

Breaching the Gap of Subcultural Refuge



Some of the best music shows I've seen, in fact MOST of the best music shows I've seen have been in people's houses. Maybe it's the intimate atmosphere or simply the fact that most of the best cutting edge ideas come from sources OUTSIDE the rock club format, but nothing beats seeing your favorite punk band in a dark, dirty, dingy basement.

In Buffalo, I've been to several house venues: most notably on Custer Street and Winspear Avenue; maybe there are others I don't know about. But across the country, there's a trail of these counter-cultural places doing things under the radar. In a way these un-coded houses and small storefront spaces provide a second home for its participants—a sense of place and community. Their service to the community is an important one.

To a large degree, the same ethos behind punk rock can be found in grassroots independent film. In the same way that bands tour around the country in beat up vans, indie filmmakers have been blazing the trails of microcinemas, creating a network of places to screen video and film work around the country. Yet however alike the two worlds are, there are many differences. With the threat of living under the re-election of the most conservative administration of our lifetimes, it's high time for unity of the cultural vanguards.

Rock Rock Rock n' Roll High School

I was 17 years old when I attended my first punk rock show. I can't remember who played, but I do remember it was at this punk rock record store on Main Street in Tonawanda called Discovery Records. The building's still there but now it's a video game store. Anyway, they used to do shows there on the weekends, and you'd climb up a rickety set of stairs to a large empty attic space, and bands would play there on the sagging floorboards. Half the time I didn't care for the music (they booked a lot of straightedge hardcore bands) but I always enjoyed going to those shows, hanging out, and seeing music there. Being underage, I couldn't go to the bars, so there was nothing to do, no place to go. So I

started making my own self-published zine, going to shows, and hanging out there in Tonawanda.

I remember seeing this one band, Link80, play at that time. They were from San Francisco, and they were all around 17 years old. I remember talking to one of the band members about how they booked their own cross-country tour and released records on a record label based in their parent's garage. They would send the cd's to be reviewed by kids all over the country who made small self-published zines assembled late at night at Kinkos, and print their own T-shirts and stickers.

This completely blew me away. At that age I didn't have any interest in politics or business ethics, but this do-it-yourself ethic of doing business on your own terms, completely independent of capital interest, was raw and inspiring. It may sound contrived, but this music and way of doing things changed my life and opened me up to a new way of seeing the world.

The following year I was a film student at The University at Buffalo. My teacher Anya Lewin told me I should check out this place called Squeaky Wheel. It took me a while to build up the confidence to set foot in the place—I mean I didn't consider myself an artist and this place was definitely for artists. I did eventually venture in to an open screening and later that year became a summer intern. At first I was hesitant. I was the youngest person at the screenings and probably the least educated or concerned about all the academia and artsy side of these events. But the more I hung around and went to events at Squeaky Wheel, Anya Lewin's house (dubbed "Cornershop"), and occasionally Hallwalls, the more similarities I started to see between the punks and the film goers.

Both were defiantly uncommercial. Both did things their way, on their own terms. Both fostered a place for people to come together for uncensored self-expression; they explored issues that were both highly personal and at times very political. Both had a strong sense of community, considering the same people would be at every film screening or punk show.

No doubt about it, there were some glaring differences. The indie filmmakers made films of an academic nature, work that was completely abstract (some of which I didn't and still don't like). They philosophized and drew theories about their work, and, in general, took themselves and their art a lot more seriously than did the punks. The punks, on the other hand, were fun and spontaneous, but also vile and disgust-

ing, hopelessly immature, and often exclusive in their conformity to non-conformity.

Over the years I've thought a lot about how my involvement in these two worlds overlap and what that means, just as I have about the realms of art and politics. It seemed I was one of only a few people going between these two worlds and surely there could be more unity and collaboration between the two. There must be some way to breach the subcultural gap.

Starting With My Backyard

Years later, I wound up moving to Eugene, Oregon. Now 27, I noticed a lot of similarities between Eugene and the Buffalo in which I grew up. There was no place for people under 21 to see music. There was no place like Squeaky Wheel to see underground film. There was no unity between the Eugene punks and those interested in the arts. After talking to my roommate Jesse, we decided we wanted to create that space to unify these people. We wanted to create a space for artists, musicians, and filmmakers in Eugene.

But how were we going to do THAT? We were both broke, full-time college students. Well, it turned out to be pretty easy. All those years in punk rock basements paid off—our friend knew a band from Portland that was on tour. We cleaned out our basement and put some fliers around town, and forty people showed up to see the show. Just like that, we had our instant community. People came, the police didn't, and we realized we were doing a good thing. People started asking if they could volunteer and we thought we might be on to something.

We called ourselves "My House", and I made a logo in 5 minutes of a house in a circle. The space itself was humble—cement walls, low ceilings, makeshift furnishings of fold-up chairs, carpet squares, and Christmas lights. With a little engineering, we made some risers out of scrap plywood and palettes, installed clip-on "track lighting", and bought a used PA with our meager door earnings (all shows were a \$3-5 donation). We acquired a bunch of extra mattresses that made a comfortable crash pad for visiting bands, filmmakers, and artists. We usually cooked up a big vegan soup and served it to attendees in used tofu containers and got day-old pastries donated by a local bakery.

Without boring you with thousands of details, we wound up putting on 45 no-budget events in our year and half existence. Most events were held in that little basement, but some larger events were held at other locations. One event,

The No War Art Show, drew over 600 at the opening to a closed-up storefront space we got permission to use. Another event, a *superhappy-fundayinthepark*, featured over 25 bands and filmmakers performing on 2 stages in a public park in downtown Eugene.

But looking back, what did we get out of it? It's hard to say. We certainly became better organizers (if you are interested in a more thorough analysis of programming at My House, email me at notmoscato@yahoo.com and I'll email you our "DIY Guide to Organizing"). We did it because we wanted to see this thing happen in the community. And I think we were successful in breaching the gap between the punks and art goers.

Yet, a lot of events still seemed to only attract the hipster crowd. While some events, especially the non-music events drew people of all ages and walks of life, it was often a younger, college-aged crowd. It is tough to get the average working Joe to head to the basement on the weekend off. Still, at one event, I recall someone remarking, "That blew me away...I never imagined someone could have an art gallery in their basement." It was those moments that made all this insane work somehow worthwhile. And it is those moments that I remember the fondest.

Something Funky in the Works...

Last summer I did an internship on an organic farm in rural Oregon. The farm had 4 other interns and they were all into different subcultures. Andy was in to hiphop. Rachel was in to "insurgent country". Katie was a hippie. Marty was into emo-core (their words not mine). Then it hit me, here we all are, all into different subcultures, yet we all came out to this farm because we all believed in the same radical leftist causes. Why did it take moving out to this farm to figure this out?

Something funky is going on in America.

A lot of people in this country are fed up. They are sick of suburban mall corporate culture. They are hungry for something different, honest, and non-commercial. The recent success of *Fahrenheit 9/11* shows that Americans want to hear different perspectives and are willing to support unpopular formats, like documentary, to see it. These are encouraging signs. Still many of us are stuck in our comfort zones. The University Heights punks never go to shows at Squeaky Wheel or Hallwalls. The Squeaky Wheel and Hallwalls crowd never go to Community Access or shows at 29 Custer Street. Neither of these groups go to places like The Massachusetts Avenue Project or The Western New York Peace Center. I don't know why; I go to them all.

Maybe it's up to programmers to put on events that are more broad reaching and diverse. Having more mixed media events, such as a 30-minute film, followed by a musical performance, followed by a slide show, or a music show that featured a hiphop group, a punk band, and a folk group would attract a broader range of people. A lot of times programmers don't look hard

enough...there are a lot of options! I recommend the zine *Rock Out!*: Ideas on Booking DIY Shows (send \$2 to Megan Wells, PO Box 5027, Chicago, IL, 60680-5027, chicapalta@hotmail.com) for more good ideas about booking diverse music shows. I also think it's important to attend as many different kinds of grassroots events as possible. This could lead to future connections and networking opportunities. Organizations should also consider pooling their resources to put on bigger events at more mainstream venues for financial and accessibility reasons.

Moreover, I'd like to see this independent do-it-yourself culture break out of its hipster mold. Our small storefronts, not-for-profit centers, and basements are great, and they are a place to start. But I also think it's time to start thinking about how to collaborate and how to do it quickly! There is something fundamentally wrong with the path upon which our current administration is leading our country. My great hope is that we, the cultural promoters, cultural producers, and cultural supporters, will be able to work together toward a change in



Photo One



Photo Two



Photo Three

the cultural landscape of the country. It is my hope that we'll be able to breach the gap from our comfort zones to a larger arena and into the streets.

Marc Moscato does a number of things, including curating and instigating events around New York State, making short documentary videos, and self-publishing zines for the last eight years. He has a BA in Media Studies from SUNY at Buffalo and a MS in Arts Administration from the University of Oregon. He ran diy arts collaborative, "MY House", which presented 45 multimedia events based in a basement in Eugene, Oregon between the years 2002-2003. His current interests include: finding a job, making short documentary videos and homesteading. His projects are archived at www.notmyhouse.com.



Photo Four

Photo One: My housers assembling zines at a workshop entitled "Make it Better" in our living room. Photo Two: my house participants taking part in a 16mm direct animation film workshop (photo Jesse Garlick) Photo Three: This bike is a Pipebomb perform to a raucous crowd at my house. Photo Four: The intima perform in the basement of my house (photo Ken Fletcher)