

How I finally learnt to love.....Grindcore! and in doing so reclaimed a very close friend

Matt Grimes

(For Stevie G – my punk soul brother)

Section I: Memories

I still remember it to this day, the sheer feeling of shock and surprise when my then best mate Stevie G played me the opening refrain of “You Suffer” - the first vinyl release from Napalm Death. Just as I heard the first few seconds of aural assault coming from the speakers on Stevie’s record player it was over, as if it didn’t happen, as if it was an acoustic hallucination – all 1.3 seconds of it. A momentary blast of noise that seemed to be made up of pure unadulterated, visceral anger, and despair. In an instant, it seemed as if anarcho-punk was destined to morph into another more extreme sub-genre that was beyond my comprehension of what symbolized music, well anarcho-punk music at least. Stevie had this massive smile on his face as if to say, “This is as good as it is ever going to get Matt,” – this was the future, past and present of extreme music, right there in the squat we shared.

I had heard of Napalm Death before hearing this particular tune; their name had been brought to my attention through an advert in a fanzine I had picked up at a gig somewhere. It was for a demo tape they had made called “Punk is a Rotting Corpse” and available by mail order from the fanzine distro. Perhaps the title of the demo tape was a portent to what was to follow in the ensuing years that, for me, marked the demise of anarcho-punk as it fragmented into a number of more extreme sub-genres of music that seemed to push the envelope of sonic experimentation and assault.

Stevie and I were really close mates and had been since secondary school. We had made each other’s acquaintance through the tried and tested ceremony of the school playground fight. Stevie was the only outwardly visible punk at my new school and when he spotted me on my first day of school, also doing my best to look as punk as I dared, he decided that in a school of 1,500 kids there was not enough room for two punks, so one of us had to go.

As is common with school fights, no one ever wins because the teachers come and break them up before it gets that far. We were both dragged off to the headmaster’s office and given five of the best with a Dunlop Green Flash plimsoll (the headmaster loved tennis and I was convinced he didn’t like even numbers either, hence only getting five rather than six of the best). From that day on Stevie and I decided that the fight wasn’t between us, but between us and the “system” – that school, our parents, the police- in fact everyone who was not a punk.

And that’s how Stevie and I forged a relationship that lasted for a number of years. We did just about everything together. Hitched penniless around the country to go to punk gigs,

experimented with drugs and alcohol, got into fights with skinheads and mods, bunked off school and listened to punk music whenever we could, and argued with our teachers and parents about the injustices of authority. In the summer of 1981 when it was time to leave school and the parental home, it only seemed natural that we would get a squat together because that was what we had been talking about for years. So along with a number of other miscreants we had “collected” on the way, we set off into town to liberate a building and join the ranks of the *real punks*. Time moved on, and whilst some things changed others remained the same. We still carried on squatting together, spending a lot of time with the anarcho-punks in London, often staying at squats there for weeks at a time. We went hunt sabbing, took part in political rallies and demos with Class War and the Anarchist Federation, even hippy free festivals such as Stonehenge, where I made my first contact with a ‘tribe’ of people that would later form the next chapter of my life. Anarcho-punk was in “full flight” and Stevie and I were living the dream (of sorts): no money, and no jobs but, most importantly, no responsibilities and feeling part of a community of likeminded free people.

I’m not sure when it happened exactly, but at some point the mood of anarcho-punk shifted and got darker, as did the politics and the people around it. Margaret Thatcher’s decimation of the mining communities, the Peace Convoy, and an escalating nuclear muscle flexing exercise with Russia only added to the bleakness, as society seemed to become more fragmented. The music also started to get more sombre and gloom-ridden, with bands such as Discharge, Amebix, Icons of Filth, Antisect, and Extreme Noise Terror playing breakneck speed thrash punk with lyrics focussing on nuclear death and destruction, and total state control of a near future oppressed dystopian society. Squatting became more problematic and with it came a new breed of crusty squatter, dosed up on Special Brew, Tuinal and even louder and more aggressive extreme music that seemed shambolically reflective of its listeners.

Stevie had been up in Birmingham for a while, staying with some mates and came back excited about a new band he had seen a couple of times at a venue called *The Mermaid*, which already had a reputation for the punk scene that had developed around it. That band was Napalm Death and Stevie described the experience as likened to being hit in the face with a sonic sledgehammer – he had (he said) found what was missing from his life: something that unleashed and expressed that anger he had carried with him; something cathartic.

So this sort of brings me back to the beginning and me hearing Napalm Death for the first time. I just didn’t get it, and Stevie trying to convince me by playing it over and over again, that this was the future of music. We didn’t see eye-to-eye over this, it just didn’t work for me and that’s when the problems started. Stevie was always a 100%, all or nothing bloke and he had latched onto this sound and that would be his focus from that point on. With Stevie’s forays into this extreme music, and my lack of interest in it, he started hanging out with a more “committed” group of people, who ended up at the squat and with them came this additional pervading darkness: heroin.

It was only a matter of time before Stevie got tempted into it, part of his all or nothing character, and from then on heroin became a regular feature of a large number of the squats residents. We would argue more, the music in the squat became more extreme and aggressive,

personal stuff would start going “missing” and after one of Stevie’s so called “committed” new mates threatened me with an axe, after a four day amphetamine binge: our friendship imploded. I decided after some contemplation and another summer at free festivals to get away from the toxic atmosphere in the squat and join the Travellers on the road. As a parting gesture of goodwill and hope, I offered the hand of friendship to Stevie and tried to persuade him to come on the road with me, away from the heroin and the darkness, but he was too wrapped up in his own pitiful ego by then. I left Brighton, not returning for a number of years, and sadly heard on the grapevine a year after leaving that Stevie had died of a heroin overdose. I couldn’t bring myself to attend the funeral – a regretful decision that has always troubled me. Looking back it was almost inevitable that Stevie would not quit this mortal coil easily or peacefully - he always was a person of extremes, energetic, volatile, unpredictably violent, but beautifully funny and my best mate.

Section II: An Afterword

I’m not suggesting that Grindcore (as this type of extreme music later became to be known by) was responsible for our friendship falling apart, I am sure it was as much the heroin and the company Stevie chose to keep. For a number of years I could not entertain the thought of listening to Grindcore because of the memories associated with it and my musical tastes had, by then, encompassed the E- generation as I travelled from one free techno party to another, with my new “tribe.”

Certainly the highly political song titles and lyrical content of Napalm Death had always struck a chord with me, even if the music initially didn’t. Finally, after hearing Napalm Death again on the John Peel radio show one night in 1992, I decided to revisit the band’s stuff. I was intrigued by the production values of the band and the paradox they seemed to create. The sound of their music takes punk’s lack of concern for formal structure and standard musical convention to another level. They offer a version of punk at its most blunt and brutal. Atonal in their approach their songs are brief, often limited to one or two minutes, and tended to avoid formal lyrical structure in favour of short, sharp statements, revealing a pre-occupation with state control, corporate power and a dystopian society built on economic and physical slavery.

From the titles of the songs their lyrical content is seemingly important, but paradoxically is mostly indecipherable due to the mode of delivery. Deena Weinstein (1991; 2009) suggests that in mainstream Heavy Metal lyrical matter may not be of concern to the listener. However I would suggest that the importance of the lyrical matter to the artists in this case is vital: the content informs the form completely.

It would be fair to say that “You Suffer” and a number of Napalm Death’s repertoire are not songs in the context of the model adopted by Western culture and the western music canon in recent centuries, but it could certainly be regarded as a song within the context of the musical structures of other cultures. While Napalm Death’s songs do not contain a narrative as would be common in traditional folk ballad structure, it may be possible to view a large proportion

of their work as existing within an extended tradition of Folk Music which includes music characterised by “protest,” a continuum in which I would include Crass and a number of other anarcho-punk bands whose political dissent pervades their repertoire. The political impact of extreme metal music comes into question particularly when looking at arguments such as those of Keith Kahn-Harris. Kahn-Harris (2004: 6) argues that the very nature of extreme metal is “reflexively-anti-reflexively constructed as a depoliticizing category.” He identifies the ways in which black metal, for example, constantly toys with the ideas of violent racism and fascism, however will never embrace it outright. Napalm Death on the other hand, I would suggest completely embrace the lyrics they sing, and have been involved in campaigns against apartheid, animal exploitation, global corporate, and state power among others, and express their disgust of fascism, racism and the establishment. Napalm Death, I would argue, are not accommodated by Kahn-Harris’ analysis of extreme metal at all because of the nature of their songs and their behaviour. This is also reflective of the political stance of a large number of anarcho-punk bands and the anarcho-punk scene from which Napalm Death emerged.

The recording techniques and seeming lack of acoustic treatment and mastering perhaps reflect the very raw subject matter implicit in their lyrics. Where it is traditionally perceived that the meaning of the song is carried in the lyrical content, Frith (1986) argues that the meaning is also carried in the performance of the song. It could be suggested that the “differentiation” which occurs in the sound of Napalm Death is related to the way in which the group focus on the delivery of sound and also on the way in which that sound is utilised as a carrier of meaning, both of which are key elements that seem to underpin the Grindcore genre. The actual structure of the text of the song is broken down, by the vocal delivery, into monosyllabic content. Listening to the vocal output, this low pitch guttural sound seems to come from another place outside of the human vocal range. It seems the voice travels from the diaphragm, from the lower points of the body, inside the resonant sound chamber of the torso, which allows the low pitch to be sustained without damage to the throat or lack of breath to sustain the sound. This acoustic approach is not dissimilar to early Buddhist temple chanting, where monks would employ tonal variations in their meditative and ceremonial chanting, in a quest to connect with divinity. This style of delivery and associated production values seems to contribute to a sense of sonic rapture, of speech being drawn to a halt and fractured, with the suggestion that the end result of this process will be atomisation, an attack upon the fabric of the text itself. A form of sonic rupture where, if only for a moment, a new sphere of possibility may be opened, in the space created by this rupture.

So perhaps that’s what Stevie saw in this music all those years ago, that rupture and the possibilities that might have opened up, indeed not only for not him but for all those around him. Perhaps if I had also seen that, then things may have turned out differently for both of us. I like Grindcore and have done for a number of years. I enjoy listening to it, albeit mostly in a slightly nostalgic way. The good thing now is that I can listen to it and remember the better, happier times with Stevie before it all went tragically wrong. Perhaps I should have just listened to Napalm Death a bit more then.

Matt has had a varied and colourful life as a punk, Traveller, activist, performer, art technician, landscape gardener, DJ, parent and educator. He is a Senior Lecture in Music Industries and radio at Birmingham City University and a member of the Birmingham Centre for Media and Cultural Research where he is currently studying for a doctorate on anarcho-punk, memory, ageing, and legacy. Matt is a steering group member of the Punk Scholars Network and has written on anarcho-punk, punk 'zines and radio as a tool for inclusion and social change.

Passionate about equal access to media, Matt has worked with a number of marginalised groups such as Gypsies and Travellers and isolated teenagers in rural communities; using radio production techniques as a way of giving a 'voice' to the 'voiceless' and enabling them to create media and counter-media.

Born into a West Ham United supporter's family, Matt swapped allegiance to their archrivals Millwall at the age of 12; coincidentally at the same time he discovered punk rock. His dad and grandad never forgave him. He has remained committed to Millwall ever since: probably because no one likes them and he don't care.

He spends a lot of time cycling, rock climbing and gardening, trying to live as ethically as possible –though at times failing miserably.

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Discography

"You Suffer" Track 12 from "Scum" (LP) 1987 Earache Records