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Wren Nelson April 9, 2023

Do-It-Yourself Resistance: Atlanta Punk in the Late Twentieth Century

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An abstract of

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Abstract

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By Wren Nelson

This honors thesis explores how Atlanta punks utilized a variety of resistance strategies to take action on their political beliefs. American punk has gained more scholarly attention over the last several decades, but the South has largely been ignored. My work begins to attend to this gap in the scholarship by analyzing Atlanta punk in the 1980s and 1990s. I build on Kevin Dunn's discussion of do-it-yourself ethics as a mobilizing force in American punk scenes, as well as on subculture and social movement theory by multiple authors. I bring together pre-existing literature on American punk with primary resources from the Atlanta, Georgia scene to establish the connection between punk and activism in a city and region often overlooked because of its conservatism and supposed lack of left-wing political energy. Additionally, in-depth interviews with members of the Atlanta scene from the 1980s and 1990s help build an image of a vibrant scene and the vast range of ways Atlanta punks were conducting resistance. I find that Atlanta punk was intensely political in this time period and punks' tactics of using culture as a political tool, do-it-yourself activism, and constructing safe spaces in an unsafe environment can all be helpful for sustaining resistance in the South.

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Introduction

"Punk rock, music and art are not just for the lucky and the rich, but for the oppressed and marginalized in the people in this society—so we can network and find each other and feel some validation and relief from the lies and denial of the TV culture. It's about using our own resources. We want you to create and create forever." These lines written on the label of Atlanta punk band Pagan Holiday's EP "Slutedge Secret Love Terrorists & Other Girl Conspirators" may reflect what punk rock was about better than anything else. Punk rock may be known for its eye-catching fashion, its aggressive lyricism and music style, and its hub, New York, but there was and is much more to punk than that. Participants were doing plenty of political work, too, and sometimes in unexpected places. The South is one such unexpected place due to its history of repression and conservatism towards queer southerners and southerners of color. However, as punk scenes popped up across the country in the early 1980s, youth across the South, from Austin, Texas, to Pensacola, Florida, to Birmingham, Alabama, were drawn to punk's aesthetics and anger. Atlanta, Georgia was no exception and punks were doing powerful cultural and political work in the city. Such work has gone largely unnoticed but is worthy of further study to enhance scholars' understanding of the punk movement in America and its impact.

What even counts as punk can be a difficult question to answer. As scholar Kevin Dunn states, "Punk, like a flag or any other open symbol, is something many people feel passionate about, but have a hard time agreeing on its shared meaning."[1] Punk rock, as I understand it, consists of diverse creative elements, and a commitment to leftist politics, usually communist

[1] Kevin Dunn, *Global Punk: Resistance and Rebellion in Everyday Life* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 10.

and anarchist ideals. Punk has always involved those who commit themselves to right-wing politics, but for the purposes of studying transformative politics within a southern punk scene, studying those on the left-wing side of punk results in a more useful analysis. Right-wing punk politics are less useful for an analysis of transformative politics as they generally consisted of support for Reagan and a conservatism that already had institutional power at the time. Additionally, I do not seek to articulate the boundaries of music or fashion that defines punk. Some may be more recognizably "punk" than others, but I prefer to focus on the intent, meaning, and effects of music, fashion, and other kinds of cultural products rather than draw lines around what "counts" as punk. Furthermore, what constitutes resistance can be a fraught category. For the purposes of my work, my definition of resistance is purposefully broad to capture the many avenues of punk resistance: obvious acts of resistance as well as discursive acts of resistance that include political discussion and music, among others.

So why Atlanta? Atlanta may seem like an odd choice of focus, especially considering the larger scenes across the country that I could be paying attention to, but I believe a study of southern punk is in order. For all the literature on punk in the 1980s and 1990s, little academic attention has been focused on southern scenes beyond its flashiest and most popular members (R.E.M. comes to mind). A number of questions are left unanswered about punk in the South. For example, how did punks deal with the often repressive political environment in the South? How did the ethics and strategies of resistance in the subculture help mobilize punks to combat the conservative political context of the time? How do we understand the effectiveness of a subculture largely described as white in a majority-Black city? What can punk teach current and future southern activists? These questions, among others, deserve answers.

Atlanta punk was heavily influenced by its local context as well as its larger national context. In the 1980s, much of American punk was galvanized by the election of President Ronald Reagan. He represented many larger issues that punks railed against: war, social conservatism, consumerism, and the entertainment industry. The "entertainer-in-chief" was the perfect enemy of a subculture based in grassroots production of media against the status quo. The Reagan era was also characterized by a kind of polished positivity that punks sought to destabilize by embracing their anger.[2] Beyond Reagan, American punk was largely a "middle-class phenomenon and a reaction to feelings of social and cultural alienation in the context of suburban life."[3] Additionally, cultural shifts beyond Reagan included the fact that "popular culture during the 1980s was marked not only by corporate centralization but also by conservative content."[4] Amongst a conservative and repressive context, punks were finding ways to challenge everything from the government to their peers' expectations. When compared to other American punk scenes, the Atlanta scene had many similarities in politics and aesthetics. However, it lacked the political prominence (though not the political energy) of larger scenes like New York City or Washington, D.C. due to its smaller size. The Atlanta scene also had to deal with more deeply entrenched conservative social norms, meaning that different groups and subcultures had to stick together, and the Atlanta punk scene couldn't afford to have quite as many internal divisions (though they absolutely existed).

My work builds on pre-existing scholarship on punk as a social movement. Particularly helpful for my understanding of American punk in the 1980s is Kevin Mattson's book, *We're not Here to Entertain: Punk Rock, Ronald Reagan, and the Real Culture War of 1980s America*. This

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[2] Kevin Mattson, "Did Punk Matter?: Analyzing the Practices of a Youth Subculture During the 1980s," *American Studies* 42, no. 1 (2001): 79.
[3] Gerfried Ambrosch, "American Punk: The Relations between Punk Rock, Hardcore, and American Culture." *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 60, no. 2/3 (2015): 215.
[4] Kevin Mattson, "Did Punk Matter?" 79.

book places punk firmly in its historical context and looks at punk as a powerful (if complicated and often contradictory) political force. This book takes on the ambitious task of analyzing punk actions across the country, which has given me ample context to add Atlanta to the narrative. In my analysis, however, I intend to take culture more seriously as a site of resistance. Scholars such as Kevin Dunn in his book *Global Punk:Resistance and Rebellion in Everyday Life* and Ryan Moore and Michael Roberts in their article "Do-It-Yourself Mobilization: Punk and Social Movements" emphasize the do-it-yourself ethic in punk. Understanding DIY in punk is essential to understanding how punk functions as a mobilizing force. The idea of creating your own culture outside of profit motivation created extensive networks between punks that allowed for mobilization that would have otherwise been impossible. DIY culture also empowered individuals to take change into their own hands.[5] Moore and Roberts take particular interest in culture as an active role in punk activism, instead of culture as a more passive connection between punks and politics.[6] Additionally, Dick Hebdige's work *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* and George Lipsitz's *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* have influenced how I understand punk cultural production and its relationship to politics. Hebdige's seminal work in subcultural theory understands punk as a kind of revolt through symbolic choices, particularly style. Style in this case represents refusal and "the elevation of crime into art (even though, in our case, the 'crimes' are only broken codes)."[7] George Lipsitz's analysis of the frequently paradoxical nature of the relationship between culture and politics provided me with an intellectual basis to understand how punk navigated this relationship and where it had successes and failures.

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[5] Dunn, *Global Punk*, 9.
[6] Ryan Moore and Michael Roberts, "Do-It-Yourself Mobilization: Punk and Social Movements," *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 14, no. 3 (September 2009): 274.
[7] Dick Hebdige, *Subculture:the Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen & Co., 1979), 2.

My work fits into a fairly small niche of scholarly work on southern punk and southern music scenes. Grace Hale's *Cool Town: How Athens, Georgia Launched Alternative Music and Changed American Culture* focuses on Athens' alternative music scene. Hale's work has commonalities with mine, including our focus on how subcultures created a more tolerant space within an intolerant South, and the ways in which do-it-yourself culture can pop up in unexpected places. Still, the Athens and Atlanta scenes were quite different despite their overlaps. Athens maintained a more artsy and less aggressive sound and vibe, while Atlanta, with some notable exceptions, preferred fast-paced and aggressive hardcore punk. The book *A Punkhouse in the Deep South: An Oral History of 309* by Aaron Cometbus and Scott Satterwhite focuses on a punkhouse (a house occupied by a group of punks) in Pensacola, Florida and more closely resembles what I've tried to do with this thesis. Relying on thirteen interviews with participants in the Atlanta scene of the 1980s and 90s, my work follows similar themes of DIY culture and resistance in the South and the everyday people that made up the community. This is also a way in which my work differs from many other works on punk. It is easy to fall into the pattern of focusing one's analysis on the most-well known figures in American punk; this approach is useful for a general history of punk in America but fails to fully capture punk's power as a grassroots movement on the local level.

In order to analyze the Atlanta punk scene, I have combined existing literature on punk with archival sources in the Emory University punk rock archive and thirteen in-depth interviews that I conducted with members of the scene. In order to capture the voices of those to whom I could not speak directly, I consulted documentaries and interviews conducted by others. I gathered participants through snowball sampling; interviews were semi-structured and lasted about an hour each. Questions focused on each person's history in the Atlanta punk scene (what

got them into punk, what venues, zines, and bands stood out to them, etc.) before focusing on the issues they cared about, any political action they did (or did not) see in the scene, and how they viewed punk's political commitments. These conversations revealed fascinating details of the Atlanta punk scene impossible to ascertain from archived documents alone. I conducted interviews with Brook Hewitt, Katy Graves, Elma Dieppa, Chris Mills, Randy Blazak, Jimmy Demer, Bill Taft, Kelly Hogan, Clare Butler, Theresa Starkey, Billy Fields, Stella Zine, and Randy Gue. Interviewees were predominantly white and male, though I interviewed two people of color, six women, and one non-binary person. At the time of their participation in the Atlanta punk scene, they ranged in age from middle schoolers to college students and older. They all held some form of leftist politics that was influenced by the Atlanta scene as well. Brook Hewitt was very young when she was part of the Atlanta punk environment but frequented shows and common hangout spots. Katy Graves was part of the band Catfight and participated in activism during her time in the punk scene. Elma Dieppa was a fan of punk music that frequented shows and parties, and her participation in protests shaped her political ideas. Chris Mills was in the band Dead Elvis, politically active, with particular interests in communism and anarchism. Randy Blazak managed the band Drivin N Cryin, and was heavily involved in politics, especially in battles between left and right wing factions. Jimmy Demer was in the popular Atlanta band Neon Christ. Bill Taft was in multiple bands, including The Jody Grind and the Opal Foxx Quartet (which became the band Smoke), and participated in activism, especially in music-based actions like benefit shows. He went on to be a founder of Common Good Atlanta, which provides incarcerated people in Georgia access to higher education classes. Kelly Hogan was in the band The Jody Grind and the Rock*A*teens and also used benefits as a way to pursue change through music. She is still a musician today. Clare Butler was in the band The Now

Explosion and ran two clubs with the members of that band: the Nitery Club and the Celebrity Club. She participated in quite a few politically oriented stunts and actions as well. Theresa Starkey was another fan of the music and lived near Atlanta's punk hub, Little Five Points. Billy Fields ran away from home, was a street kid in the punk scene, and started playing music later on. Stella Zine was the vocalist for the band Pagan Holiday; they founded one of the first riot grrrl chapters in the South and did harm reduction work that they continue to this day. Randy Gue was the roadie for Neon Christ and part of at least one band himself, and he was also heavily involved in combating the right-wing presence in the scene. Today, he is the curator for Emory's punk rock archive. These in-depth discussions construct a rich history of the Atlanta punk scene that was largely invisible before. Individual stories of the ways punk shaped and continues to shape participants' politics reveals punk's impact on southern participants as well. In an era regularly defined by Ronald Reagan's personality and politics, these narratives display that many people were unwilling to play along, even in the conservative South. As marginalized groups continue to face violence and oppression in the South, their stories provide examples of the many ways resistance can be conducted.

In the first chapter, I offer an overview of the basic history, geography, and some of the bands of the scene, the political dynamics that fractured the scene, Atlanta punk's connections to other underground scenes, major political issues, and significant themes that emerged from my interviews. In the second chapter, I look at punk's DIY ethic and how it primed punks for resistance as well as the different strategies and vehicles for resistance in the Atlanta scene, including (but not limited to) music, zines, stunts, and direct political action. In the third chapter, I analyze what current southern activists can learn from the Atlanta punk scene's successes and failures as well as how punk encourages us to imagine a punk and queer South. I end with an

epilogue discussing the state of the Atlanta scene today and how the individuals I interviewed went on to embody punk politics and ethics long after they left the scene.

By pulling from a variety of sources, I have constructed a history and analysis of the Atlanta punk scene and the ways in which its participants conducted resistance. The image that begins to appear of this largely ignored scene is one that is vibrant, creative, and fiercely political. It had its pitfalls, but even in its missteps the scene gives scholars and activists alike plenty to analyze and learn from. Punk wasn’t just a New York or California phenomenon; the subculture was inspiring people to action everywhere, including within the U.S. South.

"My Tribe of Misfits": An Overview of Atlanta Punk

Atlanta occupies a particular social and political context as the birthplace of the Civil Rights movement and was declared by city leaders as early as the 1950s to be one of the most progressive cities of the South.[8] Despite this, Atlanta was still a city very much influenced by its more conservative southern context and its complicated history of race, class, and gender, which in turn affected the construction of its punk scene. By 1980, Atlanta was on the rise as a truly international business city, cemented through international business relations and the construction of the massive midfield terminal of the Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport that year. Atlanta enjoyed massive economic growth during this period, and between "1980 and 1998, the Atlanta regional economy grew by 906,928 jobs, a rate of increase of 99 percent." [9] However, not everyone got to share in this prosperity. For example, as white unemployment decreased in the 1980s, Black unemployment increased.[10] Additionally, Black men held an increasingly large share of the least-skilled and lowest-paying jobs.[11] In the decades prior to this period, white Atlantans had fled their neighborhoods for the suburbs to avoid desegregation and abandoned newly-desegregated public places and public transportation. Atlanta may have had a reputation of remarkably civil race relations, but not equal ones.

Atlanta's social conservatism still shines through in this period, despite Mayor William B. Hartsfield's declaration in the 1960s that the city was "Too Busy to Hate." For example, Atlanta remained one of the most segregated cities in the country in the late twentieth century.[12]

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[8] Kevin M Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton University Press, 2005), 3.
[9] Larry Keating, *Atlanta: Race, Class And Urban Expansion* (Temple University Press, 2001), 11.
[10] Keating, *Atlanta,* 33.
[11] Keating, *Atlanta,* 26.
[12] Keating, *Atlanta*, 42.

Much of this segregation was due to white flight—white Atlantans moving out of the city as Black Atlantans moved into "their" neighborhoods. Over the course of the 1960s, "roughly 60,000 whites fled from Atlanta. During the 1970's, another 100,000 would leave as well."[13] As much as Atlanta would like to hold on to its progressive image as a city with civil race relations and a booming economy that benefits everyone, a closer look indicates that that was not the case. Part of punk's power in 1980s Atlanta is that it disrupted this narrative. While not always as critical of the issues closest to home, punks in Atlanta were able to capture the anger hidden behind a "Too Busy to Hate" facade. Additionally, the kind of fear and anger that punks in Atlanta provoked through their existence alone displays the conservative violence still present in the city, even if its residents and leaders would have liked to think otherwise.

Additionally, a coalition of wealthy white business leaders and Black middle-class political leaders governed Atlanta until the mid 1980s.[14] This led to class being just as important of a factor as race in Atlanta politics, with many middle-class and poor Black and white Atlantans left out of political decision-making.[15] Because of the lasting impact of this coalition, business interests took center stage in Atlanta politics. This almost single-minded focus had dire consequences for Atlanta's poor Black residents in particular. For example, "the city government, with coalition backing, tore down all or part of poor Black neighborhoods in and around the downtown area."[16] Even as political power became more decentralized from the traditional coalition, this focus on business and development continued. Financial investment and political energy were focused on national and international business, to the expense of Atlanta's

[13] Kruse, *White Flight*, 5.
[14] Keating, *Atlanta*, 69.
[15] Keating, *Atlanta,* 70.
[16] Keating, *Atlanta,* 76-77.

local identity and character. This approach to politics in Atlanta was also highly influenced by the Reagan era's conservatism and pro-business policies.

Punks saw Atlanta in several, often conflicting, ways. On one hand, some were fed up with "the old South concept and a lot of towns had" and found Atlanta to be an opportunity-rich city free from that concept.[17] To some degree this was true, as shown by the election of a Black mayor in 1974, Atlanta's large queer scene, and Atlanta's many powerful Black political leaders. On the other hand, Atlanta was still heavily influenced by Bible Belt conservatism. Punks in the city were acutely aware of how wary many Atlantans were of anyone who appeared to be different, to the point where punks faced a consistent threat of physical and verbal violence. The South presented a complex and contradictory ideological landscape that Jello Biafra, lead singer of the Dead Kennedys, described best as a "fascinating illness."[18] Punks in Atlanta upheld a fiercely anti-corporate ideology in a period where these business interests were pursued at the expense of peoples' livelihoods and even basic city interests. Punks were a small but vocal minority that stood in stark contrast to this degree of corporate interests and Atlanta's polished image. Atlanta's tension between its more progressive and corporate pursuits lent itself to a unique punk scene that helped reimagine the South and what it meant to be southern.

Mapping the Atlanta Scene

Punk came to Atlanta in 1978. While punks certainly existed in Atlanta before this, the January 5, 1978 performance by the Sex Pistols at the Great Southeast Music Hall (in what is now Lindbergh Plaza) was a defining moment for many Atlanta punks. This show ended up being an important moment for people who were not punks as well because the moral panic

[17] Clare Butler, interview by Wren Nelson, December 13, 2022.
[18] Dead Kennedys, "Press Conference, Dead Kennedys," recorded by Miller Francis, May 28, 1983, Radio Free Georgia, audiocassette recording. Accessed via Stuart A Rose Manuscript Library.

created around this show was impressive in scale. The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* took a more bemused tone, starting their coverage of the event with "Yes, there are actually people in Atlanta willing to stick safety pins through their cheeks."[19] The article comments on the large media presence at the event, indicative of the frenzy created around one forty-five minute set, and proclaims that the Sex Pistols were "anti-climactic" compared to the moral panic preceding it. Perhaps most indicative of this panic were the Atlanta and Memphis vice squads' presence at the show.[20] To many, punk's "introduction" to Atlanta was confusing, unnerving, and potentially very dangerous.

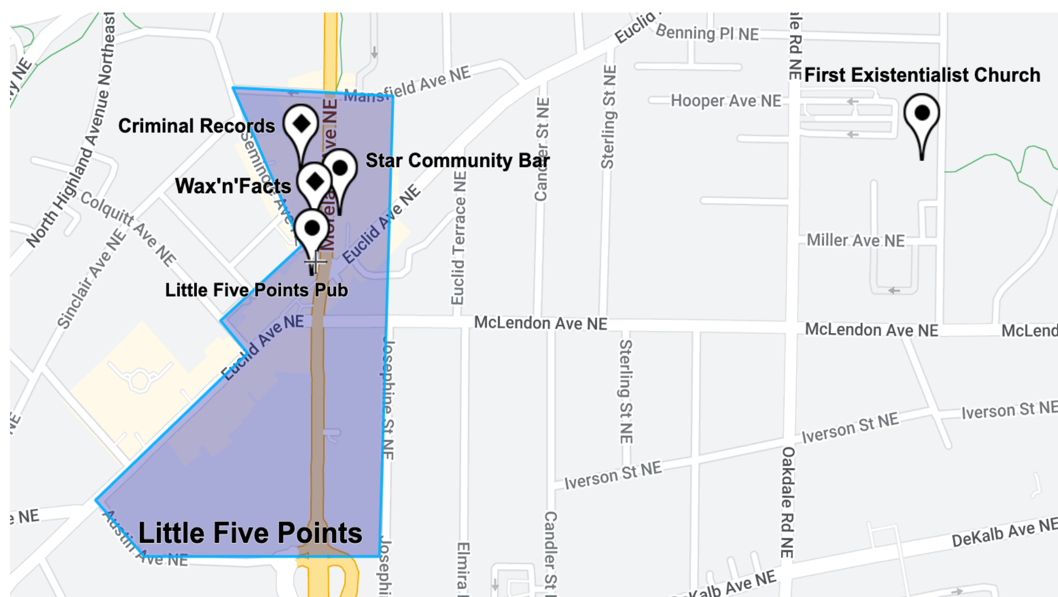


Figure 1. Map showing the Little Five Points Area, located East of Downtown Atlanta. Venues are marked with a circle; other important locations are marked with a diamond.

Atlanta's punk scene was most densely located in Midtown, Ansley Park, Cabbagetown, and Little Five Points. The enduring center of the Atlanta punk scene was Little Five Points,

[19] Billy King, "Sex Pistols Pretty Punk, Some Fans Join the Act," *The Atlanta Constitution*, January 6, 1978, 1, https://ajc.newspapers.com/image/398449975/.
[20] John Rockwell, "Sex Pistols Make United States Debut," *The New York Times*, January 7, 1978, https://www.nytimes.com/1978/01/07/archives/sex-pistols-make-united-states-debut.htm.l.

located around Moreland Avenue and east of downtown Atlanta. As Katy Graves stated, "it was the Mecca."[21] This stretch of stores, bars, and musical venues still hosts much of Atlanta's alternative and punk activity today. Little Five Points served as a refuge for the "freaks" of Atlanta and continues to do so.

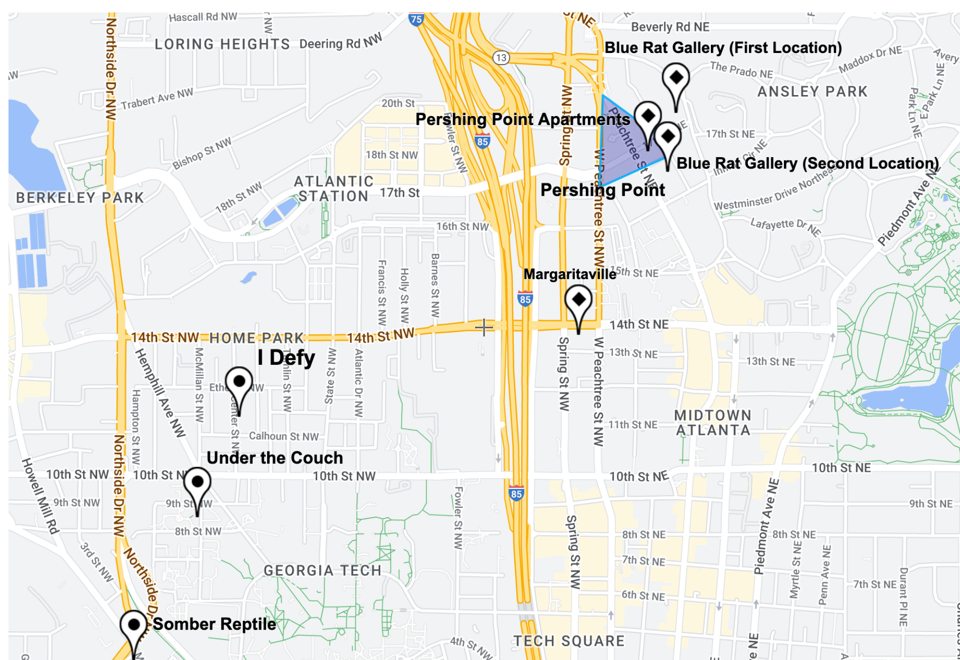
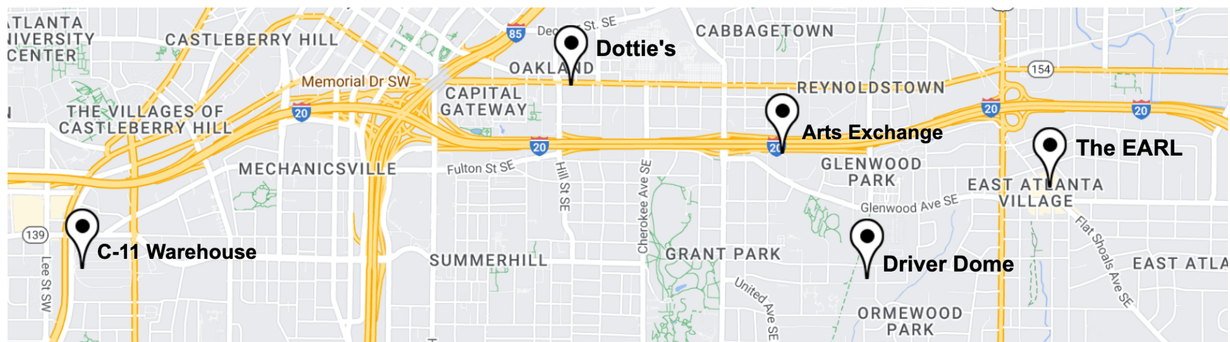


Figure 2. Map showing the Pershing Point and Georgia Tech area, located North of downtown. Venues are marked with a circle; other important locations are marked with a diamond.

Another important hub outside of Little Five Points was Pershing Point, which stood between the streets Peachtree, West Peachtree, and 17th street in Ansley Park. This location was described by Randy Blazak as "our Greenwich Village."[22] Pershing Point was the home of quite a few punks and queer folks, along with the Blue Rat Gallery, an art collective that also served as a venue and small record label for underground bands. Unfortunately, it was leveled in 1985 to make room for what is now Pershing Park Plaza, the home of a large office building. The

[21] Katy Graves, interview by Wren Nelson, September 17, 2022.
[22] Randy Blazak, interview by Wren Nelson, October 22, 2022.

demolition of the "venerable" apartments exacerbated "fears of losing touch with the area's past" in Midtown.[23] Unsurprisingly, the apartments were torn down in pursuit of business interests. The demolition of the apartments was part of a larger trend of rapid development in Midtown, which resulted in the demolition of older buildings to make room for more office buildings. Pershing Point was sacrificed to make room for an IBM office building, which ended up being



built elsewhere.[24]

Figure 3. Map showing venues near Cabbagetown, located South of downtown.

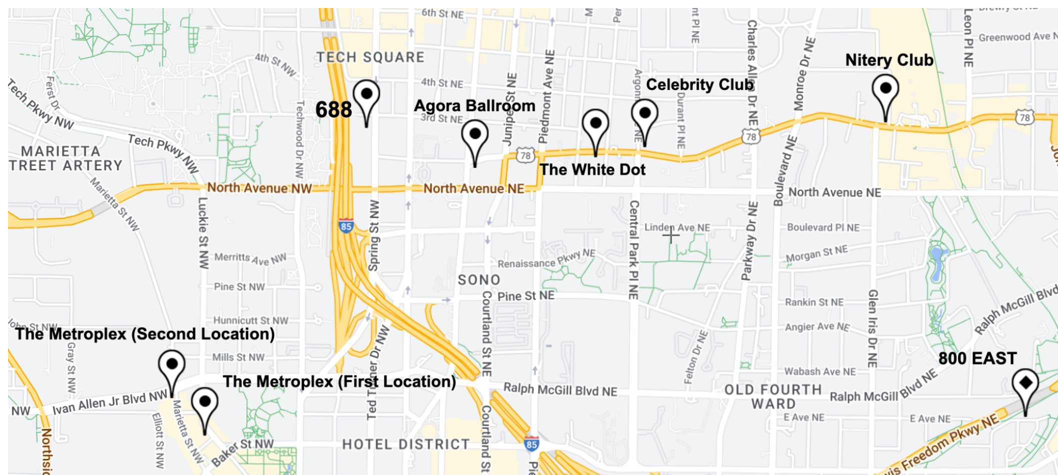


Figure 4. Map showing venues on and around Ponce De Leon, located in between the Pershing Point and Little Five Points areas.

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[23] Michael M. Pousner, "FOCUS: Atlanta; Midtown Challenges Downtown," *The New York Times*, November 2, 1986, https://www.nytimes.com/1986/11/02/realestate/focus-atlanta-midtown-challenges-downtown.html.
[24] Pousner, "FOCUS: Atlanta; Midtown Challenges Downtown."

Venues were extremely important locations for both music and for community building. Some of the most notable ones are the Metroplex and 688 in Little Five Points, although many others existed for differing periods of time. Names come and go on flyers housed in the Rose Library: the Masquerade, the White Dot, Driver Dome, Catacombs, and Celebrity Club, among others. The Metroplex as a venue was particularly important because bands were able to stay there when they stopped in Atlanta. Venues spread across Atlanta were safe havens for the "freaks" and misfits of Atlanta, and provided them a place to share their voice in ways they would not have otherwise had.

Beyond venues, Atlanta punks found other hubs. A prime example was Junkman's Daughter in Little Five Points, currently located on Euclid Avenue. Due to their collection of alternative clothing (and Doc Martens, a rare find for many in the 1980s), they became a common stop for a variety of people, especially those in bands. Katy Graves, who worked there in the 1980s through the early 90s, recalled that "Everybody in every band came through there. And I mean everybody, from literally U2 and Bjork and Bobby Brown to any punk band that's in town."[25] This was also a location where punks could find employment, often a rare find in a time where many employers would reject punks based on appearance. An additional important location was Wuxtry Records in Decatur and Athens. This store has existed in its Decatur location since 1978; it not only served as an important stop for bands coming through but was also a place for punk kids to get jobs in Atlanta. Restaurants like Margaritaville on Spring Street also served as common hangout spots, and Margaritaville was notable for several reasons, including that its margaritas had wine in them. Universities also played a role in sustaining the scene by having the resources to bring bands in that may not have come to Atlanta otherwise.

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[25] Graves, interview.

A small detail that made a large impact on the existence of the Atlanta scene was the drinking age. Prior to 1984, the legal drinking age in many U.S. states was eighteen. Thus, more young people had access to certain music venues and bars. Punk appealed to younger people, especially teenagers, so the fact that it was easier for younger people to access these spaces was vital to the formation and maintenance of the scene in the early 80s. Maintaining the scene became more difficult after the drinking age was raised because most venues had to host twenty-one-and-up shows to make a profit. To skirt this issue, younger punks snuck into shows. Touring bands would often host an all-ages show in addition to a twenty-one-and-up show, and in a particularly creative move, the Metroplex was physically split into two halves: all-ages and twenty-one-and-up.

The Atlanta scene of the 1980s looked much different than the one today, or even in the '90s due to gentrification. White flight in the 1960s and '70s left cheap housing available in many areas of Atlanta, which allowed punks to find housing and build communities. Affordable housing was not permanent, however. Pershing Point was bulldozed, and as neighborhoods became increasingly gentrified, punks found themselves being priced out. Venues fell victim to this trend as well. The Metroplex had to close its doors in December 1988, and 688 closed in 1986 after the drinking age was raised to twenty-one.[26]

Scene Demographics

The Atlanta punk scene, like many other American scenes, was predominantly white kids, mostly middle class, and mostly male. According to my interviews the scene had some racial diversity, but not enough to avoid being predominantly white. Part of the reason for this

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[26] Scott Henry, "Atlanta Punk! A Reunion for 688 and Metroplex," *Creative Loafing*, October 1, 2008 , https://creativeloafing.com/content-165784-atlanta-punk-a-reunion-for-688-and.

lack of diversity compared to Atlanta itself is the stigma surrounding punk. Punk was commonly associated with a loss of socioeconomic status, and many non-white parents did not want their kids to lose what they had worked so hard to achieve. Diversity in the scene also decreased as right-wing violence got more commonplace, forcing people to leave for safety reasons.[27]

However, we should not write off the Atlanta scene as a white-exclusive movement, and instead take seriously William DuVall's claim that "hardcore in Atlanta, like almost everything else, has Blackness at its very roots."[28] DuVall's experience does speak to what I have found in my research. While I did hear a lot about the whiteness of the scene, I also heard a lot about the acceptance of punk, especially when it came to marginalized groups, allowing the scene to have a decent amount of racial diversity. Brook Hewitt summed it up nicely to me, stating that "It was that kind of thing of like, it's okay to be gay. It's okay to be Black. It's okay to be a woman. Those things didn't matter, in the punk movement."[29] While clearly a colorblind sentiment, which can obscure racial discrimination instead of addressing it, it nevertheless displays a mutual respect in the movement that helped foster a welcoming community.

Notable Acts

Atlanta was a smaller scene, but its participants were not lacking in musical energy. A few bands and acts tend to come up frequently: Neon Christ, Phreddy Vomit, DDT, and The Restraints, for example. Neon Christ and DDT were the most universally praised in my conversations with participants. The Restraints, who were making music prior to the 1978 Sex

[27] Randy Gue, interview by Wren Nelson, January 26, 2023.
[28] Sound Check, "William Duvall Chats about His New Documentary on Neon Christ and the Atlanta Punk Scene," AFROPUNK, February 21, 2011, https://afropunk.com/2011/02/william-duvall-chats-about-his-new-documentary-on-neon-christ-and-the-atlanta-punk-scene/.
[29] Brook Hewitt, interviewed by Wren Nelson, September 4, 2022.

Pistols show, were foundational to the Atlanta punk scene. They are also somewhat controversial, due to their right-wing tendencies, which included going as far as wearing Nazi memorabilia to incite a reaction. Punk, while known for its left-wing politics, does consistently have a right-wing faction that was also drawn to the idea of fighting the status quo. Atlanta was no exception to this trend and had its fair share of right-wing punks. These right-wing tendencies may have been a controversial façade put on by the band, and I received conflicting accounts of how serious these beliefs were. No matter how sincere their views actually were, The Restraints absolutely attracted a right-wing audience that may have opened the door for a strong skinhead presence later on. Despite these controversies, the band, and their frontman Chris Wood, were essential for building the Atlanta punk scene because they were an early and consistent presence. While Atlanta bands tended not to focus on Atlanta-specific topics, there is an exception. DDT's song "Last Train to Athens" is a fast-paced song reflective of the rivalry between the Atlanta and Athens music scenes. DDT pokes fun at the less aggressive and less overtly political new wave bands coming out of Athens such as R.E.M. and Love Tractor, with lines like "I hope I never see Pylon again" and "What the hell is a love tractor?" Despite their differences, the two scenes were closely linked through music, and bands from both scenes inspired one another. The Now Explosion, for example, had close ties to the Athens scene and regularly played shows with Athens bands.[30] The two scenes also had similar visions of an alternative society that was radically different from their current reality.[31]

Non-Atlanta bands had a profound effect on Atlanta punks as well. The Sex Pistols show was extremely important to introducing people to punk and helped bring more energy to the early Atlanta scene. The Clash is also important for developing Atlanta punk's political sensibilities on

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[30] Butler, interview.
[31] Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Cool Town: How Athens, Georgia, Launched Alternative Music and Changed American Culture* (University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 4.

the left-wing side, who often took their cues from the band.[32] The Clash had an openly socialist perspective, took on issues such as racism and US interventionism, and allied themselves with a variety of leftist groups. Other nationally known bands like Black Flag or DRI were also influential in that they provided an example of how to live in ways consistent with punk politics. In a humorous story about DRI, Mills mentioned going to the grocery store with a few members who were "opening up food packages and making sandwiches to eat, and they walk out not buying a thing. And this was not just because they were poor. It was also because they were very, very anarchic and anti-traditional society."[33] Atlanta bands provided the unique creative energy driving the scene, but Atlanta punks generally turned to bands outside of Atlanta when deciding how to get politically involved.

Identity Construction

In our discussion, Mills stated that "what punk rock and other subcultures do is they offer an opportunity for you to find yourself and live as yourself the entire time you're awake."[34] This theme of finding one's identity came up continually throughout all of my interviews. Some of this self-discovery came from reading. Hebdige's 1979 book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* came up more than once as a book that Atlanta punks were reading to understand what they were doing and where they came from. This book focuses on U.K. punks, and the ways in which style becomes a signifier for rebellion. Punks were clearly thinking critically about their own identities and what it means to be punk, so much so that they were actively seeking out sociological literature.

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[32] Blazak, interview.
[33] Chris Mills, interview by Wren Nelson, October 22, 2022.
[34] Mills, interview.

Punk also allowed participants to construct their own identities by providing a space where participants didn't have to play by the rules. This was expressed to me in statements like "you play all the games, and you do all the things and someone can still, you know, say 'You're weird' or 'there's something wrong with you,' when in reality what, what is the game? I mean, like, who cares if the box is ticked off?"[35] Atlanta punks were casting off expectations in favor of living how they wanted to.

Overlaps with the Gay Movement

The Atlanta punk scene had overlaps with other movements, especially the queer movement. Several individuals I interviewed recalled seeing RuPaul, now one of the most famous drag queens in America, quite often in common hangout spots for punks. In fact, he makes more than one appearance in the book *Plus 1 Atlanta*, which features flyers from multiple decades of the Atlanta punk and otherwise alternative scenes. One particular flyer from 1987 features Ru with a mohawk-style haircut and promotes his new album Starbooty on Funtone USA.[36] Multiple individuals who spoke to me described his drag style at the time as being what they would identify as punk. It seemed that everyone I spoke with had their own RuPaul story. When RuPaul came up in my interview with Mills, he casually responded that Ru had given his apartment to Mills and a bunch of other punks when he moved to New York City.

One of the ways punk overlapped with the queer movement was in location. Randy Blazak, in his blog post titled "Ode to a Gay Bar," discusses how "It didn't take long to learn that the 'queers' were a part of my tribe of misfits. That was the beginning of the end of my

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[35] Elma Dieppa, interview by Wren Nelson, October 15, 2022.
[36] Henry Owings, *Plus 1 Atlanta: Concert Ephemera From a Storied Metropolis 1962-2003* (Atlanta: Chunklet Industries, 2022).

homophobia."[37] He explicitly states how punk connected him to gay life in Atlanta and facilitated his unlearning of homophobia. He was a common patron of 688, a popular punk venue, and would regularly end up at places like Backstreet, a gay bar, after shows. These interactions through sheer proximity helped build connections between social movements. Even heterosexual punks found themselves the targets of gay bashing, such as being taunted for listening to "fag music," or as Randy relates in the same blog post, "A guy once drove up next to my car on Piedmont Road and said, 'You look like a fag from England,' and then started whacking my Gran Torino with a 2 X 4."[38] Clare Butler and Randy Gue also reported similar experiences of threatening behavior and being on the receiving end of slurs. In Atlanta, punk essentially meant gay, and this association resulted in random acts of violence. For their own protection, the two scenes stuck together.

Many of the individuals I spoke with who described themselves as "punk-adjacent" occupied this gray area between the gay movement and punk. The Now Explosion—made up of members Larry Tee, Lady Clare, Elouise "Champagne" Montague Mellencamp, Lizette, and Lahoma Van Zandt—is one of several acts that occupied this space. The Opal Foxx Quartet and The Jody Grind did as well. The Opal Foxx Quartet was fronted by Benjamin Smoke, who identified as gay and regularly dressed in drag. For his years in the Opal Foxx Quartet, he adopted the character of Miss Opal Foxx.[39] These punk-adjacent bands were particularly involved in gay issues and participated in a benefit show in the 1990s at the Georgia State Capitol to protest the state's anti-sodomy law. They did so with punk's unique sense of humor and rough-and-tumble attitude. Kelly Hogan, a member of the Jody Grind, made a t-shirt that

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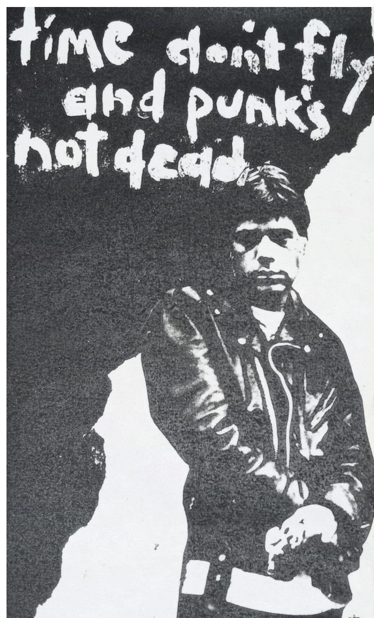
[37] Randy Blazak, "Ode to a Gay Bar," *Watching the Wheels* (blog), June 15, 2016, https://watchingthewheelsdad.net/2016/06/15/ode-to-a-gay-bar/.
[38] Blazak, "Ode to a Gay Bar."
[39] *Benjamin Smoke*, directed by Jem Cohen and Peter Sillen (2000; New York), 00:12:19 https://youtu.be/_NW9hU4nPUw.

said "lick the sodomy law" and also ended up holding the bass drum in place for the Opal Foxx Quartet.[40] Georgia's sodomy law would end up being repealed a few years later.



Figures 5 and 6. Figure 5 is a audio cassette cover which shows Benjamin in front of the text "time don't fly and punk's not dead." Joe Neuhardt, "Anyone else still have this collection?" Facebook, November 18, 2022 ,https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=4869105903191897&set=gm.10159241420746478&idorvanity=51991646477. Figure 6 is a photo featuring RuPaul, Todd Butler, and Benjamin. Photograph taken by Joe White, provided by Bill Taft, ca. 1980s.

Other Relevant Political Issues

Atlanta punks were mobilized by a variety of different issues, but a few common ones stand out. They include racial justice, anti-nuclear war, anti-capitalism/anti-consumerism, and freedom of speech. Anti-capitalism was a particularly common theme, and several people I spoke to discussed the impact of groups like the Revolutionary Communist Party and the Revolutionary Communist Youth Brigade on the Atlanta scene, which had a major communist

[40] Kelly Hogan, interview by Wren Nelson, December 3, 2022.

presence. Atlanta punks often served as "cannon fodder" and didn't participate in any decision-making in these groups, but they were more than happy to participate in events.[41] Beyond events, punks in Atlanta would participate in fundraisers for the organizations as well. Punks also regularly debated the merits of communism in arguments that were "kind of academic like, you know, what's better socialism or fascism? It was like, purely academic at the Majestic Diner at two o'clock in the morning after 688 was done."[42] Punks were actively participating in organizations when they could and were intensely debating relevant issues when they couldn't.

The issue of South African Apartheid also surfaced in interviews. Randy Blazak credits this particular issue for helping develop a racial consciousness among participants, and he participated in a protest that involved constructing a shanty town on Emory University's campus. Other participants discussed racial justice as something that was important to them and others in the scene. Atlanta punks had a tendency to overlook racial issues closer to home, but quite a few punks participated in the protest marches in Forsyth County in 1987. Forsyth County had been an all-white county for over seventy years, after a lynching occurred and the several hundred Black residents of the county had been driven out.[43] A march of up to 20,000 protesters went to the county and faced off against hundreds to thousands of white supremacists. Individuals associated with the punk and queer scene, such as RuPaul, were present at this march.

The fear of nuclear war among young people, especially punks, in this time period should not be underestimated. There were constant reminders of the possibility of nuclear annihilation, such as consistent air raid sirens at Emory University.[44] Chris Mills had a similar experience, reminding me that "we were also living under the zeitgeist of maybe gonna die in a nuclear war.

[41] Chris, interview.
[42] Blazak, interview.
[43] Dudley Clendinen, "Thousands In Civil Rights March Jeered By Crowd In Georgia Town," *The New York Times*, January 25, 1987, https://www.nytimes.com/1987/01/25/us/thousands-in-civil-rights-march-jeered-by-crowd-in-georgia-town.html.
[44] Blazak, interview.

And that preyed on our minds a lot."[45] The fear punks experienced surrounding the possibility of nuclear war was palpable and resulted in a lot of anti-war sentiment that came out in songs and publications. The Atlanta hardcore band Neon Christ has a few songs on the topic, including "Ashes to Ashes" which features the lyrics: "They keep building all the arms they please/Ashes to ashes/Dust to dust/If things don't change/Our world will be lost/One mistake starts the fight/Solving problems the wrong way."

Not surprisingly, quite a bit of political energy was focused on Reagan's presidency and the conservatism he represented. Blazak told me that left wing punks would consistently protest essentially anything that was happening, "whether it was Nicaragua, or the arms race, or whatever Reagan was doing."[46] Reagan was one of the more obvious political enemies of punks, as he "oversaw an incredible conservative ascendancy built out of a quirky coalition of free market libertarians and culturally conservative, fundamentalist Christians."[47] His presidency also oversaw a conservative shift in cultural content, as well as an overly positive view of America. Punks across the country recoiled from this and sought to disrupt it with both cultural production and political action. Atlanta was no exception to this.

Ideological Disputes

An additional dynamic within the Atlanta punk scene were the ideological disputes between skinheads and communist punks. The term "skinhead" refers to a working-class subculture that began in Britain that generally rejected conservatism and focused on working-class pride. By the 1980s however, skinheads commonly held racist and conservative

[45] Mills, interview.
[46] Blazak, interview.
[47] Mattson, "Did Punk Matter?" 78.

views and were common targets for recruiting by far-right terrorist groups like the Ku Klux Klan.[48]

By the middle of the decade, skinheads had a prominent presence in the Atlanta punk world, which further politicized and divided it. While Atlanta was no different than any other scene in that it had its share of right-wing punks, skinheads' increasing presence made those political divisions much more hostile. Additionally, the Atlanta punk scene was small, so left-wing and right-wing punks had little choice but to share spaces. Each faction had coexisted fairly peacefully in earlier years, so it was unlikely that either would give up their typical hangout spots. Prior to the revival of the skinhead subculture, the label of "misfit" mattered more than political ideology. While this kind of acceptance is admirable in some ways, it also allowed for punk's almost naïve use of hateful symbols (like the swastika or the iron cross) for the purpose of provocation. As it was described to me in interviews, this unity on the basis of outsider identity began to change with the increased presence of skinheads and violence. Blazak explained to me how "the skinhead thing really changed things because they started targeting people, they targeted women at feminist rallies, they targeted queer people."[49] He also commented on this period as being a moment of realization that "things are splitting. Yeah, like we're not just all rebels together, are misfits together. It's splitting politically."[50] Beyond just causing the scene to split, Demer claimed that skinheads "killed" the punk scene in Atlanta.[51]

By far the most memorable example of the conflict between far-left and far-right punks in Atlanta is the Clash Riot in 1982. After a Clash show, some skinheads badly beat multiple members of the scene who were members of the Revolutionary Communist Youth Brigade. One

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[48] Blazak, interview; Gue, interview.
[49] Blazak, interview.
[50] Blazak, interview.
[51] Jimmy Demer, interview by Wren Nelson, November 5, 2022.

of the communists who was beaten was identified to me as "Red Rick," who wore a "Black leather jacket with a red star on the back."[52] A potential individual involved in the fight on the right-wing side has been identified as Chris Wood, the frontman for the foundational (and controversial) Atlanta punk band The Restraints. The police got involved in the conflict as well, further escalating the situation. Randy Blazak recounted his experience as someone who was involved on the left-wing side of the riot and proudly informed me that he had taken a swing at a cop that night. He also discussed this experience as a moment that profoundly changed his perspective and got him more involved in politics, a commitment he upholds today in his work studying right-wing extremist groups. Others whom I spoke to recalled this event as one that stood out to them as well. Chris Mills was not present, but he still knew some details, including that police were essentially grabbing people at random. Apparently so many people were at that show and ended up arrested by the police that there was a noticeable number of people missing at his high school the next day.

The Clash Riot was not the only outbreak of violence due to tensions between skinheads and communist punks. The Disco Riot at 688 is yet another example.[53] The skinhead band Anti-Heros actually created a song about this night, fittingly titled "Disco Riot." The song features lyrics like "Queers all gave us hated stares. We were drunk, we didn't care." This is certainly not a reclamation of the slur "queer," as we see frequently today, but instead a derogatory use. At the end of the song, they describe how "Bill met a guy with a van and a wrench, beat his head to a bloody mess/ They ran us down with the van, Chris took a broken leg like a man/ Cops grabbed us, we all went down, They can't run us out of this Black old town." While it is possible that they were exaggerating somewhat, violence did occur, and Atlanta

[52] Blazak, interview.
[53] Blazak, interview.

police (as seen in the Clash riot) did have a tendency to escalate the situation. While this dispute occurred at 688, in many ways the Metroplex became a center for this kind of conflict. This venue was central to the scene, but it attracted both left and right-wing punks, leading to conflict. The Metroplex also tended to be a place where tensions boiled over because its second location on Marietta Street was across the street from a warehouse where skinheads would hang out. This level of proximity essentially guaranteed trouble.

The threat of violence over these political tensions was consistent and changed the Atlanta scene. Randy Gue informed me that the threat of skinhead violence made a lot of people leave the scene, and at times took the joy out of it. Red Rick, who was present at the Clash riot, was once again beat "within an inch of his life" at the Arts Exchange, and after that day he "never came back around to the Metroplex." [54] Billy Fields told me that skinheads caused him to leave the scene eventually because "skinheads, to be honest, a lot of stuff they did was really pissing me off."[55] The repeated violence wore down many participants, especially members of minority groups, until they decided to go elsewhere.

But in a group of people largely made up of teenagers and young adults, how much of this was actually about politics? Brook Hewitt gave her own perspective, stating, "that was over girls, you know, I mean, they could say it was over racism."[56] Billy Fields told me that he was unsure about the reputation skinheads had and told me that, in his experience, many skinheads simply got grouped in with the worst of them.[57] Randy Blazak and Randy Gue had a decidedly different experience, stating that many were neo-Nazis or were passively supporting that ideology.[58] Based on what I've gathered, the actual political nature of these conflicts seems to be

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[54] Billy Fields, interview by Wren Nelson, January 22, 2023; Gue, interview.
[55] Fields, interview.
[56] Hewitt, interview.
[57] Fields, interview.
[58] Gue, interview; Blazak, interview.

somewhere in the middle. For certain people, especially the younger members of the scene, it seems to be that conflicts tended to be less serious, more social than political. However, for individuals on the slightly older or more politically active end of the spectrum, these conflicts were extremely political and extremely serious. Even if politics did not play as big of a role in these conflicts as people claimed, they still had reverberations that irreversibly changed the scene and affected the construction of individual participants' political commitments.

Community

While skinhead and communist conflict fractured the punk scene, participants still found community. Perhaps one of the most important common threads that came forward in the interviews was the sense of community participants found in punk. Several people I interviewed described feeling like they didn't quite belong anywhere, even if they generally got along well with their peers. However, through punk, many of them found themselves and a place where they felt a true sense of belonging. When I asked about their history in the Atlanta scene, some described a sharp realization, like Katy Graves who stated, "I was like, 'Oh my God. My people, like these are my people.'"[59] Others described a feeling that their experience of the world had finally been validated, and they weren't alone, such as Elma Dieppa who stated, "it was what first made me realize that hey, we can be angry. But you know, this isn't—It's not just me."[60] Brook Hewitt stated that "punk was just like the right place and the right time for me, it was the perfect storm. If I don't, honestly, I don't know what I would have done without it. It was my lifeline."[61] These narratives about punk reflect the strong community ethics of the scene and the deep meaning that community held for them. Billy Fields felt that the Atlanta scene, for the most

[59] Graves, interview.
[60] Dieppa, interview.
[61] Hewitt, interview.

part, “was a lot more chill and cohesive. I mean, it was a lot more love. It was almost like a hippie scene,” when compared to other scenes.[62] While Atlanta absolutely had its problems with factions and violence, it also had moments where it achieved a more welcoming environment than the more “cutthroat” scenes of New York or Washington, D.C. [63]

This community ethic was explained best by Katy Graves: “You gotta take care of people. That's what the whole scene was to me.”[64] Beyond being a common ethical commitment in punk, this kind of care was extremely important in a city like Atlanta. Another participant discussed the risk of being physically beaten for looking punk in Atlanta. Taking care of one another was not solely an ethical commitment but was instead necessary for survival. This kind of care took multiple forms. It could mean letting other punks stay on your couch, sharing equipment, or supporting each other’s bands at shows. Community care could also mean sharing information. For example, Clare Butler and the Now Explosion put on shows that would aim to dispel prevalent myths about AIDS. Bill Taft discussed a harm reduction benefit he attended which was “a great way to learn about the harm reduction concept. That's always stayed with me, because I realized how little I knew, and how important it is to keep learning.”[65] A commitment to community care did not go away as many of these punks got older. Graves told me that one of her first reactions to the Coronavirus pandemic was to make masks for people who did not have them. She said that she “did it because we all need masks. And anybody who told me they lost their job, I just sent them some masks. Because that's the kind of shit we all did. That's what you do. You gotta take care of people.”[66] In another example, Blazak has spent much of his life researching right-wing hate groups and hate crimes in order to understand them and prevent

[62] Fields, interview.
[63] Fields, interview.
[64] Graves, interview.
[65] Bill Taft, interview by Wren Nelson, November 12, 2022.
[66] Graves, interview.

further tragedies. Stella Zine got involved in feminist and harm reduction work in their time in the punk scene and continues this work as part of the Atlanta Harm Reduction Coalition.

Conclusion

Atlanta rarely made it easy to be out of the norm. It may have had the advantage of a clean reputation, especially when it came to race relations, but this often hid an ugly reality of racism, homophobia, and discrimination. Punks challenged this carefully maintained image by bucking expectations and expressing their anger in the city "Too Busy to Hate." They found community in a variety of locations in Atlanta, from music venues to gay bars to restaurants. They expressed themselves through bands and zines and built welcoming and supportive communities. Of course, this did not mean they all got along, and conflicts between right-wing and left-wing punks fractured the scene and led to violence more than once. Atlanta punks formed their own political opinions by reading, debating with other punks, watching the world around them, and participating in political action themselves. They had lofty goals for political revolution, but how did they actually resist the status quo? Through my research, I found a list of common strategies that I will outline in the next chapter.

"Whacking Through the Jungle": DIY and Resistance Practices in Atlanta

Punks utilized many forms of resistance in order to pursue their goals. Punks took action, through grand acts or simply continuing to express their beliefs. With their sharp sense of humor, anger, and a large dose of a do-it-yourself ethic, they attempted to create the change they wanted to see. Resistance strategies varied widely, including creating safe spaces in venues, neighborhoods, and record stores, publishing their own fanzines, creating music about political issues free from corporate influence, and direct action protests. The strategies of resistance I outline here were often in service of left-wing politics, with communism and anarchism being the most common ideological threads.

Do-it-Yourself

Punks' do-it-yourself (DIY) ethic is absolutely central to their power as a subculture, and is one of the few aspects of punk that unites every scene. Dunn describes the DIY ethic as "an ethical commitment to an anti-corporate stance" that "provides individuals and local communities with resources for self-empowerment and political resistance."[67] Scholars Ryan Moore and Michael Roberts state that the DIY ethic "demands that punks take matters of cultural production into their own hands by making music, fanzines, and record labels, creating a network of venues for live music performance, as well as creating other forms of micromedia that are commercially independent of the corporate culture industry."[68] DIY principles are inherently anti-capitalist, as they are focused on "local initiative and production" and avoiding

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[67] Dunn, *Global Punk*, 9, 15.
[68] Moore and Roberts, "Do-It-Yourself Mobilization," 273.

supporting large corporations.[69] I have found that DIY was more than an ethical commitment in punk—rather a revered organizing principle that stayed with individuals long after they stop actively participating in a punk scene. Archivist Randy Gue was clear about the degree the DIY ethic shaped him and his work now as an archivist, commenting that it “was truly one of the most powerful things I've encountered in my life. It's made all the difference in what I'm doing.”[70] The commitment to DIY is one of the few aspects of punk that seem to appear in every American scene. Additionally, DIY punk proved to be fertile ground for many forms of resistance. Dunn argues that it provided “individuals and local communities with resources for self-empowerment and political resistance.”[71] If participants could put out their own albums and publish their own zines, who says they couldn’t organize?

Punks took up DIY resistance in particular due to their desire to avoid supporting profit-motivated, consumerist ways of creating music, as well as to move beyond being passive consumers to active producers of culture. The forms this resistance took were diverse: people created their own zines (short for magazine or fanzine) expressing their views, started their own bands, created their own record labels, and hosted their own shows, among other actions. Atlanta punks were no exception to this. DIY was a mobilizing force for nearly every person I interviewed. To quote musician Kelly Hogan’s description of the DIY ethic in creating culture, Atlanta punks were “just out there like whacking through the jungle, figuring it out on your own” and “were just doing it because we couldn't not do it.”[72] The “it” Hogan refers to here could be a number of things: buying clothes second-hand and altering them, learning instruments yourself and starting a band, learning how to record your own albums and book shows, making zines to

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[69] Mattson, “Did Punk Matter?” 73.
[70] Gue, interview.
[71] Kevin Dunn, *Global Punk*, 9.
[72] Hogan, interview.

be exchanged through the mail, designing and making fliers, all done with whatever resources one has at the time. Outside of cultural production, DIY also provided participants with a sense of agency. Gue explained that the DIY ethic taught him that “you can have agency, you can create the world that you want to live in.”[73] DIY was a principle that primed punk for resistance.

Music

Music was a common outlet for punks’ political views. Many punks were able to use music to convey their beliefs in an arena where they could be heard. Music and the political opinions therein were spread through shows, as well as records and audiocassette tapes that could be found in some local record stores, or exchanged through the mail for a few dollars. Punks could hear about new music through zines, word of mouth, or alternative radio shows. Compilation albums also helped spread music to a wider audience. The Atlanta band Neon Christ found some national success in punk scenes due to their inclusion on the compilation album Peace, put together by the band MDC. Neon Christ, in their music, discussed everything from frustration with their parents to their anger over the draft to the nuclear arms race. Their self-titled song is particularly revealing for the work they attempted to do: “We don’t believe in your institutions/Wanna shatter your misconceptions/Don’t wanna live your values system/Have to kill off your old perceptions/We don’t wanna live by your neon Christ.” These lyrics reveal anti-establishment views and declare that the members refuse to believe or participate in a traditional value system. The term “neon Christ” was a stand-in for conservative Christian American values. This term also has a consumerist dimension, hence the “neon,” which calls to

[73] Gue, interview.

mind neon advertising signs, as well as a sense of artificiality. In these lyrics they declare their opposition to the status quo and their desire to "shatter" it.

Of course, Neon Christ was just one notable band among many in the scene, and other bands were doing plenty of political and creative work. The Now Explosion was creating space and music for Atlanta's gay community. Pagan Holiday was making space for girls and queer folks in the punk scene through their music, and they engaged with a variety of political issues through art. Zine's "through the front door" approach to politics comes through in their music.[74] In the song "Femme Whore Butch Pimp," the lyrics follow a "femme whore" who "worked on Ponce De Leon." The song additionally uses the lesbian identities of "femme" and "butch" as empowering figures and "those girls had more power than girls are supposed to have/femme whore and the butch pimp with more power more power than girls are supposed to have." Much of Pagan Holiday's work engages with these themes of oppression and empowerment and encourages women and queer folk to claim their rights. The Opal Foxx Quartet, fronted by Benjamin dressed in drag as the character Opal Foxx, engaged with a variety of topics and audiences, expanding notions of what music and identity could look like.

Music also served as a mobilizing force in punk and played a central role in sustaining the punk movement. Roberts and Moore describe music as an "organizing catalyst" for punk.[75] Like Rock Against Racism in the U.K. or Rock Against Reagan closer to home, the Alternative '88 Fest was intended to be an event that mobilized people not only to enjoy some music, but take political action during the Democratic National Convention in Atlanta. Unlike Rock Against Racism or Rock Against Reagan, it failed in this pursuit. Atlanta police were able to block off streets well enough to prevent many people from getting to the event. Mills reasoned that the

[74] Stella Zine, interview by Wren Nelson, January 24, 2023.
[75] Ryan Moore and Mike Roberts, "Peace Punks and Punks Against Racism: Resource Mobilization and Frame Construction in the Punk Movement," *Music and Arts in Action* 2, no. 1 (2009): 23.

event was shut down with such efficiency because “the city doesn't like people to get out and then be disorderly. So they fight it.” Plus, “it’s bad for the Chamber of Commerce.”[76]

Benefits were also a common way to use music to achieve political goals. Hogan told me that “when you're a broke ass musician, and you can't donate money to your cause, like playing a benefit for something feels good.”[77] For punks with few resources, a benefit was an accessible way to take a stance on an issue or promote a cause. Neon Christ, for example, played an Election Day benefit alongside Destructive School Children in November 1984 for the anarchist group Circle A. These benefits had a larger impact than just feeling good to play or being convenient, however. For example, the Opal Foxx Quartet and the Jody Grind played a pro-choice and anti-sodomy law benefit on the steps of the State Capitol. In the image of the Opal Foxx Quartet performing, the drum kit has a poster on it reading “Sodomites for Choice.” This show displayed solidarity across identities and issues within the punk and underground music community in Atlanta. These shows were part of growing resistance to Georgia’s anti-sodomy law, which was finally struck down in 1998 by the Georgia Supreme Court.

[76] Chris, interview.
[77] Hogan, interview.

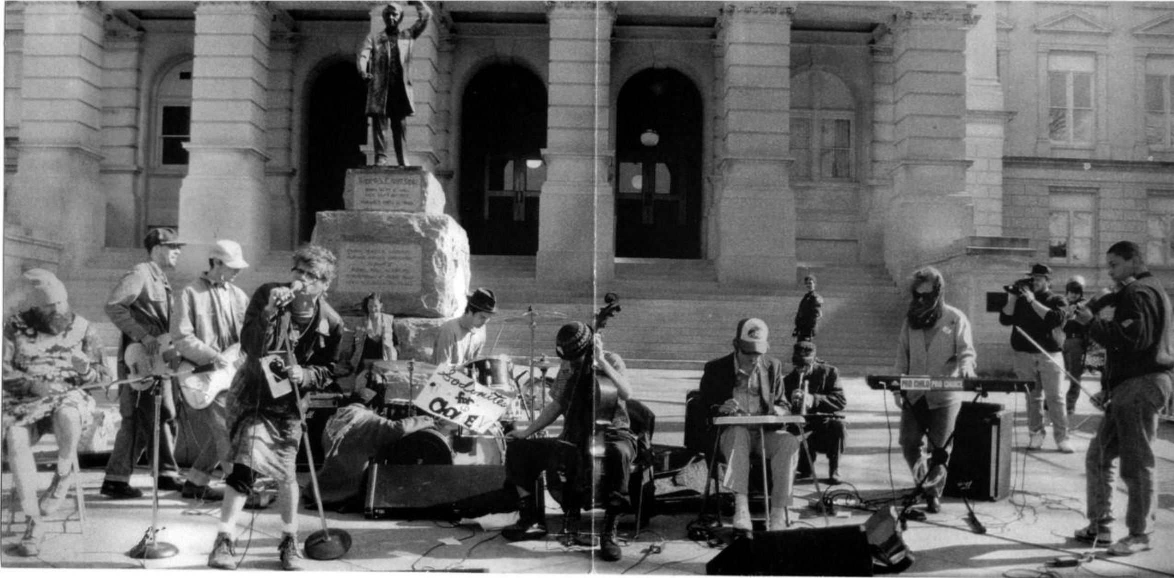

Figure 7. This image shows the Opal Foxx Quartet performing in front of the State Capitol to protest anti-sodomy laws and to show support for pro-choice politics. Photographer unknown, provided by Bill Taft, c. 1990s.

Shows could also function to spread information. During the AIDS crisis, the Now Explosion hosted shows that provided information on how AIDS was (and was not) spread and promoted safe sex practices. Clare Butler described the reasons for these shows: “one thing we realized in New York is, you know, AIDS had just started, they had just named it, and we saw people dying all the time. And I was like, ‘Oh, my God, they're not even saying anything about this in Atlanta, we've got to do something about it.’”[78] The Now Explosion often took information directly from the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) in New York (a queer political organization that started in the 1980s to demand that the AIDS crisis was addressed) and provided it to a largely gay audience at these informational shows. They helped fill the silence and lack of information surrounding AIDS in Atlanta, saving lives.

[78] Clare Butler, interview by Wren Nelson, December 15, 2022.

Zines

Zines were one of the most common creations coming out of punk. Do-it-yourself ethics empowered an explosion of creativity where participants actively created their own culture. Zines, while often ephemeral, helped drive forward discussion and provide knowledge to punks across the country. As discussed by Lucy Robinson, zines "construct a bottom-up history; irreverent, both textual and visual, recycled and disseminated beyond profit and funding structures."[79] A "bottom-up history" allows individuals with the least political power to have their voices heard.

A variety of zines were published in Atlanta and surrounding areas. They all varied greatly in their content, run time, and style, but all were DIY. Often run by one or two people, these zines regularly depended on contributions from other scene members to add content, and several featured handwritten instead of typed content. Nearly everyone attempted to make their own zines, and the identity of the editor(s) is often unclear. Zines were also meant to be accessible and spread widely, evidenced in part by the fact that many of the Atlanta zines I saw from this time period were free or the cost was no more than two dollars for international readers. Additionally, nearly every zine had a section dedicated to the other zines in Atlanta and where to get them, and some had sections reviewing both local and national zines. These zine sections, while rarely more than a few pages, displayed the vast network of zines being passed around, analyzed, and debated. Punks could get their hands on a zine by sending a letter to the addresses featured in these sections, get them through friends, or in some record stores. Readership of zines could be incredibly broad due to the vast networks punks created, so any

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[79] Lucy Robinson, "Zines as History," in *Ripped, Torn, and Cut:Pop, Politics and Punk Fanzines from 1976,* ed. The Subcultures Network (Manchester University Press, 2018), 39.

zine could have readers both at the local level and between countries. Readership varied between zines based on content, but readers would generally consist of those who were invested enough in music and politics to want to stay up to date, as well as those who had the extra time and a little money to spare. Street kids in the punk scene, for example, would have been more focused on day-to-day survival than zines. Atlanta punks I interviewed tended to remember *Ratlanta*, *Muzik*, and *Suicide Attempt* as particularly notable. In my research, I was able to look at copies of *Ratlanta*, *Suicide Attempt*, *Lowlife*, *Positive Mental Attitude (PMA)*, *Fight Back*, *Decontrol*, and *Restless-n-Bored*. *Lowlife* sits on the less political side of the spectrum, featuring occasional interesting commentary but generally focusing on underground art, music, poetry and literature. This zine was run by Glen Thrasher, a consistent presence in the Atlanta alternative world and an integral figure for the Destroy All Music radio show at Georgia Tech, which exposed its listeners (including many of the people I spoke with) to a wide array of experimental music, including punk music.[80] *Suicide Attempt* and *PMA* also tended to focus on music but did not shy away from political content either. Both of these zines frequently featured interviews with bands in which they asked about the political content of their music, as well as discussions of their political views.

Ratlanta, *Fight Back*, *Decontrol*, and *Restless-n-Bored* had the most directly political content and had the most content dedicated to organizing. A fantastic example of this comes from *Fight Back*, which featured a “Pledge of Resistance” from the Atlanta Committee on Latin America with the text, “ We are convinced that a serious possibility exists that the Reagan Administration may take direct U.S. military action in Central America. Plans calling for non-violent resistance across the country have been developed, to be executed in the event of

[80] Taft, interview.

overt intervention in Nicaragua or elsewhere in Central America."[81] The pledge then outlines the specific actions to be taken in the event of an invasion in Central America, provides the ACLA's mailing address, space for interested people to put their information, as well as boxes to check their congressional district and what actions they are able to participate in. A copy *Decontrol* featured a page with the headline "NAZIS FUCK OFF!" which proclaims that "These 'white power' and 'nazi' people who claim to be skins and punks are a joke" and that "The punk movement has always been strongly anti-racist."[82] Beyond these declarations, they also announce that in order to do something about the far-right faction in the scene, they have started The Committee for Scene Safety and invite readers to contact them for more information or to join the cause. While I have found no evidence of this group creating any change in the scene, this attempt at organizing is still notable.

[81] Fight Back, 1984, SERIAL 2016 15, Atlanta Punk Periodical Collection, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.
[82] Decontrol, 1990, SERIAL 2016 14, Atlanta Punk Periodical Collection, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.

Figures 8 and 9. Figure 8 shows the cover of an edition of Ratlanta. Figure 9 shows the cover of an edition of Suicide Attempt. Photographs by Wren Nelson. Ratlanta, ca 1980s, SERIAL 2016 18, Atlanta Punk Periodical Collection, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA. Suicide Attempt, January 1985, SERIAL 2016 21, Atlanta Punk Periodical Collection, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.

Publications coming from outside Atlanta also held considerable weight among many Atlanta punks. *Maximum Rocknroll* is perhaps the most notable of the national publications. Started by Tim Yohannan, *Maximum Rocknroll* began as a radio show, playing punk music from across the world, and first appeared in print form in 1982. It featured sharp and thoughtful political discussion among editors and readers, interviews with punk bands big and small, and scene reports from across the world. The political discussions in the magazine centered on a variety of issues of interest to punks, and Mills informed me that it was very influential for Atlanta punk activists. The letters to the editor are a fascinating microcosm of the issues punks were thinking through and debating at the time. A range of topics are covered: from taking on

skinhead's points with sharp historical and political analysis, to calling out homophobia in the scene and encouraging gay punks to keep doing what they are doing, to wrestling with questions of punk's future and how punk should address politics.

Venues and the Power of a Scene

Venues played an important role beyond just being the location of creative expression. Music venues constituted a large part of the scene and were community building sites. They provided the physical infrastructure needed for a punk scene to sustain itself. Venues, record stores, and other locations claimed by punks functioned as safe spaces that provided some relief from negative attention, spaces for creative expression, and spaces for political expression and mobilization.

Scenes themselves are important sources of resistance. In *Global Punk: Resistance and Rebellion in Everyday Life*, Dunn states that punk scenes serve two purposes: "to protect, promote, and nurture individuals within the scene and their practices" and "provide the lens through which global punk forms are understood and put into practice."[83] Without a scene and the physical spaces that make up a scene, it is extremely difficult to learn and actually put into action practices of resistance. The spaces Atlanta punks claimed for themselves provided a safe haven for outsiders of all kinds and provided the essential physical infrastructure to maintain an active activist presence. Atlanta punks had a large network of important gathering spaces in the city. The Metroplex and 688 are two that were central to the scene for many and come up frequently in participants' stories, but were still just one part of a larger and shifting network of house venues, bars, restaurants, and clubs that made up the scene. Punks often jumped between different venues and scenes, such as Theresa Starkey who discussed how "it could be Weekends

[83] Dunn, *Global Punk*, 63.

[a gay bar] one day that I'm going to, and then the next it could be, I'm going to see a band at the White Dot, but I'm actually sneaking in with a fake ID. Or I'm going to the Metroplex."[84] Venues included some restaurants, such as the Little Five Points Pub, which regularly hosted alternative artists and where Benjamin (of Freedom Puff, Opal Foxx Quartet, and Smoke) worked as a waiter, the Majestic Diner, site of 2 a.m. political debates, or Dottie's, a somewhat bizarre mix of a redneck and punk dive bar.

A venue that is emblematic of the importance of the construction of safe spaces was the Celebrity Club, located on Ponce de Leon Avenue and run by the members of the Now Explosion. It catered to a gay and punk audience, giving queer people a space of their own in the homophobic environment of Atlanta. When talking about the vision for the Celebrity Club, Butler explained that "we definitely wanted people to walk in and know that this was a gay friendly place."[85] The art collective 800 EAST was another example of safe spaces constructed within the unsafe environment of Atlanta. 800 EAST, as a queer art collective, did avant-garde theater in downtown Atlanta making a statement that queerness is everywhere, as well as community building work, including childcare and a queer prom night.[86] In the DIY spirit, 800 EAST, and punk and queer artists more generally, also made safe spaces wherever they found themselves. It wasn't uncommon for punk and queer artists to set up in an abandoned space for the night and hold an art show, or have some bands play.[87]

[84] Theresa Starkey, interview by Wren Nelson, December 15, 2022.
[85] Butler, interview.
[86] Starkey, interview.
[87] Starkey, interview.

Identity as Activism

Punk resistance also took the form of outwardly claiming punk identity, primarily through stylistic choices. While fairly well accepted today, punk fashion made an individual "a lightning rod for random physical abuse" in 1980s and 90s Atlanta.[88] Atlanta punks' style choices reflected a kind of resistance outlined in Hebdige's book *Subculture*: "the idea of style as a form of Refusal, the elevation of crime into art (even though, in our case, the 'crimes' are only broken codes)."[89] A punk's appearance itself was a challenge to traditional southern norms.[90] Punks' willful challenging of these norms resulted in outrage, so much so that appearing punk put a target on a person's back at this time. Nearly every person I spoke to recalled multiple instances of (often homophobic) verbal or physical abuse based simply on appearance. Just claiming punk identity and donning its signifiers became a radical act.

An integral part of punk resistance includes lifestyle politics which makes sense for a subculture made up of such young participants; they may have had little to no institutional authority, but they could control what they were doing with their own lives. Punk scholar Kevin Mattson writes, "this youth subculture made clear that lived life was the clearest expression of a person's protest against social and political ills—especially the ways in which corporate culture had taken over everyday life. Direct action and anarchism stressed lifestyle politics, a domain over which someone could possess full control."[91]

Punks were also claiming other identities. Atlanta's riot grrrl and queer scenes provide particularly striking examples of this. Stella Zine and their bandmates in the 1990's Atlanta scene regularly reclaimed derogatory language such as "slut," "whore," and "dyke" for themselves.

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[88] Mills, interview.
[89] Hebdige, *Subculture*, 2.
[90] Gue, interview.
[91] Mattson, "Did Punk Matter?" 84.

Zine also started one of the first riot grrrl chapters in the South. This chapter served as a kind of consciousness-raising group for its members.[92] Butler in the Now Explosion did a similar kind of work by presenting alternative versions of femininity on stage. When explaining the importance of her performances, she told me, “I mean, in the world, it can be a scary place to be female, and our whole culture just makes you feel like you're completely at fault for everything. And somebody else, you know, being a predator to you somehow, that's your fault. That's bullshit. And so I was really calling that out. And I really loved doing that, I loved it. And so many people said they understood that and felt very empowered by it.”[93] Female punks in Atlanta were formulating new ways to embody femininity and reclaim “incorrect” femininity through their performances.

Queer punks were also asserting their identities. Benjamin Smoke, for example, was openly gay and regularly appeared in drag for performances. The Now Explosion served as an example for young gay people in Atlanta as well. Butler told me that “there was a house where, you know, homeless gay kids could live. And the guy who ran it was a big fan of our band, and he would just bring the kids and to see our show, the ones who either had fake IDs, or were 18. And so we had this huge crowd of people who were kicked out of their houses.” Butler stated that performing for this crowd was important to her because of the response from these kids that “Oh, my God, I saw you and I knew it was going to be okay.”[94] Stella Zine and their band Pagan Holiday made the choice to only perform with other riot grrrl and queer bands in order to support other female and queer members of the scene. They also made this decision for their own safety because they faced harassment in more male-dominated punk spaces.

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[92] Zine, interview.
[93] Butler, interview.
[94] Butler, interview.

Political Action

When punks weren't playing or enjoying music, making zines, or finding themselves in heated debates with other punks, they were often participating in political action. This wasn't always organized by punks themselves, though some actions were. Rock Against Reagan and its "War Chest Tours" were organized by punks, and they brought a mix of direct action protest and musical performances to several cities in the United States.[95] Punks became, to quote a magazine reprinted in *Maximum RocknRoll*, "part of a new generation of protestors who prefer street theater and spontaneous action."[96]

An important organization for the majority of the individuals whom I interviewed was No Business as Usual, or NBAU. NBAU was a national organization supported by the Revolutionary Communist Party which promoted the issue of nuclear disarmament and direct action methods. This organization also focused on the fact that corporations profit off of war and nuclear stockpiling. NBAU made the argument that business as usual allowed this system to continue to push the world towards another world war, and the best way to stop this impending crisis was to disrupt and shut down the status quo.[97]

An incredibly important date for those who were involved was No Business as Usual Day on April 29, 1985. No Business as Usual Day was a day of direct action protests as well as other political actions across the country, including Atlanta. Punks in Atlanta were very interested in the NBAU as well as the connections between company profits and war. Punks used the networks they had created through venues, radio shows, and publications to get the word out about events leading up to and on April 29th 1985. The Celebrity Club, owned by Clare Butler

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[95] Kevin Mattson, *We're not Here to Entertain:Punk Rock, Ronald Reagan, and the Real Culture War of 1980s America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 205-206.
[96] Mattson, *We're not Here to Entertain*, 202.
[97] No Business as Usual, *Flier for the 'No Business As Usual' Campaign advocating for nuclear disarmament*, [1985?], Washington D.C. https://digdc.dclibrary.org/islandora/object/dcplislandora%3A37489#page/1/mode/1up.

and the Now Explosion, had special performances and video screenings in the week leading up to NBAU Day. Video screenings included video taken from the Stop the City Day in London, and the War Chest Tour actions in Dallas and San Francisco. Punks in Atlanta were preparing for NBAU Day by watching what punks were doing in other southern cities like Dallas, Texas, to learn about direct action methods. The small radio show Revolution Rock hosted by Miller Francis helped spread information about NBAU's message, actions occurring on April 29, and the events hosted by the Celebrity Club. Francis also provided contact information for NBAU in Atlanta and encouraged people to get in contact and find ways to get involved and "have fun with your eyes wide open."[98] The actions in Atlanta surrounded the Peachtree Center MARTA station, as it represented the New South and the center of business as usual in Atlanta to punks.[99] It was also the subject of jokes and speculation at the time that it was a nuclear fallout shelter. Francis stated in his promotion of NBAU actions that "today's train station is tomorrow's fallout shelter."[100] Miller Francis and the host of Leather Jacket, Melanie Collins, encouraged listeners to take responsibility for what happens next and asked listeners to consider what they would do if they knew that on April 30 nuclear war would break out. The two hosts also planned to host a joint four hour show on April 29 to Actions in Atlanta that day included a die-in, in which protestors would pretend to die due to nuclear warfare. In the image featured below, Randy Blazak pretends to die while a cop stands over him. Another protestor and someone taking photos can be seen in the image as well.

NBAU actions on No Business as Usual Day were not limited to these kinds of eye-catching protests. Teach-ins were another approach to raising awareness and attempting to

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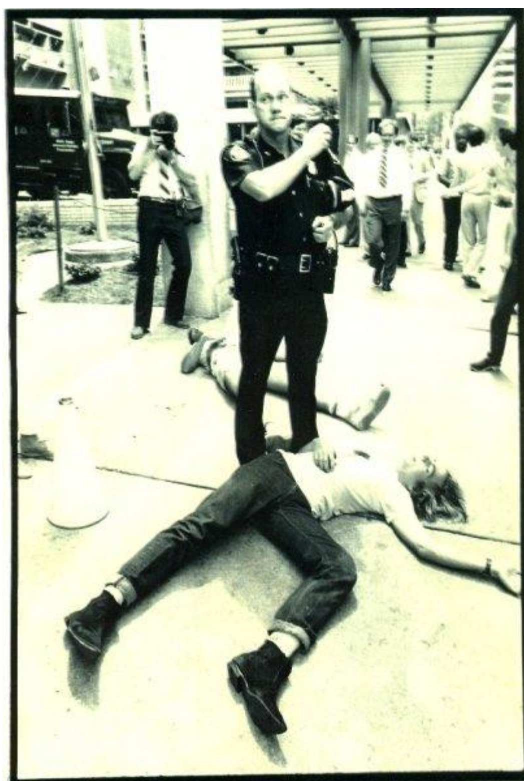
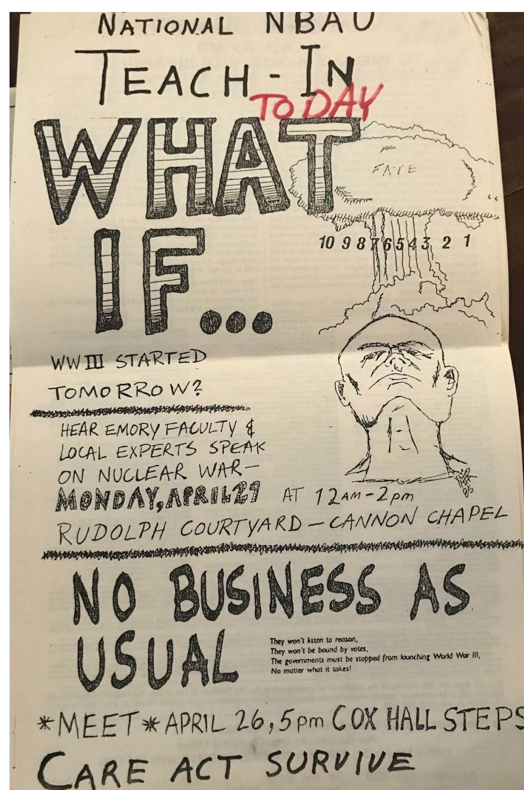
[98] Miller Francis, "Revolution Rock, 1985 April 22," recorded April 22 1985, Radio Free Georgia, audiocassette recording. Accessed via Stuart A Rose Manuscript Library.
[99] Miller Francis, "Revolution Rock, 1985 April 22."
[100] Miller Francis, "Revolution Rock, 1985 April 22."

bring about change. A teach-in featuring professors occurred on Emory's campus on NBAU day in an attempt to educate college students about the potential for nuclear war and encourage them to take action. A flier for the event reads, "They won't listen to reason. They won't be bound by votes. The governments must be stopped from launching World War III, no matter what it takes!" Arguing that governments will not listen to reason or votes and that they must be stopped at all costs displays NBAU's commitment to direct action. The slogan "CARE ACT SURVIVE" is written at the bottom as well. This lends us quite a bit of insight into the values of NBAU participants, many of whom are punks. Commanding participants to care, act, and survive emphasizes resistance alongside the constructive work of community care.





Figures 10 and 11. Figure 10 shows Randy Blazak (in the foreground) participating in a die-in on NBAU day. Figure 11 shows a flier for Emory events surrounding NBAU day. Photos provided by Randy Blazak.

No Business As Usual Day was not the only example of political action by Atlanta punks, however. Another notable example is Greg Johnson's arrest for burning the American flag at the 1984 Republican National Convention in Dallas, Texas, leading to the Supreme Court case *Texas v Johnson*. Johnson was born in Indiana and lived in several different countries, but was an Atlanta resident and a member of the Atlanta punk scene at the time of the protest in Dallas. Within the scene, he was known as "Commie Greg" and was an active participant in the Revolutionary Communist Youth Brigade.[101] He was convicted with desecration of a venerated object, a conviction he challenged without success in the Fifth Court of Appeals of Texas, but his conviction was then overturned in the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals. His case then made it all the way to the Supreme Court, who decided in a landmark opinion that burning the flag was protected under the First Amendment. Johnson continued his activist work, including in a 2005 post to revcom.com in which he addresses a proposed constitutional amendment that would make burning the flag a crime. In this post, he provides criticisms of the American government that echo sentiments held in the Atlanta punk scene. He states, "For those who would speak out and act against the system and its crimes, the amendment would create an atmosphere of intimidation backed up by police, courts, and jail. A wide range of political protest and even artistic expression would face prosecution and punishment." He further asks "Just how far is it from saying people can't criticize or express contempt for the symbol of the government to saying people can't criticize the government at all?"[102] Johnson, like many punks, was particularly interested in issues of open expression and the ability to openly criticize the United States government.

[101] Gue, interview.
[102] Gregory "Joey" Johnson, "Flag Amendment and the Assault on Political Dissent," revcom.us, July 24, 2005, https://revcom.us/a/009/flag-amendment-assault-dissent.htm.

These two examples were, of course, only a small part of actions which Atlanta punks took. Members of Atlanta's punk and underground scenes showed up in large numbers to the second march in Forsyth County, and some participated in anti-war and anti-interventionist demonstrations at Fort McPherson in Atlanta and Fort Benning near Columbus, Georgia. Punk energized its participants to take their future into their own hands and inspired many to get involved in very direct ways.

The Value of Stunts

Punks were more than willing to use a humorous or shocking stunt to change the conversation. As Mills reminded me, "don't underestimate the value of a practical joke or public statement."[103] Few were better at this in Atlanta than the Now Explosion. In one instance, Butler crashed an anti-sex work protest by dressing up in a stereotypical sex worker's outfit and holding a sign with the slogan "Honk If You Want Hookers." The particular protest she was countering occurred in Midtown, which had a heavy prostitution presence. Butler explained to me that "people moved in to gentrify the neighborhood. And it's so ironic that as soon as you pay money for a house and move in, and you're a straight couple with kids, you want everything else to be sanitized, and you want everything else gone. And you want it to be just like the suburban place you moved from."[104] She effectively drew away attention from the moral panic and made their demands less impactful through this stunt, as cameras and news coverage were more drawn to her outrageous appearance.

[103] Chris, interview.
[104] Butler, interview.

Figure 12. An image of Clare Butler counter-protesting an anti-prostitution protest. *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* photography, February 28, 1985. Accessed through Georgia State University Library Digital Collections.

The Now Explosion rarely slowed down when it came to stunts. In an iconic example, they decided to have a float in Atlanta's "Salute to America" Fourth of July parade in the early 1980s, feeling that the parade was obnoxiously patriotic and wholesome. Butler described the float as a "super hippie, funky party thing. And we were blasting our music from loudspeakers. And all around us were people like clogging teams from North Georgia and shit like that, and beauty queens in, you know, chiffon gowns, and stuff all around our float. And we were like the party float. And we had RuPaul there dancing with his dancers, the U hauls. And we were also the only float with people smoking, you know, on the float, which was great."[105] They also had their float officially described as a Christian acapella group, adding to the absurdity. They brought queer Atlanta to a sanitized event and had fun while doing it.

[105] Butler, interview.

In a mixture of a stunt and performance, riot grrrl band Pagan Holiday had a show at Dottie's the night of the opening of the Olympics in 1996 where they performed a spoken word piece about the event and burned a Georgia flag. They chose to perform a spoken word piece comparing the Atlanta Olympics to the Berlin Olympics in 1936. This comparison served to highlight the various "clean up" policies the Atlanta government took up in preparation for the Olympics. "Cleaning up" the city included arresting thousands of homeless people under a stricter loitering law and even giving out "one-way bus tickets out of town," according to the Associated Press.[106] Additionally, Stella Zine spoke with me about how adult stores and strip clubs were also targeted.[107] These populations were not the only ones impacted either. Poor Black residents of neighborhoods surrounding proposed Olympic construction sites bore the brunt of its impact after "revitalization" once again turned out to mean removal without replacement of housing.[108]

Individual Change and Community Care

A kind of social change created by punks that is often overlooked was their ability to reach out and help individual people, even if they were unable to create change on a larger scale. It is worth remembering that punks were often teenagers and often had very few resources, so the chance that they would change any established policy was minimal. Still, Atlanta punks were "getting up every morning and deciding that you're going to continue to be somebody who influences other folks," to quote Mills.[109] Punks were not only thinking about their own values; they were talking about them with others and trying to change their minds too. Every person I

[106] "Criminals, Homeless Targeted for Olympics," *AP News*, March 21, 1996, https://apnews.com/article/c236a8e39878f2c4d8c3d13c332d9d66.
[107] Zine, interview.
[108] Keating, *Atlanta*, 165.
[109] Mills, interview.

spoke to had their politics shaped in some way by being in the punk scene, which taught them to take action and advocate for others.

A memorable example of the way punks were creating small changes was related to me by Brook Hewitt. She recalled a participant whose "dad was a doctor, and she had like a convertible Mercedes, you know, but she drove homeless people around and she didn't care, you know, so she was rebelling in our own ways. Because her parents would have totally killed her if they had known she had like, Black homeless people in her pristine vehicle."[110] For some, resistance came in the form of making change for just one other person, and ignoring arbitrary divisions between people. In a smaller scene like Atlanta participants may not have been able to create long-lasting change, but they found ways to use the resources at their disposal to help others out.

Punks were also looking out for one another in ways that displayed the strength of their community and resisted the individualistic and conservative attitudes of the time. Stella Zine and their bandmates often faced harassment from male audience members, but they also had moments where they could rely on fellow scene members for support and safety. Before a show at Dottie's, a man came up to Pagan Holiday member Deeds and their girlfriend and threatened them with brass knuckles. During the show itself, the same person "in the middle of that spoken word jumped up on stage, pushed Deeds off the bass and came at me. And all of these folks, these women, folks beyond the binary, grabbed this guy, pulled him into the pit, and jumped on him."[111] In moments where people tried to intimidate or enact violence to shut down expression, Atlanta punks took it upon themselves to protect each other. In the case of the tragic death of The Jody Grind members Rob Clayton and Robert Hayes, as well as the Atlanta poet Deacon

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[110] Hewitt, interview.
[111] Zine, interview.

Lunchbox (Timothy Ruttenber) in an automobile accident, the Atlanta underground community came together to celebrate their lives. Bill Taft discussed the plan of celebrating them with a parade, which "was comforting, because someone on the other end of the phone could go, 'Oh, yes, a parade. When's it going to be?' I'd say, 'Sunday.' 'What can I do?' 'Bring a float. Make something.' People had a purpose and a task. You can do something physical with your grief."[112] Here, the DIY ethic was central to mobilizing the community to come together to heal and process their grief.

Building Networks

Punks built up impressive national (and often international) networks that were conducive to mobilization. Much of these networks were built through zine and music distribution, as well as touring. It was also common practice to write letters to bands, which helped maintain these networks as well. Jimmy Demer explained that these underground networks were "all based on the passion of the music and loving that music," reiterating the way that music was a mobilizing force within punk.[113] Punks were sharing creative and political ideas through these cross country networks. These networks were also essential for being able to create, release, and go on tour on a DIY budget. Since many bands stayed in a city while they booked their next show(s), strong community networks were formed across the country through touring. Through this network, punks learned how to book tours, who to go to for booking shows, and also discussed political issues with bands and other participants.

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[112] Scott Freeman, "The Triumph and Tragedy of The Cabbagetown Sound: Part 1 of 2: Have you Heard Death Singing? An Oral History," *Creative Loafing*, June 24, 2010. https://creativeloafing.com/content-168324-the-triumph-and-tragedy-of-the-cabbagetown

[113] Demer, interview.

Zines were essential to spreading the word through these networks. For example, the infamous Clash riot outside the Fox Theater in 1982 was talked about in zines everywhere from California to the United Kingdom. In a 1983 press conference with the Dead Kennedys in Atlanta, front man Jello Biafra discussed that the riot was an "altercation instigated by local fascist thinking types in conjunction with the Klan" and "the cops did nothing to stop them." According to some individuals who can be heard talking on the recording, the United Kingdom's version of events "billed it as a riot." To that point, Miller Francis can be heard responding that "it was a police riot."[114] While the West coast account is not entirely accurate–I have not seen any evidence at this point that the Klan was involved, for example–this displays just how far news could travel in these networks. Networks established through music, zines, small record labels, and touring were essential for taking punk from a local phenomenon to a national and international force.

Conclusion

Atlanta punks were using a variety of tools at their disposal to create big and small changes. They were talking about events happening in the world around them, encouraging action, and even trying to organize within the scene to make it a better place. Music, self-published zines, national networks, and radio shows were vital vehicles for ideas that lent themselves to more concrete forms of resistance. These included stylistic choices, claims to different identity categories, direct action protests, stunts, and acts of community care. In an era defined by consumerism, individualism, and conservatism, punks in Atlanta and across the country were actively rejecting these narratives through a wide variety of means. As we consider

[114] Dead Kennedys, "Press Conference, Dead Kennedys," recorded by Miller Francis.

these different methods of resistance, it is also important to remember how these strategies may still hold weight today.

"Creativity is a Survival Skill": Takeaways from Atlanta Punk Activism

Unfortunately, punk didn't revolutionize the world through its activism and resistance. Several participants expressed frustration with this fact, such as Elma Dieppa who stated, "I joke about the fact but you know, really, we suck because I used to demonstrate against nuclear war, and just the whole corruption of the system. All those things are still here today."[115] But punk didn't need to change the world to have an impact or provide current southern activists with important takeaways. By learning from punk's strategies, there is potential for even stronger movement-building today.

Lessons of Punk Activism: Culture as a Political Tool

One of punk's most important lessons is the power of connecting culture and politics. Music in particular was the most powerful vehicle for political expression in punk. Atlanta punks were listening to and discussing the politics of bands across the country and the world, as well as making their own political statements. Cultural creation was also the driving force of political thought in punk. However, the importance of cultural creation to punk politics does not mean that their relationship is not strained and complex. As George Lipsitz states in "Popular Culture: This Ain't No Sideshow," "Politics and culture maintain a paradoxical relationship in which only effective political action can win breathing room for a new culture, but only a revolution in culture can make people capable of political action."[116] Punk attempted to navigate this paradox,

[115] Dieppa, interview.
[116] George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 16.

with some success and some failure. First of all, punk music made politics accessible. Putting politics in a song is an easier way to get people to listen to your perspective, and there is the possibility that listeners may investigate the political content further on their own. Personally, I have educated myself on plenty of events or issues that I first heard about through a punk song. Music can put forth a serious political message, but it can also be a lot of fun, making it perfect for accessible education through shows. Bill Taft was a proponent of this approach, and he told me that " the rhetorical strategy was, you know, really create a situation where people can have fun and get informed. And I think that proved to be an effective way."[117] He hosted benefits and informational shows himself, but also learned a lot from other people's shows. Taft explained to me that punk shows taught him about subjects such as harm reduction, something he would have not known of otherwise. Music additionally served as a way for people who may not be heard otherwise to amplify their voices. Young people, people of color, women, and queer people in the Atlanta punk scene could make themselves heard through music and performance in the punk scene. Stella Zine brought up issues of harm reduction, sexism, and homophobia; the Now Explosion and the Opal Foxx Quartet educated audiences about AIDS; Theresa Starkey joined in on performances queering spaces in Atlanta; and Jimmy Demer and Neon Christ raised issues of nuclear war.

Atlanta punks were using all kinds of cultural products as vehicles for political change beyond music as well, including fashion, zines, and fliers. Stella Zine and Pagan Holiday were fantastic at making even something as small and commonplace as a flier into a political statement by including political messaging on it. A flier for a show featuring Stella Zine and Bill Taft included phrases like "punks speak out against hate," and a quote from feminist thinker bell hooks: "When men show a willingness to assume equal responsibility in feminist struggle,

[117] Taft, interview.

performing whatever tasks are necessary, women should affirm their revolutionary work by acknowledging them as comrades in struggle." Punks looking at these fliers will get the information they want, alongside a quick lesson in feminist theory. In another example, each member of Pagan Holiday included issues they were passionate about on the insert of the vinyl of their EP, including harm reduction and how to escape from domestic abuse.

Figure 13. A flier for a show at the Star Bar that includes a quote from feminist thinker bell hooks. Provided by Stella Zine.

At the same time, punk's radical cultural work was able to be co-opted by the mid-1990s. While some punks were still absolutely doing radical political work, especially in the newer subgenres of queercore and riot grrrl, Nirvana's rise to stardom and the popularity of grunge

aesthetics showed that punk culture was losing its threatening edge. Culture is an incredibly powerful tool, especially when trying to reach people who aren't overly sympathetic to a cause, and activists today should follow punk's lead and focus on cultural production that is not for profit. Culture, when wielded as a political tool, is most powerful when it is not limited by corporate interests. Maintaining this edge to culture does take constant work, as capitalism is able to be sustained in part because it co-opts and nullifies threatening culture. To avoid this, cultural production focused work must be anti-corporate, constantly evolving, and must exist in multiple forms. A daunting task for activists to say the least. However, committing to doing creative cultural work can drive a movement. It also gives participants a vital outlet. As Brook Hewitt says, "creativity is a survival skill."[118]

Lessons of Punk Activism: Carving Out Safe Spaces

The South can be particularly dangerous for oppressed groups. Atlanta punk reminds us that it is possible to create safe spaces in an unsafe environment. Clare Butler and the Now Explosion, Bill Taft and Benjamin Smoke and the Opal Foxx Quartet, and Stella Zine and Pagan Holiday were all carving out safe spaces for marginalized groups within Atlanta, and within Atlanta's punk scene.

Even white, male, middle-class punks had to create safe spaces within Atlanta due to the resistance to their expression. I believe it is worth remembering that these were physical spaces, and how physically being in community with one another in safe spaces can be incredibly empowering and foster political action. Venues in particular provide space for the articulation of radical values and the formation of community. The Celebrity Club, as I have mentioned, was a fantastic example of a safe space for queer folks and punks in Atlanta. Other locations, like

[118] Hewitt, interview.

Pershing Point, assorted gay bars, 688, the Majestic Diner, and art spaces like 800 EAST were also essential safe spaces for community members. Every person I talked to had some kind of moment in their punk experience where they were hooked, and it often involved one of these spaces. When talking about his first punk show, Randy Gue said, "I tell people that that night was like grabbing hold of a live wire. My life went from black and white to full technicolor in the span of one evening."[119] Of course, many of the safe spaces that existed in this time period are no longer around. A changing landscape is not necessarily a problem, and some of punk's centers in Atlanta still exist such as Little Five Points, the Masquerade and a few other venues. Still, alternative and underground communities have struggled to replace many of their vital community centers from the previous decades. The loss of the Metroplex and 688, for example, hurt the punk scene in Atlanta. These spaces are fragile and take real work and investment from participants. Effective community building requires the maintenance of as many physical safe spaces as possible in order for resistant groups to be sustained.

Beyond being the locations of many individuals' introductions to punk, venues also provide the theater in which culture functions as a rehearsal for politics.[120] They were essential community meeting places where Atlanta bands could play and experiment, allowed conversation between Atlanta punks and out of town bands, and were the sites of clashes over ideology. Venues were an integral part of how Atlanta punks built their politics. They could experiment, argue, and learn in these spaces, leaving participants better equipped for political work outside of punk spaces. Having sites for experimentation and negotiation of politics within a movement allows for stronger political action outside of these sites.

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[119] Gue, interview.
[120] Lipsitz, *Time Passages*, 16.

In addition to such safe spaces, punk's ethic of community care is also vital in a southern context. Having a community one can fall back on in times of struggle is incredibly important for survival in any marginalized group. Community care is not new to activists by any means, but it is worthwhile to remember just how central it is to sustaining resistance. Atlanta provides us some interesting examples: The Committee for Scene Safety featured in the zine *Decontrol*, the riot grrrl chapter formed in Atlanta, and an audience taking responsibility for removing someone trying to threaten the riot grrrl band Pagan Holiday. Sometimes, caring for one's community took physically fighting those trying to do harm to others. There are also smaller examples of community care, such as accepting people into your "tribe of misfits," to quote Randy Blazak, as well as giving other punks a place to stay for the night.[121]

The people whom I interviewed continue to do community care work and reflect on community care and building safe spaces as a large part of what punk was to them. Graves put it most succinctly: "You gotta take care of people. That's what the whole scene was to me."[122] As mentioned earlier, during the beginning of the recent pandemic, Graves took the commitment to community and the DIY ethic that she had learned in the Atlanta punk scene and applied it by making masks for people.[123] Stella Zine, who continues their harm reduction work at the Atlanta Harm Reduction Coalition, does care work for Atlanta's most vulnerable populations. Taking care of one another is vital to maintaining resistance.

Lessons of Punk Activism: The Do-It-Yourself Ethic

Perhaps punk's most important lesson is the power of the do-it-yourself ethic. Its impact on scene participants cannot be overstated. The DIY ethic inspired participants to take control of

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[121] Randy Blazak, "Ode to a Gay Bar."
[122] Graves, interview.
[123] Graves, interview.

their own culture and their own futures and motivated them to start their own bands, make their own zines, and even organize politically. This ethic democratized culture, taking music from the realm of massive corporations and placing it in the hands of individuals. It may not seem like much today, where self-made artists are more common and it is easier for small artists to develop a following through the internet, but it was revolutionary to many in the 1980s. The DIY ethic also allowed participants to make the jump from making their own culture to doing their own political work. This jump was pretty simple for many punks, especially considering that making one's own culture outside of corporate demands is in itself political and central to how punk functioned as a social movement. No matter if punks were booking their own shows or organizing a die-in to protest nuclear war, their DIY approach was incredibly empowering. If you could make your own music, your own fanzines, your own record labels, who says you couldn't organize an action or a protest?

DIY practices also made anti-capitalist action more accessible to participants. In a capitalist society, it is impossible to completely resist capitalism or exist outside of it. However, a commitment to DIY gives participants actionable steps to resist consumerism and capitalism. It draws connections between abstract political thought and daily realities, which makes anti-capitalist action accessible to a broad range of people. You don't have to read Marxist theory to understand how to get clothes second hand and alter them yourself, to try creating a record label that focuses on supporting bands instead of making a profit. The everyday ways that resistance can be conducted can sustain a movement.

In the current southern political climate, it can often feel like attacks on people's ability to live livable lives are never-ending. In Georgia alone, a massive cop training facility is being built that will lead to further police violence and ecological devastation and the current moral panic

about transgender individuals is making its way into law. This kind of environment can make political action feel overwhelming and hopeless. The do-it-yourself ethic helps to ease some of that despair. As Stella Zine stated, the DIY ethic allowed a "massive sense of like, I'm not just going home and putting the covers over my head to feel like it's worthless, pointless, and just want to not think about anything. I'm gonna do something, connect with other people. And then people start to feel hope. And hope is powerful, I think. And punk rock."[124] The DIY ethic can easily be interpreted as doing your part, no matter how small, and these everyday actions build into something much bigger.

Lessons Learned: Atlanta Punk's Missteps

However, these lessons southern activists can gain from punk does not mean that the Atlanta punk scene was free of problems. The violence from skinheads and neo-Nazis in the scene, for example, should not be ignored. It is a reminder that identity alone is not enough to build a movement. In this case, the identity of "misfit" being the standard for inclusion in the punk scene left punk's principles open for use by people who wanted to do incredible harm. Instead, we must build, as Cathy J Cohen states, "a politics where one's relation to power, and not some homogenized identity, is privileged in determining one's political comrades. I'm talking about a politics where the non-normative and marginal position of punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens, for example, is the basis for progressive transformative coalition work."[125] southern activists should absolutely pay attention to the strategies punk provides to deal with the simultaneous harms inflicted on people in the South. Still, utilizing its strategies does not mean we should not be vigilant of the ways punk's principles can be misused.

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[124] Zine, interview.
[125] Cathy J. Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: the Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" *GLQ*: *A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 3, no. 4 (1997): 438.

Additionally, Atlanta punk often left much to be desired on the racial awareness front. While many punks were anti-racist to some degree, were participating in protests against racism such as the marches on Forsyth County, and were even discussing issues of Apartheid in South Africa and imperialism in Central America, many punks failed to actively address the racism around them. When I asked about the demographics of the scene and its racial dynamics, I often received a response that fell into a colorblindness narrative which certainly falls short of a more radical racial politics despite the good intentions behind it. It also obscures the racism present within punk and allows participants who engage in racist behavior to abdicate responsibility. This reminds white southern activists in particular that relying on notions of acceptance can easily become complacency and that while organizing shouldn't necessarily revolve around identities, they must be taken into account.

Constructing a Punk and Queer South

One of the most important things Atlanta punk reminds us of is that the South is much more than its stereotypes. To quote the back of an edition of *Decontrol*: "There's more than hicks in GA."[126] Atlanta punks were doing exciting work in an area of the country overlooked by many progressives and were creating progressive spaces for political and creative expression. In a city with many contradictions (Atlanta was described to me as both a more progressive "Black power town" and a more conservative "Bible Belt town" over the course of my interviews), punk and queer Atlantans were making sense of it and staking their own claims on what it means to lead a non-normative existence in the South.[127]

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[126] Decontrol, 1990, SERIAL 2016 14, Atlanta Punk Periodical Collection, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.

[127] Butler, interview; Gue, interview.

In her analysis of Deaundra Peek and the Atlanta televisual drag scene, Margaret McGehee writes, "They were, in effect, 'unmooring' Atlanta from its associations with southernness (conservatism, whiteness, elitism, heteronormativity, and more) and essentially undoing the construction of southernness (along with race, gender, class) in the process."[128] The larger network of punk and queer scenes that Atlanta was connected to helped "unmoor" Atlanta from its association with a backwards or hateful South. Atlanta punk and queer scenes did important work to expand ideas of where punks and queer people were, as well as who participated in progressive politics through their attempts to lift Atlanta out of its conservative context. For current southern activists, however, I believe that it may be just as important to reclaim southernness as we deconstruct conservative southern identity. These misfits of the South laid the groundwork, and it is our turn to reshape southernness into something that fits more people. Punks can be southern, queer people can be southern, marginalized people can be southern, and it is vital to continue working on constructing a South that actually supports these groups.

Expanding notions of southernness also brings the silences in the archive to light. Had people not kept materials from their time in the punk scene, had people not made the choice to collect said materials into books and archives, my work would have been over before it started. I am particularly indebted to Randy Gue and Emory University's punk rock archive, and his work as curator speaks to the importance of saving materials from social movements and subcultures. The materials he has collected provides a strong counter narrative to hegemonic southernness. It is easy to find examples of hegemonic southernness in the archive, such as records of Confederate monuments and other examples of "southern heritage." It can be harder to find and

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[128] Margaret McGehee, "Vienners at Odum's: DeAundra Peek and the Atlanta Televisual Drag Scene" in *Queering the South on Screen*, ed. Tison Pugh (University of Georgia Press, 2020), 263.

preserve materials from groups that challenged the status quo. I was lucky to have archived materials available to me, but I can't help but wonder what other social movements occurred in Atlanta that don't have dedicated archival collections. Going by much of the archives, it is easy to come to the conclusion that the South has always been a dangerous place for oppressed people and that there was little sustained pushback other than the Civil Rights Movement. However, this is clearly not the full picture. Continuing to fill in the gaps within the archives is an important project for anyone seeking to study left-wing social movements in the South. Preserving the materials coming out of social or countercultural movements in the South gives current activists something to look to for inspiration and makes the history of resistance in the South fuller and richer.

Epilogue: Atlanta Punk's not Dead

On a fall Friday evening, I find myself at a punk show in Little Five Points. It is actually my first time in the area; despite my interest in all things alternative, I had never actually made the trip. As my friends and I make our way to Criminal Records, I feel a true sense of belonging amongst the skateboarders, punks, and "misfits" of Atlanta. Even in a city that is not my own, it feels like coming home. I chat with friends and wander through the shelves of records until the band begins to make their way to the stage (a platform barely a few inches off the ground, but a stage nonetheless). The music starts and the atmosphere turns electric. The drums pound in my chest, and I can't help but smile as I watch the crowd begin to build energy before exploding into a mosh pit. They appear chaotic, yet are surprisingly contained; anyone standing on the edges of the pit is left untouched. I had never seen a crowd this diverse at a punk show before—the multiracial Atlanta band Upchuck has drawn an audience of queer folks, people of color, and punks of all genders and ages. In this record store, in this crowd, in this music, I experience true joy.

But it's not just me that is excited about Atlanta punk. Bands across the city are making their own culture and bringing impressive creative energy to all that they do. Both punk bands and participants are talking about politics, and continuing earlier practices of community care. The current Atlanta scene is fostering the current generation of activists and artists. The band Upchuck is a fantastic example of this. Fronted by Kaila "KT" Thompson, this band uses their music to demand space for the stories of Black women and the trauma Black and Brown people experience on a day-to-day basis. The band is meant to be a release not only for its members, but for the audience as well. Their description on their Spotify reads: "songwriter KT screams of

haunting tales of discrimination, ignorance, and life in a doomed generation. Only the wise and relentless will thrive in a revolutionized world, and upchuck is sternly handing the fuel for a new gen." Punks from the 1980s scene are taking notice of the exciting things happening in Atlanta punk today as well. Jimmy Demer, when discussing a Neon Christ reunion show from a few years ago, stated "we didn't know if anybody was going to come. But I mean, we had 1,000 people come, and it was a really diverse crowd. And so that was pretty thrilling for us." He continued, "it was the scene that we always imagined, like what we always wanted it to be and it never was. And now it is."[129]

Their era of punk may be in the past, but each person I interviewed is still up to exciting work today that was influenced by their time in punk. Randy Gue is currently an archivist and is the curator of the Atlanta Punk Rock Archive at Emory University, a collection that has made my research possible. Katy Graves, Brook Hewitt, and Jimmy Demer all work as teachers, displaying the punk commitment to informing others. Bill Taft went on to co-direct Common Good Atlanta, which provides college-level education to the incarcerated or formerly incarcerated as a way to empower them and their communities. Randy Blazak is a professor of sociology, who studies hate crimes and far-right groups in an attempt to combat hate crimes and right-wing extremism. Stella Zine works for the Atlanta Harm Reduction Coalition as a continuation of their feminist and harm reduction work in the punk scene. Theresa Starkey is an assistant professor of Gender Studies and assistant director of the Isom Center at the University of Mississippi, and has helped start Pride celebrations. Elma Dieppa has done work over the years aiding small companies and assisting other Latino professionals. Kelly Hogan, Chris Mills, and Billy Fields are creatives continuing their creative work from their time in the punk scene; Hogan is currently performing with Mavis Staples and with The Decemberists. Clare Butler

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[129] Demer, interview.

spent many years as a speechwriter at Georgia State University and has made sure to keep her troublemaking spirit alive by seeing what silly things she could get GSU's president to agree to say. They are all examples of punk's ethics and ideals in action. Punks may grow up, but that doesn't always mean they leave their beliefs or their punk spirit behind.

Atlanta punk is still producing changemakers, several decades past its heyday in the city. Punk continues to connect youth to revolutionary politics and fosters a vision for the world that changes lives. Punk gives people a chance to develop a strong political consciousness and sense of self and provides them the tools to take action. It may have been declared dead in 1979, or 1985, or yet another year of any person's choosing, but it has never stayed down for long. New generations continue to pick up the mantle and utilize punk to envision and create the future they want to see. It didn't die, and I'd argue it didn't fail. It changed Atlanta, it changed the United States, and it changed places all over the world. In a completely revolutionary way? Maybe not. But it changed people and continues to serve as a site of resistance. And that is nothing to scoff at.

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