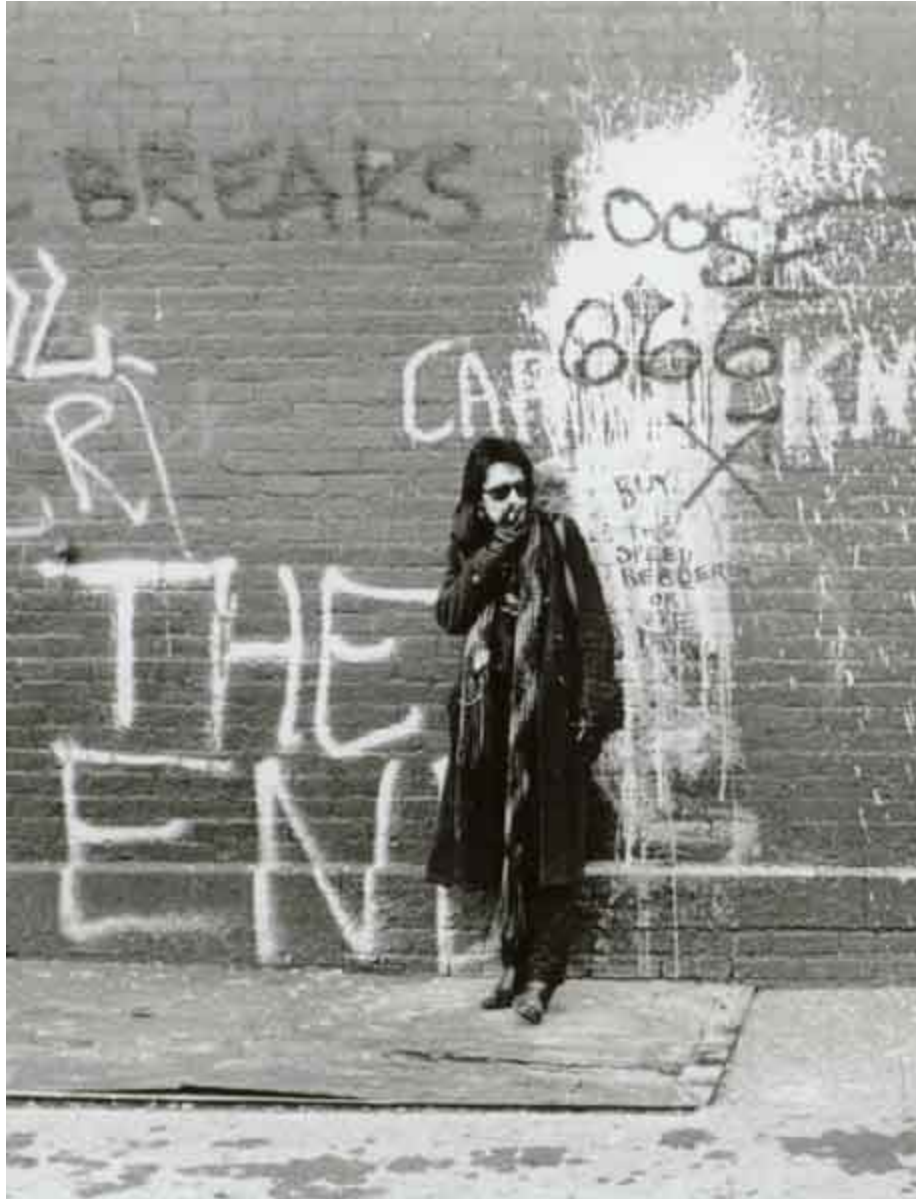


Ephemeral Creation: Music and Art in Chicago, 1978 to 1983



by Ken Mierzwa

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cover photo: Nancy Rapchak in front of O'Banion's, January 1982
all photos by Ken Mierzwa

Introduction

Punk came to Chicago a little late, in mid-1977. Once it arrived, we made up for lost time.

I found it almost accidentally, about a year later. Those first few years, there weren't very many of us... perhaps a few hundred regulars initially. What I write about in these pages was gone or changed beyond recognition before most people knew it even existed.

This is my story of what happened, as nearly as I can recall it after all these years. To borrow from New York poet and songwriter Jim Carroll words which he originally cast in a very different meaning: "Come with me... I am your connection."

1. The Sound of Crashing Glass

The near-north side streets were dark and deserted. We went through the door into O'Banion's, and the first thing that registered was the sound of crashing glass. I couldn't see a thing. There wasn't much light, and the walls were painted black. For a few moments I stood near the bar while my eyes adjusted to the dim interior.

My first visit to O'Banion's was sometime in the summer of 1978. My friend Al said it had to be seen, so we drove down one night to check it out. O'Banion's was on the northeast corner of Clark and Erie. The building is still there, but today it's the latest of a succession of yuppie restaurants in a gentrified neighborhood. In 1978 it was still a pretty marginal area, with graffiti on the walls and sleazy liquor stores, the kind where patrons put their money, or sometimes a watch or a diamond ring, through a semi-circular opening in the bullet-proof glass and get a pint bottle back in exchange. Years later I learned that the same guy who owned O'Banion's also owned one of the sleazy liquor stores.



In design, O'Banion's was a typical Chicago tavern. The front half was a long narrow room with a bar running most of the length. There was a bit of space in the very front, with a bench against the wall and a pinball game or video game in the corner. The back room was more spacious, almost square, with a wooden dance floor, a small raised stage at the back (it may have been built a little later, not right away), and a few tables tucked under the narrow balcony which ran along both sides. In the far right rear corner was the DJ booth, a tiny raised space reached by a ladder. I clearly remember Nancy from that first night, every now and then leaning down to take a request or dashing to the front for a moment, with her pale skin, long straight black hair, heavy eye makeup, and black straightleg jeans. Roseann was at the front bar. Of course I didn't know either of their names at the time.

The crashing sound turned out to be empty bottles of Stroh's tossed into the big plastic garbage can at the far end of the bar. It was standard background noise at O'Banion's, soon just an accepted part of the atmosphere, but at

first it was a bit unnerving. I wonder how many people took one look and fled, never to return.

My memories of the customers are less distinct. Probably that's because they were a nondescript and diverse lot. The "punk" scene had not yet become a fashion show, and in those early days there was a real mix of clothing styles. I remember pretty ordinary haircuts, lots of jeans and a few flannel shirts and plain tee shirts, some ratty salvation army chic, maybe a few leather jackets but not like it would be a year later. No one person really stood out from the crowd. But what did strike me was that no one was passing judgment on anyone else. Here we were, college kids just down from the suburbs, and while no one really went out of their way to be friendly, no one stared or acted rudely either. Considering how drunk some of those people were, that was actually a little surprising. I was accustomed to bars where fights were routine and lots of people acted like idiots after a few too many beers. While a few of these folks looked a little scary, like they hadn't had any sleep in days, it was basically live and let live. Quite a while later, in my journal, I commented on my early impressions of O'Banions:

December 19, 1980: I have yet to convince myself that I know what made all the people in those bars what they are. They certainly have things in common, but there is also much diversity; in background, in education, upbringing, income, neighborhood, previous musical taste, and who knows what else. What drew them to this place? Individualism, certainly. Escapism, often. They attract attention, but many only reluctantly, and usually only at night. Many dress very ordinarily during the day, hold traditional jobs. It's a relatively small group, and proud of it. While outsiders are not discouraged, they tend to feel uncomfortable until they learn the music and the dress. What role does violence play? It's always there, felt, just below the surface, but very rarely openly expressed. Perhaps the music and dancing is the release, the safety valve, that prevents open, physical violence.

It was so different from my recent experience that I kept going back, sometimes with Al and sometimes with my more open-minded friends from school. I remember dancing there with my friend Roslyn, and seeing the same excitement in her eyes that I must have had the first night. That was one of the best parts, seeing the excitement on the faces of first-timers. The music wasn't bad, and we never heard the same song twice in one night.



O'Banion's, looking southeast from Clark Street

2. Nothing on the Radio

Not everyone has the opportunity to experience a paradigm-shifting subculture firsthand. These things only come along once a generation or so, and one must be in the right place, at the right time, and in the right frame of mind. There is a lot of luck involved.

In my case, I was barely born when Kerouac and Burroughs published the seminal beat works. I was just a little late for the 60s thing, starting high school in late 1969. Yes, I participated in a protest or two, but we - most of the people my age - never really understood what it was about. Vietnam was winding down, and although I had a draft card, for me there was never a lot of risk of lugging an M-16 through the rice paddies. The peace treaty was signed seven months before I turned 18.

But I was there in the mid-1970s when "punk" music swept out of London and New York. It arrived in Chicago a year or two later. I was just finishing college, in my mid-20s, and was questioning everything. My uncle, the only true intellectual in my family, had just died at the age of 60. He left a few tangible things, but all that knowledge, all those ideas, survived only in the books I inherited and the ideas he had passed along to me. He had never published a word. It threw me into an existential tailspin, delving into Camus and Sartre and anything else I could get my hands on to try to figure out if there was any point at all to life. So besides being in one of the right places at the right time, I was certainly receptive to anything that would turn the world upside down for a few years.

It might have been the last good chance for a while. It's tougher for today's kids, the corporations have got a very good handle on packaging revolution and profiting from it these days. Someone will eventually find a way to undermine that, but it's going to take a little extra effort now (perhaps a few people already have... for example, see Camille de Toledo's discussion of "temporary autonomous zones" in the 2008 book "Coming of Age at the End of History" which elaborates on ideas that have been kicking around already for a few years). Rebels don't usually have access to a sophisticated marketing staff and top ad agencies and law firms. The early 80s also might have been the last time that celebrities, even cult-level celebrities, were relatively accessible to anyone outside the establishment press. Today every band with any sense has an agent to control access and spin the image.

But in any case, I believe in documenting whatever one is lucky enough to experience, especially when it something that relatively few have had the opportunity to experience.

Through much of the 1970s the music we heard on the radio was abysmal. Some of the recent efforts to market 70s nostalgia appall me. I lived through it, and it sucked the first time. Disco was the worst, mostly a bunch of people who could count their IQ on their fingers and spent their whole paycheck on clothes and fancy cars to try to impress each other. All show, no substance, a cult of shallow materialism. The rock scene was a little better, but by then it was all about big name bands, endless guitar solos, and singers with overgrown egos. It might have been OK if the record companies hadn't been trying to shove the whole thing down everyone's throat. But it was the time of the top 40, and we were forced to listen to the same few hits over, and over... and over again. It was like an endless broken record.

There were attempts to do other and more creative things. Even in Chicago, Triad radio offered obscure music not heard anywhere else, but after a few years they faded away. Really it was just a leftover from the innovations of the 60s. By the mid 70s change was in the air, although you'd never know it in the Midwest. I remember on a 1975 trip to Toronto seeing a record store window on Yonge Street, plastered full of New York Dolls record covers, and sensing that it was a precursor to... something. Indeed, there were rumblings in London and New York by then which were soon to change the music industry.

The first "punk" bar in Chicago was La Mere Vipere, on Halsted Street. It opened on May 5, 1977, and ended less than a year later, with a mysterious fire, on April 27, 1978. Years later lots of people claimed they had been to La Mere Vipere, but Roseann usually said she had never seen them there.

O'Banion's opened in June of 1978 and had the scene almost to itself for a little while, providing a showcase for early Chicago new wave bands like Bohemia. The only other early venues for music were the first incarnation of Oz, and Gaspar's, a neighborhood tavern which booked bands on weekends. They were soon joined by Neo, Misfits, Lucky Number (later Club 950), Tut's, and other clubs. Most of the clubs were in marginal neighborhoods, either abandoned industrial areas or places with bums and winos on every corner. It certainly contributed to the mood:

January 7, 1981: I'm looking at some notes I made about a week and a half ago concerning alienation and estrangement. Then, when I had spent many consecutive nights in the inner city, I could feel those afflictions. The subdued fear that permeates the spaces in and around those numerous buildings, and all who inhabit those spaces for more than a few hours. Not conscious fear in the usual sense, but something that seems to hang in the air like fog, that one is sometimes aware of but cannot touch. And it is always seen in others.

Through 1980, a handful of local bands played wherever they could, and most even were able to cut a single or two. Poison Squirrel, The Dadistics, Phil n' the Blanks, Skafish, Immune System, probably a few others I'm forgetting. Bohemia even managed to cut an EP. But none of the first batch of local bands ever enjoyed more than regional success; they were about to be overshadowed by a succession of British bands touring the states.

3. Transition (1979-1980)

I hung around the clubs a lot through 1979 and 1980, but was pretty much just part of the crowd, there for a good time like anyone else. It would be a while yet 'til I thought of it as more than a social outlet.

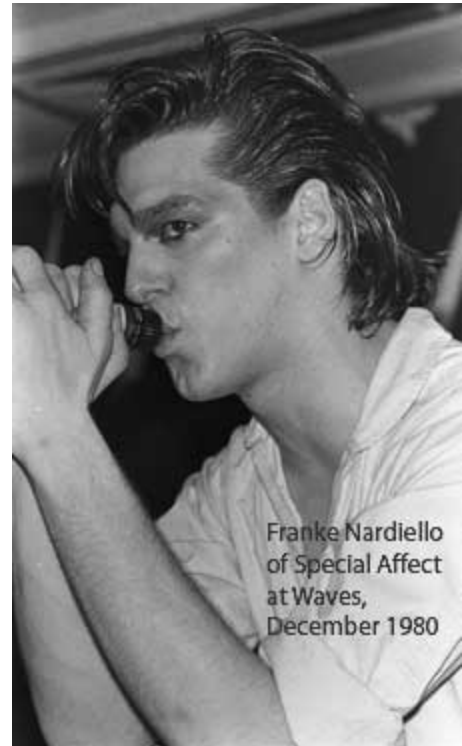
Unfortunately, I can't recall a lot of detail from the earliest years. I have plenty of random memories, but not much context to place them in. I wasn't taking photos yet, and have only sporadic journal entries from this period.

There were visits to O'Banion's, on a fairly regular basis. There were trips to Gaspar's, a club on Belmont and Southport, to see bands. Gaspar's was a strange place, of conventional appearance but with a succession of separate rooms connected by doorways. There were probably only three rooms, but for some reason the first time left a memory of walking through a seemingly endless succession of rooms, one after another, and finally finding the band in the last room. I'm sure of having seen Phil n' the Blanks there, and The Dadistics, and probably a few others. I made no effort then to talk to the bands, although I'd meet some of them a year or two later. But then, it wasn't time yet. It was just entertainment.

I'll take a moment to talk about The Dadistics, for the simple reason that it's the only one of the early bands that I know very much about. They were kids from the Art Institute, with Audrey Stanzler on vocals, the late Fred Endsley on guitar, Michael Hernandez on bass, Frank Eck on drums, David Schutt on keyboards, and Ed Dietrich as an alternate bass player. The Dadistics played from 1978 to 1981, and released two 45's; I still have a copy of the first one, with "Modern Girl" and "Paranoia Perception." Like a lot of the music coming out of the early Chicago scene, it had more of a pop new wave sound, and even today the songs are fun to listen to (go to The Dadistics MySpace page to hear them). Of course I didn't know much of this at the time, I saw the band more than once because I liked their sound, and most of what I now know of them I learned from Audrey years later.

More and more out of town acts were coming through Chicago. Tuxedo Moon, an innovative San Francisco duo, played Tut's in September of 1980. New York's Bush Tetras were the opening act. November was a busy month, with the Psychedelic Furs in from Liverpool, followed a few days later by Toronto's Martha and the Muffins, then later in the month, 999.

Late in 1980 I met Franke Nardiello, lead singer with a little known local band called Special Affect. One night after a Special Affect show at Waves, I went with Franke and Al to several other clubs and got home near dawn. I vaguely remember seeing Scott Wilk and the Walls. That was the first night I remember taking photos at the clubs. Later I did more photos of Special Affect as they became a little better known, put out an album and played bigger clubs. Franke and Al Jourgensen were the band members I came to know best. Franke eventually moved to England to front a band called The Drowning Craze, and cut a couple of obscure singles. He later returned to Chicago, and in 1987 or 1988 co-founded (as Groovie Mann) My Life With The Thrill Kill Kult. Al went through a succession of short-lived bands, including the one-night wonder "Silly Carmichaels" who played an amazing set in a Lincoln Avenue storefront and then dispersed; then Al founded Ministry and hit it big.



Franke Nardiello
of Special Affect
at Waves,
December 1980

Franke was maybe a little too creative for the mass-market; middle-America was just never going to get it. I'll always remember the mannequins in his second-floor apartment window on Diversey, every time we drove by we'd look to see how he had dressed them that day:

Franke's mannequins - symbols of the city. Cold. Lifeless. Unfeeling. Emotionless. Not in control of their own destiny, and not caring, having no desire to change anything. Controlled by others.

In late 1980, local hard core bands began to draw a little attention. Da! and Strike Under played some of the smaller venues. Black Flag swept in from the west coast and played at Oz... more about Oz later.

By this time I was starting to make a wider set of connections within the Chicago alternative scene. One day I was at WZRD, the basement radio station at Northeastern Illinois University, for some reason I can't recall now. Terry Nelson was one of the better known DJ's there at the time. He was a little older than most folks in the music scene, mid 30s I think, and lived for music and nothing else. If a new record came out, any new record, he had it before anyone else. I don't think he had worked a real job, one that actually paid, anytime recently, and his girlfriend Lorna Donley (lead singer in Da!) later complained that he spent all their money on records. One entire room

of their apartment on Lincoln Avenue was filled with metal shelves full of records. But he knew as much about music as anyone.

That day at WZRD I also met another DJ, a new addition to the staff. Marilyn Mueller walked into the room, introduced herself with an assertive handshake, and over the next couple of hours we had an on and off running conversation about all sorts of things. She was hard to miss, with red hair, pale blue eyes, and a yellow Sex Pistols tee shirt cut a little ragged around the edges. She was also one of the more intelligent people I've ever met. Marilyn became a good friend, and it was possible to discuss almost anything with her.

There was a sad note in March of 1980. Ian Curtis, singer of the Manchester band Joy Division, committed suicide after a long period of health and relationship problems. Joy Division never made it to the states, although a U.S. tour had been about to begin. Chicago was one of the few places outside of England where the bands record sales were strong, thanks to a solid promotional effort by Wax Trax. The posthumous release of the "Closer" album continued the trend. It was another outstanding effort. Although often dark and moody, Joy Division's music was powerful - and unlike much of what was produced at that time, it is just as potent today. Although the band re-formed as New Order, they were never really the same without Curtis.



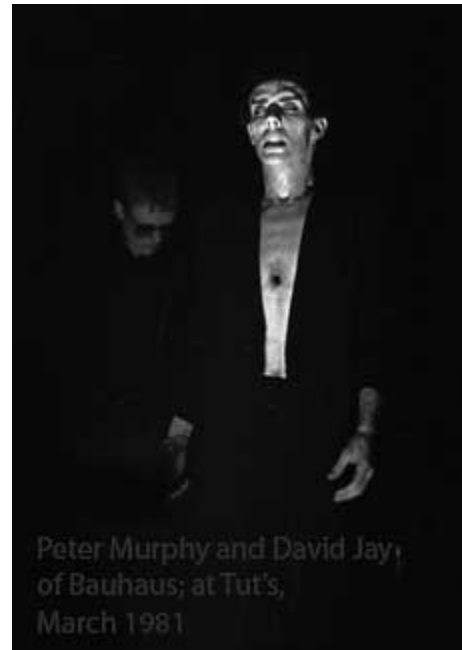
Terry Nelson on the air
in the WZRD studio

4. Spring on Belmont Avenue

So much happened so fast in 1981, that looking back it's hard to believe that it was really all in one year. Actually less than a year, because it got off to kind of a slow start.

By now, the scene had taken on a decidedly post-punk flavor. A few of the early bands were still out there, but in general things were now much more diverse. The creative spark of the late 1970s had flown off in a number of different directions. Most conspicuously for us, some of the British bands were now touring the U.S.

As the snow melted, life returned to the city streets. It kicked off with Joe "King" Carrasco, a fun band from the American south with a strong tex-mex influence, at Tut's on March 6th.



Tut's was at the corner of Belmont and Sheffield. The neighborhood included a couple of cheap corner liquor stores and a tattoo parlor frequented by sailors in town for the weekend. The Ravenswood elevated tracks (now the Brown Line) ran right past the building. The 1981 incarnation of Tut's began to book really innovative music into the space. The second floor layout included two rooms, a music room with a raised stage, and a smaller back room with a bar. There was a hallway connecting the two rooms, and the stairs up from the street intersected the hallway. The bouncers sat at the top of the stairs. There were a couple of smaller rooms off of the hallway, an office and an ambiguous room not open to the public where Val, the owner, hung out with a few mysterious characters.

There were two bartenders at Tut's. Kathleen was a muscular woman, a bodybuilder, with short hair. Veronica was more petite and feminine, with long brown hair and a propensity for wearing short skirts and tight tops. She was very good at flirting with the customer's. Every week there were a couple of personal ads in the Reader (Chicago's free weekly paper) proclaiming lust for Veronica in an assortment of creative ways. But under the glam, she was really just an ordinary girl.



The real attraction of Tut's was that the back room and the hallway were reasonably quiet. It was possible to carry on an extended conversation even when a band was playing. On many a night I ignored a bad band to talk about politics or philosophy instead. But on March 7, 1981, the band was very good and no one lingered in the back room.

Bauhaus came out to a modest crowd, perhaps a little over a hundred people. I was up in front, pressed against the edge of the stage. It was a fantastic show, and I was mesmerized - but kept taking photos. Under the harsh glare of a spotlight, and dressed in black, Peter Murphy did his best Bela Lugosi imitation, while Daniel Ash made a guitar do amazing things and David Jay pounded out a vibrant bass. After an EP and a succession of singles, Bauhaus had just put out their first album (In the Flat Field). The show included most of that early work.

At the end of the show, the crowd dispersed. I came back into the music room after a while, and Peter Murphy and Daniel Ash were walking around with no one to talk to. So I went up and talked to them. They seemed almost shy, so strange after the animated stage performance. I took a few more photos, although it was more difficult without the bright spotlights.

On April 11 the British influence returned to Tut's. This time it was Echo and the Bunnymen, a psychedelic/existential bunch from Liverpool. Like Bauhaus, they were still at cult-level status after one single and with an album (Crocodiles) recently out, but no real hits yet. The music was relatively subtle, and the lyrics sometimes not entirely rational, but often profound. It took a few listens, but to this day I still like some of that early work.

I was in what was to become my usual spot, pressed against the stage just to the right of the main microphone, camera in hand. Ian McCullough managed to do a solid and coherent show, despite funny-looking eyes and a bottomless glass of vodka and orange juice.

At the time I was using a Nikon FM for location work, lightweight, durable, and with an inconspicuous black body. I was usually so close to the stage that a fast normal lens was more than sufficient. Sometimes if there was enough light I'd use a short telephoto, a 105mm, to grab really tight head shots. Tri-X was the film of choice at the time, there really wasn't anything much faster.

One night I was in the hallway at Tut's when suddenly one of the big windows in the back room shattered. Some guy had just thrown a chair through the window; I never did learn why. He jumped from the window across to the elevated tracks only several feet away. His buddy tried to follow, but missed. He plunged two stories down onto the concrete sidewalk. The paramedics came to remove the body.

Not long after that I witnessed one of only three fights I'd see in my entire time on the punk scene. It happened at the top of the stairs at Tut's, and I never did hear what caused it. No one got off more than one or two swings, and both guys neglected to put down their beer mugs. Both left on stretchers, and the walls were spattered with blood.

There were still more interesting bands that spring. Problem Dogs, a local outfit, played at Space Place, just west of the loop, on April 25. I'm not sure if that's the night I met them, it may actually have been quite a bit earlier. I encountered them repeatedly at parties over the next year or two, and had many an interesting conversation.

On the night of the 26th, D.O.A. swept out of Vancouver and into Oz. I think that was the Broadway incarnation of Oz; there were so many, it was hard to keep track. Oz was a bar in name only. It had no liquor license, and had no intention of trying to get one. Mandated closing times were ignored. After a while the cops would shut it down. A week or two later it would sprout like a mushroom, in some other low rent space, in some other dark and obscure corner of the inner city. Because there was no sign on the outside and no advertising, only word of mouth, it usually took the cops at least a few weeks to find it again. The crowd was usually small, mostly hard-core punks and anarchists, lots of black leather jackets.

That night I was there with my friend Diz, and I vividly remember an amazingly beautiful young woman, tall, thin, blue eyes, long dark hair. I didn't actually meet Lisa until a few weeks later, when I photographed her in the ladies room at Exit while our mutual friend Crystal guarded the door; but this night Lisa had consumed a few too many drinks. She kept wandering out on what passed for the dance floor, perched on six-inch spike heels. She'd try to move in among the slam dancers, and within a moment or two would crash hard to the ground. Over and over, she'd pick herself up, wade back into the otherwise all male crowd, and fall again. She didn't seem to feel a thing.

A more permanent Chicago institution was Wax Trax records. On Lincoln Avenue just north of Fullerton, next to the Biograph Theater where John Dillinger was gunned down, it was THE place to buy records. They always had the latest British import music, an unbelievable selection of it, and a

knowledgeable staff. The fanzines were in a rack toward the back, and later an upstairs expansion sold mostly clothes. Through 1981 it was one of the very few places to buy black straight-leg jeans in Chicago. Ask for them in any of the mainstream franchise stores, and not a chance, they were still selling bell bottoms.

Sometime in April of 1981 I took a photo of Carol, one of the staff at Wax Trax, in the doorway of the store. She was wearing her "A Certain Ratio" button (another of the Factory Records bands out of Manchester). It was one of those random moments, she was out for a cigarette break as I walked in or out. There are two negatives. I didn't see the sadness in her eyes at the time, but it's evident enough in the photo. She's looking right through the camera. By summer she was dead, having carefully copied the exact methods used by Ian Curtis a little over a year earlier.

5. In print

I need to take a moment to talk about the people. Of course I never took a formal poll; but my sense was that mostly, they were kids like me. Kids who had lived in the city long enough to be at home there. Kids who had subsequently grown up in the suburbs. As we approached school age, parents had moved to places with better schools. So we were smart kids. There was just one problem. We saw through the smokescreen called the American Dream. Today, at least in some circles there is agreement that the post-war automobile culture produced a mowed-lawn and concrete wasteland, where families were isolated in their detached houses, there was little street life, and a car was needed to go almost anywhere. Of course that didn't matter much, because with no town center, there was no place to go anyway.

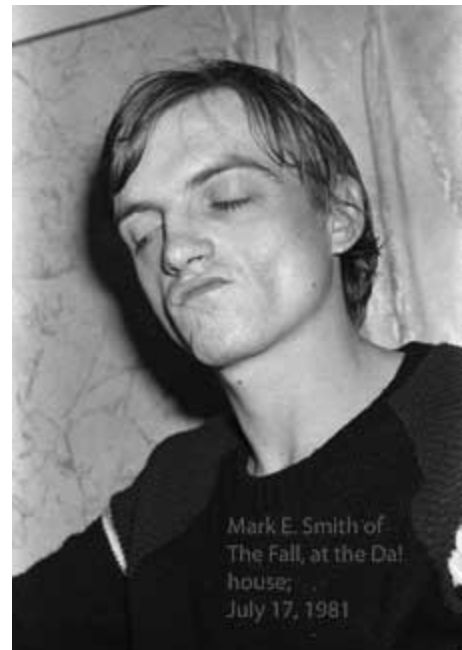
A lot of us ranted at our parents and anyone else who would hold still long enough. "Can't you see?" Well no, actually they couldn't. A whole generation was so rooted in the postwar progress-will-overcome mentality that there was no thought that parts of it could have been a mistake. Everyone was far too concerned what the neighbors might think, far too busy trying to conform. After weeks or months of futility, we accepted that no one in the suburbs wanted to understand. So while generally playing by society's rules, some of us - a small percentage, really - began to migrate to the inner city. There, we found others like ourselves. Artist's colonies have perhaps always moved to the fringes of society, to the places with low rents; and paradoxically, artists are often the first wedge of gentrification. They make the neighborhood "safe" enough for others to follow. We were just a new kind of artist.

There were dangers. A lot of people were navigating treacherous philosophical and emotional waters, questioning everything about the human condition. When the underpinning, everything we had been taught to assume, was swept away... well, what else was there? For a while there was a void. We knew how to assemble and analyze information -- I already had some formal training in philosophy, and others had relevant skills -- but it took time to assemble an alternate world view. During that time, one was at risk. These same thoughts can be found in the writings of many great authors and poets: Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Lautreamont, Poe, Artaud, Jarry; most of whom died too young. I lost some friends prematurely, too. Those who made it to the other side came out stronger.

These things, along with a more easily understandable rebellion typical of the youth of all generations, contributed so much to the music and to the parallel and related artforms which developed along with it.

On Bastille Day, 1981, I was sitting at the bar at Exit on Wells Street. I had been talking to Kathleen, the bartender; she had left Tut's a while back. At some point that transitioned into a conversation with the blond-and-pink haired girl sitting next to me. Cheryl was a former art student, originally from Detroit. She was intelligent, but so were a lot of other people in the room that night. She stood out because she had been to the edge. We had both read Lautreamont, and I remember her calling it a "dangerous" book. We talked about dada and surrealism, especially about the paintings of Marcel Duchamp, and about her experiences running codeine across the Canadian border. She had worked as a stripper, by choice, and as a form of self-expression. She told me that she went by three different names, depending on the situation, and I knew that none of them were real. After a while we left Exit and drove out to my studio to take some photos. I showed her the proof sheets a few days later. A few weeks after that she called me, really depressed, and I talked her out of suicide. She seemed OK after a while, but I never heard from her or saw her again. I used one of the photos of her in an exhibit in 2001, and whenever I look at that photo I wonder if she made it.

Two nights later, The Fall played at Tut's. Not exactly a household name today, they were from Manchester, England and were known for their rough sound and caustic lyrics. What can I say about Mark E. Smith? Tall, gawky, a bundle of contradictions, confident but walking a slightly different path than anyone else. He was the one constant. The rest of the band turned over frequently, thus maintaining a coarse barely-able-to-play the instruments sound. I'm told that some of the songs were written by clipping headlines from newspapers, pasting them up on pages, and filling in the gaps. The name of the band came from the Camus novel. Mark E. Smith and his cast of thousands have been prolific, continuing to produce music right up to the present.



Two of the songs played that night, "N.W.R.A.," and "Hip Priest," were recorded live and included on the subsequent album "A Part of America Therein, 1981." Mark's stage presence overcame the cheap aqua-blue windbreaker and brown polyester pants, but the slightly chaotic songs were best of all. It was an outstanding performance. The event organizers estimated the crowd at about 400, although I think that's optimistic.

A small group of people joined the band for a post-show party on Foster Avenue. Despite Mark's thick Manchester accent, we managed to carry on a series of disjointed conversations about American and British culture. At times I think I was catching every third word, while his manager was telling me that she could "understand Americans perfectly because we hear them on the telly all the time." When I framed a tight head shot of Mark in the small north side kitchen, he cocked his head at a strange angle and closed his eyes. It's an appropriate 6:00 am portrait of him. A little later a petite and somewhat wasted girl bared the tattoo on her breast for the camera, then smeared spaghetti sauce from a pot on the stove all over her face. Later she discarded her shirt, applied additional spaghetti sauce, and ran out into morning rush-hour traffic. Miraculously, there were no arrests despite the fact that the Foster Avenue Police Station was less than 200 feet away.

July 16 was also the night I officially joined the music press. Craig Schmidt, editor of a local fanzine called *Cooldest Retard*, was at the party. He asked if he could run some of my photos. Three shots were included in the September issue, the eyes-closed photo plus two close-cropped head shots taken during the show. By the next issue I was on the masthead, and was writing reviews as well as providing photos.

Perhaps the greatest innovation of the punk and immediate post-punk era was self-publishing. Independent record labels blossomed almost overnight, circumventing the control of the major companies. Simultaneously, homemade fanzines began to appear in record stores and other alternative outlets. Anyone with something to say and willing to do a little work could now reach an audience.

Today we take self publishing for granted. Anyone with basic computer skills can produce a newsletter and run off hundreds of copies. But until about 1980, it wasn't so simple. Guy Lawley [*in* R. Sabin (editor), 1999, *Punk Rock: So What? The Cultural Legacy of Punk*, Routledge, London] summed up the crucial event which made self publishing realistic:

"One other factor probably fueled the small press boom more than punk: the photocopier, increasingly available in offices, libraries, and high street shops after 1980. Paying a printer to produce a comic or zine usually meant printing hundreds of copies which weren't going to sell, as printers would only take on larger print runs. Photocopiers meant you could print as few as you needed, then give them away or sell a limited print run to break even or make a modest profit."

Cooldest Retard was produced on typewriters by the individual authors. Early personal computers were available but still expensive and mostly limited to larger offices, and they were hobbled by limited memory, crude software,

and dot-matrix printers. So we did it the old fashioned way. The articles and photos were then delivered to Craig, who spread them out on the floor of his Bissell Street apartment, cut them to size with a pair of scissors, and glued it all together. The completed originals then were taken to the recently opened Kinko's on Lincoln Avenue. By the time I joined the staff they were working on issue #16... in typical post-punk contrarian fashion, they'd started counting from somewhere well above 1, and the earliest issue I have is #9, published in September 1980. A year later they had a circulation of about 1200 copies. Most of those sold through Wax Trax Records, just a few doors down from Kinko's, and a few other alternative record shops in Chicago. A few hundred were shipped off to be distributed in New York, London, and Liverpool. The cover price was 81 cents.

I'd been reading Coolest Retard for a while, and still have copies of most of the issues. It was a central source to learn about obscure music. The staff had diverse interests, and amazing energy. Each issue had reviews of recent live shows, record reviews, notice of upcoming shows, and ads by clubs, record stores, and other alternative merchants. The 'zine was all about, and only about, the latest music. As I was to learn later, expression of political opinions was not encouraged... or more likely, it was not well understood.

In retrospect, the 'zine was crude. The articles vary tremendously in quality, with some riddled with typos. Reproductive quality was primitive at best. But the chaotic appearance was typical of early 'zines, and somehow fitting for the times. There were no formal staff meetings, and there was no scheduling of who would cover what. We just went to whatever we wanted to. I met most of the rest of the staff one by one over a period of several months. Everyone found their own niche.

Although none of us were paid, the job had it's benefits. I rarely had to pay to see a band. Often my beer was free too. Backstage access was routine. The bigger acts on tour were already a little jaded, and probably did interviews only to sell records. They probably heard the same questions in every city. But the smaller bands clamored for attention. After a while, unsolicited records and demo tapes began to appear in my mailbox.

The British bands were usually well covered, with most of the staff turning out for the interviews. Mostly I concentrated on taking pictures in those situations. Karen and Diane covered the rockabilly shows. Coverage of reggae was limited to the bigger name acts, and I can't recall who did the new romance dance bands, which I avoided.

I pretty much had coverage of the art bands and industrial bands to myself, because it was kind of a fringe area and the other staffers were already busy with other things. The art bands often played together only once or twice, or

if they lasted longer changed names and styles. There was little publicity, and it took a lot of networking to keep up with what was happening. I covered one bunch from the Art Institute three times, with three names, and three distinct sounds; same four people. They were actually pretty good no matter what they were calling themselves that week. The industrial bands could be just as unpredictable, and often they were trying to mess with society anyway. The best ones, like Cabaret Voltaire or Throbbing Gristle, pulled it off. The worst I ever heard was a local bunch called O No (a fitting name), guys in white sheets creating the most awful out of tune noise I've ever heard. I walked out after 10 minutes. The better local acts included The Men and Max Grey.

I also did a lot of the up-and-coming hard-core bands, even though I had mixed feelings about the music. Usually I was the only one on staff crazy enough to wade through the slam dancers to get to the edge of the stage to get good photos. I don't think the term "mosh pit" was invented til a few years later, but that's basically where I had to stand for 20-30 minutes at a time to get enough good shots. It was easier after a few beers, but also required good peripheral vision and almost a sixth sense to detect human bodies hurtling through the air. It didn't hurt if you were able to get a shoulder into them and push back.

There were two problems with the hard core, or thrash, bands. First, they all started to sound the same after a while. Loud fast angry music and incomprehensible vocals. Even the strongest lyrics didn't mean anything unless you had the hard copy of the words. It was kind of summed up by one experience with Articles of Faith, basically a good band with a University of Illinois straight-A history major writing the very political lyrics. One night, in the middle of a set, one of the guys broke a guitar string. The rest of the band improvised while he found a new string, but at about half of the usual frantic pace. Made up on the spot, it was the best thing they ever played in public. I told them that after the show. They never slowed down again.

The second problem was the negative attitude. Yeah, we already know things suck. After listening to enough angry young men sing songs to that effect, it seems fair to ask the question: "OK, what are we going to do to change things?" No answer from the thrash bands, just more angry lyrics and even faster music.

6. In the basement (late summer/early fall 1981)

The succession of out-of-town bands continued. On August 1 we heard Romeo Void, one hit wonders out of San Francisco. Then on August 8 I photographed Killing Joke at Tut's. I never did learn a whole lot about them other than their British origin. The songs, and the cover art, were overtly political, scenes of battle carnage, faces painted black on stage. The music was essentially a wall of sound, not bad to a point but repetitious after a while.

In September New York's Bush Tetras came through again. They played Chicago frequently, and by now I was getting to know them, having sat in on multiple radio and 'zine interviews. Bands fronted by women were still relatively uncommon, and in this case there were three women, all with an urban edge, including Pat Place of Contortions fame. They created interesting funky songs like "too many creeps."

On September 17, San Francisco's infamous Dead Kennedy's played C.O.D., a just remodeled basement club on the far north side corner of Devon and Sheridan. It was a huge club by post-punk standards, big enough to hold perhaps a thousand people, with a large stage. Bigger name acts were required to fill the space, and the managers - their names escape me now, but they were very approachable and generally great guys - were aggressive promoters. Bobby Skafish, probably the best known local alt-music DJ (at WXRT) at that time, hung out at C.O.D. With Misfit's, a smaller and older club only a block away, the Rogers Park/Edgewater neighborhoods temporarily became a hot spot for the music scene.



C.O.D. packed them in for the Dead Kennedy's. I didn't even try to get near the front, it would have been madness in the huge crowd. Instead I stayed near the back bar with a long lens and stood on chairs to shoot over the mass of heads.

The following night I was making the rounds of a couple of clubs when someone told me that the Dead Kennedy's were doing an unannounced show at O'Banion's. If word had gotten out they would have been lined up for blocks, O'Banion's just wasn't a very large space; but apparently hardly anyone heard in time. I had a very close up view.

O'Banion's was a tough venue for band photos, just too dark. Since I already had some pretty good shots from the night before, I concentrated on more personal candids later. After the bar was closed, at about 5:00 am, we did an interview with the band in the tiny basement. I took a bunch of handheld photos by the light of a single bare 60-watt ceiling bulb, quarter second exposures in the poor light. A few of the shots were sharp enough to use. The graffiti covered walls and stark light created an appropriate mood.

The photos went a lot better than the interview. Jello Biafra had an opinion on just about everything. I disagreed with him on almost every issue, and thought he was a pompous ass. Sorry, I was just not impressed.

On September 25 the Bush Tetras were back, this time at Misfit's as the opening act for Alex Chilton of Boxtop's fame. Better known as a songwriter than as a performer, Chilton had been around for ages, a long and difficult musical career. Although he later cleaned up his act, the trademark bottle of whiskey was still in hand that night.

After the show, Craig went to the backstage door and inquired about an interview. I was standing right there when Chilton came to the door, bottle still in hand, looked at Craig, casually said "I don't talk to the press," and disappeared. To the best of my knowledge, he was one of the very few who refused an interview. I respect him for it.

My notes are a little fuzzy for October; but in rapid succession I photographed Orchestral Manuevers in the Dark, from the north of England; then Snakefinger, another innovative British act; then Nick Cave and The Birthday Party, in from Australia; and then James Chance.

The Nick Cave show, at C.O.D., was a haunting experience. Although the songs only hinted at the intricate dark layers of sound that would evolve later in the Bad Seeds incarnation, it was a memorable show. Today I can name only one of the songs from the playlist that night, "The Friend Catcher," but it seems as if it were only yesterday. Years later one of my photos from that night was exhibited at a major gallery.

Today, when kids see my photos of Nick Cave or Bauhaus, they start asking about goth... but no one had coined the term yet in 1981, or at least it wasn't in common use in this context. These bands were just part of a larger, relatively ambiguous category influenced by existentialism, surrealism, other art schools of thought, sometimes psychedelia, sometimes by eastern philosophy. The music could be hauntingly beautiful, but it generally was not cheerful. In England an earlier version epitomized by bands like Joy Division was sometimes called the movement with no name. The boundaries were not clear yet.

On October 26, Modern English played C.O.D. Although they still get a fair amount of airplay today, the crowd really wasn't that large, and it was easy to get good close photos. Singer Robbie Grey hung out on the stage and talked to us afterwards; a few of my friends already knew him, I'm not sure how. Robbie was one of the least pretentious people I met in my several years of involvement in the music scene. Just a regular guy, he acted as if he were playing a local pub instead of a major club halfway around the world.

In the waning days of the month, Autumn Records held a record release party for several bands, including Effigies and Da!, and then Silver Abuse played at Cubby Bear, a watering hole across the street from Wrigley Field populated by baseball fans by day, and music fans on selected nights. Post-punk under photos of Ernie Banks and Ron Santo... it was surreal.

One of the more memorable nights at Cubby Bear was the time when Naked Raygun (then one of my favorite hard-core bands) came out for an encore wearing only their instruments, strobe lights flashing in an otherwise completely darkened room. One more song, and they were gone.

The Wrigley Field area around Clark and Addison was another satellite cluster of music clubs, which I've not mentioned much so far. Cubby Bear was right on the corner. A few blocks north up Clark Street was a pair of venues, a large first and second floor music club called Stages, and later Metro; and in the basement a succession of smaller clubs. In 1979/1980 it was Waves, where I first heard Da! play; by late '81 it was Cool Runnings, a dub reggae club. I used to go there every now and then for a change of pace, and often was one of only two or three whites in the room. The Jamaican DJs spun great music. Later the space became Smart Bar, with more emphasis on obscure films and an arty crowd, with some music. No matter what the name, you had to know where to look to find it; through a door, down stairs, along a concrete hallway, through another door, down another set of stairs. Metro and Smart Bar are still there today, with Metro still catering to alternative events such as Nocturna and still hosting an occasional very interesting band. During a Chicago visit a few months before editing this updated version, I saw Wire play an excellent show at Metro. They were kind enough to play several songs from the 154 album, one of my favorites when it was brand new in 1979.



Silver Abuse at Cubby Bear, October 1981

7. Trick or treat

Halloween 1981 was one of those amazing nights that just runs together into one big memory.

The night began at Exit; unusual, because Exit had a 4:00 am license, so we often ended our nights there. My first batch of photos of people in costume were done on the sidewalk and near the back bar, with strangers posing freely.



After a while I went over to a party at Crystal's apartment, near Sheffield and Diversey. Crystal was a regular at Exit, someone I saw frequently at that time. The costumes were amazing; I was the only vampire, but we had spacemen, gorillas, a couple of androgenous creatures, men dressed as women, women dressed as men; I'd have to look at the proof sheets to remember all of the costumes.

Finally, sometime very late, a few of us headed over to a party at the high rise apartment of Jim Nash, owner of Wax Trax. People milled around on the sidewalk in front, on the roof, on the stairs. We leaned out a window and watched the infamous Lincoln Towing Company haul away dozens of illegally parked cars on Broadway. I shot a bunch of film over the course of the evening, negatives populated by every kind of bizarre creature. I've never seen a Halloween before or since with so many costumed people on the city streets.

The evening of November 4 was warm for autumn. A little after dark, a line of thunderstorms passed through. I was about half done shaving when the power went out. Finishing the best I could in the dark, I grabbed my Nikon, two of my faster lenses, and shoved a few rolls of Tri-X in my jacket pocket. My flash was broken, so it was going to be an available light night.

Siouxsie and the Banshees were to play at the Park West on Armitage Avenue, not exactly a venue known for booking punk bands. But Siouxsie was already better known in the states than a lot of her peers, so it made sense to play a larger venue. Park West was in an already gentrified neighborhood, and usually did more mainstream and upscale shows, complete with cocktail waitresses roving among the small tables on the floor. The down side of a show at an unfamiliar venue was that none of us knew

the management. There was no guest list, at least not for anyone from the regular crowd. Pay at the door.

The show was pretty good, though. As usual, I was pressed against the front of the stage grabbing photos. Siouxsie had been at this game a while, and she had an unusually strong stage presence... she was especially good at making eye contact with random individuals in the crowd. She was very much aware of the camera, and played to it on occasion. There were times when she came closer than the 18-inch minimum focus distance of my lens, so close that I could feel her breath. The crowd was surprisingly quiet and well behaved.

Susan Ballion had grown up in the London suburbs. She was a fixture on the early London punk scene, already known for heavy make-up and bizarre dress... including a controversial tendency to appear at shows bare-breasted and wearing a swastika armband (contrary to popular belief, most punks and post-punks were strongly anti-nazi. I still have my "no nazi's" armband. A few people used the symbol for shock value, though. We harrassed them whenever we could). Siouxsie's musical career was born on September 20, 1976, when they played with almost no practice and using the Sex Pistol's equipment. Two years later, their first album was in the record shops.

After the show, Craig tried to arrange an interview. First it was maybe, then it was on, then off, then on again. After quite a while, we were finally ushered backstage. The dressing room was plush relative to most of the other clubs, with soft chairs and tubs full of beer on ice. The band members seemed pretty relaxed, and right away Steve Severin urged us to help them drink the beer, because the club had given them too much. Siouxsie sat in the center of the room, and held court. She was already notorious for messing with the press. Craig was perhaps a bit too obviously infatuated with Siouxsie, and of course she then tormented him for the balance of the interview. She was friendly enough with the the rest of us, me and Karen snapping photos, and I forget who the fourth person was that night. The stage persona never really dropped until the very end, though. As we filed out toward the door, Craig said something like "maybe see you in Wisconsin next weekend" (the next show was in Madison, I think). Siouxsie retorted with something like "in your dreams." I laughed out loud, I couldn't help it... and Siouxsie looked me right in the eye, as she had so many other times that night; except this time, she flashed the only truly genuine smile of the evening, just for a few seconds, before pulling all outward emotion safely out of sight.



Siouxsie Sioux, backstage at Park West

8. Year end

November and December included a number of hard core acts. First though, there was an appearance by former New York Dolls member David Johansen. It was actually a surprisingly tame performance, and I didn't bother to write anything about it.

Then something totally different - Blurt, a quasi-industrial band with a single titled "the fish needs a bike." Funny, but it didn't hold my attention for very long. They were followed by the Effigies, by this time Chicago's premier hard core band. Musically they were tight, and although as fast as anyone, the lyrics were actually understandable. One of the band members had gone to high school with my younger brother, who never had understood any of this.

By now a running rivalry was underway between AoF and some of the younger thrash bands, and The Effigies. The AoF guys took themselves pretty seriously, and even today I can't help but smile when hearing a line in an early Effigies song, which I assume to be aimed in that general direction: "we might be kinda laughing 'cause you ain't been."

In early December I took a brief interlude to photograph three of the bartenders; first Rose, in an empty apartment off Clybourn Avenue, and then on two separate occasions, Veronica and Andrea in the studio. More and more frequently, I was documenting not just the bands, but the people around them.

On December 11, Black Flag played Club 950, on Wrightwood Avenue just off of Lincoln Avenue. My review follows, exactly as it was published in CR:

The place is packed - the people near the stage are jammed too close together to slam, and instead are pushing and shoving toward the stage. Those who are further back stand in one place, watching in studied indifference, and a few people still sit at the bar attempting to carry on a conversation or make a pickup. They soon revert to their drink because it's much too loud to hear what anyone is saying. The band is ... well, predictable. The energy is contagious, the music itself seems secondary; merely a means to an end. The boundary between stage and audience has dissolved, as band members attack the crowd and fans run, fall, or are pushed onto the stage.



Something seems different, though; when I saw this band last winter at Oz, the crowd was even more uncontrollable (although much smaller), but they were spontaneous, and the mock-violence in front of the band was simply an expression of frustration with everyday life in a world that seemed beyond control. And besides, at 5:30 am everyone was too drunk or tired to care what anyone else thought.

Yes, tonight is different; a few of these people were at last years show, but mostly these are new faces, punked-out, but in a stylized way, pre-planned, image conscious. Their actions are the same way; a few people are being very careful to make their leaps onto the stage when my camera is pointed in their direction.

Later conversations with some of the people in the crowd only strengthen my earlier impressions. Many of these people are only thrill seekers. They haven't got a clue what this is all about.

There is a big difference between the harmless slamming that occurs at most hard-core shows, and the willful violence that is often inspired by some of the west coast bands. Other writers have tried to defend and justify the carefully aimed elbows, occasional fistfights, and other acts of thinly veiled machismo that occur at some Black Flag shows; anyone that takes that viewpoint is part of the problem, and has no business complaining about the condition of society until they open up their pitiful little minds and get their own priorities straight. They are merely acting as a powerless accomplice to the short-sighted and self-serving politicians who are so good at defending and justifying senseless wars.

The guy next to you on the dance floor already knows something is wrong. Write your congressman a letter instead.

There I go again, interjecting social commentary into a music fanzine.

The tirade about violence was aimed at a particular writer, I can no longer remember who it was. But it was intended as a direct response to something that had recently been published in some rival 'zine.

On New Years Eve Tuxedo Moon and Ministry appeared at Misfits. I've briefly mentioned both bands before. Tuxedo Moon, a San Francisco duo utilizing various keyboards, synthesizers, and the occasional guitar, had put out their classic "Half Mute" album a while back, then a follow-up. They were always enjoyable.

Ministry, a local outfit, had formed in late 1981. At Al Jourgensen's request, I did their first promo photos at the Space Place rehearsal studios sometime in the fall. Those early photos were never used, because one of the guys in those photos had left the band before the first show. At this first show, Audrey Stanzler joined Al on vocals, and she's front and center in several of my photos. But after a second show she too moved on.

For Al, Ministry was a total change of musical direction. But the electronic dance music formula worked, at least for selling records. A few years later they could be heard on TV Budweiser commercials.



Ministry's first show:
New Years Eve at Misfits.
Al Jourgensen with Audrey Stanzler
(formerly of The Dadistics),
who appeared in only a couple
of shows before leaving the band

9. The Beginning of the End

In the bitter cold of January 1982 I spent a lot of time at O'Banion's. I've got lots of photos from those few weeks, I pretty much just hung out and photographed patrons. They were almost always aware of the camera, and although I didn't know most of them, no one turned away. At the end of most nights, after all the customers were gone, I'd hang out in the back room til dawn with the staff (Nancy, Roseann, Phil) and drink a couple more beers.

As the other clubs booked big acts and attracted large crowds, O'Banion's had once again become a hangout for some of the people who wanted to talk about social issues. Most nights Nancy was spinning a diverse array of vinyl, but every now and then there would be a band. Usually they were lesser-known hard core acts, like Direct Drive (about to change their name to Articles of Faith).

On January 23 Toxic Reasons from Dayton, Ohio, played. After the show everyone, including the band, went to a party at someone's house; I can't recall whose or even what neighborhood it was in. I do remember a very long and very intense political discussion with a couple of the band members, Phil the roadie brooding in the corner, and some girl laying on the floor, pulling her shirt up and flashing her chest.

One night at the very end of January I started the evening on the far north side at Misfits, then was headed south on Lake Shore Drive. It was something like 23 below zero, record cold, when my radiator hose blew. I managed to make it to the Wilson Avenue elevated station in the rough Uptown neighborhood, left the car, and jumped a southbound train. It was well after midnight, and only a few dozen bums were riding, trying to stay out of the brutal cold. The four block run from the Grand Avenue station to Clark and Erie was maybe the coldest I've ever been, but I knew there would be friends at O'Banion's. I ended up sleeping on a couch at the apartment of a couple of the guys from Articles of Faith. The next afternoon things moderated enough to be able to pour a little antifreeze in the car and drive it to a repair shop.

I might have been to O'Banion's one more night after that. Within a week it was closed and padlocked. A few days after that, I helped Nancy take her records out of the DJ booth and load them into her brown 1971 Chevy Nova, and then up into her apartment. We had to get the key for the O'Banion's padlock from the owner, at one of those nearby sleazy liquor stores. As we moved boxes, Nancy gave me a few well-worn records she had extras of, The Clash and a few others. I still have them. Late in 1983, Nancy moved to New York.

O'Banion's had been open for just under four years. It had not changed much in that time, basically the same staff, basically the same niche. While other clubs came and went, O'Banion's remained the purest version of Chicago "punk" right up to the very end. The closing of O'Banion's marked the beginning of the end. We didn't know that yet, and it took perhaps another year for everything to fall apart.

But I went to fewer and fewer shows, and was more and more disappointed by the people I met. Some of the bands were beginning to cash in. The big record companies had stopped trying to fight, and were basically just buying up the talent. In the process, the suburban masses were "discovering" our music. The clubs were packed now, with places like Metro drawing hundreds or thousands of people for some bands. Most of those people were more concerned with what they were wearing than with philosophy or art.

There were still some good times ahead in 1982. But as I look back at the list of bands I photographed, it is evident that I began to avoid the bigger acts, and increasingly covered obscure local bands or very specialized types of music.

First though, there was a sort of punk-postscript. In March, The Damned passed through Chicago. One of the original London punk bands, they were summed up by Jon Savage [in his book *England's Dreaming*]:

"They were the bash-street kids of punk: their lack of calculation and insistence on high-octane, hell-raising fun meant that their rapid rise was bedevilled by the impossibility of any planning. While the other groups were carefully considering their moves, The Damned went out there and pulled faces at the world as if there was no tomorrow."

But a lot had changed since the the day in 1976 when The Damned had cut their first record deal, as evidenced by my notes written the day after the show:

The Damned played last night - so many morons pushing toward the stage no one could move. Some of us went to Neo after that to watch the hollow-headed N.R.s dance their lives away. Then another party at Rhonda's, that I suppose was lively enough, but I was too involved in a long and aggressive philosophical discussion to pay much attention. The end result of the evening - and morning (it was 7:00 am before I headed home) was frustration and disillusionment. Everybody had something or someone to complain about, and plenty to say, but the ideas are disorganized, sometimes conflicting, and seldom positive.

Everything is breaking up into little cliques, and each one finds another one to hate.

Although the next band epitomized this new cynicism, at least they were a lot of fun. Flipper, out of San Francisco, did not take themselves or anything else very seriously. With catchy titles like "Love Canal" and an entire song consisting of "see, there's this... it's like... uh.... forget it, you wouldn't understand anyway." Right there, on one little piece of vinyl, and in very few words, they summed up the whole experience.

The night was a blur. Nancy and Roseann knew the band, so introductions were made before the show. Things got so informal that I took many of my photos from right on stage at C.O.D., actually among or behind the band, with the audience clearly visible and looking up. Later bassist Will Shatter practiced his sneer for the camera, then we lined up some completely absurd group shots. I had a blast.

Will died of a heroin overdose in late 1987.



Flipper: Left, the view from onstage; Right, Will Shatter



The author (left) during a pre-dawn discussion with Ed Pittman of Toxic Reasons and Virus X of AoF. Photographer unknown.

10. Alternatives (spring/summer 1982)

In May, CR sponsored a party at the Artful Dodger, a small tavern on Milwaukee Avenue in the Wicker Park neighborhood. Mostly it was just a mellow get-together over a few beers. But toward the end of the evening, Roseann got up on the tiny stage in drag, and did a wonderful Lou Reed imitation. The event had not been widely publicized, so there were perhaps 50 people there to see it. A lot of them were old timers though; and perhaps the fact that anybody who had been around more than a year or two qualified as an old-timer said something about how rapidly this scene had evolved.



There were a couple of other acts in May, DV8 and Bonemen of Barumba, but I didn't really take the time to write about anything else til the following month. On June 13, Stages hosted "The Kitchen Touring," three New York acts which perhaps were more performance art than music. My review ran a full page in CR:

The Reader ad billed Glenn Branca and David Van Tiegham, but rumors of cancellation were circulating days before the show - resulting in a thin crowd for this Sunday night performance with a modified lineup.

Those who came were treated to a startling diversity of creative talent. The Kitchen is a coalition of New York based performance artists and musicians, and this partial sampling proves they are an innovative bunch.

Julia Heyward opened the show; I've seen a lot of bands play in front of projected films, but this was different; the films and slides, done by Julia and including images of herself and her co-performers, were largely inseparable from the music. In fact, the films not only added to the music, they often dominated it, and in a few instances I found myself so immersed in a series of images that the music seemed ambient, and the band on the nearly unlit stage seemed to disappear.

Next, David Van Tiegham, who has played for Laurie Anderson, Pink Floyd, David Byrne, and Steve Reich; in this solo performance, titled "A Man and His Toys," he stretched the definition of percussion to it's limits and beyond; using every conceivable object to produce sound,

including a table full of pans, light reflectors, and other metal objects; a balloon, feedback from a walkie-talkie, caps on the floor, and far too many other things to list. All this over a background tape consisting primarily of more percussion, but including the chirping of birds and other natural and man-made sounds. Not many people could have pulled this off at all, much less done it this well; but this performance received the lengthy applause it deserved.

Finally, Rhys Chatham; four guitars and a drummer. Although he is often compared to Glenn Branca because they both use multiple guitars, there is a tangible difference in their music. In any case it is something that must be experienced to be appreciated. While other bands occasionally build to a crescendo, this one never stops..... a constant peak, incredibly intense music.

And then, in an utterly stunning encore; Truus de Groot screaming out her anguished vocals, gyrating madly along the front edge of the stage, stabbing an accusing finger at the audience... while the three remaining guitars continue to belt out that relentless, driving sound; and Rhys Chatham walks across the stage, sometimes next to Truus, sometimes face to face with the other guitars, each seeming to draw additional strength from the others in that formidable triangle, until the sight and sound is so powerful that it reaches beyond rationality to the most primitive emotions.

A while after the end of the show I found Truus de Groot sitting alone on the stairs at the back of the club, lost in thought. She seemed so ordinary, of average height, with short dark hair, wearing black pants and a black tee-shirt. Passing her on a city street, you wouldn't have looked twice. Some of what I wrote came from our subsequent conversation, but we talked about a lot of other things too. She was so quiet, and our conversation so tranquil, that it was hard to believe this was the same person I had seen emanating energy on stage.

The Kitchen was part of a creative flowering coming out of Manhattan at that time; Laurie Anderson (another child of the Chicago suburbs, Downers Grove in this case) was directly involved with the group. Patti Smith, Robert Mapplethorpe, Jim Carroll, David Byrne, all moved on the periphery.

Glenn Branca finally did make it to town in July. There were a lot more more guitars, a whole line of them across the stage, a bigger and louder wall of continuous sound. But even though it was a little more polished and included more people and more equipment, it made less of a lasting impact on me than the first Kitchen show. Maybe I just had more of an idea of what to expect the second time, or maybe it was just my mood.

In the interim, on June 22, the Cramps had come to town. It was one of only a very few big shows I attended in 1982. Usually I was indifferent to rockabilly-influenced bands, but this bunch of ambiguous origin was so dark and so over-the-edge that I just had to see it. Stages was relatively crowded, but with a little aggressiveness I was able to push up to the edge of the stage.

This was not the entire original lineup; Bryan Gregory had recently taken his demonic presence to a new west coast band which never really went anywhere. But Lux Interior and Poison Ivy and Nick Knox were as crazy as ever, and the twisted lyrics were intact. A guy a few over from me was shouting obscene suggestions at Ivy, when she walked straight at him - never breaking a note - and their eyes locked. Like her namesake, pretty but potentially a lot of trouble? The unspoken message got through, he shrank into submissiveness and was quiet for the rest of the evening.

A little later in the summer Richard Hell played Chicago. One of the mid-70s New York originals; as enigmatic as ever. Even I didn't know quite what to make of him. He had managed to completely miss out on the recent hype, and the show was not all that well attended. Were the bizarre lyrics from a mind testing the edges of the possible, or just one locked in the vise of a long-term habit? Maybe a little of both.

The summer wound to a quiet close. Chron Gen and a couple of obscure hard-core acts played, but they were not holding my interest much more than any of the other traditional alternatives.



Richard Hell

11. Dissonance

By the fall of 1982 I was actively seeking out bands that were beyond the tolerance limits of the general public. In October I photographed Kino Eye, the latest incarnation of one of the Art Institute bands. They were one of the few musical aspects of the block-long Judy Chicago art festival held in the south loop area.

Then in November the Max Grey band played Club 950. Max was a bartender and manager at Club 950, and sometimes played with The Men and a couple of other local industrial acts. He had been telling me about his band for so long that I was beginning to wonder if it was for real. Finally, here they were; and there were a lot of them. No wonder it had taken a while to get things together. I did enjoy the show though, and afterwards we lined up a few group photos in the alley behind the club.

I can't remember if it was at this show or an earlier one; but even though I neglected to write it down, I vividly recall an incident that took place outside of Club 950.

Art MacQuilkin was a major player in the Chicago industrial music scene. Besides being the founder of The Men, one of the better known local acts within this obscure genre, he also was the owner of Snat 5 Records, which supported several of the local acts by booking shows and sponsoring records or tapes. It was the only local record company that was run like a real business, out of a sparkling clean west loop loft office buzzing with activity. He was a Northwestern University grad, and was a few years older than many of the other music enthusiasts. Smart and charismatic, on this night he was in a mood to test what he could get away with.

He was leaning against the brick facade of Club 950. It was between sets, and several of us were outside. I was the only one talking to him at that moment. A bum, an older guy in torn clothes and with a week-old stubble, staggered by; not an unusual occurrence in that neighborhood. Art started up a conversation with the bum, friendly at first. Without changing tone or cadence, the words suddenly became insults. The bum protested, threatened violence, talked about how he had been recently released from prison on a felony rap; Art then brought him back down, friendly and reassuring. A few minutes later, more insults, followed by another recovery. This went on at least three or four times. It seemed to me to be a game; could he play the bum like an instrument? Apparently, he could. Suddenly, the conversation was over, and the bum knew it. He shuffled away, grumbling into the night.

It was one of the most amazing demonstrations of verbal skill I have ever seen.

A little later, I was surprised by the moderately large turnout for David Thomas at Stages. I must assume that most arrived on the basis of advertising. As lead for Pere Ubu, Thomas had uttered the most unconventional, and often the most un-musical, things... certainly fitting for a band named after Jarry's bizarre fictional character. Usually it was far removed from any conventional melody, and sometimes it was hard to listen to. As a solo act he had toned it down quite a bit, although there was still little danger of him ever cracking the top-40. I must assume that most in the crowd were disappointed. I was too... I would have preferred the half-crazed rantings of Pere Ubu.

By now the regulars had mostly drifted away. As I explored art and industrial bands, others had also gone in different directions. Sometime in late 1982 I saw Gang of Four at Metro. Then I went to one last show in early 1983 after a long absence, and there was hardly anyone left from the old days.

In February Bauhaus returned to Chicago. It was hard to believe that only two years earlier I had been able to walk right up to them in a nearly empty room. This time Metro was jammed to the four walls, and the balconies were overflowing too. I watched from a distance, enjoying the music; the sound had evolved, but they were still a very good band. I tried to ignore the crowd. I talked to Michele Fitzsimmons for a while; she had recently done an art exhibit at an Oak Street Gallery, showing nude photos of herself taken in assorted public places. She would quickly drop her coat, the photographer would shoot, and as soon as the coat was back on they would move along. It was a pretty strong exhibit, laced with all sorts of cultural commentary.

But my talk with Michele was about the only thing that would pass for an intellectual conversation that evening. I saw only a few other friends.

My final writings for CR, a couple of record reviews, were published in the January 1983 issue. I wanted to write about other things, cultural and political things, and wasn't hearing a lot of enthusiasm for that. The 'zine dragged along, without me and several of the other writers, for a few more issues before fading away. The last one seemed superficially full of enthusiasm, but it was forced and contrived. No one felt that way anymore.

It was over. There was no longer any doubt about it.

Partially, it was the changing music and the ever-growing crowds. There were still good people, probably quite a few of them; but it was getting

harder to sort them out from the hordes. Mostly though, it was me. I was burned out. It had been such an intense time, maybe too intense. Probably it was unsustainable even under the best of circumstances. A particularly dreary winter of '82/83 had contributed. It was one of those long, gray winters, with little snow but lots of cold and clouds and slush. It was time to move on to brighter things.

I spent some time out in the woods, first nearby and then later on the west coast. I tested the musical waters briefly in Los Angeles and San Francisco, and with my friend Marci saw a breathtaking Christian Death show. But there was no going back there. New directions, new relationships, a whole new lifestyle waited.

So what had come out of it? For me, a series of experiences I would never forget. For society at large, a creative burst that forever changed the music industry. The big companies had been forced to anticipate change instead of just dictate taste. Although the big money is once again the main player, things are better than they had been.

The ability to self-publish, whether music or images or words, has been a more profound change, one which cannot easily be reversed. It is no longer limited to paper... the internet has made it possible to reach an international audience.

There have been many books written already on the cultural influence of "punk." More will be written. Mostly, I'll leave it to them to try to explain, at least for now. I'll say only that while there certainly were some negative aspects to the whole thing, it had many subtle and a few not so subtle influences on our present-day world, and some of them were positive. Like any burst of creative energy, much junk was generated along with a lesser amount of quality work which holds up well today. Some of it continues to influence creative minds.

A lot of us will never forget. Those experiences will always be with us, part of us.



The Max Grey Band, behind Lucky Number aka Club 950

12. Epilogue: Anarchy = Redemption

It's amazing how one simple event can trigger another, and another, and another. In a way, that's the story of punk. It's exactly what happened in the late 1970s and early 1980s. A few people expressed what was on their mind, the timing was right, and in no time punk was on a fast ride, out of control but so much fun.

It's happened again, this time on a more personal level.

Although I walked away from post-punk in early 1983, I did keep all my photos, journals, notes, and assorted memorabilia. Every now and then I'd pull them out and look. Finally, in 2002, it seemed to be time to write about it. I hadn't seen any of my old friends in 19 or 20 years, and I'd left Chicago for the west coast. But it was time.

I started, slowly and painfully at first. The general outline came together pretty quickly, using my carefully dated notes on negative envelopes to establish a timeline. But I stalled after a few fragments of chapters, picked away at it but made little progress at first.

My friend Meghan Vogel gets credit for the next burst of motivation. She's a big fan of The Fall, and pretty knowledgeable on music in general. I met her when she attended one of my photo exhibit openings in her role, at that time, as a freelance writer. We ended up doing an interview which ran in the Arcata Eye. A few weeks later we had a long talk about music. I drove home inspired, and stayed up all night to churn out four chapters; in fact it felt like a replay of the punk days, when I watched the sun rise so often as I captured ideas on paper before they could slip away.

Most of the rest followed over the next few days. Within a few weeks, what turned out to be essentially a memoir of my days (nights?) as a post-punk journalist... an earlier version of what you've read in these chapters... was posted on my web site.

Within a week a couple of folks had found it during searches, and they spread the word. An amazing number of people e-mailed and shared their reactions and thoughts. At first it was mostly people I'd never met; a few may have been at those same shows, but some had barely been born at the time. Eventually, I started to hear from long-lost friends.

One day I received two e-mails about an upcoming O'Banion's reunion in Chicago. Coincidentally, I already had a business trip scheduled which overlapped the date. So I went.

When I walked into Club Foot that night in June 2003, I had no idea how I'd recognize anyone. Then I saw a familiar face behind the bar; it was Roseann. It was so crowded, there was so little time to talk, but later she e-mailed me. On the next trip to Chicago, she invited me to an art opening at Qualiatica, a gallery on Elston Avenue. Roseann gets the credit for the next step on this journey, because she went out of her way to introduce me to a lot of people that night. One of them was gallery owner Jim Swanson, a former owner of the Artful Dodger. The next day, Jim offered me an opportunity to exhibit my post-punk photos.

The exhibit took place in September 2003, and was one of the most amazing events of my life. Openings were held on two consecutive weekends, and Jim printed professionally written and designed pamphlets for the exhibit, which he titled "Anarchy = Rebellion," as well as sweatshirts with one of my photos (the one on the cover of this book) on the front.

Kathryn Hixson's text for the exhibit pamphlet ends with the following statement, which perhaps sums up the images included in the exhibit:

"There is punk history and there is punk experience. The photographs in 'Anarchy = Redemption' testify to the lived, ever-fleeting present that was punk rock in all of its contradictory, exhilarating glory."

We had a total of four artists for the exhibit; myself, former Dadistics bass player and current stamp artist Michael Hernandez de Luna, and Karen Wehrle and Diane Dittrich, two of my former colleagues from the 'zine. I had 71 photographs covering one entire long wall of the gallery, and the others contributed smaller quantities of artwork. In typical post-punk fashion, I'd self-published a hard copy version of this book in time for the exhibit, and sold about 100 (at cost) during those two weeks. The first edition is now a scarcity, and I have only a few left.

All evening long during both receptions, people I hadn't seen in 20 years or more walked up. It was so good to see so many old friends, and to make new ones.

Another exhibit followed three months later, this time at Echo Gallery, a trendy alternative space. This time I had 10 larger prints hanging as part of an international 10-artist exhibit; my emphasis here was more on the bands and less on the patrons. Although Echo attracted a different type of clientele, everything from art school students to fashion models and trust fund babies who flew in from LA for the weekend, a core group of ex-punks attended. Some I'd seen at the Qualiatica exhibit, others now appeared for the first time since the old days.

I've attended each annual O'Banion's reunion since then, and re-connect with more people each year. There are so many others I don't remember from back then, although we must have been in the same clubs on the same nights. Either way, we have so much in common, and we pick up right where we left off. It's as if the intervening years never happened.

I still hear from other people by e-mail, since many of us are now scattered all over the U.S. I've had lunch or dinner with old friends in multiple cities during my business travels. A few others have visited me, spent a night or two at my place in California.

One thing that's become evident is that those from the old gang are today, usually, either successful or dead. There doesn't seem to be much in-between. So many didn't survive the original experience. Others took longer to fade away. But the list grows longer with each reunion, as we track down more people and hear more stories. As for the successful ones, very much still alive and still young in heart and mind; when I say successful I don't necessarily mean in a material sense, although that's true for many. Rather, I mean by each individual's own definition, their own goals. Some have followed traditional pathways, become lawyers or risen into corporate leadership roles. Others have found lifestyles that provide for the essential things while leaving plenty of free time to pursue creative endeavors. No matter which path they've chosen, no matter how well they blend into their mainstream surroundings, most of them still question everything. They still see through the lies, and still do what they can to change things for the better.

One of the biggest differences: In the old days, we took ourselves much too seriously. Today, we tend to smile more often.

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