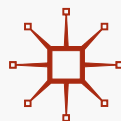


TYLER SONNICHSEN

CAPITALS OF PUNK

DC, Paris, and Circulation in
the Urban Underground



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Tyler Sonnichsen

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Ian MacKaye, Arnaud Gabelli, and Philippe Roizès on the porch at Dischord House in Arlington, Virginia, Summer 1987. (Photo courtesy of Phillippe Roizès)

*Banned in DC with a thousand other places to go;
Gonna swim across the Atlantic, 'cause that's the only place I can go!*
Bad Brains, 1982

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Roman Jaskowski (L) with the author (R), Roman's kitchen, Malakoff, France, Summer 2015

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1

Introduction: A Tale of Two Cities and Scenes

On January 20, 1969, a little-known band led by Yardbirds guitarist Jimmy Page played a hastily booked show a few miles north of Washington, DC, at the Wheaton Youth Center. Or, they didn't. Accounts of this apocryphal early Led Zeppelin show are still contested. Filmmaker Jeff Krulik, known for his 1986 guerilla-style documentary *Heavy Metal Parking Lot*, investigated the alleged show in his 2012 documentary *Led Zeppelin Played Here*. He suggests that the show did happen, but several DC-area baby boomers cast reasonable doubt. After all, nobody has found any surviving flyers for the show. Nobody has any ticket stubs. Nobody, even the biggest Zeppelin fans Krulik could find, had any autographed items from that night.

All of these curiosities had reasonable explanations. Led Zeppelin's first album had been released stateside one week prior to the show and with relatively little promotion. Nobody in the audience would have known any of the songs Page's new band played. One or two people featured in Krulik's documentary claimed that the band was promoted as "the new Yardbirds." While rock 'n' roll had been a global phenomenon for almost two decades, the concert industry of established clubs, promoters (flyers),

and distributors (tickets) was embryonic at best. The well-documented excesses of the musicians, coupled with their rigorous touring and recording schedule, did not lend much credence to their accounts. When Krulik asked Page about it at the 2012 Kennedy Center Honors, the gracious guitarist said it was possible, but he had not thought about it in decades.

Led Zeppelin Played Here may not conclusively answer the question, but it does explain to the contemporary viewer *why* one of the first shows by one of rock's most popular bands has faded from memory. While Krulik's justifications are valid, I would argue that they are more matters of time and, even more significantly, place. Look at the date. As the caravan bringing the British rock stars wound its way down to DC through blinding snow from the Midwest, Richard Nixon was swearing in as President. The local press and populace were understandably distracted from the goings-on at a suburban youth center. Americans were fighting a highly contentious war both abroad in Vietnam and at home against one another. The recent assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy had sparked cycles of solemn mourning and raucous rioting, especially in a heavily scarred capital city.

In 1969, the US capital found itself in a precarious position, a button-down city licking its wounds after being torn to shreds the previous April. Across the pond, the French, whose colonial occupation of Southeast Asia had stirred into a multinational war effort, watched Parisian student protests flare into a national shutdown the previous May, the events of which theorists still analyze, celebrate, and condemn in similar breaths. It was understandable that popular culture—film, television, and music especially—was not dominating the mainstream discussion of either town. DC native Marvin Gaye, who would register one of the most beautiful screeds against the Vietnam Era in 1971, had left for Detroit over a decade earlier. Though both cities had produced a handful of noteworthy (if not commercially successful) bands over the prior decade, neither possessed anything that amounted to the status of a “rock ‘n’ roll town.” To most of the world's population, even many native or transplanted Washingtonians and Parisians, they still don't.

On May 6, 2010, a four-piece from Northern Holland named Rush'n Attack played a bar basement show at Le Pix, a charming bar on Rue Pixérécourt in Paris' Belleville neighborhood. The Parisian band Kimmo, whose members booked and promoted the show, opened for them. A friend of mine from back in DC put me in touch via email with Mathieu Gélézau, one of Kimmo's two singer-guitarists. I was scheduled to land at Beauvais airport far outside of Paris on the evening of their gig. I had never been to Paris before, and I would not have an active phone while I was in France. This would require some strategy. On April 21, I emailed the band:

I'm a punk fan from Washington DC who wants to come check out your show at Le Pix on May 6. My buddy Ryan (who's lived in France for a little while) told me about your show, and it's happening a weekend when I'm visiting Paris, so, awesome.

I'm landing at Beauvais airport at 1840h so I'll hopefully be getting to Paris around 2000h? If I get right on the metro and come out to Télégraphe should I be able to make it in time to see enough of the show?

A few days before the show, I got a reply from Mathieu:

Hi Ty,

Mathieu from Kimmo here. Happy to know we have a fan in DC!

So, for the show at Le Pix, I think we will play at 21:30h.

If you are in Beauvais at 18:40h, maybe you can be at Le Pix at 21:30 but you have to be speed! If you are in Paris at 20:00 or 20:30, it will be OK.

We play 45 minutes I think.

Hope to see you at this show.

I did not reply and admit that I'd never actually heard his band's music, but his friendliness and eagerness for me to see them perform made me ready to be a fan. After catching a well-timed shuttle from Beauvais to Porte Maillot in eastern Paris, I hopped on the Metro and navigated to Télégraphe station, the closest one to the venue. At the time, I knew nobody in Paris and spoke no French. My bulging backpack gave me away as a stranger, especially on that quiet Thursday night in what

appeared to be a gentrifying neighborhood (a suspicion that eventual research and better acquaintance with Paris would later verify). At the time, I was working full-time at a public relations firm in Washington, DC, enjoying one of my two luxurious weeks of paid vacation in Europe that my Parisian counterparts would likely have either laughed at or pitied. I was disenchanted with, to lift from The Clash, “working for the clampdown.” I had been thinking about going to graduate school for geography, but I still did not have a comprehensive grasp on the eclectic subject, much less how prominently geography would play into what I was about to experience, tucked away on a Paris side street.



Kimmo guitarists Mathieu Gélézeau and Natasha Herzock sound check before a gig at Le Pix bar, May 6, 2010. (Photo by the author)

I arrived as the first of the three bands were finishing their set. I asked for Mathieu, and we were able to chat for a few minutes before Kimmo went over to the small stage to set up. For the few minutes leading up to their first song, I wandered over and thumbed through the items on the

merchandise table, got a beer at the bar upstairs and brought it down, and stood against the back wall, trying to blend in. Listening to a cacophony of French for the first time in my life thrilled my tourist brain.

Kimmo opened their set with a song off their new album *Bolt and Biscuit*. I had never heard the song or even anything by Kimmo before, and I was thousands of miles from DC. But even before their first song ended, I felt surprisingly at home. The reason hit me surprisingly quickly: *Wow... this band seriously sounds like they're from DC.*

* * *

You may be wondering (understandably so) why a story about hardcore punk would begin with an anecdote about Led Zeppelin. Two key yet heavily contrasting reasons come to mind. First, the idea that any show could happen this apocryphally in DC predates the strong sense of community and the archive that would come to characterize the city's underground scene. Second, it provides a case study on the dearth of "rock 'n' roll culture" in the US capital that eventually gave rise to such a vibrant punk underground, as much as DC hardcore (or, "harDCore") did not develop in a vacuum. Bands integral to what mainstream radio would later tag as classic rock may not have actively participated in punk culture, but they formed the adolescent soundtrack to many who would build punk scenes. A pack of teenage skateboarders at Wilson High School in northwest DC listened to artists like Ted Nugent and Foghat because, until the Ramones and Sex Pistols showed up, their arena rock was the hardest, fastest, and loudest music available (see Andersen and Jenkins 2001).

Punk rock, given the cultural sea-change that it introduced, added little to the canon fundamentally. The bluntest evaluations of punk cite how the movement hit the reset button on rock music, dialing it back to its raw roots. Many characteristics of punk that become standardized after the late-1970s explosion were not revelatory. In certain respects, the mores of DIY (Do-It-Yourself) and underground, alternative music venue promotion have always existed. Punk just mollified the concept

and brought it more to the forefront of the discussion on cultural production. It sought to break down the hierarchy associated with artistic creation as well as the socially and corporately constructed divisions between the artist and the performer. A short list of DC artists and bands across numerous scenes—hardcore, Go-Go, salsa/merengue—all lived up to that ethos. DIY also sought to operate outside of the culture industry, not conforming their output to satisfy major labels' expectations.

Before rock clubs became more common in the late 1960s, rock 'n' roll bands played wherever shows could be set up. Early rock 'n' rollers performed in high school auditoriums, grange halls, bowling alleys, and ballrooms. The pre-fame Beatles honed their chops playing at seedy bars in Hamburg's Reeperbahn district (see Inglis 2012; Fremaux and Fremaux 2013), a highly valued chapter in their anthology and mythology. As Led Zeppelin and their ilk ushered in a more proficient club industry in the 1970s, punk and the associated underground emerged as a cosmic equal-and-opposite reaction. Ian MacKaye, one of those Wilson High School skaters who would eventually help grow the city's punk scene to global recognition, told the fanzine *Comet* in 2001:

Punk has no single definition... but to me it has always meant the underground, the place where conventional approaches to life can be taken to task. I don't think of it as so much of a 'movement,' rather a constant parallel world that has been around for as long as there has been an 'overground.' There has to be a place where profit and popular tastes don't dictate creation, otherwise we would never go forward.

MacKaye's sentiments, which he has echoed consistently for over three decades in his roles as punk musician and head of Dischord Records, reflect central theses on the "culture industry" which theorists like Antoni Gramsci, Theodor Adorno, and Max Horkheimer set forth generations ago. All three demonstrated in their heavily cited works that "the idea of alternative culture demands an understanding of the hegemony of the mainstream...constructed to keep the working classes and other marginalized groups in a state of perpetual disempowerment" (Spracklen 2014, 254). The existence of an "alternative" implied either outright inferiority of the mainstream or at least holes which those on the fringes aimed to

fill. As Charles Fairchild posited, these weren't so much issues with music, but the institutions: "The creation of an alternative requires the negotiated maintenance of a specific set of social and cultural strategies while carefully avoiding the stubbornly persistent calcifying aspects of tradition" (1995, 26).

This dynamic tension, at least for the harDCore scene and its diasporic elements, has persisted for decades, despite brief flashes where the underground and mainstream have converged under the aegis of corporate interests. In the early 1990s, the commercial success of the northwestern rock band Nirvana transformed independent labels into a veritable farm system for the majors. A handful of DC-area punk musicians eventually saw financial spoils out of this transition. Shudder to Think, Jawbox, and The Dismemberment Plan all either recorded or released critically acclaimed yet commercially unsuccessful records on major labels. Jawbox publicly regretted their decision to leave Dischord, or at least to sign with Atlantic, despite being given ample creative freedom and self-sufficiency (O'Connor 2008, 24). The Dismemberment Plan was signed and then quickly dropped from Interscope Records in 1998, so they decided to release their last two albums (1999's *Emergency & I* and 2001's *Change*) on their DeSoto, a homemade label run by members of Jawbox. However, only Dave Grohl (who left the Northern Virginia band Scream to join Nirvana in 1990) and Henry Rollins (another one of the skater kids from Glover Park who left for LA in 1981 to front Black Flag) have maintained mainstream celebrity status, for which both had to leave DC. Cult figures like Shudder to Think vocalist Craig Wedren have achieved success in the entertainment industry, scoring television shows and movies without losing sight of their DIY roots. Others still, like scene kid Damian Kulash, designed occasional 7-inch record sleeves for the Arlington-based Lovitt Records before winding up in Chicago and forming viral-music video auteurs OKGO. Though some members of the harDCore family have left DC and entered the mainstream, the DC scene continues to offer an ideal of resistance and self-determination in a society that exponentially devalues art and activism.

The persistent and often tense conversation between the mainstream and underground will provide a foundation for this book moving forward, inspiring the conversation about how indispensable punk culture has

always been to understanding urbanism. This book recognizes the impossibility of drawing clear-cut lines between what qualifies as “underground” and “mainstream” two decades into the realm of internet-mediated society. Though the internet was not the reason that the Kimmo show took place, it played a vital role in promotion and led me to the show, and after some years of reflection, this story.

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2

DC and Paris: Capitals of Punk

This book intends to make strides in the conversation between music, geography, and contemporary urbanism through one of underground music's most storied legacies. The focus is the circulation of DC punk and hardcore music between Washington and Paris, with the lessons advancing larger discussions of sense of place and the indispensability of popular culture in understanding these phenomena. While the Washington, DC, punk and hardcore scene has been archived and mythologized expansively (see Connolly et al. 1988; Andersen and Jenkins 2001; Azerrad 2001), a negligible amount of such documentation exists of its global impact or of its valuable counterpart in Paris. Drawing histories and meanings from ethnographic interviews and textual, archival research, this story will illustrate how and why punk circulated between the two cities and continues doing so. This story will also provide a greater framework through which to understand music and the nature of urban circulation.

Like many authoritative books on any subject, the process has been iterative and extends well beyond the period of my life as an academician. The raw research directed specifically for this book took place over the past three years, highlighted by a month of in-person interviews in France with many informants in July 2015. I also incorporated two brief trips to

DC into the project, though the project did not necessarily focus on DC's impressions of Paris, but the other way around. The following chapters will account for that juxtaposition, laying out my primary and secondary sources, acknowledging the obstacles to charting the history of this cultural circulation as well as decisions I had to make in the process. This will also include an explanation of the mechanisms of circulation (music, writing, and adapted technologies) as they both created conduits for culture to flow between the cities and have provided me with data at this stage in their life span.

This book also includes a contextual history of Franco-American cultural circulation, which predates the existence of either country under their modern constitutions. The late twentieth century is the main focus, however, as the pre-internet era in punk has become increasingly mythologized in international circles. Discrepancies exist between collective sense of place among punk fans and the realities of these places. These discrepancies reveal the nature of cultural perspective on place and collective memory, and it is important to ask why the sounds and images of the pre-internet era (roughly before the mid-1990s in the West) have dominated the discourse. The history will be told as a story of circulation, detailing both some moments in the coming-of-age and global expansion of DC punk as well as in the stories of Parisian punks who've either visited DC as musical tourists or use that city's legacy as inspiration for their own musical and artistic operations. Much focuses on these Parisian and otherwise French perspectives on this cultural exchange, as manifested through the "tourist gaze" (see Urry 1990), reflections upon revanchist urbanism (or gentrification; see Smith 1996) in both cities, and impressions of "Americanness" versus "Frenchness" in DC's alternative iconography.

Ultimately, the goal is to seek the answer to that pivotal question I asked myself in that Paris pub in 2010: What *is* it about Washington, DC? What can the Franco-American circulation of punk culture teach us about how we study alternative landscapes and understand underground tourism? How can these lessons be applied to the greater study of circulation and the greater study of popular music?

Geography is a notoriously amorphous field. Many of the overarching themes that govern scholarship on music and culture are equally applied to geography, anthropology, sociology, and musicology. However, circulation is the most relevant interdisciplinary platform through which to