

The Emergence of Punk Rock in Rapid City

By Shawn Krush

It was unusually warm Saturday night in January of 1986. Dozens of teens and young adults lined the sidewalks of a Knight of Columbus Hall talking in small groups. They were clad in leather coats, long black trench coats, flannel shirts, and combat boots. Their hair was spiked, colored, shaved into Mohawks or any combination of the fore mentioned styles. From inside the building, came a hectic drum beat accompanied by screeching guitar, growling vocals, and a pounding bass line.

The same scene had become common in America's larger urban areas and liberal artistic cities such as Los Angeles, New York City, and Berkley, but this particular punk rock show was taking place in Rapid City, SD, which was neither large (about 45,000 pop.) nor liberal (politically or socially). Oddly, the punk rock scene in Rapid City would evolve into an incredibly tight knit community that was able to attract some of punk's most popular bands and garnished attention in nationwide fanzines.

Some might suggest that Rapid City's geographical location contributed to the number of bands that decided to play in such a small market. After all, the city is located nearly half way between Minneapolis and Denver. Conveniently, each city was a nearly a days drive from Rapid City (the speed limit at this time was 55), bands could stop in Rapid before moving onto the larger venues¹. While all of this true, other larger cities such as Lincoln and Omaha, Nebraska could have served the same purpose.

Other's might suggest that Rapid City's demographics made such a movement possible. As it was mentioned earlier, the city was not well suited for the growth of a punk rock movement. It was located in a conservative state near a large Air Force base. Both of which contradict the anti-Republican, anti-military stance of punks. It could be that this contradiction spurred the growth of the scene amongst the areas teens. Yet, if this were true, one might have expected to see successful movements in cities with similar characteristics such as Cheyenne, WY. This was not the case. Being a punk in Rapid City during the 1980's was not easy. Obtaining music was difficult, due to the fact that the franchise music stores such as Musicland and Sam Goodies did not carry alternative products. Punks were limited to a small selection of music in Budget Tapes and Records, a locally music store.

If its geographical location and demographics were not the only attributes that contributed to the growth and popularity of this Midwestern subculture, what other factors were in place?

A Definition of Punk Rock

Like other subcultures related to music, punk also embodied a lifestyle. The music is easy to define as it is incredibly simplistic. Most punk songs are structured around the same three guitar chords and flow to a 4/4/ time. Other than that punk songs are short (rarely longer than three minutes) and driven by an incredibly fast tempo.

The lifestyle on the other hand, is not so easily definable. Most punks reject the normal social values and see their appearance as a means to protest commercialized pop culture. Consequently, some punks dressed for shock value rather than comfort. These contrary ideologies are accompanied by aggressive anarchical attitudes.

The Origins of Punk Rock

Punk Rock has been around for more than thirty years, but most music historians cannot pinpoint its exact origins. Even the origin of the term "punk rock" is debated amongst music historians. A.S Van Dorston of *Fast and Bulbous* an online fanzine suggests that "The word "punk" first made an appearance in music journalism in a 1970 essay, "The Punk Muse: The True Story of Protopathic Spiff Including the Lowdown on the Trouble-Making Five-Percent of America's Youth" by Nick Tosches in *Fusion*"². While other historians argue that the term was coined by rock critic Dave Marsh, who used it to describe the music of ? and the Mysterians in the May 1971 issue of *Creem* magazine.

While this disagreement exists, one topic that historians rarely disagree upon is that the musical movement evolved in both the United States and Great Britain simultaneously during the mid-1970's.

The origins of punk rock in the United States can be traced to New York City and the club known as CBGB's. Bands like the Ramones, and Iggy Pop and the Stooges began to emerge in protest of commercialized music such as disco and arena rock. These bands remained true to the simplistic drum beats and guitar chords that were popular amongst the garage bands of the 1960's. Although the earliest punk bands lacked a large following in their early history, their style of music gained in popularity over time, and most of the New York bands such as the Ramones, Blondie, and the Talking Heads were eventually signed to major record labels.

Great Britains punk movement can actually be traced to an earlier form of music known as Ska. Ska was a mixture of traditional reggae rythms mixed with rock and

roll tempos and many of Britain's early punk bands such as the Clash adhered to this unique sound. Other British bands such as the Sex Pistols and the Damned based their sound upon American bands such as the Ramones, but added lyrics with anti-political and social references. In fact, British radio stations refused to play the Sex Pistol's song, *God Save the Queen*, due to the fact that it openly attacked the British monarchy.³ Just as the American bands had gained popularity, so did the British bands. By the end of the 1970's, both the Sex Pistols and the Clash had signed with major labels.

Perhaps it was their success that dismantled the early punk bands. By the early 1980's many music critics felt that the movement had died. But there was an exception, influences from Britain and New York had created a new form of punk rock in the California underground known as hardcore punk. In 1982, Maximum Rock and Roll released the album, *Not So quiet on the Western Front*. The album was a compilation that included the work of nearly 40 bands from California and Nevada.⁴ Hardcore punk relied upon the simplistic musical styles of the New York groups and the dissident lyrics of the British bands mixing the two styles with faster drum beats, heavier bass lines, and screaming vocals. While hardcore bands such as Black Flag and the Dead Kennedys never achieved the commercial success of New York and British bands, they created an organized self sustaining punk rock movement that would later diffuse into the Midwest and directly affect the evolution of Rapid City's scene.

The Rapid City Scene

While pinpointing the emergence of punk rock in Rapid City would be impossible, the one event that most locals agree marked the beginning of an organized scene was the Amy Metzger Benefit Show. The benefit was held in January of 1986 in response to a local teen's battle with leukemia. While only two bands (Dissent and Social Joke) played the show, hundreds of teens attended.⁵ The show's success identified the possibility of a large organized scene in the community, and local band members strived to make the most of this opportunity.

Dissent

Although several bands contributed to the success of Rapid City's scene, Dissent might have been the most influential. Dissent was first formed in 1985, after drummer Todd Smith, guitarist Bob Baker, vocalist Troy Zoller, and bassist April Froschieser, came together and began making music in an attic located at 1215 Mt Rushmore Road.

While Dissent would undergo several lineup changes (particularly at bass) over the next few years, they paved the way for similar bands.

Dissent based its form of music on California hardcore. Todd Smith's hard-driving tempos were often accompanied by socially and politically poignant lyrics written by Bob Baker and Troy Zoller. Dissent was a band with a message and they used their music as a means to spread it. In a note, that accompanied the lyric sheet to their first tape, *Last Goodbyes*, Baker shed some light on this message when he wrote,

“Dissent is the foundation of our very existence as a people. It is the very basis of our freedoms. Expression of dissent is the basis of change, the basis of the reactionary process, the basis of our individuality. Dissent will uncover the truth, threatening the false. It is seldom used to its full potential. Use your dissent. Be yourself, we can show the world that the minority is right. Start by getting involved in your life, in the community, in our government. Educate yourself on how we can use our freedoms. How we can use our dissent. This tape is a reaction to the world we live in.”⁶

Lyrical Baker and Zoller focused their attention on combating teen apathy and social conformity. In songs such as *Conformity Their Way* and *You Choose*, they urged teens to break free of the traditional social norms that had been implanted by the mass media and preached individuality and conscientious choice. Other songs such as *Abe Lincoln* and *MX Missile* introduced local citizens to new views concerning social injustices and the ongoing build-up of nuclear arms during the cold war. When asked in a 1988 interview with MoshPit Records what it was that Dissent tried to express in their lyrics, Todd Smith answered, “we consider ourselves individuals and try to be aware of how we interact with everything, from how we interact with other people to what the government is doing. A lot of songs have to do with social awareness and social behavior. It all comes back to the old saying that if you want to change anything, you have to start with yourself.”⁷

This statement pretty much defined Dissent's attitude toward nearly everything. They were an almost totally self-reliant band. The members did everything from creating their artwork for flyers, stickers, and t-shirts to recording, producing, and distributing their own music.⁸ In fact in 1988, the band was able to create Amity Records not only to record and produce their own music but the music of other local

bands as well. As they did so, their hard work began to pay off with recognition from national fanzines such as Maximum Rock and Roll as well as a letter from Dead Kennedy front man, Jello Biafra.⁹

Not only did the members of Dissent promote their own music and agenda, but they also promoted shows for local and out of town bands. Attracting bands for shows was not very difficult. As mentioned earlier, the area's geographic position helped, but the treatment of touring bands by promoters such as Bob Baker and Todd Smith was probably the biggest selling point. Bob Baker pointed out this fact in the interview with Moshpit Records when he suggested that, "we guarantee bands a certain amount of money and we always pay that, no matter what, even if we lost money on the show and have to pay the band out of our own pockets".¹⁰ As word spread of the South Dakota scene and the decent treatment of acts, some very popular bands began to play in Rapid City including Social Distortion, DOA, and the Descendents.

While attracting nationally known talent was no problem for Rapid City's promoters, finding a venue in which that talent could perform was no simple task. Early venues such as the Knights of Columbus Hall and the Mother Butler Center closed their doors to punk rock shows due to vandalism and noise complaints. Often the vandalism could be something as simple as scuff marks on a tile floor due to combat boots and slam dancing. Managers of smaller private venues were apprehensive because they believed someone could be hurt slam dancing.¹¹ As a result, the places where shows could be held were very limited. In an attempt to remedy the problem, the member of Dissent decided to create their own venue.

In December of 1986, the band's members and other local punks pooled their money and rented an abandoned dance hall on La Crosse Street. After cleaning the place out and applying a new coat of paint, they opened Shmeglies. While it was impossible for the members to sign musical acts for every weekend, Shmeglies provided local punks with a place to hang out. After a couple of months and several shows, the venue began to attract the attention of local police. Arrests and citations forced the doors to be closed, and promoters once again had to search out new venues.¹²

Finally, the members of Dissent and other local bands opened their houses to the scene. These houses were often named after the street on which they were located and like Schmeglies provided punks with a warm place to congregate. Overtime, most of the people in the scene knew each other very well and used these impromptu meetings to consolidate their views and efforts. Consequently, the

scene lacked cliques such as the Skinheads that plagued larger scenes and violence at shows was almost nonexistent.

KTEQ

While bands like Dissent were the backbone of the Rapid City scene, other support was provided by a local college radio station known as KTEQ. KTEQ was created in 1971, through the efforts of South Dakota School of Mines Students, Jim McGibney and Greg Carrey.¹³ McGibney head of the Student Association put in much of the work such as approaching the administration for a loan to build a studio and antennae as well as submitting countless applications to the FCC for a broadcast license. As a result of McGibney and Carey's efforts, KTEQ broadcast its first show on August 7, 1971.¹⁴ The choice to air "Also Sprach Zarathustra" rather than the Star Spangled Banner made it apparent that KTEQ was not going to be a traditionally formatted station.

The station was funded by the School of Mines Student Association and through fundraising efforts such as on-air auctions, concerts, and donations from local corporations. By 1981, it was estimated that funding totaled nearly \$15, 000 in a good year.¹⁵ This was then distributed to obtain and maintain studio equipment, collect music for the library, and pay station managers and engineers.

KTEQ studio's were originally located in the Surbeck Center but found a new home in the old gym building during the summer of 1980. The studio consisted of two rooms, the broadcast room and small room that contained the station's music library. While the studio was located on campus, the antenna was located on Skyline Drive. Originally, the antenna was only a 10 watt transmitter, and the station was not able to reach the entire city including the School of Mines' dormitories.¹⁶ In 1982, the transmitter was increased to 750 watts, and KTEQ could be heard throughout the city and surrounding area.

The station was primarily manned by students that were willing to cover the three hour time segments each week, but as the station increased its broadcast time to 24 hours, local community members were also given the opportunity to obtain time slots. There were no prerequisites to being a DJ on KTEQ radio, you simply had to promise not to play TOP 40 music. 1981 programming director, Rod Nelson mentioned KTEQ's alternative stance in Black Hills Monthly Magazine, when he noted that, "We introduce new albums, play new music. If we think an album is being overplayed, we pull it."¹⁷ Consequently, the station played an eclectic variety of music ranging from blues grass to hard rock, and by the mid-1980's, hardcore punk entered that spectrum as well.

The first KTEQ show that was completely indebted to playing nothing but hardcore punk was the Mr.X which aired on Saturday nights from 3:00A.M to 6:00 A.M.. This particular time slot allowed DJ Mike Miquel to air nearly anything he wanted to without offending anybody. Although the time slot was incredibly inconvenient, The Mr. X show became popular with listeners and other punk shows began to air in prime time slots such as Troy Zoller's Friday afternoon show and the Sounds of Defiance show which aired on Saturdays from 3:00-6:00 P.M..¹⁸

The only instructions given to KTEQ's DJs during the mid 1980's were related to running the equipment. Otherwise the DJ's were pretty much allowed to determine what material was appropriate. As more and more punk shows began to air, lyrical profanity became a problem. As a result, South Dakota School of Mines Administration pulled KTEQ from the air in the summer of 1986. After a long series of compromises between the administration and campus management, it was agreed that KTEQ would be allowed to return to broadcasting if the DJs cleaned up their acts. Rather than limiting the DJ's play lists, station managers decided to place warnings on albums that contained profanity and urged the DJ's to censor the songs as they played. The controversy subsided and KTEQ continued to air punk rock for another 10 years.¹⁹

Besides introducing its listeners to punk music, KTEQ also played a hand in booking some of the most popular bands. The station used its influence with alternative record labels and other college stations to attract these bands. On November 11th, 1986 KTEQ successfully promoted the Dead Milkmen show as benefit to raise money for the station. The show was incredibly successful not in the fact that made large amounts of money or attracted a somewhat sizeable crowd, but rather that it garnished the attention of other nationally known bands as well as the local media. A review of the show in next mornings Rapid City Journal introduced the local population to a brief view of the subculture in a somewhat positive light.²⁰

Conclusion

Together, the local bands such as Dissent and KTEQ were able to create a punk community that thrived rather than collapsed. In the end these two factors and the efforts of other individuals allowed a unique subculture to thrive in what had been a somewhat stale cultural landscape.

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