge**

New York's hardcore in the 1980s impacted hardcore more broadly and left a lasting legacy. The early straight edge scene in New York revitalized and perpetuated the existence of straight edge. During the first half of the decade there were few straight edge bands and those that existed often came from the

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<sup>223</sup> Wood, *Straight Edge Youth*, 137.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>225</sup> Haenfler, *Straight Edge*, 211.

hardcore scene with few straight edge members.<sup>226</sup> If it had not been for the outburst of straight edge in New York during the second half of the decade, straight edge would have likely died out. New York hardcore had been at the forefront of the hardcore sound throughout the second half of the 1980s. This meant that as straight edge took off in the City, many other parts of the country followed not far behind in their own hardcore scenes. Straight edge bands from the West Coast such as Insted, No For An Answer, Chain of Strength, and Brotherhood received national attention, while on the East Coast, bands outside of New York such as Floorpunch and Mouthpiece did so as well. All of these bands emulated the appearance and musical style of their New York peers. Now, this movement is still a thriving youth subculture that has continued to evolve, with acknowledgment of a clear distinction from its earlier form. Most recently, many hardcore bands from around the country have tried to replicate the sounds of New York bands during the 1990s. Bands from New York take a particular pride in their city's legacy. It is common for bands to stamp their merchandise with "NY," "NYC," or "NYHC." This is something very rarely practiced by hardcore bands from other cities. However, there are currently no notable New York City straight edge bands, and there have not been for the past decade. Perhaps ironically, while many other hardcore scenes have developed largely around straight edge bands and membership, particularly in the late 1990s and early 2000s, New York has seemingly dissociated with straight edge. Still, where straight edge has grown and continues to do so, the New York straight edge bands from the second wave remain the most valuable part of the subcultures history second only to its inception.

Thus, the end of the second wave of hardcore was by no means a step towards an end to hardcore, but it was an important leap in a new direction. The second wave solidified hardcore's existence while New York specifically solidified straight edge's growth. The new direction was represented in how hardcore and straight edge would be perpetuated. At its outset, hardcore was created by "kids" seeking to identify themselves as distinct from broader cultural norms by associating with the subculture as a source of individuality. By the 1990s, it was the norms hardcore had created for itself that members identified with.

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<sup>226</sup> Only a few straight edge bands existed out of the relatively large number of hardcore bands that toured nationally during the first half of the 1980s. Most notably, this includes Minor Threat, DYS, Society System Decontrol, and Uniform Choice.

Thus, in an ironic turn typified by subcultural patterns, in many ways hardcore began to *produce* its members, as opposed to its members producing it. These members stepped away from the value of community growth and self-reflection that characterized the first two waves as a necessity for the scenes existence. By the early 1990s, hardcore had begun to grow tremendously, thus causing some new members to lose sight of the original aims and intentions of hardcore. As suggested by Ian Mackaye, "I think what was going on in the eighties was a reaction to what [hardcore members] inherited; what was going on in the late eighties and into the nineties was a reaction to what those kids inherited."<sup>227</sup> Still, not all was forgotten or ignored. Of course, as the scene grew, the message evolved and had the potential to influence more than ever before. However, by the start of the 1990s, the message was largely militaristic, as opposed to the positive themed scene of a few years prior. Hardcore in the 1980s was certainly distinct from that which followed in the 1990s. Identifying the value of hardcore for those already within the scene during the mid to late-1980s, and how this value transcended beyond hardcore is pivotal to any research done on the impact of this topic.

In 1978, writer Dave Laing wrote an article titled "Interpreting Punk Rock" acknowledging the association between punk and the "cultural revolt of proletariat youth." Laing considers political themes, style, and the shock effect that all characterize punk rock. However, a prerequisite to cultural revolt through punk is to remain un-integrated into the music industry; punk was integrated.<sup>228</sup> Hardcore remained untouched by outside sources competing for the bands and record sales. Hardcore remained true to the 'do it yourself' principles on which punk had been founded. Furthermore, hardcore members did not want to be integrated; they sought to further themselves from the industry and its social norms. This made straight edge a logical development in hardcore, as it stood in opposition to sex, drugs, and an industry standard of rock & roll. New York City hardcore and straight edge in the 1980s were more than the perceptions of outsiders and even of their own members. These movements constituted youth subcultures that were unparalleled by any other, which made their classification subject to words that diminished their complexity. These movements endorsed a unique combination of ideals taken from right-wing

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<sup>227</sup> Peterson, *Burning Fight*, 58.

<sup>228</sup> Dave Laing, "Interpreting Punk Rock," *Marxism Today* (April, 1978): 123-128.

philosophy touted by Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No" campaign and disgust for the status quo. While the issues that many of the bands wrote and sang about were political in an abstract sense, many members did not make the correlation between their association with hardcore and politics. In fact, they often asserted that hardcore was not political.<sup>229</sup> As localized as the scene was, it may not have made sense to suggest it was beholden to a political ideology. Unity represented the ultimate goal. However, this in itself was political. Moreover, a DIY ethic and slam dancing constituted political activities. It was a political stance that stood in opposition to what members witnessed on the streets of New York: the status quo. Hardcore was both political and rebellious by nature. Members engaged in subconscious rebellion by attending shows or starting bands. This rebellion directed hardcore members even after they left the scene, making it an anomaly in youth subculture.

New York hardcore always had a purpose beyond the music. The bands believed that they had something meaningful to say that might be of some influence to those listening and attending their shows. Perhaps most straight edge members believed that their decision in choosing to become straight edge was personal, but by doing so, they stepped into a socially concerned scene that promoted ideas beyond CBGB and New York's deteriorating inner-city. Now we have to ask, what was the result? Hardcore in New York could never have influenced people not predisposed to its sound and ideals. It lacked an ad campaign to sell its often-unwelcoming image. Messages of positivity, animal rights, and the threats of consumerism espoused by bands during New York's second wave were simply not intended for anybody outside the scene. Plus the music was too loud, too fast and too aggressive. This generally meant that only people who already embraced hardcore's music heard this music. Hardcore's preached to the choir due to the idealized pride in unity and locality of the early scene. It was not exclusive, but it was tight-knit.

Conclusively, hardcore is fluid, always evolving, and New York in the 1980s was no exception to the rule. Punk and hardcore from their inception have maintained a societal stigma due to their defiant nature. However, defiance is subjective. Members of the straight edge and hardcore scene during the 1980s were consistently defiant but not in opposition to objective moral good established in American cultural norms. Instead, these movements embraced defiance

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<sup>229</sup> WarZone, interview by WNYU.

against the norms that they felt were objectively moral wrongs. The movements had purpose; it did not engender aimless youth rebellion. They began as a reaction to the realities of hardship in the Lower East Side and resulted in an attack on many American cultural values. Thus, along with positive, ethically and socially concerned lyrical content, hardcore, in its complex and contradictory nature, formed a growing militant faction. Nonetheless, what New York proved is that hardcore punk is an anomaly of youth subculture that is often regarded as nonsensical and violent. An essence of progressive ideals cultivated New York's straight edge scene and remained with members as they fell out of the changing scene. While New York's cultural landscape explains why hardcore developed out of a deteriorating inner-city, the lasting impact on its members, and the way in which its legacy continues to impact hardcore, reveal hardcore's true value.

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