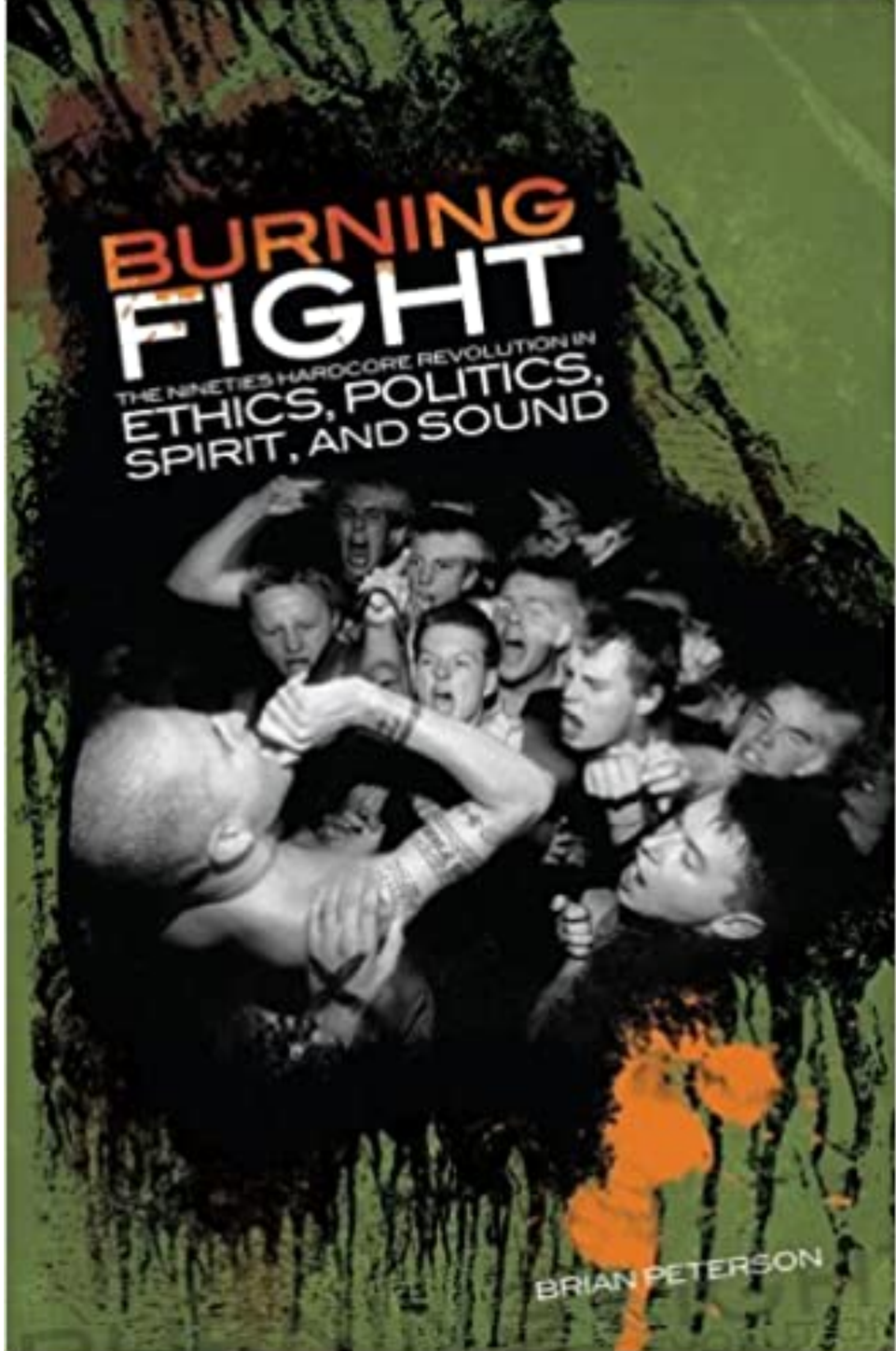
Nineties Hardcore

Notes from the book *Burning Fight*

(Introduction & Chaps 1-4)

INART 125 | History of Punk Rock | Furness



A quick word about this document

- All of the content here consists of direct quotes from passages written by Brian Peterson, the editor of *Burning Fight*. Within the book, these passages are used to frame/introduce specific sections and chapters that are comprised of quotes taken from interviews with participants in the 90s hardcore scene, i.e. musicians, zine writers/editors, show promoters, etc.

- Given that the interviews in the book contain a multitude of different perspectives, some directly contradicting each other, I strongly recommend reading the book to get a fuller perspective of the issues and ideas outlined in the following slides.

- The material extracted here is from the Introduction and Chapters 1-4.

Politics and Social Awareness

Politics and Social Awareness

(p. 25)

- Revolutionary politics and anti-government ideas have played a fundamental role in hardcore and punk since their inception. In the late seventies, punk rock started as an iconoclastic cultural movement that rejected most mainstream beliefs and ideologies in a way that was often intentionally offensive. Punk's imagery was often meant to shock. Many punks dyed their hair, had body piercings, used lots of drugs, and generally spurned the norm. Punk rock music was also loud and aggressive, which was the opposite of much of the popular music of the time.

Politics and Social Awareness

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- Hardcore was an offshoot of punk, though early hardcore scene members saw themselves as punks who rejected the more fashion-oriented “new wave” direction some people in the early punk scene gravitated toward. In response, hardcore became faster, more aggressive, and took even more uncompromising political stances. Regardless of the level of political or social awareness a band conveyed, nearly all made some sort of comment on politics or society at one time or another - otherwise it might be hard to define them as punk or hardcore in the first place.

Politics and Social Awareness

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- From the mid eighties into the nineties the political bent of bands varied widely. Instead of just a general rejection of mainstream culture, bands started to take on more alternative ideas. Eventually, various sub-scenes were formed that sometimes exclusively aligned themselves to political or ethical principles like straight edge, DIY, anti-racism, animal rights and anarchism, though there was plenty of overlap among most of these. This differentiation of issues continued into the nineties as grassroots factions deepened their focus on these topics and continued to introduce new ones.

D.I.Y.

Do it Yourself

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- The do-it-yourself (D.I.Y.) ethic has always been a vital issue in hardcore and punk. Independence from the corporate world is seen as important to maintain the ethical integrity of the music. Although some early punk bands' albums were released by major record companies, hardcore's early bands, labels, and fanzines were created without the backing of large organizations. They defined their own music, issues, and positions and were free from the influence of commercial record companies and publishers. This simple concept went beyond the boundaries of the scene and became a general philosophy of taking your personal ideas, beliefs, and ultimately your life, into your own hands.

Do it Yourself

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- As hardcore moved from the eighties into the nineties, the issue of D.I.Y. became even more important in maintaining what many felt was the underground, anti-corporate, ethos so ingrained in hardcore. Bands with a punk rock or hardcore lineage such as Sonic Youth, Nirvana, and Green Day signed to major labels and became mainstream successes in the early-nineties. The success of these larger bands brought even more major label attention to the underground music scene of which hardcore was a part.

- Most viewed this as corporate colonialism. At the time, several prominent hardcore bands either flirted with or actually signed to major labels, which caused a lot of controversy. These trends prompted many in the scene to become more defensive about maintaining its independence from big business. Some saw these major label deals as an act of treason while others were sympathetic toward bands that aspired to get their music to a broader audience. Unsurprisingly, the debate against major label involvement and the position taken those who defended a band's decision to sign with such labels divided the scene to a certain degree.

Race

Race

(pp. 33-34)

- The issue of race was also heavily discussed in hardcore. From the eighties into the nineties, many in the scene spoke of racial unity and the promotion of cultural awareness, often as a way to push back against white power skinheads that were sometimes on the fringes of the scene. Despite this anti-racism focus, a number of people felt that some in hardcore and punk had, even if subconsciously, racist sentiments at times or at least expressed some racial insensitivity. Some also felt that because the scene was predominantly Caucasian, there was somewhat of a built-in lack of cultural awareness.

Race

(pp. 33-34) Continued

- On the other hand, people from all backgrounds were often drawn to hardcore because of the political and ethical concerns voiced in the scene. Bands like Downcast, Los Crudos, and Racetraitor examined issues of white privilege, gentrification, and a perceived Eurocentric attitude some countries had in matters of economic policy and international diplomacy. Such bands occasionally drew criticism if their members did not come from disaffected minority groups because some thought that these discussions should be led by those most directly affected by those issues. Others, however, felt that as long as the issues were being discussed in a sincere manner, the ethnicity of the person doing the talking was not important.

Gender and Sexuality

Gender and Sexuality

(p. 37)

- Women have been involved with some aspects of hardcore since the beginning, but many felt marginalized by the ratio of males to females involved in the scene. Like many other music scenes and subcultures, men have largely outnumbered women in hardcore. Women formed bands, wrote zines, booked shows, and took part in other ways, but male perspectives were always the most prominent. Many saw this as a contradiction as the scene is theoretically a place where everyone should be able to have their voices heard. It wasn't that men always actively excluded females (though females who were in bands were sometimes heckled at shows, and some experienced more overt forms of sexism), but rather there seems to have been a culturally ingrained notion that females should remain in the background.

- The nineties, however, found females more visibly involved in the scene. Female bands like Spitboy and loosely organized female groups such as the Chicks Up Front Posse, not to mention many male voices in bands and zines, voiced their concerns about the lack of focus on gender and sexuality issues. Many of these people were inspired by other nineties underground movements like Riot Grrrl, which had become established in nearly all facets of alternative music and art.

Gender and Sexuality

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- Openly gay voices were also rarer than one might expect in a supposedly “alternative" sub-culture. The scene has also had its share of homophobic slurs in lyrics or in the banter at shows, which is likely a by-product of the macho overtones that can often accompany the music. Consequently, these ideas and behaviors made it appear that the scene was, at the least, not concerned with gay issues. Things started to change in the nineties though as a variety of zines that dealt with homosexuality like *Positron* and *Kill the Robot*, as well as many prominent members of the scene coming out about their sexuality, helped make gay issues an important part of the dialogue during this era. Homophobia became less acceptable as the years passed.

- Although these topics were sometimes met with prejudice and misunderstanding, the conversations fostered a broader awareness of issues pertaining to gender and homosexuality in the scene.

“P.C. Backlash”

“P.C. Backlash”

(pp. 45-46)

- Throughout the nineties, the focus on political and ethical dialogue inspired people to think and act. However, others insisted that this atmosphere also brought about a large amount of peer pressure that compelled people to take positions on these matters regardless of whether or not they actually cared about them. In addition, sometimes the ideas were presented in such a confrontational way that it was difficult to engage in an open discussion without it turning into a yelling match. These factors led toward cynicism from some, which sparked a backlash against the presence of that dialogue.

“P.C. Backlash”

(pp. 45-46) Continued

- Because of this division it seemed that many who were deeply involved with issues like animal rights or social work became less concerned with hardcore and channeled their passions into those areas directly. At the same time, hardcore’s mainstream acceptance also continued to grow as the nineties progressed and corporate interest in the scene increased. A number of bands signed to major labels or larger indies while still trying to present a personal or political message. But some felt that corporate involvement took away from the focus on substantive issues.

- This tension pushed a number of people to become firmer in their views about politics and its role in hardcore. People struggled with these ideas so much that it often forced people to question their very involvement with the scene.

Personal Impact

Personal Impact

(p. 51)

Frustrated with their lives, environment, social setting, and government, many came to hardcore as an escape. But instead of simply offering an alternative social setting to the mainstream, hardcore created a dialogue that impacted not only the scene but drove people to try to change the world they originally wanted to get away from. Many people’s entire political or personal consciousness was shaped by the debates that occurred. For them, hardcore wasn’t just a rebellion for rebellion’s sake - it was about learning something and making a change in response .

Straight Edge

Straight Edge
(p. 56)

- By definition, straight edge is a personal decision to reject alcohol and drugs in order to better oneself and pursue a more fulfilling life. But this definition varies widely among those who apply the term to themselves. Most reading *Burning Fight* will have some familiarity with straight edge due to its long presence in the hardcore scene, but one must examine its history to see how a personal belief developed into a full-fledged movement in the eighties and continued to evolve through that decade's end. This evolution continued into the nineties and, as with many other ideas underpinning hardcore, its definition was expanded to encompass other topics like animal rights, politics, and various ethical concerns, though not everyone agreed that these other topics should be included in the concept of straight edge.

- Ian MacKaye, bassist for Teen Idles (1979-1980) and later the frontman for Minor Threat (1980-1983), and some of his bandmates and friends are credited with coining the term "straight edge" to describe their non-use of drugs. They felt that intoxicants had a negative effect on many of those around them. Whether it impacted social circles, family members, the punk scene, or society itself, this group that originated the idea of straight edge was dismayed with the excesses of drinking and drugs, which they saw as a hindrance to living a productive life.

Straight Edge
(p. 56) Continued

- They were also frustrated that many punk shows were held at bars where underage people weren't allowed in. According to Michael Azerrad's *Our Band Could Be Your Life*, when the Teen Idles went on a short West Coast tour in 1980, they were not going to be allowed inside a San Francisco venue because all of the members were under the legal drinking age. In order for the band to play, the members agreed to wear black Xs on their hands so bartenders would know they were under age. The members took the idea back home with them to D.C. where the "X" became identified with this group of "straight edge" kids who rejected the idea of using intoxicants altogether.

- Not too long after that Teen Idles tour, MacKaye formed Minor Threat along with drummer Jeff Nelson, bassist Brian Baker, and guitarist Lyle Preslar. Minor Threat was a seminal hardcore band whose fast and intense music and thought provoking lyrics made them one of the most influential in the history of the genre. The cover of their 1983 record *Out Of Step* featured a simple drawing of a black sheep straying from a flock of white sheep. It was a visual representation of the proverbial 'black sheep' being at odds with mainstream society-a feeling which the band expressed in the title song of that record along with several other songs, such as "Straight Edge" ("*I'm a person just like you I But I've got better things to do I Than sit around and fuck my head I Hang out with the living dead"*). The lyrics are as much a statement of rebellion against mainstream society and many of the negative behaviors people exhibit as they are about drug use.

Straight Edge
(p. 57) Continued

- Some accused Minor Threat of trying to push their views on others. Suggesting to others how they should live their lives was a sensitive topic in a scene that many joined because of its lack of rules. However, the band repeatedly pointed out that they weren't trying to force mandates on others. They clarified their message by re-working the aforementioned song “Out of Step”; one of their well known songs that advocated a straight edge lifestyle. In an effort to rectify any potential misunderstandings, the band added the following spoken word section during an instrumental break: *“Listen, there's no set of rules I I'm not telling you what to do I All I’m saying is that I’m bringing up three things that are, like, so important to the world I That I don't happen to find much importance in.”* This is an expression of the “it's a choice, not a label” position that many adopters of straight edge took.

- Straight edge became widely discussed in hardcore as many saw value in what MacKaye was saying, although there were also many others who liked and respected Minor Threat’s music and message generally but felt alienated by the concept of straight edge. Straight edge ideas were present in the lyrics of several punk bands and other early D.C. hardcore bands like Teen Idles, S.O.A., and Government Issue, but Minor Threat, having coined the term, is usually given credit for the concept.

Straight Edge
(p. 57) Continued

- Over the years that followed, people began to apply the term “straight edge” to themselves whether they were already drug-free or newly adopting the philosophy. The concept of straight edge was regularly debated in the scene throughout the eighties. In particular, one of the most discussed issues was whether or not straight edge should be a self-identifying label or whether it should be simply a personal choice. Many also felt that the scene must be united and that factions would weaken the movement and hamper any change it engendered. While these debates did have an effect on individuals and the scene as a whole, as more people adopted the straight edge philosophy, it became a distinct movement within the hardcore scene. This brought further criticism from many who considered themselves straight edge but believed it was a choice and also from those who had no stake in the idea or rejected it outright.

Straight Edge
(p. 57) Continued

- Members of Boston bands like S.S.D. and D.Y.S. applied the term to themselves as bands and as individuals and were among the first to write about straight edge in a more militant manner. While many felt these bands attempted to make straight edge its own regimented movement in hardcore, Al Barile, guitarist of S.S.D., wrote in the 1982 photo zine *My Rules* that straight edge was something that should be interpreted by the individual rather than a specific code of conduct, which is similar to MacKaye's point of view mentioned above. California bands such as Stalag 13 and America’s Hardcore also referred to themselves as straight edge. California’s Ill Repute and Idahos Septic Death were loosely affiliated with the ideology. The influential early Reno, Nevada punk/hardcore band 7 Seconds didn’t clearly define themselves as straight edge, but befriended Minor Threat and supported some of the ideas behind straight edge in their lyrics. During this time people involved in the scene usually considered themselves punk or hardcore first and straight edge was secondary to their identity. Hardcore was a movement that was seen as a way to reject mainstream society and often as an alternative to it. This was the primary concern but many also felt that destructive and negative behavior wasn’t helpful and saw straight edge hardcore as a way to reject society without harming themselves.

Straight Edge
(pp. 57-58) Continued

- Another major factor in the propagation of straight edge was fanzine coverage. Especially in places like California that were far from D.C., zines often played as large a role as bands did. *Flipside*, one of the most widely distributed hardcore/punk zines, ran an article on D.C. and Dischord and regularly covered straight edge bands even though it wasn't their focus. Smaller zines also played a big role: *Touch and Go* (by Tesco Vee and Dave Stimson), one of the first punk fanzines in the U.S., came from the Midwest and covered the D.C. bands very early on. Barry Henssler from the Necros did *Smegma Journal* which covered hardcore and touched on straight edge. *Leading Edge* (by Martin Sprouse, Jason Traeger, and Pat Weakland), *Think* (by Billy Rubin), and *Ink Disease* (by Thomas Siegal and Steve Alper) all had features on D.C. bands and other hardcore including straight edge bands. Boston zines such as *Suburban Voice*, *XXX*, and earlier issues of *Forced Exposure* covered some straight edge bands, focusing on the Boston scene in particular. There was even a zine called *Straight Edge*. Especially after Minor Threat broke up, zines were one of the only ways to hear about straight edge until more touring bands formed.

Straight Edge
(p. 59-60) Continued

- Although many hardcore fans from in the mid to late eighties agreed with the ideas underlying straight edge, there was a sizable number of people who felt that it was becoming actively exclusionary. In some scenes the tension between straight edge and non-straight edge factions increased as the arguments pertaining to these lifestyle choices continued. By the late eighties, militant bands like Judge, A Chorus of Disapproval, Confront, and others formed and took a more hardnosed approach to issues relating to drugs and alcohol. While these bands were popular in many circles, they were also disliked by those who saw this next evolution of straight edge as even more of a reason to not be associated with that part of the scene.

- While many of the eighties straight edge pioneers had toned down their message or even completely rejected it altogether as the nineties arrived, the legacy of what they accomplished, as well as a broader awareness the concerns they tried to spotlight, influenced many nineties straight edge hardcore bands and scene members. Many who played roles in the nineties hardcore scene saw straight edge as a powerful choice amidst a culture that is known for excess. The nineties, in fact, would see straight edge heighten its connection with animal rights, political and moral issues, and social concerns. In many ways the incorporation of these various perspectives diversified the straight edge scene, but some felt these other issues just divided people further.

Animal Rights

Animal Rights
(p. 84)

- Probably the most fervent ideological battles waged within the nineties hardcore scene were issues pertaining to animal rights. These included vegetarianism, veganism, and other related environmental issues. Although many in the hardcore scene incorporated animal rights into their belief systems, these issues divided the scene in some ways. Those who incorporated animal rights into their lives, particularly with respect to their diet, often felt that the choice became an important part of their identity. For those who made these choices, it changed their entire outlook and they even found it to be a catalyst for change in other areas of their lives.

- Issues relating to animal rights and vegetarianism in hardcore and punk were introduced in the early eighties. Early U.K. punk bands like Crass, Conflict, and Flux of Pink Indians, among others, spoke out against meat eating and animal experimentation and played an influential role in spreading these ideas around the scene. American political punk and hardcore bands like M.D.C. (though some feel they teetered back and forth on these issues), Crucifix, and, later on, Nausea also advocated for vegetarianism. Many of these bands were highly concerned with the political climate of the time. The Cold War was still playing a role in international politics and threats of nuclear disaster, class polarization, and environmental concerns were topics of major importance in the hardcore and punk scene. Many of these bands saw taking a stance for animal rights issues as one direct way of fighting back against corporate control. Emotional interests in the welfare of animals also played a role. When people learned about animal testing, the often cruel treatment animals receive at slaughterhouses, and the sometimes unsanitary conditions of such places, it made them think twice about their choices. At the least, they felt that not eating meat was a step in the right direction.

Animal Rights

(p. 84) Continued

- Some other notable eighties musical figures also helped spread these messages. Influenced by the ideas of bands like Beefeater, Ian MacKaye and others from the D.C. hardcore scene were rumored or known to be vegetarian and to support animal rights. British post-punk bands like The Smiths also prominently spread a vegetarian message. Their 1985 album *Meat Is Murder* gained international prominence as much for its subject matter as its music. At the time, there was also some congruence between the political concerns voiced in hip-hop and hardcore. Bronx, New York, emcee KRS-One of Boogie Down Productions often spoke about his vegetarianism in interviews and on stage. His political and ethical views were widely shared in both hip-hop and punk/hardcore circles. Although not all of these artists or groups affected the entire scene's outlook on these topics, their impact was noticed and discussed by many and at least had an effect on the members' immediate social circles.

- Although many disliked any sort of spiritual affiliation with hardcore, influenced bands like New York's Cro-Mags and Cause for Alarm spoke about vegetarianism and made it a topic of discussion in the New York hardcore scene. A lot of people in the scene considered Krishna consciousness, a spiritual movement rooted in a branch of Hinduism, to be a cult, but several respected people in hardcore investigated and practiced the faith. One of the primary tenets of the group is that every practitioner must be strictly vegetarian. Despite the general disdain for religion that was present in the scene, philosophical discussions about the various reasons for becoming a vegetarian were common. Krishna consciousness had been on the periphery of the New York scene since it started, but its role in hardcore generally grew larger in the late eighties and early nineties.

Animal Rights

(p. 85) Continued

- Animal rights groups like People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (P.E.T.A.), which played a role in the animal rights movement in nineties hardcore, also helped spread these messages. Many of these organizations started in the seventies or eighties and gained prominence in underground artistic communities like the hardcore scene, where ideas alternative to the mainstream were typically explored. In the nineties they would often set up tables at hardcore shows, pass out free literature, and pay for ads in zines with the goal of promoting the discussion of these topics and recruiting new members for their causes.

- By the early nineties the link between straight edge and vegetarianism that was popularized by many of the youth crew bands had arguably become its own sub-scene in hardcore. The two issues became intertwined and it wasn't uncommon to go to a show, meet someone, and have that person immediately ask if you were straight edge and vegetarian or vegan. For some, these were just conversation starters and, because they were so common in the scene by this point, seemed fairly innocent questions. Others, however, felt answering "no" to either of the topics was the first step toward exclusion.

Animal Rights

(p. 86) Continued

- Syracuse's Earth Crisis arguably made the largest and most widespread impact on the animal rights debate as their mix of metal-influenced hardcore and militant lyrics launched the vegan straight edge movement and their music became one of the most popular sounds in the nineties scene. Through albums on Victory Records and tours with other hardcore bands (and later larger metal bands), they built up a sizable audience. They also received mainstream media exposure from CNN, MTV, and other outlets for their views on straight edge, animal rights, and environmentalism. Earth Crisis were succeeded by other vegan straight edge hardcore bands like Abnegation, Framework, Green Rage, Warcry, Morning Again, Culture, Birthright, and Day of Suffering to name just a few.

- While these bands became more prominent in the scene, the level of militancy increased. Many dedicated to these causes felt that just being a vegetarian or vegan wasn't enough. Radical animal rights and environmentalist groups like the Animal Liberation Front (A.L.F.), the Animal Defense League (A.D.L.), Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, and Earth First! became popular, and a number of hardcore kids became members. Some were involved in direct action and even played a role in organizing local, national, and international protests. This deeper focus led to a level of scrutiny that was often extreme. For instance, some vegans began to examine the manufacturing processes of foods and other products and even the sub-components of those items' ingredients to determine whether or not they were truly free of animal products.

Animal Rights

(p. 104) Continued

- Although hardcore has addressed a wide spectrum of topics, animal rights is one that has maintained a strong and lasting presence. Attention paid to most topics is cyclical, but like straight edge, animal rights and vegetarianism/veganism particularly have become almost inextricably linked with the scene. Not every person involved with hardcore is drawn to animal rights issues, but it's difficult to find another topic that permeates all of the sometimes territorial and varying sub-scenes within hardcore as thoroughly.

- Animal rights impacted people on several levels. The issues made people think and make decisions about how to act. Consequently, animal rights could act as a catalyst and impact other areas of peoples' lives by introducing them to a more complex world and prompting them to consider what actions to take in these new areas.

Spirituality

Spirituality
(p. 109)

- An essential component of hardcore is the spirit invested in the music. Every form of music comes from within, but the passion displayed at a hardcore show can be similar to what is seen at a religious ritual. At nearly every hardcore show, bands play their songs with the utmost intensity, singers testify to an issue that is close to their hearts, and fans struggle to reach the stage in an effort to be a part of the experience. To many, hardcore is a religion - it can have its own values and belief systems (e.g. straight edge, vegetarianism/veganism, D.I.Y.), classic texts (e.g. records, zines) and leaders (e.g. band members, zine writers, show promoters) who speak their minds and sometimes find themselves wrapped in controversy.

- During the nineties, something controversial happened in hardcore: a variety of religious ideas, most prominently from the Hare Krishna movement and Christianity, began to have a very visible presence in the scene. The Krishna conscious band Shelter was probably the first primarily religious hardcore band, but others like 108, Focused, Strongarm, Prema, and Zao followed suit and also openly discussed their spiritual beliefs. Although there were bands in the eighties that wrote about such topics, the nineties bands took these messages further. For example, several Hare Krishna influenced bands made their spiritual beliefs the central focus of their music and their lives in general. Members of the bands moved into Krishna temples, had special Krishna haircuts, wore robes and other trappings of the group and followed a strict diet and other ritual behaviors. As with other notable debates in the nineties scene, religious adherents openly advocated for their causes. Most people involved in the scene, however, saw this as intrusive.

Spirituality
(pp. 109-110) Continued

- Many in hardcore have had fairly strong agnostic/atheistic stances due to disaffection with organized religion, so the presence of anything spiritual in the scene was hotly contested and is still discussed now. Most people feel that hardcore is about rejecting the norms and values of mainstream society. Pioneers like Minor Threat derided organized religion as being “full of shit” (in the song “Filler”), and found the corruption stemming from religion had such a negative impact on the world that they saw no place for it in hardcore. Others felt the need for religion or spirituality in their lives at some level, and first Krishna and then later other religious ideas were brought into the hardcore scene in an attempt to fulfill that need.

- While some argued spirituality and religion had no place in hardcore, spirituality acted as an important component for several classic hardcore bands including Bad Brains and their Rastafarian message and the Cro-Mags and their dedication to Krishna consciousness. To many, rejecting all spiritual influences would be to disregard the impact of those legendary bands themselves. Furthermore, if hardcore is truly about thinking for yourself then why the need for a complete ban on spirituality?