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The 40th Street Underground: A Mini-Ethnography of Sorts

Introduction

The first half of this paper will attempt to describe the day-to-day existence of a West Philadelphia rock club. The second contains my own tentative analysis of my findings during the course of my research, which lasted from late September to early December 1993. Many recent writers in anthropology, particularly Marcus and Fischer (1986: Ch.2), have stressed the need for "reflexivity" in the writing of ethnographies. I agree with the notion that the ethnographer should position him or herself for the reader in relation to the subject matter about which s/he writes. This issue seems particularly relevant to my own experience conducting research at the 40th Street Underground, as shortly will become apparent. I will begin this paper by relating how I chose this particular site for my field research. I believe as well that it is necessary to relate my own sources of bias up front in this particular research project.

## The Ethnographer's Expectations

West Philly is a fermenting countercultural stew of poets, musicians, and artists. The music has churned away in basements and warehouse parties for years, where friends play for friends and honesty and uniqueness are applauded...the music has oozed into legit venues like Cafe Kairos, the 40th St. Underground, and across the Schuylkill to Center City. The West Philly crucible has distilled a powerful brew of artistic purity and bewildering variety. In this collection Starfish Productions offers eight of the best of the West Philly family. No two sound alike. Listen up.

The above passage is from the liner notes of If It Dropped Into Your Neighborhood, You'd Look Up Too: The West Philly Collection (1993 Starfish Productions), a compilation album that I purchased shortly before moving here to West Philadelphia. The album also contains the following dedication in the booklet that accompanies the compact disc: "Special Thanks To: [long list of people and organizations]...and most especially, importantly, and essentially, all of those dirt poor, coffee sucking, herb smoking, big dreaming slack geeks who've made the scene and are the scene" (Ibid.). I was intrigued by these two passages, to say the least. Words like "countercultural," "uniqueness," "honesty," "geeks," and "scene" conjured up powerful images in my mind. I envisioned a tightly-knit community of creative non-conformists and social misfits ("geeks") who use art and original music to subvert the dominant paradigms of bourgeois America. I imagined that the

expressive culture of this community would glorify an alternative lifestyle, possibly involving drug use ("herb smoking"), that existed outside of normal middle-class life.

I was further intrigued when I found out that the 40th Street Underground, one of the "legit venues" mentioned in the album liner notes, was a bar less than a block away from the University of Pennsylvania campus. It seemed like the perfect focal point for a field project concerned with exploring the social meanings of alternative rock music and local music-based subcultures. I set out to the Underground to find out how much of what I had read about the West Philadelphia "scene" was true and how much was hype.

I admit I had two additional, ulterior motives for choosing the 40th Street Underground as my field site. First of all, as I mentioned above, I was new to the area and was eager to explore the local recreational and entertainment offerings in West Philadelphia. I most likely would have visited the 40th Street Underground, and perhaps even become a regular there, even if I hadn't planned on writing an ethnography about it.

My second ulterior motive relates to my avocation as an amateur rock musician. The band I was in at the time was looking for places to play, and I wanted to find out if the 40th Street Underground would be a possible candidate for gigs. As a result I may have been more cautious than I would ordinarily be when talking to the people in charge.

At this point it is necessary to expose another source of ethnographic bias that became apparent shortly after I began my research. Almost all anthropologists at some point in their career face the prospect of "going native" and abandoning their original anthropological mission. I quickly discovered that, in a way, I already was a "native." I found that as an educated twentysomething white male alternative music fan (and musician), I already possessed a basic performative competence in 40th Street Underground discourse. I was able to have detailed conversations with musicians setting up onstage about the relative merits of different guitar amplifiers as well as participate in an animated discussion about vintage American hardcore punk bands taking place between guys sitting at the bar. Consequently, I frequently found it difficult to observe events from the "outside" as ethnographers are expected to do, without presupposing any contextual details invisible to the observer. It was often easy to project my own experiences onto the behavior I observed, a temptation I tried hard to resist. However, I did find that my previous knowledge was often quite helpful when I later tried to form interpretations for my observations; I will return to this issue in the concluding remarks at the end of the paper. For now, the reader is advised to keep the ethnographer's biases in mind as I relate my findings in the following pages.

## The Setting

The 40th Street Underground bills itself as "Philadelphia's hottest nightspot." It is a subterranean, box-car shaped room located at the corner of Fortieth and Spruce Streets beneath a popular all-night cheesesteak place that owns and operates it. The entrance is on street level and one must go down two flights of steps after entering.

The sight awaiting the visitor at the bottom of the stairs is somewhat underwhelming. On the left is a small stage, which consists of two rectangular platforms raised eight inches off the ground. On the right is a row of dark wooden tables and benches built into the wall. Further down on the left, past the stage, is a small, ordinary-looking bar shrouded in darkness. Across from the bar is a door leading to the restrooms. A television is mounted on the ceiling to the right of the front entrance and a jukebox, containing one hundred compact discs, sits between the restrooms and the tables. There are no other distinctive features in the room other than some tables and chairs scattered around in the small space between the stage and the bar. The room is narrow and low-ceilinged, and dark wood paneling pervades throughout, reminiscent of a dimly-lit medieval tavern. One significant consequence of the way the room is set up is that it is difficult to watch the band play while sitting at the bar, though hearing them is definitely not a problem in such a small space.

## A Typical Night

The following description is a composite sketch of a typical night at the 40th Street Underground. The description is based on ethnographic materials that were produced during and after several nights of observation and interaction at the site. An example from that material, field notes and commentary from a single performance on the night of October 30, 1993, is included at the end of this paper in the Appendix.

The 40th Street Underground, hereafter occasionally referred to as the 40SU, is open Wednesday through Sunday night. Doors officially open at 9pm, although very few people actually show up that early. I would usually arrive between 9:00 and 9:30, and often the place would be completely deserted except for the bartender, who would still be setting up. Depending on the night, a bouncer will be stationed at the door anywhere from the time the doors open to around 10:15. The bouncer is a large, burly man whose job is to check ID's (you must be 21 to enter) and collect a three dollar "cover" (charge for admission). (One of the reasons I always arrived early was to avoid this cover charge.) The role of bouncer is played by several different individuals; they either sit on the landing between the two staircases or right outside the door. Occasionally more than one bouncer will be standing by the entrance; this may be for added security (though it is unclear why this would be necessary), though it often seems like only one is actually on duty, while the others are just "hanging out." They

tend to be somewhat vindictive and unfriendly when interacting with the people who enter the club. This seems to be a common behavior among bouncers of all sorts.

There are usually two bands scheduled to play each night. The first normally plays from around 10:30 to 11:30pm, and the second plays from around midnight to 1:00 am. The bar usually stays open until around 2:00 am. The following is a list of some of the names of bands who played at the 40th Street Underground during the time interval spanned by my research (the idea for this list came from Finnegan, 1989:107-109):

Ignotia	Ninefinger	Martha's Monster
Feel	Poor Luther's Bones	Red Paint People
Phleg Camp	Bone Tunnel	Babelbox
Pork	Feel	Tin Men
Genghis Khan Experience	the Pox	O Mighty Isis
Grieving Eucalyptus	Toybox	Random X
Imbroglia	86	Spongegod
Groovy Monster	Purge	EDO
Peel	Lumpy Pudding	Zen Guerilla
Papa's Gun	Zonic Shockum	Puncture Project
Bacchan Rage	Bag of Hammers	Mondo Topless
The National Wrecking Co.	Zoeticphunkphyletic	

## The 40th Street Underground Discourse

During the times when the bands are not performing, the patrons sit at tables or at the bar and play songs on the jukebox. Except for the very beginning of the night, there is almost no point in the evening during which music, either live or prerecorded, is not playing. The music fills up the "sonic space" around the different conversations going on between groups of people. The loud music (the jukebox is turned up enough to approach the sound level of the live bands) allows for more privacy and creates an atmosphere of leisure. This is similar to the way music is used in most bars.

Often it is hard to converse anywhere in the room while the bands are playing, though that doesn't stop people from trying. Most of the conversations in which I participated took place among the people sitting around the bar. When I refer to "the 40SU discourse," I am referring primarily to the content of these conversations, which seemed to revolve primarily around references to various pop culture phenomena. During my research I took part in discussions about the merits of countless bands, science fiction movies from the 1950s, guitars, cartoon characters, MTV, and the feasibility of conducting a "sociological" study of soundchecks. My preliminary conclusion regarding this "discourse" is that it is not open to everyone; it seems to be overwhelmingly white, male, and educated in its orientation.



## The Performance

Various "framing devices" (after Goffman 1974) are employed to alert the audience that the band is about to start performing. These devices include shutting off the jukebox (sometimes in mid-song), turning off the lights over the tables and turning on the spotlights aimed at the stage, and usually an aural cue from one of the band members, most often a vocal greeting directed at the audience.

These framing devices separate the band's "real" performance from other onstage activities such as setting up, testing equipment, and soundcheck. During soundcheck, which usually takes place fairly early in the evening if it happens at all, the bands play a small portion of their set in order to hear how they sound and, if necessary, adjust the relative volumes of the instruments. Soundcheck therefore resembles an actual performance in most ways except that it is shorter and it is not accompanied by a change in lighting. Another way in which the soundcheck is distinguished from an actual performance is where the musicians place themselves. Often musicians will stand or sit out in the audience in order to hear the overall sound better. This effect is especially dramatic when the musicians possess wireless hookups for their instruments (eliminating the need for cables). Martha's Monster's bassist actually walked up the front steps of the 40SU during their soundcheck, playing the whole time, while their lead vocalist sang while sitting in one of the booths facing the stage.

During the actual performance, about an hour later, the whole band stayed onstage. I have found that while band members (other than the drummer) frequently move around during soundcheck, during performance only singers occasionally move around in the area in front of the platform, while the other members confine themselves to the stage.

An interesting phenomenon related to the framing of performance is that although there are usually audience members present during the time the band is setting up and doing soundcheck, the band members attract no overt attention from them, even when they are playing loudly, during these activities. Similarly, when a band finishes playing their set, the attention of the audience is almost immediately diverted from the stage and no one will appear to be watching the musicians while they "break down" and put away their equipment. The jukebox will usually start playing a few seconds after the band completes their last song and continue playing until the second band performs or until the bar closes for the night.

### The Audience

Attendance at 40SU performances depends on the night, the band's local popularity, and the size of the band's "entourage." Attendance at most events ranges from thirty or so people to well over a hundred. I define "entourage" (an etic term) as those people in the audience who arrived with the band, or at least

appear to have some significant prior association with one of the band members judging from their interactions with that person. While most performers are male, most entourage members are female, including, but not limited to, girlfriends of the band members. On slow nights--especially Wednesdays and Thursdays--the entourage makes up a sizable percentage of the total audience, often more than half. I noticed that bands I saw play the 40SU more than once had many of the same people in the audience, people I had never seen attend any other band's performance at the 40SU.

It was on less well attended nights that my presence was most conspicuous. Many of the performers were gratified by my attention--the guitarist from Babelbox told me "It's good to have people who just wanted to hear some fucking music" who are not personally connected to anyone involved with the band and therefore not obligated to show up. Generally an audience member's observable level of involvement with the music could be correlated with whether or not the person was part of the band's entourage and with the person's gender. Women were much more likely to dance to the music; men would only dance at very crowded shows; usually they stayed seated and showed their involvement in the music by nodding their heads to the beat.

Audience members who were not part of the band's entourage often would appear aloof. There were always a few people, almost always male, who remained seated at the bar during the band's performance and appeared to ignore the musicians entirely, except

perhaps as background music similar to that provided by the jukebox. Often the most enthusiastic male members of the audience were musicians in the other band scheduled to play that night.

### An Atypical Night

An anomalous situation observed in the field can sometimes reveal certain codes of conduct that otherwise remain hidden. Such a situation occurred at the 40SU on the night of November 10th. That night, a Wednesday, was designated "Open Stage Night" by the management, who had not officially booked any bands to play. To those few who showed up at the club that evening and stayed for any length of time, a number of unusual phenomena were in evidence. Among them:

1. Very slim attendance; no more than twelve people in the entire establishment at any one time. The total number of people who made appearances that night was less than thirty. The small number of people present helped create a very casual atmosphere. One early customer sitting at the bar commented that he felt like he was in someone's living room.

2. There was no bouncer at the door the entire night. This particular night anyone could have walked in free of charge, which may have attracted some people who normally did not frequent the nightspot.

3. The single bartender on duty all night frequently participated in the performance onstage. Throughout the evening she travelled back and forth between the stage and the bar, alternately playing the role of musician and bartender. Whenever new customers walked in and sat at the bar, Kendall would conscientiously walk over and ask what they wanted within a few minutes of their arrival, serve them, and then return to the stage. The informal atmosphere and small attendance allowed this unusual code-switching behavior to take place.

4. As stated, the featured attraction was an "Open Stage Night" instead of a band. Anyone could have gotten up onstage and performed. Although only six people took advantage of this opportunity, including Kendall, the separation between performer and audience (and bartender) roles was considerably diminished.

When I first arrived at the Underground at around 9:40 pm on November 10th, Kendall was sitting next to the stage playing a blue electric bass through the club's rudimentary PA system. No one else was there and the stage was bare except for a single microphone on a stand. Kendall told me that she used to play bass before she started singing (I had seen her band, Purge, at the Underground the week before [see Appendices A and B]) and she was "getting back into it" after buying a used bass from the bass player in her band for a mere \$170 (with a case!). After serving

drinks to me and my companion, she returned to the stage. I mentioned that I wanted to play a song on the jukebox, but Kendall said she still wanted to play the bass. As bartender she had control of the jukebox volume--it is the bartender's job to turn it off before a band starts playing, and in this case she used her authority to ensure that her performance would not be interrupted by the intrusion of prerecorded music.

The dual roles of server and performer were fairly easy for Kendall to maintain because there were so few customers demanding her attention. Two minor difficulties did arise, however. During the course of the evening some tough-looking biker types entered the bar and were greeted warmly by the bartender, who seemed to know them. Later Kendall went over to the stage and began playing her bass with two other musicians, a guitarist and another bassist, who had been engaged in a collective improvisation over a drum machine pattern (they had brought in their own equipment for the performance). While Kendall was playing, a rather intoxicated biker patron attempted to embrace her on his way out. Normally one does not initiate physical contact with a performer while he or she is playing. This rule of conduct is usually followed at concerts at the 40th Street Underground. In this particular instance the intoxicated biker was unable to separate Kendall's role as friendly bartender from her then-current role as onstage performer. It is permissible to physically interact with the person in the former role but not the latter. The biker appeared

to either be confused by the fact that both roles were filled by the same person, or to be unwilling to regard Kendall's playing as part of a "real" performance context that necessitated a certain social distance between performer and audience member. Overall it seemed as though the bikers had come to the bar primarily to drink and did not take the events onstage seriously. It seems unlikely they would have paid the normally required three dollar cover charge to enter; in fact I don't think I saw them on any other night. In any case, Kendall was able to brush off the biker and he went on his way.

The other incident also involved one of the bikers. One of them, who was visibly intoxicated, had managed to push aside the table and chairs and tape blocking the restrooms, which were identified as being "out of order" by a sign on the door--people were supposed to use the restrooms upstairs in the cheesesteak place--and had apparently used the non-functioning facilities contained within. He was able to get away with this because Kendall was playing bass with the other musicians onstage and wasn't paying attention. When she saw the man emerge from the closed restrooms she cursed, put down her instrument, and walked over and resealed the tape blocking the bathroom entrance and replaced the table. She had neglected one of her bartender's responsibilities because she had become involved in the musical performance, and once she discovered what had happened as a result of her inattention, she rushed to fix the situation. Another

way in which this particular night was atypical relates to the identity of the two musicians who showed up with equipment and practically monopolized the stage for most of the evening (although when Kendall joined them they were careful to follow her lead, despite the fact that they appeared to be much more experienced players). They were two African American musicians who lived in West Philadelphia whom Kendall had never seen before. I hadn't either, and I haven't seen them since. The music they played was unquestionably a form of rock music that was not musically out of place at the 40SU. When Kendall asked them to play "blues" (so she could sing) they didn't know how and seemed totally unfamiliar with the twelve bar blues pattern.

I was struck by a sense that, although these men listened to and played the same kind of music as most of the patrons and performers I had encountered at the 40th Street Underground, they still would face obstacles if they attempted more fully to integrate themselves into the scene there that could stem from variables like socioeconomic class and education level—in other words, the dominant 40SU discourse would exclude them.

#### The 40th Street Underground as Contested Space

I mentioned before that the 40SU is owned and run by a popular cheesesteak place. I found that this arrangement often results in conflicts of interest between customers and management stemming from the fact that the managers are dissatisfied with the



amount of money the 40SU makes most nights, and have taken different steps intended to attract more people to the bar which usually backfire. For example, the whole reason why "Open Stage Night" happened in the first place was because Dave, the cheesesteak place employee in charge of running the 40SU, felt that the "loud music" of the bands was driving away "Penn students." (Actually it is true that I saw very few people who looked like Penn students during the course of my research--the 40SU seemed to attract more of a postcollegiate crowd despite the fact that it was located less than a block away from the undergraduate high rise dorms; in the nightly conversations between patrons, the school mentioned the most often was Temple). As a result, Dave recommended that Kendall not book bands for Wednesday nights, a strategy which resulted in almost no one showing up at all on those nights (see the "atypical night" described above).

Tensions between the management and customers may also have existed as a result of a cultural difference I inferred between the bouncers and the patrons. Although both groups were predominantly white, the bouncers resembled "jocks" in appearance and behavior, a group that according to my prior familiarity with the discourse of alternative rock, is considered "the enemy." The bouncers, for their part, mostly seem to regard the bands that play the 40SU and the people that go to see them as "weird." The following excerpts from my field notes from November 11, 1993

illustrate this cultural difference:

Dave (who happens to be a rather large, burly man who frequently works as a bouncer) is sitting by the front entrance of the 40th Street Underground. A heavysset, stocky guy with a baseball cap and a t-shirt with the cheesesteak place's logo on it approaches from the Pine Street side. When he reaches the door, he directs an obscene gesture at Dave in the way of a greeting. Dave opens the door and walks out, clearly annoyed. The guy is most likely a co-worker and fellow bouncer, and it appears as though he is late for his post. Some women Penn students walk out of the house next door and the guy shouts suggestive remarks at them as they walk past towards the intersection at 40th and Spruce...Three men approach the door. They are wearing leather jackets and flannel shirts. One has long hair and the others have beards. They ask Dave what bands are playing that night and he has to check the calendar hanging in the window to tell them...The men decide they don't want to pay the three dollar cover charge to get in and they leave. Afterwards the stocky guy comments, "Those guys were weird." Dave looks at his coworker and says, "Weird is good--weird is fine as long as they show up."

### A Brief History of the West Philly "Scene"

Soon after I began my research at the 40th Street Underground I realized that I was not finding what I expected to find. Many of the bands I spoke with had no connection at all to West Philadelphia, the audience was usually composed of the band's friends, and everyone I met at the 40SU seemed perfectly normal. There was only one person whom I saw every night I was there: a young man who worked as a biochemist at Penn (hardly a slacker) who was much more interested in the 40SU as a place to get inebriated and "hook up" with a member of the opposite sex than as a performance space. I was beginning to wonder if there really

was a unified music "scene" in West Philadelphia.

I finally got some answers when I interviewed Andy McConnell, someone I knew from my college days who is now heavily involved with local music in Philadelphia. Andy is a guitarist in EDO, one of the most popular bands I saw at the 40SU. He is also one of the editors of a local music publication and the drummer for the Genghis Khan Experience, another band that occasionally plays the Underground. Andy informed me that things had changed in the short time that had elapsed between the release of the compact disc that inspired me to begin my research and the present. For one thing, Kendall, the bartender mentioned in a previous section, became the 40SU's new booking agent. According to Andy, she books a "tougher, more varied group of bands, less neighborhood bands."

Though Andy told me that for a while it did seem like there was a genuine West Philadelphia alternative music scene, he also described putting together and promoting the compilation CD as being a real ordeal; many of the bands who participated in the project lost interest and didn't attend the planning meetings. The album itself is a collection of recordings each band made independently with equipment of widely varying sophistication. I spoke to Ray Monahan, who digitally assembled the album in his studio, who told me that it took him twenty hours to get all the different recordings to sound like they belonged on a single disc.

Andy told me that he felt that there was no longer a cohesive sense of community between West Philadelphia bands. He concluded

by saying that the best way to define the current scene in West Philly is to say merely that some bands attract a larger crowd in the 40th Street Underground than others. He then revealed that EDO is now trying to "get away from the West Philly crowd" by limiting how often they play at the 40SU to every 8 to 10 weeks. They would rather start playing more often in Center City clubs, especially a popular club called Khyber Pass, and Andy is concerned that the "Khyberheads" consider West Philly bands to be too "lightweight" and "happy." (I will deal with what he might mean by these terms in the next section.)

I was curious about whether or not a "counterculture" actually existed in West Philly. While it is true that there are some communities of artists, poets, and other middle-class dropouts who live in "squats"--abandoned houses where one can live without paying rent--located in West Philadelphia, Andy described the members of most West Philadelphia rock bands as "respectable, middle-class," though he later said that "everyone has different money situations." Andy himself does not have a full time job; he lives on the three hundred to four hundred dollars a month he receives from his father. His roommate, Pete, the other guitarist in EDO, is not as fortunate; he delivers pizzas and sometimes has to miss gigs because of work.

Andy expressed many misgivings about playing at the 40SU: it doesn't hold enough people, the bands have to supply their own PA system, and there is very little room for dancing. However, he

concedes that since the Cafe Kairos closed (the other "legit venue" mentioned in the CD liner notes, it was a coffee shop popular with Penn students), the Underground is the only real place to play left in West Philadelphia, and if it closed, "that would be it for the West Philly scene!"

### A Brief Look at the Music

When I asked Dave, the cheesesteak place employee in charge of running the 40SU, what kind of music bands at the Underground played, he replied, "Basic, real basic, nothing fancy." The bands I saw at the Underground all conformed to a guitar/bass/drums lineup; some bands had two guitarists, one had a percussionist. The bands had three to six members, depending on how many guitarists there were and whether the singer played an instrument or not. Within these limited parameters of instrumentation a number of different styles of alternative rock music were apparent at the 40SU. They could be distinguished by attributes such as use of dissonant intervals, guitar tone (clean vs. distorted), vocal style (harsh vs. smooth), drum rhythm patterns, and the relative importance of the bass guitar in the ensemble. Most of the styles I heard at the 40SU I would refer to as "derivative," in that they strongly resembled the styles of more established bands. Some of the more entertaining bands had sounds that were less easy to fit into an established musical genre.

Andy McConnell described the music of many West Philly bands

(like the ones on the compilation CD) as possessing a quality he called "quirkiness," which seems to refer to a particular sort of musical and lyrical absurdism apparent in their songs. According to him, it is this "quirkiness" that alienates the Khyberheads, who prefer a more "grounded, rough, and gritty" sound. My own interpretation of this division is that the Khyberheads prefer a purer "punk", sound while West Philly bands have combined the cynicism and "hard edge" of punk music with a more easygoing, "hippie" aesthetic. The discomfort with this more lighthearted approach felt by some local music fans is illustrated in the following reaction of an audience member to the scene at a 40SU show:

I just think the people there were really fake, just really--I don't know--big poseurs and they just really irritated me just watching them like they were so, like, happy and like acting just so wonderful; you know when they go home they're probably just as boring and depressing as I am or anyone else.

The fact that this person's major criticism of the event is that people seemed happy, and that this happiness must necessarily be false, raises a number of interesting issues that unfortunately lie beyond the scope of this paper. This quote does suggest, however, why a band like EDO, with its elaborate stage show (see Appendix), major chords, and silly lyrics would have trouble gaining acceptance in some circles.

I mentioned to Andy that I thought EDO's newer material sounded "darker" than their older songs, with heavier guitar and

more dissonance, and he agreed that this was related to the band's wish to be taken seriously by the audience in Center City, who, like the person quoted above, tend to view music that isn't negative and "depressing" with suspicion.

### Conclusions

In an article entitled "'Authority' Revisited: The 'Other' in Anthropology and Popular Music Studies" (1990), Grenier and Guilbault comment that scholarly treatments of popular music tend to assume that the music constructs "sites of difference" that constitute "others" suitable for study. I began my research assuming that the people I would be studying were members of a distinct subculture separated from my own reality. Though I soon found out this wasn't the case, I continued for a long time to look for things in the data that simply weren't there. My expectation that I would find an articulated culture of resistance against mainstream society in the microculture of the 40th Street Underground was an artifact of my own idealism. Simon Frith once wrote "For most young people leisure is enjoyed not in opposition to work but as an aspect of it--work and leisure complement each other; only "rebels" read rock for alternative values, only for "rebels" is music not just leisure's garnish, but its point" (1981:224). Seduced by the slick packaging of a certain compact disc and by the now-tarnished promise of "another way" inherent in the phrase "alternative music," I set out to find

rebels where there were only ordinary people out looking for a good time.

In her study of a New York performance space, Marina Roseman found that "[t]he physical structure of the New Rican Village operates as a locus for reference points that are ultimately as varied as the numerous participants entering the door...it is built partly of wood and concrete, and built partly of concepts and expectations. Where the wall ends and the concept begins depends on the interpreter" (1983:132). The same could be said of the 40th Street Underground, and indeed when I "entered the door" of that establishment I brought with me my own set of concepts and expectations.

Some of my research did end up confirming my initial assumptions. I expected to find a local mode of discourse that excluded working-class and female points of view. Whether it was Kendall saying that she hoped no "rappers" would come down off the street and monopolize Open Stage Night, or a guy sitting at the bar commenting that it must be "redneck night" when a blue-collar, traditional heavy metal band took the stage, or ethnocentric assumptions about what constitutes a "music scene" that do not take into account local African American neighborhood musicians (after all, white bohemians are but a small minority of the West Philly population), I saw signs of an exclusionary mindset all around in the nightly social interactions at the 40SU. Of course, this still could be a projection on my part, but I doubt it. I



would suggest that an exclusionary, white educated middle-class elitism has always been a part of the discourse of alternative rock.

### Coda

Throughout the process of doing this research, I have tried to refrain from making too many value judgments based on my own experience and beliefs. Nevertheless, I find it hard not to be a little disturbed by a situation in which local music scenes are not created to celebrate a common aesthetic, but are constructed in order to gain publicity and "exposure" for the bands that make up the self-described "community," and once one of the bands gets enough exposure, it seeks to distance itself from its original audience. Of course, this is a small part of the larger picture, in which music that was once about social protest has become a lucrative commodity for mass-market leisure consumption. Perhaps I am over-reacting; the need for much more research in this area is obvious, though I don't think the full impact of punk and alternative rock's huge crossover success in the 90s can be measured yet.

My final point deals with how academics approach the subjects touched upon this paper. Most studies of rock culture take what I call a "literary-historical" approach to the phenomenon, in which the music is read and critiqued as "text" and the history of different "movements" and the development of different genres is

documented (for an excellent example see Chambers 1990), some authors add their own experience to their analysis (cf. Duncan 1984), and, more recently, some have applied postmodernist literary criticism to rock music-related phenomena (cf. Kaplan 1991). While these books make interesting reading, they don't tell us very much about the social realities that correspond to the cultural phenomena under study. I only know of one book (Gaines 1991, a study of suburban "burnouts" in Bergen County, New Jersey) that takes an ethnographic approach to studying the impact of rock culture on the lives of actual people. I would suggest that explorations of the patterns of consumption and diverse interpretations of popular music that take place on the ethnographic level will contribute the most to the ongoing debate over what mass-produced music is really capable of accomplishing in society, and how much idealistic academics exaggerate this capability.

10/30 (40su)

APPENDIX: A Performance at the UndergroundField Notes from October 30th, 1993

Setting: 40su : Saturday; Mischief Night....

Bands: EDO + Purge

9:37 PM -- The 40th Street Underground is practically empty. Four males are here besides me; three are most likely band members, the fourth is Dave, the bartender this evening, who also runs the place. There is a noticeable lack of security here--Dave is running in and out, from upstairs to the back storeroom behind the bar. No one is tending bar and no one is drinking. Some amplifiers, including a big Marshall cabinet, and PA equipment are lying by the stage, seemingly unattended. The special tonight, written on the blackboard sitting on the bar corner, is bottles of Michelob Dry or Busch for 75 cents. The other special is "Boys' Night Out": pitcher of beer \$2.25 for all-male groups. This is rather strange and I didn't really see too many people with pitchers throughout the night. It made me think that there aren't that many all-male groups that frequent the Underground. Mixed groups are by far the most common, and all female groups are also seen occasionally. interaction: between Dave and a guy standing by the jukebox. Dave informs the guy that the tracks are messed up on the West Philly compilation CD, so that you can't pick a specific song or band you want to hear. The guy plays a Ziggy Stardust song instead. This is a fairly quiet time, and I use it to draw another map of the Underground space and to write down some of the one hundred CDs contained in the 40su jukebox (see FN-L 01 and handwritten notes).

Yanni Papadopoulos, EDO's bass player, shows up. I say hi and ask him where the rest of the band is. He doesn't know where anyone is so he leaves. Later he returns with Terry, the drummer.

9:50 PM: Terry is setting up his black Pearl drum hardware. More people, including several women, have arrived and are sitting in small groups around tables or at the bar talking quietly. The jukebox plays continuously and fills up the sonic space between different conversations. People are coming down the stairs carrying musical equipment: bass cabinet, bass head, guitar amplifier, more PA equipment, a mixing board. This is musicians' space. Kendall, the singer for Purge and regular 40SU bartender arrives. She is dressed in black leather and Harley Davidson motorcycle boots. She looks different--her hair is tied down and she looks tense. She does not acknowledge me. Around this time, Dave has stationed himself at the bar and people have begun to drink, mostly beer.

10:00 PM (approx.): The drummer from Purge, a skinny white guy with long blond hair, is playing the hardware set up by Terry. The set is still incomplete--there are no cymbals. The set has a double kick pedal and one bass drum. The drummer is playing rather loud, simple patterns. Perhaps he is acclimating himself to Terry's drums. No one is paying attention to him, at least not overtly. The jukebox is still playing all this time. Kendall is talking with some guys who look like bandmates next to some PA equipment in front of the stage. One guy, who later turns out to be the band's bassist, is wearing a big Eagles jersey...this is interesting [at the time everyone was predicting a disastrous season for the Eagles due to several injuries on the team; this could be related to a member of another band I saw wearing a Phillies shirt onstage after the team lost the world series]. Gender ratio is now about even, with slightly more women.

10:15 PM: Still no cymbals on the kit. There is a mannequin head on stage with a mask on it--one of EDO's props, for use during their set. A guy walks in wearing a Quaker Oats box turned into a mask holding a length of coiled garden hose with a mouthpiece at one end. After all, it is Halloween (almost). A woman is wearing a black dress with Christmas lights lit up on it. Another woman is in a black and white outfit with the yinyang painted on her face with black and white greasepaint. The bathroom has been cleaned and the graffiti painted over with bland gray blue paint. Already there is some new graffiti. Yellow stickers with the name "Plunger" (most likely a band moniker) are on the toilet and the wall over the toilet in the left stall. In the right stall

someone put a Babelbox sticker on the right side wall and one graffito states defiantly that "graffiti is the last form of free speech--Vandals of America". Someone has scrawled "Babelbox" (the name of another band) on the paper towel dispenser. This dates from their last concert a few days ago (see FN-S 40). Around this time I notice that a bouncer has been stationed on the landing of the staircase leading to the club. Prior to his appearance, anyone could have walked in.

10:25 PM: Bob Hemp, EDO's audiovisualist, is passing out EDO flyers to each table. We take some. Elliot arrives wearing a navy blue suit, a red striped tie and some mardi gras beads. interaction: between two women and Elliot: Is that suit from Today's Man?/No, Bryn Mawr Goodwill. (Fits him well, though.) The people in and observing this exchange find this funny. Elliot takes a while to acknowledge my presence, even though there aren't that many people here yet. I finally approach Elliot, who cheerfully greets me but soon tells me that he is very tired from his work at the Fotomat. He tells me he spent the last two days cleaning bleach out of his "chemistry", his photo-developing apparatus. In response I quote a Dead Milkmen song called "The Bleach Boys," a reference he knows, and we have a laugh. (The song is about a bunch of guys who are "so bored" they start drinking bleach.)

10:35 PM: The jukebox is playing "Let the Good Times Roll" (The Cars). The bar is much less lit up than the tables. The majority of the people there are male. One of the regular 40SU (male) bartenders is there (the one with the same birthdate as Sean--see FN-S 10).

There is a silent football game being broadcast on the television by the front steps. Somewhat later, Bob Hemp staples a white sheet against the back white wall. I don't know how much difference that makes regarding the projection quality--I should've asked him.

10:40 PM: A guy is showing off on guitar, ostensibly to test his equipment: a Fender amp driving a big Marshall cabinet. He plays scale runs, rhythm parts through the overdriven (distorted) channel, and strange funk slaps and pulls (usually techniques used on electric bass guitars) through a cleaner channel. He doesn't really use this technique in his upcoming performance. No one

appears to be paying attention to him but he is hard not to notice as he is playing pretty loud. He doesn't acknowledge the audience, similar to the way they ignore him. The jukebox blares on top of his warmup. After a while he stops.

10:45 PM: Many people are drinking Michelob Dry bottles--"hey, it's seventy five cents!" Some people are more picky and they drink Killian's Red and Yuengling Porter draughts (The Underground features these two beers on tap almost every night) in the regular 40SU steins. I only have one M.Dry in the course of the evening. Andy McConnell, rhythm guitarist for EDO, enters with a chipwich and Chochochino bottles.

10:53 PM Yanni is writing EDO's set list in black permanent marker on the back of one of the flyers distributed earlier by Bob Hemp. He makes a copy for each band member and adds individual embellishments on each one--joke titles, strange lettering and even some illustrations. The first song is "Don't shit on my doorstep." Later on Andy tells me and some women the story behind this particular tune. (Apparently one day Yanni woke up to find human feces on his front doorstep.) Onyx [a rap band] is once again on the jukebox. Bob is setting up his multimedia rig; he's got an overhead projector with a spinning lens with four different colored gels, a filmstrip projector, and a 16 mm movie projector. He also has numerous transparencies. Very impressive. EDO is the only local band I know of to include audiovisual projection effects in their act.

11:15 PM: Jim McShea, the percussionist, reintroduces himself to me. I didn't recognize him because he had cut his hair. We talk about his contribution to the "Undergrowth" track (he played "mini-kegs and sparrow samples") on the West Philly CD. He tells me that the studio where it was recorded is in the basement of the building at 45th and Baltimore, called "The Palace", where he used to live. Psycho killer is on the jukebox. Bob is projecting an image with the filmstrip projector of what looks like a partially dissected human fetus. We comment on it, saying it's gross. Another image is of a handgun. A guy is wearing face makeup of uncertain pattern; different colors are smeared on his face. Terry has a T-shirt that says "I don't" with a circle around it. Fragment: she's a Catholic schoolgirl! Acch! (said by a woman at the bar loudly). The bright lights over the tables have been turned off. EDO has many props, including a large foam rubber

mask and a small red octagonal metal sign that says "acid." Elliot is giving out free movie posters. They're the sort of posters you get free from video stores who don't want them anymore. EDO also has a woman friend of theirs bring a large loaf of pumpernickel bread to share with the audience during their set. A talkative guy with long blond hair starts giving the bread out early. Later he starts rolling bits of bread into little round balls and Bob Hemp makes a Cocoa Puffs joke and everyone at the table laughs (Cocoa Puffs is the name of a round, brown sugared cereal which used to be advertised on TV when I was a kid watching Saturday morning cartoons.) Elliot admonishes him for not being cool (because he stole the bread) but he controls himself and doesn't come across as sounding cross and uptight, though he is probably a little of both, as the time before performance is very stressful for even a seasoned performer, and nicely asks him if he intends to save the rest for the show. Of course he does. The talkative guy and two women, one of whom appears to be Andy's girlfriend, who are hanging with him create a "Madonna" like figure out of a divining rod brought in I think by Yanni, some bottlecaps, a brown paper bag with a face drawn on it in red marker, an aluminum ashtray, and some stickers. They appear very pleased with their creation and proudly show it off to Elliot and to their friends, who seem moderately amused by it.

10:45 PM: After saying "Hello?" into the mike a few times, Kendall gets Purge to start playing. She is singing through a close delay of some sort and her voice is loud and piercing and kind of whiny. In between songs, she tells the band to "stop talking and start playing." The band plays loud and ugly, sounding a bit like Pantera and White Zombie. The drummer is wearing a Pantera t-shirt with "Fucking Hostile" (one of Pantera's songs) written on the back. Kendall acts very different onstage compared to her cool collected behavior while working at the bar. She is clearly performing even between songs. She even grabs the bottom of her black T-shirt and pulls it forward semi-suggestively during her songs, but she seems very uncomfortable with taking this too far. Between songs she repeats the name of her band "you know, like binge and PURGE" and introduces songs: "I wrote this song 'cause I was sad and I wanted to bleed, but I wrote a song about it instead" (for a song called "Bleed"). The main themes of their music seemed to be death, horror, pain, and relationships gone sour as a central metaphor. "Feel me my body's warm..." Kendall's singing was vaguely monotonous and lacked a real dynamic

range, even more than the instruments did. Their songs got a friendly but not overwhelming response. No one was dancing. This would have been a typical weeknight performance at the 40SU.

A guy asks Elliot for EDO flyers. He gives him some.

12:49 AM: EDO is still setting up. It's very crowded now and more people are arriving. Some people have already left, the ones who had come to see Purge as well as the members of that band. The crowd began to have a more "crunchy," tie-dyed appearance, an EDO crowd, more obvious now that the "hard alternative" people were thinning. A woman near us has green fake eyelashes and a green dress. Everyone is drinking and smoking. No sign of illicit drug use. Andy tells me that the night's performance and the night after that are being recorded direct to ADAT (an eight track digital recording format) through a separate sixteen channel mixing board. This is one of the reasons why it took so long to set up; two guys who arrived later than the others were in charge of the recording and were still setting it up. The talkative blond guy and I make a bogus EDO set list on the back of another flyer with all the songs we wanted EDO to play, but knew they probably wouldn't. We also added a few additional encore songs to the real set list. This was a way of showing off our knowledge of songs from throughout the band's long career (well over five years), the more obscure the better. I realize that there is very little formal separation between performers, patrons, and employees at the 40su when I see a guy dressed in street clothes pick up some beer bottles and throw them in the trash.

12:54 AM: Elliot addresses the audience from the stage and tells them of the imminent arrival of daylight savings time, so that EDO can play an extra hour (they didn't). He briefly describes the history of daylight savings time, saying it originated with a law passed by Franklin Roosevelt.

12:56 AM: EDO starts playing. The vocals are a little low. Elliot asks that they be turned up but even then you can't hear the words. By the second song almost everyone is dancing in the cramped space around the stage. Some people--mostly males--remain seated at the tables--they are unable to see the stage very well--other males remain in partial darkness sitting at the bar during EDO's set. Most of the men are dancing, though, and the dancing women outnumber them by a small margin. The temperature and the



humidity of the room increase by about twenty percent during EDO's set. I am standing on a bench facing the stage, so I have a good view of both performers and audience. Pete Wilder, EDO's lead guitarist, and Jim McShea are on my left and are in shadow; the lights directed at the stage don't extend that far. Bob Hemp is busy setting up various audiovisual effects, including a "lava lamp" effect created by putting colored oily water on the surface of the overhead projector. A short woman in a black leather jacket helps him for part of the night; mostly she spins the gel wheel around. Members of the audience are taking turns wearing a large foam rubber mask while dancing, and one guy is wearing a melting Nazi mask (from Raiders of the Lost Ark) while he dances. During the show Elliot gets a big guy to stand on him during the "Getting the Wrinkles Out" song. Elliot also throws chocolates out to the crowd at one point and he and Jim wear plastic Frankenstein masks during "Boris Karloff" in front of a projected Frankenstein image from the original movie. The whole scene is very striking with the dancing, crowded bodies, the colored lights, projected images, costumes, and musical performances. It created a vibe that included all the active participants. They play for over an hour, including an encore, the Anomaly song [a recording of which is on the West Philly CD, track #7]. Much of their material is new and is darker than their old stuff, but the audience already knows many of the songs; the song about smoking marijuana gets a particularly enthusiastic response.

2:23 AM: I thank the performers. They seem satisfied but not thrilled with their performance. I have spent the last five hours at the 40SU, saw two bands and only spent a dollar (75 cents plus tip). People are starting to leave and the band starts breaking down their equipment onstage, ignoring calls for another encore. Soon they are no longer the center of attention. I know that they will be there a while putting equipment away and loading it out into their cars, but I am more than ready to leave and don't feel like staying and chatting. I'll hopefully be back Wednesday night.

2:30 AM: Went home. Wrote down some more notes when I got back, but not enough.

Later Andy told me that very few of the songs recorded that night were good enough to be potential candidates for release on the eventual live album. The night after furnished better recordings,

but the crowd was smaller and less enthusiastic. The Casbah, the place where they played, is a very interesting performance space in Center City similar to the 40SU in that it is owned by and located beneath a restaurant, this one specializing in Middle Eastern food.

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