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Underground in the Confederate Capital: Punk Subculture in Richmond, Virginia

Christopher J. Dalbom  
*Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College*

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UNDERGROUND IN THE CONFEDERATE CAPITAL:
PUNK SUBCULTURE IN RICHMOND, VIRGINIA

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

in

The Department of Geography and Anthropology

by

Christopher J. Dalbom
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Abstract

The intent of this thesis is to investigate the role of the punk subculture in Richmond, Virginia from an ethnographic perspective. Through participant observation and open-ended interviews, it seeks an understanding of the role of the subculture in the lives of those who embrace it and how it shapes their experiences in Richmond. In doing so, it hopes to fill a gap in music geography and in the study of the punk subculture.

According to much of the literature, punk died decades ago, but for those who claim punk allegiance in Richmond today, it is very alive and real. This ethnography shows how the punk subculture, continuing to defy critics with its very existence, allows individual punks to have an identity separate from mainstream society.

This work illustrates how punks in Richmond use the city to suit their own needs – needs antithetical to the mainstream Richmond population. Through finding places otherwise ignored or undesired, the punk subculture is able to adapt and survive and create a geography of its own.
Introduction

A Personal History

In late 1994 a song began to receive commercial radio play that was unlike anything I had ever heard. “Come Out and Play” by the Offspring resonated with me more than anything else these sheltered suburban ears had ever heard. It was heavy, energetic, loud, fun, and clearly about something. Then I saw the video for it on MTV (yes, when MTV showed videos). I had never seen anything so cheap. Despite the grunge revolution having taken hold in the preceding few years, Nirvana and their cohorts were supported by major labels with deep pockets. On the other hand, The Offspring’s video just seemed to be shot with a camcorder in people’s backyards and edited using a couple of Photoshop effects. I found out that this was “punk.” I had no idea what that really meant, but it scared me a little and conjured up vague memories of seeing people with purple and green Mohawks and leather jackets outside of the Tube in London when I went there as an eight-year old. Nonetheless, I needed this CD.

After buying it from my local enormous chain store, I took Smash home. I will never forget opening that CD and the first time I listened to it. The music was faster and louder than anything else I had known. And they swore! A lot! On the third song, “Bad Habit,” about road rage there is even a diatribe of “Stupid Dumbshit Goddamn Motherfucker!” For the first time, I owned something that felt like contraband. I loved it. Upon opening it, a folded white sheet with red writing fell out. As I listened to my new purchase, I poured over the available catalog of recordings from
Epitaph, the record label that produced *Smash*. I began to realize this came from an entire world I had no idea existed, a world with bands like “Rancid,” “Rich Kids on LSD,” and “Bad Religion.” I had no idea what they meant or what they were, but they must have sounded anything like the CD that was blowing my mind at that moment. I was hooked.

Punk rock became my music of choice and over the next few years I came to love the live show. But I had good friends and none of them were interested in punk, so I never dove into the punk subculture in Kansas City and punk never became my life, just my music and my hobby. My interest never flagged and by the time I was in graduate school in Baton Rouge I was attending house shows in Beauregard Town and making a few friends in the city’s small, hardworking underground punk scene.

When the time came to embark upon this project, I realized that punk was the one thing to hold my interest throughout the years and settled upon punk rock as my topic of choice. I had already been interested in music history and the inception of punk, but wanted to know how punk came to such places as that house in Beauregard Town. I knew that the Baton Rouge

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1 “Underground” came into use in the early 1980s when describing the network emerging around touring bands unaffiliated with major labels (Azzerad, 2001). Underground is synonymous with “indie” or “independent” – both of which lost subcultural cache when flogged to death by mainstream media and major labels in the early to mid 1990s.

2 “Scene” is a common word with varied uses in punk: most commonly, it refers to all of the punks and punk-related happenings in a city or area, “the Norwegian scene right now is just crazy”; it can refer to a group of punks who commonly socialize together “our scene usually hangs out at Sticky Rice for $1.00 PBR night”; finally, it can mean the entirety of punk or a punk subculture everywhere on the planet, “the scene just isn’t what it was before MTV”
scene simply was not big enough to cover in this study, so I asked my
friends who were heavily involved in the punk scene in Baton Rouge, “what
city has a good punk scene?” Everyone said Austin, Texas, or Richmond,
Virginia. That was fortunate; I was interested in a city without a well known
and well documented punk history and my advisor and I agreed that both
the punk scene and I could get lost in the shuffle of a big city such as
Philadelphia or Los Angeles. Richmond or Austin it was. My girlfriend and
I road-tripped up to Richmond for a weekend. We saw a show at the Nanci
Raygun featuring some local bands, drove around the city, and talked to a
record-store clerk who said the punk scene “used to be better” but she was
“probably just jaded.” Our weekend road trip to Austin was less inspiring.
We moved to Richmond several months later. It turns out my friends in
Baton Rouge were right. Richmond is an insular place haunted with
Confederate ghosts where the Lost Cause won, but it is one heck of a punk
town, and something I never could have imagined sitting in my bedroom in
1994 listening to The Offspring for the first time.

**Introduction to Study**

“Punk” became known to most of Europe and North America in the
mid 1970s when a handful of bands playing rock and roll that was often
louder, faster, more abrasive, and more offensive than was ever heard before
suddenly garnered international attention. It was a response to and protest
of the alienation between performer/musician and listener/fan during the
disco era. Also gaining attention were their fans. These kids weren’t all
right, or so thought outsiders shocked and frightened by what they saw in
the mainstream media - bizarre dress and violent behavior. They were perceived as an even more heinous disruption to the dominant paradigm than the beat and hippie movements in preceding decades. Foremost among these bands was the Sex Pistols who caused an outrage on British television and protests in every town in America they played. The Sex Pistols were so closely tied with most people’s conception of “punk” that when the band broke up in 1978, many pronounced punk dead.

But countless bands and fans, both before the Sex Pistols’ inception and especially since the Sex Pistols’ break-up, have associated themselves with the word “punk.” So, today, more than a quarter of a century after the Sex Pistols, groups of people in places around the world in places not widely known for punk subculture, like Richmond, Virginia, identify themselves as punk and gather under said banner. How is it that this subculture endures long after its announced death? Where within Richmond, a city shaped so strongly by the inertia of centuries of history, does punk find “life” after “death?”

In order to find exactly how this vitality is manifested and what about the subculture today is important, I undertook an ethnographic study of the punk scene in Richmond, Virginia over the course of two years. I let those who identify themselves as punk define what punk today can mean, why it means so much to them, and how it shapes their experiences in Richmond.

Historiography of Punk

Not surprisingly, literature about punk can be separated into two categories – popular and academic. The popular texts are typically written
about the early punk scenes – New York, Los Angeles, London, and Washington DC – and by insiders from those scenes. Legs McNeil and Gillian McCain’s *Please Kill Me* offers an oral history of early New York punk, while Marc Spitz and Brendan Mullen’s *We Got the Neutron Bomb* offers the same for Los Angeles. Jon Savage’s *England’s Dreaming: Anarchy, Sex Pistols, Punk Rock, and Beyond* covers the Sex Pistols and, thereby, much of early punk in the United Kingdom. Finally, and perhaps most importantly for Richmond, Mark Andersen and Mark Jenkins chronicled punk from its inception through the end of the century in Washington, DC, with *Dance of Days*.

Unlike these popular works, all academic writing on punk must deal with Dick Hebdige’s *Subculture: the Meaning of Style*. Hebdige’s work on subculture is the original criticism of punk and British white youth subculture and thus is widely cited in writings about punk and subculture. For Hebdige, punk was the latest in a line of British youth subcultures but, unlike previous styles, was heavily influenced by reggae and British West Indies culture. According to Hebdige, the Ramones and American proto-punk were one only one of many factors influencing punk. Since Hebdige separates British punk so distinctly from American punk, other academics citing his highly influential work have also separated the two. One consequence of Hebdige’s work was pointed out by John Charles Goshert (2000) – a preoccupation with the most popular punk bands like the Sex Pistols or the Clash. Jude Davies’ (1996) work is a criticism of Hebdige’s, but it falls into that same trap by citing X-Ray Specs and the Slits; Davies’
acknowledgement of less commercially successful music was restricted to stating, “the punk subculture remains very healthy at gigs and in the fanzines of a D.I.Y. [Do It Yourself] music scene with close links to unrespectable hard-left politics. There are still hundreds of groups who still perform a version of punk, often with direct reference to a galaxy of causes from hunt sabotage to antisexism” (Davies 1996, 23). Jude Davies correctly references groups practicing punk in ways other than playing music. This phenomenon is acknowledged within punk and within important publications within the subculture, like PunkPlanet, that include topics like writings, services and protests in their coverage of the punk community. Yet most work in the field by academic writers has yet to look beyond the music.

John Charles Goshert writes that that which is commercially successful can not be punk and thusly criticizes most academic studies of “punk” (Goshert 2000). He is one of the few academics to address what punk has been since the late 1970s and early 1980s as well as one of the few scholars to focus on American punk. Since so much of the academic work done on punk has occurred in the United Kingdom, neither the cultural importance of American punk nor American punk’s influences on British punk have been critically examined.

One academic study of punk subculture did manage to fuse Functionalist and neo-Marxist theories of subculture (like those of Hebdige) with actual empirical research. Stephen W. Baron’s participant observation study with punks in Victoria, British Columbia brought fieldwork into a
field where it was severely lacking (1989). However, Baron positions punk as a delinquent youth subculture and concentrates his work on interviewing teenage punks, skinheads, and skaters. Given the ever increasing number of punks who are far removed from adolescence, classifying punk subculture thusly is insulting to many punks, limits its power and potential for change, and puts the subculture in a box that limits the scope of the study and predefines punk without the punks’ input.

This study is an attempt to further the participant observation methods that are underrepresented in punk subculture studies as well as in the field of music geography, but also to take a qualitative, reflexive approach to maximize the voices of those within the scene.

Study and Methods

I engaged in an ethnographic study of contemporary punk subculture in Richmond, Virginia, from August 2004 to May 2006. Here I clarify what I mean by “ethnographic study” and “subculture.”

If I am to address subculture, then I must address culture as well. As Hebdige writes, subculture “invokes the larger and no less difficult concept of ‘culture’” (1979, 4). For Subculture, however, he follows the work of Roland Barthes who reconciled cultural studies’ paradoxical definitions of culture through semiotics. Previously, culture was defined as both an ideal — “high culture” — and as a reality — “low culture”. Semiotics found “a marriage of moral conviction... and popular themes: the study of a society’s total way of life” — a definition shared with the work of T. S. Eliot, who also informed Hebdige’s work (ibid, 10).
The dominant conception of culture in cultural geography has been the Sauerian superorganic conception of culture perhaps most fully expressed by Wilbur Zelinsky. This concept reified culture as a total entity that conditions behavior within that culture. Aberrations from this whole were seen as outside of culture, as the realm of politics (Hebdige 1979).

“New” cultural geography, informed by cultural studies and sociology sought to incorporate politics, economy, and society into a concept of culture. This change was lead by James Duncan (among others) who called for cultural geography to approach culture “as a set of traditions and beliefs that may guide action especially when they are defined by the actors themselves as ‘natural’ or ‘correct’ modes of behavior” (1980, 197). Geographers, then, should attend to interactions “between individuals and groups that produce these guidelines for behavior within a certain cultural context” (ibid, 197). Following this logic, my work here studying the punk subculture focuses on the interactions of the people, places, and groups within the scene – interactions based, to a large degree, upon established conventions within the scene. Indeed, these do address “correct modes of behavior” that “guide action” within the scene.

Of course, with qualitative research, it is difficult to nail down a specific research question before doing the fieldwork for it (Bogdan and Biklen 1998). But during my stay in Richmond, the crux of my work came into focus as I personally ran into trouble with reconciling my own place in Richmond. It is an old city, a proud city, and something of a closed society, still. Yet within it persists this vibrant underground music scene, and my
inquiries began to shape around the question of how punk rock in all its manifestations affects how punks see, use, interact with, and find (or seek?) comfort in Richmond.

Within that are several other questions: What is punk for these people? Is it not dead? What is its appeal? Does it change places like Richmond? How? What about Richmond makes that scene unique and so rich? What are the geographic limitations of that scene? Does this scene have static, defined boundaries, or is it part of a more loosely defined wider scene? All are questions that in some form or another are asked of punk everywhere, including in my preliminary fieldwork in Baton Rouge and Philadelphia.

Specifically, my fieldwork consisted of open-ended interviews mainly in the form of informal conversations. When asked if the interview would be “just bullshitting or with questions and a recorder?” I responded that it’s “bullshitting with a recorder on the table.” In order for this to be an effective method, I had to be persistent in my pursuit of interviews – more prospective interviews fell short than interviews came through, and it was a continuing challenge for my work. Although most interviews were one-on-one, some group interviews – for instance with members of a band – were also quite useful in obtaining information about the Richmond scene and ideas about punk.

In addition to interviews, I undertook a participant observer role in the punk community in Richmond. I attended concerts, went to independent record stores, and worked in Carytown – a shopping district in
Richmond popular among certain portions of the Richmond underground scene. I was a participant as observer, taking notes openly (Kitchin and Tate 2000). This was not a problem. Punks are used to seeing people writing reviews for “zines”³ or websites taking notes at concerts, and I never received any hostility towards my note taking.

The Internet proved to be an invaluable tool in this study as well. For a subculture that is stridently antithetical towards mainstream culture and mainstream spaces, its relationship with the Internet is a strange one. It has affected the punk scene just as mainstream society with tools for both building and diluting traditional, non-cyber communities. Not only is email a necessary tool, but online communities like MySpace serve a huge function for networking and promoting for individuals, bands, promoters, venues, and zines. MySpace, which is now an enormous cultural phenomenon as something of a tween-cyber-meat-market and is owned by the same corporation that owns the Fox News Channel, started as a venue for underground bands and has reached a point now so that if a band exists, it has a MySpace page. A search of MySpace for bands within fifty miles of Richmond identifying themselves as “punk” yields approximately five hundred results. Thanks to Internet innovations like MySpace, everyone in the community is only a click away and the punk community is able to use mainstream innovations to their advantage.

³ “Zines” are homemade magazines; they are a direct expression of the do-it-yourself philosophy that guides so much of the punk subculture. Michael Azzerad (2001) called zines the “house organs of the indie scene” (p. 4).
Because this is an ethnographic study, I am most concerned with the views and concerns of Richmond’s punks. As Miles Richardson would say, with a listening eye, I seek the truth in the lives of others. Because of taking this empathetic approach, I have had to be open-minded and humble enough to adapt to the lives of those I worked with.
The history of music geography is similar to that of cultural geography as a whole. Cultural geography is generally divided into “traditional” and “new” cultural geography and current cultural geographic work can be divided into these two literatures, but within both literatures, music geography has been a late-developing sub field. Prior to the formation of a sub field of music geography, Arthur Olaf Andersen wrote “Geography and Rhythm” in 1935. This essay expanded on ideas of environmental determinism and applied them to folk music throughout the world, stating that a nation’s climate and topography influenced melody and rhythm. However, this article was not followed up in the discipline, nor have music geographers since noted Andersen’s work, so music geography did not really begin until the late 1960s when Peter Nash presented on music geography at the 21st IGU Congress at New Delhi in 1968.

The resulting article, “Music Regions and Regional Music,” was published in the *Deccan Geographer* in 1968, is noted to be the first music geography essay (Carney [1978] 1994). Interestingly, the first words of “Music Regions and Regional Music” are echoed in nearly every music geography writing today. Here Nash noted the lack of attention given to “non-visual aspects of man’s life” as opposed to the preoccupation with the visible impacts of even religion and art (Nash 1968). Nash questioned whether or not music is geographic. He wrote, “At this time judgment must still be suspended as to whether there is something truly ‘geographic’ about
music. Almost anything can be put on a map..., but unless the phenomenon under consideration interacts with other elements to shape the ‘character of places’, it does not really qualify as ‘geographic’” (Nash 1968, 2). Nash was clearly attempting to preempt criticisms of an article that was the first in the field to address music or art of any sort.

Nash cited the work of Fred Kniffen and Wilbur Zelinsky as examples of excellent geographic studies of visual aspects of the landscape, but followed a 1937 article by John Leighly titled “Some Comments on Contemporary Geographic Method” that called for an increase in the study of the “topography of art.” Nash found the lack of geographic inquiry into art as well as music concerning and compared its non-visual nature to religion – a subject not unfamiliar to cultural geographers.

Three years later, the Journal of Geography was the first American journal to publish an article on music geography. Larry Ford’s “Geographic Factors in the Origin, Evolution, and Diffusion of Rock and Roll Music” identified the culture hearths of rock and roll and traced the diffusion and development of rock and roll; an approach common in traditional cultural geography studies. Ford justified studying things like popular music by calling it a tool used to explain geographical concepts to introductory geography classes (Ford 1971).

Two decades later, Carney reviewed music geography’s growth in the 1970s and ‘80s and stated that despite “largely positive” reactions to the work, some in the discipline met it with skepticism and characterizations of “frivolity and nonsense.” Despite resistance from some members of the
field, twenty-six journal articles were written and twenty-six professional meeting papers were given during those two decades (Carney 1994 has an excellent chapter detailing the history of music geography). No longer did music geographers feel a need to justify or rationalize their choice of study so explicitly.

In 1996, Nash and Carney published “The Seven Themes of Music Geography” in *The Canadian Geographer*. One, “origins,” is simply work done by ethnomusicologists and folklorists before geographers studied music. Grand nomothetic work like Nash’s pioneering article mentioned above exemplify the second theme, “world distribution and types.” Much of Carney’s work falls under the theme of “location analysis” that describes regional sub-styles and cores. Much of the fourth theme, “source areas of musical activities” centers on diffusion and, with modern popular music, questions such as “why is Seattle/Athens/Austin such a musical hotspot?” It was this theme of musical source areas that Warren Gill linked to tensions between structure and human agency in his article “Region, Agency, and Popular Music: The Northwest Sound, 1958-1966” (Gill 1993).

Work like James R. Curtis and Richard F. Rose’s research on the formation of the Miami Sound (1983) and Abernathy’s research writing about the role of radio in the transformation from folk to modern country music (1986) fall under theme five, “trends based on electricity.” Under the

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*Although an article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* exposed Dr. Carney’s plagiaristic habits (Bartlett and Smallwood, 2004), his tireless efforts within the discipline of cultural geography to gain exposure and recognition for music geography solidify his place in the field’s history.*
sixth theme, “impact on landscape” geographers have examined places
where music has played a huge, obvious role in the development of that
place. Branson, Missouri and Salzburg, Austria are two examples. Nash and
Carney note the emergence of “global music” and “technological
innovations” as two themes that will have large roles in the continuation of
music geography (Nash and Carney 1996).

Finally, within the traditional music geography literature, only one
study of punk music has been written. William Thomas Rice II’s Master’s
thesis at Cal State-Fullerton from 1998 is titled “The Geography of Punk
Music.” Rice documented the history of punk and its diffusion across
geography and into society without undertaking any original research or
fieldwork.

The work done in traditional music geography “can be characterized
by several adjectives—empirical, descriptive, humanistic, atheoretical,
nonanalytic, and subjective. Occasionally, music geographers have flirted
with diffusion theory, but by and large research results have been more
idiographic than nomothetic” (Carney 1994, p28). Carney also
acknowledged criticisms of music geography as “unscientific” and
“scattered.” While my work can also be described as descriptive,
humanistic, subjective, and unscientific, it is noticeably different from most
if not all traditional music geography simply because it is explicitly
qualitative research. Despite the field’s interest in hearths and diffusions,
recently has traditional music geography documented the effects of these
changes in the musical landscapes on the people who listen to them.
Although I am interested in the diffusion of punk to Richmond, I am most interested in the punk subculture as conceived by the punks themselves; therefore, my research does not connect greatly with the whole of traditional music geography.

Because of an atheoretical approach to music geography that continues today, traditional music geography held little interest to most cultural geographers who were involved in theory-based research. But like the late development of music geography in traditional cultural geography, music geography did develop within new cultural geography and during the last decade, new cultural geographers, especially in the Commonwealth, began to research music and sound from perspectives not approached by traditional geographers. The beginning of a new, critical interest in music geography was the “Place of Music” conference held in September 1993 at University College London (Leyshon 1998). An issue of the same theme was published in Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers two years later; finally, The Place of Music was, edited by Leyshon, Matless and Revill, published in 1998. The political economy of music is addressed by several authors in this text and is a major theme in new music geography. John Loverling’s “The Global Music Industry: Contradictions in the Commodification of the Sublime” (1998) in The Place of Music argued that the music industry – dominated by a very few giant companies – is tightly linked to the way we make and listen to music, but music’s inherently social characteristics lead to a hugely varied world of musical possibilities in ways uncontrollable by the commodifying forces of the record industry. This
commodification of music is especially of concern in punk and other “alternative” forms of music as they grow in response to the largely commodified, placeless products of the record industry. Therefore, it has been a perceived commodification of punk that has lead many to label punk “dead,” but I doubt those who I work with in Richmond will believe punk to be dead and they may or may not consciously resist the commodification of their own punk culture.

Ben Anderson’s “A Principle of Hope: Recorded Music, Listening Practices and the Immanence of Utopia,” explores the idea of utopia and, extending from Ernst Bloch’s idea of utopia as hope for a “not-yet” and how listening to music can allow one to briefly reach that immanent utopia. Anderson here shows one possible function of music that indicates why music geographers must avoid studying music simply as a one-way commodity forced upon the listener by the music industry. This article takes a rare approach in music geography because it is interested in the listeners’ feelings and points of view rather than the structures of production or consumption in the music industry. Interestingly, some of those who I spoke with in this study did, at times, echo Bloch’s “not yet” utopia when referring to punk and the punk scene as an example for a better way of life for wider society to learn from.

Of course, punk is not the first musical form and subculture to arise in post-World War II America and the cultures surrounding some of those other subcultures have been addressed within the discipline. Daniel Culli has analyzed the geographic implications of the Grateful Dead, including
lyrical content and the subculture’s creation of carnival (2004). Gill Valentine has already shown how kd lang concerts create a transgressive, lesbian space where it would otherwise not exist. Beatriz Goubert, a Masters student in our department found that live Latin concerts in Baton Rouge created a Hispanic place where Latin identity could be displayed without reservation within a very non-Hispanic town. I embarked upon my research bearing this literature in mind sought to understand the question, do punks, at concerts and other events and locations, create a transgressive, punk space amidst non-punk spaces (whatever that might mean) where those in the subculture can comfortably embrace their subculture and “let their freak-flag fly”? 
Richmond, Virginia

Novelist and former Richmonder Tom Robbins, who was known to frequent Village Café in the heart of the VCU campus, wrote, “Richmond was convoluted like the folds of the brain, as if, like the brain, it was attempting to prevent itself from knowing itself” (1976, p 40). That description holds true today. Richmond’s history is long and often painful or tragic; Robbins also wrote that Richmond is “the city of which it has been said, ‘it is not a city at all, but the world’s largest Confederate museum” (1976, p. 30). This also seems to hold true and be evidence of the “convoluted” nature of Richmond that keeps it from “knowing itself.”

Richmond, and Richmonders, even more so than the rest of the Confederacy, had only one thing remaining after the Civil War – their history. So, for better or worse, that is how Richmond has conceived of itself for the past 140 years. Richmond has kept from knowing itself in the present tense and kept its past at the center of its attention – like an award around the city’s neck that acts as a millstone, weighing on the city and its inhabitants.

Although Punk culture is certainly not something most associate with the Virginia capital, it is home to a large underground punk scene. That seems in disconnect with Richmond’s history and its preoccupation therewith, but, as I have found in my study, those who are attracted to punk and those who devote time, energy, and lives to the subculture feel a disconnect with mainstream society. (Where would be easier to feel that disconnect than where the city does not connect with itself?)
Furthermore, Emory M. Thomas wrote, “Richmond seemed to attract revolutions” ([1971] 1998). Revolutions from Nathaniel Bacon to the Civil War took place there at the fall line of the James River. At its best, I think, punk is a revolutionary music. If so, then perhaps it was only a matter of time before it came to Richmond.

Richmond was founded in 1733; long after a party from newly settled Jamestown traveled upstream to the falls and met the indigenous people led by Powhatan, who had lived there for 1,400 years (Tyler-McGraw 1994). By the 1730s, the landscape was dominated by large planter estates owned by English families and powered by African slave labor. That racial division would be an overriding theme for Richmond’s entire history. Richmond became the capital of the colony and later the state of Virginia. It was the first Southern city to develop manufacturing and aspired to compete with cities like New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore, but never caught up with these more established international trade centers. Richmond became the capitol of the Confederacy and, after its defeat, the centerpiece of the Lost Cause and the commemorating of the Confederacy (ibid). This commemoration is most evident along Monument Avenue, where recently statues of Robert E. Lee and Jefferson Davis were joined by an Arthur Ashe statue commemorating the pioneering Black tennis player and activist, an addition to Monument Avenue that challenged Richmond’s centuries old racial divisions that continue today (Leib 2002).

Richmond is an old city; founded by William Byrd II as the intended link between long distance commerce and local agriculture, it is a natural
break-of-bulk point at the fall line on the James River – the southernmost of the large tributaries flowing into Chesapeake Bay (“The Chesapeake” or “The Bay” in Virginian lingo). Although Richmond maintains port facilities and the James River is tidal up to the falls, the River simply became too small for most oceangoing traffic during the nineteenth century.

Byrd and others from the first permanent English colony in the Americas left an indelible mark on the Richmond area today; references to individuals and events from the Jamestown settlement are nearly inescapable. Names both romanticized and maligned, such as Rolfe, Smith, Pocahontas, and Powhatan, are found everywhere from Middle Schools to turnpikes. The prevalence of these names attests to the importance of Richmond’s role during colonial times.

Many of the “Founding Fathers” are also referenced in Richmond’s geography. Most prominently is Thomas Jefferson, whose work in moving the Virginia capital to Richmond has been rewarded with a street, a high school, and a posh hotel all named in his honor (long after his death, of course).

Other names equally romanticized and maligned like Lee, Jackson, and Davis are also inescapable in Richmond. These Confederate leaders from the Civil War come across as figures to be revered and almost worshiped in Richmond. In fact, the entire Civil War experience seems to be worshiped and fetishized.

Clearly, the entire history of Richmond is not simply summed up in the area’s dominant place-name tropes. Huge periods of time and most of
the city’s population almost disappear under such an assessment. However, this milieu of colonists, Revolutionaries, and Confederates makes a weighty backdrop for twenty-first century life.

In 1780, Thomas Jefferson introduced a bill to make Richmond the capital of Virginia. The bill passed and the seat of government was moved from Williamsburg. Unfortunately, one year later Benedict Arnold’s forces raided the city – the first of many times it would burn. Thirty years later, fire struck Richmond again when a theatre caught fire during a performance – killing 76 people, including the governor. Richmond developed a propensity for dueling, as well, including most famous duelers such as Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr and Edgar Allen Poe (Tyler-McGraw 1994). As one visitor from Scotland wrote,

“The people of Richmond are a peculiar people. They are proud and sensitive to a degree. ... they are not a little satisfied with the moral superiorities to which they lay claim. Their code of honour is so exceedingly strict that it requires the greatest circumspection to escape its violation” (MacKay, 1846).

Richmond developed as a center for flour, tobacco, and mining; it depended on railroads rather than the James and it depended on slavery rather than free labor. Pre-Civil War Richmond disgusted outsiders like Charles Dickens, who visited in 1842 and wrote,

“There are pretty villas and cheerful houses in its streets, ...but jostling its hensome[sic] residences, like slavery itself going hand in hand with many lofty virtues, are deplorable tenements... . Hinting gloomily at things below the surface, these, and many other tokens of the same description, force themselves upon the notice, and are remembered with depressing influence” (1842, 198-99).
Of course, during the Civil War, Richmond functioned as the capital of the Confederacy while some ninety-percent of the battles in the War were waged in Virginia. Richmond’s role as capital ended with the Confederate Army setting Richmond ablaze before retreating in the face of the advancing Union Army (Tyler-McGraw 1994).

Reconstruction era Richmond remained a difficult place for the city’s former slaves; “the unvented wrath [white Richmonders] had for the Yankees, for meddling with their pet institution, was poured out on the poor Negroes” (Randolph, 1893, p. 61). By the late 1800s, Richmond was formalizing its status of the world’s largest Confederate museum with former Confederate soldier parades and statues honoring leaders like J.E.B. Stuart, Stonewall Jackson, Robert E. Lee, and Jefferson Davis – all of whom occupy places on the wide boulevard of Monument Avenue. In 1890, when the Lee statue was unveiled, Harper’s Weekly reported, “The Confederate flag was everywhere conspicuously displayed.”

Although of little help to the city’s race relations, Richmond weathered the Great Depression better than most cities; no matter how terrible the economy gets, tobacco stays popular. Tobacco remains hugely important to the region as Phillip Morris is headquartered in Richmond and is one of the city’s largest employers. Popular or not, I do doubt Richmond will top the 1949 Tobacco Festival featuring an appearance by Frank Sinatra and the crowning of the Tobacco Queen (Tyler-McGraw 1994). Although many in Richmond would likely still be in favor the event, finding a major celebrity to attend would prove to be a difficulty.
During the 1970s, Richmond public schools finally integrated. And yet one-hundred-and-ten years after the Civil War, the city still was not ready. Integration’s biggest impact was the growth of the suburbs as middle-class whites and blacks fled to surrounding Henrico and Chesterfield counties. White enrollment in the city’s public schools started the decade at thirty-five percent and dropped by half during the decade. Only the poorest and the richest (whose children attended private schools) remained within city limits (Wilson 1981). This set the scene for where Richmond is today and for the parts of the city important to the punk scene.

Richmond Today

By the advent of punk, a predominantly white subculture, Richmond was a predominately black city with a lot of empty space. White kids\(^5\) from the suburbs could rebel and become punk simply by coming into the city – where rent was extremely cheap. They gathered in Victorian neighborhoods like the Fan, or in Oregon Hill, an antebellum working class neighborhood that never lost its white, working-class flavor; both of these neighborhoods are adjacent to Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). VCU has a highly ranked art school as well as strong emphases in social work, education and the sciences. In recent years, the school has been (and still is) growing at a spectacular rate – it is now one of the two largest public universities in Virginia and has expanded its Monroe Park campus into adjoining neighborhoods of the Fan, the Carver, and Oregon Hill. Despite

\(^5\)“Kid” is a neutral term many use when referring to anyone at punk and hardcore shows or involved in the scene regardless of actual age.
the fact that VCU, specifically its art program, attracted much of the Richmond independent music scene to town, the institution has drawn ire from many for having grown too large and obliterated too many cheap residences.

Figure 1. Map of Richmond neighborhoods important to the punk community.

Gentrification has been at work in many Richmond neighborhoods since white flight and the crack epidemic bottomed the city out. Today, the Fan is a beautifully restored Victorian neighborhood with rowhouses selling for $400,000.00 – an unthinkable idea fifteen or twenty years ago. Parts of Church Hill and Oregon Hill are immaculate while others are still the ghetto, but the block-by-block march of renovation and gentrification is visible on a monthly scale. The fringes of these neighborhoods and in and
around the VCU campus are where punks in Richmond are concentrated – in
the cracks between the city’s unfortunate past and its vision for the future.

As the city’s punks bounce around the city from neighborhood to
unwanted neighborhood for cause that was pronounced dead and lost
decades ago, the ghosts of the Confederacy and the Lost Cause dominate the
landscape from monument to museum to mausoleum (Foster 1988).
Although the city’s punks would abhor the comparison, clearly in Richmond
there can be life after death.
A History of Punk

In and around Richmond today, there are scores of bands that identify themselves or their music as punk. Yet they present such a wide variety, both aesthetically and sonically, that a review of the history of the punk subculture is necessary to find the connections between all these bands signifying themselves as punk.

This is in no way a complete detailing of punk’s past nor does it imply any linear nature to punk’s history. Further, punk is approached here as much more than just a genre of music, but an entire subculture. However, punk music has always “articulated” the subculture, and it is through punk music that punk culture is most often written about, therefore a review of the history of punk here focuses primarily on the music, but other, less celebrated aspects of punk subculture, both artistic and political, will be addressed when possible. Nonetheless, thinking of the music as the leading face of the whole subculture is not wholly inaccurate.

Accounts of the prehistory of punk make older connections than many might expect. Gustave Courbet and the 19th century Realism school of art celebrated amateurism, the common man, political subversion, and sexual deviance a century before punk took on these same characteristics (Colegrave and Sullivan 2001). Rimbaud, a contemporary of Courbet influenced a number of mid 1970s New York punks such as Patti Smith (McNeil and McCain 1996). Filippo Marinetti began the Futurism movement in 1909; the movement’s attempt to break down barriers between
performer and audience preceded the audience participation that is important to most punk performances (O’Hara 1999).

Dadaism is the artistic movement most commonly associated with punk. Dada’s association with anarchy and subversion and use of outrage as self-promotion would all be repeated in punk. John Heartfield’s montage style was commonly imitated in punk, as was Yves Tanguy’s spiky haircut. With all these similarities, it’s unsurprising that the managers of the two biggest British punk bands, the Sex Pistols’ Malcolm McLaren and the Clash’s Bernie Rhodes, were highly influenced by Dadaism (Colegrave and Sullivan 2001).
The Beat movement of the mid 20th century made the commonplace and degenerate into literature, drawing the ire of many, but inspiring the adoration of punks like Richard Hell. In fact, this admiration went so far that William Burroughs has been called the “godfather of punk” (Bockris 1998).

The Beats and abstract painters like Jackson Pollock lead the way for the work of Andy Warhol. Not only did Warhol inspire Malcolm McLaren, and therefore nearly all of British punk, but Warhol managed the Velvet Underground – considered by some the first rock’n’roll group to pave the way for punk. The Velvet Underground’s uneasy performances and songs of drug abuse and sadomasochism inspired a slew of important bands that challenged the rock and roll status quo like the Doors, the MC5, and the Stooges. The Velvet’s John Cale even produced records for important punk artists Patti Smith, the Modern Lovers, and the Stooges (Colegrave and Sullivan 2001).

The next important group in the development of punk after the Velvet Underground was the aptly named New York Dolls. Another New York based group, the Dolls were a direct influence on groups like the Ramones and the Clash. Their cross-dressing hinted at the later gender-bending and androgyny that characterized many punk fans (McNeil and McCain 1996). Also, Malcolm McLaren became manager for the New York Dolls late in their career, and although McLaren could not save the tumultuous and drug-addled group, they provided a blueprint for McLaren’s master project – the Sex Pistols (Savage 2001).
Among those inspired by the New York Dolls was Douglas Colvin, from Forest Hills in Queens, New York:

When the New York Dolls were playing in Manhattan, it was like Beatlemania all over again. Every creep in town started a rock’n’roll band. ...After the Dolls split up, the little rock’n’roll scene in Manhattan died out a bit and it was hard to find anywhere to play. ...Then Television started up and it paved the way for the Ramones and Blondie (Ramone with Kofman 1997, 46-7).

Colvin was one of those “creeps” and became known as Dee Dee Ramone, bassist for the Ramones. Among this group of New York bands that followed in the wake of the Dolls, the Ramones are probably the most well known and most often identified with New York “punk” – a term that was applied to this growing scene after Legs McNeil and John Holmstrom started a homemade magazine called Punk. Partially inspired by William Burroughs’ Junky, the name came to stand for that whole scene and everything it would lead to, but Holmstrom and McNeil started it simply to get free drinks at shows. These punk groups covered by Punk most often played at a dive of a bar on the Lower East Side of Manhattan called CBGBs (Country, BlueGrass, and Blues) simply because they could not get gigs anywhere else (McNeil and McCain 1996). Despite the loftier influences impacting many early punk bands, the Ramones, with Joey’s preference for Phil Spector pop records of the 1960s, Johnny’s love of baseball and Nixon, and Dee Dee’s preoccupation with World War II, the military, and heroin, were more directly informed by pop culture. Their ability to reflect, intensify, mock and celebrate mainstream popular culture would become one of punk’s favored tropes.
By 1976, the Ramones were signed to Sire Records and played a show in the United Kingdom that July. There, they met future members of the Sex Pistols and the Clash. Paul Simonon and Mick Jones of the Clash told the Ramones, “Now that we’ve seen you we’re gonna be a band” (McNeil and McCain 1996, 231). In the way the New York Dolls had inspired groups to form in New York, the Ramones were already inspiring others.

Here, according to Dick Hebdige, a set of influences different from those shaping the New York punk scene formed punk in the United Kingdom – all coming together that summer of 1976. American punk brought the minimalist aesthetic; British glam rockers like David Bowie brought nihilism; Northern Soul brought speed – both in dancing and drugs; and Black immigrants in the United Kingdom brought reggae – part of a history of British youth responding to Black immigrant culture (Hebdige 1979). Together, it all led to the images still most commonly associated with punk – safety pins in clothes and skin, Mohawks, audiences “gobbing” or spitting on bands.

The history of the Sex Pistols’ brief career has been well documented, as has their controversial impact on mainstream Britain. In the two years that followed, the Sex Pistols were fired, banned, protested, arrested, and assaulted, but also adored. In fact, they went through three record labels, inspired countless other bands to begin, put out a number one single and one of rock and roll’s most important albums, Nevermind the Bollocks (Savage 2001). During this time, punk’s influence grew in the United States while it was exploding in the United Kingdom. The Sex Pistols broke up while on
their first and only tour of the United States, but their crossing of the Atlantic brought into focus the differences between the punk scenes in both the UK and in New York. Legs McNeil wrote:

After four years of doing Punk magazine, and basically getting laughed at, suddenly everything was “PUNK!”

I was in Los Angeles, staying at the Tropicana and hanging out with the Ramones and Alice Cooper, when the Sex Pistols landed in Atlanta. It was very bizarre, because as the Pistols made their way across America, and the hysteria was broadcast on the news every night, kids in Los Angeles, and I imagine the rest of the country, were suddenly transforming themselves with safety pins, spiked haircuts, and ugliness.

I was like, “Hey, wait a minute! This isn’t punk – a spiked haircut and a safety pin? What is this shit?”

I mean, after all, we were Punk magazine. We had come up with the name and had defined punk as this underground American rock & roll culture that had existed for almost fifteen years with the Velvet Underground, the Stooges, the MC5, etc., etc., [sic]

So it was like, “Hey, if you want to go start your own youth movement, fine, but this one’s already taken.”

But the answer that came back was, “Oh, you wouldn’t understand. Punk started in England. You know, everyone is on the dole there, they really have something to complain about. Punk is really about class warfare and economic blah, blah, blah.”

So I’d say, “Yeah, well, what the fuck was Malcolm McLaren doing hanging out, managing the New York Dolls, and watching Richard Hell at CBGB’s?”

But you couldn’t compete with those images of safety pins and spiked hair (328-9).

As McNeil mentions, he was in Los Angeles during the Sex Pistols’ tour where the third early punk scene was already underway. Los Angeles punk was rooted in the early 1970s glitter rock Hollywood scene with patron saints like Iggy Pop (of the proto-punk giants, The Stooges) and David Bowie. Not only was the punk subculture vastly different from mainstream culture, punk music was hugely different from the slick, highly produced
music that ruled the airwaves in the mid 1970s; as Joey Ramone put it, “The Eagles and the Captain and Tennille ruled the airwaves, and we were the answer to it” (Spitz and Mullen 2001, 58). The center of the mainstream music industry was, of course, Los Angeles, and punk’s most drastic response came out of LA, where the Sex Pistols seemed to have as much influence as the Ramones (ibid).

By the time the Sex Pistols broke up, critics were sounding the death toll of punk. The most recognizable punk band in the world was no more, and the influential New York punk scene was struggling under the weight of widespread heroin addiction (McNeil and McCain 1996).

But punk kept going. It was still on the rise in Los Angeles (Spitz and Mullen 2001). It was just beginning in other cities across the United States, the United Kingdom and beyond, and spawning new terms, diversifying into different types of music. New York groups formerly considered punk, such as Blondie and Talking Heads, were reinvented as new wave. Psychobilly bands like the Cramps played punk influenced by country and rockabilly music like early Sun Records recordings out of Memphis.

A group of bands from the Los Angeles suburbs inspired by Hollywood’s most amateurish group, the Germs, were lead by Black Flag and created “hardcore” in 1979 (Spitz and Mullen 2001). Early hardcore bands, especially Black Flag in LA and the Dead Kennedys in San Francisco, then inspired a new generation of groups. Perhaps the most important of
those were in Washington, DC where a fledgling punk scene started by 1978, but Washington harDCore hit its stride in 1981 with the formation of both Bad Brains and Minor Threat (Andersen and Jenkins 2001). Minor Threat is probably most famous for the song, “Straight Edge,” that inadvertently inspired an entirely new sub-subculture of the same name that rejected the excesses (read: substance abuse) that haunted much of punk since its inception (Helton and Staudenmeier 2002). Straight Edge is still a strong presence in the Richmond punk community, but one often looked upon with caution by others who perceive a holier-than-thou attitude from Straight Edge punks.

Also, after Black Flag’s Greg Ginn founded SST Records and Dead Kennedys’ Jello Biafra founded Alternative Tentacles Records, Minor Threat’s Ian MacKaye co-founded Dischord Records. Dischord still exists and has been a model for all other independent punk record labels for over twenty years. In fact, the Washington DC punk scene has a long history of paving the way for expanding punk’s musical, social, and political aims. While the DC scene is influential on a worldwide scale, its proximity to Richmond makes its history very important to the Richmond scene.

While new wave, psychobilly, and hardcore grew in the United States, in the United Kingdom post punk bands like New Order and labels like Rough Trade competed with two-tone, a punk-influenced take on ska music (Colegrave and Sullivan 2001 and Azzerad 2001).
Meanwhile, punk kept going, changing, and expanding its possibilities through the eighties without enjoying (or suffering) a great deal of mainstream media attention. “Oi!” eliminated the art school elements of punk and over-emphasized its working-class obsession, but was (originally) mostly limited to Britain. Similarly, street punk emerged as a type of punk with a stance similar to the early Oi! bands but with borrowings from early hardcore bands like Black Flag. Street punk continues to emphasize political themes in its music and is one of the more likely subgenres to make the distinction between “real punk” and “poseurs.”

Hardcore punk in California became exemplified by bands like Bad Religion in Los Angeles and Orange County and by the punk collective on Berkeley’s Gilman Street. There Operation Ivy also combined punk and ska – a hybrid that would enjoy a brief mainstream popularity during the mid 1990s. The involvement of skinheads – both racist and non-racist – in hardcore punk grew during the eighties sometimes leading to struggles for control of the scene in cities like San Diego, Portland, and Boston (O’Hara 1999).

Emerging at the same time as early hardcore punk was a group of bands, most notably England’s Crass, that took Johnny Rotten’s “I wanna be anarchy!” claim far beyond his original theatrical intent. These anarchist or anarcho-punk bands have been the most stridently anti-commercial and antagonistic towards punk’s more mainstream and popular guises. Anarchist punk and peace punk emphasize message over music more than any other punk subgenre and sonically often sound like more amateurish versions of
hardcore punk, grindcore, thrash, and death metal. Anarchist punk seems to enjoy more popularity with punks at the extreme end of the spectrum (squatters) in Europe than in the United States. These punks may call themselves “crusties” but are likely to be derisively called “gutter punks” for their homeless appearance (often not just an image) and penchant for panhandling (“crust punk,” as has been explained to me, is punk informed by anarcho-punk and sharing those same ideals and goals, but it has changed sonically through an incorporation of harder, faster elements drawn from thrash metal). Needless to say, anarcho-punk and crust punk is a far cry from the proud, working class Oi! punks.

With all this splintering and changing in punk taking place, fanzines, or homemade magazines, like Flipside, Maximum RockNRoll, Punk Planet, and Lookout continued to document the punk subculture much like the original Punk fanzine (ibid). These zines are still an important part of punk as they continue to provide another way for people to give voice to the scene besides picking up a guitar. These zines can be about music, politics, or even just random musings from the author on his or her favorite bathtub toys.

Although very early punk was moderately successful at including both men and women, the 1980s saw a macho-ization in many subgenres and a drop off in female participation. However, women began playing in more hardcore punk bands than ever before by 1990 in groups like the Lunachicks and Babes in Toyland. Eugene, Oregon’s Bratmobile and Washington DC’s Bikini Kill marked the coalescence of a new, female-powered punk that has
become known for, surprise, a fanzine from Washington, DC, Riot Grrrl (Andersen and Jenkins 2001). Amazingly, these terms, some of which are now more than 25 years old, are still highly important in defining the different parts of the punk scene – both in Richmond and beyond.

It was the philosophy of DIY (do-it-yourself) that was the most widespread and lasting influence of the 1970s punk movement. The 1980s saw the growth of the American indie underground music. Indie meant independent bands and labels throughout the country rebelling against mainstream, major-label music. The DIY ethos found its way into cities like Washington, DC, Minneapolis, Seattle, and Austin where vibrant underground scenes carried on punk’s legacy (Azzerad 2001). This ethos is hugely important to a number of groups in and out of Richmond’s punk scene. For instance, the city’s newest radio station is a community run project known as Richmond Indie Radio.

In 1991 Nirvana’s Nevermind famously replaced Michael Jackson on the top of the Billboard album chart. Nirvana, a direct product of the American indie underground, punk aesthetics and politics, and a signee of Seattle independent label, Sub Pop, paved the way for punk and punk-influenced music to return to the public eye (Azerrad 2001). Most famous of the punk-influenced music was Seattle’s grunge scene that burned out almost as soon as the national spotlight was shined on it. Berkeley’s Gilman Street bands like Green Day and Rancid made multi-platinum records, removing them from the good graces of the “true punks,” as did Southern California’s the Offspring and Boston’s Mighty Mighty Bosstones. Their
popularity brought back an ongoing argument over whether or not hugely successful bands could be “punk” (di Perna 1996). Although the early to mid 1990s brought large, mainstream followings for a handful of bands, it did little to expand the already large number of punk subgenres. The one possible exception is the expansion of third-wave ska-punk revival – a primarily American update of the two-tone ska-punk of early 80’s England (itself a revival of 1960s Jamaican ska – which, in turn, was an island interpretation of early American R&B – these rabbit holes are easy to fall down when tracing popular music history).

Since the 1990s the continuing popularity of a handful of pop punk bands like Blink 182 and Good Charlotte might provide a more-widely acceptable face of “punk” and interest a lot of younger kids in what would be derisively called “Hot Topic punk” or “mall punk.” Hot Topic is a chain of stores found in suburban shopping malls throughout the country selling a wide variety of items featuring everything from cartoon characters to Muppets to classic rock gods to mainstream punk bands.

The other punk outgrowth or subgenre to expand over the past decade is also derided by other segments of the punk universe. That outgrowth is “emo.” Emo is short for “emotional hardcore” and began in Washington, DC in the mid 1980s with the short-lived groups Rites of Spring and Embrace. In the last few years, its growing popularity has placed groups like Thursday and the Used on Billboard charts and MTV2’s heavy rotation (Greenwald 2003).
With so much happening in less than forty years, punk today has come to mean many different things; a family of music genres and sub-genres, a philosophy, an attitude, fashion styles, and an entire subculture. Defining punk clearly was not the intent of this study. I let those who define themselves as punks tell me what punk is. Many punks I spoke with would not recognize everything covered in this chapter as “punk” or simply would not recognize everything in this chapter. However, as you will see, they need not know punk history to know punk when they see or hear it. If they did not, they might be unable to know themselves.
The Shows

At the heart of the punk scene is the live show. At live shows, people gather, visit, reconnect, and make plans. Oh, and they get to watch bands play music, too. Richmond has many bars, restaurants, halls, auditoriums, homes, churches, opera houses, theatres, and street festivals and events where people can go to hear live music. Within the punk scene are several places that regularly have live punk shows. Most of the punk shows in Richmond during this study took place at a few places: the Nanci Raygun, Alley Katz, and 9 North Boulevard. Each of these three places has a different role in the community.

Alley Katz

Shockoe Bottom is a few blocks of cobblestone streets near Downtown Richmond where there are a large amount of bars, clubs, restaurants, and the 17th Street Farmers’ Market. Alley Katz is in Shockoe Bottom in, of course, an alley – Walnut Alley between 17th and 18th Streets. Alley Katz has a 500-person capacity and is the largest venue to regularly host punk shows and the largest touring and local punk bands play there. Although it is a professional concert venue, it hosts all-ages shows, mostly independent bands, and advertises primarily through independent media outlets, and although it is about as mainstream as punk gets in Richmond, on the nights it hosts a punk show, it has all the feel of an underground event.
I am fortunate that on my 27th birthday, March 3, 2006, there is a big punk show at Alley Katz. It is big because Strike Anywhere, Richmond’s most popular punk band, as measured by the number of fans listed on myspace.com, is playing a rare show in town with Boston’s A Global Threat, Canada’s With Honor, and Richmond’s Government Warning. Upon entering, the ticket counter is to the left. Behind the sturdy, light-brown lacquered wooden counter sits a woman who will take your money and to her left is the guy who checks IDs. Since this is an all-ages show, no one is turned away, but those under 21 get Xs on their hands while those of drinking age get a wristband with a sticky end that will rip some of my arm hair out by the end of the night. Once you have been processed, you can either head to the left through a doorway towards the smell of pizza or to the right up a long flight of stairs to the second floor.
Alley Katz is a brick three-story building that must have been used as
a warehouse when Shockoe Bottom still functioned as Richmond’s port.
Inside, large, rough-hewn wood beams, old iron equipment, and a sealed up
barn door on the second floor confirms that suspicion. All of this is visible
in the main room upstairs, which is quite large, but does not hold very many
people because it has a giant hole in the middle. This room is the balcony
above the stage and dance floor where a three and a half foot tall simple
iron railing that, in addition to keeping people from falling, gives fans a
place to rest their arms while watching the show below. From this vantage,“the show” is not just on the stage. It’s also a great place to watch the
goings on in the crowd.

At the back of the balcony is a dark wood bar that matches the floor.
Except for a few small beer and cigarette displays behind this bar and the
one downstairs, there is little advertising here. There are some framed,
signed posters from old shows on the exposed brick walls, and except for
graffiti made with sharpies and band stickers, that is the extent of
decoration. Alley Katz likely makes most of its money on alcohol sales, but is positioned as a concert venue first, bar second.

A second brick-walled room is to the right of the back bar, above the entrance. This room seems like something of an afterthought to the space as it is completely removed from the live show; so they made it the poolroom. There are three tables, a rack of cues, and a few wooden benches against the walls. Despite the fact that this show is sold out and one of the biggest punk shows of the spring, there are always at least a few people in this room all night. Upstairs is a good place to escape from feeling too crowded and, if you get a spot along the railing, the best place to just get a good view. But downstairs is where the action is.

That smell of pizza referenced earlier? That is because there is a pizza stand through the doorway behind the ticket counter. Although there are a couple of tall tables and stools against the wall to the left, the pizza they serve on the right is not meant to be eaten right there. Take it with you onto the main room. Alley Katz does not serve pizza just because they are really proud of some family recipe. Alley Katz, and everywhere else that serves alcohol in the Commonwealth of Virginia, is mandated to make a certain (sizeable) percentage of their gross from food sales (Virginia Administrative Code, 2006). Hence, there are no real bars in the state. Every single club or venue has a kitchen. Conversely, a lot of restaurants just stay open until 2:00 and function as bars after their kitchens have closed for the night. Instead of getting a slice for $2.00, most people just
head through the room to a narrow hallway leading to the right. At the end of the hallway, people spill out to the left into the main room.

Across the tile-floored room to the left is the main bar, twice as long as the bar upstairs. Although there are plenty of liquor bottles against the wall behind the servers, a quick scan of the room confirms that beer is on the agenda for most of the drinkers. Extremely common is Pabst Blue Ribbon. PBR is unquestionably the favorite beer of the Richmond scene. If you want to fit in amongst Richmond punks and do not really care what you drink, you drink PBR. Pabst Blue Ribbon says the drinker is without money to spend on snobby, expensive microbrews or imports, but he or she will not simply accept the Bud & Miller dichotomy of the cheap beer world.

The stage, raised three feet off of the ground and without any barriers separating it from the audience is to the right upon entering the room and the bands’ “merch” tables are in a corner to the left.

Tonight’s show is a roster of fairly straight-ahead punk bands. Strike Anywhere is known for being just about the single most strident and sincere punk band in the country today; much of their appeal comes from their ability to make the political personal. A Global Threat, the other big draw on the ticket tonight, is also a political punk band, but with more of a street punk, working class feel that so many bands from Boston seem to carry. Since this is more of a general punk show with wider appeal than some subgenres, there is a relatively diverse crowd tonight: there are a few crusties; some Mohawked and spiky haired, jacketed punks who took a lot of time fixing their hair and putting studs on their jacket shoulders; and a lot
of people in jeans, t-shirts, and hoodies. The large majority of the crowd, like at almost every punk show in Richmond are white males ages 15 to 30.

The show is sold out and the crowd is packed. The bands can lean out into the crowd, jump right off stage into the crowd – just like a stream of fans do. Crowdsurfing and stagediving at this show (and many others) happens one of two ways. One, someone in the crowd, usually a guy and almost always underage, says to the people next to him, “put me up!” They give him a boost up and get him headed away from them, hoping to make his welfare someone else’s responsibility. Two, someone, usually a guy and almost always underage, climbs onto the stage, often at the side, circles around to the middle, maybe seeks acknowledgment from a band member, then leaps out on to the crowd packed up against the stage between the three foot high riser and a slew of monitors and the mosh or slam pit that has erupted six or ten feet behind them.

People who think stagediving and crowdsurfing are fun are actually a small group, but they are persistent. It is not uncommon, including tonight, to see the same guy spend a band’s entire set jumping off stage, getting dropped by the crowd shortly thereafter, circling around to where he climbed up on stage before, and jumping off again. The crowd up front

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6The “pit” refers to the area in the crowd where people dance, usually recklessly and often violently. After Nirvana broke out of the underground music scene into wider public consciousness, mainstream media shone lights on this ritual and labeled all of it “moshing.” Moshing is not a favored word within punk. “Mosh” was actually an acronym coined by legendary New York hardcore punk band Agnostic Front that is short for “March Of the SkinHeads.” Most punks use the term “slamming.” So most punks would not say “the guys in the mosh pit” or “the guys moshing.” They would usually say “the kids in the pit” or “the kids slamming”
usually tolerates these guys and just hopes they are not wearing boots tonight. (unlike the stagediver pictured below during A Global Threat’s set).

The other part of the crowd putting on as much of a performance as the bands is the group of people in the pit. Kids in the pit at a show like this are like molecules exhibiting Brownian motion. It is a bunch of people slamming into and bouncing off of one another and those encircling the pit. The action is often fast and furious enough that the people around the pit spend more time watching the pit than the stage. It is safer that way. Once in the pit, one either actively runs into other people, or one dances in relative ecstasy while enjoying the open space that did not exist moments ago and will cease to exist almost immediately. Sometimes, two kids will link arms – thereby doubling their mass and the force with which they can run into others. Sometimes the pit will actually organize enough (usually at the behest of the band playing at the time) to become a “circle pit.” In a circle pit, everyone runs or dances around in a circle, in the same direction. As imbecilic as this sounds, when hyped up by a really good band and the entire live music experience, I personally find a circle pit unbelievably fun. On the next page is a picture of a fairly decent circle-pit during the set of Government Warning, the night’s opening band – this much of a pit for an opening band on a four-band ticket is an indication of a really energetic crowd (note the fan in the center foreground who seems to have lost a shoe).
Figure 5. A stage-diver and the crowd during A Global Threat’s set at Alley Katz.
Figure 6. A circle pit at Alley Katz.

Although the pit and the stagediving seem chaotic and mad, there are actually just a few behavior patterns to get used to. Ultimately, though,
there is one golden rule in the crowd at a punk show – if someone falls down, there are at least five hands picking him or her back up. This kind of knock-you-down-just-to-pick-you-back-up camaraderie epitomizes the pit at a punk show. Unfortunately, it is a rough place, people can and do get hurt, and a lot of fans are intimidated and alienated by the pit, which is why some punk bands discourage slamming, stagediving, and crowdsurfing. They would rather everyone feel more comfortable and pay more attention to the messages in the songs. The camaraderie and the violence associated with the pit have been decried and lauded within the punk scene since the 1980s (Andersen and Jenkins 2001). Obviously, the bands tonight do not fall into that category and some of them join in the antics themselves.

Stuck between the stage divers and the kids in the pit, are a group of fans who crowd the stage – their primary objective is simply to be as close to the bands as possible for as long as possible. Like the more mobile fans around them, they are also almost all underage – as made obvious by the Xs on the backs of their hands; Xs designed to keep bartenders from putting a drink in a marked hand. Fans keep stationed between sets for as long as necessary to keep a spot right in front of the stage. To the right are fans waiting for A Global Threat to come to the stage – a twenty-minute wait, but a spot too good to give up. These are fans focused more on the band than almost anyone else in the club. They know all the words and sing along with fury and passion. They support the band members who lean out into the crowd, and they gladly contribute a line or two when the microphone gets passed their way. When the night is over, they will be hot
and covered in other punks’ sweat. Some will have bruises on their heads or arms from a foot as it went flying overhead. Those in the very front will have bruises on their thighs and hips from getting crushed against the stage. If they are anything like I was in my more enthusiastic days, they will leave with their ears ringing, and they will tell everyone what an awesome time they had and brag that they got to sing into the mic with Strike Anywhere or A Global Threat.

Figure 7. Down time at the front of the stage between bands.
Of course, most of the people at the show tonight are not pressed against the stage, surfing on the hands of strangers, or slamming into a 250-pound punk with spikes on his jacket. Most of the crowd tonight behaves the way they do at all of the shows they go to. They stand a reasonable distance away from the stage, fold their arms, and nod their heads. This is especially true of the crowd over the age of 21. It is very difficult to hold a can of PBR and slam at the same time. Those removed from the churning and crushing melee in front of the stage can stand back and watch the band and, if they are on the balcony, the crowd, appreciatively. Or not.

Although the music is loud everywhere in the club, if you are not directly in front of the stage, you and your neighbor can carry on a conversation through the art of leaning and yelling. With Honor, the one band tonight not to connect fully with the audience, inspires derision and snide remarks around the edges of the room. So much so, in fact, that the fatal phrase of “I’ll give you five dollars if you...” is uttered by one of the punks standing near me. Moments later, the diminutive, blond lead singer of With Honor is relieved of the baseball cap he had been wearing since the beginning of the set. There is always a lot of chatter and movement between sets, but during With Honor’s set, a lot of the punks grow restless, chatter more, and wander around – to the bar; to the pizza stand; to the merchandise tables to buy shirts, jackets, buttons, patches, CDs or vinyl records; outside to smoke (Alley Katz is a nonsmoking venue, thereby bucking the usual Richmond paradigm where tobacco consumption seems to be a civic duty).
During the show people talk about a few recurring topics. Most common is where to go after the show. It is Friday and the show started by 7:00, so there is plenty of night left. The underage kids talk about who got their hands on some Jaeger before the show. People talk about upcoming shows and which ones they are planning on going to. The people who are in bands talk about how their last show went or how the recording for a new split-7-inch vinyl was great and its going to be their best recording yet. And there are a lot of people in the crowd in bands. A number of local bands come and go with rapidity and change members even faster. The result is that with all of the musicians in the Richmond punk scene, there are at most two degrees of separation. So not only have a lot of the people in the crowd played with each other in one band or another, a lot of them have played with the members of either Strike Anywhere or Government Warning.

When the show is over, people spill out into Walnut Alley in search of continuing the evening, breaking off into small groups, heading to cars parked a few blocks away. Whether they were in the pit, on the balcony, at the bar, they all emerge with ringing in their ears and songs running through their heads. The bands are headed to one of the bars on Main Street in the Fan that I can never tell apart and the guitarist from A Global Threat invites me along. As much fun as that might have been, I am thoroughly exhausted and ready to get some sleep. I am now twenty-seven and too old for this nonsense!
Nanci Raygun

Richmond’s hardest working punk club is the Nanci Raygun at 929 West Grace street in the middle of the VCU campus. The block on Grace between Harrison and Shafer is unique. As far back as the 1970s, the 900 block was something of a skid row and home to an array of low-end bars and clubs as well as a pornographic movie theater. Today, there are multiple vegetarian, Asian, and pizza restaurants on the block. A head shop, tattoo parlor, convenience store, an art supply store, two clubs, and more also contribute to the unique, but relatively tame, block. The old pornographic movie theater is now VCU’s Grace Street Theatre. Grace Street’s personality did not change until the VCU Police Department moved onto the block - driving out the worst elements of the old Grace Street culture.

The block seems to reflect the personality of many VCU students more than the campus surrounding it. Grace Street is between the newly remodeled and somewhat sterile Broad Street and the historic, Victorian-styled Franklin Street.

Nearly all of the products and services on Grace Street, ranging from tattoos to tax accounts, can be found elsewhere in town. But the feeling of the entire block is unique, and that uniqueness is realized on the block’s telephone poles. Posting bills on poles is illegal in Richmond and strictly enforced – except on this block of West Grace Street. No one takes advantage more of this situation than bands and promoters in the Richmond underground music scene.
Figure 8. 900 Block of West Franklin Street.

Figure 9. 900 Block of West Broad Street.
Nearly all of the products and services on Grace Street, ranging from tattoos to tax accounts, can be found elsewhere in town. But the feeling of the entire block is unique, and that uniqueness is realized on the block’s telephone poles. Posting bills on poles is illegal in Richmond and strictly enforced – except on this block of West Grace Street. No one takes advantage more of this situation than bands and promoters in the Richmond underground music scene.

Telephone poles adjoining the block are spiky like hedgehogs – covered with the staples used to hang posters that have been ripped off.

![Figure 10. Staples on a Grace Street telephone poll.](image)

The telephone poles on Grace Street, however, are bulging from layers upon layers of flyers. The collage of colors and designs created are so striking, that a part of the street usually easy to ignore becomes a huge part in shaping the impact of the whole block.

On that block it is not uncommon to see punks gathered on the sidewalk. The Nanci Raygun puts on several shows every week – often two
shows a night. The club plays host to every aspect of the independent music world – from rock to hip hop to techno, but punk shows are the club’s staple and the Nanci Raygun hosts more punk shows than anywhere else in Richmond.

Figure 11. Punks waiting for a show at Nanci Raygun.

It is a small club, narrow and deep, with a ceiling only 11 or 12 feet high. The ceiling gives away the age of this simple brick store building as it has the same style of sculpted tiles as many commercial spaces in Richmond built early in the twentieth century. Rather than display it as in many restored spaces in town, the Nanci Raygun ceiling is painted a flat black and obscured with pipes, ducts, and wires. The floor is plain concrete – the
type of floor in the type of space where people spit indoors and drop cigarettes without thinking twice.

The interior of the club is visually cut off from the street. The large front window is obscured by signs listing the shows and lineups for the week and only the glass front door lets light in. The entrance is a narrow space next to the stage. A small counter allows for collecting the cover charge and checking IDs and marking entrants’ hands. On the counter on the wall opposite are piles of flyers for shows and events coming up in town. It is one of several places to post flyers on this block besides the nearly bulbous telephone poles. The stage is raised and in an old retail store would have been the front window display. On the two walls perpendicular to the stage are stepped, bleacher-like seating. These steps line a small wall jutting out to separate the kitchen and back of the bar from the rest of the space. The walls of the space are decorated with two main media – spray paint and stickers. Open space on plaster walls is painted with spray-paint murals that change periodically.

The back of the bar is covered with band stickers and those marketing through that most simple of devices have moved on to sticking them anywhere else they can avoid the fate of being painted over – tables, floors, speakers, the urinals.

The back of the club has a single pool table and two early 1990s era arcade games by the rear door (used by bands for loading in and out of the club). The relatively large open space usually has two uses – merchandise tables for the bands playing and storage of equipment and bicycles.
Figure 12. A Nanci Raygun urinal with band stickers.

Figure 13. Nanci Raygun artwork and patrons.
Although the long, silver and black bar is often busy and the round, backless stools fill when there is no band playing, there is little of the corporate branding common at so many college bars. Besides the actual bottles, the only logos are a small Red Bull refrigerator and a countertop cigarette case. From the bar they serve a mix of traditional burger-and-fries fare and vegetarian and vegan options. The handful of painted wood booths across from the bar provide a place to sit and enjoy onion rings with friends.

Tonight, Monday May 1st, 2006, the Raygun is hosting a punk show put on by a community-run low-power FM station in association with their spring pledge drive. I happen to be Assistant Music Director at that station, WRIR Richmond Indie Radio, and assisted in organizing the event. Five bands are playing, including four local groups; they are donating their time and talents for the evening. Sex on Sunday is an electro-punk trio. Army of Fun is a teenaged hardcore band that I have seen play more than any other artist in Richmond. I Live With Zombies and Brainworms are both older Richmond punk bands comprised of guys in their upper twenties and thirties. The fifth, Broomfiller, is from Toronto and is reminiscent of some popular Swedish pop-punk bands. There was a sixth band originally scheduled to play tonight. Unfortunately, they were deported back to the United Kingdom earlier in their tour for reasons I never fully grasped. Although the bands are playing diverse types of punk, one of punk's shortcomings is readily evident – every single performer tonight is a white male.
Tonight’s punk show must be over before 11:00 because then Nanci Raygun will be hosting Sacrosanct – their weekly goth and industrial event. Therefore, Sex on Sunday starts up early in the evening with daylight coming in the front door and the crowd still undersized. Nonetheless, they set up on the floor in front of the stage – a laptop computer, a guitar, and three microphones. The robed singer and wigged, shirtless guitar player proceed to put on a show simply by testing the bounds of their immune systems and coming into contact with the Nanci Raygun floor more than anyone really should. A lot of punk bands at clubs like this will play on the floor in front of the stage – I Live with Zombies and Brainworms both do.
tonight. It may partially be a function of bands that come up playing house shows without a stage simply feel more comfortable being on the ground. Also, however, it is a function of the punk axiom of keeping as little distance between the performers and the crowd as possible (Andersen and Jenkins, 2001). That is one of the reasons it is difficult for a band to achieve widespread success and remain punk – with bigger shows come bigger stages, more security, and more separation between band and crowd. Nanci Raygun, on the other hand, does not have a backstage space – when not performing, the artists are members of the crowd. The performing without a stage is a matter of unity – besides the crowd is often performing just as much as the band.

Figure 15. Sex on Sunday.
The crowd gathers around and nods, claps and “woos when appropriate and is quite receptive to Sex on Sunday’s fun, funky, synth-powered punk.

Figure 16. Army of Fun and their fans.

Army of Fun is the second band to come on. They take to the stage and it will be evident why shortly. At this point it is becoming obvious that the crowd tonight is not going to be very large, but a few dozen people are here and considering it is an early show on a Monday during VCU’s finals week, we at Richmond Indie Radio are happy with the turnout. Army of Fun is noticeably younger than the rest of the performers tonight and their friends, or crew, stand out from the older crowd ordering pitchers of beer between the sets.
When Army of Fun starts, most of the club moves up to watch, but the front of the club is promptly taken over by the band’s friends. The first time seeing hardcore dancing is a shocking experience. It is a descendent of slamming and the pogoing at the early English punk shows that provided mainstream media images of pasty, sickly-looking teenagers choking each other long before most of these hardcore dancers were born (Savage, 2001). Hardcore dancing is something of an acrobatic take on slammin g. Kids will jump, kick, and punch the air while hurling themselves around whatever open space they can find or make. Sometimes they run into one another or more stationary members of the crowd. Tonight, like most nights, the hardcore dancers are all teenage boys – none of whom are particularly big or strong. The significance of the ritual is clear immediately. All of the frustrations in their lives – parents, peers, teachers – come out here at the show where they can be free to punch and kick at will in a cathartic release for them and their friends. Band members and dancers alike wear serious faces, scowling and grimacing, trying to look tough and angry. Only between songs do the dancers smile and let it be known that this display of anger and ferocity is FUN! When not dancing, the Army of Fun crew sings along as the group’s frontman points the mic to the crowd. Meanwhile, most of the crowd simply tries to avoid getting hit by a flying sixteen-year old.

Broomfiller, the Canadian trio, puts on a good set, but falls victim to what can only be called scene-ism. The Richmond punk scene does a fine job of supporting local bands – especially within the various sub-scenes.
Punks also turn out well for known touring bands and established, touring punk bands regularly sell out the Nanci Raygun. However, smaller, unknown bands from out of town have trouble getting much attention. I have seen small bands, like Cleveland’s Never Say Die, touring without larger groups or playing without local support end their night at The Nanci Raygun with $5.00 in their pockets – nowhere near enough to pay for gas to the next show. The life of a touring punk band is almost never a glamorous one. Tonight, some pay attention and come up to the front to see the Broomfiller set, but nearly half of the crowd is outside visiting on the sidewalk or in the parking lot next to the art supply store.

Once the local bands return to the stage, or floor as the case may be, the crowd reconvenes and is happy to huddle around the groups, singing along, drinking beers, nodding in rhythm. By the end of the Brainworms set, people looking noticeably different from the jeans and t-shirt punk crowd start bringing in instruments and equipment. It is almost time for Sacrosanct and the club that hosts more punk shows in Richmond than anywhere else is ceasing to be a punk space. In fact, it will not be a punk space again until the next punk show there, Wednesday.7

9 North Boulevard

The long tradition of house shows is alive and well in Richmond. The house show began when the earliest of independent punk bands like Los

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7 Industrial and other loud-music subcultures do have overlapping roots and histories, especially shortly after the punk explosion when underground music was still a very small pond (Azzerad 2001), but subcultures like industrial and goth have separated from the punk banner as they have grown.
Angeles’ Black Flag started touring and were unable to play at larger clubs, so bands from different cities would play at and sleep at each other’s homes. House shows in basements put the underground music scene quite literally underground (Azzerad 2001, ).

I found out on Myspace.com about a house that has started putting on shows, and I head to 9 North Boulevard on Saturday, January 21, 2006. The address surprises me somewhat. This part of Boulevard is on the National Register of Historic Places. Along this street are churches and synagogues, multiple museums, and Victorian homes and apartment buildings. Despite the fact that a large number of the apartment tenants are young and part of the VCU community, it seems unlikely that an owner of one of these renovated Victorian homes would be putting on punk shows. Even more unlikely is the chance that they would be able to do so without getting complaints to the police from neighbors about the noise or the crowds.

Since these complaints seem inevitable, I assume the show must start (and end) early. I walk to the house early, arriving around 7:00 at a three-story Victorian home, but there is no way to tell anything unique is happening here tonight. I walk around to the back alley. Nothing is there save for a cat darting behind a fence and a guy on a cell phone by a van behind 9 N Boulevard. Although I take him as a sign that a show is going to happen tonight, there is clearly nothing going on yet. Rather than lurk in an alley, I take a walk and return an hour later.
The front of the house appears the same as before except for a handwritten note on a half sheet of white notebook paper that is taped to the inside of the storm door. It reads, “please go around to back of house.”

Figure 17. 9 North Boulevard.

I do so. There are now maybe a dozen people behind the house and a couple more cars than before. A gaggle of road and track bikes (track bikes look like ten-speeds without any breaks or gears and are the preferred means of transportation for some within the punk scene) are accumulating by the
porch and along the fence that separates this patch of gravel and weeds from the one next door. A few are loading instruments and equipment into the basement through a door down a half-flight of stairs. Despite the fact that it is a cool night (sweatshirts and beanies) there are a few people sitting on the narrow back porch that stretches across the building over the basement door. I do not know anyone and it is not apparent what the set up is except that the show will be in the basement.

I head down the stairs. There, a few people are standing around visiting in a place that few people would anticipate as the best new place to see a punk show in Richmond. It is one large room that reflects the long narrow structure of the building it anchors, maybe 25 feet by 75 feet. On the left, a section is walled off, presumably as a utility room. The ceiling is unfinished sheetrock above a few small I-beams that run lengthwise down the room (east-west). One such beam about eight feet from the north wall is supported by six, two-foot square brick columns that were painted white, but have been marked up by graffiti tags made with black Sharpies. The walls are painted brick, as well, with the east and north walls painted white and the south and west walls adorned with large, multicolored graffiti murals, or “pieces.”

The bare, uneven concrete floor is dusty and dirty with cigarette butts. The only furniture is a moldy couch, a brown kitchen table and some rickety wooden chairs clustered by the bottom of the stairs, but musical instruments and furniture is scattered about and some people are sitting on large speakers and amplifiers wherever they happen to be. Although there
are two large trash barrels in the basement, empty beer cans and bottles are everywhere; not surprisingly, many are Pabst Blue Ribbon. The entire room is lit by three bare light bulbs and a handful of half-lit strands of white Christmas lights.

In truth, save for the graffiti and band equipment, it probably looks like a lot of basements in rented houses. But it is still readily apparent where the “stage” is as there is a slight upslope in the floor at the west end of the room covered with a torn, stained piece of carpet that was once white or a white-like color.

As I wander around the room and wait for a show to happen, I overhear conversations about track bikes — presumably from the owners of the track bikes in the alley, and a lengthy discussion of early Snoop Doggy Dogg music videos. One high school student is told his dad is rich. He says he is a math professor and guesses his salary is $70,000.00. It strikes me as bizarre that this was the loudest conversation of the night, drawing in most of the crowd in the basement through sheer volume. Once everyone is loaded in, the door to the alley closes and a full-sized mattress is placed over the door. Ah, house shows. Fire code be damned! It is around this time that any small windows in this basement are also behind mattresses. It would seem that the potential for noise complaints has greatly been lessened. People start coming down the creaky wooden stairs instead of through the now mattressed door.

Four bands play tonight: Moon Boggle; Army of Fun; The Internet; My War. Moon Boggle is a new wave band featuring the only two females to
perform tonight. They have a NASA theme that includes the drummer wearing a full body flame-retardant suit and a crash helmet. For Army of Fun, that same drummer strips the costume and plays guitar as they go through their set of straight up hardcore punk rock. Despite the fact that no one in this band is older than sixteen, they have established themselves as one of the best hardcore bands in Richmond with energetic live shows and loyal, enthusiastic fans. The Internet plays a nice set with a bassist/vocalist who is celebrating his 30th birthday and a guitarist who broke his collarbone yesterday and is playing in a sling. My War, the final band of the night, puts on a nice set that lives up to their namesake – an album from groundbreaking hardcore band Black Flag.

I have been going exclusively to shows at clubs since moving to Richmond, and a few things stand out at my first house show since moving away from Louisiana. The behavior of the crowd during the sets is basically the same as anywhere else. Most people stand back from the stage with their arms crossed and nodding their heads while a few people are dancing and slamming with such vigor that someone in Army of Fun has to say, “I know you guys are having fun, but please try not to knock into the P.A.”

Late in the evening, I count eighty people. Eighty people at a small club show, like the Nanci Raygun, is a fairly decent turnout and although there is no fee at the door, a hat is passed around – people give what they can, which is probably less than a club would charge, but with the bands getting the entire kitty, they likely get a better take home than they would otherwise.
Although the show is basically a hardcore show, there is a wide variety of people here from various arms of the Richmond scene – a wider variety than is usually seen at small club shows. Here there are skinny hardcore high-school kids wearing Vans on their feet and designer jeans hanging halfway off of their nearly nonexistent butts, twenty-something rockers with beards, and crusty street punks with dreads, black boots, stretch jeans, and studded leather jackets.

Despite all of these different parts of the scene coming together, the night is really relaxed. It is a peaceful show without a single sign of unrest or violence. I do not know if it is simply because there are not bartenders eager to pump everyone full of cheap beer, but I think it really is because we are in someone’s home. It is more welcoming than a bar or club. And it is more punk because no matter how many punk shows a club puts on, that place is still a club, it is still about making money and at some point in the night, everyone is going to be kicked out onto the street. The house show feels even more removed from mainstream society than a show at a club – it takes the underground scene literally underground. Even on this historic street, the inside of this house is clearly a punk space and is always a punk space twenty-four hours a day. Since so many punks profess to feel uncomfortable in that mainstream society, it only seems natural that the farther into a punk place away from the rest of the world these punks get, the more comfortable and relaxed they can be.
The Lives

In this chapter are interviews with three different punks in Richmond: Donna Manion, Mark “Sparks”, and Andrew Necci (I do not know Mark’s last name as this pseudonym is all he gave me). All three are different ages and at different points in their lives. With the exception of the sizeable number of underage punks in the community, they represent the range of ages within the Richmond punk scene that includes many who are well into their thirties. On the other hand, they also represent the lack of racial diversity within the community. Like the vast majority of punks in Richmond (and elsewhere in this country), all three are white.

Two, Donna and Mark, are roommates and heavily involved in the anarcho-punk community, while Andrew is a well known figure in the hardcore scene. These two scenes are at opposite ends of the Richmond punk world. Anarcho-punks, or crusties, are distrustful of and have distaste for the hardcore punks who have a reputation for violence. However, they are all part of Richmond’s underground punk scene and, at times, do overlap and interact without incident. In fact, I never encountered any scene violence, and the only reports of scene violence I ever heard about were within smaller sections of the punk community.

For all three of these individuals, punk truly is their life, possibly for life, and it would be difficult to imagine them functioning without punk. This study was set out to examine punk as defined by those who identify themselves as punk. In these interviews, it becomes evident that not only do they identify themselves as punks, but their identity is as a punk. Both
Donna and Andrew left the punk scene and stopped being punks at one point in their lives and both ended up feeling empty and lost without punk. The punk subculture provides people a community of kindred spirits, established social codes, and someone to be. People like Donna, Mark, and Andrew, who feel isolated by anger or awkwardness, find solace and identity in each other. They also all in one way or another embody the ability of the scene to find a place in the city. These three individuals’ lives demonstrate the punk subculture’s fluidity and natural tendency to occupy places unwanted and ignored by mainstream society.

**Donna Manion**

February 16, 2006

A few blocks and a world away from new, antique-styled streetlights and renovated houses – the Church Hill promoted by the Greater Richmond Chamber of Commerce– live Donna and several other anarcho-punks. On a cool Thursday evening, I find her house amidst dark blocks of other run-down homes, empty lots, and condemned structures.

I interview Donna for an hour and a half in her bedroom on the second floor of a clutch of semi-dilapidated yellow clapboard rowhouses. The room has two open windows looking over the front of the house where overgrown trees and bushes obscure the first floor from the street. Her large gray cat with a short tail and a face too small for her head (whose name I missed) alternates lounging with wandering around the room while we talk, interrupting the conversation when she fails to use the litter box properly and pees on the floor while standing in the litter (an incident that
does not faze Donna who simply laughs and cleans it up with a mop kept nearby seemingly just for this development.

The floor is bare wood painted a blue-gray hue. Flaking paint reveals that previous layers of this same grayish paint and a peachy hue under those. The floor is littered in a manner typical for a graduate student in a degree-finishing crunch, meaning a prevalence of books, CDs, and the remnants of stimulants/crutches/addictions – in Donna’s case, empty convenience store soda cups and ashtrays overflowing with butts. The walls are brightly painted – one blue, one yellow, and a couple red – in an amateurish fashion. Tacked to walls are a handful of posters and flyers from punk shows.

Although the room is busy and full, it maintains a Spartan feel. The main pieces of furniture in the room are a desk and a bed. The desk is large and homemade – possibly from found wood. Sturdy legs hold up a large wooden board functioning as the tabletop. At the center of the desk sits a fairly new Dell computer, but otherwise, the desk seems like an extension of the floor (or the floor an extension of the desk, more likely). During the interview, I sit on a rolling desk chair facing away from the desk, towards the bed.

Donna sits on her bed – a mattress and box springs sitting directly on the floor and no more than two feet away from the litter box. At the foot of the bed sits a TV, VCR and DVD player on top of a worn, wooden table. A table that in a previous life may have been an end table in a set of hefty living-room furniture framing an impressive, overstuffed, silken sofa.
During the interview Donna moves from sitting to slouching, to lounging, to lying down.

The parts of the interview that she finds especially taxing or challenging lead her to shifting around and looking up to the ceiling as she formulates answers. Donna is currently finishing her own Master’s thesis. Her degree is in sociology and she is writing on subtle sexism in the anarcho-punk scene. Her research is not restricted to Richmond. Being on the other end of a recorded interview after having conducted several interviews herself is a jolt to her comfort level; something she references several times during the interview (“oh God, why is this so hard? It’s because I’m being taped that’s why”).

During the interview, the phone rang once (no one was there) and we were interrupted a couple of times by punks looking for cigarettes and the location of other friends. Every time there was an interruption though Donna was happy to dive right back into the interview and keep going.

At 39 years old, Donna Manion is older than many punks in Richmond. She is originally from Rome, NY, and although she moved around a few times previously, she moved to Richmond from Rome twelve years ago. Growing up in Rome, where they had “Punk Day” in school when everyone dressed really “wild,” her father worked at the nearby Air Force base as a civilian, and she had little to no contact with punk until high school. However, her childhood in Rome had a profound affect on her later interest in and definition of punk.
In the early 1980s, Donna took a trip with a friend to New York City and saw punks at a club. The contact was memorable, and although the effects were not immediate, she was into punk within several months. At first, punk bands for her meant “like The Smiths and The Cure” – bands she would not think of as punk now, but she maintains that in the ‘80s, “if you had unnaturally colored hair, you were punk” and that “back then punk was hardcore and goth.” Soon, however, someone who didn’t look punk, “he wore black, he looked artsy fartsy,” introduced her to Dead Kennedys and Angry Samoans. “And that was it for me.”

Despite living in Upstate New York away from any real scene, Donna quickly became enamored with punk, especially anarcho-punk:

“I was alone when I was heavily into it. There were NO anarcho-punks around me. All my friends were in England. I kept in touch through snail mail. It was awesome. Every day I’d go to the PO Box since my father was a civilian worker on an Air Force base. He didn’t want me getting these things mailed to the house. Big brother! I’d get stuff every single day. Zines, letters, tapes, records. This was in the 80s. 84, 85, 86.”

Her interest in anarcho-punk came primarily because of her proximity to that Air Force base. “I grew up reading the bottoms of B52s... because it was the 80s, the Cold War, and in 8th grade I read the autobiography of someone who survived Hiroshima.” She started questioning norms, going to nuclear proliferation protests, and “by the time I met punk it was like ‘this is a perfect match and this is where I belong’”. Despite being thrilled to find punk and her new connection to England’s anarcho-punk scene, the transition wasn’t always easy. Previous to finding punk, Donna was what she called one of the “in betweens.” But then she experienced what she
estimates most punks in the 1980s went through, “back then if you looked like that [with colored hair], you had to pay for it.” Punk life was not easy. “It wasn’t like you were popular… [you did it] because you were angry and pissed off at the world and that was why you did it, and you got more pissed off when you got ridiculed and harassed, chased down the street, got your picture taken, [and] people screamed at you all the time.” For Donna, clearly, punk was about anger; anger at her school, her town, her country, her time. Punk both fueled and directed that anger in a communal and constructive manner.

Donna feels that her teenage experience was unique to punks of her era. Though every era must yield a unique experience, her attitude speaks of a punker-than-you spirit dating back to the first stirrings of the New York punk scene in the mid 1970s (Colegrave and Sullivan 2001). Donna thinks that punks in the 1980s were people who were ostracized and humiliated, but just wanted an identity. To her, early punks in the 1970s, especially in England, were mostly about shock value, but by the 1980s, punks were figuring out how to use punk as a tool and “sing about something important.” Conversely, she questions how much punk can mean to people who got into punk in the post-Nirvana 1990s and 2000s: “I always ask [them]… why did you get into punk, they’re like ‘I don’t know, my friend was playing Rancid’ or ‘Green Day’… What does it mean to you? ‘The music’s good, and I like the fashion.’ To me that’s something very different from getting ostracized and hating the world and the way everything is and feeling alone. ‘cos that’s the way I felt.” She often cited Green Day as part
of a paradoxical aspect of punk where having punk on the radio changes things like people’s commitment to punk: “there’s punk on the radio for God’s sake! On mainstream radio!” She does see their useful place as they may be able to attract new people to punk and that’s “definitely a good thing.”

That intense punk identity cultivated in the 1980s has been an enduring blessing and burden for Donna. Punk has been her calling and her instrument for “trying to make the world a better place.” Although I think Donna is proud to be a punk, she recognizes why some can “get tired of the life” since “if you’re in anarcho-punk, you’ve got your daily problems and you’ve got the world’s problems on top of you. You’re trying to make the world a better place. You’re trying to eliminate oppression, any type of inequality, you’re going to protests, you’re putting out zines…” For her, punk is a commitment – a commitment to make larger problems a personal task. Although she found purpose and motivation through punk, at one point she felt the need to eliminate punk’s place in her life.

I had to take a break. It was just too much. I was going through a divorce, I was feeling guilty because I wasn’t squatting, I wasn’t doing this, I wasn’t doing that, I wasn’t in England, I was alone all the time because I was punk, I had no support system. I needed to take a break. I needed a breather. It was just too much. Sometimes you just gotta focus on yourself.

Clearly, this identity that Donna wears proudly weighs heavily on her. She feels a responsibility to the world, to the scene, and to punk itself to behave a certain way. But that responsibility of being punk has become closely entwined with her identity.
Shortly after leaving the punk scene, Donna moved to Richmond. Here, she was “very lonely.” “I was depressed. I hated it here.” She does not think her difficult transition to Richmond was unusual. “There’s a lot of people in Richmond that are from other places, and they all say it takes at least a year to get comfortable here.” The city’s Southern sensibilities were strikingly different from her Upstate Rust Belt background. “Down here they’re very guarded. They’ll say, “Hey how are you?” and say, “Hello” on the street... but it takes a lot longer to get to know people down here... . It’s very hard.”

Eventually, Donna returned to her punk roots, but not through traditional means. “The Internet got me back in... there was a chat room on Prodigy. I started talking with punks in chat rooms.” These punks reintroduced her to punk of a less weighty variety than her beloved anarcho-punk – “American punk stuff like Screeching Weasel that isn’t anarcho but that stuff has a place in the scene, too... . I started finding out about these bands. It’s not too taxing, it’s funny, they’re catchy, so I started buying some of that shit for a while.”

Reinvigorated by exposure to new, different bands and having completed a difficult transition in her life, Donna returned to her roots. “Somehow I gravitated right back to anarcho-punk crust stuff.” Now, a decade later, “I’m rooted. I have friends, I have people around me, I have less stress, less mental disorder, ...I feel like I’m part of something... and I know my identity.”
Once back into punk, Donna enjoyed being part of a local punk scene that she could find comforting and frustrating, inspiring and fractured. Being interested in crust/anarcho-punk, Donna and her friends are part of a smaller scene within Richmond’s larger punk scene. Their scene-within-scene status seems to be an effect of self-segregation. “A lot of anarcho-punks view other punks as not serious or lesser and this happens between certain sects of punk.” I do not know whether or not this division occurs in other subcultures, but I believe that punks, and especially crust punks would view this commitment and view of punk as a life-choice rather than a hobby or interest is what separates and elevates punk over other modern-day subcultures.

This segregation, and the economic implications that go along with, it plays out in the city’s geography. Donna and her crusty/anarcho-punk friends live within two blocks of each other in a poor, primarily African-American section of the Church Hill neighborhood - a location somewhat isolated from the rest of Richmond’s punk scene who more often congregate closer to Virginia Commonwealth University.

Anarcho-punks strive to make the world a better place, but they certainly do not believe that is possible from within the mainstream system they find so disillusioning. Therefore, part of the anarcho-punk ethos involves striving to get out of the system as much as possible. This includes squatting (living in abandoned buildings), panhandling, not bathing, and living communally in a rejection of the capitalist system. However, the extreme lifestyle can obviously be trying and Donna’s decision not to
embrace it as fully as others obviously weighs on her. Likewise, the anarcho-punk agenda makes it difficult for them to relate to all other parts of the punk community (and vice versa). Nonetheless, the fractures allow for a scene to be both small and big. “The anarcho scene is kind of small, [the scene] is big because you go to shows and there’s a shit-ton of people you’ve never seen before there..., but because of your certain style of punk, you’re going to latch on to people who you identify with.” There are clearly scales within the scene that are associated with comfort level for Donna. Her small-scale anarcho scene is her home and her identity. The whole punk scene is something of a buffer zone; a medium scale where she can find common ground either in politics or music.

There are so many shows here, though not lately, it’s not a huge scene, but it’s pretty big... There’s a lot of stuff sometimes, and you can pick and choose. ...The anarcho-punk scene’s not very big; we’re all around here these one or two blocks. There’s a lot of emo kids, there’s a chaos punk contingent, there’s an activist scene that’s kind of related in a sense... they just listen to really horrible music.

At a larger scale, and offering less for Donna, is the city of Richmond as a whole. Again, she moved here twelve years ago and was miserable while not part of the punk scene. Her opinion of the city as a whole has not improved drastically. “There’s a bunch of artsy-fartsy people living here. There’s a lot of money here, even though right now we’re sitting in the ghetto. There’s a lot of racism here, a lot of discrimination, ... a lot of yuppies.” Now finishing her Masters, Donna is considering a move. Not to get away from Richmond’s artsy-fartsy yuppies and discrimination, but to find a bigger anarcho-punk scene. “Maybe Philadelphia, maybe Portland.”
She says she has never moved for punk before, but seems excited about the prospect and wonders if she should have done it before now as well.

When given the chance to make a final comment at the end of the ninety-minute session, Donna seized the chance to make a prediction about the prospects of the greater punk movement, showing her deep faith in a movement that has shaped the past 25 years or so of her life:

Punk will never die…. Because the world is fucked up…. As long as there is problems in this world and there’s people that are young, when you get older you get a little less inspired and jaded, but if punk is around, which it will be, it’ll be refreshing itself. It’s not going anywhere. There’s too many zines, there’s way too many bands, …I really don’t think punk will ever be extinct.

Her statement attests to the growing pains of a “youth subculture” and of those who have grown up through it. Punk is constantly being reshaped and redefined by new people coming into the subculture – people, especially those fueled with anger like a teenaged Donna, who are often young, much younger than Donna. Her identity is clearly linked to punk itself, but that means her identity is linked to the ideas and passions of those much younger than her. Just as punk is refreshed by young, jaded people, so are Donna and others like her who put so much of their own identity into the subculture.

Donna also touched on punk rock’s difficult relationship with mainstream media when declaring the pitfalls for a lifetime in punk, but proclaimed her everlasting allegiance in a beautiful testimonial of faith:
Mainstream media. That always kills it. I guess old age for some. But it’s definitely for life for some. When you grow up that punk, your identity is solidified. When I got out of punk, I didn’t know who the fuck I was. It was very hard. Depressing. I may not look punk, or whatever, but I call myself punk and I don’t even care what people say anymore. It’s my identity. It’s my thing. It’s my history and it’s the way I’ll always be.

“Mark Sparks”

February 16, 2006

After Donna and I conclude our interview, we head downstairs to the backyard. There, at the bottom of the stoop leading out of a kitchen stacked with pots, dishes, and foodstuffs – mostly unlabeled beyond handwritten notes on tape, four punks, two males and two females, are talking. Donna introduces me and asks if anyone else would want to give an interview then and there. Her roommate Mark, the only one of the group I have met before, agrees. Everyone else heads inside and I sit on a plastic chair facing Mark.

The light from the kitchen spills out behind me lighting a narrow strip of an otherwise darkened yard. The yard is narrow, but fairly deep, and although the fence along the back alley was tall and wooden, the side fencing is low and chain-link. Leafless trees would have done little to block light from a side street if there were actually any streetlights. Nonetheless, I can make out a scrubby yard with patchy dead grass. Near the back alley lined with wispy trees and brush there is a small garden near a waist-high compost heap. To my right, a large dog is chained up among old patio furniture. He barks occasionally and loudly. To my left, every once in a while, a punk comes out of the kitchen in the next rowhouse to smoke.
During the interview, Mark rolls a couple of his own cigarettes. He rolls them tightly and has to relight them if he goes too long without taking a drag. Given the deft and easy manner with which he rolls these cigarettes, he must simply not be used to talking so much while smoking.

Accompanying these rolled cigarettes, Mark drinks from a large bottle of beer in a brown paper bag. He’s young (23) and slight of build. His skin is smooth and dusty from sun and dirt from working outdoors. He wears a black, patched hat over light brown dreads that poke out of the back of his hat onto his neck, wire-rimmed glasses, a hooded sweatshirt with a few patches of crust punk bands, and worn brown pants.

Mark doesn’t want to give me his last name. He simply says, “They call me ‘Mark Sparks’.” He does tell me that he is from Doswell, Virginia, a small town about twenty-five miles north of Richmond. He moved here from his mom’s farm six years ago, but he started coming to Richmond before that to do things like go to concerts.

He came to Richmond for those shows after some “punk dudes” from his high school gave him a mixtape that included the Misfits and Black Flag. Mark expanded his punk knowledge and collection at shows thanks to merchandise (“merch”) tables set up at shows by bands and distributors (“distros”). From the get go, Mark liked the fast music and meaningful lyrics. More than that, though, Mark appreciated that punk offered an “underlying theme of an alternative to the normal model for the world. Cos it’s fucked up. There had to be something other than what was going... the typical mode of life.” Mark may have been overly enthusiastic at first. “I
think at the time I though punk was something its not quite, not yet. I liked the idea of being there to help out with change. I met people who shared my ideas and saw them doing something with them – like Food Not Bombs. 8

Mark is clearly an idealist who found in the punk community people who shared the same ideals as his own. He barely talks about punk music for most of the interview and focuses on the punk community and punk way of life. Despite widespread assumptions about punk as a violent group, Mark enjoys its peaceful nature and finds an escape from the attitudes he encountered before finding his place in punk. “Punks always seem to get along with other punks. Everyone seems to take up for everyone else. ... I remember in high school I heard the word poseur every day of my life. But now people seem pretty accepting. That’s cool. It’s community, you know? Community that actually makes things happen, not just talking about it.”

Although Mark enjoys the community, he is not content to be satisfied with its current state. Instead he sees it as “a good start” with “good potential for seeing people to a better place.” I can tell that Mark really does see punk as a way to a better world – not just for punks, but for everyone. “I just like people.... I got respect for all kinds of people, cos you never know what the fuck happened to them. What the hell they’ve been through, like we’re all the same, you know, there’s not really a difference between punks

8Food Not Bombs is an organization committed to “sharing free vegetarian food with hungry people and protesting war and poverty” (www.foodnotbombs.net 2006).
and like non-punks I guess. Everybody ties into my plan... it's what you do that matters.”

Mark moved to Richmond because “I was tired of living on a farm.” He enjoys city life. “I like to be near the city, it’s a good resource for information, meet interesting people, get to do all kinds of punk shit.” Yet, now, Mark would love to head back to the country. He wants to put the things he has learned from the anarcho-punk scene, from his job installing solar heating elements, and from communist (little “c”) activities into a rural project. “I don’t want to live the way I’m living now. I’m trying to get out of paying rent. I’m trying to get a couple people together to get some old agricultural land... I’ve been learning a lot about growing foodstuffs... using all these skills I’ve learned building houses.”

Mark has high hopes for the punk way of life. Specifically, he would like to see some of the communal ideas he and his friends there in their rowhouses employ seen and appreciated by the larger world. “I think it’d be cool to find a way to have like those ideals manifest itself in punk in our actions every day. Because then I feel like having normal folks see us doing shit like that. Like building tight sustainable communities and influence them. That’d be great.”

Perhaps Mark wants punk to be more widely appreciated because he has had troubles outside of the tight-knit community he loves so much:

I hope it makes it something pretty good not something that makes people want to beat up punks, because I went through that in high school and I don’t want to do that again... redneck dudes, in the middle of nowhere, yeah, you look like a punk, yeah, heh, it's not so good. Then you got to take shit cause the
cops want to fuck with you. [low] that’s no good. Had a cop pull a gun on me and my buddy the other day, heh.

In addition to these types of confrontations, Mark has had further problems in Richmond. A health problem prompted Mark to give up squatting in abandoned houses in Richmond. Some of the neighborhoods where Mark and some other anarcho-punks have squatted, such as Jackson Ward and the Idlewood area, are neighborhoods where the city is emphasizing urban renewal. At the center of much of Richmond’s urban renewal is the constantly expanding and renovating VCU campus; creating a tension between the school that attracts much of the city’s punk scene and some of the scene’s crustier punks. In addition to eliminating squatter flats, VCU is working to eliminate the homeless presence in the adjacent Monroe Park where many punks participate in feeding the homeless population with Food Not Bombs. “They’re even giving Food Not Bombs a hard time. They don’t want homeless people anywhere near campus. Now they want to move the shelter to some industrial, arsenic-tainted place.”

While interviewing Mark, it seems obvious that if Mark came of age in the 1960s, he would have thrown himself into the hippie/counter culture with as much gusto as he has embraced anarcho-punk. Mark has managed to define himself as punk without a hint of the nihilism that started out as the biggest philosophical divergence between punk and preceding subcultures.

Ultimately, Mark seems to just be a guy with a really good heart and a lot of big ideas who cannot feel comfortable within mainstream society. He has no interest in the more macho, violent elements that can bubble up in other areas of punk, and he finds anarcho-punk so appealing because it is a
place of big, un-compromised ideas, a place where nobody is going to tell him to “be realistic” or “think about his future.” Despite his idealistic nature, Mark recognizes that not every punk shares his views, “there’s some good punks and some who make a mess of what everybody else is doing.”

Andrew Necci

February 22, 2006

Andrew Necci is an amateur scholar and writer. A musician and philosopher. I met Andrew at his 30th birthday party which was a show he put together in his friend’s basement. He was handing out his zine, “No Signal.” It was the first issue and I was impressed by passion with which he wrote and how much of himself he put into the work. He wrote, “It’s not an exaggeration to say that over the course of the last year, hardcore saved my life. At least, I don’t think it is.”

Although I did not get to talk to him at that show, he was busy after all both handing out zines and playing a set with his band, The Internet, but through email we arranged a time for me to come to his house for an interview. As it turns out, Andrew and I live on the same street, seven blocks apart. We live on Grace Street, which runs along the northern edge of Richmond’s glorious and glorified Fan District and adjacent to Broad Street – Richmond’s primary surface street. Like the rest of the Fan District, it is lined with small-to-medium-sized maple trees and Victorian homes. Although it does not have abandoned buildings or vacant lots, many of the buildings are in need of renovation or restoration and are rented cheaply by landlords who would rather not be troubled. Andrew’s apartment
is in a nice, narrow, two story building that looks to have been renovated recently.

Although I arrive at the time we decided on for the interview, he still looks surprised when he answers the door wearing jeans and a loose, white t-shirt. Andrew is stocky and slightly overweight and has uncombed, wavy brown hair down to his shoulders. He leads me past a bedroom full of books, CDs, records, and comics (his) to a thoroughly unremarkable blue couch in a living room with a medium-sized TV and a coffee table where Andrew sets his water. We camp out on opposite sides of the couch with the recorder on the empty cushion between us.

Andrew likens himself to “a Christian who found a Bible and decided to believe in Jesus.” This is because Andrew is straight edge. Like most straight-edge punks, Andrew embraced the ethos while a teenager (Andersen and Jenkins 2001). Unlike most straight-edge punks, Andrew came to the lifestyle separate from any other straight-edge kids or any other punks at all. Although Andrew grew up in various places within the state, he went to high school in Charlottesville, Virginia, where Andrew never connected with any punk scene. Young Andrew became interested in punk through a few different avenues; a tribute to The Misfits on a Metallica album (he was into metal in middle school), through references in the Rolling Stone to punk pioneers like the Ramones and stalwarts of the 80s underground rock world like Sonic Youth, through overnight free-form rock shows on WTJU, the University of Virginia’s radio station, and through mix tapes from other students at his high school. All of this was happening in the very early
1990s, not long before Nirvana’s *Nevermind* album shifted the paradigm of popular music. All of this amounted to Andrew becoming a big fan of punk music, but he remained one step removed from the punk world. “I didn’t go to shows. I didn’t know there were shows in Charlottesville.” Still, Andrew had a pivotal moment in 10th grade when he was loaned the Minor Threat Discography CD by “a kid in my art class… he knew a lot more than me.” Andrew was hooked. He started buying albums simply because they were on the same label, Dischord, as Minor Threat. He had “found the straight edge version of the Bible” – the Minor Threat songs “Straight Edge” and “Out of Step” that inspired a movement within the hardcore punk scene had also inspired a kid just listening to music in his bedroom and reading a growing number of zines (Andrew proudly remembers that his first copy of *MaximumRocknRoll* was a September, 1991 double-issue).

Andrew still did not know anyone else who was straight edge when he graduated from high school and headed off to Randolph Macon College in Ashland, twenty miles north of Downtown Richmond. It was then that Andrew finally started attending punk shows in Richmond with some regularity. Andrew finally started to see some of the bands that he had shown such a great interest in – My Bloody Valentine, Fugazi, Jawbox, and Four Walls Falling. Four Walls Falling was a popular and important band in Richmond’s hardcore scene from the late 1980s and early 1990s.

At first, unfettered by scene politics, Andrew did not see the lines dividing different types of music – it was all different, underground stuff.
that couldn’t be found on the radio, but “then I started going to shows in Richmond and depending on what show you went to and where you went to it, you got a whole different crowd of people show. So, I was kinda surprised, but I didn't really fit in appearance-wise or music taste-wise.”

This was especially true with a lot of straight edge punks in Richmond. A drug-free lifestyle “really made sense to me,” he tells me. However, in the decade between Minor Threat’s heyday and Andrew’s arrival at Richmond hardcore shows, “straight edge” the lifestyle had come to encompass more than the simple, original message of the songs. It was something of a rude awakening for Randolph Macon’s “only straight-edge punk kid.”

I had no idea there were these other trappings around it and when I started going to shows here in 1994 it was weird for me because I met all these tough guys and they were straight edge and I thought they’d be down with me, but I was a weird indie rocker. I always had long hair. I never dressed like them. I didn’t listen to the same type of music as them…. I didn’t like Earth Crisis [a prominent vegan straight-edge band from New Jersey], I thought they were assholes. I was vegetarian starting my second year of college, but for the first four years I ate meat. Fucking so did Ian McKay. He wasn’t vegetarian at first. It’s not the same thing. And these kids were like “oh, you eat meat, you’re not straight edge. You have sex, you’re not straight edge. You do this you do that, you take aspirin when you have a headache….”

In what is clearly another case of punks trying to be “punker than you,” the songs that criticized the prevalence of excess and self-destruction within the punk community led to strident straight-edge kids condemning the use of aspirin.
Despite having come to the punk scene from a socially-isolated background, Andrew made friends. “I didn’t fit, not really, but fuck it. I didn’t care. Other people cared. My friends didn’t care. I didn’t care. Older dudes didn’t care.” Two years after arriving at Randolph Macon, Andrew dropped out of college and moved to Richmond – fully immersing himself in the punk and hardcore scene.

Since then he has played in a slew of bands, published his own and written for others’ zines, and generally enjoyed a city of which he says, “this place does rule.” We discuss other topics at length. Andrew, philosopher that he is, is able to offer a treatise on each.

Andrew on why violence is more common for younger punks: “…when you’re 18 you’re so used to school and you go to shows and there’s shitheads there and you feel like you have to deal with the shitheads. You can’t just go ‘fuck it’ and not think about them and ‘I’m gonna go do my thing if they don’t wanna be down, fuck em.’” This violent mentality is more common amongst hardcore and straight-edge punks than with the rest of the scene – perhaps partially because hardcore kids, such as those dancing at Army of Fun shows, appear to be younger – while older punks tend to drift to other parts of the scene. This violence is an aspect that baffles some other punks – especially the peaceful anarcho-punks who repeatedly expressed to me bewilderment and dismay at the behavior of hardcore kids. Andrew, who goes to several live shows a week, sees and laments these scenes-within-the-scene divisions:
There's a lot of different little cliques. I spent a lot of 2005 going to lots of shows my friends weren't going to. And they were pretty good shows. And I still do that... What I've noticed is that there's the indie rock shows, punk shows, hardcore shows, metal shows, there's clicks within hardcore, clicks within punks, clicks within the emo kids. As you really step back and look at it as a whole, there is a ridiculous amount of shit going on in Richmond. ... the problem is it's kind of fractured. I'd love it if everybody went to everybody's shows.

Unfortunately, not everyone in Richmond is as catholic within the music scene and their opinion of the town can suffer for it. “You'll talk to kids who are like ‘whatever man, I don’t know what they’re talking about. Richmond sucks.’ Those kids are jaded.” He also references a reoccurring theme I have encountered in other informal interviews: “there’s this Richmond curse thing, where if you leave, you’ll come back. Because if you leave, you will go to a town that is not as cool as Richmond. There are very few towns in this country as cool.” Whether or not Richmond is one of the single coolest towns in the country, a lot of people in the scene do return to a city that Andrew repeatedly states is a great place for punk.

Andrew, though, has one of the best explanations I have ever heard for why Richmond is such a good town for underground music. His theory centers on geography and economy at both the local and national scales. Richmond, he posits, is a favorably-sized city located in a preferable position to base small tours out of:

There’s just something about the size. It’s not too big, not too small.... It’s close to a lot of other places. You can have a band in Richmond and you can tour for a week and you can hit the whole east coast. You can go play Atlanta, come up and hit North Carolina, hit DC, go to Philly & New York and then come back down and play somewhere in Pennsylvania or
Maryland and finish back up here in a week. Or you can go to Kentucky or you can go to Tennessee you can hit the eastern Midwest. You can go to Chicago. You can go to Indianapolis. Wherever, man, you can go there. You can go to Cleveland. You can go to Columbus. It’s really easy. You can do weekends here. If you wanted to work Monday through Friday jobs, you could be a band who does 8 straight weekends and hit up the east coast and the eastern Midwest. That’s really important.

Richmond’s relative location to so many places is something not lost on VCU’s recruitment department who use this map to illustrate Richmond’s place essentially halfway in between Atlanta and Boston.

Figure 18. VCU promotional map of Richmond’s relative location.
However, there needs to be more than just location. Washington DC is only 105 miles away, but gets a poor review from punks in Richmond. This is partially because it is so big it is just too easy to get lost in the shuffle or have a very cohesive scene, but also because it is just too expensive. To be able to afford to tour, one band that has since relocated to Richmond had all five members living in a one-bedroom apartment in the Virginia suburbs and paying $1,000.00 a month rent. That same band is currently renting a large home in Richmond where ten people live and they regularly put on shows in their basement. This is 9 North Boulevard, also known as the Fortress. That band includes Andrew’s best friend and former bandmate who since moving back to Richmond has been thoroughly enjoying living somewhere with a low enough cost of living that it is possible to just work part time and play in a band (which will invariably lose money).

Furthermore, Andrew speculates, the socioeconomic trends within the city are just as important to the scene. A balance has to be struck where one or more neighborhoods are safe enough that people feel comfortable enough to live there and/or go to house shows there. However, a neighborhood can not get too nice and price itself out of the affordable range for musicians working part time jobs. A few years ago, the punk scene in Richmond was without anywhere fitting such a description:

For a while there weren’t houses doing shows and it kind of hurt the scene. Oregon Hill was getting gentrified, but not fast enough. The Fan got too nice and you couldn’t do shows in
the Fan anymore, but you couldn’t really live in Oregon Hill and do shows yet, either. And when you could live in Oregon Hill and do shows, that helped. ...but for a long time nobody had places like that. People moved into apartments to pay the rent; nobody could afford houses anymore. And that’s really what was hurting it, but when Oregon Hill really opened up it was doable again. But the cost of living, it just shifted. It didn’t cost too much to live in Richmond, it cost too much to live in the Fan. But then Oregon Hill opened up. And Jackson Oregon Hill opened up. They were too dangerous before that.

Combine all of these things with ample available practice space in those rented homes or in cheap storage spaces, and Richmond really does seem to be a good city in which to be in an underground band. These same factors are likely what helped to establish Richmond’s reputation as a good punk and hardcore city back in the 1980s. That inertia helps keep the ball rolling.

As mentioned above, Andrew started a new zine in January 2006. No Signal is a monthly music zine with show and CD reviews and a listing of punk shows coming up in Richmond. No Signal is by no means his first foray into the world of self-published zines. While growing up in Charlottesville, Andrew “would buy any zine I found at Plan 9 [an independent record store in Charlottesville and Richmond]. ... These were important to me because I love reading and I love reading from a point of view I can relate to. And I can relate to punk rock. I can relate to music criticism.” In addition to stirring his curiosity about the music these zines covered, they inspired him to write his own. His first attempt came in high school, “I think I did 12 copies of the first issue and the 2nd issue didn’t exist as anything other than originals. It didn’t matter. I just wanted to
write. I had stuff to say.” Andrew certainly wasn’t alone. In fact, when he came to Richmond and immersed himself in the scene, writing a zine “used to be a rite of passage... There were a lot of people doing it. They sucked, but that wasn’t the point. You did it. You did a band. You did a zine. You know? Nobody does that any more. It’s a shame. I think it’s more important to the community than playing in a band.” Having played in bands and made zines, he feels that making a zine is less “self-glorifying” than playing in a band and a more selfless venture than rocking out on stage.

Making a zine is not just important as a component of the DIY ethic developed early in punk’s formation, but they help individuals relate to each other and to the punk community as a whole – something that takes on added significance for people who feel as if they cannot relate to the world as a whole. As Andrew says:

I think expression is important to people in the punk-rock community because it is a lot of alienation from mainstream society. Some want to find a place where people will understand them. And that’s what zines are. They’re like a hand reached out to a larger community. Like ‘do you understand me?’ it’s really people looking for friends. Even writing about music.

Andrew includes himself in that description. He readily admits to being alienated from mainstream society. Although I wonder if he and those like him end up defining “mainstream society” as that which makes them feel alienated or uncomfortable. Andrew’s search for friends and acceptance within the scene and his uncomfortable relationship with mainstream society
has led him to creating several zines over the years, but kept him from
finding employment using his writing talent.

Lately, however, as technologies change, and as the Internet has taken
a more central role in people’s lives and the punk community itself, the
former “rite of passage” of making a zine has seen a decline. Although it
certainly is not a lost art (yet), zines are less common and often are taking
on a noticeably different quality – a trend Andrew does not welcome:

These days people are really into making things look
professional. I think that’s really anti-punk. Not, not that
people who make their shit look professional aren’t punks -
maybe they are, but you lose something. You lose the tangible
feeling of it all. It is about sitting there and putting together
inserts all night. I’ve done that. ...Zines are the biggest
expression of [DIY]. That you alone, or maybe you and your
friends cut shit out. You wrote it yourself on computer. You
printed it, you cut it, you folded it.

Are zines really the biggest expression of DIY? Not necessarily, but full
DIY realization is easier with a zine than with a band. Making a zine from
conception to distribution, as described by Andrew above, is possible
without specialized training or equipment, making it different from forming
a band or recording music.

Now, when anyone with a desktop publishing program can make a
slick, professional-style zine, it clearly leaves Andrew feeling flat, and a
little sad, it seems. Although there may never be as many zines again as
there once were, they are still fairly commonplace – I have been handed a
few others at shows here in Richmond over the past few months besides
Andrew’s No Signal. However, what decline there has been in zines in punk
and other underground music can likely be directly attributed to the
Internet, which is one reason why Andrew considers his relationship complex enough that he named his latest band, in which he sings and plays bass, The Internet.

Another reason for his complex relationship with the Internet ties into his statement in the first issue of No Signal that hardcore saved his life. Andrew had a faith crisis and left the Richmond underground music scene for three years. In doing so, he lost himself. It was through the Internet that he reattached to the scene and regained his identity.

By 2002, Andrew had become “really jaded” and disillusioned with the scene; he was ready to move on with his life and leave punk behind. “I think part of it was that I was older and I was feeling like I can’t stay in hardcore and it was kind of a kids thing.” For three years, he tried life outside of punk and hung out with people he knew from outside of the scene, people his own age, “but that was even more frustrating, in a way. Although I didn’t realize it initially. …kids that I was hanging out with were into D & D [Dungeons and Dragons] and they were like what I would have been if I had never discovered punk rock, basically.” Andrew realizes now that his discomfort with mainstream society was not a phase. Although D & D is not necessarily part of mainstream society, as it does not make Andrew uncomfortable, but it does not provide an identity. Without punk as an identity, he has a really difficult time. He thought he had met the love of his life, but when he could not commit to “a middle-class life with a picket fence and 2.5 kids” she broke off plans to move in with him. Andrew was crushed and sought solace in the Internet. While looking for human contact
through the safety of an Internet connection, Andrew met a woman who encouraged him to go to a house show where Are You Fucking Serious? (a now defunct Richmond hardcore band who I actually first saw at a house show in Beauregard Town in Baton Rouge) was playing.

It was the first time I’d been to a show in so long; people were like “oh my God!” and I was like “I’ve been feeling so alone and I’ve got all these friends right there in Richmond. Here’s something I can do.” So I started going to shows whenever I heard about one. …Three days later, Wow! Owls played. These were ex-bandmates and friends. I thought everybody was going to be like “Where have you been? You’re not down anymore.” But everyone was just like, “oh my God. It’s so good to see you.” Nobody judged me about where I had been or what I’d been doing, they were just glad I was back. And so it was like, “why did I think I had to leave this?”

Now, Andrew is reinvigorated. He still is uncomfortable with mainstream society and the American middle-class dream, but he knows who he is. He has a band. He has a zine. He has a scene, and he could not be more satisfied with his life, “it means so much to me all over again. I took it for granted for a while. I was 25, 26,…and I see people 25 or 26 taking it for granted now! …When I was ten, everybody hated me. It was only when I found punk rock that I could relate to people.”

*     *     *

Andrew, Mark, and Donna all met punk through the music. Something about some song or album grabbed their attention and spoke to them and they, like myself and other punks I have spoken with, followed that music down the rabbit-hole into an entire world. Then, an interest turned into a lifestyle, and, eventually, an identity. Punk is how people like these three individuals define themselves. After doing these interviews, I
began to realize why what is and what is not punk is such a contentious topic. Someone fighting over the definition of punk is fighting over his or her own identity. When he or she is tying so much of his or herself to a term or a concept little could be more important than that concept.

Both Donna and Andrew spoke of punk in religious terms; Donna questioned her own lack of faith in punk and cited it as a possible regret in her life. Andrew compared the Minor Threat discography to the Bible. Both have experienced what my youth minister called a “faith crisis.” During which, they felt isolated and unhappy. These are grown adults who have thought long and hard about what punk is and why it is important to them. The importance of punk in these people’s lives is unquestionable, and yet it is the importance of punk to the individual that seems to go unaddressed by so much of the academic literature on punk.
Conclusion

No matter how vibrant Richmond’s punk scene might be, sometimes reality of just what “mainstream society” means hits home. On May 12, 2006, Richmond was alive with excitement. No one from the city was more popular at that moment than Elliot from American Idol. He was a finalist on the Fox reality/contest show at the time and returned home to Richmond in a much-publicized visit. Sixty-year old women from work asked me if I was going to see Elliot sing downtown at lunch when he received the key to the city and sang. I said, “Who’s Elliot?” Well, not only did everyone who watched American Idol know who he was, anyone who read the paper knew – he took up half of the front page of the Richmond Times-Dispatch that day.

On that May afternoon, as I drove down Monument Avenue and neared the Stonewall Jackson monument at the corner of Monument and Boulevard I noticed people standing on the sidewalks and at the base of the Jackson statue. They were holding signs, but that is not all that uncommon as demonstrations around statues of Confederate heroes regularly occur here. This time, though, the signs said things like “ELLIO T WE LOVE YOU!!!” I got to my apartment building on Boulevard and the pot dealer who lives on the first floor was hanging out on his porch. “What is all this, man?” “I don’t know. Something about some guy from American Idol.” Several other people from my building come in and out and none of them know who Elliot is, well, none of them will admit to knowing who Elliot is. Here, within the VCU-art-school-hipper-than-thou universe little could be lam er than watching American Idol.
It turns out that Elliot was on his way to sing the Star Spangled Banner at a minor league baseball game and my street was part of a much-publicized motorcade. The press coverage and the presence of hundreds of teenage girls and their mothers was a shocking reminder that punk and all underground music, in the grand scheme of things, is really not very big. Kids playing loud, rebellious music in their friend's basement will never compete with someone appearing every week on national television, and no matter how many bands call Richmond home, most people in Richmond are the same as most people everywhere – blissfully unaware of punks like Andrew, Donna or Mark who are actively avoiding Elliot and the entire world that his success epitomizes.
This research asked how the punk subculture affects punks’ relationship with Richmond. Through participant-observation at live shows and interviews like those with Donna, Mark, and Andrew, I came across repeated references to a mainstream society that was ridiculous, uncomfortable, and simply wrong, and here was Richmond’s most unified showing of support in years for a contestant on a TV show who sang pop songs. There could not have been a clearer showing of what, exactly, it is that these punks are hiding from and even fighting against.

Also of interest was how a subculture claims space. Punks in Richmond take over a club like Alley Katz for a show, leave behind stickers at Nanci Raygun to mark their space, create a small community in a half-empty, rundown neighborhood like Donna and her friends, or create a home and live music venue in the middle of a historic street renowned for its Confederate museums. But when the whole of Richmond seems to turn out for a singing symbol of corporate America right on the lawn of 9 North Boulevard, the tenuousness of creating and keeping a subculture’s space becomes apparent. Punk’s ability to change Richmond pales in comparison to these corporate powers.

Clearly, punk is alive in Richmond, Virginia. What was pronounced dead with the Sex Pistols (Savage 2001), lives on in the form of certain philosophies such as the DIY ethic, communal interests and well-being, and the power of music to inspire as punk. However, much of how the punk subculture is described by punks like Mark, Donna, and Andrew, is as a subculture based in large part on what it is not. It was not and is not
mainstream society. In the mid-1970s, it was not the Eagles, Captain and Tennille, or whatever else was on the radio charts (McNeil and McCain 1996). It was not Thatcherism, stiff upper lip, or, despite Malcom McLaren’s best efforts, the Bay City Rollers (Savage 2001). At its heart, punk has become about anger towards and awkwardness with the dominant paradigm, whatever that may be, rejecting that paradigm, and the empowerment that comes with that freedom to do other than what is expected.

This reflexivity has given punk flexibility and longevity beyond previous British youth subcultures defined by Dick Hebdige (1979). Punk’s adaptability applies to the places of punk, as well. Punks in Richmond congregate in the cracks of the city. As discussed by Andrew, the Richmond punk scene shifts around – finding the edges of urban blight (Ferrell 2001). The situation sounds not terribly dissimilar to some of the classic situations of punk scenes like New York’s Bowery in the 1970s (McNeil and McCain 1996) or Georgetown in Washington, DC in the early 1980s (Andersen and Jenkins 2001). Andrew’s speculation certainly makes sense at first glance with regards to Richmond; it is a relatively inexpensive city to live in and is centrally located on the East Coast. Would his speculation hold up under critical study? Would this apply to other cities, as well?

The role of political economy in shaping the place of music and subculture, both within a city at a neighborhood level, and between cities at a regional level has not been properly examined by those in new cultural geography – something that would have fit rather well with the work

By combining political economy research with ethnographic fieldwork, such research would not only be useful to music geography, but urban geography as well. The importance of subcultures like punk in using areas in a city found undesirable by other groups seems like a topic ready to be taken on, as well.

However, when discussing punk’s place in the city, an African-American city like Richmond, the whiteness of punk must be addressed. Although there are punks in Richmond who are not white, I was unable to interview any and can only offer second- or third-hand anecdotes. Race in punk was not a topic for this study, so I did not go out of my way to interview minorities, but the experiences of minorities in punk, a subculture that fashions for itself a minority-like status (Traber 2001), would make for a fascinating study similar to work done with women in punk – themselves a minority within the subculture (Rosenberg and Garafalo 1998).

What does punk hold for people in Richmond, Virginia? That is the question at the heart of this study. After all, it attracts people from outside of the city to it, people like Mark Sparks or bands like Smoke or Fire or The Catalyst, who relocated from Boston and Washington, DC, respectively, to be part of the Richmond punk scene. It also attracts young people like Army of Fun and their friends who throw themselves into concerts, literally, with reckless abandon. Punk is an identity for individuals who all feel the need to find a way contrary to mainstream society, and the punk identity is continually being rewritten by new individuals and new ideas. The punk
scene in Richmond is similarly being changed by those new to the scene, both from the city and from without. In a city that is so resistant to change in its identity, the fluidity of punk itself is contrary in its very nature.

Yet, by occupying different parts of the city, those usually unwanted and ignored by mainstream society, the punk subculture finds its way to survive and thrive in this unexpected place. And so, here in the Confederate capital, punk rolls on underground while centuries of Richmond history, Elliot, and his many fans remain in the light.


Vita

Christopher J. Dalbom was born and raised in Kansas where he spent the first decade and half of his life in a wholly punk-free environment. His love of geography grew throughout his time at the University of Kansas thanks to Drs. Shortridge, Myers, Shortridge, and Nunley. At Louisiana State University he gained wisdom, friends, and a wife. In Richmond, Virginia he made friends and hosted multiple radio shows for WRIR-LP 97.3 Richmond Independent Radio. He still does not know whether or not he is punk.