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Out of Pocket

Lament of the Middle Aged Punk

By [Josh Indar](#) 8 October 2012
PopMatters Features Editor

I was about 13 when I stole my first punk rock cassette from the Warehouse in Hermosa Beach in 1985. I had to have it —*Group Sex* by the Circle Jerks. It's their first album, a spasmodic masterpiece of Reagan-era hardcore. There are 15 songs on it, but the whole lot clocks in at only 15 minutes. The songs were so short the entire album was recorded twice on one side of the cassette, leaving the other side blank, save for an inscription urging listeners to "Record whatever you want on side two and destroy the music industry from the privacy of your own home."

It was my favorite tape for years, a staple in my Walkman as I rode the RTD bus around L.A. with every gangster, blue-collar worker and down-on-his-heels businessman staring daggers at me.

It wasn't so easy being a punker back then. Music was a lot harder to steal, for one thing. For another, everybody wanted to kick your ass. People think I'm joking when I tell them that now, but it's barely an exaggeration. Every time I left the house in those years I ran an angry gauntlet of cops, surfers, cholos and beachnecks, all of them looking to take out their frustrations on some unlucky punk.

I lived a block from the old church where Black Flag used to practice, and where the Circle Jerks first got together.

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Circle Jerks - My Career As A Jerk

Director: [David Markey](#)

Cast: Circle Jerks

(US DVD: 23 Oct 2012)

[Amazon](#)

I got into it when I was 12, but I was already late to the party. By the time I saw my first show in 1986, the amazing L.A. punk scene that spawned bands like X, the Germs, the Weirdos, Alleycats and Black Flag was in full retreat. Violence at shows had become the norm—every show I went to back then had an ambulance parked out front—and smart club owners had already figured out they could make a lot more money and mop up a lot less blood at the end of the night by staging hair metal acts like [Motley Crue](#).

This left punk bands with nowhere to play and a lot of punk fans with pent-up aggression that often devolved into self-destruction. There was a lot of cutting and fights and drug abuse in my circle of friends. One guy I knew got high on PCP and held his family hostage at gunpoint until SWAT busted in and took him away. Another got kicked out of school for beating up the Vice Principal, then went to jail for robbing the Carl's Jr. across the street from his house.

Come to think of it, maybe there was a reason everyone wanted to kick our asses.

The cops sure hated us. Walking around Hermosa Beach wearing a Black Flag shirt was like living in occupied territory. I'd be strolling along, minding my [own business](#), when three cop cars would screech up out of nowhere, and before I knew what was going on, I'd be on the ground in handcuffs with my 15-year-old face pushed into the sandy sidewalk. They'd never bother to arrest me, they just wanted to teach me lesson. What that lesson might've been, I never learned.

My friends and I used to hang out at the Hermosa Beach pier with the immigrant fisherman, the ex-hippy burnouts and the ubiquitous runaway girls from places like Fresno. Every now and then we'd see Keith Morris, the singer of the Circle Jerks, wandering by. He was just a short, scrawny dude with enormous dreadlocks and worn-out clothes, but he had the most casual confidence I'd ever seen, like he just didn't give a shit. I was too in awe (and probably too high) to ever try and talk to him.

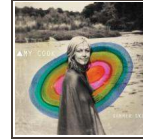
All those memories came flooding back as I watched the new documentary *Circle Jerks: My Career as Jerk* on a day that just happened to mark my 40th trip around the sun. As I sat in the air-conditioned calm of my little suburban home, reliving those not-so-glorious days, I felt the oddest combination of emotions. Is there such a thing as shameful pride, bleak nostalgia or uneasy contentment? How is one supposed to feel when witnessing the collision of one's present and past?

Staring at the churning whirlpool of fists and flannels revolving around Morris as he spat out the anthems of my youth, I wondered why I never managed to give up on punk rock. I know I probably should have by now, and I've even half-heartedly tried a couple of times. But the truth is that I'm well past rehabilitation at this point. Despite my advancing middle age, I still feel much the same way toward the world as I did 25 years ago.

I mean, it's not like I go around in bondage pants and a purple mohawk or anything. I've dutifully mellowed out and learned to accept things I have no control over. One part of me is even a little ashamed at the indignity of being a 40-year-old punker, but when I look at my life and my recession-diminished prospects, I don't see a single reason to try and change. The anger, confusion and resentment I felt at 15 has thankfully faded, but some part of it still simmers in the back of my skull.

In the zeal of my youth, I thought punk was the final fight, the front line of the culture war against Reaganism, religious fundamentalism, mindless consumerism and environmental suicide. In my naïveté, I even thought we were winning at one point. But all those corrosive strands of


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our culture somehow seem stronger than ever today. How stupid we baby punx were, to think that writing songs and putting out 'zines would so much as dent the forces organized against us. Our attempts to convince society it was sick were about as effective as the brutally cryptic lesson the HBPD kept trying to teach me.

And yet, what else could we have done? It seemed then, as it seems now sometimes, that the world is a machine set to self-destruct. Realizing that requires one to make a choice—you can ignore it, deny it or try and do something about it. I guess that's where the shameful pride comes in—we tried something different than our parents did. We committed ourselves to something we felt was monumentally important. But did we really accomplish anything?

Sometimes, in moments of guilt and panic over the wasted days of my youth—those tenuous moments we all have when we count our accomplishments and wonder if we could've done more or better—I wonder if punk actually made things worse. All the shock tactics and cynicism we deployed to make our point back then did seem to percolate into the mainstream, but in a horribly unexpected way.

We all thought it was hilarious to crank up the Crucifucks' "Hinckley Had a Vision" and sing along that we wanted to "kill the president, chop off his head and mail it to them in a garbage bag." It might still make me laugh if it wasn't for the fact that there are people saying similar things about our current president, only they're not punk rockers—they're aggrieved, misinformed adults with access to firearms and unlike us punkers, they don't seem to be joking.

Just as punk music has migrated into the mainstream, punk rhetorical tactics have been co-opted by the right and used to rally a base that, despite being old enough to know better, somehow has a lot in common with '80s punks. They feel cheated, victimized, angry and resentful and they want to go out and do something, anything, about it. So they agitate.

Only unlike punks, they're not beaten up for expressing themselves—they're bankrolled by billionaires and lauded for their civic participation and respected for saying things so wrong and crazy that any sane person might think it was all an elaborate piece of performance art. They even took a tip from the DIY movement, creating their own media to reinforce their views, just as punks, locked out of the mainstream, did with indie magazines and record labels back in the day.

I would really hate for that to be the legacy of punk rock. At least Keith Morris is still out there, dreadlocks and all, screaming and ranting about the bullshit inherent in everyday life and the importance of staying hopeful and whole despite the apparent senselessness of it all. Circle Jerks is over, but his new band, OFF! is a powerhouse. They're so good that a lot of people think they can single-bandedly revitalize underground punk. That'd be cool for the kids, I guess, only I don't see it happening, at least not in the US.

Modern American youth have a menu of subcultures besides punk rock to choose from, and most of them don't involve any commitment whatsoever, beyond buying a T-shirt or two. Maybe that's a good thing, to not get locked into a fashion or ideology that you'll have to justify to yourself when you hit 40. But I don't have any regrets. Punk rock has enriched my life in too many ways for me to denounce it now. I learned through punk rock that the struggle between the individual and the collective is a constant negotiation, even as you get older, and that winning is as simple—and as complex—as staying true to oneself.

Besides, the music is as relevant as ever. The Circle Jerks' "When the Shit Hits the Fan" may be a quarter-century old, but the lyrics are straight out of today's headlines: "In a sluggish economy / Inflation, recession hits the land of the free / Standing in unemployment lines / Blame the government for hard times / We just get by however we can / We all gotta duck when the shit

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- 9 - Very Nearly Perfect
- 8 - Excellent
- 7 - Damn Good
- 6 - Good
- 5 - Average
- 4 - Unexceptional
- 3 - Weak
- 2 - Seriously Flawed
- 1 - Terrible

hits the fan."

A song like that may have no appreciable effect on society as a whole. It doesn't create jobs or feed hungry kids or force politicians to solve the problems they're elected to solve. But to the individual (or to this one at least), these kind of songs are priceless treasures. They lend hope and humor to a dark and scary situation. They let me know I'm not the only who's noticed that everything's fucked up, that I'm not crazy for thinking the way I do, that the sneering mob I sometimes imagine society to be is actually composed of individuals like myself, with individual thoughts and struggles and concerns and ideas.

Isn't that what culture is for? Connecting the individual to the collective in a way that benefits both? That's why I got involved with punk rock in the first place, though I didn't understand it that way at the time. It's also why I'm still involved. But check back with me when I turn 50 next decade—maybe I'll be over it by then. Maybe I'll have finally grown up and assimilated and figured out what the HBPD was trying to teach me. I'll be perfectly content, making plenty of money and won't have any need for this adolescent, antisocial nonsense.

I wouldn't bet on it, though.

Josh Indar is a recovering journalist who currently writes novels and short stories. He lives in a little college town in Northern California, where he tutors homeless & foster youth and plays in a band called Severance Package. He holds an MFA in creative nonfiction from Antioch University, Los Angeles.

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OUT OF POCKET



Lament of the Middle Aged Punk

By Josh Indar

8 Oct 2012

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By Josh Indar

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By Josh Indar

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