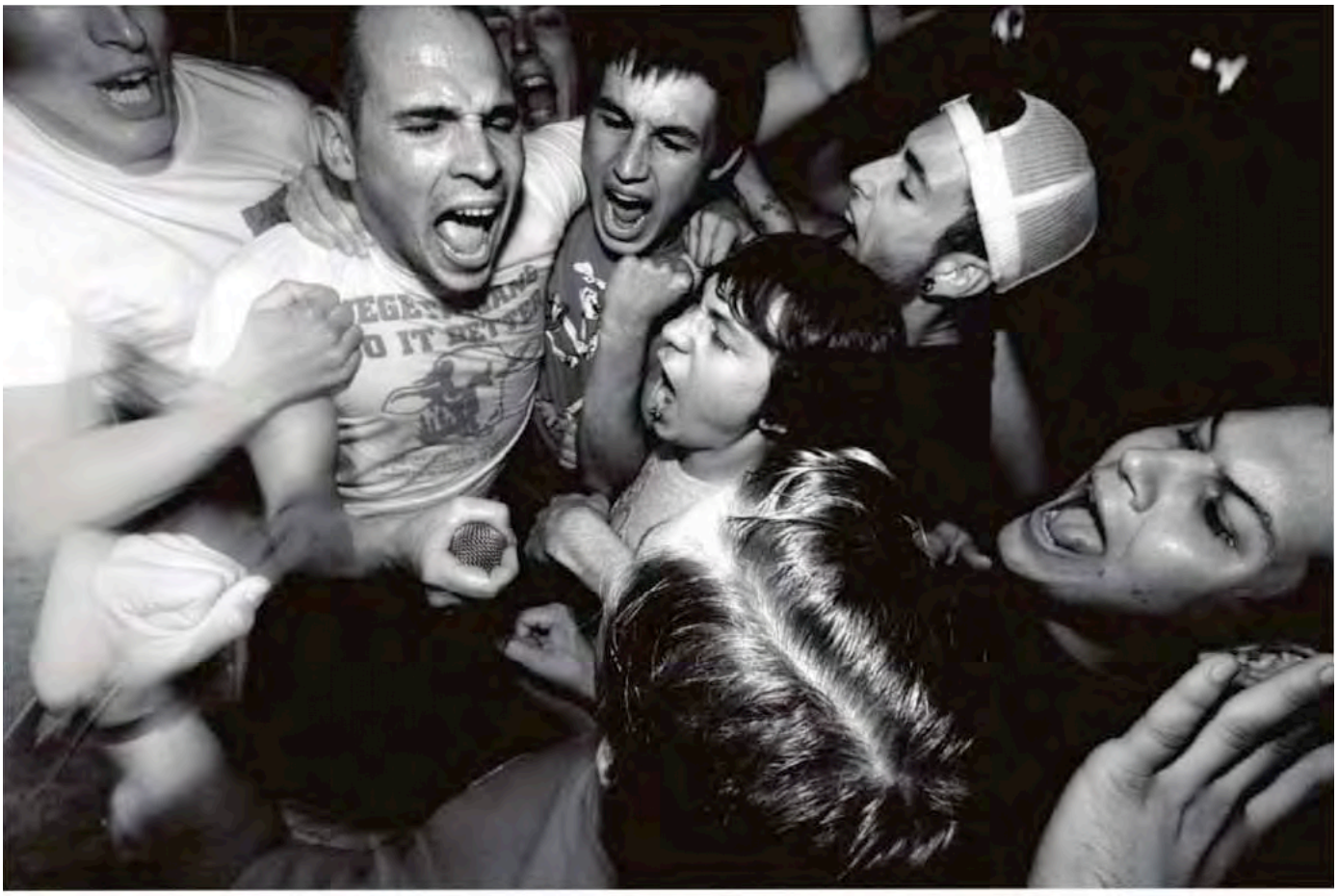


Hoods Up (Germany), Hengelo/The Netherlands, 2007 Bartosz Skowron (bartskowron.com)

Introduction

Gabriel Kuhn

The history of the term "straight edge" in the hardcore punk community has been much more colorful and long-lasting than Ian MacKaye could have ever imagined. MacKaye, at the time singer in the Washington, DC, band Minor Threat, wrote the lyrics to the song "Straight Edge" in 1981:

I'm a person just like you
But I've got better things to do
Than sit around and fuck my head
Hang out with the living dead
Snort white shit up my nose
Pass out at the shows
I don't even think about speed
That's something I just don't need
I've got the straight edge

I'm a person just like you
But I've got better things to do
Than sit around and smoke dope
Cause I know that I can cope
Laugh at the thought of eating ludes
Laugh at the thought of sniffing glue
Always gonna keep in touch
Never want to use a crutch
I've got the straight edge

Against both expectations and intentions, these lyrics would not only provide a label embraced by scores of drug-free hardcore punk kids, they came to spawn a self-identified straight edge movement spreading around the world and remaining a vital part of the hardcore punk community to this day.

The US history of the movement has recently been traced by Ross Haenfler in the book *Straight Edge: Clean-Living Youth, Hardcore Punk, and Social Change* (2006), a study that is highly recommended to anyone interested in the straight edge phenomenon.

A superb history of straight edge from an international perspective is provided by the Brazilian band Point of No Return in their essay "Bending to Stay Straight," which is included in this volume.

Roughly speaking — numerous exceptions will be encountered throughout the book — straight edge history can be divided into four phases:

1. The early days of Washington, DC, hardcore punk when straight edge ethics became a prominent part of a fledgling and visionary underground scene — roughly 1980 to 1983.

2. The first wave of self-identified straight edge bands across North America, often referred to as the "youth crew movement" — roughly 1984 to 1990.

3. The "new school" straight edge bands of the 1990s, strongly characterized by the increasing significance of animal rights, hence often known as the "vegan straight edge movement," with the so-called "hardline movement" as its most ardent wing — roughly 1991 to 1999.

4. A rather diverse global straight edge movement, including old school revivals as much as vegan straight edge reunion tours, straight edge pop bands as much as straight edge power violence bands, and anti-materialist attitudes as much as a lucrative straight edge merchandise industry — roughly 2000 to present.

A more detailed timeline, intended to help situate the contributions to this book, is included above.

While the core of straight edge identity has always been the abstinence from alcohol, nicotine, and common illegal drugs such as cannabis, amphetamines, LSD etc., there have been considerable variations on how far to take the interpretations of "abstaining from intoxicants" or "living drug-free." Many heated discussions have concerned the consumption of caffeine, the use of animal products, or sexual conduct. Disagreements often relate to the primary reasons for living straight edge. Is it simply to remain "sober"? Is it to "avoid cruelty"? Is it to be "anti-consumerist"? Is it

to attain "moral purity"? These questions — and many others — will be discussed in this collection.

Straight edge politics have varied significantly, from the explicitly revolutionary to the outright conservative. It is the latter strain that has dominated — at least in public perception.

The overall impression of straight edge within radical political circles has been negative as well. While the early Washington, DC, hardcore punk underground is usually praised for its commitment to positive social change, both the youth crew movement of the 1980s and the vegan straight edge movement of the 1990s have drawn much criticism. While the critique of the former largely focused on male bonding ("brotherhood," "wolfpack"), martial posturing ("true till death," "nailed to the X"), and the lack of political perspective beyond vague affirmations of "youth" and "unity," the latter was criticized for self-righteous militancy, a reductionist focus on animal rights and environmental issues, and an ethical fundamentalism that, in its worst forms, resembled reactionary Christian doctrines: condemnation of premarital sex, abortion, homosexuality etc.

Both movements have been accused of extreme male dominance, violent behavior, intolerance, and an inability to detach their sober principles from a moralistic puritan tradition. These images seemed further confirmed by severe clashes between straight edge youth and rival groups in Salt Lake City, Utah, and Reno, Nevada, which left people badly injured and even dead. The subsequent classification of straight edge as a "gang" by the cities' police departments was much exploited by the corporate media.

For all these reasons, straight edge has been approached by many radical activists with a strong dose of skepticism, often ridicule, and sometimes unabashed hostility. Despite the ideologically less dogmatic and more multifaceted character of contemporary straight edge, reservations remain strong.

However, there has always been a "different edge": engaged in political struggle and social transformation, but not judgmental, belligerent, or narrow-minded. This is what will be presented in this book. The aim is not to define the "true meaning" of straight edge. There is no intention to engage in pointless definitional battles. The intention is to demonstrate that there has always been a strain of radical, politically conscious straight edge culture that has manifested itself in many different forms.

Needless to say, understandings of "radical" differ. In the context of this book, the attribute refers to people who **a)** actively pursue a fundamental (radical) social change in order to create free and egalitarian communities, and **b)** maintain a clear distance to politically ambiguous ideologies. Hence straight edge activists affiliated to religious groups or belief systems will be as much absent as those representatives of the 1990s vegan straight edge scene whose political legacy remains in doubt. This is neither to deny the progressive potentials of religious movements nor to

pass judgment on any particular scene. It is merely an expression of the frame that I, as an editor, felt most comfortable with. I understand and appreciate that other frames could have been used — and hope others understand and appreciate the one I have chosen.

Apart from an involvement in radical politics in its myriad forms, all the contributors to this volume are or have been connected in one way or another to hardcore punk straight edge culture: as artists, organizers, or activists. This is why the book is about straight edge and radical politics, not about sobriety or drug-free living and radical politics. The latter book would be very different, accounting for a wide range of radicals, from Andalusian anarchist teetotalers to American Indian Movement activists advocating abstinence to conscious hip hop artists like Dead Prez. Although I very much hope for such a book to be published, the focus of this volume is more specific.

The volume's contributors represent influential straight edge bands, scenes, and labels as much as radical political projects with straight edge sympathies and leanings. Despite shared convictions, the authors and interviewees cover a range of perspectives: from conceiving straight edge as a "lifestyle" to objecting to such a definition; from questioning the straight edge label to defending it; from describing straight edge as a central part of political activism to declaring it above all a personal choice. The contributors also differ in their interpretations of hardcore punk, the culture that straight edge is rooted in. Many readers will have their own understanding of the term. For those not versed in the culture and its vocabulary, the following very general definitions may serve as guidelines:

Punk: an anti-establishment counterculture, most notably expressed by provocative (anti)fashion and an aggressive minimalist ("three-chord") musical style, most iconically embodied by the British Sex Pistols in 1977.

Hardcore: first used as a synonym to punk in the US, developing into its own genre (often named hardcore punk) in the early to mid-1980s by favoring low-key visual aesthetics over extravagance and breaking with original punk rock song patterns.

DIY: a principle of independence and of retaining control over one's work, DIY (abbreviating *Do It Yourself*) defines original hardcore punk ethics and, to many, remains the decisive criterion for "true" hardcore punk; the most tangible aspects of hardcore punk's DIY culture are self-run record labels, self-organized shows, self-made zines, and non-commercial social networks.

Crew: commonly used in hardcore culture as a reference to a group of hardcore peers; particularly popular within straight edge during the so-called "youth crew" movement of the late 1980s.

To X up: the phrase refers to the most common straight edge symbol, the X painted on the back of your hand; the symbol's origins lie in minors being marked that way at shows so they could not drink; when the mark was turned into a self-affirming indication for drug-free living, it became a positive reference point for sober hardcore punk kids and has appeared in countless variations within straight edge culture since.

Posi: short for "positive," the term has been used to indicate straight edge bands and activists advocating social awareness and rejecting the self-righteous tendencies within the movement.

Hardcore punk eventually split into several sub-genres. Relevant for this volume are mainly the following (descriptions are necessarily simplified and further personal research is strongly recommended):

NYHC: common abbreviation for the hardcore scene that developed in New York City in the 1980s, often associated with aggressiveness and tough-guy bravado.

Grindcore: blends hardcore punk with metal, industrial, and noise, often with extreme speed; primarily used as a musical category.

Power Violence: characterized by distorted sounds, radical tempo changes, and short forceful songs, the genre shares grindcore's main influences.

Crust (or **crust punk**): taking its name from the "crusty" image of its adherents, crust developed its own aesthetic blend of 1977 British punk, roots culture, and black metal; visually, piercings mingle with dreadlocks and black clothing, while musically classic punk riffs meet death metal, grindcore, and power violence elements; generally considered politically conscious, often linked to the "anarcho-punk" movement, and outspokenly DIY and anti-consumerist.

Metalcore: mainly a musical category, it indicates a blend of hardcore and metal elements; popularized in the 1990s vegan straight edge scene, particularly by bands from the Victory and New Age record labels.

Emo (or **emocore**): a conscious attempt to go beyond the hardcore "tough guy" image, musically, lyrically, and image-wise.

Screamo: a variation on emo, considered more experimental and intense musically.

Riot grrrl: a feminist punk hardcore movement that emerged in the early 1990s.

Queercore/homocore: a fusion of hardcore and queer culture/politics.

Important hardcore punk periodicals include:

Maximumrocknroll (MRR) (1982 to present): founded by Tim Yohannan, *MRR* remains the key publication for the international hardcore punk community.

Profane Existence (1989 to present): one of the main voices of the anarcho-punk movement; based in Minneapolis, MN.

HeartattaCk (1994-2006): during its existence rivaled in importance for the hardcore punk underground only by *MRR*, and especially popular with a political and DIY-oriented audience; *HeartattaCk* had a straight edge editor in Ebullition Records founder Kent McClard, but was never run as a straight edge project.

Punk Planet (1994-2007): both in terms of design and contents, *Punk Planet* built important bridges between DIY hardcore punk and a wider audience interested in underground culture.

Hardcore punk scenes, including straight edge scenes, have always been predominantly male. In Western societies they have also remained largely white, despite notable exceptions — see, for example, James Spooner's documentary *Afro-Punk* (2003).

The image of male and white dominance has further been reinforced by the fact that many histories of hardcore punk have solely focused on North America. In this book, a conscious effort has been made to include voices that are often underrepresented. This means a strong international focus as well as a relatively strong presence of routinely overlooked minority groups within the scene. However, there seems little point in denying the demographics of straight edge culture by assembling an overly misrepresentative cast of contributors. Admitting to the culture's problems and engaging in critical debate seems mandatory.

The respective chapters only serve as vague markers. There are plenty of overlaps: the members of former straight edge bands talk about local scenes as much as the "Manifestos" reflect on straight edge culture or the chapter on "Perspectives" adds information to hardcore history. The chapters' main purpose lies in avoiding a completely random order of the volume's complex and rich contributions.

Chapter I, **Bands**, provides a historical overview of political straight edge culture along the lines of highly influential bands: Ian MacKaye of Minor Threat talks about the origins of straight edge in the early Washington, DC, punk hardcore scene, critically reflects on the development of a "straight edge movement," and offers his own understanding of the term. Michiel Bakker, Olav van den Berg, and Paul van den Berg tell the story of the "original communist straight edge band," ManLiftingBanner, hailing from the Netherlands in the early 1990s. Dennis Lyxzén revisits the exploits of Sweden's unique punk hardcore outfit Refused and the strong impact it had on the Swedish vegan straight edge movement of the

1990s — one of the strongest left-wing straight edge movements in history. The interview is accompanied by the liner notes to the last Refused record, *The Shape of Punk to Come* (1998). Frederico Freitas of São Paulo's celebrated radical vegan straight edge band Point of No Return provides an overview of Latin American straight edge culture with a focus on its political ramifications. The interview is preceded by "Bending to Stay Straight," a Point of No Return essay about the history, values, and politics of the straight edge movement, originally included in the 2002 release *Liberdade Imposta, Liberdade Conquistada / Imposed Freedom, Conquered Freedom.* Bruno "Break" Teixeira, singer of Portugal's main straight edge export, New Winds, talks about the band's history, his personal blend of drug-free living and radical activism, and one of Europe's strongest recent political straight edge scenes.

Chapter 2, **Scenes**, focuses on countries and regions where significant radical straight edge scenes have developed: Jonathan Pollack, co-founder of Anarchists Against the Wall, an Israeli direct action group in support of Palestinian resistance, talks about the intriguing anarchist straight edge scene that appeared in Israel in the 1990s. Tanja, a longtime radical straight edge activist, provides further insight into Sweden's vegan straight edge movement of the same decade, while Gabriel Cárdenas adds an update on political straight edge in Sweden today. Robert Matusiak, founder of Warsaw's Refuse Records, one of the most important international labels for political straight edge, provides a sketch of the Eastern European straight edge scene and its conflicting political orientations reaching from antifascist crews to white power factions, particularly in Russia. Finally, Kurt Schroeder, a veteran of the US vegan straight edge scene of the 1990s and founder of Catalyst Records, globally renowned for its blend of straight edge hardcore and radical politics, reflects on developments in North America.

Chapter 3, **Manifestos**, brings together documents that have drawn explicit links between radical politics and sober living: "The Antifa Straight Edge" was published by Alpine Anarchist Productions in 2001, "Wasted Indeed: Anarchy and Alcohol" by the CrimethInc. Ex-Workers' Collective in 2003, and "Towards a Less Fucked Up World: Sobriety and Anarchist Struggle" by Nick Riotfag in 2005. Current updates by the authors follow the texts.

Chapter 4, **Reflections**, features pieces on often neglected aspects of straight edge culture. Nick Riotfag examines the relations between sobriety and queer culture in "My Edge Is Anything But Straight: Towards a Radical Queer Critique of Intoxication Culture," while the interview with drug-free and radical queer activist Lucas, "The Only Thing I'm Drunk on Is Cock," adds personal tales and thoughts. Jenni Ramme, founder of Poland's Emancypunx Records, home of the seminal 2003 *X The Sisterhood X* compilation, explores queer and feminist themes in her interview,

while Kelly (Brother) Leonard shares her experiences of running xsisterhoodx, an online network for straight edge women. Bull Gervasi, bass player in Philadelphia's iconoclastic straight edge band R.A.M.B.O., ponders the difficult relations between straight edge and crust punk, while Andy Hurley, currently drumming for Fall Out Boy, outlines personal politics where veganism and straight edge meet anarcho-primitivist convictions.

Chapter 5, **Perspectives**, offers contemporary ideas on straight edge living and radical politics. Federico Gomez draws on his experience as a straight edge singer and political activist on three continents when stressing the importance of international networking. Santiago Gomez provides an in-depth analysis of both straight edge's radical potentials and conservative pitfalls in "Between Culture and Politics: Straight Edge as Intuitive Resistance." Laura Synthesis, founder of London's Synthesis zine distribution, takes a sharp look at the contemporary straight edge scene in "Queen of the PC Police." Ross Haenfler, author of the above-mentioned *Straight Edge: Clean-Living Youth, Hardcore Punk, and Social Change* explains "Why I'm Still Straight Edge," before Mark Andersen, co-founder of the punk activist collective Positive Force DC, closes the book with a touching appeal for straight edge's place within a broad radical movement in "Building Bridges, Not Barriers: Positive Force DC, Straight Edge, and Revolution."

Unless noted otherwise, the contributions are all original. The five reprints have been included with kind permission of the authors.

All the interviews were conducted between August and December 2008 in person, on the phone, via live chat, or over email; all were updated in June 2009. All the interviews were conducted by Gabriel Kuhn, except for the interview with XsaraqaelX, conducted by Daniel Freund, and the interview with Lucas, conducted by Nick Riotfag.

Since different spellings of "straight edge" have developed over the last twenty-five years — including "Straight Edge," "straightedge" and the abbreviations "sXe" and "SXE" — the choice was left to the authors. US spelling has been used in general, except for Laura Synthesis' essay that is kept in British English.

All photographers are listed. Significant contributions have come from Daigo Oliva and Mateus Mondini, two São Paulo based artists who dedicate a lot of their time to documenting the hardcore punk underground. They also issue a photo zine, *Fodido e Xerocado*. Mateus Mondini founded his own record label, Nada Nada Discos, in 2009.

Working on this volume has been a tremendously encouraging and joyful experience. It has confirmed the perseverance of a vigorous, caring, and inspirational global DIY hardcore movement that retains all of its political promises. The beauty of this movement is, to borrow one of Ian MacKaye's favorite

phrases, *no joke*. I am tremendously grateful and indebted to everyone who has been involved in this project. While I had the privilege to put it together, it has truly been a collective effort — any editorial mishaps remain of course entirely my responsibility.

When I first planned this book, the idea was to create a valuable resource for a group of people I considered big enough to make such an effort worthwhile: namely, radical straight edge activists. Once the contributions began to trickle in, I realized that the book's appeal would be much wider and that its audience would extend far beyond this community.

The texts collected here ought to be of interest to anyone fascinated by the history of punk, hardcore, and underground culture; to students of sociology, social movements, and international politics; to seekers, existentialists, and philosophers; to radical activists, no matter their diets or drinking habits, and to sober folks, no matter their cultural adherences.

Bands

- **Minor Threat**
  Interview with Ian MacKaye
- **ManLiftingBanner**
  Interview with Michiel Bakker, Olav van den Berg, and Paul van den Berg
- **Refused**
  Interview with Dennis Lyxzén
  The Shape of Punk to Come
- **Point of No Return**
  Bending to Stay Straight
  Interview with Frederico Freitas
- **New Winds**
  Interview with Bruno "Break" Teixeira

Minor Threat

Interview with Ian MacKaye

Ian MacKaye was a founding member of the early 1980s Washington, DC, punk hardcore bands Teen Idles (1979/80) and Minor Threat (1980-83). He was one of the most important influences on the development of the US hardcore punk underground, and — albeit unwillingly — the instigator of the worldwide straight edge movement. The Minor Threat songs "Straight Edge," "In My Eyes," and "Out Of Step" remain the most referenced songs in straight edge communities. Ian continued his musical career with the bands Embrace (1985/86), Fugazi (1987 to present), and The Evens (2001 to present). He co-founded Dischord Records in 1980 and still runs the label out of "Dischord House" in Washington, DC.

Discography:

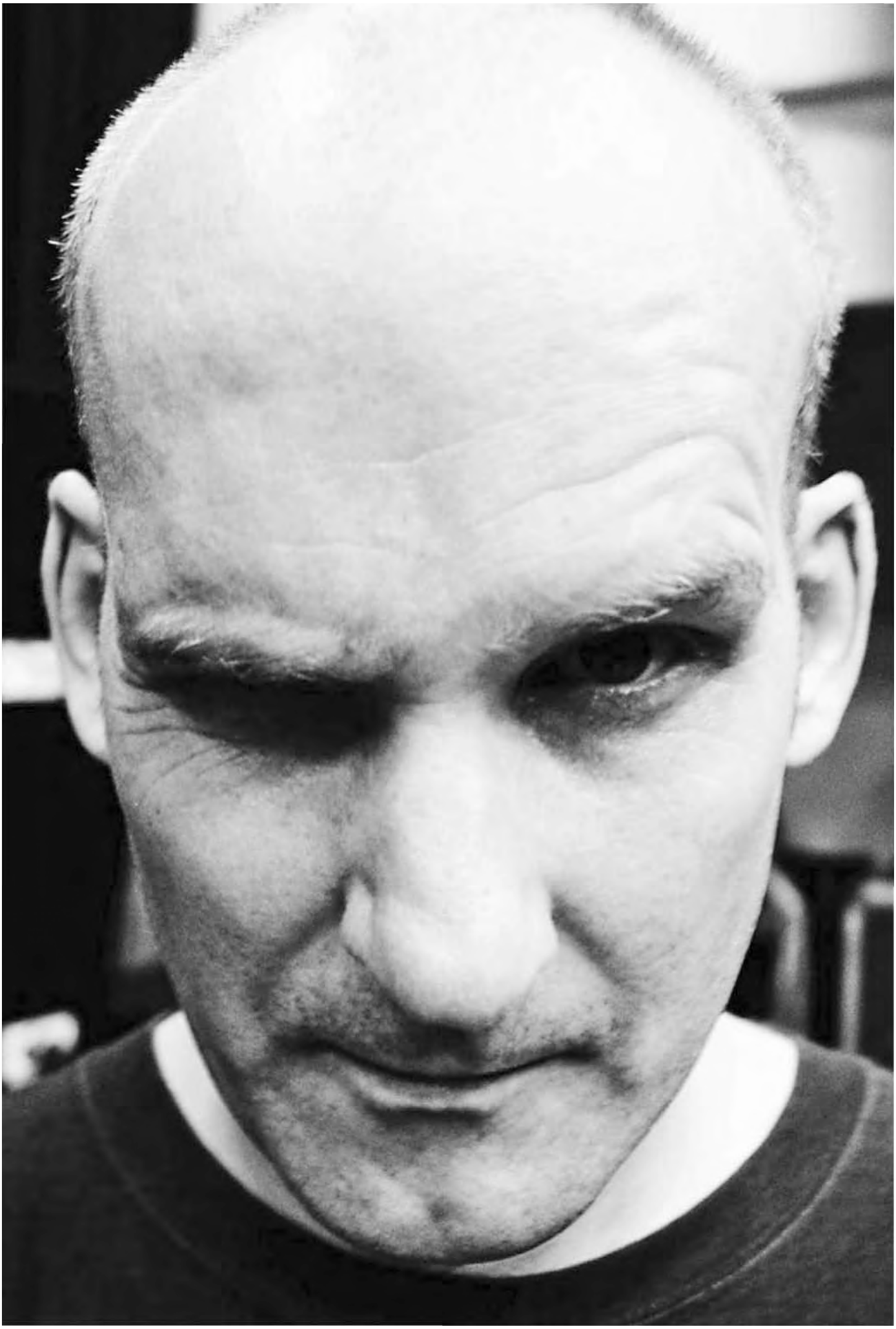
- *Minor Threat*, 1981, Dischord Records (EP)
- *In My Eyes*, 1981, Dischord Records (EP)
- *Out of Step*, 1983, Dischord Records
- *Salad Days*, 1985, Dischord Records (EP)
- *Live*, 1988, Dischord Records (DVD)
- *Complete Discography*, 1989, Dischord Records
- *First Demo Tape*, 2001, Dischord Records

Since you asked me about this the last time we spoke: I checked on how many white guys in their thirties and forties we have in the book. It's about twelve out of twenty.

That's not so bad. I mean, it's not that you are doing anything wrong. It's just that there exists a certain kind of people who put a claim on history; and this seems to be a particularly acute pathology amongst aging white dudes. It's like history should somehow be their province. I find this really disturbing. Mostly because I'm a white guy and I'm forty-six and a lot of people ask me about history, and I just don't want to be another one of them dudes, 'cause I don't claim history. That's also why I don't read a lot of punk histories, because, having been there, I started to understand how people who write histories — or about histories — ultimately tend to shape them into manageable narratives, and in doing so they pervert or distort the reality. And since I was there, it'd be difficult for me to read these books without going, "That just did not happen that way!"

Opposite: Ian MacKaye, São Paulo, 2007 Daigo Oliva

Well, this book doesn't focus so much on history, I suppose. I think it's mostly about gathering people's thoughts on all sorts of issues. I mean, sure, I'll ask



people about history too, and I'll probably ask you a couple of questions about DC in the 80s, but I mean, you can dodge those if you don't want to talk about it...

Oh, I don't mind talking about it. It's just that I think of it more in terms of being somebody who's experienced something and is willing to share these experiences. The problem is that within our culture — and when I say our culture, I specifically mean American culture, but I think it extends to Western culture in general — there is a celebrity factor that makes people who are in the public eye appear to be all-important as opposed to those who just do their work and stay on point. There is the classic moment when people say, "Yes, and then punk, or hardcore, or straight edge, or whatever, died." But it always died when they left the picture or when their band split up. It seems that they are talking about an energy that was contained within them — whereas I see an energy that is a constant ever-flowing river. And this river has always been there, and it always will be there. And what this river ultimately stands for is the free space in which unconventional, unorthodox, contesting, and radical ideas can be presented.

When I first approached you concerning this project I sent an email saying that I wanted to talk about the "political dimensions of straight edge." You said that this set off alarm bells for you. Why was that?

I mainly said that because I was born and raised in Washington, DC, and people obviously associate me with the town and its politics. When you wrote that, I felt that you were perhaps trying to appeal to what you might have thought was my political leaning — like you would say, "Look I don't want to ask you about straight edge, I want to know more about the political stuff because you are from Washington, DC." And so I was like, whoa, I don't know what the political dimension would be in that case? I think a lot of people assume that because I live in Washington I'm really caught up in the kind of politicking in a way, because the White House is here, or the Congress.

However, what I really learned from living in a city in which you have an industry like the government was that the way to navigate these institutions is to never engage with them, and to work on the margins instead; to always work around them. There was a saying amongst the young punks here about how if you went to public schools in Washington, DC, you learned two basic things: one, how to wait in line; and two, never ask for permission because the answer is always no. So the thing to do was: just do it, don't ask for permission! At some point the authorities would come along and say, "You can't do that!" but then you just said, "Oh, I didn't know." If you had asked them, they would have just said no right away. Mainly because of the bureaucracy and the sludge of the administration. They just didn't want to do any extra work.

This played a really big part in the development of the punk scene: we didn't ask, we didn't get permission, we didn't get licenses, we didn't get copyrights, we didn't get trademarks, we didn't fill out any forms, we didn't get lawyers... We just rented rooms and put on shows, and we never formalized anything with the government whatsoever. We just put on these shows that were completely illegal, but nobody cared, because, essentially, you didn't give them the opportunity to care.

But taking that initiative without asking for permission is a political statement, right?

There is no doubt about that. See, email is a very stupid form of communication and I balked when the word "political" appeared. I don't know you, I'm not sitting with you, I can't understand you, I don't hear the tone of what you are saying. The word "political" is just a difficult word. Many people ask me whether Fugazi is a political band, or Minor Threat... Well, of course! Every band is political. Everything is political. Every action is political. But I think there are plenty of people who consider themselves political activists and who do not believe that these bands are political because they don't do this or they don't do that; like, they don't go to this particular protest, or they don't sign this particular petition, or on their liner notes they don't list this particular organization.

It just depends on what one's relationship with the word "politics" is. I know that in this country — at least during the last decade, but I would say probably during the last twenty or thirty years — the overarching dominant political party is not the Republican Party or the Democratic Party; it is the "Apathetic Party." For example, there are many bands that do not want to think about where they play, who they play for, how much they charge, what the arrangements and settings of their shows are, etc. These are people who feel like that's just not part of their world. This is an example of the politics of apathy.

When you say that everything is political, is that because everything we do affects others?

I guess I would say yes. I mean obviously everything we do — or don't do — has its effects. There are many ways to illustrate this. For example, for the life of me I cannot understand how bands would submit to playing shows that are limited to people over the age of twenty-one. I find it unconscionable. Today there are a significant number of people playing shows whose love of music goes back to seeing bands like Fugazi when they were fifteen or sixteen years old. However, now that they're in a band themselves this is somehow no longer relevant. And this is a political action on their part, because what they are saying is: we support the status quo, we support the

corporations, and we do it because it's easier for us, because it's more convenient for us, and because it's more lucrative for us. So by not doing anything about this, they are making a very political statement — especially in this day and age when politics are governed by business.

Let me ask you about the famous "political" DC hardcore scene in the 80s. I think we've already clarified what you understand as political, so I'm not going to ask whether it was "really" political or not. But let me ask you this: was the involvement in what we might want to call "social struggles" — like anti-racism, gender and sexuality issues, support for the homeless, etc. — really a crucial part of the scene? I'm asking because you always hear conflicting reports. There are some who claim that this was important to the kids in the scene, while others say that it was all just about music and individual rebellion...

Who are all these people?

People who write books about the history of hardcore, for example...

Oh, okay. Well, punk, or underground music, or hardcore, or whatever you want to call it, is not singular. I mean, it is essentially a projection of every person. So, for instance, for people who filter things politically it was one thing, while for people who filter things purely through amusement it was another.

In my estimation, the early punk scene, in the late 70s and early 80s, was going through a birthing process, and every time something new is created you have friction. I think that in the early days much energy was being spent on recognizing that we were part of something new, and a lot of us were trying to get our minds around what the hell it was.

Punk rock in the beginning was so many different people who came from so many different places. They were all these outcasts, all these people who just did not fit in for various different reasons. Some people didn't fit in because they had troubles with their families; some people didn't fit in because of their sexuality; some didn't feel normal psychologically; some didn't feel normal politically. And all these sorts of margin walkers, these people who were outside, joined together and gathered under this new manifestation of the underground. And there was a lot to learn, a lot to take in, and there was also a sense of circling the wagons...

Like defense?

Yes, exactly. You create a position of defense. I think that's where a lot of the really tough guy posturing, the spiky hair, and the leather jackets came from. It was basically circling the wagons.

The activism came in where, coming out of the late 60s as a child, you felt that the government should never be trusted and that authority should always be questioned. In this sense, I was always interested in activism. The problem was that you had people, certain political activists, who only saw music as a way of raising money for their causes. They only had interest in bands when they played for their fundraisers. I reject that. There are probably some people in music who don't take politics seriously, but there are certainly many people in politics who don't take music seriously. But the thing about music and politics is that music was here *before politics.* Music was here *before language.* This is no fucking joke!

I know that the big industries have trivialized music in many ways by turning it into entertainment or amusement, but music as a point of gathering is something that goes back all the way to the beginning. So what I was often dealing with when talking to political people was an attitude like, "Well, we don't really care about your music, as long as you can generate an audience and we can get some money..." I remember with Fugazi, these people would come to us and would want us to play for them, and we'd say, "Okay, we do a $5 door," and they'd say, "Oh no, we should do a $25 door," and we'd say, "No, we do a $5 door." They were unable to appreciate our insistence of having a low door price, but *this is activism,* this is activism in our own life.

So, yes, even in the very beginning of the underground punk scene, in 1979, 1980, there were people who were just political activists, who really didn't give a goddamn about the Teen Idles or about Minor Threat. They were just concerned with their own issues. And some of them were a little obsessive. They were kind of — they were almost like a cult. So I think that, in response to that, we — and I mean Minor Threat, SOA, that era of early hardcore bands — moved away from "Politics with a capital P," like, the *formal* version of politics. We said, "We're not interested in *your* politics, what we are interested in are *personal* politics; we're interested in this music, in this community, in this scene."

At the same time, we did do benefits, but we always demanded that the benefits were actually connected to the shows themselves. Like, we would have a show — and then give away the money we made. For example, we did a number of benefits for the Bad Brains 'cause they were always getting their stuff stolen. We also did benefits for venues that were getting evicted, or for kids who were getting evicted from their house.

HR from the Bad Brains also had the idea to do a "Rock Against Racism." There had been these Rock Against Racism shows in England, where the Clash and Sham

69 and those bands played. But HR just saw those events as rock concerts for a lot of white kids. So he said, "Well, we're gonna do a Rock Against Racism here in DC, but we're gonna go play in a black neighborhood." Washington, DC, especially then, was primarily a black town. The majority of the town was black, like 60-70 percent, and there were neighborhoods that were 100 percent black. It was very polarized. So HR organized a couple of Rock Against Racism shows, including one with the Teen Idles, Untouchables, and the Bad Brains. We just played in a housing project. In my mind that certainly counts as political.

So this was all in the early 80s?

Yes. And then by around 1984 things changed. The elders in the DC punk scene began to drift away for various reasons, and the scene was left to these younger kids. There was a lot of senseless violence going on and it was really off-putting. The problem was not limited to DC. Skinheads seemed to be rampant all over the United States. In other towns, there were kids who were trying to battle with skinheads. They wanted to beat them up and chase them out of town. I thought that was just ridiculous. In DC, we decided to just create a new scene instead. That was certainly a political action, too. Not least because a part of creating a new scene created a situation in which we, being in our early twenties, began thinking about the larger world. I believe there was a very natural evolution, which then led to what became known as "Revolution Summer."

Can you tell us a little more about that? What happened?

I would say that Revolution Summer was an infusion, a moment when the DC punk scene and its personal politics suddenly merged and dovetailed with formal politics. We got involved in political action. Reagan was in office and the apartheid issue was really big. We were discussing gender issues, environmental issues, diet issues, and so on. It was a time of politicization.

Unfortunately, the name Revolution Summer has caused some false interpretations — which is partly our fault because we came up with it. Some people were like, "Oh, look, they think they are being revolutionary!" But that was not actually what we were thinking. We used the word "revolution," and it is a very strong word, but it was not to suggest that we were creating a revolution. For us Revolution Summer was all about our immediate community. It really came out of a loss of direction or emphasis.

How so?

In 1983, a lot of people were very discouraged. A number of bands, most notably Minor Threat, Faith, and Insurrection, had broken up, and even though there were

other bands — good bands: Government Issue, Marginal Man, bands like that — the bands that had been crucial for us, the kids I hung out with, were gone. Especially Faith, who were just an enormously important band — I think a lot of people don't realize how significant they were. Anyway, 1984 kind of turned into a dark year, and no bands were really forming. Eventually, everyone was like, "Well, we're gonna do something!"

So we decided to pull something together. First we planned "Good Food October." The idea was that in October 1984 we were all going to eat good food, we were going to make good music, and we were going to be politically active. But then October came and went. So we set a new target date for the summer, and this time it worked.

What kinds of actions did you do?

One of the most successful was the Punk Percussion Protest, something that I remember being hatched at Dischord House. We initially discussed the idea of putting a band on a truck and driving back and forth in front of the South African embassy to protest apartheid. We gave up on that concept because no one we knew had a truck and we figured that the cops would shut us down immediately. So instead we put word out to as many people as we could that they should come join us near the embassy with any sort of percussion item they might be able to find. We got a lot of people out and it was such a baffler for the police — just a really positive experience. We definitely created enough noise that the people in the embassy knew we were out there. There was a series of creative actions along those lines throughout the summer.

You said that your goal at the time was to create a new scene. Did Revolution Summer help with that?

Definitely. It established a new beachhead. A lot of kids at the time felt very discouraged about the violence in the punk scene. There were a lot of kids who felt that they were going to walk away from punk altogether and do something new — goth or heavy metal or whatever the fuck they were going to do. Revolution Summer showed them that there was a possibility to be into punk rock without being into guys stomping on your head. Revolution Summer really showed the possibility of a new underground.

You talked about "personal" and "formal" politics merging at that time. What happened then? Why did that momentum get lost?

I don't agree with that. That kind of momentum might not have been celebrated in the same way afterwards, but I know people who have been involved with this stuff for twenty-five years now. It's true that if you are a collective — even an informal collective like we were — you are able to craft and execute actions that are harder to do

once that collective has dissipated. But people continued doing things within Positive Force, for example, which was a sort of confluence of Revolution Summer.

We have Mark Andersen, one of the co-founders of Positive Force, contribute to the book too.

There you go. Many people who came out of that scene went on to do really intense political work.

Did a lot of them — or all of them — stay connected to the hardcore scene?

Well, it depends on what you define as the hardcore scene. Like, whenever Fugazi played throughout the 90s, I would see those people. But if you're talking about seeing every band that called itself "hardcore" or...

...reading *Maximumrocknroll* up and down...

...right, they wouldn't do that. But we didn't even do that in 1985. This is a good example of just having different perceptions of politics. Tim Yohannan had a more squared off idea of politics and of political action. Yohannan was a dear friend of mine, I loved and respected the dude, so I'm not saying that he was wrong. But by the mid-80s, he certainly ridiculed us and thought that we were wimpy. That's how "emo" became a pejorative... Yohannan really loved the term and he used it all the time to dismiss bands. But, that's alright. Yohannan just had more of an orthodox idea of what punk was, an idea that ran really contrary to mine. For me, punk has always been the free space.

What about political action?

I think of political action as an exercise, and people should exercise throughout their entire lives. If you believe that the people who are calling the shots should not be trusted, if you believe that power corrupts, then you should always be prepared to protest and to act against those who get too much power. And you must know that you're not finished even if you put one person out of power or make one aspect of the power structure disappear. You're never finished! I don't have this kind of romantic notion about political activism where it's like, "We go out into the streets and we bring down the government and everything will be fine!" I just don't think about things like that. I think that political action is a lifelong effort that will manifest in specific ways, depending on where you are and whatever it is that you are doing. It's the same with punk: I believe that punk doesn't end with your leather jacket. I imagine my funeral is going to be punk! I'm serious about that.

Because it will be outside of mainstream society's norms?

Let me explain it this way: I'm a parent now. Amy and I had a kid back in May; we have a six-month-old son. When he was first born and I was walking with him, I kept on running into these guys in the neighborhood. Maybe I've seen them before, maybe I haven't, but they are always like, "Hey dude, welcome to the club!" And I'm like, "Wow, what club did I join?" It confused me and I didn't feel comfortable with it at all. How could something so organic — what is more organic than the birth of a human being? — turn into a "club"? But then suddenly it struck me and I was like, "Wait a minute! I'm a fucking punk!" I've always felt like a freak, it's just that I had never been a parent before. And I realized that these were the same dudes who used to say, "What's with your hair? Are you a fag?" I'm not saying they are bad guys — they are just normals, they are regulars, they are straights. Me, whatever I do in my life, I'm interested in creative response — and that's what I call punk. If people don't agree with me, that's fine, I don't care. They can have punk, and they can have it however they want to have it. But I have it my way.

You mentioned Rock Against Racism in DC being organized in a housing project. I'm wondering whether that means that the early DC hardcore scene wasn't as white as the hardcore scene later became.

First off, I think those Rock Against Racism shows were highly entertaining for the kids in the projects because they thought it was the most ridiculous thing they had ever seen.

The scene has always been predominantly white and the whiteness of the scene has been an issue from time to time. People have asked me, "Well, if Washington is 70 percent black, how is it that your shows are 90 percent white?" My response is: apparently that's who wants to come see kids jumping around on stage with a guitar. I don't know what else to say about that. We never turned people away at the door. I mean, we played shows at the Wilson Center with fifteen bands for three dollars. Three dollars! No one has ever been turned away. The Wilson Center was in a neighborhood that was at the time largely African-American. I don't know why they didn't want to come see the shows, probably because they thought it was stupid. For the same reason, a lot of Latino kids don't come. It's just not their music. And I find the notion that you should "reach out" and try to get these people involved not very convincing. Why? It seems disrespectful. I mean, these kids are certainly capable of making up their own minds of whether this is something they want to get involved with or not. Again, I don't think it's a matter of access. I think it's just a matter of taste.

Look at the go-go scene. This is a thriving underground music scene in DC. It is almost entirely black. However, I don't think anybody asks go-go bands, "Well, how

come you don't have a 30 percent white audience?" It is because for many varying reasons these are just different cultures; and I'm talking about *real* culture, culture that speaks to a certain part of the population. Don't you think that if culture spoke to everybody, it wouldn't really be culture anymore? It'd be like network television.

Let me also go back to what you said about kids fighting skinheads out on the streets, and your approach of creating a new scene instead...

Let me be more specific: for most of the skinhead kids — and they weren't all skinhead kids, but they were all troubled — the issue was violence. The punk scene was a perfect nest for them. People who have violence and control issues need an environment to exercise these things. The world at large is too scary for them, they need something more immediate and conquerable. Especially since punk had gotten the "nihilistic" and "self-destructive" tag from the media, it drew these people. It made punk perfect for them, and violence was their language. If you spoke to them in violence, then you were only awarding them.

In the early stages of the punk scene I did that. I fought a lot. I operated under a philosophy: *bruise the ego and not the body*. The idea was that I would never back down from a fight, but I would also never take a brick and smash someone's head in after I had knocked them down. All I wanted to do was to repel these kids, to stop them by standing up to them. This was how I thought I could reconcile what was essentially a pacifist mindset with punching people.

This violence seemed necessary because I felt that we are under attack. For example, there was a gang in Washington called the Punk Beaters. They were a bunch of redneck guys, jocks, who would go out looking for punks to beat up. So, then we would go with my brother Alec, who was fourteen years old at the time and a very punk-looking kid, to the area where the Punk Beater guys hang out. We would have Alec walk a block ahead of us, and if these guys came to get him, twelve or fifteen of us would take them out. Our idea was to show them that you can't fuck with the punks like that.

At some point, however, the whole violence thing just turned upon itself. People at shows would get into fights because somebody was wearing a wrong T-shirt or had long hair or just something really absurd like that. This made me realize what a completely pointless, unconstructive activity it was, but, by talking to these kids, I also understood that they had been inspired by my violence. It was like this biblical concept coming true, violence begets violence, and it became very clear to me that this was something I had to stop in my life.

At first it was difficult, and I remember thinking, "How can I stop when I'm always under attack?" I don't know how many times I would have a car go by and someone would scream, "Fuck you, you fucking punk faggot!" But then I realized that if you do

not speak that language, you recognize that they are not talking to you. Let's say that I'm in Sweden, and a carload with a bunch of guys goes by and they yell something at me in Swedish. I don't know what they're saying. As far as I know, they are saying, "I love basketball!" Who knows? So when I'm walking along the street here and some guys go by in a car, and they don't know me, I don't know them, but they say, "You're a fucking punk faggot, fuck you!" then it should have the same effect. They are not talking to me, they don't know me, and I'm not what they say I am, so they must have confused me with someone else. In short, if you don't speak the language of violence, you are released from violence. This was a very powerful discovery for me.

The next step was to start bands like Rites of Spring, Embrace, Lunchmeat, Beefeater —bands that were considered very wimpy at the time. We stopped with the aggressive posturing and started playing different kinds of music. This infuriated many kids, because they had no longer a soundtrack for their violence. It was too wimpy for them.

And straight edge was part of that change?

No. Straight edge was already in place in 1979, 1980, it was something that had always been happening and that wasn't particular to that time. The song "Straight Edge" was a song about the way I lived, about who I was, and about living my life however I wanted.

In the 1970s, I was given a lot of grief of my high school peers and my friends for being straight; I was ridiculed. Then when we got into the punk scene, all these punk rockers ridiculed me. And all the time I just felt like, "Hey, I'm just me!" I didn't say to anyone that they were stupid for drinking — still they gave me so much shit. The first sort of straight edge song I wrote was probably "I Drink Milk" by the Teen Idles. This was obviously a joke song — "I drink milk, I drink milk, I drink milk" — but the reaction to it was so visceral, and people were like, "We're gonna tie you up and make you drink a beer!" HR from the Bad Brains always told me that he was going to tie me to a tree and make me smoke pot with him. And I was always struck by this, thinking, "What the fuck is this?" Like, I never said to HR, "I'm gonna tie you to a tree and not let you smoke pot!"

Ultimately, the situation kinda came to a boil in my mind, and I guess eventually I just wrote a more angry song. But I think the beginning of the song is very clear, and I think the first line of the song is the most important: "I'm a person just like you." And then it continues: "I have better things to do." That's the way I looked at it: I had better things to do than just get high, and I was just being straight about it. But it wasn't like I decided, "Oh, I'm going to be straight," or "I'm going to be straight edge." That's just how I was. It's just me.

In life, if you decide to forgo something that everybody else does, it gives you a perspective on society that you couldn't have if you were just engaging. It teaches you a lot about the world. I didn't do these things because I was trying to be different — apparently, I was different. What I learned was that just to be myself meant to be a freak. And so I wrote a song about being a freak. I've said many times before that the biggest influence for the song was the Jimi Hendrix song "If 6 was 9." At the end of the song, Hendrix says, "I'm the one that's gonna die when it's time for me to die / So let me live my life the way I want to." He was singing about being a freak.

Straight edge was just a declaration for the right to live your life the way you want to. I was not interested in trying to tell people how to do that. I mean, obviously things got pretty crazily perverted over the years.

It seems that you were never all that interested in being part of what was later called the "straight edge movement." Was that related to the part of not wanting to tell others what to do? Especially since parts of the straight edge scene started to do exactly that?

Of course! Originally, the declaration was two-fold: one point was to say that this is the way I want to live and that you have to respect my way; the second point was not limited to drinking or to taking drugs — it was about being obsessed. I think some people simply missed that.

The big debates really started when "Out of Step" came out. Specifically, the lyric "don't fuck" seemed to flip people out. You could hear them say, "My god, he's anti-sex!"

I definitely chose those words carefully, and I stand behind them still. But you'll notice for instance that the lyric is "Don't smoke, don't drink, don't fuck, at least I can fucking think." So first off, I use a grammatical trick in there: the fourth line modifies the first three. The first three sound like directives or orders: "Don't do this, don't do this, don't do this." The fourth line says: "But at least I can fucking think!" Which clearly says that I don't do these things — but I can think; I may not be like other people, I may not party — but at least I can think, at least I got that. You can even see on the lyrics sheet that the word "I" is put in parentheses, which was a result of long discussions within the band. Some people in the band were very concerned that kids might read the whole thing as a directive, while I was less concerned about it. But that's part of me, I'm rather unapologetic about stuff. I'm more like, "Fuck it, tough on them!"

Then there is a second thing that's important in those lyrics. If you look at the words "don't smoke," everyone figures I'm talking about smoking cigarettes, or grass, or hash; "don't drink" — everyone figures I'm talking about alcohol; "don't fuck" — everyone figures I'm saying, "No sex!" Think about that! Think about the word

"drink": what does "drink" mean? Do you think that people would ever figure, "Oh, he wants people to no longer take any beverages, or any liquids of any sort?" But when the word "fuck" comes on, they cannot understand it the same way. That just blew my mind. What I was clearly discussing was abusive, quest-oriented, manipulative sex. People who were not interested in other people's feelings, but only in getting off. I saw as a teenager that people's energies were so squarely caught up in getting laid that a lot of pain and hurt came with that. People were being hurt and damaged and traumatized by other people's behavior. I knew women who were raped by people who did not care for anything other than getting off. And I just thought that this kind of obsession was not healthy.

So, straight edge, the whole idea, the whole concept was really anti-obsession. If your whole world is committed to this one thing, then clearly it's not a good situation.

Why do you think the sex aspect freaked people out so much?

I think American culture is deeply dysfunctional about sexuality. This is probably true for most cultures, but especially for American culture. Our culture is so fucked up on sex. I mean, you might remember this huge uproar about Janet Jackson's nipple that showed on TV during the Super Bowl some years ago, no matter how imperceptibly. This ridiculous incident caused an unbelievable series of new restrictions. Today, if you have a cussword air on a radio show you might get a half a million dollar fine — for a cussword! What kind of a country are we living in? There is a very dominant right, religious element in this society. You hear people say that America is all about the separation of church and state, the free exercise of religion, etc. That is all bullshit, the conservative component of religion is really powerful. And I think this is why, if you grow up in this culture, there is this idea — also within the punk scene — that sexuality should be transgressive. That's why you have "sex, drugs and rock'n'roll" — the idea that sex is a rebel act. I mean, come on! Sex is the requirement for the perpetuation of the human race. And yet somehow it's been relegated to fucking in the streets.

I think because of all this, sex became this sort of rallying point: if you're rebellious, then you fuck. And I think the problem was that people's sexual behavior, particularly because of the psychological nature of sexual dysfunction, became very abusive, especially towards women. Women were being treated as targets and conquests. Especially in the early L.A. punk scene, there was a lot of emphasis on scamming. It was really a shock to me to meet punk bands who would come to Washington, hit on all the women and say things like, "Hey, will you give me a blowjob in the bathroom of the club?" How is this different than Led Zeppelin or any of these bands? I thought that we rejected groupie culture and rock'n'roll, that we saw it as

a bankrupt approach to music, and that we went beyond the idea that rebelliousness can only manifest in either self-destruction or the exploitation of others. So I couldn't understand what was going on, and I thought I'd speak out against it. And I got a rise out of people.

I'm pro-sex, I certainly have no problem with sex between people who want to have sex. But I felt that so much energy in our scene was spent on selfish aims, basically on trying to get laid all the time, to the degree where it really compromised our communities.

I also think that the sexual transgression plays a massive role in the consumption of alcohol. People drink to enter into situations that are not necessarily good for them. I feel that people should always be present.

You said that the song "Straight Edge" was about defending the way you lived your life. Were you the only one who lived that way when the song came out? Or was there already a "straight edge scene"? If not, when did such a scene develop?

When you have a bunch of kids there is always a sense of what's cool and what's not cool. I believe that at the time it wasn't so much about "becoming straight edge," it was more about kids being human beings and making choices.

I think what happened at first was that an alternative had been created — a scene that people could get involved with that wasn't the standard rebel party scene. Of course we were rejected by other kids who thought that we were stupid or made them "feel guilty." But the idea that we were all totalitarian fundamentalists really had more to do with people's own issues than with ours.

There was of course also a pragmatic aspect to this, which was that we were deeply invested in the idea of keeping clubs open to punk bands, and we knew that if kids fucked up by getting drunk and smashing the club or whatever, we would lose our space. So in that sense there certainly was pressure, because we were like, "Hey, we're not fucking around, if you're going to drink, do it after the show, away from the club, don't do it anywhere near here!"

But most of the kids involved with the early DC hardcore scene were drinking. Some of my dearest friends were fuck-ups. It certainly wasn't this weird cult where you'd get slapped if you were seen with a cup of beer in your hand. That is just a fallacy.

When you say "we," who does that include? Minor Threat?

No, it was a larger clique. I guess you could call it the "Dischord scene" — you know, the scene first defined by Minor Threat, Faith etc. and then morphing into Rites of Spring, Embrace, Beefeater, that era.

But not all of these kids were straight edge, right?

No, most of those kids were drinking too, at least sometimes. The kind of strict straight edge thing didn't really show up until SS Decontrol. And the policing aspect of it, that just seemed to come out of New York.

When you say New York, you mean Youth of Today, Bold etc.?

Yes. And there were the Connecticut kids, and it kinda dovetailed, there was Gorilla Biscuits, Crucial Youth. It was a scene that I think was aesthetically to some degree influenced by Dischord, musically very much by SS Decontrol, and attitude-wise mostly by the Boston or New England scene.

Do you have any recollection about first hearing the phrase "straight edge movement" being used?

No. The first time I ever got the idea of a straight edge movement was when I met people who identified as the "bent edge movement." As far as I'm concerned, there was a countermovement before there was a movement. Minor Threat toured in 1982, and kids would show up in Tucson, Arizona, and say that they were "bent edge;" or kids would come up to us in Dallas, Texas, and say that they were "curved edge." These were people who were provocateurs, trying to fuck with us — but they essentially defined the straight edge movement.

Maybe in L.A. or Orange County there were people, like America's Hardcore, who actually identified as such. This would be the origin of a more organic kind of movement: people who say, "Hey, this is weird, there are kids here, and there are kids in Reno, and kids in Boston, and kids in the Midwest, and they are all doing this really cool thing." However, I think it was always more about punk rock than about straight edge. Like, we were the new American hardcore. You had Johnny Thunders and Sid Vicious and these kinds of people, and now you suddenly had these kids who were making this radical music but were not stumbling around like junkies. That was significant.

So in this sense the "we" I used above means all these kids, The Necros and 7 Seconds and others, and I guess it was a kind of a movement, but, again, it was more of a punk rock movement or a hardcore punk rock movement or a kids' movement than a straight edge movement — maybe it was straight edge, but we didn't think of this as a defining element.

There are two different ideas of movements: there is an organic idea of a movement, and then there is a very formal idea of a movement. In the latter case people start to do newsletters and they want you to sign on to something. I've never been interested in that. I'm just not a subscriber.

It's interesting that you stressed the anti-obsession aspect of straight edge. Arguably, it seemed that a lot of straight edge kids became rather obsessive...

No doubt. Even when the second version of "Out of Step," which is on a 12-inch, came out, I put a little thing in there saying, "This is not a set of rules!" So, already in 1983, I'm trying to say, "Look, there is no movement here!"

For me, straight edge was never intended to be a movement and I never saw myself as a part of such a movement. However, I want to be really clear: I think that the vast majority of the people who identify as or with straight edge are human beings who try to do the right thing in their lives. The fact that they are even thinking about their behavior, that they are thinking about the effects of their behavior on the world, is, I believe, positive and good. The problem with movements is that they put humans in something akin to a higher calling and then others have to take the backseat. There's a religious element there. And then you always have people — even if it's only one percent — who have power issues or, more specifically, violence issues. Essentially, what they are wrestling with is not a conflict about intoxication or drug use or sexuality. It is about power and violence. And if people have this inside of them, they have to get it out. So they go around looking for triggers: things that can set off situations in which they can release this energy. This is why these people run to nationalism, religion, or sports, all these really imaginary things. Like, why would people who live in Texas on one side of some imaginary line have an issue with those who live in Mexico on the other side of that imaginary line? It's ridiculous. But if you need a trigger for your violence, you need someone who is "the other" and you need a line on the ground that allows you to say, "Okay, if you step over that line, then we'll beat your ass!" Straight edge was perfect for that if you saw it as a series of directives. And that's how these people started to see it, as very simple rules: "If you do this or that, then you are stepping over that line, and at that point you've waived your rights!" This is something that I saw most clearly articulated in a text handed out by the hardline people.

Didn't hardline activists picket Fugazi shows?

Yes, they would picket us. They were very dogmatic, and their main issue, as far as I could tell, were animal rights. So at one point I received some information from them, a declaration of sorts. It said that all life was precious, and they laid it all out in detail. And then the text said, "We will educate you about this, and if you do not accept the education, then you have waived your status as a living thing." That's basically what it said. I mean it wasn't quite as crude but it was pretty fucking close. Essentially, they were saying, "We will give you a chance; but if you don't agree with us, we're gonna beat your ass!"

I think it's always interesting to look at where these people go. I would meet these hardline kids, and when I came back to their town a couple of years later I would ask, "What happened to this kid?" And often people would be like, "Oh, he's selling crack." They were just gangsters, and if you think about gangsters — gang guys — it's all about turf; which goes back to the example of the line. I remember once visiting this stupid high school and there was a mural of an eagle on the ground in tile, and I walked across it — I mean, it was on the fucking floor — and I got jacked up by these dudes for stepping on their eagle. That's what I mean. These are all triggers.

But you think that, overall, the violence aspect in straight edge was overrated?

The reason why the people who had issues with violence managed to dominate the whole idea of straight edge was that our cultures are obsessed with violence. The media will always talk about violence. If there is a party — and I use this analogy a lot — and there are thirty people talking, twenty-eight having really fascinating, incredibly illuminating conversations, and two ending up punching each other, all that people will talk about the next day is the fight. I don't know why. This is just the way we process things. Violent people end up getting an enormous amount of attention. And then kids who have never heard about straight edge will hear about it in the context of violence, and some will be like, "That sounds cool, you punch people out — I'm in!"

The whole idea of straight edge was incredibly maligned by a small amount of people. It became vulnerable because everyone gathered under one tree. This means instant death for everybody when the lightning strike comes. By referring to straight edge as a movement and by identifying with it and by adopting rules or whatever, people allowed themselves to be put into trouble. Because when things start to go wrong, you need to react, and once these guys started beating everybody up, a lot of kids were like, "This is stupid, I need to get out of this situation, I don't wanna be identified with that!" So then they "stopped being straight edge," whatever the fuck that means. And then in turn you have internet sites where people out those who "broke their edge." It's so ridiculous! This is why I cannot understand that people would want to huddle under the same tree.

When hardline people picketed your shows, what exactly was their problem? That you weren't outspoken enough?

I think that there were two reasons why we were picketed. Actually, picketed might be too strong of a word, they came "to talk to us" and give us "a chance to explain ourselves." One of the reasons was that we were pro-choice. This was a big

issue for them. The other one was that we were not more outspoken about our diets. I mean, I've been a vegan for twenty-two years now, Joe was a vegan for almost the entire time in Fugazi, and we were all vegetarians. But I guess the hardline people wanted us to make this some kind of an issue. I remember this one time in Memphis a hardline activist confronted us in front of the local health food store. He asked us why we didn't have any vegan songs. We just totally couldn't believe the question. Guy finally said, "Well, considering that none of our songs eat meat or dairy or any animal products, I guess they're all vegan." It's just so absurd! I also remember the kid wearing fake leather DocMartens. I always felt that this was absurd too. I mean, I don't wear leather. But I would never wear anything that looks like leather either. It seems to be completely counterproductive 'cause the main issue with the leather industry is that it's fashionable. So if you wear something that looks like leather, what's the statement that you're making?

Anyway, I think that a lot of hardline kids felt that there was a war happening. So they were militant, and they felt that we should also be militant. You gotta remember that in the punk scene, or the underground community, the self-cleaning oven is always in place. People's power is limited to their scope, and it's like that saying goes: "The people who get hit are the people within arm's reach." So, instead of them picketing Aerosmith or whoever, they go to some little punk show and are rough on the people there.

What about those rumors of you...

...slapping a beer out of somebody's hands?

For example.

That's one of the most annoying fucking things. I've been told so many times that I slapped a beer out of somebody's hands. I don't think I ever did that, not once, and yet it has become part of my legacy. Then there is also the story about me hitting someone with a hammer for blowing pot smoke in my face. This is actually true, but the story is never told correctly: When I was in high school, I was part of a community theater group. We had this club house within the school that was completely underground. People were drinking and getting high, but it was our club house, and so I hung out there too. They always called me "the group conscience." One day this kid from my school — who was a stoner and a kind of bully — was getting high, while I was building flats. We were teasing each other, we did that a lot. At one point he came over, tapped me on the shoulder, and gave me this look, like, "You got a problem or something?" So I stood up holding the hammer, he blew pot smoke in my face, ran away, and I threw the hammer and it hit him in the leg. So, yes, I literally hit someone with a hammer for blowing pot smoke in my face. However, it's really different from

the idea that most people have. They always see me attacking somebody and putting a hole in their head.

This is precisely the kind of thing that my life is filled with: people have this perception of me that is so inaccurate. It has largely to do with other people's projections of what my work has been about. But my work has basically always been about peace and love, that's it. It's not true when people say, "Ian, you never wrote any love songs." My songs are all love songs, ultimately. Think about a song like "Filler." I'm talking about one of my best friends there, and about what he's been doing to himself and why he got so fucked up. Songs like that are all songs about my passion for connection, and my agony over disconnection.

I heard you make a really interesting distinction between straight edge as a "lifestyle" and, as you put it, straight edge as "life." Can you explain this?

When I wrote the song "Straight Edge" I wasn't writing about something new. I wasn't saying, "Hey, here is a new way to live!" I was talking about the way that people live to begin with. Later I read so much about the "straight edge lifestyle," and I was confronted with it all the time. There have been so many times when I would read something like, "Ian MacKaye is a practitioner of the straight edge lifestyle." A few years ago it finally hit me what was so annoying about it: it's no fucking lifestyle! A lifestyle is something that one chooses. Like, if you choose to live on a beach and go surfing all day, that's a lifestyle. But being straight is the base, that's what's underneath all of this! We're born that way!

I've always thought about life as a straight line, a simple, straight line, on which we are all equal and identical. Everything added to that — like our surroundings, our culture, all these things — that's what makes us different. But as far as the essence of life goes, we are identical, we are the same thing, all of us. And so, in my mind, when someone starts saying, "So, you live the straight edge lifestyle," I say, "No. *I live life.*" And last time I checked, there are three or four necessary components to life: air, water, food, and sex. The sex is there because we must procreate since otherwise we're out of luck. So, as far as I am concerned, straight edge is just life. I don't choose to be straight, I *choose not to be the other thing*. It's the semantic subtlety that matters here.

Another problem I see associated with the "straight edge lifestyle" is that it becomes a framework for merchandise. "Okay, now I decide to live the straight edge lifestyle. What do I need to buy?" People look for things to signify their lifestyle choices. I cannot believe it when I see straight edge merchandise! It's just mind-boggling.

So being straight edge means to follow that straight line of life without adding anything that we don't really need; things that mainly serve the interests of corporations?

Well, I mean, if you want to take it extremely literally, yes. However, obviously I think that there is some merit in talking to you on the telephone, otherwise I wouldn't do it. I mean, any literal interpretation of what I just said could ask, "So, why are you wearing shoes?" I understand that. But I just want to stress the problems associated with the word "lifestyle." I think that people use the word for two reasons: either they use it to dismiss something; or they use it to suggest that there is a certain way to be. But what's the blueprint of the straight edge lifestyle? How do you live that lifestyle? Do you have to go to a particular website? Do you need any particular clothing? I don't know.

My point is: to live simply and not to buy into any such demands, *that is normal*. What is perverted is the mainstream understanding of living.

You've said something — and I don't remember the exact quote — but you've said something to the extent that the only thing you really want is people to be well.

Of course! There was a certain period in my life when I was very angry, when I was really agonizing over things. It made me feel miserable, and I began to question everything: What is the point of all this punk rock? What is the point of me singing? What am I trying to do? Eventually, I realized that the reason I was so angry was because I want people in the world to be well. And I realized that it was a worthwhile project to pursue in my lifetime. But I also understood that I myself needed to be well to do that. So I figured that I would do my best to live a life of wellness. This doesn't mean that I'm trying to bask in my riches. It means that I'm trying to release myself from the anger and agony. Remember what I said earlier about someone going by in a car and calling me "a fucking asshole"? They are not talking to me — 'cause I'm not a fucking asshole.

There are a lot of things happening in this world that are horrific. But I have no control over this. The day them fucking planes crashed into the buildings here in 2001, I was in Dischord House, right here. People called me to tell me what had happened, so I turned on the TV, I saw the planes crash and immediately turned the TV off, and returned to the book I was reading — a Kurt Vonnegut book, which in fact was a perfect book for that moment. While I sat there reading, I looked out the window, and it was an absolutely crystal clear, gorgeous day. I saw the trees and thought, "These trees don't give a fuck about what just happened. They don't care. And they're going to be here after all this shit is over."

Humans have been brutalizing each other since the beginning of time. I don't know why. But there is a certain point where one has to accept that this is a little bit like the weather. You cannot control it, and you cannot understand it. What happened that day was incomprehensible. No matter who did it. Whether it was Al-Qaeda or the US government or someone else. And it will remain incomprehensible, no matter how often you look at it. The only result of looking at something that's incomprehensibly brutal over and over again is detachment. If you take your hand and you start slapping yourself as hard as you can, it's going to hurt — but after a while you'll feel nothing 'cause that's the way we survive. We become numb. I don't think that helps anybody.

So on September 11, after I had finished the book, I sat down and I answered all the mail. Everything was fucked up here — all the bridges were closed, the phones were down, etc. — and it seemed like answering the mail was the best thing to do. I looked at it as a vote for the future. Because I believed that someone would read it — that there would be a September 12.

I guess that's an illustration of putting into action a philosophy of *Live as you desire the world to be*! It doesn't mean to be unaware and not to care. It means to love and to be well and to wish for others to be well too.

Towards a Less Fucked Up World:

Sobriety and Anarchist Struggle

"Towards a Less Fucked Up World: Sobriety and Anarchist Struggle" was first self-published as a pamphlet in 2003. The text proved to be pivotal for contemporary connections between radical politics and sobriety. The author, Nick Riotfag, revised the original version for this book and has added an afterword.

Nick Riotfag is an anarchist, queer, and straight edge activist/writer who lives in North Carolina.

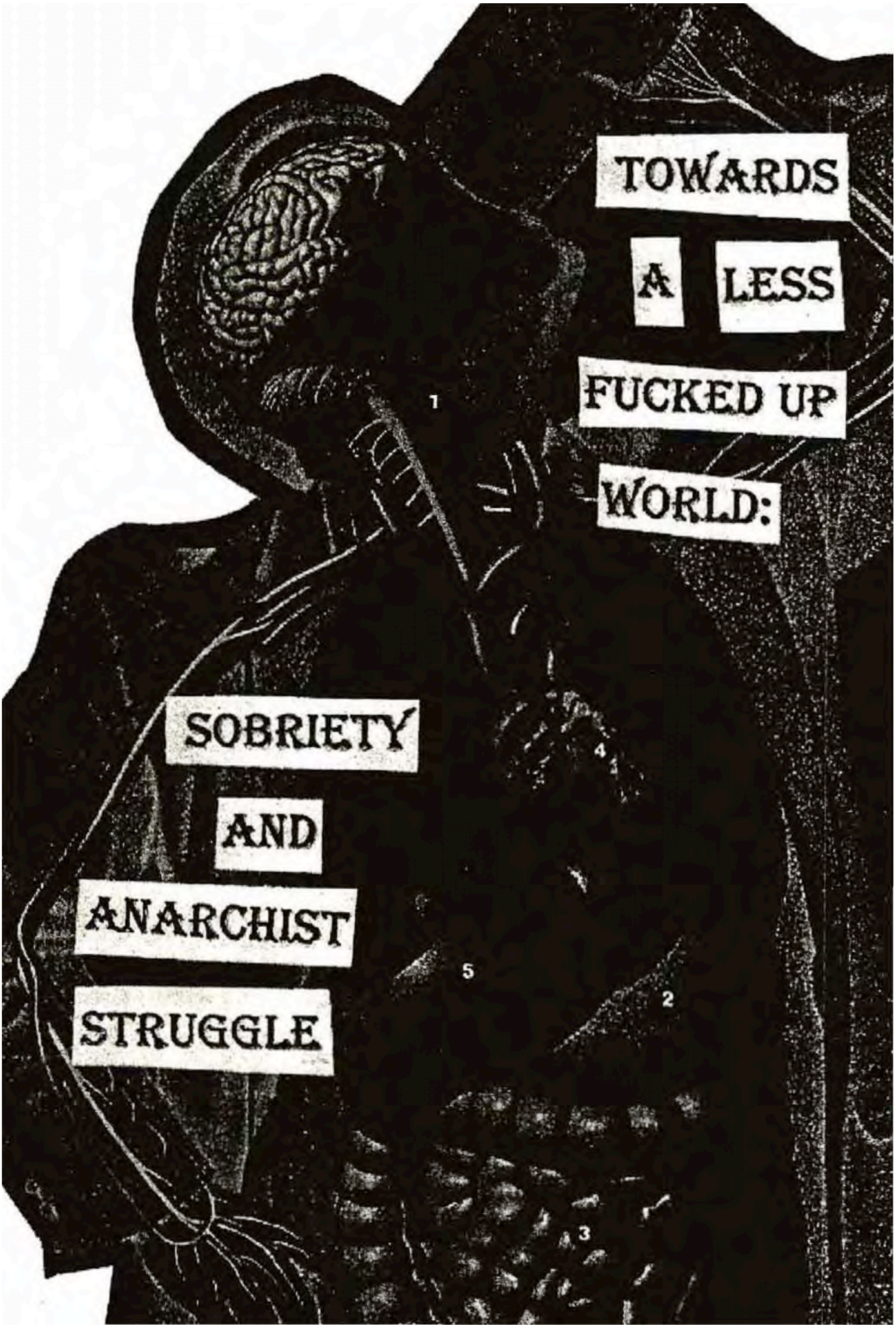
Introduction

This zine is an ongoing project I've been writing in my head and on paper for several years now. Since I decided to become permanently sober several years ago, I've constantly struggled to find safe spaces; I hoped that when I started to become a part of radical, activist, and anarchist communities, that I would find folks who shared or at least respected my convictions. Instead, I found a painful paradox: radical scenes that were so welcoming and affirming in many ways, yet incredibly inflexible and unsupportive around my desire to be in sober spaces.

I have plenty of reasons for being substance-free that aren't "political," per se. Some are more personal or internal: I love my body and want to preserve my health; I'm personally terrified of addiction; I tend towards extremes, so I think that if I did drink or drug I'd overdo it; my family has had alcoholics and drug abusers who have ruined lives. Others are more pragmatic: as an activist I participate in actions that could put me at risk for arrest, and the legal risks of drug possession just aren't worthwhile; I have better things to spend money on; and so forth. However, my primary reasons for choosing this lifestyle are specifically connected to my political beliefs as a revolutionary, a feminist, and an anarchist. I don't think that most folks with whom I work on political projects realize or acknowledge that my choice to be sober isn't just a personal preference or an annoying puritan dogma. This zine is my attempt to articulate why I consider sobriety a crucial part of my anarchism and feminism.

I've tried to put it together in a way that combines theory and analysis with my personal experience. The first few sections explore the connections I see between intoxication and different kinds of oppression (sorry if it gets a little wordy at times); the next bit talks about how intoxication fits into radical communities; then I offer two stories from my life and my reflections on them before the conclusion.

Opposite: Front Cover to the original Towards a Less Fucked Up World zine


TOWARDS
A LESS
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WORLD:
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AND
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I realize that sober folks have traditionally not been known for presenting our views respectfully, with open ears and loving hearts. I'm definitely among those who stand guilty of bludgeoning people with my beliefs. Hopefully this zine will at least in part rectify that tendency by explaining my views without judging or blaming non-sober folks or seeming to set myself up as superior to others. If it fails in this, I apologize in advance, and welcome folks to call me out on it. That said, please know that much of my anger that manifests in a "judgmental" or "preachy" tone comes from constant denial of safe space, refusal to recognize the legitimacy of our feelings and opinions, alienation in most social environments, and general ignoring of our concerns and desires and needs. I write with love and rage, and I apologize for neither.

A Quick Note On Words

I like the term "straightedge," not because I'm especially invested in the bands and the scene, but rather because I like the way it places my decision not to drink or take drugs in the larger context of a positive radical social critique. Of course, I've found that most folks — probably many of y'all, too — have nothing but negative associations with sXe: macho white dudes beating up people, crappy music, super dogmatic and preachy assholes, or even anti-abortion extremists. Even though I completely reject all of those things, I still think there's hope for reclaiming the term as something positive. But because for most folks I've asked it's often more of a stumblingblock than a help, I'm going to stick with "sober" or "substance-free" for the purposes of this zine.

Here are some definitions for some of the key concepts I'll be talking about:

- **Intoxication:** an artificially altered state of mind produced through drug and alcohol consumption
- **Intoxication Culture:** a set of institutions, behaviors, and mindsets centered around consumption of drugs and alcohol
- **Patriarchal Masculinity:** a way of behaving and understanding oneself as a man based on fucked up sexist values
- **Anesthesia:** artificially-induced numbness to sensations and feelings

Masculinity, Rape Culture, and Intoxication

Dear readers: please know that this section includes discussion of sexual violence and other things that may be difficult or triggering for some folks. Please use self-care to determine if and when it makes sense to read this. Thanks!

I saw a billboard once as I was riding my bike through downtown New Orleans. It was advertising some kind of fancy liquor, whiskey I think. The slogan was, "It's what

men do." The message was almost reassuring to me; the only possible conclusion, I supposed, is that I must not be a man. The mass media encourages folks socialized as men to affirm our masculinity through intoxication, specifically through capitalist alcohol consumption. The whiskey billboard I saw, along with Budweiser ads that show "male bonding," various beer companies whose commercials use men objectifying women, and countless other advertisements, show alcohol as the common theme that links men as they engage in the most manly of activities. How surprising is it, then, that alcohol is almost always involved in some of the "manliest" pursuits of all — male violence against women, including domestic violence, sexual assault, and rape?

The relationship between intoxication, gender, and violence is complex. A significant proportion of gendered violence — specifically sexual and relationship violence against women — is committed by men while intoxicated. Of course, this doesn't mean that intoxication causes violence, but it would be equally foolish to ignore the correlation. In heterosexual interactions, men who have learned from media and pop culture to understand themselves as initiators and seducers use alcohol as a tool for overcoming resistance both from the desired sexual conquest and from their own conscience. At the same time, in this harshly puritanical, sex-negative culture, many rely on alcohol as their only means of overcoming the shame they feel about our sexual desires. Generally speaking, I think that the broad dependence in this society on alcohol in the process of finding partners and having sex obscures our sexuality, negatively impacts communication, reduces our ability to give and receive meaningful consent, lessens the probability of safe sex practices, and supports rape culture. When this dependence, and all of the dangers it entails, connects with patriarchal notions of sexuality, including male senses of entitlement, the hunter/hunted dynamic, and "no means yes" myths, the result can be disastrous.

As a man, part of my decision to live a sXe or sober lifestyle stems from my recognition that patriarchy and intoxication culture go hand in hand. Intoxication is used as an excuse to justify (and legally, a mitigating factor in the prosecution of) a wide range of unacceptable behaviors, including sexual harassment and rape. In my personal experience, many people I've known — most often men — have significantly altered their behavior while intoxicated in ways that directly reinforce oppression (i.e. becoming more openly homophobic and misogynist in speech, more sexually aggressive, etc), and expected the fact that they were intoxicated to somehow alleviate their responsibility for these behaviors. The idea that being intoxicated somehow makes one less able to make rational and compassionate decisions should be a reason to abstain from using alcohol and drugs.

In saying this, I want to make clear that I do not intend to blame victims; there is absolutely no excuse for sexual or relationship violence, regardless of the intoxication or not of the assaulter or the survivor. I refuse to allow one's intoxication to reduce

one's culpability for fucked up behavior. If there's any possibility that drinking or taking drugs could increase, even the slightest bit, one's capacity to be violent or abusive, then I consider that more than enough reason to be substance-free. If you're making the decision to get intoxicated or fucked up, and you care about living your ideals in any meaningful way, you need a plan for how you can be held accountable, by yourself and others, for how you behave when you choose to do so, in sexual situations and beyond.

I want to emphasize that this is not something that exists only in the "mainstream," as if anarchist or radical communities were immune from its effects. Women in our communities are speaking out about sexual harassment and assault and rape at the hands of "radical" men. In virtually every case of which I'm aware, alcohol played a major part in these incidents. One of my dearest friends has been sexually harassed on multiple occasions and sexually assaulted by intoxicated anarchist men, who, while sober, expressed serious and firm anti-patriarchy convictions. Yes, anarchist men, feminist men, men who say they are fighting patriarchy with all their might, that means us: if we take seriously the charge to be responsible, anti-sexist allies to women, I strongly believe that we must look very critically at the ways we get intoxicated.[1]

This pattern of boundary-crossing while intoxicated doesn't always fall predictably along gender lines. Sometimes women take advantage of men sexually using intoxication; at times the intoxication of both or all parties makes it difficult to sort out accountability; sometimes participants don't neatly fit gender boxes and power dynamics play out with more complexity. Alcohol-based coercion and blurry consent also exist in same-sex relationships and interactions, in some especially difficult to escape ways due to the particular stranglehold of intoxication culture in queer communities.[2] Although the conditioning that men receive in our patriarchal rape culture contributes to higher rates of men crossing boundaries without consent, all of us — men, women, and others, transgender and non-transgender — have the capacity to violate others. But more importantly, we also all have the capacity to become allies

1. To clarify: I don't want my focus on calling out men who drink alcohol to examine their behavior to falsely imply that sober men are generally off the hook, not likely to sexually assault, and not in need of examination of our patterns of consent and sexuality. That's pretty elitist, in terms of how it puts sober men (especially me) on some sort of different, less guilty level, and also dangerous, in its implication that we somehow need to be less vigilant about owning up to our capacity to violate folks' boundaries. All of us, regardless of gender, sexuality, or substance use, have been raised in a rape culture, and in particular folks socialized as men have been subjected to especially harmful messages about masculinity and violent sexuality. Although alcohol, in combination with media's linking of masculinity and intoxication, can be used by men as a tool to facilitate the expression of this rape culture, choosing to drink or not drink does not make any of us less subject to the socialization we've received, nor less in need of a critical look at consent and sexuality.

2. For a more in-depth exploration of the intersections of intoxication and sexuality in queer communities, see "My Edge is Anything But Straight" in this volume.

in the struggle to undermine patriarchy and construct a society based on consent. I think that because of this, all people who are committed to fighting rape culture and patriarchy can benefit from critically examining our patterns of intoxication, and discussing ways to be held equally accountable for behavior while intoxicated as well as while sober.

Oppression and Anesthesia

Maintaining privilege and continuing to oppress a group of people is only possible when oppressors can see the people they oppress as less than fully human. A major tactic in the dehumanizing process is the oppressor's anesthesia, numbing oneself so as to be unable to empathize with the people they are relegating to a sub-human status. Mab Segrest wrote a moving essay about how a key strategy for maintaining white privilege is the anesthesia of white people towards the suffering of people of color, through distance (out of sight, out of mind), rationalization, intoxication, and other methods. Likewise, masculinity operates by forcing men to stay detached and impassive in the face of physical or emotional pain, setting up sensitivity and empathy as "female" (and therefore inferior) characteristics. Constructing masculinity as unfeeling — anesthetized — makes possible the incredible suffering inflicted by men upon women (and other men) through violence, rape, child abuse, denial of access to birth control and medical care, the patriarchal nuclear family, and so many other means. In this context, it makes perfect sense that intoxication would be linked with masculinity. Intoxication often reduces the ability of people to empathize with others, an integral part of being an oppressor.

A friend of mine pointed out that when she was in high school, most of the kids that she knew who had any idea of what was happening in the world were getting completely fucked up as often as they could to neutralize the pain of that awareness. I can understand how activists, who (theoretically) operate by refusing to ignore the suffering and oppression in the world, face an incredible temptation to try and numb themselves, even temporarily, to the pain they see and feel and struggle against every day. However, I also strongly believe that if everyone in our culture was both fully aware of the full extent of how fucked up our society is — and refused to simply ignore the pain of that awareness though various methods of intoxication and anesthesia, from booze to television — then people simply would not stand for it.

Even providing for the (minority, I think, of) people who are simply cruel and hateful, I truly believe that a population honestly facing the realities of poverty, oppression, and misery rife in this culture cannot do so with both clear heads and clear consciences. When heads are not clear, clear consciences become less and less important. When people refuse to be numb and truly live the pain of this culture, it

motivates action. I believe that our task as activists or people who feel a call to change this culture is first and foremost to be open to that deep pain, to feel it and mourn it and hate it, so that it lights fires in our chests that burn for our participation in revolutionary struggle.

Youth Liberation and Sobriety

The most well-known icon of sXe, the Xs that some edgers draw on their hands, originated out of a gesture of solidarity with youth. To this day, kids at shows and other all-ages events that serve alcohol often have black Xs drawn on their hands by the people taking money at the door as a sign that they aren't allowed to drink. In the early 1980's, when Minor Threat began bringing the substance-free message to the punk scene, people who noticed kids marked with these Xs as symbols for prohibition of alcohol started drawing them on their hands, regardless of age, to show solidarity with youth and a commitment to sobriety. Because of the prevalence of intoxication culture, shows and other events often cost more for young kids, or don't allow them in at all. The drinking age serves as a legal tool for enforcing segregation and discrimination directed towards young folks, setting up an entire system around consumption of alcohol that simultaneously devalues youth and glorifies intoxication, constructing it as "mature" and advanced and all of the other positive traits associated with adulthood.

As a result, among young people, the mystique of intoxication culture leads to semi-secretive consumption of alcohol and other drugs, often to a destructive degree. For kids around the ages of eighteen to twenty-two or so, just before and after the drinking age, the ability to finally partake in the highly coveted "privilege" of intoxication culture leads to cults of hyper-intoxication, reinforcing the mystique even more. When the destructive consequences of getting fucked up manifest dramatically in young folks, as shown by the number of deaths from binge drinking, clueless and patronizing adults wag their fingers and bemoan "peer pressure" as the cause, when it's blatantly fucking obvious that the causes lie in their own actions.

The entirely adult-constructed mystique around intoxication, hypocritical and inconsistent policies promoting potentially fatal intoxicants while violently suppressing less harmful ones, and the oppression and devaluing of young people in general frequently lead to the desire to emulate the destructive fucked up patterns of adult intoxication with the vehemence of youth. Fuck "peer pressure" — I've felt consistent and unrelenting pressure from every sector of adult society to intoxicate myself through every possible means for as long as I can remember. Do adults honestly think that a "drug education program" in 5th grade and some condescending guest speakers in a high school health class would cancel the effects of an entire social system based on oppression requiring intoxication and anesthesia to survive?

My decision to abstain totally from intoxication culture has a lot to do with my desire for youth liberation. Maybe I don't want the privilege that comes with adulthood to destroy my body legally. Maybe I don't buy the argument that only adults — being naturally superior to kids, according to adult chauvinist logic — are responsible enough to handle getting fucked up. I think the impressive thing is being strong enough to survive without getting fucked up — if becoming an adult means accepting the need to numb myself into accepting the status quo, then fuck it, I'm following Peter Pan and never growing up.

Intoxication and Social Life

Seriously, one of the reasons why living in a community that drinks constantly bugs me is that it makes conversation so damn boring! I can hardly ever hang out in a large group without conversation turning for a substantial period of time to drinking, getting fueked up, what so and so did when they were fueked up, how fucked up so and so's going to get, blah blah blah. Who fucking cares? Are people really so boring most of the time that they don't merit conversation without corporate-induced altered consciousness? Can we really not think of anything more interesting to talk about than our self-destructiveness? What about our dreams, our passions, our crazy ideas and schemes, our hopes and fears? I hate going to parties where intoxication numbs individuality into mush, so that I can have the same mindless banter with 100 people but not a conversation of any substance with a single person. Am I anti-social for staying home with one good friend or a book when that's the alternative?

Beyond boring conversation, dependence on alcohol limits our social lives in other ways. In bar culture, public interaction is limited to contexts where we have to buy something in order to spend time with other people. It makes us less well equipped to enjoy one another's company in ordinary mindsets or without corporate intervention. We bond over buying, consuming, numbing, and things rather than creating, experiencing, feeling, and personalities. Instead of challenging it, we accept the proposition that we need consumer capitalism to be able to "loosen up," have a good time, and get past the hang-ups and self-restraint that constrain our lives.

Intoxication and Corporate Culture

I know a disturbingamount of folks in radical communities who spend their entire income on alcohol and tobacco. People who shoplift from the local food coop because they don't want to pay for food will head down the street to the chain convenience store and pour the tiny bit of money that they do have into some of the most wicked fucking corporations in operation today. There seems to be an incredible blind spot around tobacco and booze with regards to ethical consumption; kids who'll demon-

strate against Wal-Mart or Exxon for their labor or environmental practices will then turn around and buy cigarettes and beer from stores that have devastatingly negative impacts on local communities and that were produced by companies that are central to everything that's awful about global capitalism. Kudos to kids who at least make an effort to buy local, grow/brew their own, and such, but the industry feeds off of them just as much, knowing that the more dependent they are on chemical stimulation the less they'll care where it comes from.

Growing tobacco is incredibly destructive to land; after three years of hosting a tobacco crop, soil is so depleted that nothing can be grown there for the next twenty. Tobacco (grown by indentured servants and slaves) was the single reason why the first English colony in America managed to survive, and with increasing numbers of white settlers requiring new swaths of land every three years to sustain the colonial economy, it's not a stretch to say that tobacco-motivated theft of native land was one of the major catalysts for the genocidal campaign against the indigenous people of this continent that continues to this day. This process continues around the world, as tobacco corporations constantly absorb new plots of land to feed the cravings of the millions of addicted around the world. To get this land, corporations steal it from public lands or indigenous tribes, "buy" it from peasants so impoverished by global capitalism that they have no choice but to sell it (so that they can be more easily forced into the new factories), or convert land that previously grew food crops that actually nourished rather than poisoned people.

In most nations in the global south, tobacco is flue-cured, a labor-intensive process that requires massive deforestation; one researcher estimated that tobacco cultivation and processing accounted for one of every eight trees cut down in underdeveloped countries. As more and more land becomes ecologically devastated from tobacco cultivation, the cycle accelerates, less and less land is available for food production, and more and more deadly chemicals and genetically engineered strains are required to grow anything. Tobacco companies offer subsidies and technical support to farmers in underdeveloped nations to switch from food to tobacco, and since IMF structural adjustment programs have decimated public support of agriculture, many farmers have no choice but to convert, accelerating hunger within their nation and increasing their dependence on the global capitalist market. Tobacco is at the heart of the horrifically pathological global system of capitalist agriculture that prioritizes the right of First World people to poison themselves over the right of Third World people to eat.

Intoxication In Oppressed Communities

Drugs and alcohol are used as colonial weapons against folks of African descent in the United States. Frederick Douglass pointed out in his slave narrative that on

holidays, masters would encourage slaves to drink to excess specifically to skew their perceptions of what freedom was and to promote passivity the rest of the year. From absentee-owned liquor stores in black neighborhoods to the CIA's introduction of crack as a weapon against black communities, white people have profited from the economic drain, physical debilitation, and social conflict and violence exacerbated by alcohol and drugs in black communities. The black revolutionary tradition in the US has strong tendencies towards sobriety, from the Malcolm X to the Black Panthers to Dead Prez, drawing specific links between black oppression and intoxication culture.

When a slave was drunk, the slaveholder had no fear that he would plan an insurrection; no fear that he would escape to the North. It was the sober, thinking slave who was dangerous, and needed the vigilance of his master to keep him a slave. — Frederick Douglass

The native communities that survive in North America are almost all absolutely devastated by alcoholism. Alcohol abuse has severely disrupted what positive community structures have survived the European genocide. For the past several hundred years, alcohol was used by opportunistic whites as a way to con native people into signing "treaties" robbing them of their land, and as an intentional strategy of sowing discord into previously unified, harmonious, and sober communities. Currently, alcoholism is one of the leading causes of death among native people; around reservations that have prohibited alcohol, primarily white "drunk towns" have sprung up with dozens of bars and ABC stores just past the reservation borders to turn indigenous addiction into capitalist profit, often with fatal consequences.

Queer and trans communities struggle with astronomically high rates of alcoholism, due both to an attempt to escape the pressure of hiding their sexuality from family, friends, and society, and due to the emphasis on alcohol as a form of recreation throughout mainstream queer culture. Beer companies are among the largest sponsors of "Pride" celebrations and advertise extensively in queer publications; in most areas of the US, the primary social spaces for queer-friendly (or even queer-safe) interaction are bars whose primary function is selling intoxication. One of the first specifically gay and lesbian organizations in many towns is a chapter of Alcoholic Anonymous. Substance abuse rates among queers are also severe, as untold numbers of ravers and club queens burn out on cocaine, crystal meth, ecstasy, and other substances. The epidemics of AIDS and other STDs continue, in spite of the incredible efforts of educators and activists throughout the country, largely because of risky sex while intoxicated. For sober queers, virtually no physical or social space exists.

Intoxication and Radical Communities

The reluctance of "activist" or "anarchist" or "radical" communities to acknowledge how fucked up (pun intended) intoxication culture can be genuinely baffles me. Ever since I got involved in radical politics, these connections have seemed obvious to me, but the fact that so few people appeared to agree made me wonder whether perhaps I was the one who had it all wrong. Alcohol (ab)use, tobacco smoking, and varying degrees of drug use have been central institutions in the lives of the vast majorityof the radical folks with whom I've worked. Only recently have I begun to make connections with other sober radicals apart from scattered acquaintances, and nearly all of us relate to the feelings of isolation within our communities, alienation from our peers, and frustration with the lack of support we feel for sober safe spaces.

Yet the fact that we're the few, the lonely, and the sober by no means indicates that we're the only ones who see or complain about the problems caused by intoxication culture's infiltration into radical communities. My individual conversations with many distinctly non-sober folks often reveal a genuine anxiety about the negative consequences of their personal and the scene's social dependence on drugs and alcohol. My personal experience and the experience of numerous women, people of color, and queer and trans people with whom I've discussed the issue confirms to me how hypocritical people can be who claim to be fighting oppression yet participate proudly in intoxication culture. More and more, this issue seems like the elephant in the corner that no one's willing to point out.

I think it's high time (ha ha) that our communities started meaningful dialogues around issues of sobriety and intoxication — and there are going to have to be non-sober allies who step up and take active roles alongside the substance-free folks for it to work. We need to be negotiating agreements for collective houses and spaces, social gatherings, shows and events, and other spaces in our lives that respect the needs of folks both sober and not, with a particular emphasis on respecting the requests of women and trans folks, whose needs are least frequently considered in developing community standards. This is not something that many of our communities are used to, but in my opinion it's absolutely essential. This process has the potential to be a revolutionary transformation, as we move away from a loosely associated group of people who work together to an actual community where we respect each others' needs and hold each other accountable.

Intoxication and "Autonomy" vs. Accountability

In the process of developing community agreements, some folks may feel that they're being denied their "autonomy," their right to live their own lives how they want, including the right to get fucked up if they so desire. Personally, I wholeheart-

edly support the right of any individual to fuck themselves up with chemicals as much as they want to, without sanction from the state, organized religion, or self-righteous zine writers. However, I only support that right so long as you contain the destructiveness of your choices to yourself; as someone wise once said, "Your right to swing your fist ends where my nose begins." And I'd argue that very few people who do choose to get fucked up honestly and completely look at how their choices to do so impact others, particularly oppressed folks.

From the financial support of really fucked up corporations, to the targeting of people of color and queer communities and the increased rates of addiction and devastation in these communities, to the relationship between intoxication and patriarchal masculinity, to the fucked up behavior towards women that so often arises with intoxication... it's NOT just a simple personal choice you make yourself, in a bubble, to smoke or drink or take drugs. There's an incredible amount of baggage that goes along with the decision to get fucked up that activist communities, in my experience, rarely acknowledge.

Some anarchists see anarchy as the ability to do whatever they want without having to be accountable to anyone else for their actions. I personally think that that kind of attitude is just the standard American "rugged individualism" bullshit repackaged as a faux-radical alternative, because it doesn't challenge the fundamental alienation from each other we suffer under capitalism and the state. If our society replaces genuine community with consumer culture, authority, and oppression, that kind of anarchism simply rejects any idea of community at all. For me, anarchism is about replacing the false community of the state and consumer culture with a community based on mutual aid rather than competition, gift economy rather than capitalism, and collective agreements based on full consent and voluntary association rather than rules or laws based on state coercion and violence. Instead of being accountable to authority, I want us to actually be accountable to each other. A pretty important part of that is being able to come together as radical communities and have conversations about how alcohol and drugs impact our work, our spaces, our relationships, and our unity, and to figure out what sorts of agreements and boundaries make sense for us.

As a perfect example of the kind of community-based response to alcohol and drugs I'm talking about, look at the Zapatista movement in southern Mexico. During the weeks I spent in Chiapas learning about their struggle, I learned something that most of the kids in the Subcommandante Marcos t-shirts don't mention: all autonomous Zapatista communities are 100 percent alcohol free. No alcoholic beverages are sold or consumed in any of the autonomous municipalities, and on the signs indicating that you are entering Zapatista territory in rebellion against the Mexican government, many specifically say that these are alcohol and drug free spaces. I learned also that the reason for this is because it was a central demand of the women involved in discussion about

the new society they were building. Mexican women feel most acutely the effects of alcoholism, in terms of domestic and sexual abuse, and because being financially dependent on men in a patriarchal society means that when husbands spend the family's money on booze, the wife has to struggle to pay for food for her and her children. The director of a feminist collective in San Cristóbal with whom I spoke said that male alcohol abuse is one of the central problems facing women in Mexico today.

Consequently, the communities agreed to the demand of the women for drug and alcohol free communities, in spite of the fact that many of the men wanted to be able to drink. Some villages even split around this issue. Currently, the no-alcohol agreement is enforced by the community, and it is almost always respected; folks who refuse to respect the prohibition are ostracized or, if they refuse to change their behavior, face expulsion from the community (incidentally, it's almost unheard of for it to reach that point). A traveler I met who had passed through Guatemala and parts of southern Mexico on his way to Chiapas mentioned that in most of the rural villages he'd passed through, the majority of the men would be drunk by 10 AM, every day. The Zapatista communities, he observed, had a completely different vibe; people got far more done and treated each other with more respect.

I mention this example for a number of reasons. For one, I think that many anarchaholics who supposedly idolize the Zapatista struggle could stand to learn about how those communities deal with alcohol and drugs. Also, I suspect that a lot of North American anarcho folks might find such a prohibition "authoritarian" or worse. This gets at the heart of how I see the difference between hyper-individualist and community-based anarchism. There's nothing authoritarian, in my opinion, about an agreement reached collectively to abstain from individual behaviors that the community collectively decides are harmful to itself as a whole. The key to the Zapatista autonomous project is that it's totally based on voluntary association; no community or individual is forced to participate. Many villages have chosen not to be an official part of the network of autonomous municipalities if they don't consent to all of the agreements made by the Zapatista movement, and that's fine.

Furthermore, the Zapatista agreements on alcohol are an example of actually acknowledging and directly respecting the autonomy of women. How many anarchist groups or communities in the US who claim to be feminist have actually adopted the desires and needs of women into their practice — or even bothered to ask? All in all, the people involved in that struggle decided to place the good of their community, as determined through consensus, above the unlimited "freedom" of individuals to do as they please. I would challenge our anarchist communities in the north to think critically about our priorities and grapple with these difficult questions about individual and community, autonomy and accountability.

Story #1

My primary activist community when I first moved to the town where I now live operated out of a collective bookstore, an awesome space full of radicals working on positive projects. Just a month or two after I'd become very involved, I was invited to attend a retreat with the board of directors at a beach house several hours away from where we lived. I'd heard people joking about how much alcoholic fun they were going to have there, which immediately made me feel unsafe. The facts that I don't drive and would have no way to get away if I felt unsafe, didn't know many of the people involved very well yet, and was the only young person all made me very nervous about the situation, and I expressed my misgivings to a friend who worked at the store. She assured me that there wouldn't be much alcohol, that people wouldn't be getting too drunk, and that if I felt unsafe she would be available for me. With that assurance, I somewhat reluctantly came along.

On Saturday night, two people left to get alcohol, returning with four cases of beer and several bottles of liquor. Everyone except for me was an adult and everyone except for me drank pretty heavily that night, including my friend who said that she would be available for me. I felt very uncomfortable, but I didn't have any way to leave, any idea where I was, or any alternatives for entertainment, so I just sat through it. The next morning we got started with our work hours later than we'd planned to because folks were hung over and wanted to sleep. When we debriefed at the end of the retreat, I mentioned that one thing I would have changed was to have less alcohol, but I didn't feel comfortable enough to express how seriously I felt alienated and unsafe, or ask for ways to hold the group accountable next time. No one discussed it further or followed up with me about my discomfort. I don't know how to breach the subject without putting people on the defensive, and I feel like I'm being selfish, whiny, hypersensitive, a "party pooper," or anti-democratic by expressing how I feel about it. I don't necessarily think that it would be fair to ask the group to completely ban alcohol at the retreat, especially given that every single person but me of a group of fifteen or so enjoys drinking, yet the only alternative seems to be the default of me faking smiles and sitting uncomfortably through situations that make me feel unsafe and alone.

One way to address such a situation for sober folks to feel safe and able to still participate might be to ensure in advance that at least one or two other people will be there who will commit to stay sober for the night (whether or not they usually do). That way, the group could still drink if they chose to do so, while the sober person can still have a way to feel safe with someone, or leave if necessary and not feel totally isolated. I would suggest finding someone you trust a lot and know will be committed to an evening of sobriety, and to be sure to ask them to commit in advance, so that they haven't built intoxication into their expectations for the activity. Other possibilities include asking all of the people involved to make it an alcohol-free occasion, particularly if it's a small group or event, or simply declining to attend and making clear that

the presence of drugs and alcohol is the reason why you're not coming. Whatever you decide, it will probably work best to calmly and specifically explain your discomfort, and to take care not to judge or make assumptions about other people's behavior. If people committed to sobriety stop making excuses, staying home, or remaining silent when they feel unsafe, hopefully we can start a dialogue about issues of intoxication in activist communities that will help create social space for substance-free folks.

Story #2

I attended an environmental defense action camp for a week with about 150 kids in the mountains. I was pretty nervous about going out there with no way to get out of the situation and a big crew of rowdy booze-loving primitivists, but I decided it was more important to go and to learn the skills I could learn. Things went surprisingly well for most of the week; halfway through there was an alcohol-light campfire sing-along that was a blast. On the last night, there was a big party planned, with all sorts of preparations made for multiple kegs and beer runs and home brew and more. Amazingly, the organizers were really concerned with ensuring that the folks who wanted to remain sober had a safe space, and planned to make a clear community agreement in advance with specific dry zones, etc. The full-group meeting broke off for dinner before the conversation could take place, so a group of fifteen or so folks interested in seeing that sober spaces were secured stayed late and talked through options; even more amazingly, almost all of the group were folks who were planning to drink, but wanted to be allies to the sober folks. After a frustrating and long set of negotiations, a separate campfire area that was to be not only alcohol free, but only for folks who had not had any alcohol that night, was set up, with individuals committing to gather wood and dig the pit. I was pretty thrilled, having never before been in a space where people even acknowledged that sober people had valid needs, let alone worked hard to create a distinct safe space and make it a priority.

So I hung out that evening at the sober campfire... along with about five or six others. We were a pretty low-key bunch, and I for one felt distinctly glum. It was nice to have the company, but I couldn't shake the feeling of being quarantined. We were only a few hundred yards away from the massive drunken bonfire, with over a hundred kids hollering and stomping about, though none of them could come to our fire, and most of us didn't feel remotely comfortable going over to theirs, even though most of our friends and crushes and lovers were over there. After thirty or forty-five minutes, most of us had drifted off to our tents, the screams of the revelers echoing in our ears. I sat morosely by the dwindling embers for a long while, trying to figure out why I felt so dejected. Isn't this what I wanted, our own separate "safe space"? I felt guilty for not sufficiently appreciating what was undoubtedly the most comprehensive effort to address my needs that had ever been made in a radical space. Finally, as

the main party in the distance tailed off into isolated voices fighting and cursing or sobbing, I ambled off to bed, feeling as lonely and isolated as ever.

That experience represented a mixture of positives and negatives, and could point towards some constructive solutions. On the plus side, organizers and participants (at least a number of them) did make a substantial effort during the day to plan a sober alternative space that would be safe; on the minus side, the larger group wasn't engaged in that process, and most folks in fact were simply informed that if they planned to drink, they weren't permitted to go in a certain area, reinforcing the absolute sober/not dichotomy which felt isolating to me. On the plus side, many non-sober allies stepped up to make sure that safe spaces were provided, which I think is crucially important; on the minus side, the allies didn't extend their support into actually participating with the sober folks and abstaining themselves, except for one person, and not many of the sober folks for whom the space was being designed actually participated in its planning. On the plus side, the space was created and respected; on the minus side, there were hardly any folks there, and it wasn't much fun, though everyone agreed they were glad it was there. The proximity to the "main" drunken party, the severely disproportionate number of non-sober to sober folks, the lack of actual activities beyond a space and a campfire, the feeling of being quarantined, and the general lack of support among many camp participants (excepting the organizers and wonderful allies) made the reality of the sober space fall far short of the expectations.

To improve the situation in the future, a few things that could be changed:

1. Ensure broader participation in the process of making sober-safe spaces; make it a part of full-group discussion, make a caucus of the folks who actually plan to stay sober a central part of the process, and figure out some mechanism for accountability to that caucus.

2. When circumstances permit, make the actual space far enough away physically from the drunken ground zero so that it doesn't feel like we're being pushed just outside the "real" fun, and we don't feel the need to defend the territory as our only few square feet of safe space.

3. Plan not just spaces, but activities for sober folks — be creative and flexible, whatever folks think could be interesting and outrageous. Spin the bottle, treasure hunts, hide and seek, twister, bike scavenger hunts, dance parties, anything! The idea is not only to make it more fun for the sober folks, but to make an incentive for some of the not-always-sober folks to commit to being sober for the evening so that they can hang out with the fun group. This can be the best kind of substance-free advocacy — showing that the sober kids can party hardy even better than the drunks!

Conclusion: The Beginning?

Hopefully some of the ideas in this zine have been helpful, or provocative, or maybe showed things in a different light, or gave you some starting points for addressing the concerns of sober folks in your communities. I wouldn't expect most folks to accept or agree with everything I've written, but with luck it'll open a few minds and hearts and start some debates. Also, some of us are thinking towards developing a sober support network to share resources, develop propaganda, start conversations in our communities, identify safe spaces, and support each other when we feel isolated. It's a long way towards a less fucked up world, but with honesty, dialogue, and each other's support we can begin heading that way. Until then,

with love and rage,

Nick Riotfag