Rules of rebellion: slamdancing, moshing, and the American alternative scene

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Introduction

Since 1993, popular music magazines in the USA such as Rolling Stone have reported the outbreak of an alternative music ‘revolution’, as bands such as Green Day (who trace their musical roots to late-1970s punk groups such as the Sex Pistols) achieve large-scale popular success. In September 1994 the Boston Globe newspaper devoted significant coverage to the free Green Day concert in Boston that was cancelled midway through as the crowd of 70,000 (comprised mostly of teenagers) threatened to overwhelm the security guards. The news media have focused their attention on the dancing known as ‘slamdancing’, or ‘moshing’, which is associated with this newly popular music. Slamdancing and moshing are two different, albeit similar, styles of dance in which participants (mostly men) violently hurl their bodies at one another in a dance area called a ‘pit’. The media attention paid to this music and its associated violent audience-behaviour paint them as emerging threats to public safety. On 10 September 1994, the Globe reported that ‘there have been severe injuries in mosh pits, where fans act out the hostile lyrics of groups such as Green Day’.

This punk-derived music and dance have, in fact, existed as part of a subculture (often termed the ‘alternative’ subculture, or the ‘alternative scene’) since the supposed death of punk rock after its brief hurrah in the late 1970s. Numerous scholars have produced in-depth studies of the 1970s ‘first wave’ of punk rock (Hebdige 1979; Laing 1985). However, few serious examinations of the alternative subculture in the United States exist, besides Greil Marcus’s Ranters and Crowd Pleasers (1993). Marcus’s study mostly looks at musicians, though, without studying the people who listen and dance to the music. Other, smaller-scale studies (Baron 1989; Fox 1987; Lewis 1988; Willis 1993) examine the youths that make up the alternative subculture. Although dance has played an important role in many music-based subcultures, few subcultural scholars have taken dance itself as the primary object of analysis. In her essay, ‘The spatial organization of the indie music gig’ (1995), Wendy Fonarow briefly describes the dancing practices of members of the alternative scene in Britain. Her description, however, focuses more on the space occupied by dancers (the ‘pit’) than on the dances themselves. Fonarow treats the pit as a fixed site which always exists, rather than as an entity whose emergence depends on specific dynamics between crowd members. These dynamics, as well as the driving forces behind them, comprise much of what I aim to examine in this paper. Meanwhile, in ‘Entering the pit: slam-dancing and modernity’ (1997),
Bradford Scott Simon does look at slamdancing and moshing, but he treats them as interchangeable names for the same dance. In this paper, by contrast, I recognise slamdancing and moshing as two different, albeit similar, dance styles. My analytic focus is aimed towards explaining their differences.

In paraphrasing Dave Laing’s thesis in *One Chord Wonders* (1985), Frith and Horne write that, as the early punk movement died down, it divided into two camps: one camp, the ‘mainstream’ punks, ‘was content (like the Damned and the Clash) to run through their original songs of rage and riot in the same way for the same audience time after time’ (1987, p. 134); the other housed the ‘vanguard’ punks, who were the ‘self-consciously experimental groups’ (ibid.), such as Cabaret Voltaire. In this paper, I focus on the former group, because its descendants are most linked with practices such as slamdancing and moshing. When mentioning the ‘alternative scene’ throughout this paper, I refer to the descendants of the so-called ‘mainstream’ punks.

This paper is based upon participant observation research conducted during the summer of 1995, when I lived in San Francisco, California, a city with a thriving scene. In the San Francisco Bay Area, I attended numerous concerts in order to observe band and audience behaviour (especially slamdancing and moshing). In addition, I interviewed twelve individuals who either at one time or still considered themselves members of the scene. I spoke with these interviewees (six men and six women, ranging in age from 14 to 32) about their experiences in the scene. Most of my interviewees were from the Bay Area, but some were from other parts of the nation. These interviews allowed me to gain insight into the meaning of the scene to its members. Understanding the significance of the alternative scene requires more than simply analysing the music and dances associated with it. In his essay ‘Defending ski-jumpers: a critique of theories of youth subcultures’ (1981), Gary Clarke criticises the work of Dick Hebdige for its failure to ‘examine how subcultures make sense to the members themselves’ (ibid., p. 87). In *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979), Hebdige presents an insightful analysis of punk, interpreting the subculture’s symbols, but he does not talk to any actual punks. This lack of solid, first-hand evidence makes it easier to view Hebdige’s conclusions as mere creative (albeit well-argued) speculation, and I attempted to avoid this pitfall by conducting interviews with members of the scene.

Beyond being a study only of other people and their experiences, however, this is also a work which extends from my own experiences as a member of the scene. I have considered myself part of the scene since the late 1980s, when I was introduced to its music and culture in suburban Albany, New York, where I attended high school. The ideology and practices associated with the scene, particularly the dancing, have always fascinated me, and this study has given me the opportunity to examine their meaning to other people, as well as to myself. I would like to thank Gary Comstock, Rob Rosenthal, and particularly Mary Ann Clawson of the Wesleyan University Sociology Department for all the help they have given me on this project.

**Ideologies of rebellion: ends and means**

The members of the alternative scene are all interested in being rebellious. Within the scene, however, there exist various ideologies of rebellion. In *Club Cultures* (1996), her study of British clubbers and ravers, Sarah Thornton writes that ‘subcul-
tural ideologies are a means by which youth imagine their own and other social groups, assert their distinctive character and affirm that they are not anonymous members of an undifferentiated mass' (1996, p. 10). Although I do not employ the same Bourdieu-derived analytical framework as Thornton does throughout Club Cultures, her explanation of the role played by ideology is helpful when applied to the members of a scene which portrays itself as some sort of 'alternative'. The different ideologies which exist in the American alternative scene correspond to the main sub-groups of the scene, and they lay down 'rules of rebellion' for scene members to follow. These rules address the means and ends of rebellion. I argue that different views regarding the best means of rebellion are shaped by the tension between individual and communal rebellion. Members of the scene confront the paradox of being part of a scene (and, therefore, a community) which endorses individuality. In resolving this paradox, some members of the scene take on the view that rebellion consists mostly of communal action, while others view rebellion more in individual lifestyle choices. For members of the so-called 'political punk' sub-group of the scene, rebellion consists primarily of communal action in pursuit of macropolitical change. The members of the other two main sub-groups, the 'apolitical punk' and 'straight edge' (particularly the brand of straight edge which originated in New York City in the mid-1980s and continues to thrive today) groups, believe that rebellion stems from individual lifestyle choices. At this point, I should note that I have developed this three-category framework of sub-groups of the scene through my own research. Although the term 'straight edger' is recognised throughout the scene, the terms 'political punk' and 'apolitical punk' are not as widely used. I have employed these two terms because I believe that they best characterise the ideologies of these sub-groups by drawing attention to their contrasts.

This tension which exists between unity and individuality is not unique to the alternative scene. In Habits of the Heart (1985), Robert Bellah and his co-authors argue that this tension underlies dominant ideology in America. The members of the alternative scene, however, are all attempting to rebel against various aspects of American life. The different ends goals of this rebellion among the sub-groups of the alternative scene are the other main factors which differentiate their respective ideologies of rebellion. For all of the sub-groups of the scene the primary enemy is outside control. In rebelling against this outside control, the political punks aim for the creation of a society which is ordered, but in which that order is voluntarily maintained, with no need for externally imposed forces or rules. In contrast, the apolitical punks want to create their own environment separate from the mainstream in which they are free from all controlling forces and rules, even if that results in chaos. For these two punk-identified sub-groups, the mainstream is the main symbol of outside control, so when they rebel against outside control, they rebel primarily against the mainstream.

Although the New York-influenced straight edgers rebel against outside control, they want to replace it by taking control of others and making them adopt their Puritanical beliefs. These straight edgers do rebel against the mainstream, to the extent that it symbolises outside control, but their anti-mainstream sentiment is tempered, perhaps because they see the people in the mainstream as potential converts to their belief system. The only ones who are not potential converts to the straight edge system are the members of the punk-identified sub-groups, because they oppose all controlling forces and rules. Ironically, this places these straight edgers at odds with their fellow members of the alternative scene.
I will argue that slamdancing and moshing mirror the ideologies of rebellion which exist in the scene by emphasising individual and communal motion in ways which reflect a desire among dancers for the elimination of all rules (in slamming) or for ordered control (in moshing). First, though, I will discuss the ideologies of rebellion in the alternative scene.

**Political and apolitical punk ideologies of rebellion**

After the supposed ‘death’ of punk rock in the late 1970s, the scene moved back to where it originated: underground. Responsibility for issuing records was assumed by small, independently owned record labels, and scene members organised concerts (called ‘shows’ in the scene) at any available venue, from rented church spaces to American Legion Halls to people’s living rooms. Fan magazines (called ‘zines’ for short), often produced using only a copy machine and a stapler, became the main form of communication in the scene, as they had been during the first wave of punk. Most zines number only a few hundred copies per issue, but there are major zines, such as *Flipside* and *Maximum RockNRoll* (MRR), with circulation levels of over one thousand copies (O’Hara 1995, p. 47).

*MRR* was begun by one man, Tim Yohannon, in 1982. Based in the San Francisco Bay Area, each issue of the zine includes record reviews, interviews with bands, editorial columns, and letters from readers. The letters section in *MRR* has often included letters from politically minded scenesters exhorting punks to unite and help bring about some real political change in the United States (and the world). These letters exemplify the ideology of rebellion of ‘political punks’ by emphasising the primary importance of communal action while still recognising the importance of individual rebellion. In one letter typical of this sentiment, a punk asks:

> Are we so diverse within our blossoming subculture as to make unification impossible? What do we want by unity? To make everyone the same? This is not only ridiculously impossible, but also not something desirable. Unity for punk, for society in general, should only be the realization of acceptance of differences and getting along. We can do this. Many of us do. I think the diversity in the scene and the hope to keep it going is what’s kept it maintained. The world could learn something from this. (Randy Underdog, *MRR* 88, September 1990)

Political sentiment in punk tends to view the mainstream as the main enemy. This ‘mainstream’ is symbolised politically by the current social, economic, and political order in America and musically by the existing Top 40 order. With punk music as the soundtrack for their revolt, political punks aim to break down the existing social, economic, and political order. In the words of Craig O’Hara, author of *The Philosophy of Punk*, ‘When it comes to choosing a political ideology, Punks are primarily anarchists’ (1995, p. 56). However, for political punks, ‘anarchy does not simply mean no laws, it means no need for laws. Anarchy requires individuals to behave responsibly’ (ibid., p. 78). Political punks desire a society in which order is self-imposed, not externally imposed.

Calls for punk unity and political action are often limited to letters in zines, but some punks have attempted to take more concrete political action. In the early 1980s, a Washington, DC punk named Mark Anderson founded a group called Positive Force DC. The group ‘was very active in forming protests against the Gulf War and has raised thousands of dollars for causes such as food banks, the Washington Peace Center, Planned Parenthood, and AIDS centers among others’ (ibid., p. 68). Positive Force often works with punk bands in the DC area, organising
benefit shows to raise money for the causes it supports. Indeed, the DC area is a hotbed of political punk bands, including Fugazi, considered by many to be the archetypal political punk band. The efforts of Positive Force DC are examples of concrete attempts made by punks to take their commitment to punk unity and action beyond mere sloganeering. Anderson, founder of Positive Force DC, demonstrates how he maintains his commitment to intrascene unity, while still espousing individuality, when he writes:

I’ll tell you what I think punk isn’t – it isn’t a fashion, a certain style of dress, a passing ‘phase’ of knee-jerk rebellion against your parents, the latest ‘cool’ trend or even a particular form or style of music, really – it is an idea that guides and motivates your life. The Punk community that exists, exists to support and realize that idea through music, art, fanzines and other expressions of personal creativity. And what is this idea? Think for yourself, be yourself, don’t just take what society gives you, create your own rules, live your own life. (Mark Anderson, handout, 1985)

Whereas scene members like Anderson view punk rebellion as a commitment to political change largely through communal action, others are less interested in striving for these goals. As these letter-writers to MRR state:

If most MRR readers believe punk to be about doing constructive things they are mistaken. Punk was about tearing things down (ie, Religion, Government, Rock Star systems, fashion, school, rules). This groovie supportive alternative movement that has evolved from the northern California punk world is something else. When a tadpole becomes a frog you don’t still call it a tadpole. Punk is dead. (Mutt, MRR 125, October 1993)

For a ‘movement’ that stresses the somewhat obscure concept of individuality, punk rock seems to have been overrun with shitheads preaching unity, peace, and most importantly, vegetarianism. So let’s get it straight, kids, unity is fascism, peace is something used to sell tye-dyed shirts (and if you want peace here’s a piece of my boot), and vegetarianism is no fun . . . Take heart, there is a solution. Sell your records for drug money, buy a case of black label, and a big, juicy hamburger. (The Fouled Mouthed Elves, MRR 83, April 1990)

As the statement that punks should ‘buy a case of black label’ suggests, this side of punk is often associated with so-called ‘drunk punks’, whose self-proclaimed purpose is, basically, to get drunk. ‘Drunk punks’ are more commonly known as ‘gutter punks’ in the scene. I refer to them as ‘drunk punks’ throughout this paper, however, because ‘apolitical’ punks frequently used the term ‘drunk’ to describe themselves in interviews. As Jerry, a 21-year-old, self-described ‘dirty fucking squatter alcoholic punk’, put it:

Q: So why are you in the scene?
A: Because I’m a drunk. There’s nothing better out there. Everything else fucking sucks. At least with these, with my pals here, we can understand everybody sucks and we just want to get drunk.

Jerry expressed his opinion on political activism later in his interview:

Q: What about people who are like, ‘Let’s unite the punk scene so we can make some real political change in America’?
A: I don’t think anything’s going to make a real political change, so I’m, I’m totally against politics. I think it’s stupid. There’s nothing we can do to change anything. It’s just a fucking fact. We can think we’re making a big difference, and we’re really not.
Q: What do you think makes it impossible?
A: Big business, corporate America.

For these ‘apolitical’ punks, as for political punks, punk rebellion is about ridding their lives of outside control and imposed order. This imposed order is symbolised
primarily by the ‘mainstream’, which is in turn represented for apolitical punks like Jerry by corporate America. Whereas political punks call for a society with no need for rules, apolitical punks desire a society with just no rules. In Jerry’s words, ‘I really don’t give a fuck what anybody thinks about what I’m going to do, I’m just going to do it.’

Despite this stated desire for no rules, however, the drunk punk ideology of rebellion is itself a system of rules. It is misleading to refer to the drunk punks as ‘apolitical punks’, because they are not completely lacking any politics. Rather, their politics is a call for resisting the power of social institutions through militant individuality and rebellious lifestyle choices, such as constant drunkenness. Apolitical punk bands like Fear (with their album entitled More Beer) showcase this celebration of inebriation. Apolitical punks believe that breaking down the existing order can best be accomplished by individual behaviour which flies in the face of accepted social rules. Although these punks emphasise individual over communal rebellion, unity is important to them, albeit to a lesser degree than among political punks. This unity is more of a small-scale unity among themselves and their friends, especially among the drunk punks. Instead of calling for punks everywhere to unite and change the world, drunk punks value a sense of unity among their closest friends and travelling companions. As Janee, a 16-year-old, self-described ‘drunk’, stated:

Q: Do you feel camaraderie, say, with the people here, with the other drunks?
A: Yeah, they’re my family, I love them to death. I don’t really know very many people here [besides the other drunks], really at all. It’s like, my brothers and sisters.

Many drunk punks, including Janee, are without homes and money. It would be difficult for them to mount a movement for large-scale punk unity and political change, even if they wanted to, because they lack resources. However, unity among their circle of friends is vital because their friends are the only family that they have. Apolitical punks like the drunk punks are the ones most frequently occupying slamming pits, and, as I will later argue, this dancing reflects and reinforces the importance which they place upon individual expression and small-scale unity in their ideology of rebellion.

Hardcore and the New York City straight edge ideology of rebellion

A major branch of the punk scene, called ‘hardcore’, emerged around 1979. In their book *Hardcore California: A History of Punk and New Wave* (1983) authors Peter Belsito and Bob Davis describe the emergence of hardcore in California. Whereas previous punk scenes in California were concentrated in more urban areas, the hardcore scene was (and remains) more suburban. The California hardcore scene originally developed in the suburbs outside Los Angeles, such as Orange County, Hermosa Beach, and Huntington Beach. Hardcore music, as played by some of the early hardcore bands like Black Flag, was faster and more aggressive than other punk rock and, compared with previous punks, ‘the new breed of suburban Punk was physically tougher, angrier and more immediately REAL about their intention’ (Belsito and Davis 1983, p. 38). The more ‘real’ nature of hardcore energy stems from hardcore’s more stripped-down aesthetic, reflected in both the music and the fashion.

Hardcore style has always been more conservative than other punk styles.
Rejecting the mohawks and leather jackets of punk, it includes elements such as short hair (sometimes shaven completely bald), basic T-shirts, and jeans. From the beginning, hardcore scene members, compared with other punks, expressed their rebelliousness less through looking different from others and more through aggressive behaviour, which mirrored their more aggressive music. As punk music gained a more furious pace in hardcore, the dancing which accompanied it also became more violent. Previous punk dancing was similar to the original punk pogo dance, in which dancers jump up-and-down as if they were riding pogo sticks, with some body contact between dancers. With the emergence of hardcore, the dancing gained more arm-swinging on the part of participants and more forceful body contact, becoming true ‘slamdancing’ (Belsito and Davis 1983, p. 45). Although it originated in hardcore, slamdancing spread to the rest of the punk scene, and the original pogo declined in popularity.

In the 1980s, hardcore scenes sprouted around the US, and hardcore developed a split personality like the rest of the punk scene. On the one hand there were political hardcore bands, such as Bad Religion and Government Issue, with messages similar to those of other political punk bands. On the other hand, there were more apolitical hardcore bands, including Black Flag, with songs about getting drunk and watching television. These political and apolitical hardcore branches were, and still are, counterparts to political and apolitical punk. This is not surprising, since hardcore is an offshoot of punk. Most members of the hardcore scene consider themselves to be punks, albeit ‘hardcore punks’.

However, ideological distinctions between punk and hardcore emerge upon examination of the phenomenon of ‘straight edge’ hardcore. Straight edge, which was developed about 1981 by the Washington, DC band Minor Threat, is a personal philosophy which opposes alcohol and drug use, as well as promiscuous sexual activity. As the lyrics to the Minor Threat song, ‘Straight Edge’, state:

I’m a person just like you
But I’ve got better things to do
Than sit around and fuck my head
Hang out with the living dead
Snort white shit up my nose
Pass out at the shows
I don’t even think about speed
That’s something I just don’t need

I’ve got the straight edge
I’m a person just like you
But I’ve got better things to do
Than sit around and smoke dope
Cause I know I can cope
Laugh at the thought of eating ludes
Laugh at the thought of sniffing glue
Always gonna keep in touch
Never want to use a crutch

I’ve got the straight edge

In the documentary film Another State of Mind (1983) members of Minor Threat insist that straight edge is not intended to be ‘a set of rules’ for everyone to follow. Nevertheless, the sermon-like, ‘I-versus-You’ nature of Minor Threat’s lyrics
gives the band the air of self-righteous preachers. In the words of Ian MacKay, lead singer for the band, the aim of straight edge is ‘controlling things and not letting them control you’ (Flipside 1982). The way to ‘control things’, according to Minor Threat, is through increased self-control.

In its emphasis on voluntary, self-imposed order and control, the early straight edge ideology of rebellion is similar to that of the political punks. At the same time the emphasis of bands like Minor Threat on the individual’s pursuit of a clean, pure mind reflects the focus in straight edge ideology upon rebellion via individual choices, not communal action. In this emphasis on rebellion via individual behaviour, this straight edge ideology is, ironically, similar to drunk punk ideology. Like both political and apolitical ideologies of rebellion, early straight edge ideology of rebellion conceives of the primary ‘enemy’. In Another State of Mind, MacKay discusses how he came to formulate the concept of straight edge. All his punk friends around him were rebelling by getting drunk and doing drugs, but MacKay did not want to do that. He saw self-control as a better means to rebel against the mainstream. The film also contains footage of MacKay and Jeff Nelson, Minor Threat’s drummer, working at an ice cream shop in posh Georgetown. As they are shown scooping cones for customers, MacKay describes how ironic it is that they are honest, polite workers, yet they are punks, with their heads shaved, etc. In these comments, MacKay demonstrates that straight edge rebellion, as conceived by Minor Threat, focused on the individual gaining self-control in order to be better equipped to fight ‘the system’.

In the mid- to late-1980s, though, a new generation of straight edge hardcore emerged, centred around New York City bands such as Youth of Today, Bold, and Gorilla Biscuits. This new breed of straight edge was not confined to New York City, as it influenced straight edge hardcore throughout the country, especially New England. These straight edgers began to see maintaining self-control less as a means to aid fighting the mainstream and more as an end in itself. As the maintenance of control in itself became so central to them, they began to advocate not just self-control, but also control over others. Early straight edgers like Minor Threat were, like the political and apolitical punks, rebelling so that individuals could live unencumbered by imposed rules; in early straight edge ideology, the rules were voluntarily adopted by straight edgers. In contrast, the second-generation straight edgers were rebelling with the ultimate goal of becoming agents of control with the power to impose rules on others. In advocating their right to impose rules and control on others, though, the ideology of rebellion of these straight edgers was at odds with that of all punks, both political and apolitical. As a result, some of the New York-influenced straight edgers no longer considered themselves punks at all.

The intense emphasis on control in this second generation straight edge ideology of rebellion was reflected in their music. The songs of these New York straight edge bands differed from earlier straight edge music (and from other hardcore) in that they included slower, more churning sections which displayed the distinct influence of heavy metal. In his analysis of heavy metal music and subculture, Robert Walser discusses how heavy metal bands communicate the importance of control ‘in their free appropriation of symbols of power, and in their material enactments of control, of hanging on in the face of frightening complexity’ (1993, p. 159). Similarly, Deena Weinstein argues that ‘heavy metal’s insistence on bringing chaos into awareness is a complex affirmation of power, of the power of the forces of disorder, of the power to confront those forces in the imagination, and of the power
to transcend those forces in art’ (1991, p. 38). Metal musicians take control over the forces of chaos and disorder in their technically demanding performances. In heavy metal, the New York straight edge bands recognised a musical vocabulary which stressed the importance of control, and they adopted aspects of it in their own music. At the same time, fans of this new straight edge music began to emphasise the importance of control in their dancing, and moshing emerged.

**Slamdancing and moshing: what are they?**

Slamdancing is a style of dance which originated in the United States in the punk rock subculture of the late 1970s and early 1980s. It is a modification of the early punk ‘pogo’ dance. Slamdancing brought increased body contact to the original pogo. Much like slamdancing was a modification of the pogo, moshing emerged in the mid-1980s as a variation on slamdancing. Although slamdancing and moshing are so similar that many people use the two terms interchangeably, there are specific distinctions between the two dance styles to be pointed out, and I distinguish between them in my analysis throughout this study. In my interviews, though, I used the terms interchangeably, largely because many in the scene do so – some do not call them by either name, referring to their actions as ‘just dancing’. I relied upon personal observation of interviewees’ dancing and their descriptions to determine which style of dance they favoured, according to the criteria I am employing. This is why, in the interview excerpts throughout this study, I will sometimes refer to the dancing as ‘moshing’ when talking with a slamdancer.

Although people occasionally slamdance and mosh to recorded music, it is far more common for it to be done at live music shows. Both are aggressive dances which are performed mostly by males in a roughly circular area called the ‘pit’. Naming this area the ‘pit’ designates it as the site of some type of battle. Being part of the scene is about being rebellious, and the term ‘pit’ suggests that this is a main site of rebellion. The pit is not an explicitly marked off area, but pits usually form in front of the stage where a band is playing. Occasionally (usually at shows in larger venues), more than one pit will break out in various parts of the crowd. Although ‘the pit’ refers to an area, a pit only exists if people are dancing in it. If people are not dancing, there is no pit, and people at shows do not dance to every band that plays. It is impossible to predict when and if a pit will form for a band, although for bands which are very popular in the scene, pits tend to form with the first note of each song. The formation of a pit is generally a reflection of the crowd’s affection for a band, so if a crowd does not like a band, a pit will not form. Otherwise, pits tend to ‘break out’ when the energy of the band’s performance causes the energy of one person or a few people in the crowd to build to a point at which they move to the front-and-centre pit area (if they were not already standing there) and begin agitating like excited atoms. If other people in the crowd are not as excited as these individuals, then no one joins them, and the ‘proto-pit’ usually dies. If the rest of the crowd is excited, though, then people join the initial dancers, and the pit forms, clearing a space in the pit area as non-dancers in the crowd shrink away from the dancers. Fully fledged pits seldom form at shows with few people in attendance. At less crowded shows a pit will sometimes form with an initial burst of energy, but that energy will die out, leaving a relatively large empty area in front of the stage into which no one moves.

The pit area does not touch the stage because that would raise the risk of
dancers colliding with it. There is usually a collection of people, about three or four bodies deep, between the front boundary of the pit and the edge of the stage. These ‘buffer’ individuals face the stage, willing to endure constant pummelling from behind by dancers in exchange for a close-up, front-and-centre view of the band. The rest of the pit boundary is marked by a ring of people (again, usually men) who face into the centre of the pit and try to make sure that dancers in the pit neither run into people outside the pit nor hit non-dancers with their swinging arms. If a dancer makes bodily contact with one of these ‘pit guards’, the guard will usually push the dancer back into the pit to continue dancing. The effectiveness of these guards is limited, though. When a dancer runs into a pit guard on the edge of the pit, it is often with enough force to cause the guard to fall back into the crowd somewhat, thus interfering with the people who want to watch the band or dance by themselves.

Inside the pit, there are certain moves associated with moshing and with slamdancing. Although many of the moves are similar in the two styles, there are unique characteristics of each, too. Slamdancing involves fast movement. Often, this movement takes the form of everyone in the pit running counter-clockwise, occasionally slamming into each other. The dance involves some arm-swinging, but it is usually just one arm (most often the right one) in motion. When dancers are running counter-clockwise, the swinging of the right arm serves a double function. On the one hand, it allows dancers to slam into people and then quickly push them away, and on the other, it helps dancers gain momentum while running in a counter-clockwise circle. Sometimes, however, slamdancers do not run in a circle, but rather move in a more ‘run-and-collide’ fashion, simply throwing themselves into the part of the pit where the most people are gathered, slamming into each other. Most slamdancers are not actually trying to hurt each other. Traditionally, when a dancer falls to the floor, the dancers in the near vicinity stop and pick up the fallen dancer.

Whereas slamdancing is more frenetic in its movement, the body movements (such as arm swinging) involved in moshing are slower and more exaggerated. Moshers keep their bodies more bent over and compacted, and they swing either both arms or just one (usually the right) arm around across the body in a move that one of my interviewees called ‘the death swing’. This swinging of the arm(s) in moshing is far more theatrical and exaggerated than in slamdancing. If a moshers swings only one arm, the non-swinging arm is kept ready to provide some guard against collisions with other moshers. The dancers often stand in a stationary position while performing these moves, but sometimes they run into other people inside and on the edge of the pit. To do so, dancers generally just move to where there are other dancers clustered and colliding with each other and join in the collision. This run-and-collide style of moshing can be distinguished from the style of slamdancing which also involves running and colliding by the more exaggerated body movements in moshing. Moshers do not move in counter-clockwise group motion. In recent years, new moves, such as jumping karate kicks, have been introduced into the repertoire of moshing. The picking up of fallen dancers is a tradition that was sometimes ignored by moshers when the dance first emerged, but it is followed more often nowadays.

Two phenomena which sometimes can be seen at shows when pits form are ‘stagediving’ and ‘crowdsurfing’. Stagediving is the name given to climbing up on the edge of the stage and jumping onto the (hopefully) waiting arms of fellow
audience members. When (and if) the crowd catches the stagediver, the crowd passes them over their heads for as long as people are willing and able to do so; this is crowdsurfing. Although it is possible for someone to crowdsurf without stagediving by being hoisted atop the crowd, stagediving and crowdsurfing are often linked. Stagediving and/or crowdsurfing have been banned at some venues around the country because they are more dangerous than slamdancing and moshing. In this study, I concentrate my attention more on slamdancing and moshing than on stagediving and crowdsurfing.

Slamdancing and the apolitical punk ideology of rebellion

The moves involved in slamdancing reflect the balancing of individuality and unity which punks undertake in formulating their ideologies of rebellion. On the one hand, the fundamental elements of the dance, including the violent collisions with other dancers and the arm-swinging, are assertions of individual presence and autonomy in the pit. On the other hand, there are elements to slamdancing which create and reinforce unity in the pit, often in the form of a concern for the well-being of other dancers. These elements include the counter-clockwise group motion of dancers and the traditional picking up of fallen dancers. Simon, too, recognises the tension between individual and communal expression which exists in the dance (1997, p. 166). Slamdancing also mirrors punk ideologies in the symbolic breakdown of order which seems to occur in the pit. The fast, counter-clockwise motion of dancers turns the pit into a swirl of seemingly chaotic motion. Although slamdancers themselves do follow customs which prevent the pit from degenerating into actual chaos, the pit, when viewed from the outside, looks like a lawless realm. The enemy for punks is the mainstream, and slamdancing allows punks to present the threat of chaos while still maintaining unity among themselves within the pit.

Most explanations of the motivations behind slamdancing focus on the energy of the dancing. When I asked Dave why he slamdances, he first played a song for me on a cassette player that he carried with him. Then he answered my question:

It’s about the pump of the music. Did you hear that tempo? It’s a certain tempo that really gets me rolling, and metal’s like way too fast and stuff. There’s just a certain tempo that makes me want to dance, you know, and that’s the whole thing. Isn’t disco about dancing? Isn’t everything about dancing?

For Dave, there is a definite element of enjoyment in the energetic display of slamdancing. Along similar lines, other slamdancers say that they do it because of the adrenaline rush which the music and dancing give them, as this passage from my interview with Jerry demonstrates:

Q: Why do you mosh?
A: Adrenaline.
Q: Adrenaline? Does that pretty much say how you feel while you’re moshing?
A: Yeah.

Another punk, Nathan, expressed the same sentiment in his interview:

Q: Do you dance at shows?
A: It depends on what you mean by dancing.
Q: Well, do you slamdance or mosh?
A: Yeah.
Q: OK. What do you like about it? I don’t want to say why do you do it, but I mean that’s kind of what I’m getting at. Like what do you feel?
A: It’s basically just adrenaline.

Other slamdancers also do it for the energy involved in the dancing, but they see this energised state as an opportunity to vent aggression. Joe expressed this in his interview:

Q: Do you dance at shows, like slamdance or mosh?
A: Yeah.
Q: See I want to ask people why they mosh, like what do you feel when you mosh?
A: Taking out aggressions.
Q: Aggressions against?
A: Everything.
Q: Society?
A: Yeah, so that way we don’t have to be totally brutal when we’re running on the streets at night.

Beyond their shared emphasis on the energy involved in the dancing, all the above explanations for slamdancing are similar in that they stress the role of the dancing as an individual display. For these punks (Dave, Jerry, and Joe are all drunk punks), punk rebellion is primarily about individual expression, and slamdancing reflects this rebellion. In portraying the dancing as such an intensely individualised activity, all the scene members cited above give the impression that slamdancing is just an adrenalised dance with no rules at all, in which impulsive urges drive dancers to act out spontaneously in any way they desire. This idea of the lawless individual in the pit reflects the vision of rule-breaking individuality which is such a large part of being a punk, especially a drunk punk. Indeed, all five of the drunk punks interviewed for this study, as well as the one apolitical hardcore punk, still participated in slamdancing.1

In describing their reasons for slamdancing, Jerry, Nathan, and Joe all resort to formulaic clichés to stress the role of the dance as individual expression. In his research, Simon recognises a similar pattern. Of the approximately fifty people he surveyed, ‘[s]ixteen respondents used the words aggression or release in their free response to the statement “Please describe why you slam or mosh and how you feel afterwards”. The responses were surprisingly predictable’ (Simon 1997, p. 165). This demonstrates the way in which the alternative scene provides a framework through which members understand their own rebellion. Drunk punks like Jerry and Joe may have been drawn to the scene for its supposed support of unbridled individuality, but once they become a part of the scene, they adopted one of the scene’s standard methods for displaying this individuality. Not only are their actions structured by the scene, but also their interpretation of these actions is framed by drunk punk ideology.

Moreover, just as drunk punks’ explanations of their dancing are structured by this ideology of rebellion, their actions while slamdancing are structured by ‘rules’ of the pit. The traditional rules of the pit include picking up fallen dancers, moving together in a circular motion in the pit, and bodily motions such as swinging arms and high-stepping legs. These conventions, especially the picking up of fallen dancers and the circular pit motion, are also the aspects of the dancing which reinforce unity in the pit by promoting ritualised group behaviour and a concern for the well-being of other dancers. Even Jerry, who claims to slamdance just as an adrenaline release (suggesting an exclusive concern with individual expression), is
interested in preserving and protecting the well-being of others in the pit, as this passage indicates:

Q: Have you ever gotten into a fight or argument related to moshing?
A: Oh yeah, just about every show.
Q: Really? Do you have a favourite story or a good story?
A: Not really. It’s not really anything I can think about. It’s just like a quick thing, you just want to punch some guy or something.
Q: Why? Because they do something to you?
A: Yeah, just annoy you, just fucking – I don’t know, being a dumb jackass, and you’re sick of it.
Q: What can somebody do to be a dumb jackass?
A: This one guy, a fucking huge guy, probably pushing like 300 fucking pounds, he’s fucking huge, and he’s just like running and just like hitting people, picking them up and throwing them and shit.

Drunk punk ideology defines rebellion as individual expression. Jerry, as a drunk punk, points to this expression as the main reason behind his slamdancing. At the same time, drunk punk ideology also acknowledges the importance of a certain degree of intrascene unity. Reflecting this, Jerry recognises that some degree of community is necessary for the pit to be enjoyable. Simon addresses the issue of dancing-related violence such as that described by Jerry when he asserts that ‘[v]iolence itself was not a reason for participating in slam-dancing but a negative result of those who are ignorant of “the rules”’ (1997, p. 164). In her interview, Christy, an ex-political punk and ex-slamdancer who is no longer closely tied to the punk scene, cited the feeling of community in the pit as part of the reason why she slamdanced:

Q: Do you dance in the pit or did you ever at any point?
A: When I was in high school and in college I used to love it. I used to always do it, but I haven’t in years.
Q: Do you know why you stopped? Do you know why you did it and why you stopped?
A: I did it because, well, I mean, it was really fun. It was a big – in Florida it was like a circle pit, just like the classic scenario. It was like a total adrenaline rush, it was like this actualisation of, ‘We’re all in this together’. And you dive in there and you fall down and people pick you up. It’s just like a total physical, you know, you’re so amped up and you’re fifteen and you’re full of like all this shit, and you just go out there and just throw yourself around. It was great.

For Christy, slamdancing provides, on one hand, an adrenaline outlet. Her description indicates that both the music and the dancing produce bursts of adrenaline which feed off each other. The music causes an ‘adrenaline rush’, which causes people to start dancing. Then the dancing itself produces another rush, and the energy perpetuates itself. On the other hand, for Christy the dancing also serves to create feelings of unity with other punks. Indeed, for Christy the pleasure of the dancing depends upon the presence of others in the pit. As a political punk, Christy views communal action as an important part of rebellion, and this community is reflected in her interpretation of slamdancing. This only further emphasises how the scene structures the actions and interpretations of its members. Christy and Jerry each interpret slamdancing in slightly different ways, with Christy placing more emphasis upon the communal aspect of the dancing than Jerry. This difference stems from the ideological differences between the political and apolitical punk sub-groups in the importance they place on individual versus communal rebellion.

While slamdancing can reinforce a sense of community among dancers, it can
also strengthen the sense of community between band and audience. In her interview, Janee stated that she slamdances to communicate her appreciation to a band:

Q: Why do you think you slamdance? What does it do?
A: It’s an appreciation of the music. It’s like how some people would applaud to good music. That’s an appreciation of the type of music you like, and that’s the best way you can do to show your appreciation of it, I guess.

Although Christy and Janee indicate that the promotion of various types of unity is a motivation for slamdancing, more slamdancers cite the dance’s individualistic elements as their reasons for participating. In promoting individual motion focused on the breakdown of order and control, slamdancing mirrors the ideology of rebellion of apolitical punks, who make up most pits. Many political punks (including four of the five with whom I spoke) actually renounce slamdancing, in part because of their greater emphasis on communal rebellion.

**Moshing and the New York City straight edge ideology of rebellion**

In contrast to slamdancing, moshing lacks the elements, such as circular pit motion, which promote unity in the pit. The development of moshing in New York City in the 1980s even saw the partial breakdown of the convention of picking up fallen dancers, as pit violence increased. New York City straight edge shows became legendary for their brutality. One writer to *MRR* noted:

This is a letter to let people know about what has been happening in N.Y. in the past few months. Please print this — it is very important that word of this gets out. Blood is being shed, and lives are being taken, by crews of self-glorified skinheads and bad-ass little boys. One night they fucked so badly with this one guy at a Prong/Warzone show, that he later died while in the ambulance to the hospital. (Anonymous, *MRR* 85, June 1990)

Compared with slamming, the fundamental body movements of moshing, such as the more violent swinging of the arms, the more violent body contact, and the lack of group motion place even greater emphasis on individual territoriality over (comm)unity. Whereas the bodily motion of swinging arms and high-stepping legs has remained the traditional motion of slamdancing since it first emerged, moshing has seen the introduction of new moves such as jumping karate kicks. Tim, an avid mosh, writes:

If you pay attention, you’ll notice that some people actually dance and have moves . . . with punches and jumpkicks added in. Running around in a circle and bumping into other people holds no appeal for me because dancing with some sort of style and flow is very important to me, as it is for a lot of other people at the shows. (Personal correspondence, August 1995)

This desire to experiment with new moves on the part of moshers demonstrates their concern with individual expression in the pit, and this reflects the emphasis on individual lifestyle concerns over scene-wide unity which exists in the branch of the scene that spawned moshing. In my research, I encountered no explanation for the motivation behind moshing which emphasized the feeling of unity that it gives participants. Rather, moshers’ explanations for their dancing tend to focus more on the venting of individual aggression. In her interview, Rebecca stated that she moshes largely to vent frustration and anger:

A: I’m actually a very violent person, and that’s a good way for me to take it out because I don’t go around picking fights or anything like that. I’ve never really been in a fight, but I have a lot of violence. That’s something that’s very interesting. I didn’t realize it in high
school, because everyone thought I was this happy-go-lucky person, or whatever. I was like, 'If you knew the thoughts that went through my head'. And they were just like, 'Yeah yeah whatever'. And I’m just like, 'No, if you knew'. (laughs) But I didn’t realize until college just how much anger I have had in me.

Q: Like general anger?
A: Yeah, I thought I wasn’t really rebelling against anything, but I realised I was. A lot of it had to do with my stepmother at the time, my now ex-stepmother – yeah! So I think a lot of it had to do with her, and I knew most of it had to with mainstream society at my high school and in the area.

Q: Suburbia?
A: The suburban, the closed-mindedness.

Rebecca was the only mosher I interviewed in person for this study, in part because metal-influenced, straight edge hardcore is not common in the Bay Area. However, based on my own experiences in the mosh-intensive environment of Albany, New York, as well as correspondence with my high school friends (including Tim, who is quoted above), I believe I gained an accurate sense of the motivations behind moshing. Rebecca and I are both from Albany, and we went to the same shows in high school. She was always one of the first people in the pit, easily noticed because she was one of the more theatrical, aggressive mosherers. Although she was unsure of the source of her aggression in high school, this aggression was definitely present, and the moshpit provided the site to vent it. In letters to MRR, other people on the scene cite the outlet for aggression which moshing gives them (Anonymous, MRR 118, March 1993). Considering that hardcore music is more aggressive than other alternative music, it is not so surprising that mosherers are more into venting their aggression than anything else.

From my own experiences as a mosher, I can state that I moshed as a release of personal frustration and tension. When I first became a part of the alternative scene, I lived in suburban Albany, where moshing predominated, and the dancing served as an outlet for my tension and frustration. While I was in the pit, I used to close my eyes and swing my arms, seeking contact with others only so that I could push them away. While I was pushing other dancers away from me, I envisioned myself rising alone above arms which were linked to faceless beings. These beings kept me from reaching a transcendent state in everyday life, but in the pit I rose above them. The other mosherers in the pit symbolised these beings, and keeping my balance and control in the pit symbolised my triumph over them. For me, moshing was an intensely individual activity, in which I was able to release the frustration and aggression which I felt towards the forces that somehow kept me down. In the pit, I could triumph over them.

Despite all these portrayals of moshing as an activity centred on the individual, moshing, like slamdancing, could not take place if not for the formation of a moshpit. As I described earlier, the formation of a pit is a communal activity, and as such it requires some sense of unity with other dancers. If one person starts dancing but no one joins, then chances are that the ‘proto-pit’ will die out. Considering that pit formation requires a united, communal effort, the fact that few mosherers point to the dancing’s potential to reinforce and create community as a reason why they do it clarifies the way in which the ideology of the New York straight edge hardcore scene and its contemporary descendents emphasises individual concerns in its ideology of rebellion. However, straight edgers do value communal rebellion, albeit to a lesser degree than they do individual rebellion. New York straight edge bands like Bold called for straight edge unity in their songs, and these calls are
echoed by contemporary bands who are influenced by bands like Bold. With this in mind, why did the New York straight edgers phase out elements of slamdancing which promote pit unity, such as circular pit motion and (to some degree) picking up fallen dancers, in developing moshing? Why did they not just slamdance like the drunk punks, who also emphasise individual over communal rebellion?

The answer to these questions resides in the different goals of rebellion of New York-influenced straight edgers and drunk punks. Drunk punks see rebellion as individuals showing themselves to be different from the mainstream by breaking rules and breaking down control. For straight edgers, meanwhile, rebellion is an individual battle to gain control and strength. Originally, this ‘control’ in straight edge was primarily self-control, but since the emergence of New York City straight edge (and moshing) in the 1980s, this has also meant control over others. The slowed-down dance of moshing, like the slowed-down, heavy metal-influenced music of these straight edge bands, reflects their increased focus on gaining control. The straight edgers who developed moshing were less interested in preserving the traditions of circular pit motion and picking up fallen dancers not because they opposed the unity for which they stood, but because these are also the elements of slamdancing which support disorder, a lack of control, and/or weakness— all qualities which the New York City straight edge ideology of rebellion denounces. Circular pit motion, although it may promote unity within the pit, also increases the level of chaos by moving dancers around the pit in frenzied motion. New York straight edgers were rebelling against the lack of control and order, so they developed moshing as a slower, more stationary dance. Picking up fallen dancers would seem to increase order in the pit, but it also gives support to dancers who are too weak to fend for themselves in the pit. In developing moshing, the New York straight edgers could have maintained the elements of slamdancing which promote pit unity, but doing so would have come at the expense of demonstrating power and control. Forced to choose between strength and unity, they chose strength, even though that meant sacrificing pit unity. This reflects the primacy of individual control in their ideology of rebellion.

For these straight edgers, the moshpit is a sort of proving ground in which those who are too weak must be forcibly eliminated. Straight edge has always been about being strong enough to stay in control, and this emphasis on strength and control only increased with the New York City bands and those that followed in their footsteps. Indeed, Victory Records, arguably the pre-eminent record label currently issuing straight edge records, recently released a compilation album of various bands on the label entitled Only the Strong . . . . In fighting for control, these straight edgers are also rebelling against punk, which positions itself against outside control. The New York City straight edgers, who developed moshing, often did not consider themselves to be punks at all. So, they took slamming, which was part of a subculture with which they did not identify, and attempted to impose control and order on it through moshing. The exaggerated, violent gestures of moshing can be seen as attempts to beat some order into the pit, to purge the pit of its chaotic, anarchic (i.e., punk) elements. Ironically, with so many dancers in the pit attempting to use aggression to impose some sort of order, moshing ends up more chaotic and violent than slamming. While there are drunk punk slamdancers who, like moshers, dance to release aggression, their dancing is not as violent as moshing because the primary object of aggression for drunk punks is the mainstream, an entity not identified with the pit. However, for straight edge moshers, the object of aggression is
the disorder and chaos symbolised in part by the pit itself, and this disorder must be purged.

Conclusions

In this study I have examined the three main sub-groups of the alternative scene: the political punks, the apolitical/drunk punks, and the straight edgers. Each sub-group subscribes to its own distinctive ideology, or set of rules, of rebellion, which addresses the best means and ends of rebellion. These ideologies of rebellion also influence the attitudes towards slam dancing and moshing adopted by members of the scene’s sub-groups. Political punks advocate communal rebellion over more individualistic action, and their goal is the elimination of imposed rules in favour of a self-imposed order. These punks often reject slam dancing and moshing because aspects of these dances clash with both the means and the ends of political punk rebellion. On the one hand, the bodily motions involved in slam dancing and moshing favour individualised, rather than group-oriented, action, so violating the political punk emphasis on communal action. On the other hand, the symbolic breakdown of order in the pit is not the self-imposed order desired by political punks. Slam dancing and moshing serve as a physical rejection of the values of political punks, so these scene members denounce the dances in return.

Apolitical punks, on the other hand, find in slam dancing a reflection of their ideology of rebellion. The individualistic bodily display in the pit mirrors the apolitical punk emphasis on rebellion through individual, instead of communal, action. The seemingly chaotic atmosphere in the pit, moreover, is a small-scale realisation of the apolitical punk goal of a society without rules. The straight edgers who developed moshing as an outgrowth of slam dancing also value personal over group rebellion. However, these scene members do not aim to eliminate all rules. Rather, they rebel in order to impose their rules on others. This desire for control and strength brought about moshing, a dance with greater emphasis than slamming on individual dancers controlling the pit. Slam dancing and moshing reflect the ideologies of rebellion which exist in the American alternative scene, and, through their participation in (and rejection of) these dances, members of the scene pledge allegiance to the rules which govern their rebellion.

Endnote

1. Among the twelve individuals I interviewed for this study, there were five apolitical drunk punks (four male, one female) and one male apolitical hardcore punk, all six of whom slamdanced. I also spoke with five people (four female, one male) who had associated themselves with the political punk scene. Only one of these five still slamdanced, and three of them did not consider themselves part of the alternative scene any longer. The twelfth interviewee, a woman, was the only moshed interviewer directly for the study, which is otherwise based on personal experience and correspondence.

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