Senior

thesis

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What is the essence of a musical group? Is it the bands or their fans? Or is it the bonds that form between an audience and performer? An accepted process exists in popular culture for the generation and performance of music. This process includes a formal setting for playing and experiencing music which segregates performers from spectators. Although bands may find influence from a wide array of different sounds, their music is still only the product of a small group of people—an elite. The audience controls a proportionately small segment of the musical performance. Bands are a musical elite. The audience as it exists is not unlike the proletarian described by Karl Marx in his *Communist Manifesto*. One of Marx's major principles is the elimination of personal property. The abolishment of personal musical property removes the performance from a system in which an elite can control the experience (a formal venue). The result: a roaming jam session which invites the general public to participate in the development of music.

This project's initial spark came from the writings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. This passage in particular is especially pertinent:

> By bourgeois is meant the people in the class of modern capitalists, owners of the means of social production and employers of wage labor. By proletarians, the people in the class of modern wage laborers who, having no means of production of their own, are reduced to selling their labor power in order to live.

> That is, all written history. In 1847, the prehistory of society, the social organization existing previous to coded history, was all but unknown. Since then, Haxthausen discovered common ownership of land in Russia, Maurer proved it to be the social foundation from which all Teutonic races started in history, and by and by villages communities were found to be, or to have been the primitive form of society everywhere from India to Ireland. The inner organization of this primitive communistic society was laid bare, in its typical form, by Morgan's crowning discovery of the true nature of the gens and its relation to the tribe. With the dissolution of these primeval communities society begins to be differentiated into separate and finally antagonistic classes…(Marx and Engels 57).

The only necessary allegory between music and economics is the substitution of performer for bourgeois and of audience for proletarian. Within mainstream society, the status quo for musical performance is one where musicians control the means of musical production and where the audience, having no musical talent of their own, is resigned to a passive role in the situation of a show. This does not go to say however that an "antagonistic" relationship exists between performers and audiences but simply to illustrate the point that an elimination of the accoutrements of current performance standards is necessary in order to create something innovative (as innumerous revolutions around the world have proven).

This pioneering idea is not without primacy. For decades, sub-cultural movements have generated music that centers around a community. With little regard (if any) for the rewards of mainstream society, Bop, Hippie, and Punk musicians—to name a few—crafted their art for the sole purpose of the art itself. Subverting societal values such as economics requires the development of an underground network of fellow 'enlightenees'. These musicians rely on other counterculturals for survival. "The only people the younger generation had to look up to were their peers, so it fell to them to run the clubs, own the record labels and design the clothes" (Colegrave and Sullivan, 13). Often fellow Punkers would even put up their favorite bands or entire tour caravans. Punk was the first sub-cultural movement to be utilize a D.I.Y. (do it yourself) ethic en masse. The later Hardcore

scene took D.I.Y. to an even further extreme:

> "...the fire was coming from people under 21. So we demanded all-ages shows and the music press dismissed it as a cheap gimmick. But people who came to those shows grew into dozens of bands in the next five years. I still get letters from people who say their first exposure to Punk was Dead Kennedys at Bond's in New York—that matinee show where we played horribly. It was too early in the day for a show but people loved it and figured, 'Hey, I can do this too. I think I will'" (Jello Biafra. Blush 105).

Biafra defines the essence of D.I.Y. here. The eventual spread of Hardcore by frontmen such as Jello Biafra of the Dead Kennedys and singer Ian MacKaye of Minor Threat also transmitted the encouragement for other young people to follow in their footsteps. Together with other HC outfits, D.I.Y. culture was diffused throughout the United States and Canada in the late 70s and mid 80s where the earlier Punk Rock had failed to reach.

There are many ways in which sub-cultural communities can be interpreted as socialistic. For

Previous page: Dizzy Gillespie, 1983.
Photo credit: pierodemacrhis

Above: Jello Biafra of the Dead Kennedys and crowd, 1980.
Photo credit: ookami_dou

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example, "…the theory of the Communists may be summed up in the single phrase: Abolition of private property" (Marx and Engels 82). Music created in a community for a community has already achieved the status of public property. Common to nearly all early hardcore shows is the practice of slamdancing. This loosely organized activity occurs only when the band is playing. The audience actively interacts with the performers through the act of constant and repeated stage diving during. In the maelstrom of the Fear show during Saturday Night Live, the violent antics of the HC kids combined with the upbeat anthems in Fear's set such as "Beef Bologna" and "Let's Have a Riot" frightened the producers into ending the performance prematurely for fear of a riot breaking out during broadcast. During this performance (which may be viewed online) the line between performer and audience is blurred. Neither the band nor audience can claim sole ownership to the theatrics engendered. Together with the band's music and the audience's active participation, a fusion is born to which neither party can claim possession. Music creation in removed from the hands of the few and shared in a more egalitarian manner.

In terms of performance, Fear's SNL show and many others in the hardcore genre are extremely successful. According to Philip Auslander, the modern performer exists in three layers: "the real person (the performer as human being), the performance persona (the performer's self-presentation), and the character (a figure portrayed in a song text)" (Auslander, 2006, p.4). For a performance to be successful it must be engaging in the realms of the real person, the persona and the character. A deficiency in any of these categories can severely affect the outcome of a show. Without the performer engaging the audience to the maximum effect of these three categories, a true comprehension of true musical identity cannot be made. The fusion mentioned earlier pertaining to a relationship between musician and audience can only be achieved if the performer optimizes the person, persona, and character.

Auslander places emphasis on the performance in modern rock. Attendance is a requisite for complete comprehension and appreciation. In the days before the establishment

Below: Sigma Phi Hardcore show, Ann Arbor.
Photo credit: Patrick Hartley

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of the internet as a viable media source, music reproduction was limited by the fragility of vinyl records and later the exponentially diminishing quality of cassette tapes. The most fulfilling and engaging way to experience music was ad fontes—the public performance which is witnessed first hand and is physically and personally engaging. In other words there is no substitute for viewing "this primary data" (Jones, 1990, p.61). This quote is from an article titled "Enhancing the Value of Museum Websites: Lessons from the Practical Engagement Front" by Bradley Taylor, a professor in the school of information at the University of Michigan. Here, Taylor describes the use of surrogates in education. Surrogates "are visual or text-based substitutes for works that were created and exist in a different form than the original" (Taylor, 2003, p.109). The original data of a work of art is a first person experience of a painting, for example. Instances of surrogates in art are perhaps most common when they are used for instructional purposes in an art history class. Although they can be helpful as educational tools, surrogates are an inaccurate representation of the works they represent when viewed out of context. For any type of reproduction there is a certain amount of distortion that arises from the process of reproduction. Viewing a reproduction is a diminished experience compared to that of an original. As applied to music, the "original" is music experienced first-hand. With the advent of the Internet, musical surrogates saw an explosion as mp3's exchanged with programs such as Limewire and Napster. Websites such as Myspace and Pandora (despite the feeble attempts of musical groups to achieve unique page layouts) provide only a fraction of music's actual potential.

Problems with music's representation on the Internet reveal problems with music itself. In its current state, popular "mainstream" music has once again evolved to discourage a community of active scene participants. In an increasingly protean world, the Internet presents itself as an ultimate medium able to synthesize and substitute physical experiences of life. Music has become too distanced from it source as practice of the people.

Enter Grin Mcilwrath. His goal is to subvert the industry standard for the production of music. Grin is a persona invented to be a symbol of a musical revolution. This revolution is a reaction against the sterility modern music.

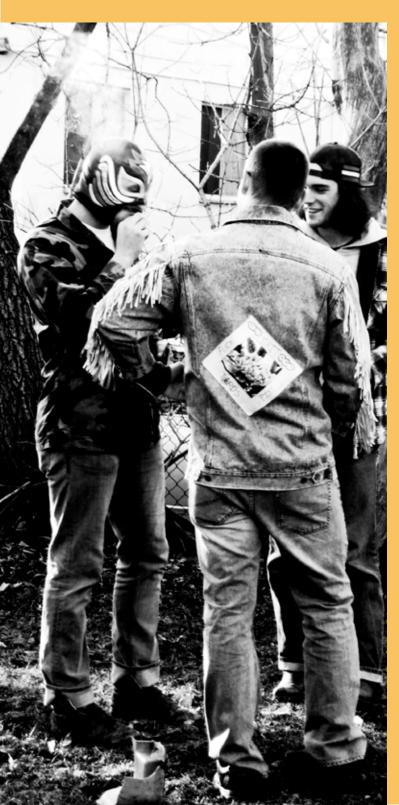**Below: Grin Mcilwrath at the Stimson Kroger, Ann Arbor.**

He dons a Mexican Lucha mask to conceal his true identity. Grin Mcilwrath's ideals place music in the hands of the people—literally. He roams the streets of Ann Arbor inviting random pedestrians to become a part of his potentially infinite band. Grin's "shows" are a strange site. He carries all the supplies needed for a mobile jam session in a green children's wagon: a guitar, an abbreviated drum kit comprising only a snare drum and tom. Also accompanying the guitar and drums are business cards and number of patches. The business cards bear the name of a website (grinmcilwrath.com) and are handed out to participants as an incentive to visit the site. Those gracious enough to participate are rewarded with the "Grin Patch", a badge of membership in Grin Mcilwrath the band. Performances of Grin Mcilwrath consist of one or two songs played on acoustic guitar in a particular area of high urban traffic. These songs are simple and in most cases only involve two or three different chords.   Only a few songs are played in one location—perhaps an effort to maximize impact.

Photo stills of these performances are posted on the website grinmcilwrath.com—another way of creating the sensation of subscription to his ideals. Grin has reconsidered the use of surrogates in the internet. The photos are used only as a supplemental aid and are in no way the sole purpose of the website. Photography integrated into a php based web forum designed for posting by the general public. Pictures of band members are motivation for they and other web users to participate in discussions. There is even a Myspace page devoted to the annihilation of Grin Mcilwrath and the ideas for which he stands.

To end his performances, Grin Mcilwrath looked to American history for inspiration. One occurrence in sub-cultural history stands out as an allegory to Grin Mcilwrath's "IP Anger Management"(the name his final performance): "The Death of Hippie" in San Francisco's Haight Ashbury. "The announcement of a Death of Hippie ceremony answered a feeling in many quarters

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that the [Hippie] movement had gone wrong and needed to be cleansed of the ugly accretions of the summer" (Perry 233). In the summer of 1967—The Summer of Love—thousands of teens flocked to the Haight hoping to become part of the scene happening there. Under the stress of such an influx of young people (as well as other factors), the Hippie Movement unraveled at the seams. The Death of Hippie marked the exodus of the movement from San Francisco and the end of the Hippie Movement. Activities included a procession through the Haight-Ashbury which ended with the destruction of Hippie symbols (long hair, marijuana, beads, etc.) by way of fire.

"The Death of Hippie ceremony had been theatre" (Perry, 272). Grin's ending performance was nothing short of matching the Death of Hippie (at least in spirit). The equivalent of Grin Mcilwrath's Summer of Love was his parting experience with the University of Michigan's art school. This gathering was an attempt to alleviate the anger and frustration acquired from an entire year's setbacks as well as the need to end the project in an appropriately destructive and dramatic way. For incentive, Pabst Blue Ribbon beer was provided for the attendees of IP Anger Management. The beer was held in the very wagon that once carried the articles of Grin Mcilwrath's public performances. About twenty participants showed for the event. As a precursor to the eventual demise of Grin's guitar and drum set, several plastic chairs and a garbage can were destroyed with a sledgehammer and axe. After several beers, the guitar was finally smashed—first on a tree and then with the sledgehammer and axe. The drums followed. Everything was reduced to ash under the assistance of gasoline. As a project about community relationships it seemed only necessary to end it in a social environment.

Grin Mcilwrath represents the invention of a persona for use in community based music. Music created with the musical proletariat owning the means of production subverts the status quo of musical culture. The product of such a process has been influenced by everything from Marxism to Punk and Hardcore. Grin Mcilwrath's legacy is an unsuccessful attempt at stimulating a musical culture. The Achilles heel of these performances was the lack of public awareness of such events. A sub-culture of one cannot exist. In order for this type of project to succeed, a great amount of community involvement is required—more than Grin Mcilwrath had time to enlist.

Left: IP Anger Management. March 20, 2009.
Photo credit: Kristen Hansen.

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