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The Shape of Punk to Come

CrimethInc.

August 11, 2006

HeartattaCk, a little-known newsprint periodical, has just published its final issue. This is a small tragedy for punks like me, as this magazine played an important role in political do-it-yourself punk over the past decade. But let's pray for the dead and fight like hell for the living, as they say. *HeartattaCk* is dead, but political punk and the d.i.y. communities associated with it are not—so let's talk about what we can do to keep them vital.

The milieu that *HeartattaCk* grew up in and nourished—the whole vinyl records with screenprinted covers, tortured lyrics about social issues, bands speaking between songs at basement shows, everyone doing their own one-issue 'zine thing—worked and flourished because it was well-suited to its times. Social and historical conditions have shifted some since then, and I think it's not entirely a coincidence that *HeartattaCk* is passing on now, too. We can only speculate as to why the whole thing took off back in the '90s: maybe it was the evolution of the best aspects of the '80s straight edge scene, or the harvest of a generation that grew up influenced by Fugazi, or the development of a less drunk and rowdy version of the Profane Existence model for d.i.y. punk. Any

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grand narrative imposed in retrospect is bound to be arbitrary at best.

It's a little less risky to speculate about what's going on today, though, and probably more instructive. What social changes have taken place since the scene centered around *HeartattaCk* first appeared, and how do we take that into account in our future efforts to nurture a radical punk community?

The most obvious answer to the first question is the cyberspace boom. There was a time around 1998 when everywhere a band went, someone would be interested in interviewing them for a 'zine; by four years later, that was a rare occurrence. Kids who desired to express themselves weren't making 'zines as often as they were using message boards and other internet forums. I'm not going to say that the internet is a bad thing altogether (that same era saw a sudden explosion of massive political demonstrations, which certainly benefited from internet communication), but it has ushered in major social changes that are influencing the d.i.y. community as well as the rest of the world.

I'll hazard the guess that these changes make it a lot harder for a 'zine like *HeartattaCk* to serve its purpose. Kids are so used to getting information free on the internet that they're unlikely to purchase a 'zine to read record reviews or, unfortunately, columns like this one. Don't get me wrong, there's still a place in the world for non-virtual reading material, it just plays a different role. As our experiences with the CrimethInc. experiment have demonstrated, free literature is still in great demand, as reading anything lengthy on the internet is excruciating; but the advertising that once paid for much of it is also shifting online, and the photocopying scams that facilitated the heyday of the 'zine revolution have largely died out for the same reasons.

The internet hasn't spelled doomsday for books, as they play a role it cannot. People will still pay for colorful, durable commodities. I imagine this explains the continuing popularity of vinyl, as well—now that people often get their music and information on-

industry" that d.i.y. punk should fill with something more meaningful than mere entertainment. The fact that *HeartattaCk* is calling it quits at this moment in time should pose no obstacle to this, but it certainly makes it more difficult to imagine how it can be accomplished. With a vacuum to fill in our society, a void to fill in our own community, and a world changing so fast we can barely keep up with it, us punks have our work cut out for us.

I'd like to conclude with a deep and heartfelt thanks to everyone who has helped sustain this magazine, and thus the punk community, for more than a decade now. As a dropout revolutionary whose life hopes are pinned to the total transformation of this society, the punk scene has been a major source of support and succor for well over half my life, and I owe a lot to anyone who has kept it alive and dangerous. I pledge to repay you in kind with my own efforts to maintain it, which I'll be keeping up for decades to come.

be immediately uploaded into cyberspace and distributed widely, it seems to me that topical bands could respond to current events immediately with songs addressing the issues. CRASS responded to the Falklands war in what was record time in those days, but it still took them several weeks; today, a punk band could produce and disseminate a moving anthem about, for example, Bush's handling of Hurricane Katrina faster than the corporate media could react with denials that the whole thing ever happened. A combination of intelligible political messages, accessible aesthetic forms, and lightning-fast mass distribution could make for really powerful music of dissent.

One thing has not lost its power in the age of virtual interaction: actual punk shows. Today it's more important than ever that people come together to interact in person beyond the gaze of market analysts and federal investigators. If people no longer buy records, they will still go to see the bands whose music they download; if people no longer read interviews in 'zines, they will still listen to bands talk between songs. As we lose ground for political content in liner notes and 'zines, we have to regain it at shows. Now is the time for punk bands to play in front of enormous banners proclaiming their stances, as Nausea used to; now is the time to bring radical speakers and movies and literature tables to shows, and to hold big potluck dinners before or after shows at which entire communities of punk rockers can get to know one another and lay plans for the future. The bands that set new precedents for exciting or challenging live shows will be the ones that keep d.i.y. punk alive, as they always have been.

The commercial hardcore scene, which, led by Victory records, parted ways from the rest of the punk underground in the early years of *HeartattaCk's* existence, has finally washed up on the shores of corporate so-called success: those bands are playing for \$20 a ticket at glitzy rock clubs now, or paying \$75,000 (seriously! and they have to rent tour buses on top of that!) to get a spot on the Warped Tour. This leaves a vacuum in the "entertainment

line, the chief role of a record or book is to serve as a sort of status symbol, and LPs make fancier possessions than CDs do. Likewise, if the new format of *Profane Existence* is working out for them, I bet it's for this reason. *Clamor*, for that matter, has just shifted its format from bimonthly magazine to quarterly journal, perhaps in imitation of our new biannual journal *Rolling Thunder*; it's no longer as easy to sell magazines as books.

The internet may make it easier for kids of middle class means to express themselves to a wider audience than 'zines ever could have, but it is not accessible across class lines the way 'zines were, and it often really drags down the level of communication. Compare the most inarticulate and unoriginal 'zine of the '90s with the most eloquent and well-mannered message board dialogue of today and you'll be forced to agree. Not only does cyberspace encourage meaningless bickering (it connects us the way a traffic jam connects people: each of us isolated behind a screen, resenting all the others), but it limits the depth and context of the information that can be exchanged.

On these grounds, I think we need a renaissance of actual three-dimensional literature in the d.i.y. scene. This literature will have to do something new and different that the internet cannot. As implied above, I fear it will have to be either free or fancy. The mass-produced free literature that comes out of the main CrimethInc. hubs is only possible because of the vast infrastructure of benefit funding, petty crime, and international cooperation that supports it; unless others are able to band together in equally large groups, they'll have to find ways to commandeer resources on a smaller scale (my local collective has been using the free student printing at a nearby university, though none of us are students). As for "fancy" material, this need not be mass-produced: it can also be made in small quantities on an individual basis, so long as the results are fascinating and unique. I hope to see someone solve the problem of how to make literature useful, exciting, and accessible in punk

circles again soon; if no one does, it's gonna be a bad scene, if you'll pardon the pun.

Now let's look at punk music itself and how it ties into the welfare of the d.i.y. community in the age of the internet. For good or for ill, every subcultural explosion in punk history, including those of d.i.y. and political movements, has corresponded to the development and popularization of a new musical aesthetic: for example, the vegan straight edge eruption of the '90s can be traced to Earth Crisis's innovative combination of metal riffs with macho dance beats and self-righteous rhetoric, just as the distillation of crust music was instrumental in establishing the anarcho-punk community. My hypothesis about this phenomenon is that when a band is doing something that seems new in a musical sense, it helps listeners imagine that things could be different in other ways as well.

This suggests that the next resurgence of d.i.y. punk activity will probably be connected to the development of a new musical style. Those who see punk music as a mere vehicle for political messages often undervalue the purely artistic aspect of things, but they do so at their own peril. Like it or not, in most circles punk is still a social network based around music appreciation, even when (as is the case for your humble author) it opens doors for participants to work towards a complete transformation of their lives. If you are an anarchist musician, hoping to foment social unrest with three chords and the truth, you'll do well to put some energy into coming up with new arrangements for those three chords.

Unfortunately, thanks in part to internet technology, purely aesthetic concerns are now often at odds with political content in music. The irony of people attempting to convey nuanced political commentary by screaming unintelligibly over chaotic noise has been a cliché since long before most of us first heard Born Against, but at least for the past thirty years there have been record covers and liner notes to make it clear what all the screaming was about. Now that many people get their music by downloading it off the internet, all that has changed. It was already a problem that musical

styles initially associated with radical politics could swiftly be emptied of content by sales-hungry clones—witness all the Discharge imitators that couldn't care less about war or anything else; now it will be all the harder for any aesthetic to retain a political charge, unless the content is obviously political upon first listen.

Therefore, though there aren't any signs of this on the way right now, I'm hoping the next musical innovations to come out of the punk scene will make politics audible again. This could be accomplished by creative use of sampling, or by intelligible singing à la the Dead Kennedys or Chumbawumba, or spoken parts à la Oi Polloi. That first Against Me! record worked on this level—everyone could sing along to “Baby, I'm an Anarchist”—but they went on to sell out immediately thereafter, leaving the experiment untried. Political punks are in a tight spot: we have to develop new aesthetics to maintain the vitality of our milieu, but every aesthetic, no matter how abrasive, that isn't explicitly confrontational and liberating is instantly co-opted and turned into commercial drivel.

Another word about aesthetics—as recording technology advances and certain punk bands get the most expensive recordings they can, the popular punk sound becomes less and less accessible to most bands. If the aesthetics we promote are exclusive and expensive, our scene will be correspondingly hierarchical. We would do well to promote a do-it-yourself sound (and for that matter, level of technical proficiency) that anyone can achieve, so as to benefit from the creativity of everyone, not just wealthy or popular or technically skilled musicians. The original punk boom following the Sex Pistols, and likewise the Riot Grrl explosion, were both revolts against established, expensive aesthetics that unleashed a torrent of new creativity and possibility. Tragedy's “Vengeance” record can only do the opposite, however impressive it sounds.

The internet does offer one opportunity that, to my knowledge, few bands have taken advantage of. As basic recording equipment is more available now than it has ever been before, and songs can