The nature of community in the Newfoundland rock underground.

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Abstract.

Twenty-five years of independent, underground, or punk rock music-making in St. John's, Newfoundland, have been defined by geographic isolation. In tracing a historical record of the small city's punk/indie scene, this project seeks to evaluate recent academic discussion surrounding the role of collectivity in artistic 'independence' and examine the impact of prevailing international aesthetics and changing communication technologies on local practice. The self-containment and self-sufficiency of the St. John's music community, largely the product of the city's isolated position on the extreme eastern tip of a large island off the east coast of North America, provide a unique backdrop against which to foreground a discussion of the distance between indie/punk rhetoric and reality. I contend that 'scene' in popular and academic use refers to the casual aggregation occasioned by similar interest and shared location, while 'community' hints at effort, co-operation and productive support.

Abstract.

L'isolement géographique de St John's, Terre-Neuve, caractérise sa production musicale indépendante (dite « indie »), underground ou punk-rock des vingt-cinq dernières années. En traçant l'historique de la scène punk/indie de cette petite ville, ce projet cherche à évaluer le débat académique actuel sur le rôle que joue la collectivité dans « l'indéépendance » artistique. L'étude vise également à examiner l'effet sur la pratique locale que produisent l'esthétique internationale répandue et les technologies de communication changeantes. L'isolationnisme et l'autosuffisance de la communauté musicale de St-John's, résultant en grande partie de la position isolée de cette ville située à l'extrémité est d'une grande île au large de la côte est de l'Amérique du Nord, offrent une toile de fond unique pour illustrer l'écart entre la rhétorique de la musique indie/punk et la réalité. Je prétends que l'usage populaire et académique du terme « scène » renvoie à la camaraderie entre les acteurs d'un même milieu qui ont des intérêts similaires et qui partagent le terrain de St. John's, alors que l'usage de « communautéé » fait allusion à l'effort commun, à la coopération et à l'appui de tous dans la production musicale.

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Introduction

We waste our lives living at the fag end of the empire, where the radio's broken and it's raining half the time.

"Fag end of the empire," JKW.

The tourism tagline the municipality of St. John's has been using for the past half a dozen years or so is "city of legends." You can see it on the 'welcome to...' plywood sign on the hill that climbs steadily out of Donovan's Industrial Park, past the careful suburban development in Paradise and onto the commercial rush of Kenmount Rd. (which my commuter father wearily but grandiosely refers to as "the Kenmount"). Presumably the committee that came up with the phrase - or the ad agency contracted by the committee to come up with it - had history, adventure, pioneering, and fishing in mind. There is a painting of a multiple-masted sailing ship above the slogan on the sign.

There have been plenty of legendary figures and moments in the five centuries during which there has been a European presence in St. John's: you have Cabot's crew casually tossing a bucket into a North Atlantic teeming with cod fish and hauling in a wriggling harbinger of the raison d'etre of a colony; you find the French and the English trading raids on the harbour and its backdoor, Quidi Vidi gut, burning the meagrely developed outpost a few times each; we've met pirates, sealers, crooked governors, railroad shysters, and Canadians. There are legendary buildings, legendarily rustic inhabitants, legendary bars and legendarily drunk patrons; there are those folk songs, that accent, the friendly goodwill, and the weather.

I like the legend metaphor because of the largess it lends to things which often seem banal, and for the way it implies inherent exaggeration, if not a certain amount of fabrication. It

seems a little desperate to call yourself legendary. I also like the way legend is loaded with doubt; St. John's styles itself a ghost story, an Atlantis, a Shangri-la. It is almost as if the place is unsure of its own existence, clinging to a slippery rock, shrouded in fog, way the hell out on the extreme edge of the continent.

That's another of the town's tags: 'the easternmost city in North America.' St. John's is almost nine hundred kilometres from Halifax, the nearest city of any comparable size, which is in turn almost eight hundred kilometres from Montreal. Toronto is only two-thirds closer than Ireland from Signal Hill (the enormous granite rock cliff overlooking St. John's harbour). The drive to the Nova Scotia ferry at Port-aux-Basques is twelve hours, and that ferry ride is an extra five (imagine the horror of the touring band who has neglected to carefully look at a map of the island). The east coast of Newfoundland isn't close to anything. At all. It is an end-point, the kind of place that it was illegal to settle in for a century, the kind of place where fashion is half-a-decade late and openly derided when it finally arrives. St. John's is 'the oldest city in North America,' and it is still cursed with many of the same social problems and backward ideas that must have been creeping around seventeenth century ale houses.

Legendary, isolated, old St. John's: intellectual and economic center of Newfoundland, recent oil boomtown, and self-contained punk rock capitol of this project. Unwitting test site for ill-fittingly urbane ideas concerning cultural undergrounds and the points at which they make themselves manifest. Home to a diverse but obscure collection of musicians and fans committed to DIY as often by necessity as by choice. Fag end of the empire. Where the radio's broken and it's raining half the time.

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This thesis aims to do two things: test academic discussion surrounding scenes, especially those related to cultural production and consumption, and trace the narrative of the punk/independent rock underground in St. John's, Newfoundland. Obviously, the latter is meant to illustrate the former. Although 'scene' has come into recent academic vogue as a handy way to refer to a grab-bag of collectivities, I think the term often alludes to the most frustratingly superficial properties of the communal underground, and the discussion surrounding it has been unnecessarily tangled with that of the metropolitan city. The example of the wax and wane of the scene in the decidedly non-metropolitan St. John's points to the term's tendency toward the fickle, the fashionable, and the politically impotent. My basic argument is that in a relatively small, local context, community is ideal where scene is practice.

Formally, the project consisted of interviews with musicians, promoters, fans, and scenesters in and around St. John's, as well as a survey of recordings, zines, newspaper articles and internet forums. The findings of the research are presented in three sections: methods/methodology, theory/literature review, and narrative history of the rock underground in St. John's.

Chapter 1: Methods and methodology.

Perhaps one is chosen by a methodology rather than the other way around. In exploring the nuances of something as ephemeral as a 'scene,' the battle for concretization had to be fought on many challenging fronts: how could an act of theoretical investigation be a cultural history at the same time? How could that history be assembled? What would get left out? Would it be fair to leave anything out? How could the report be anything but purely subjective? How could a collection of dusty zines, stretched-thin cassettes, bad snapshots, and clumsy anecdotes form the base of serious academic inquiry?

Too many questions, rarely enough answers. This large-sized account of my adventures in punk rock methodology will attempt to describe the collection of ethnographic techniques I used to conjure life out of artifact and memory. It will also delineate the more philosophical questions that should haunt every researcher, the questions of authority and politics. I will use this section of the thesis to exorcise the creeping demons which have kept me from writing a straight cultural history. I think it is important to acknowledge that these demons have pushed me in a bent direction that more closely resembles the subject I am studying. Form and content must be appropriately matched, even in a rigidly structured academic setting; when studying the willfully obscure and vaguely politically resistant, one must devise documentary tactics which honour a certain kind of obscurity and offer a mouthpiece for a certain kind of resistance.

Methods.

The bulk of the original research conducted for this project consisted of personal interviews (both face-to-face and online), consultation with the fragments of documentation surrounding the music underground in Newfoundland (zines, newspaper articles, recordings), and a participatory monitoring of the electronic forums devoted to the scene. Each technique was loaded with complexity. I had to learn to control my regular habits and push them toward an academic end. Each method was a skill that had to be learned on the job.

In Search of an Indie Rock Interview Practice...

In her article "Two Feminists in Search of an Interview Practice," Leslie Rebecca Bloom details her experience with ideological methodology. She offers a list of "propositions" about feminist interviewing, and carefully defines ideal interview circumstances. My own interview practice was an admittedly haphazard affair, limited by time, money, availability, and weather. I did not carefully craft a similar set of guidelines, but I did enter each interview with a clear purpose and a shrewd sense of what I wanted to avoid and what I wanted to accomplish.

Interview subjects were chosen based on their ability to provide information I could not find anywhere else. The even distribution of subjects according to age, gender, and niche-representation was approximate at best and random at worst. I almost exclusively interviewed musicians who were keenly interested in the arts or music community at large in some way. I figured that the most thoughtful responses would come from scene-builders: I chose Dan Murray

(the youngest interviewee) to represent the latest generation of scene enthusiasts because of the diversity of his participation - Dan sings in the hardcore band Get Stabbed, publishes personal zines, runs an online concert announcement database, and organizes all-ages shows; I chose Mike O'Brien and Wallace Hammond (the two eldest interviewees) because they are two of the most outspoken, experienced, active and available members of the city's first punk generation.

All but one of my interviews were with musicians. I decided to focus on music-makers because I was most interested in the atmosphere of community that forms around cultural producers. Artists in a city the size of St. John's are frequently the best audience for one another; in a willfully obscure music underground, artists are frequently the only audience for one another. I felt that the voices of the musicians would be the clearest and most passionate.

Conducting interviews with often-eccentric artist subjects was at once a source of delight and serious frustration. Interviewees came from diverse educational backgrounds, and had varying stakes in the enterprise: some were keen to mark their place in the scene's history, others were keen to promote recent projects, and almost all of them were flattered to be asked to share their experiences for what may or may not be some sort of 'official' record. The bulk of the in-person interviews were conducted in a three-week span over the Christmas holidays of 2002-2003. Appointments were hastily made, and meetings took place wherever a mutually convenient location could be found. Each location coloured the atmosphere and, inevitably, the content of each interview. The characters evoked by specific surroundings added significantly to the stories that were being told: Phil Winters' Bung tour anecdotes were perfectly offset by the dark, grimy confines of the lighting booth at the province's biggest theatre (the Arts and Culture Centre); Cherie Pyne's more intimate reflections were enhanced by the tea we drank around her

kitchen table; Mike O'Brien's authority was reinforced in his crowded, history professor's office.

One of the challenges of interviewing more experienced and media-savvy subjects involved 'interview autopilot.' I was pleasantly surprised at how unguarded each participant seemed, even after signing a release (all interviewees agreed to full disclosure, even when given the express, reinforced option to remain anonymous) and in the presence of a slightly-ominous-looking black handheld microcassette recorder. Some subjects, of course, were quick to fall into soundbite-esque patter. I became much more adept at steering interviews without 'leading' them as the weeks went on. In transcribing the tapes, I could hear my voice grow more confident, probing, and incisive according to chronological progress. All of the subjects seemed responsive when I pressed them to transcend their contrived media-wall.

Cultural Ephemera.

I feel that my attention to the cultural ephemera of the scene was the least developed of my ethnographic approaches. Physical documentation of obscure independent music is almost always scant, largely limited to a handful of press clippings and fanzines articles, fading photographs, and poorly dubbed cassette demos. When possible, interview subjects allowed me access to their personal collections of gig flyers and set-lists, but my consultation with much of this material was limited by time and respect for the protective urges of the participants. The bulk of the physical material consulted comes from my own collection of artifacts. This collection is representative of only the past 7 to 8 years of the scene's lifespan. Most of the zines from the 80s are lost to time, and much of the writing from the early 90s is a casualty of my

inability to properly secure access to it.

The discernible lack of documentation was one of the chief motivators for this study. It is obvious why cities like Washington D.C. and Seattle have entire tomes devoted to their respective underground rock scenes, and it is obvious why Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, and even Halifax warrant entire chapters in Barclay, Jack, and Schneider's *Have Not Been the Same: the CanRock Renaissance*: the music birthed in these centres managed to worm its way out of the cultural ghetto of regionality. In the case of Seattle, the music industry was forever dented by the fleury of interest in early-nineties alternative rock. In the case of D.C., a small group of fiercely loyal devotees have chosen to create their own socio-political mythos, and a large group of musicians all over the world have agreed to help them perpetuate and lionize this mythos. In the case of the Canadian cities, the music press and recent cultural historians have paid attention to the country's largest centres as a reasonable extension of urban pop cultural bias. I cannot, however, find fault with the mandate of Barclay, et al. (although my tone may suggest otherwise); music from small, isolated areas has (and will presumably always have) little impact on the national cultural radar.

21st Century Cultural Ephemera: the web.

Music scenes have become increasingly self-conscious with the proliferation of new media technologies. Web-based messageboards, email listservs, e-zines, and personal homepages have radically altered the way independent music scenes interact. Documenting this change has become another of the key challenges of my research. Locating and accessing long-

forgotten tapes and leaflets is one problem; keeping track of the never-ending daily flow of digital conversation is quite another. If I seem quick to bemoan the lack of physical, written scene documentation, let me make it clear that I am at least as aggrieved by the overwhelming flood of casual internet correspondence that defines pop cultural fandom in the early 21st century.

The obvious benefit of web sources is their instant, widespread accessibility. The story of punk rock's birth in Newfoundland posted by Wallace Hammond on the small, poorly-designed Da Slyme website has been an invaluable starting point for early-scene research. Likewise, the Gamberg email discussion group has been a firm tie to the city for me during my physical absence (so much so that I often notify friends at home about shows, not the other way around). The recent rite of passage for independent musicians, the posting of mp3s on band websites, has kept me current with the city's music. Without the web, I would not be able to justify the decision to study Newfoundland at a mainland institution.

The problems with appealing to the internet for scholarly research are as significant as the trans-geographic benefits. While e-zines and band websites can easily be treated like traditional printed zines or press kits, electronic forums suffer the carelessness that has come to characterize electronic communication. The two key contemporary forums I relied on, the Gamberg listserv and the 709hardcore messageboard, are typical of their genre. The email discussion group is a churning, daily, computerized collection of letters-to-the-editor: people generally rely on the (admittedly very loose) conventions of the friendly email, participants often commit to receiving individual messages at private addresses, and orderly archives can be easily accessed. The web-based message-board churns more rapidly and less eloquently, more a computerized collection of toilet stall graffiti: posts are generally short and quite blunt, get dispatched from often-anonymous

parties, and vanish after a few days of visibility.

The welcome democracy of scene web forums is limited by access to technology, and marred by bickering and static. Many of the community's most prominent participants lack the savvy, interest or resources to enter the dialogue, or are turned off by its capricious tenor. The inclusiveness the web affords - especially in the case of a scene conducted in one corner of one town where the added reach cannot be overstated - creates a different exclusiveness, based on technological availability and finances. While personal computers are essentially ubiquitous in homes and libraries, scene conduct online is still the turf of those with the resources and the time to use them. These limits are often reflected in the nature of online dialogue: the discourse - and its relative usefulness - is duly affected by the nature of the participants.

Methodology.

Myths and myth-making: secret history, narrative and subjectivity.

I guess I would have to say that myth-making is good, especially if the myths get really exaggerated. It's inspiring to hear about meteoric rises and falls. Why shouldn't St. John's have its own rock mythos? (Schwartz, email interview)

The greatest ethical-methodological dilemma in this project came from concerns about my personal relationship to St. John's and its scene. While the participant observer is a familiar personality from the qualitative research tradition, it is still a thorny business separating assumption and affinity from finding and feeling. It should be very clear that I grew interested in the history of the St. John's rock underground because I played a part in its recent incarnation. The years I lived in St. John's were filled with shows attended, shows performed, college radio programs hosted, on-air interviews conducted, recordings purchased, recordings distributed, flyers designed, flyers pasted, beers consumed, friends made, rivalries fostered, and formative memories wound taut and resonant as guitar strings. I was a scenester (or a "scene junkie," as one interviewee kindly put it [Bragg interview]). I was a musician, fan, and pundit. I was one inheritor among many of a tradition begun twenty-five years earlier by a group of geeky prog fans at Memorial University. How could my exploration of scene history be anything remotely resembling an objective account?

It could not be.

It is not. To wit, Roland Barthes:

> What I mean is that I cannot countenance the traditional belief which postulates a natural dichotomy between the objectivity of the scientist and the subjectivity of the writer, as if the former were endowed with a 'freedom' and the latter with a 'vocation' equally suitable for spiriting away or sublimating the actual limitations of their situation. (12)

My account is neither a chronicle of historical fact nor a biased fantasy. It is a blend of the two,

the way any honest quantitative research in the humanities is a kind of rigorous fiction. The 'actual limitations' of my situation are relatively clear, and I think it is important to delineate the decisions I made which most betray my subjectivity.

The most precious distinction concerns musical genre and style. When I use terms like punk, underground, or independent rock I refer mainly to an operational ethos, but it is naive to pretend that subscribers to that ethos are not linked by similar stylistic influences and instrumentation. In St. John's, artists of varying genres are forced together by the necessity of shared space, so I actively chose to focus on those whose musical style was identifiably a certain kind of 'punk' or 'rock' or 'indie.' This means that politically charged jam band the Discounts, for example, who share the stage with many of the contemporary artists I examine, are virtually absent in this account. The level of independence required for the rock to count as 'independent' is not always strictly consistent, nor is inclusion or exclusion by this criteria: Thomas Trio and the Red Albino, one of the most popular Newfoundland bands from the late 80s and early 90s, are skipped because of their AM radio popularity, national university-circuit touring and trip to the Buddokan (courtesy of a commercial songwriting competition); while Hardship Post, with their video play, critical attention, and commercial manager still figure heavily.

The early years of the city's punk scene receive the closest scrutiny because they established a rough pattern of development which still repeats and because they are most in danger of being abandoned to history. The impetus to record the narrative of punk's development in Newfoundland while memory is still relatively fresh and the original players are still involved drove the whole project, as did the urge to celebrate the work of a group of people who have been (mostly) content with local success. Subsequent eras are more interesting for specific developments: the mid-80s for stylistic diffusion and the roots of the city's 'sound'; the early nineties for the boom in audience and media attention; and the turn of the century for the prominent rise of the scene's internet culture. Certain groups seemed to me most emblematic or

suggested specifically interesting individual cases; certain stories rose out of interviews and begged to be told.

The problem with a project like this is the near-impossibility of a satisfactorily comprehensive account. There are probably dozens of worthy examples of struggling musicians working in the indie/punk vein in the city who happen to be invisible to me because of a tape stolen from the CHMR library or a name forgotten in an interview. This is my slightly defensive disclaimer: unable to include everything, I had to pick and choose which examples best served the project or seemed to best represent a corner or era of the scene. Exclusion is, after all, one of the basic tenets of scenehood.

Apologies made, I return to the quote from Alex Schwartz which serves as this section's epigraph: why not make some myths of our own? I see my project as the Newfoundland-extension of Greil Marcus' *Lipstick Traces*, wherein the nihilistic underside of the past few centuries of western culture are linked in a "secret history." Reading reports of a recent This Day Forth reunion show in St. John's on the hardcore messageboard, I find a group onstage preaching nostalgia for the late 90s and wonder if efforts to connect a moment like this to punk's genesis in the city is wise. Marcus says:

> This story, if it is a story, doesn't tell itself; once I'd glimpsed its outlines, I wanted to shape the story so that every fragment, every voice, would speak in judgment of every other, even if the people behind each voice had never heard of the others. (23)

Perhaps this privileges hindsight too much (it almost certainly privileges the 'fragment-shaper' too much), but I think that even if "the entanglement of now and then is fundamentally a mystery" (23), fashioning a narrative out of cultural fragments is not only reasonable, but beneficial. While I do not think I have accepted Schwartz's dare to inflate and exaggerate as much as possible, I think this thesis is a myth-making project. Scenes are entities that thrive on the abstract perception that 'myth' represents to me, and communities necessarily entrust their faith in progress and action to certain elusive definitions of self. Barthes says that the left-leaning

myth ducks the title because of its self-awareness:

> There remains about it something stiff and literal, a suggestion of something done to order...this essential barrenness produces rare, threadbare myths: either transient, or clumsily indiscreet; by their very being, they label themselves as myths, and point to their masks. (148)

The myth of the St. John's rock underground I seek to capture here is certainly both clumsy and indiscreet. Lacking the "major faculty" of "fabulizing" (148), it perhaps fails to be a myth under either Schwartz's or Barthes' definitions. My "secret history" may not capture the violence or nihilism of Marcus' tale, but it does expose the links between historically separated denizens of a small city's modest cultural underbelly.

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When explaining my project to interviewees, correspondents, and friends, I inevitably began referring to the process of 'constructing a historical narrative,' or 'tracing a narrative,' or 'telling an untold story.' The story I managed to cobble together tumbled from the mouths and fingers of its characters in songs, in writings, and in interviews, and it draws most of its colourful detail from a variety of subjective first-hand accounts. The narrative framework hosts an array of conflicting points of view, and it makes for compelling commentary on the ephemeral nature of scene memory. I think this is a good story: these are rich characters defined by a colourful setting. I hope my methods have afforded me the opportunity to render it with at least a measure of punk rock propriety.

My servitude to all things literary betrays itself fairly gracelessly, but I believe this outmoded faith in storytelling has guided the project to a readable, honest place. Mr. Schwartz: the ascents and plummets may not streak with the heat, light, and speed of meteors, and the figures are generally life-sized as opposed to larger-than, but I have recorded for you a rock mythos of St. John's. I bet someone will find at least a little bit of inspiration in here.

Chapter Two: Literature Review/Theoretical Frame.

"Too bad the scene is dead."
"Chapel Hill," Sonic Youth.

The first definition in my pocket *OED* for scene is a "place in which events, real or fictional, occur." My casual and academic use of the term is rooted in this suggestion of physical or figurative location: scenes are where things transpire, stations giving-rise-to or rising-out-of action. They are containers, banners, and stages.

Skipping ahead, the seventh definition in the little dictionary alludes to the specific sense in which the term operates in my work. This use is deemed "colloquial" (a telling reflection of academia's grapple with vernacular) and it signifies an "area of interest" or "milieu." Scenes are sets, specialties, and clubs. They both enable and refer to enabled interaction. The term alludes to the space for and result of production.

Music scenes are a swarm of activity, and they are very clearly both the spaces where music and performance emerge and the substance of the music and performances that inhabit these spaces. A scene is the process, the product, and the factory floor; the fact that it also makes essential the chattering gossip of the factory workers, the cut of their uniforms, their stolen glances over bagged-lunches, their anti-managerial toilet stall graffiti, and the joyful amateur choreography of their quitting-time dance is what renders the concept metaphysically unique.

Scene is a distinctly social phenomenon, a site of rich and varied communication. The term's inherent ambiguity creates a frustratingly diverse pattern of use: there may be as many precise conceptions of scenehood as there are scenes. My use of 'scene' refers to the (relatively) recent heritage of scholarly attention to groups of artists and audiences. It is useful to examine the way collectivity has been framed differently in the recent past, and how vernacular speech and academic thought have pushed against and pulled upon one another.

Subculture and scene.

'Subculture' is the terminological forbearer whose genes my version of scene most closely resemble and whose lessons have been the most instructively ideological. The notion of subculture, inspired by the emergence of punk, was explored earliest by Dick Hebdige and the Birmingham school of sociologists in the 1970s. In *Subculture: the Meaning of Style*, Hebdige seeks "the meanings embedded in the various post-war youth styles" (3), and suggests that the term is "loaded down with mystery...secrecy, masonic oaths, an Underworld" (4). 'Subculture' suggests resistance against hegemony, and mobilizes an ideological weight which seems idealistically overstated at best and quaintly dated at worst. Writing from a moment when the politically charged atmosphere of punk fuelled and was fuelled by British social unrest, Hebdige's firm assertions seem facile now:

> Subcultures represent 'noise' (as opposed to sound): interference in the orderly sequence which leads from real events and phenomena to their representation in the media. We should therefore not underestimate the signifying power of the spectacular subculture not only as a metaphor for potential anarchy 'out there' but as an actual mechanism of semantic disorder: a kind of temporary blockage in the system of representation. (90)

Spectacular subculture has proven itself less well suited to the mechanics of disorder than it is to metaphor, and while it is true that "violations of the authorized codes through which the social world is organized and experienced have considerable power to provoke and disturb" (92), the provocation and disturbance is mild and generally limited to sensibility. Hebdige notes the ease with which capitalist hegemony absorbs and reconfigures transgressive subcultural stylistic innovation:

> It is through this continual process of recuperation that the fractured order is repaired and the subculture incorporated as a diverting spectacle within the dominant *mythology* [my emphasis] from which it in part emanates: as 'folk devil,' as Other, as Enemy. (94)

The overestimation of the transformative power of sensibility is what plagues Hebdige's analysis, just as the elimination of ideological concerns threatens the urgency of scene and its advocates.

The preoccupation with 'style' in Hebdige's work shows traces of the similar preoccupation with visuality and signification in formal examinations of scene.

Scenes can be moments or sites in subcultures; there are subcultural scenes (like the one I am examining), and there are scenic subcultures. The difference between the terms rests in circumstantial use and the assignment of political potential. Subculture seems to imply scope, force, and momentum: it is a bold, certain classification. A scene is a much more modest and, perhaps, less fraught affair.

Art world vs. scene.

The communal nature of artistic production received an exhaustive examination in Howard Becker's *Art Worlds*. While Becker's work primarily uses examples from the fine arts and literature, his basic declaration of co-operative purpose transposes easily to an analysis of pop form and invokes a less combative spirit than the one espoused by Hebdige's subculture. Becker's definition of his title subject essentially echoes the punk rock ideal of community:

> All artistic work, like all human activity, involves the joint activity of a number, often a large number, of people. Through their cooperation, the art work we eventually see or hear comes to be and continues to be. The work always shows signs of that cooperation. The forms of cooperation may be ephemeral, but often become more or less routine, producing patterns of collective activity we can call an art world. (Becker, p. 1)

Art worlds, like scenes, are interactive spaces wherein producers, distributors, and audience members engage. Becker constructs a simple diagram of artistic practice defined by interdependency, offering especially prescient insight regarding institutional exclusion and change. The individualistic rush to greatness and (or perhaps through) renown is subject to mild critique, and Becker's words endorse the comparatively modest goals of communities or artisans aligned with (or perhaps resigned to) the satisfaction of marginal or local 'success':

> If the arts were organized differently - less professional, less star-oriented, less centralized - [that] support might be available. The problems arise when thousands of students hope to become Broadway stars, premier ballerinas in a major company, or winners of the Nobel Prize in literature. But the arts might be, and have at times been, organized so that these were not the available or reasonable goals to aim at. (Becker, 52)

A reorganized, independent milieu is not only a "reasonable goal" - Becker's "maverick" artists often effect the essential structural change that makes way for new definitions of accomplishment:

> Artists produce what the distribution system can and will carry. It is not that nothing else can be produced. Other artists, willing to forego the possibilities of support and exposure characteristic of a particular art world, do produce other kinds of work. But the system will ordinarily not distribute those works, and such artists will be failures, unknowns, or the nuclei of new art worlds that grow up around what the more conventional system does not handle. The development of new art worlds frequently focuses on the creation of new organizations and methods for distributing work. (Becker, 129)

Reading Becker's ruminations on outsider art as a parable for the network of independent rock is convenient but perhaps slightly facile; to call punk rock scenes "new art worlds" is especially generous, as artist/label/performance tropes essentially mirror the standard practices of the music industry. *Art Worlds*' contribution to the discussion is a broad, basic framework for understanding the history of artistic collectivity.

Community vs. scene.

In Will Straw's 1991 article "Systems of Articulation, Logics of Change: Communities and Scene in Popular Music" we find an early direct engagement with scene, and a clear delineation of the differences between the term and a more general notion of 'community':

> The latter presumes a population group whose composition is relatively stable - according to a wide range of sociological variables - and whose involvement in music takes the form of an ongoing exploration of one or more musical idioms said to be rooted within a geographically specific historical heritage. A musical scene, in contrast, is that cultural space in which a range of musical practices coexist, interacting with each other within a variety of processes of differentiation, and according to widely varying trajectories of change and cross-fertilization. (373)

To grossly oversimplify: history's collection of independent rock musicians in St. John's denotes a firm, steady community, while the broad phenomenon of indie or punk rock and instances of community manifestation might qualify as scenes. Community is local; scene may be both local and translocal. Straw acknowledges the trouble with polarizing terms which depend upon and inhabit one another:

> Clearly, the point is not that of designating particular cultural spaces as one or the other, but of examining the ways in which particular musical practices 'work' to produce a sense of community within the conditions of metropolitan music scenes. (373)

The phrase 'sense of community' seems like a key part of the discussion, and the notion that scene harbours co-operation or productivity only when certain practices do some 'work' speaks to a difference between purposeful unity and the happenstance of adjacency.

Straw notes the "paradoxical status of localism" here: the structures of scenic instances of community, "the small-scale infrastructures of production and dissemination," have been the backbone of 'alternative rock' for decades, but they seem to merely reproduce a "musical cosmopolitanism" which is "likely to remain stable from one community to another" (378). The

celebration of the 'local,' of community, creates a strange barrier to stylistic innovation or serious individual musical identity:

> Each local space has evolved, to varying degrees, the range of musical vernaculars emergent within others, and the global culture of alternative rock music is one in which localism has been reproduced, in relatively uniform ways, on a continental and international level. (378)

I read the "circuit" as the network of rock nodes that emerged most recognizably and most durably in the United States during the 1980s, and I am inclined to agree that "local cicrumstances" as a "feature commonly invoked in claims as to the political significance" of scenes may be more appropriately conceived as a semi-autonomous unit within a connected whole. For me, the 'political significance' of the scene (or these scenes) may be found in the luminous sum of bright, blinking points rather than the bulbs themselves. Straw's analysis succinctly identifies the translocal nature of locality, and captures the ambiguous role of connection, concluding:

> The substance of these values is less important than are the alliances produced by their circulation within musical culture. One need neither embrace the creation of such alliances as a force for social harmony or condemn them as politically distracting to recognize their primacy in the ongoing politics of popular music culture. (385)

My preference for the creation of productive alliances points to my dissatisfaction with the vaguer properties of the scene. The idealistic myth of punk rock to which I subscribe elevates "the substance of these values" to the same level as the "alliances produced by their circulation." The difference between scene and community may be found in the relativity of this imbalance.

Blum: Parsing the 'grammar' of scene.

Alan Blum's recent article in the "Cities/Scenes" issue of the journal *Public* is the most direct academic examination of scene as discrete phenomenon. He states that "there has been no attempt to theorize the scene as a social formation" (7), and asks if "we should try to recover some disciplined sense of the interpretive exchanges between the scene and collective life" (8). Attempting to "rebuild parameters" (10) from the "vernacular usage" of the term (which, apparently, "always seems weighted with specific and local meaning that grounds its very intimate appeal and seductiveness for those under its spell" [9]), Blum formulates a 6-point 'grammar' of scene which warrants thorough scrutiny. How appropriate a metaphor is 'grammar' in this instance? The characteristics outlined by Blum run into, through and around one another, and resemble less a structural guideline than they do a series of vaguely suggestive demarcations. Perhaps the reference to language is meant to draw parallels between the unpredictability, dynamism, and ephemerality of linguistic exchange and that of the contemporary scene: grammar is historically malleable, subject to the slow revision of users over time. Scene as a descriptive tag has suggested itself, according to Blum:

> In everyday life we speak regularly about scenes and it is in such ways that the scene first appears to and for us. Then we ask, what are we talking about when we address the world in these ways, is there a persistence underlying this diversity? (8)

In seeking persistence, Blum succeeds in carving out an assortment of useful if apparently arbitrary scenic elements.

The first grammatical rule involves the scene's 'regularity.' Scenes are habits, sums of repeated behavioural patterns. A scene cannot exist without a group of individuals doing some specific thing over and over. Somehow Blum sees fit to include what he calls "the occasioned character of the scene - doing seeing and being seen" in this category, noting that "the tension

released by this relationship is the very content of the scene" (10). The verbal and visual pun is a powerfully relevant operator, and it is difficult to argue that appearance and perception do not define a certain scenic element, but this 'occasioned character' seems to be alluding to the 'theatricality' and 'performativity' that Blum will later define as individual categories. We also learn that regularity, along with voyeurism and exhibitionism, may be made a "parasitical" possibility by the scene; it seems more reasonable that regularity might *engender* the parasitical nature of voyeurism and exhibitionism, and that 'parasites' could be more favourably construed as 'audiences.'

Extensiveness, the next stop on Blum's tour of scene grammar, begs the question of scenic exclusivity: where are the borders of scenes, and how porous can they be? The biggest problem with the playful, perhaps even Socratic, dialogic style that Blum adopts is his aversion to rhetorical commitment. A relevant question like "does exclusiveness resonate so intimately with the character of scene that its 'hospitality' to all tastes and visitors can rob it of its vigor and distinctive character?" (11) can be answered very confidently in the affirmative: scenic membership is select by nature. How could a scene have any "character" at all if it did not consist of a specific and limited group?

Blum's analysis of the scene's mortality, conversely, is direct and prescient. Forever preoccupied with the concept's status (noting that temporal caprice often marks the scene as "too insubstantial to support an enduring interest"), Blum cuts to the withering heart of collective wax and wane:

> The evolution and decline of scenes is an object of fascination in collective life, for it is often thought that the inexorable fate of scenes, their volatility and ephemerality, confirms their inevitable link to fad and fashion. (11)

The question of legitimacy also drives Blum's burrowing toward the layer where scene is inherently 'transgressive.' Like my own attempt to write an untold, buried, hopelessly region-

specific story, Blum locates a "tension between city and scene" (12) based on the distance between standard local record and locals' less standard memories, noting that:

> ...the accomplishments of scenes are often hard won and hard fought: there is perhaps an official history of scenes and a darker, secret, covert history that is deposited in the fragmentary remains of witness testimony, or that awaits recovery. Yet the mystery of such scenes, the enigma that awaits exploration, is their local character. (12)

The issue of mortality also raises the spectre of scenic productivity. Scenes are obviously not merely the sum of their cultural output (if they were, punk in St. John's would be little more than a small stack of recordings and flyers), rather they are a swirl of activity, personality, performance and self-consciousness. Blum's Socratic twitch offers a fruitful tease in this corner of the scene's grammar when he asks "if we can imagine art scenes in the absence of art, we would need to ask, just what then is being practised in the scene?" (13). Having twitched, Blum states that practice lies in interaction itself, asserting that "this points to the interdependence implicit in any scene which could bring together lovers of the form" (13). Scenes do not have to produce at all costs; scenes are celebrations of shared interest. Even if they appear and disappear in a puff of sociocultural pixie dust (or perhaps *especially* if they slide quietly into and out of visibility or existence), scenes are significant-yet-temporary manifestations of affinity and identity.

Collectivization, the basic and most favourably included tenet of my working conception of scene, appears to Blum as another variable. He asks "can a scene depict stakes of collectivization ranging from the aggregate of those linked loosely by implication of a common relation to shared resources, to an incipient community engaged in forming, shaping, and revising its identity as a collective?" (12). It seems obvious that a scene is inclusive enough a concept to include less-connected units relying on specific infrastructure (eg. members of a broader music scene, say all of the performers who inhabit a city's downtown) along with self-identified subsets of that group (eg. the community-driven and incredibly self-conscious hardcore scene that

performs down the street from a pub hosting trad-folk musicians). Blum's unwillingness to align scene with collectivity or community signals the definitive break between oft-repeated punk rock ideal and what becomes crass practice and hints at the derision inherent in terms like 'scenester.' Scene is often what develops instead of community. Scene is the simulacrum of community, retaining its image and surfaces but lacking its center or heart. Collectivization is a scenic necessity, but it does not necessarily define or drive it the way it drives community. Perhaps scene's susceptibility to parasitism is what undercuts its ability to foster community and breed positive collectivity instead of loose aggregation.

Blum next invokes the performative or theatrical nature of scenesterism. Returning to the 'scene/seen/seeing' pun, it becomes clear that Blum privileges the visual in his scenic grammar and, in so doing, highlights what I (and the great majority of history's punk/independent rock musicians, critics and fans) would call the scene's greatest weakness. The benefit of scenic theatricality is the generally even contract that participants seem to engage in with one another. Blum notes that parasitism is offset by agreement, awareness, attention and consent:

> The subjects of the scene always work to shed their aura as simple spectators by doing or exhibiting the engagement required of those who enjoy being seen seeing, that is, as those who enjoy immersion in the practice. Such subjects work to accomplish the reciprocality of coming-to-view as a social relationship or course of action that resists abstractedness (its potential to be incarnated as the disinterested view) in order to appear engaged by the mutuality of viewing. This is what it means to say of subjects of the scene that they work to be seen, not necessarily in the shallow sense, but to be seen seeing, that is, to be seen as engaged by the reciprocity of seeing. (15)

The presence of the theatrical element enables those who might just observe to participate in a meaningful, imperative act; in spite of the scene's tendency toward surface and performance, 'seeing' privileges the audience member and assigns him or her a productive role. Blum insists that this property evokes a "deeper bond" (15) between scene members, adding that "here is where the fan, hanger-on, groupie or even tourist becomes essential to scenes" (16). It is fair to

say that many of my interviewees were grateful for the consistent, dependable audience for their work, and were upfront about their role as audience for other artists in the city. I would argue that it is the regularity of the 'seeing' Blum describes which produces his 'bond.'

To Blum, the theatrical bond forms the root of scene's 'transgressive' nature, a characteristic which he sees as formal rather than a coincidence of content:

> The scene is transgressive not because it celebrates 'counter-cultural' values or 'lifestyles,' or marginal, esoteric doctrines or even subversive philosophies, but because its transgression resides in its exhibitionism and in the spectacle of its claim to mark itself off from the routinization of everyday life...Performance is transgressive in its very potential to create exposure or humiliation even in its most mundane shape such as calling a spectator to perform in a way that dissolves the border between audience and performer. Performance challenges self-containment and in so doing, saturates the scene with an aura of danger. (17)

Again, it is tempting to read this as a gloss on punk (or even rock and roll) idealism: scenes are co-operative, participatory arrangements. This is where the transgressive property of scene resides - in the fluid interplay between group members irrespective of 'official' role (dancer, ticket-taker, bartender, DJ, speaker). Participants will the scene into being through isolated-yet-connected performative acts.

His grammar arrayed, Blum's analysis sprawls and contorts. We learn that Socrates was the original urban scenester and we are told that the scene may be "the city's way of making a place for intimacy in collective life" (23).[1] We take a quick tour through the political economy of scene, and dismissively declare it, like the city, inherently capitalistic:

> The entrepreneurial and corporate absorption in the scene is integral to the engagement which it mobilizes, the fascination that it induces. The scene charms the collective, and in arousing contempt, covetousness, or plans for 'exploitation,' makes the very creativity of the city into a collective value. The vitality of the scene can always become a commodity.

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[1]Collective or public intimacy seems to warrant a place in scenic grammar.

(26)

I think it is pretty clear that scenes are 'entrepreneurial,' but I have grave doubts about the 'integral' nature of 'corporate absorption.' There is no doubt that vital scenes very quickly become vulnerable to commodification, but they can certainly form fully actualized, Blum-grammatically-correct entities without banner ads, IPOs or plastic figurines. Is it fair to say that there have been no scenes in communist countries, or would Soviet writers or Cuban musicians form furtive capitalistic enclaves in these instances? A scene *may* be a market, but it is not necessarily one, and certainly not merely one.

The persistent problem with 'scene' as a vernacular and academic term is that it seems to be inherently elusive. Blum fares well in exploring the notion while maintaining the often-frustrating ambiguity that it thrives on. The conundrum is perhaps best elucidated in this passage:

> If the scene is more than a site of regular recurrence, must it not also be a site that is more than a theatrical focus? To ask such questions is not to seek to legislate the meaning of scene by disqualifying some and elevating others, but rather, to point to the ambiguity of scene as a collective representation in a way that we (who theorize) must take into account. (18)

Scene is an ambiguous collective representation; this is not a concession of philosophical defeat, rather an acknowledgement that the popular use of the term and the nature of the phenomenon resist 'legislation,' or even much cogent theorizing.

The working definition of scene which I will use speaks according to the properties of Blum's grammar, and relies on Straw's distinction between scene and community. In the context of the independent/underground rock music scene in Newfoundland, it becomes clear that scene is the lived local reality, while community is the spoken ideal. The distinction is perhaps formal at best - the terms are often used interchangeably by participants - but it does serve to isolate certain circumstantial differences: community evokes investment, work, co-operation, and place;

scene involves spectacle, ephemerality, and impermanence. Despite my advancing of what amounts to a sort of frustrated, idealistic critique of scene, the term and the phenomenon belongs to one of the more complex and indelible features of communal experience. It is safe to say that a community without a scene is a pretty dull thing, and that there could be no underground without the furtive posturing, elitist barriers, and sociocultural secret handshakes the scene engenders.

The punk/indie tradition and ethos: DC/Olympia and beyond.

Punk has always been about asking "why?" and then doing something about it. It's about picking up a guitar and asking "why can't I play this?" It's about picking up a typewriter and asking "why don't my opinions count?" It's about looking at the world around you and asking, "why are things as fucked up as they are?" And then it's about looking inwards at yourself and asking "why aren't I doing anything about this?"

Daniel Sinker (11)

The 'punk ideal' or 'indie ethos' to which I continually refer has its roots in the more socially conscious bands of the British first wave (especially the Clash) and the American underground of the early 80s. My version of punk and independence is the "Garageland" version, the Dischord and K and Kill Rock Stars version, and the Minutemen, Fugazi, and Bikini Kill version. It is also the *Punk Planet* version (probably the best and most diverse contemporary zine surveying independent art, culture and politics) :

> The motivation behind punk is almost offhandedly referred to as "DIY" nowadays. That stands for "Do It Yourself." It's taken as a given in punk rock, but it's the foundation that the entire culture is built upon. Punk writers aren't sitting at home hoping that their piece gets published, they're publishing it themselves; fans aren't waiting around for someone to put out a record by their favourite band, they're releasing it themselves; we're not waiting for a club to open up that will book shows that cater to the under-21 set, we're opening them ourselves. Punk has never waited for the OK from anyone to step out on its own. DIY is the answer to "Why?" (Sinker, 11)

DIY is my punk ideal, and its insurrectionist nature is characterized both by desire and necessity. Joe Strummer wanted to "stay in the garage all night" and documented getting burned by false record label promises in "Complete Control," mentioning tour hassles, release squabbles, and the unavoidable dictates of commerce:

> They said we'd be artistically free
> When we signed that bit of paper
> They meant let's make a lotsa mon-ee
> An' worry about it later.

Mike Watt and the Minutemen maintained artistic and procedural control because it seemed like the only realistic way to operate was to "jam econo":

> Econo is an old concept. The punk rockers picked up on that, the idea of scarcity and just using what you got. And maybe more of you comes through because there's less outside stuff you're sticking on - all you got is you, so you have to make something out of it. (Azerrad, 74)

The individualist urge Strummer, Watt and others champion is tempered heavily by an appeal toward a community of the like-minded, from the micro-level (intra-band/direct collaborator) to the macro (the underground venue network, say, or the kinship between artists). Ian MacKaye, founder of Minor Threat, Fugazi, and Dischord records, is an outspoken proponent of the most literal kind of 'complete control' and DIY, and his bands and label choose to keep every aspect of music and business firmly in hand. MacKaye is committed to connection over isolation, however:

> I need to interact with people for ideas to develop. I don't play guitar by myself, I only play it with my band. I'll play piano by myself, but when it comes to writing songs, it's really about companionship. It's about working on things with other people. So much of what I've done has been about collaboration. (Sinker, 31)

> I wanted to be part of some vocal, active, revolutionary gang/tribe/family/community. I wanted to be a part of something, I wanted to have parameters of some sort that made me feel like I had a culture. And if I wasn't going to be raised with a culture that went

beyond my immediate family, then I damn sure was going to create one. (Azerrad, 143)

MacKaye and his label also represent the blueprint for how to document a local scene. Dischord has only ever released work by groups from its hometown, and it was formed to put Washington, DC on the world's punk rock map. True to plan, the capitol city will forever be associated with the angular guitars and righteous angst that have been the weapon of choice of the Dischord roster during the twenty-plus years of its existence.

Washington, DC is not the only example of communal punk rock productivity and a certain kind of zealous idealism, however: SST's Los Angeles, Touch & Go's Chicago and Merge's Chapel Hill all staked out aural territory in a similar fashion (albeit with a much less strict commitment to place). Olympia, Washington's K and Kill Rock Stars labels form a different end of the aesthetic punk rock spectrum (the former especially trading DC's freneticism and shouting for clumsily strummed guitars and, often, a more traditional, gentle pop feel). The musical maturity of most of Dischord's roster was largely absent from Olympia's early scene, but the commitment to both the local community and the burgeoning national and international independent rock networks easily matched that of the left coast Washington. A town of about 40,000, Olympia is state capitol, home to one of the most liberal colleges in North America (Evergreen State), and close neighbour of two metropolitan cities (Seattle and Portland). The fertile surroundings lent themselves well to what has become an indie mecca. Guy Picciotto of DC's Fugazi says:

> It just seemed like paradise being out there. It's such a weird sleepy small town and yet there was so much action there - there were so many great bands, so much energy. It was one of the first places we played where we really felt at home, where the kids were dancing and the vibe was just incredible. (Azerrad, 400)

Michael Azerrad, rock journalist and recent chronicler of the American rock underground of the 80s, notes that "the two towns formed a strong cross-continental bond, not only making musical connections but exchanging useful ideas and information, forging a consensus about the way things ought to be in the indie world and beyond" (401). Beat Happening's Heather Lewis adds what might be the definitive small-town punk rock credo: "not a whole lot happened there, so it was what you made of it" (469).

The punk ideal I cull from these examples prizes inspiration, passion, creativity, and co-operation over nihilism, fashion and competition. I argue that these are the goals of the independent underground community, less so the goals of individual scenes. Obviously there is plenty of room in each punk rock town for iconoclasts, curmudgeons, clothes horses, and subcultural tourists; this, we have learned, is the nature of scene. Without doubt, the musicians, writers, artists, venue-operators, and fans of the Olympia and DC scenes do not all subscribe to the politics or aesthetic rubric of each municipality's most famous (or infamous) denizens. It is unlikely that even these most famous denizens fulfill the challenging role to which I assign them; to err is certainly punk. MacKaye's vision of the contemporary rock underground as a Sixties-style countercultural gang remains at least partly accurate, even if this accuracy lies in the eminent co-optability of the movement. The success of Nirvana (and REM and others before them) proved that this particular gang was yet another small mouthful of gum sticking first to the underside of the school desk of popular culture before getting added to the large, festering wad that rolls across its surface; there may have been some wad discolouration, and the unwieldly thing may have wobbled some for a little while, but it undoubtedly remains intact and very, very sticky.

Chapter 3: History/narrative.

He's going to be on stage tonight
He's going to kick it out with rage tonight
Move over, the kid's arrived.
He'll be alright.
Climbing the greased ladder rung by rung.
Singing a song that must be sung.
--"The Kid's Arrived", the Reaction.

Having assembled a framework, the historical rock and roll canvas may be effectively stretched and covered. What follows is the story of a scenic community, or a chronological series of communal scenes; this is an attempt at a community chronicle.

Prehistory of a punk scene.

The roots of Newfoundland's punk rock underground lie in traditional places. Wallace Hammond and Mike O'Brien, two of the longest-running scene stalwarts, both relate a few fragmentary stories of the almost completely undocumented 60s rock underground. O'Brien, a history professor at Memorial University in Newfoundland, remembers seeing the "psychedelic, dayglo painted van" of a band called the Backdoor driving around the city in the 1960s (interview). No other traces of the Backdoor could be found.

Hammond, the historic center of Newfoundland's punk scene, recalls "*the* local rock band" of his late-high school/early University moment: Lukey's Boat, who were named after a traditional Newfoundland folk song and who covered Cream and Jefferson Airplane along with a rare handful of originals. He notes that they were "infamous for having rock bands banned from the Arts and Culture Centre, circa '68, when their keyboard player stopped the show and in a long

rant exhorted the audience to revolution. The ban was rescinded the following year only to be brought back when a visiting rock band's guitarist climbed into a grand piano during a solo (the band was the Yeoman Rock Show and the guitarist was Ted Nugent)" (Hammond email, 11 May). Lukey's Boat won a trip to London in 1970 as second prize in a national battle of the bands competition (the champions were the Collectors, who would become Chilliwack). While there they lured small-time EMI recording artist Dennis Parker to emigrate with the promise of gigs in Newfoundland paying up to $1800. Hammond says that Neil Bishop - Lukey's Boat's bassist - and Parker (who is currently head of the Music Industry Association of Newfoundland), were "St. John's Rock Royalty in the seventies." By 1975, their band, Mantis, was drawing crowds of up to 1,000 at university gymnasium shows, and Hammond cites them as both an influence and an intimidating force: he mentions that the MUNRadio cronies who formed Da Slyme "couldn't aspire to that level of writing or musicianship" (email, 11 May).

O'Brien remembers things less reverently:

> It's hard to explain to people who were younger and weren't around in the 70s just how stifling the atmosphere around here was. There were no bands here doing original material. If you were in a rock band you played what was on the radio at the clubs. There was no original material of any kind. It just wasn't in people's mindsets. As opposed to now, if you're going to play at all you have to have original material. The mindset then was that you had to play cover tunes for 10, 15 years before you somehow graduated to writing your own songs. (interview)

Phil Winters (guitarist for 80s metal-punks Schizoid, then socially conscious sludge-meisters Bung, and currently Hot Nuts) and Liz Pickard echoed this sentiment. Hammond's stance comes from his closer involvement with the daily operations of the city's industry as a sound engineer: he was the house soundman for Memorial's Thompson Student Centre concerts in the late 70s, toured with internationally renowned folk revivalists Figgy Duff in the early 80s, and has been

earning a living working sound in the city's bars and halls for almost 30 years. His perspective is far more sympathetic to the plight of the working musician, and as a prog-rock fan, the working 'musician's musician.'

Hammond and O'Brien both cite the 1972 St. John's performance of Captain Beefheart and the Magic Band as a formative experience for the first wave of Newfoundland punks. Hammond says that "everyone involved in Da Slyme and the Reaction witnessed these performances, and I think I can fairly say that those guys laid down a very serious vibe which still resonates in what we do to this day" ("Da History of Da Slyme"). O'Brien also cites other traditional proto-punk influences: the Stooges, the MC5, and the humour of Frank Zappa (interview).

The conservative, isolated confines of St. John's provided the perfect establishment for an unruly, underemployed yet-relatively-educated group of drunken misfits to kick against. With the steady growth of MUNRadio - the campus broadcaster which graduated from "hi-fi club" to fully fledged, CRTC-licensed broadcaster in 1974 ("History of CHMR") - and the first traces of rock infrastructure beginning to develop in the city, the conditions that would create a punk scene were moving into place.

"Piss-eyed Sleazoids": Da Slyme, the Reaction and the birth of Newfoundland punk.

We got no talent and we don't expect applause.
We're out of tune and the sound is a lost cause.
Whaddaya think about that?
No talent, that's where it's at.
"No Talent", Da Slyme.

February 3, 1978, was the date of Newfoundland's first ever punk rock show. MUNRadio hosted a 'beer bash' fundraiser in the games room adjacent to the studio which featured Da Slyme: Hammond, Peter Morris (currently the head of Public Relations at Memorial University), Justin Hall (a professional photographer), Craig Squires (holder of a PhD in philosophy from the University of Toronto and currently a Systems Administrator with Memorial's Math Department), George Smith, Terry Carter, and Craig Butler. Carter and Morris had been studying and working in Halifax and Calgary, respectively, and had returned for Christmas vacation with word of a nascent Canadian punk rock explosion.

The show was promoted with a series of crude, teasing posters which both espoused and ridiculed perceived 'punk' aesthetics. One of the posters included Hall's brooding black and white photography and fake 'moral panic'-esque critiques like this one from "The Telesham" (a pun on the name of the province's lone daily newspaper, *The Evening Telegram*):

> The NEW WAVE crashed into Quidi Vidi Gut last weekend giving city sanitation crews the runs for their money - something akin to urinating in the wind - all those years of waste disposal coming back in one great wash - a bunch of punks who call themselves TOOLOOSE AND DA SLYME. Where were the police? (Hammond, "Da History of Da Slyme.")

The reliance on local imagery - the extreme self-consciousness about place evinced in this excerpt - characterized much of Da Slyme's conceptual and aesthetic existence. Newfoundland culture is rife with self-parody (see *CODCO* or its step-daughter, *This Hour has 22 Minutes* for nationally broadcasted examples), and it was this aspect of punk rock that first appealed to the prog fans in the band.

Another poster offered endorsements from the likes of "CirKus Magazine":

> When Snotty Slyme exhorts the audience to 'Eat my shorts if you love me' you know that this is no ordinary bunch of punks. This is for hard core punks only. Bring an extra pair of shorts and see what happens.

"Swillboard":

> 'I Wanna Pick Your Nose' is the most abominable piece of music in years - this song could go right to the top - Dealers: display openly and in quantity - bound to be a big hit with the pre-puberty crowd.

And even "Hester Fangs":

> Finally a band that doesn't try to write like a bunch of bloody classical composers. Hooray I say! Simple-minded people need more simple-minded songs like this one. 'One-chord punk rock song' is a downright classic - the best rock song in years. A pity it couldn't be a bit longer, though. ("History.")

Da Slyme, from their inception, were well aware of the authenticity argument surrounding punk rock, and were quick to distance themselves from the disingenuousness that has tended to characterize the local appropriation of pop form in Newfoundland. Their song lyrics, stage personas, and personal politics mirrored the contemporary punk world in forming a whirling mass of contradiction. O'Brien says that "Da Slyme started out as a joke between the b'ys at MUN Radio. They weren't really into punk at all, they just thought it was a big joke. Somehow they started getting into what they were doing" (interview). It is likely that O'Brien's report benefits from his outsider's perspective, and the self-mocking tone that underscores Da Slyme's entire output seems to confirm this trajectory of varying intent.

The February 3, 1978, performance of Da Slyme attracted 220 audience members and lasted 25 minutes. Band and crowd alike were acting out the version of punk rock they had received from mythical popular media accounts of British punk behaviour, and Hammond recalls lobbed beer bottles, broken glass, the frictionless feet of singer Craig Butler's punk rock hosiery

and his eleven subsequent stitches ("sewn only after a nurse first insisted that he remove his pantyhose as a prerequisite to treatment"), and the obligatory reprimand from the head of Student Security ("This is what happens when you play punk rock!"). The violence and the return of half of the band to the mainland capped the early momentum, but Hammond's tour with Figgy Duff that summer allowed him to catch Richard Hell and the Voidoids' performance in Toronto and the Vancouver Day of Anarchy in Stanley Park on Canada Day which featured D.O.A., the Sub-Humans, and other early Canadian West Coast punks ("History").

The broader perspective geographic dispersion afforded and the rising profile and legitimacy of the national and international punk movements gave Slyme members pause to reconsider their decision to regard the band as a one-time only quasi-theatrical event. Private party shows were organized in October and December, the second marking the debut of the city's second punk band, the Reaction.

Named after a lyric cribbed from the Jam's "All Around the World," the Reaction began their career covering new wave favourites. Rick Harbin, Mike Fisher, and Slyme member/Halifax art student Terry Carter took their cues from more classically pop-influenced British sources, and were the first Newfoundland punk outfit to record and release a 7" single. The self-titled debut was recorded in March of 1979 and pressed in a run of 500; the artist background of Carter is reflected in the multiple covers and more sophisticated and fashionable design sensibility. On the 1998 compilation *Smash the State: A Compilation of Canadian Punk Rock, 1978-82*, the intro to Da Slyme's "My only concern" features the anonymous bleating of a friend or crony, summarizing the relationship between the two bands:

> Tonight you got the Reaction, who are a joke and they know it...no, no, you got Da Slyme who are a joke, and they know it, and you got the Reaction, who are a joke and they DON'T know it...

The Reaction were a relatively tight, snappy mod outfit compared to the goofy, self-conscious

"bash and rant" of Da Slyme (Hammond, "History"). Their existence included a jaunt around the "bay circuit," and their fanbase included the "Old Shop Army," a group of rural punks who would make a pilgrimage into the city whenever the band played. Old Shop is an impossibly small, isolated town almost two hours west of St. John's. This is the first mention of the punk underground reaching outside of the city, and the account from Carter in the *Smash the State* liner essay outlines why it was difficult for any city bands to take their show to other parts of the province:

> A tour along the coast outside of St. John's, initially playing contemporary British punk new wave covers...was a less than successful recipe: playing songs by underground British bands did not go over well with musically conservative bar audiences who'd never heard the originals. "The Kid's Arrived" was penned in response to people who were really negative about this new breed of musicians. At a gig outside of St. John's, one unhappy bar patron bought a copy of the record so he could smash it while the group was on stage. (Manley)

Da Slyme could generate enough hype at a 65-cents-a-beer MUNRadio fundraiser to pack a common room full of curious, self-styled bohemian city types, but playing to rural bar patrons in the late 70s was a completely different matter. The less thuggish, self-referential Reaction, with their art school pretensions and fey outfits (the cover photo of their 1981 cassette shows Harbin sporting a jaunty scarf and wearing a tight, horizontally-striped sailor shirt) probably irritated more bay drinkers than they entertained.

The venue problem that continues to dog the rock underground in St. John's has been a feature of the scene since its inception. Sentiments like the one voiced by the Student Security Head quickly spread around the city, and most clubs, even those accustomed to the more rugged atmosphere of a rock or blues show, were hesitant to book the punks. Hammond tells the story of the birth of the city's first ever punk rock dive, the "legendary scumpit" (Manley) the Middle Earth:

> When Kirt Sic-O-Via [Hammond] and McBarf K. McBarf [a figure whose real name is lost] strolled into it in late December 1978 seeking nothing more than the cool liquid nectar of the gods known as a cold OLD STOCK [a local brew popular among arts community members], it transpired that McBarf knew the owner/guy behind the bar. They were talking and Kirt was casting an eye about the empty room. He mused aloud "Jesus

> Da Slyme could play here." The conversation quickly turned to "well we need something to drag people here...you actually have a band that WOULD play here?" (Hammond, website)

The shows at the Middle Earth and on campus in early 1979 marked the early heyday of the city's punk scene. The Reaction and Da Slyme would alternate sets and regularly pack the downtown venue to its (albeit limited) capacity of 75-100 people, while drawing as many as 300 at the university shows. It was around this time that the Reaction's single was finding its way into "numerous jukeboxes around town" (Manley), and Hammond calls the March 7, 1979 TSC show the Reaction's "finest hour, that night" ("History"). Later in 1979 Terry Carter left the Reaction and began tending bar at the Browned Off Lounge on Duckworth Street. The venue began hosting punk and experimental shows and inherited the Middle Earth's place as spatial foundation of the scene. Carter also began playing with the Infideltones, the Semitones, and the Issue.

It is around this time that the term 'scene' begins to seem an appropriate descriptor for what was evolving: audiences had been paying attention for almost 2 years, relatively steady venues were emerging, recordings were being released, and new bands were forming. O'Brien, however, states flatly that "what we were doing wasn't a scene. To refer to what was going on with Da Slyme as a punk scene...no, it wasn't. It was more a bunch of people going out, getting drunk and having a good time" (interview). I would argue that even if what was happening in St. John's lacked the fashion sense and visibility of contemporary metropolitan 'punk scenes,' the serious activity of the first bands and organizers was creating the foundation of a clearly identifiable collective entity.

The First (And Only) Newfoundland Punk Double Album.

The songs we sing will never sell, what the hell!
Don't want to go to music school, just as well.
Whaddaya think about that?
No talent, that's where it's at.
"No Talent," from the eponymous debut of Da Slyme.

In 1980, Da Slyme decided to commit their songs to wax. Unlike the Reaction, whose succinct new wave lent itself well to the single format, Da Slyme (who were, after all, composed of devoted prog and experimental music fans) opted to release a sprawling double-disc collection. Hammond writes:

> Da Slyme was in the habit of recording most of it's shows and practices in various formats and as such had a fair cross-section of stuff to choose from. Two sides worth of studio material and reams of live. Da Slyme was never a polished band and neither were the recordings. What better way to put the boots to the status quo but to do what most considered impossible - release such a raw, un-cultured, musically illiterate collection to the populace? Financed in the time honoured "pool finances among band members and friends" method, the album was prepared and a receipt indicates that the finished product was shipped from Toronto to Nfld. on Sept 30 /1980. ("History")

Discs in hand, the band were at a loss for packaging. Knowing that commercially pressed sleeves and cardboard jackets were far beyond their financial means, the group came up with a typically DIY solution: they would buy the cheapest used records they could find, acquire the discarded promo display jackets from a local retailer and spray paint over the original art work. The crude constructions caused some intra-band consternation, but Hammond notes that "the whole concept is what most people remember best about the album" ("History").

The album, released under the "Loo Enterprises" imprint, is a 36-song marathon. The first disc culls a handful of different home/radio-studio recording sessions, and includes multiple versions of a few songs, including "I'm a Piss-Eyed Sleazoid," "Eat My Shorts if you Love Me,"

and "I Ain't Got No IQ." The live disc adds a dozen other tunes, featuring only a few repeats. Hammond notes that the album was released with "little hoopla" (and no release show), seeing distribution only in a few local shops and at scene headquarters, the Browned Off.

Da Slyme's lyrical self-consciousness is typical of late-70s punk. As music fans seduced away (but not too far away) from prog, Slyme members were certainly aware of the specific authenticity debate surrounding subculture's susceptibility to co-optation: it had taken a fair amount of this co-optation for the music to reach somewhere like St. John's at all, and the two biggest British punk bands (the Sex Pistols and the Clash) were upfront about the intersection of rebellion and commerce in some of their earliest lyrics ("EMI" from *Never Mind the Bollocks Here's the Sex Pistols* and the previously mentioned "Complete Control" from the Clash's self-titled debut). Da Slyme's contribution to the critique of a fickle record industry inhabits the lyrics of "Violence, Anarchy, Baby, Mother, Daddio, Dig," a cut on the live disc of the debut album. A shifted first-person perspective (a familiar Slyme lyrical device) describes the free and easy journey the entertainment business has historically taken through youth culture:

> It's been great making money off the youth revolution all these years.
> I sucked them for all they were worth, but who the fuck cares.
> First the Twist, Flower Power, then Consciousness Expansions,
> the Supergroups, wimps and disco mania.
> Now I'm building a wall around my house and then a moat.
> And give the cops the power to shove your violence back down your throat.

The clumsy title apes the embarrassment of misappropriated lingo, but also serves as notation for the band's own ambiguous relationship to punk as a culture. Da Slyme started as a lark, and the fact that the band so cherished their adopted 'sleazoid' persona alludes to the same kind of passing interest in the movement that this song's narrator might have. The record business creep may be taking advantage of unrest and naivete, but his parasitism is not too far from the hopeless

layabout in "Defecation on the Nation":

> I say defecation on the nation,
> For all it's ever done for me.
> I want to have fun, make lots of money
> and do it all for free.
>
> I've been so long on the welfare lines it seems like my second home,
> Why should the rich keep gettin' richer while I keep gettin' none?
>
> The government sucks, it's full of corruption
> And people are too dumb to complain.
> Just welfare drunks and university flunks
> keep fuckin' up time and time again.

More Sex Pistols than Clash, Slyme lyrics held equal contempt for "the government," "the rich," "welfare drunks" and "artsy fartsy units with an English degree" (the last ripe insult appears in "They All Art the Same," a satire of the long-suffering, often-derided Newfoundland arts and culture community).

Despite the prominence of women in the contemporary American and British punk scenes, St. John's saw few contributions from women in its nascent underground rock community. The first mention of gender comes in Da Slyme's song "My Only Concern," the lyrics of which spew from yet another first-person mouth, that of an all-too-typical MUN-lad narrator:

> I won't sing songs of political import;
> My only concern is my cock.
> I don't care about social oppression;
> My only concern is my cock.
> This tube steak can't wait to put it on your plate;
> Just take out your dentures if you please.
> My only concern is my cock.
> I don't give a shit about degradation of women;
> My only concern is my cock.
> Kick out their teeth and they'll be more submissive;
> My only concern is my cock.

These lyrics were contributed by "Miss Gee," the nom-de-plume of a Slyme cohort named Glynis

who wrote for the university paper. Worried that the irony would be lost in delivery, Hammond recalls that the song, alternately titled "The Brewer's Droop," would often find itself revised live, with "I don't give a shit about Beethoven or Shubert, My only concern is Bartok" replacing the more provocative original refrain. The crass critique voiced in these lines nicely undercuts the juvenile, often insensitive humour that permeated almost everything Da Slyme produced, from the lyrics of "Truck Stop Nun" to the Karen Carpenter puppet used to advertise the "Miss Anorexia Nervosa Show" of 1983 ("History"). Da Slyme consistently danced with gleeful, inebriated abandon all over the line between satire and stupidity, often inhabiting the caricature of the thoughtless-but-good-humoured-Newfie that has penetrated the national consciousness since Confederation; obvious, once-obligatory topical musings like "Margaret Thatcher for Possum Queen" aside, the self-conscious commentary of "My Only Concern" may be the most enduring and effective political statement the group ever made. A band of 5 or 6 hirsuite, rotund tech-geeks loudly decrying sexism as part of their platform of irreverence showed that the nascent scene was at least nominally safe for women, even if it would take years for females to consistently appear onstage (and even if Hammond pointedly admitted "I don't think any of the guys in the band would be caught dead writing a lyric like that"). After Carolyn Ford fronted Slyme spin-off The A-Tones for a month in 1980, women remain marginal until the early 90s, betraying an unfortunate imbalance that has never ceased to plague the city (Hammond email, 25 June).

The Bubonic Plague, the Riot, Dog Meat BBQ and the second wave.

In that period, the late-70s, early-80s, I split my time between here, drawing unemployment, and the mainland getting my stamps so that I could come back. I was pretty much transient. I don't know if there was a year between the mid-70s and early 80s that I spent a full year back here. Nope. Didn't. 75 to 89 I didn't spend a full year here. And there were others doing the same thing. Tony Richards was in Texas, and then Alberta, Wallace was away...this is Newfoundland. This is how you live.

Mike O'Brien.

By 1982 the Reaction were finished and Slyme gigs were slowing to a semi-annual trickle. The most serious of the cavalcade of early bands connected to the two original outfits (among them the aforementioned A-Tones, the Wet Cheese Delirium, Bert Humdinger and the Bum Steers) was the Bubonic Plague, a group which was driven by the vocals and lyrics of Mike O'Brien. Evolving slowly out of a blues-y acoustic duo (with John Heels) begun for party entertainment, the Bubonic Plague featured a lineup that rotated according to which members of the punk community were in the province. The band's debut, on October 6, 1982, was a benefit for the striking NAPE employees of OZFM, NTV and the Newfoundland Herald (where Peter Morris and Terry Carter were working). Carter's post-Reaction band, the Issue, and Da Slyme also appeared. Other gigs and demo recordings filled the fall and winter, and *Wild Wild Youth in Asia*, the Bubonic Plague's debut cassette, became the first release to feature the VikkiBeat label imprint. VikkiBeat, the city's first DIY label, would go on to issue recordings by the Reaction, the A-Tones, Big Tears (another of Carter's projects), and others on home-duplicated cassette (Hammond, "History"). O'Brien recalls that the Bubonic Plague suffered from the same membership problems as Da Slyme because of the tradition of the nomadic Newfoundland young adult, stating that "people would play for a while, and then suddenly it would be 'oh, I've got to go to the mainland for a few months'" (interview). Desertion as rite-of-passage-cum-financial-necessity has seen the province emptied of young adults for decades; the chance to explore the rest of the country and earn some money – or enough employment hours to honour the great

Newfoundland tradition of drawing unemployment as a seasonal profession – continues to lure rural Canadians to the country's centers.

Bubonic Plague members trickled to Toronto in 1984, and with Hammond's arrival in August of that year, a line-up that also featured O'Brien, Mike Oakley and Terry Carter began playing shows. The band performed about once a month for a year before "Wallace decided he'd had enough of Toronto and was coming home." O'Brien is less than sanguine about the affair:

> We thought it'd be much better, but it turned out to be much the same. Still the problem of empty bars, though in Toronto there were venues to play. Here it was always a problem finding a venue. Up there there were so many bands, and if there was another punk type band playing on the same night you were screwed. (O'Brien interview)

With no advance press, only a handful of homemade demo cassettes, and little visual flair (a member of BUNCHOFUCKINGOOFS told them that "they sure didn't play the way they looked", which was "admittedly awfully straight" [Hammond, "History"]), the Bubonic Plague made very little headway in the fashion and industry-driven Toronto new-wave scene of the mid-80s. As usual, there were financial concerns:

> We tried to headline ourselves, and we just weren't well enough known. And we were all shit-ass broke. So we couldn't afford a place to practice. We didn't practice the whole year we were up there. We only practised when we played live. Amazingly, we have a few recordings of shows, and we played really well for a band that never practised. (O'Brien interview)

The Bubonic Plague played its last show to the nearly empty DMZ on Spadina Avenue, May 7, 1985.

With most of the key players in the city's punk scene scattered, a second generation of artists began forming bands who were, according to O'Brien, "more plugged into the zeitgeist of their time than we were plugged into ours." The first of these was the Riot, led by the enthusiasm and skill of drummer Duncan Snowden. The Riot had been playing with the Bubonic Plague and Slyme before 1985's Newfoundland punk diaspora, and fostered the development of the city's

first real all ages scene.

Liz Pickard, who at the time was involved with the theatre and folk music communities, remembers seeing the Riot at the Grad House on Military Road in the early mid-80s. She described it as initially seeming like a "foreign world," but she eventually went on to work with Snowden, Newhook and Justin Hall in the Red Scare, an outfit whose name suggested their activist leanings. Snowden was the "songwriter, genius, focus" of that short-lived and undocumented band (Pickard interview).

The first band to feature members of both generations of scene participants was Dog Meat BBQ. O'Brien tells the story of Dog Meat BBQ's formation:

> The secret to Dog Meat was when Duncan Snowden came...he'd been saying that he wanted to play with myself and Wallace, and we thought, well, he's just a kid, we'll see. And then he came over, and it was GREAT! Okay, so we have a band. We had a hell of a time coming up with a name, finally settling on Backstreet Jihad.

The name was short lived.

> That summer Wallace found this propaganda pamphlet from the International Fund for Animal Welfare to try to get people in South Korea to stop eating dogs and cats. And we were reading this out while we trying to practice and I said to the b'ys, "DOG MEAT BBQ...boys, we're not Backstreet Jihad anymore." (O'Brien interview)

The band's debut at the second ever Peace-a-Chord was a key moment in mid-decade city punk. The festival, begun in 1985 as an awareness-raising project by activist group Youth for Social Justice, has become the most prominent local showcase for independent musicians in St. John's. A free, 2-day outdoor concert in Bannerman Park, the Peace-a-Chord was attracting thousands of audience-members by 1989. In two decades it has featured performances by virtually every significant local act (alongside scores of their less-than-significant peers) and a handful of groups from the mainland, among them Thrush Hermit and By Divine Right. It has also been the steady peg around which the socially conscious music community's calendar rotates, and for many, the chance for broadest public exposure. Dog Meat BBQ's first performance was a homecoming for

the first wave's most prominent players and their introduction to the younger musicians who were inheriting the fragments of scene infrastructure. The "young punks" (O'Brien's term) were wary of the 70s-hangover beards and flowing locks of the recovering prog fans, but convinced by the reputedly fierce performance. This was the first time that Dog Meat would share the stage with bands like Tough Justice, Schizoid, who along with WAFUT, Fish n' Rod and Malpractice would create the city's first all-ages scene and define St. John's punk for the rest of the decade.

Many of these bands shared members and formed a peer group similar to the one engendered by MUNRadio and the Middle Earth. The next link in a series of scenic circles of friends, the metallic punk bands of the mid-80s were the first generation of St. John's high school students growing up with an accessible underground rock community.

The rise of the all ages scene and the stylistic shift: the late 80s.

"You couldn't deny metal. You can never deny metal."
Phil Winters.

Phil Winters, guitarist and lighting technician, describes his first impressions of the rock community as one of division along generic and intra-city geographical terms:

> I was worried that because I was a metaller that the punk rockers wouldn't cotton to me. Metallers and punkers, there was a total distinction between them. The punks went to Booth and the metallers went to PWC. That's how it seemed to me. But there was never any problem, just acceptance, immediately. (Winters interview)

Booth and Prince of Wales Collegiate are two of the largest high schools in the city, with reputations and demographics roughly suited to their locations - Booth is near downtown, while PWC is nearer the University. Without evoking the spectre of Hebdige too much, and keeping in mind that the distinction between these genres becomes somewhat specious and artificial in this case, it is at least a little interesting to note that the less-virtuosic 'punkers' came out of the grittier halls of Booth and the more glamourous spandex and leather fans pranced through the rooms of PWC (an acronym often derisively rendered as "Preps With Cars").

Winters and his friends formed the core of the all ages scene, and his first band, the metallic punk outfit Schizoid, debuted at the 301 Club on Hamilton Avenue in March of 1986. He remembers Bob Armstrong of local band Public Enemy as a key organizer at this stage, and he notes the continuing struggle to find amenable concert venues. Wallace Hammond had made his reputation as the punk rock soundman of choice, Don Ellis was playing in three bands (the aforementioned Schizoid, along with Fish n' Rod and WAFUT [What A Fucking Ugly Truck]), and future scene fixtures like Barry Newhook, Doug Jones, and John Nolan were marking initial performances. Geoff Younghusband, bassist, writer and film technician, remembers the first show he attended at the 301 Club a few months earlier:

There were about 30 people in attendance and I was freaked out, scared shitless, highly

> entertained and totally stoked after the experience. Ken Tizzard [of WAFUT, later prairie alt-rockers the Watchmen] also sold me a copy of Wabana Riot, a local fanzine put out by Bob Average and Chris Jerret amongst others, as well as a Tough Justice "3 seconds of silence" demo tape. I quickly assumed my position outside the games arcade downtown and started going to every show that I could. (Younghusband email)

Schizoid were the next of the city's bands to attempt a move to Toronto. They made the trip in the spring of 1987 after recording and releasing a debut single that winter. Their brief foray closely resembled that of the Bubonic Plague, and Winters' memories of the experience are less than fond:

> I hate Toronto. It was very apparent very early on that I didn't want to be there for any reason. And the personalities involved...we shouldn't have been living together in Toronto. A good learning experience, but I was home after a month and a half, I said 'fuck this shit.' We played a show, we opened for Samfuckinghain and Dioxin. There weren't a lot of people at the shows, which was discouraging. And I was just fucking sick of the place. It was July, it was as hot as it could have been, and I was working in a cheese factory. (interview)

The band fragmented after the trip, playing a handful of shows at home with replacement members. There were two reunion shows in 1990.

The tone of these bands seems to have been relatively consistent. The Riot, the Red Scare, Tough Justice, Public Enemy and even Dog Meat BBQ leaned toward the engagement of sociopolitical issues typical of American and British punk and hardcore. The most popular bands seemed to be those who synthesized their metal and punk influences (a trend which had been dividing the American underground since the rise of stylistically militant hardcore and self-styled rule-making zines like *Maximum Rocknroll*). The prevalence of the metal strain initiated during this period remains a defining feature of the scene. Rob Kean, a Memorial University sociologist who recently studied the listening habits and social circumstances of the independent musicians of St. John's notes that metal was an easy and obvious introduction to punk, and many of the

anonymous respondents in his study who came of age during the 80s echo Phil Winters' insistence that metal was an important part of their musical background. He reasons:

> It may well be that the irreverence of heavy metal serves to introduce its young listeners to a more critical way of perceiving the products and players on the stage of popular culture. The pageantry of the music makes it especially suitable for visual media, and this is reflected in the particular importance respondents attached to television as a site of exposure to the music. Even those who typically watched very little TV reported watching a lot of it during their metal years. (Kean, 44)

Neither television nor metal have gone away in St. John's, and the devotedly-vibrant-yet-low-profile metal scene has stayed strong for almost as long as its punk counterpart. The mid-80s marked a breakthrough in confident crossover that continues to remain steady.

The halcyon days of grunge: the late 80s and the early 90s explosion.

"It wasn't really much of a scene there," Sebastian Lippa says of St. John's. "Audiences were small and the clubs didn't really like having bands play. We would always play with groups who I didn't feel much affinity with. I felt way closer to the scene in Halifax artistically. It was the pop influence. It was always trickling through, whereas all the other groups that we played with in St. John's were more metal." (Barclay, Jack, Schneider, p. 513).

People were pissed off. What the fuck was Halifax? Look at us! Bung is not a pop band. (Winters interview)

By 1989 the all ages shows of the mid 80s were happening more frequently, more bands had appeared, and the Peace-a-Chord was approaching its zenith. Malpractice, the Flemming Street Massacre, and the Bottom Dogs began performing. The latter group converted a young Paul Gruchy, who with his rhythm section partner in crime Doug Rowe would go on to play in Undermine, Ditch and Hardliner. He recalls:

> We saw a band called the Bottom Dogs play, they went on to become Hardship Post. We were into the metal thing, and they caught our attention with their alternative, hardcore or punk thing, and we asked them when they were playing again. We wandered downtown and we were hooked. (Gruchy interview)

Gruchy mentions rousing all ages performances by Fish n' Rod, WAFUT and Malpractice (whose John Nolan would go on to play with him and Rowe in Hardliner). They seemed to have "honed their sound" from playing in bands for years, and impressed the neophytes with their confidence. Younghusband characterizes the interplay between the downtown scenesters and new recruits as smooth and rewarding:

> It was a very fluid and expanding scene that worked remarkably well for and with each other. As bands appeared they played with the older bands and as they broke up they kept reforming with new and old scene members, almost like a punk mentoring program. (Younghusband email)

Gruchy echoes this sentiment, but he insists that all ages shows were infrequent and bar shows

were out of legal reach for most bands and audience members. A Senior's Club near the Roman Catholic Basilica served as a venue until "the old guys that rented it got scared and shut it down" (interview).

The games arcade referred to by Younghusband above marked one of the nodes of the downtown underground hangout circuit. By 1991, the all ages scene was big enough to assert a visible presence. All ages shows began happening at the Longshoremen's Protective Union (LSPU) Hall, an artist-run theatre and gallery established in the late 70s. Operated by the Resource Center for the Arts, the Hall had been host to the burgeoning theatre community that gave rise to CODCO. It became the most important all ages venue in the city, and one of the scene's anchor points. Along with the hall and the games arcade, there was Yancey Street Comics, a small shop that employed local musicians Phil Winters and Steve Guy (of the ska band Whodafunkit). Gruchy remembers:

> After school you'd go down and hang out and chat and listen to music. It was right under the Hall, at the bottom of the stairs to the left. It was a bit of an epicenter, you could find out what was on the go, if there were shows, and if there were zines you could buy them there. (interview)

Fred's Records, the best and longest running independent record shop in St. John's, was another node, as was the war memorial directly across the street from it on Duckworth Street (Gruchy notes that the electrical outlets used to supply the monument with evening light would often be hijacked by scenesters with clippers offering punk rock hair trims). Another favourite loitering stop was Ports of Food, a cafeteria on the ground floor of the Atlantic Place office tower. Constantly hassled by the building's security, the scruffy youth found a direct, literal mouthpiece when Doug Jones' early hardcore band Age of Majority worked the guards' refrain "make a

purchase or leave" into one of their songs.

Hardship Post, the band that evolved out of the Bottom Dogs, became the heroes of the St. John's scene when the city got swept up in the grunge hysteria of 1991. Undermine dissolved that year when its members' tastes split over the sludgy trend, and Gruchy remembers the wealth of used punk records at Fred's, the result of the city's fans emigrating from fast and sharp to slow and fuzzy. As Sonic Youth quipped in the title of their European festival tour video, 1991 was "the year punk broke" - pun intended: media coverage was increasing, bands were getting signed to major labels, and it was becoming cool to like gritty, guitar-driven music again. Nirvana was huge, and while their impact on the music industry has been overstated, their rise to prominence certainly changed the way people thought about the punk rock underground from both inside and outside of it. The relatively meagre share of the limelight that swung toward eastern Canada in the next few years had a serious effect on the size, scope and ambition of the scene in St. John's.

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To put things into regional perspective, the biggest names in early 90s east coast indie rock, Sloan and Eric's Trip, began forming in their respective home towns (Halifax and Moncton) in 1990. Sloan signed with Geffen records in 1991. By 1992, Eric's Trip had turned down an offer from influential Seattle indie label Sub Pop (which they would accept 6 months later), and both bands toured the Maritimes with Toronto stalwarts Change of Heart. Halifax and its nascent scene was being groomed by the music press as the 'next Seattle' (Barclay, Jack, Schneider). Musicians and fans in St. John's were benefiting from the regional excitement, and they were both inspired by their neighbours and envious of their better fortune.

Reports from the early nineties are relatively consistent, but the perception of media attention and the relationship with Halifax seems to vary. The complementary quotes from Lippa and Winters[2] at the beginning of this section show one of the less generous versions of city sentiment: there was clearly some resentment and at least the murmured shadow of rivalry. With its art school, its larger population, its proximity to larger centers and its more frequent position in the schedule of touring bands, Halifax has leaned more toward the cosmopolitan than its smaller, poorer, isolated cousin to the east. Sonic Youth played at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in 1983. A 'cross-Canada, coast-to-coast' tour is Vancouver to Halifax. It is unquestionably the capitol of the region.

The loose group of bands that formed the core of the St. John's scene during this period - Hardship Post, Bung, Potbelly and the Lizband - shared a rehearsal space and continued with the relatively friendly, co-operative spirit that characterized the city's punk forbears. Winters says that those four bands "would play together almost all of the time" (interview); Younghusband remembers that "Potbelly were part of a lucky rush of bands of the same generation who were all friends" (email); Pickard calls Bung the Lizband's "brother band" (interview). Posters from the era confirm that the big four were constant show-mates, a clearly identifiable group separated by Hardship Post's decision to migrate to more melodic climes.

The LSPU Hall all ages scene had exploded, and Younghusband - who had begun a

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[2]Winters, who we'll recall "fucking hate[s] Toronto," has no great affection for one of Halifax's most popular 90s bands, Thrush Hermit, with whom Bung played three shows during a tour in 1994. He fondly remembers them as "smarmy little fucking dinks." (interview)

regular bi-weekly column in the province's daily newspaper, the *Evening Telegram*, called "Potbelly Nation" - notes that "once we realised that our audience was no longer just high schoolers we started playing at Bar None (which Jon Whelan [Bung's singer] began running) and then at the Loft and things kind of went wild for a time" (email). The Halifax-hosted East Coast Music Awards in 1993 served as the scene's debutante ball. Liz calls the trip the four bands took the "Newfie invasion," claiming that it made "quite an impact" (interview); Winters recalls how the Halifax crowds "didn't take to us [Bung] very much...they took to Hardship Post and the Lizband more" (interview). Allison McLeod, of Halifax band and Sub Pop signees Jale, recalls that Hardship Post "blew up the city when they came here" (Barclay et al., 513). Spurred by the 'artistic affinity' Sebastian Lippa felt with the city, Hardship Post moved to Nova Scotia where they recorded with Rick White of Eric's Trip and released an EP on Sloan's Murderecords, acquired a high profile manager in Peter Rowan, and eventually signed to Sub Pop records, turning down "a huge American record deal [with Elektra]" (Barclay et al., 514). Paul Gruchy, who "never sensed much of a Halifax/St. John's division," downplays the effect of the move on the scene:

> There was some joking when Hardship Post left because they'd done a TV interview saying they wouldn't move, and four or five months later they were gone. So there had to be a bit of joking about that. But there was no "what are we going to do now," it was au revoir. (interview)

Darrell Bennett, however, remembers that the band's first homecoming show at the Loft was "blocked, but hostile...there were a few heckles of 'go back to Halifax'" (interview). Bennett also authored a short treatise on the relationship between the two cities in the short-lived mid-nineties zine *Granite*, wherein he confirms the sentiment Lippa felt hemmed-in by:

> Our St. John's bands tend to be more aggressive and heavier than those of the melodic, poppy nature of Halifax. I think the reason for this is possibly the isolation of St. John's, the punk influence on our bands, or the lack of promotion and money we receive, all just echo in our music [sic]. ("Letter," *Granite*, 2)

The case of Hardship Post illustrates the frustration built into the scene's shaky infrastructure and perhaps even its music: the city's punk heritage was first defined by crass humour and the aggression of hardcore and metal, and the cultural and economic climate of the community practically ensured near-complete obscurity, to say nothing of the enduring curse of geography. Hardship Post escaped and began shedding their grunge trappings. While this worked for Sloan, whose turn away from the loud sound of the moment toward classic pop aesthetics made them critical darlings and Canadian rock stars, it signalled the slow, crumbling end of Newfoundland's indie rock hope. Lippa's summary is succinct and telling:

> We had been in a totally antagonistic mode, which was stupid in a way. When we started we really kicked ass. We became pretty popular around here because of that. As we were in the infancy of our career and picking up fans we changed our sound. Our shows were always a collection of one record at a time. It wasn't really inclusive of our earlier stuff, which had made us popular. We were so anti-career that it gained the impression that it was credible, but it certainly doesn't sell t-shirts. (Barclay et al., 515)

Immediately after the Sub Pop debut, 1994's *Somebody Spoke*, the band fired their drummer and toured as a two-piece. A 1995 single was released as the New Hardship Post, but the group had completely disintegrated. Rumours circulate about Lippa living in Thailand, teaching English.

The early nineties boom created the first band, after fifteen years of Newfoundland punk, that truly registered on the radar of the North American underground. Reliable venues emerged, shows were well-attended, recordings were being made, and bands were finally mounting modestly successful tours off-island.

After the boom: the mid-90s.

At the end of 1994, Best Dressed Records, a short-lived label begun by Geoff Younghusband, Jonathan Swyers (of Sterling Slacks) and Fred Gamberg (of bizarre, minimal dirge-merchants Giver), issued *Danger: Falling Rock*, the first local commercial compilation to feature studio-quality recordings. Consisting of a cassette and 8" x 11" photocopied zine (with a page devoted to and designed by each of the acts), the comp was a showcase for the booming 'alternative' scene which had formed after the media breakthrough of the years immediately previous. Bung, the Lizband and Potbelly (who had broken up after a successful 14-show tour that had taken them as far as western Ontario that July) contributed "the strongest cuts," according to a review in the *Express*, a bi-weekly provincial light news and lifestyle paper, but the tape endures as a showcase for the less popular acts of the early nineties wave who had disbanded before managing to produce widely available recordings of their own - Darshiva (featuring the other prominent female artist of the period, Natalie Noseworthy), Ditch (Gruchy and Rowe's britpop-influenced post-Undermine outfit), and Sterlingslacks (Doug Jones' post-Potbelly band with Darryl Grace and Jon Swyers) - and an introduction to some bands who would figure prominently in the scene in the next few years - Potatobug, Ched and Giver.

People generally look back at this era as a heyday. Darryl Bennett remembers his first trip to the LSPU Hall to see Ditch, Dead Red (another brit-pop influenced group whose members were originally from the province's west coast), Potbelly and Potatobug:

> It was full to capacity, and the floor was...it was really wild, and I still haven't seen anything like that since. It was the attention, it was cooler to be into that type of scene. Once Nirvana and Sloan broke, a lot more people started going to shows. You had to go downtown to see what was going on, there was no internet, to hear about a show you had to go down. (interview)

Bennett also recalls, perhaps with the corrective vision of hindsight, how accessible things seemed:

> It was easy to make friends, too. When I started going to shows everyone seemed really friendly. If you see a certain band a few times, you start talking to people around you, and the people in the bands would notice you there a few times and say hello. Everyone was pretty approachable. (interview)

Gruchy says that "it didn't seem elitist at all...it seemed pretty welcoming" (suggesting, in my direction, that "maybe you were just shy" [interview]).

Rhiannon Thomas, precocious 14-year old singer of short-lived mid-nineties punks the Blowhogs and leader of popular contemporary band the Co-Stars/Coast Guard (the former morphed into the latter during the period of my writing), remembers things differently:

> I started going to shows when I was twelve or thirteen and everyone was into grunge and pretended to have been listening to the stuff for ten years, which wasn't true. A lot of people in the scene were holier than thou and cooler and 'I've been hanging out downtown for five years' and whatever. (interview)

Elaborating on Bennett's remark concerning alt-rock's media visibility and its relationship to increased local show attendance, Thomas reflects on the quickly changing face of the all-ages audience:

> I remember trying to convince girls in my class to come and they wouldn't come. Two weeks later is when it exploded, and I thought, great! I had friends, and something to do on the weekends, and there were kids everywhere, and I just thought: what's going on? These people hated me at school. There were all kinds of people. Every weekend there were big all ages shows, with four or five bands, and kids were out getting loaded. Looking back I didn't realise that it was sort of a cultural moment. It irritated me that all these people who all through school wouldn't fucking talk to me were suddenly interested. I resented these people a bit. (interview)

The weight of the cultural moment would not dissipate for a few years. Bung toured eastern

Canada in 1994, playing half a dozen times in Toronto during that year's Canadian Music Week alone, along with the aforementioned Thrush Hermit shows and a date in Montreal with troubled buzz pop legends the Nils. Winters says that the band turned down an offer from a major label around this time, despite the fact that the tour cost four thousand essentially un-recoupable dollars ("those types of things kept us in St. John's," he adds).

I have vivid memories of driving through downtown St. John's with my parents in 1993 and 1994, noticing greasy-haired, flannel-wearing, Doc Marten-ed hipsters milling around the war memorial and the record shops. I remember photocopied posters on telephone polls and stolen car radio moments with CHMR. When I started to adopt the fashion of the moment (albeit two or three years after the fact), my rural classmates derided me for "dressing like a townie" (the light slur used by Newfoundlanders for denizens of the city). Scott "Furl" Drover, a good-natured delinquent having a second go at grade twelve in my high school, let me borrow a third-generation cassette dub of *Danger: Falling Rock* and spoke reverently of Bung, Darshiva and Potmaster shows. I was the very model of a bayman: suspicious of townie trend-hopping and unimpressed by the accomplishments of the city's popular bands. The songs on the tape sounded like second-rate alterna-sludge to me, and I remained a devoted fan of the poppier, more literate Halifax groups.

Not all of Newfoundland's rural music fans were as obnoxiously snobby as I was, nor were students at all rural schools as uninterested in fashion and culture as my classmates. The Carbonear and Harbour Grace area, one of the largest centers on the Avalon Peninsula, was home to a relatively large enclave of young musicians, writers, skateboarders and weirdos who would regularly head into the city to hang out and attend all ages shows. People boasted of skating with

the drummer from Potbelly, or playing hackey sack with Ritche from Potatobug. Sensing the link with the area, during the summer of 1995 the city's musicians organised a two-day concert which was held in a field in Makinsons (an hour's drive outside of the city, twenty minutes from Harbour Grace, and next door to my hometown, South River) . Cursed with the unfortunate name 'Newfstock,' the event featured most of the moment's prominent city bands, received coverage on CBC Radio 2's Saturday night alt-program *Realtime*, and was audible from my bedroom window. Most of the reports I received from the weekend concerned the unbelievable number of beer bottles collected and returned (to facilitate the acquisition of more beer) and the scandal of smoking joints with Carbonear Integrated Collegiate's hip, young literature teacher. Nobody seemed to remember the performances too clearly.

My nostalgic digression is designed to illustrate the reach the city's scene had at its zenith, and to exaggerate Rhiannon Thomas' remark about the 'cultural moment' we happened to experience. There was not complete stylistic consensus in the alt-milieu, of course. Echoing Paul Gruchy's dismay, Kent Burt - former CHMR Program Director, Gamberg list founder, and proudly 'new wave' solo recording artist as the Linger Effect - remembers the early-mid-nineties as "a very grey time":

> I hated Hardship Post until the "Sugarcane" single - about the time that they jumped ship and moved to Halifax. The city was desperately uninteresting for a long time - though I am probably quite alone in that thinking. The only fun band around for the longest time was Giver. And then came the dark, scary BucketTruck era... *shudder* (Burt email)

Alex Schwartz, singer for JKW and Toronto transplant strikes a harmonious note:

> Frankly there was only a few bands I really liked. There was a lot of boring grunge going on since that was the cool thing back then. I was interested in the whole thing anyway, as there was such a buzz of energy in those days around independent/underground music in St. John's. Kind of exiting even if you thought half the music was shit. (Schwartz email)

Save Bung, most of the "boring grunge" bands had abandoned the political lyrics which had

characterized much of the last decade's music. Jon Whelan, that band's singer and the operator of Bar None, would later run for the provincial legislature as a Green Party member and write a political column in alternative paper *Current*. "Nation," from Bung's popular EP *Whole*, addressed the debate surrounding Newfoundland's joining Canada in 1949:

> Well I'll live with my natural alienation,
> It stems from more than geographic location,
> (When) you live off the edge of an outsized nation,
> You know outsiders dictate your life-situation too.
> The fish are gone man,
> Our only resource is desperate young bastards,
> Gonna work cheap and of course they
> Hit the mainland without a cent in hand,
> We all understand that this has all been planned.
>
> "Thank god we're surrounded by water!" In this federation,
> July the first is not my celebration,
> Got my own land, I got my own feelings,
> But the minions of dominions don't give a fuck about my opinion,
> Minions of dominions don't give a fuck about you!

Typically, the populist lyrical appeal, pregnant attitude and wild wooliness won the band a fiercely devoted local following (which remains both fierce and devoted today) and makes them some of the most direct heirs to the Newfoundland punk aesthetic sculpted by Da Slyme.

The Lizband's *Six Songs* EP included a cover of local celebrity and singer-songwriting darling Ron Hynes' "Mary had a baby," a song about teenage pregnancy and rural claustrophobia. Pickard was the only enduringly strong female voice from the time, and she asserts that "all along this was a girl in a boys' world sort of situation. Which was very strange because it was like I was in a foreign environment, in a foreign language, and it took me a while" (Liz interview). Rhiannon Thomas was inspired by Liz's unique presence:

> I saw a bunch of bands that all kind of melded together but I loved the Lizband. All the cool rock and roll bands never had girls and there was Liz on stage wailing her lungs out and I just thought it was really cool. (Thomas interview)

The continued absence of women in rock bands in St. John's betrayed a lack of progress out of step with the North American indie-punk world (riot grrl had come and gone, Cub and Jale were two of the biggest indie bands in Canada). Thomas alludes to a less-than-welcoming community climate:

> Why don't girls do it? Maybe they don't think they can? Girls are singers, or fixtures, not really writing songs. There have been a few girls around, and there was Liz's all-woman thing, but it came across as gimmicky. I think St. John's is just behind the times a lot. It really is. It's ridiculous. A lot of guys around are really patronizing. When I started telling people that I was in a band a lot of people were like "that's nice...isn't that cute...little Rhiannon is going to be in a band, isn't that sweet." When I told a bunch of these guys they said "that's going to suck." Why not be supportive and say "go do it, have fun," instead of "you're going to be terrible at playing guitar until you've been doing it for ten years." (interview)

Pickard thinks its bound up with the conservative nature that comes with the size and isolation Newfoundland:

> Girls still just see themselves as audience members. In bigger cities it's more common, it's more cosmopolitan, there's just more going on. I think population might have something to do with it. The Catholic school system might have something to do with it: "where the men are men and the women are women." I've played shows where 35 musicians played on the stage and I was the only woman. (interview)

The grunge-heyday era essentially ended at around this time. All ages shows happened with less and less frequency at the LSPU Hall (where "crowds were thin and there wasn't much money going around" [Bennett interview]), bands were breaking up or reconfiguring, and another generation of musicians was moving away. Fur Packed Action, the city's most popular turn-of-the-century band, formed as a Bung/Potmaster side project in 1994. Mount Pearl's nu-metal pariahs Buckettruck started attracting attention and derision, and JKW played their first shows as an overdriven, ghoulish blues punk band. The contemporary punk and hardcore scene's roots can

be traced to a few of the bands from these years (Dogma, Ratfish, Molotov Smile, Good to Go). Attention from the national media evaporated and the scene began to fragment. The underground effectively resubmerged in the mid-nineties.

Local division, the enduring problem of isolation, virtual scenes: the late nineties.

Sometimes it's really hard to still be here, and to still be at it. Why am I here? I do want to stay here, but I'd like to get my music out of here, and to play out of here, and to have some money.
Liz Pickard.

Halifax here we come.
You know just what I want:
A Mercedes Benz, Muchmusic friends,
And a clever way to talk to Sook Yin Lee
All about the video. Going to get so bad
We're going to do an ad for Newfoundland Telephone.
"Alien Suck Up," JKW.

There's a weird, isolated loyalty to St. John's, "let's stay here together," and if people leave they're sell outs. They're not sell outs! They're just out playing.
Rhiannon Thomas.

By the end of the mid-nineties, the contemporary scene had formed. The Edge, Calio's, Junctions (the old Bar None), and the Ship Inn (longtime folk and arts community watering hole) were the rock clubs most frequently booked; all ages shows were being held in increasingly esoteric locations (including community and church halls in small towns outside the city). The sharp division between the city's punk and hardcore community and the more alt-rock leaning bar scene was a relatively new phenomenon. Gruchy observes:

> The local then and now hardcore scenes are quite different. More integrated and not as much anger, then, I don't think. There are different reasons for getting into that kind of music nowadays. (interview)

Inheriting skate punk from Good to Go, Molotov Smile and Hung Up were Plan 13, Under Authority, and Life of Leisure. CBS^3 straight-edge hardcore followed Dogma and "all the Andre Samuelson bands that sounded the same" (Wight interview), and began with This Day Forth, who

formed after Ratfish (Mike Gruchy, Pete Ball, and Steve Powers) collapsed. TDF featured all of Ratfish with Adam Wight and Tyrone Rumbolt, and were heavily influenced by the metal-leanings of the North American hardcore popular at the time (the root of the fashion-conscious metalcore which has breeched the mainstream in the past few years). Plan 13 and Life of Leisure were fan favourites; Wight says that his outfit was "the band that people would go outside and smoke to."

Dirtneck Records, a small local label, began booking bands and releasing CDs in 1998-99. Wight describes their genesis as opportunistic at best:

> There was a show at the Star of the Sea [an old community hall downtown usually booked for weddings] when things stopped being shitty. There was a good turnout, and Gary [of Dirtneck] started to think "we could really cash in on this." They really fucked us over. There was a show when there were little forms for audience members to fill out, and each band would get paid per check. We played about 15 shows with them. They'd set up the show, do the sound, get the gear, and organize everything. They booked the fucked up shows in weird places, in Torbay and St. Phillips. Nobody ever got paid. (interview)

Under Authority and Plan 13 both released CDs through Dirtneck, who released a local punk compilation, decided to branch out into FM-style radio rock, and folded.

This Day Forth managed to make two trips to Nova Scotia before splitting in 2000, including a trip to Halifax to open for straight edge heroes Good Clean Fun. Hung Up, the skate punk band who shared membership with Bucket Truck, toured the Maritimes and played a few dates on the Vans Warped Tour. By this point, the internet was the chief link between the island and the mainland.

Sloannet, the first east coast email listserv, started in 1992, but focused largely on the

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[3]A collection of essentially suburban towns northwest of the city

goings-on of the titular band and the Halifax scene. Geoff Younghusband made regular contributions and announced St. John's shows, as did Dave Andrews (CHMR DJ and member of overlooked indie rock outfit Johari Window), Darryl Bennett and others, but St. John's, lacking the media profile and the web infrastructure and tech savvy of Halifax, rarely figured in discussion.

The first local hardcore messageboard was part of the This Day Forth website. By signing the Halifax '902' board (it is common for hardcore scenes to refer to themselves by telephone area code) and making connections with bands like Envision and Left for Dead, it was easy for This Day Forth to set up shows away. Wight says that the message board was integral for uniting the "scattered" fans of modern-day metallic hardcore in the city, and Steven Musgrave, a Cape Breton native who moved to the city to attend Memorial's music school, met most of his future Killing and Not Enough Bullets bandmates online (Musgrave interview). The controversial contemporary 'XXX709XXX' messageboard has been around for over five years, and while it was an essential scene resource for Wight, Musgrave, and scores of others who may have had difficulty in even locating the exclusive and elusive scene, the board often repelled local veterans like Paul Gruchy and Darryl Bennett (who had an especially troubling online name-calling encounter with a hardcore board poster). In the three years I have been reading the board, frequent posters have seemed to come and go fairly regularly.

The contemporary St. John's hardcore scene is an extremist microcosm of the way the city's rock underground has always worked: bands form and reform with similar players, but at a much swifter rate (Wight alone has been in 6 bands since 1998 - TDF, Through:enemy:eyes, D-Comp, Of the Ashes, Taxidriver, Let 'Em Eat Lead - five in the last three years alone); mainland

access is limited, mostly by money (all ages hardcore shows are easily the least lucrative performance a band could make - Cherie Pyne of Secret Cervix, a mathy punk band, says that she got a "great feeling from the shows" but "made absolutely no money" [interview]); and few proper releases ever surface (scores of DIY recordings and demos circulate, but there has only been one real record in five years: the Not Enough Bullets/D-Comp split 7", released in 2001). All ages shows, naturally, attract an almost exclusively underage audience. The first hardcore show I attended in the winter of 2000 at the Riverdale Tennis Club was filled far past capacity with teenagers, and it seemed like I was entering a fully-formed self-contained world. Wight says that the sub-community generally thought of the night as a breakthrough, but realised that the large audience may not have been indicative of a widespread surge of interest in hardcore, and certainly not a surge of interest in straight edge:

> We thought "great, there's finally some change happening." But those shows were just big Friday night high school binge nights. (interview)

Dan Murray, a high school student, musician, writer and organizer, sees the same fickle interest in the scene now that Rhiannon Thomas saw in the early 90s, stating "I can see over half of the people my age who go to shows not going in a year or so. I think more people are going for the social aspect than the music" (interview). Despite the predictably quick turnover, the all ages scene is thriving; there are shows almost every weekend.

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The Gamberg mailing list began in late 1999. Named after Fred Gamberg, the committed musician, show promoter, CHMR DJ, and label-owner whose death in a swimming accident robbed the community of its most enthusiastic booster, the list was begun by Kent Burt "as a fun

way to chat with my friends and to get to know other show-goers" (Burt email). After a year or so of in-jokes and friendly discussion amongst a handful of band members and fans, list subscriptions began to grow steadily and the debate took on a different tone. Burt sees the potential in the discussion, but admits that it is rarely used as constructively as he had imagined:

> I'm a bit torn about how it has developed - there are certainly a lot more subscribers now than during the first couple of years, but there is a lot more pointless bickering as well. I'm not sure that many people on the list even enjoy it. Quite a lot of subscribers are involved directly with the music scene, but they certainly don't use it in the way they could. There are a lot of issues for which the Gamberg community could be a great asset. It could be a huge soapbox or gathering place for settling venue issues in a decisive manner, promotional idea brainstorming, and other infrastructure-building tools. However, the Gamberg community is overpowered by loudmouthed idiots who can't take anything seriously except prolonging discourse. (interview)

Almost everyone involved with the scene is at least a group member (there were 344 subscriptions as of December 2003), if not an active participant or a fan. Rhiannon Thomas is certainly not the latter:

> I had to stop reading Gamberg because it was driving me nuts. It's good for finding out about shows, but the ridiculous discussions that people were getting into, I don't care. The list brings out the worst in people. People who would never say this stuff to your face are in their bedrooms and they're saying all this stuff and it's like, get a life (interview).

Mark Turner, guitarist of alt-rock outfit King Nancy and occasional trumpeter for noise pop jokers Good Kids Pretend They're Bad shares this point of view:

> It's a way for people to argue without having face-to-face conversations. I don't think it serves much more of a purpose, to be honest. In terms of publicizing shows, it's completely unnecessary. Maybe it's a good thing if people have questions about history or if bands want to interact. But in my experience on Gamberg it's bickering, senseless bickering. I think it doesn't really serve a purpose. I think if there person whose name it was founded in ever knew, he'd come back and kick our asses (interview).

Liz Pickard is wary of the medium in general:

> If I read something on a list that's saying something bad about me, I flip out! And I get

> really defensive, and then I feel really embarrassed, so I'm trying to not write on it anymore. And I also have a few people who I write email to - they're really long, in-depth letters - who when I see them can barely look me in the eye. It's very weird. I check it out and see what's being said (Pickard interview).

Darryl Bennett says that the scene's "innocence has been lost" with the rise of its internet culture (interview). Certainly, there is far less elegant mystery than there was in the twenty years of scene communication that preceded web discussion, but it is probably disingenuous to call the past 'innocent.' Nostalgia for the early nineties is increasing, and Bung reunion shows have drawn some of the biggest crowds in recent memory. Bennett's and Gruchy's claims about the inclusiveness and appearance of community during the boom of a decade ago are likely attached to fond memories of friendships made and shows attended. Bennett admits:

> It was a bigger scene, and people were much nicer. I think it may be easy to say that in retrospect, but it's at least partly true. There was infighting and backbiting, but I didn't find out about it until years later. You think it's all bands helping out bands, and years later you realise that people weren't always that way. (interview)

Gruchy disagrees that there is any missing "innocence," insisting that "the only thing that's lost, I think, is personal communication" (interview). This is one of the more interesting paradoxes of the rise of web forums: with all of the information being exchanged, there seems to be less connection, or perhaps there has emerged a different, more fractured type of exchange (like the kind Pickard describes above). Bennett says that "you know too much," and Burt's claim about 'misuse' of the resource alludes to problems of open but imbalanced access.

Conclusion.

There are some individuals who are too cool for school, and whose impetus for involvement is ego-driven, and they're not thinking about community, they're thinking about dissing people and making people feel shitty. Then there are people like Danny Keating, who is such a torch-carrier, he's so supportive of women and men, and he wants people to get on stage. But then there are those others, who are very grumpy people, and I think there's sometimes a disproportionate number of grumpy people.

Cherie Pyne.

If you want to fight, man, go to the Avalon Mall.

"Surf Nazis Must Die." JKW.

The scene problems in the St. John's independent rock community are the same problems experienced in most towns of a comparable size (as per Straw's observation of trans-geographic structural commonalities), but they are rendered unique by virtue of the community's isolation. The dynamism offered by the appearance of touring bands and the experience and exposure available to local bands who tour is noticeably absent. The stasis the isolation affords adds the "creative advantage" that Liz Pickard mentions: support is abundant, trends circulate more slowly, and satisfaction resides in more modest expectations.

Blum's definition of scene sees most reflection in the more performative nooks of the city's indie/punk: we see his grammar spoken at the shows, on the street, and in web forums. Straw's take on the concept helps us understand the link between the activities of scene members in Newfoundland and those of the global rock underground. Hebdige's dated analysis of subculture provides the blind hope that has driven what I call the punk ideal for decades, and adds the weight of progressive politics and the clamour for change.

I think the clamour still ricochets off of the granite of Signal Hill, rolls down Duckworth Street, then splits, leaping the harbour and surging towards Cape Spear on one side and blasting

up Long's Hill toward the University and the seats of governmental power on the other. Most importantly, perhaps, it creeps into the West End, where the heart of a community has taken a position in a co-operatively-run rehearsal space and headquarters. A new organization called the Independent Arts Co-Op has inhabited a house on Symes Bridge Road. Donated by the city, the space houses musicians, writers, painters, and potters, is completely artist-run and maintained, and represents the spirit of friendship and productivity which has defined the brightest corners and most dedicated members of the Newfoundland rock underground. They are the people who are hewing their own ragged legends in a city that could use a few new ones.

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Sample questionnaire

History

When did you first encounter independent music in the city?

How did you begin to participate?

What was the nature of your participation? [which bands were you in, which concerts did you see, etc.]

Please describe the independent music community in the city when you were a participant.

Mixed benefits of 'scene'

How would you characterize the nature of the city's independent scene? Does it have the supportive feeling suggested by 'community'?

What role do internet forums play in shaping the contemporary scene? Do they help foster 'community'?

Do you think 'community' as a indie/punk ideal suits St. John's? Why or why not?