

TOO COUNTRY FOR ROCK & TOO ROCK FOR COUNTRY: COWPUNK AS  
REGIONAL IDENTITY, MUTED MEMORY, AND THE AESTHETIC ETHOS OF  
ALTERNATIVE PERFORMANCE

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A Dissertation Submitted In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Public History

Middle Tennessee State University  
Summer 2022

Submitted To:  
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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to thank my dissertation committee for their continued support, faith, and tutelage over the past four years. The firm support of Dr. Carroll Van West over the course of my studies has shaped my professional vision and self-image as a public historian. Through his seminars, independent studies, and many, many long conversations, he remains a constant source of motivation. I am forever grateful for his undertaking of this project as chair and his genuine care in my professional development. Many thanks are due to Dr. John Dougan, who has steered me in so many fascinating musical directions. His knowledge of the musical past and his broad understanding of interdisciplinary scholarship is a guiding light for historians of my subfield. I am forever grateful that I stumbled into his graduate seminar on recording and cultural context. I am also indebted to the knowledge and kindness of Dr. Brenden Martin and Dr. Ashley Riley-Sousa. They are shining examples of what it means to show up for students. Their enthusiasm for music and popular culture invigorated my early search for a topic worthy of a dissertation.

I would also like to thank the many centers, cultural institutions, and mentors outside of my committee that made this dissertation possible. Thanks to the Center for Historic Preservation, the Center for Popular Music, the Albert Gore Research Center, and to my work family at the Grand Ole Opry House. I would also like to thank my career-long mentors who began work with me many years ago at Texas State University, and who continue to offer their advice, generosity, and who generally still put up with my many e-mails. Dr. Jason Mellard, Dr. Lynn Denton, and Dr. Gary Hartman are a genius

collective of public and cultural historians whose mentorship still guides my professional growth every step of the way.

I owe a debt of gratitude to my friends. They may not have known exactly what I was getting myself into, but they cheered me on at every obstacle and milestone. To my grandparents, Wesley & Barbara, I give thanks for everything. This path was never easy, but I am truly blessed to have two individuals with such nurturing and blind faith in my life's direction. A huge thanks is also due to my mother, Roxanne, who helped me move across the country to embark on this journey. Her support is unwavering and unconditional.

Finally, a thousand thanks are due to my husband, Joshua. You are the reason I finished this race. Through every late night, every paper written or graded, every rabbit hole I explored, and every moment of doubt, you were there with such grace and calm. You believed in me the moments that mattered most. For that and so many other moments, I am forever grateful.

*For Wesley:  
Thank you for the music.*

**ABSTRACT****TOO COUNTRY FOR ROCK & TOO ROCK FOR COUNTRY: COWPUNK AS REGIONAL IDENTITY, MUTED MEMORY, AND THE AESTHETIC ETHOS OF ALTERNATIVE PERFORMANCE**

This dissertation investigates the recording and performance ethos of alternative subsets of regional punk rock and its unique intersection with country music. This analysis will dissect the ways in which regional music scenes embody aesthetics and iconography representative of southern, western, or country identity. In doing so, the study addresses questions directly related to the state of cowpunk as a disintegrating thread of cultural memory and its muted legacy. I also interrogate the complex relationships that exist between performers, audiences, and the music business, as well as examining cultural geography, material culture, and the formation of youth subcultures in the built environment.

This analysis brings regional subsets of popular music to the forefront of contemporary public history and music studies, arguing their importance as an integrated and highly interdisciplinary angle by which to deconstruct musical subculture. While cowpunk is just one example of this methodological thread, it is an applicable framework that both highlights and decodes the ways in which the public consume popular music and repackaged subculture according to regional identity.

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## CHAPTER I: “COW-WHAT?”: THE HISTORIOGRAPHICAL ROOTS OF COWPUNK

On Friday, June 28<sup>th</sup>, 1985, Jason Ringenberg and his Nashville-based band, Jason & the Scorchers, took the stage at Roskilde Festival in Denmark. Ringenberg wore a leopard print cowboy hat and a bright yellow suit with sequin flames running up the sleeves. His attire resembled the flashiness of the iconic “Nudie” suits that Nashville country stars frequently wore such as Porter Wagoner and Little Jimmy Dickens, however, his stage presence resembled the mischievously sinister stage persona of the Sex Pistols coupled with the energy of Iggy Pop. On the same lineup that weekend were The Cure, The Clash, and the Ramones.

By the 1990s, this style lovingly dubbed cowpunk had withered away in the shadow of grunge, but for a brief moment it symbolized a generational and cross-pollinated approach to regional rock in the age of MTV. Roskilde Festival is still one of the largest European music gatherings in the world and, in 1985, the Scorchers’ adrenaline-pumping cowpunk theatrics were on full display for an international audience. The Scorchers were not the only band to mix the traditional sounds of country music with punk rock, but they certainly personified the hybrid to the highest degree. Cowpunk as a genre really has no monolithic sound, but its universal trait is a melding of country and punk in some form or fashion. This could manifest in the way of performative style, recording ethos, or could even be as subtle as aesthetic choices or historical influence.

At its core, cowpunk was and is the sonic blend of punk and country music. At the height of its popularity in the mid-1980s, this eclectic style of music boasted regional hotspots in Tennessee, Texas, Arizona, Canada, and the United Kingdom, however, no

one locality served as the geographical heart of the cowpunk style. It existed on the periphery of mainstream country music but also illustrated one element of the punk mosaic of diverse performance mannerisms. Cowpunk fused “punk energy and country soul” to bring a newer attitude and younger approach to alternative musical forms.<sup>1</sup>

Chuck Eddy of *Spin Magazine* explains the ways in which cowpunk artists “took hick licks in the opposite direction” of Nashville’s hit-making machine by “revving ‘em up, not cooling ‘em down.”<sup>2</sup> This convergent style has answered to many names including psychobilly, modern prairie, alternative hillbilly, punk blues, and western beat, but for the purposes of this study, cowpunk works best to linguistically represent both regional identity assertion alongside an overt definition of genre blending.



Figure 1: Cowpunks Rank & File, circa early 1980s, Photo courtesy of the Austin Chronicle.

<sup>1</sup> Rob Patterson, “Cowpunk Deluxe,” *Houston Press*, July 18, 2002, Accessed September 2019, <https://www.houstonpress.com/content/printView/6558475>, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Chuck Eddy, “After Thrashy Nihilism Flamed Out, Cowpunk Giddy-Upped From the Ashes,” *Spin Magazine*, August 1, 2010.

The overall structure of this research is to place the historical narrative of cowpunk within the larger framework of public history methodology. Specifically, this analysis investigates cowpunk from the perspective of theoretical foundations, material culture, cultural memory, regional identity and finally, examines the tangible and intangible legacy of the cowpunk style. My previous research examined the regional and cultural legacy of 1960s and 1970s forms of alternative country subcultures in the central Texas area. This case study also used regional identity, memory, and aesthetic analysis to argue the ways in which underground subcultures and style temporarily serve as regional forms of cultural identity and markers of countercultural legacy. This research explores the early 1980s intersection of punk rock and alternative subsets of American roots music, often referred to as cowpunk. This study casts a wider net of coverage due to the fact that this subcultural phenomenon defied regional strictures, however, the styles and aesthetic markers of cowpunk are markedly steeped in the tradition of the Southern, Southwestern, and Western motifs natural to American roots music.

However, cowpunk as a regional case study turns this previous framework on its head. Instead of arguing how cowpunk and its participants' assertion of regional identity came to clearly define contemporary forms of cultural heritage, I argue that cowpunk was a subcultural moment whose cultural legacy fell victim to a disintegrating cultural memory due to its existence on the periphery of the musical mainstream. Not only will this approach strengthen an existing investigative public history framework that places regional music narratives alongside the broader memory of contemporary and retrospective consumption of popular music, but it will shed light on those stories that are pushed away from or out of the popular music canon.

It is also important to note that this research is not designed to comprehensively address each and every artist or group relevant to this musical style. While many of the musicians are mentioned throughout this work, the vast range of genre labels associated with the cowpunk style presents issues for those in search of such an exhaustive list. Alternatively, this narrative focuses on collective consumption and disintegrating popular memory associated with regional subsets of punk rock and country music.

The following chapters are studies of cowpunk's theoretical foundations, material culture, memory and regional iconography, and the structural legacy of the underground. The whole of this study is meant to construct a framework through which to study regionalized styles of popular music within the twentieth century and, specifically, highlights the importance of cowpunk as a genre hybrid whose cultural roots speak to a legacy of heritage, identity, and subcultural attitudes.

Chapter I explores the theoretical roots of cowpunk in the long history of popular music. By deconstructing the musical hybrid, this chapter illuminates the style of cowpunk as a cultural reaction. I explore the methodological definitions of subculture as they relate to punk and country music, specifically through the work of scholars Dick Hebdige, Dave Muggleton, and Ryan Moore.<sup>3</sup> Their in-depth studies of postmodernism

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<sup>3</sup> Dick Hebdige's 1979 work *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* argues the patterned trajectory of subculture in modern England's working class. He insists that youth subcultures construct their own forms of self-expression through the use of collective symbols of resistance and opposition. He claims that youth subculture move defiantly against the homogeneous world. David Muggleton's 2002 work *Inside Subculture: The Postmodern Meaning of Style* serves as a follow-up to Hebdige's work. Muggleton argues that new subcultures are constructed through an act of cultural recycling where youth find remnants of the past, utilize them for contemporary needs, and form new styles of expression by way of cultural bricolage. Finally, Ryan Moore's 2004 Article "Postmodern and Punk Subculture: Cultures of Authenticity and Deconstruction," identifies the ways in which punk subculture laments the commodification of mainstream

and the complex meanings of subculture work to clarify the psychological underpinnings of cowpunk as a style indicative of conscious aesthetic choices and stylistic intention. Performing the precursory footwork necessary to define punk, alternative country, and the attitudes associated with the genre are crucial to the comprehensive understanding of underground performative styles.

Chapter II examines the material culture of cowpunk and the ways in which its participants mixed aesthetic elements of Southern, Western, and Southwestern culture with the postmodern, edgy style of punk. Punk and country music both boast vivid visual cultures in the way of fashion and illustrative media. Through the style of cowpunk, artists and listeners alike selectively formed a unique amalgam of both genres through dress, performative style, and print media. Aesthetic choice, then, becomes a marker of regional identity and generational attitudes. An analysis of cowpunk's material reveals the collective threads that naturally unite seemingly oppositional genre subcultures such as traditional country music and punk.

The third chapter of this work interrogates the place of cowpunk within the larger canon of American iconography and, specifically, its role as a key marker of regional identity in 1980s popular culture. Both the material and immaterial culture of cowpunk serve as the evidential basis of this analysis. Furthermore, this chapter instigates the use of regional iconography to mobilize selective strains of musical tradition over time. Through a memory studies approach, this chapter highlights the ways in which cowpunk is a prime example of cultural recycling, where those in the movement pick and choose

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society. His work argues that the construction of the underground serves as a form of authentic identity making practice.

elements of nostalgia and music to personalize their own experiences within the genre hybrid.<sup>4</sup>

Regional case studies make up the fourth chapter of this work. I explore the punk hybrid undergrounds of Nashville, Austin, and Los Angeles in the early 1980s. Each of these cities cultivated unique music scenes relative to punk and alternative country music, and the ways in which their regional quirk manifested offer scholars of popular music a broad mosaic of cultural underpinnings to learn from. Nashville's rock underground hosted venues and hubs such as Phrank'n'Steins, Cantrell's, the Exit/In, and Lucy's Record Shop. Austin's deeply rooted subcultural playground embraced punk havens such as Voltaire's and Rauls. Finally, Los Angeles' punk scene, while seemingly more widespread than the aforementioned Nashville and Austin, exhibited the sound of Cowpunk and alternative country through the halls of Madame Wong's, Al's Bar, and the Masque. Exploring cowpunk with a sense of place in mind illustrates the performance infrastructure through which it rose and fell.

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<sup>4</sup> Studies for this chapter come primarily from Alison Landsberg's 2004 work *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*. She argues that society's innate attachment to mass culture throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century facilitates the construction of cultural and historical memory separate from lived experience. Her work is largely grounded in cinema and the mediation of historical film to construct prosthetic memory, but her framework is applicable to popular music and the ways in which people create their own forms of nostalgia based on personal memory and nonlived historical narrative. This study provides scholars of public history a new avenue to study popular music and their relative subcultures. The work of Jose Van Dijck is also meaningful in this study. Her 2006 article, "Record and Hold: Popular Music between Personal and Collective," argues how recorded music and the ritual of music making are based on recollective knowledge and the need for collective identity. Her work is steeped in psychological studies of memory and the human brain alongside sociological and historical approaches.

The final chapter of this research poses readers a major and ongoing problem within the field of popular music studies and public history: the problem of popular music structural preservation. The built environment plays host to some of the most important moments in popular music history and, even more important, are evidence of community building as a reaction to music consumption. Music venues are hotbeds of cultural information and remembrance; however, their preservation comes as a difficult task due to economic, cultural, and development factors. With Nashville's Exit/In as the prime example, this chapter brings the narrative of cowpunk as a cultural and musical hybrid to the forefront of current preservation issues.

#### Theoretical Foundation

It is crucial to define cowpunk as a cultural phenomenon that existed independent from mainstream punk subculture. In fact, it is a stretch to call this hybrid a subculture at all and, instead, it is useful to think of cowpunk as a moment when punks made conscious decisions to mobilize the cultural and aesthetic traditions of older forms of American roots music.<sup>5</sup> Some musicians became full embodiments of the hybrid, donning skin-tight wrangler jeans with a leopard print shirt or writing twangy punk songs that call upon late country legends such as Minnie Pearl or Hank Williams, Senior. For others, cowpunk manifested subtly as a momentary nod to cherished preconceived notions of authenticity.

Cowpunk of the early to mid-1980s was not a fully developed scene in the way people normally think of other music subcultures. For example, scholars cannot compare

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<sup>5</sup> See Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison's *Music and Social Movements: Mobilizing Tradition in the twentieth Century*. This work argues cultural recycling as a process of historical diffusion where participants selectively choose remnants of the past and make use of them in the modern to suit expressive, regional, and creative needs.

this music hybrid to the sprawling flower power scene of Haight-Ashbury in the 1960s or the progressive country scene of Austin in the 1970s that served as a regional hotbed. This is because the health of a scene and of a thriving subculture demand established infrastructure. The infrastructure of any music scene and subculture consists of performance spaces or collective hangout spots such as the local record store or a college campus. There must be a cultural and physical geography upon which musicians and audiences can build and create their respective worlds. Other intangible sources of infrastructure might include activism or a collective belief in politicking. Cowpunk certainly existed within the confines of punk subculture, but its rise and fall indicates that its existence lacked the autonomous and “active creation of infrastructure.”<sup>6</sup> Spaces of performance existed in a regional context for cowpunk acts, however, they were short lived or acted as a shared space alongside other subcultural scenes. It also important to note that, in the defiant spirit of punk, it is almost impossible to draw the “line between the scene and non-punk musical practices” due to the constant struggle to define the tangible and intangible “boundaries of the music.”<sup>7</sup>

What is the psychology of punk and how do its participants define membership? This question is a challenging one and one that also produces a variety of responses. For the purposes of this study, the most pressing framework to dissolve has to do with the multiple meanings of punk as a marker of style and identity. It is worth stressing that this work is by no means definitive, rather it offers up a number of analytical substructures

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<sup>6</sup> Alan O’Connor, “Local Scenes and Dangerous Crossroads: Punk and Theories of Cultural Hybridity,” *Popular Music*, 21 (No. 2, 2002): 226.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

from which we can situate the material evidence of cowpunk within the canon of punk attitudes.

Many scholars of popular music subcultures look to the early work of Dick Hebdige and David Muggleton. Hebdige, now a professor of art and media at the University of Southern California, published one of the pioneering works on punk subculture in the late 1970s. *Subculture and the Meaning of Style* is considered a primary source for understanding the sociology of postwar youth subculture at the height of punk's popularity. Hebdige attempts to define punk culture as a form of refusal or an act of defiance in a postmodern world.<sup>8</sup> While he acknowledges that the meaning of subculture is always up for reinterpretation, his research offers a valuable definition of culture as both "a process and product" that feeds into the argument for subculture and its reliance on a viable infrastructure.<sup>9</sup> While parts of his work are considered antiquated by today's scholars of popular culture, his insistence that punk subculture held the "power to disfigure the status quo" stands as a testament to the genre's legacy and to the basis of cowpunk's genesis.

David Muggleton's work comes at the turn of the twenty-first century and explores the idea of subculture from the angle of dress. In *Inside Subculture*, Muggleton is more interested in the ways that punk subculture makes societally resistant decisions about their clothing and accessories to mark "otherness" and difference in themselves.<sup>10</sup> As a study of identity and the subjective adoption of bygone musical traditions,

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<sup>8</sup> Dick Hebdige, *Subculture and the Meaning of Style*, London: Routledge, 1979, Pp. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>10</sup> David Muggleton, *Inside Subculture: The Postmodern Meaning of Style*, Berg Publishers, 2002, Pp. 15.

Muggleton stresses that these aesthetic decisions do not occur in a vacuum, but that they are the product of both post-modern mass consumerism and hyper individualism. When punks use their clothing to set themselves apart from the mainstream, they are borrowing aesthetic traditions that they deem worthy or somehow more authentic to a shared punk identity. However, Muggleton's take on this behavior explains collective fragmentation from subculture to subculture.<sup>11</sup> Just as the Beat Generation borrowed cultural remnants of Romantic poetry and early twentieth-century jazz, punks borrowed the subaltern sounds of 1960s garage rock and 1950s rockabilly fashion. Aesthetic choices are "suffused with self-reflexive irony" as punks "recycle cultural images and fragments, "and effectively succeed in "deconstructing the dominant meanings and simulations which saturate social space."<sup>12</sup> Think of it as a cyclical system of cultural recycling where one generation after the other mobilizes the traditions of the past to suit their own contemporary need to self-identify and separate from the mainstream.

Another important element of punk subculture that needs proper dissection in order to understand the cowpunk style is the cult of authenticity. At the very heart of the punk and country genre is the ongoing quest for musical and cultural authenticity. Scholars, musicians, and fans argue endlessly back and forth in search of a framework that checks all the boxes, when authenticity is, ultimately, a social construct. How we generationally describe authenticity changes over time and according to personal taste.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ryan Moore, "Postmodernism and Punk Subculture: Cultures of Authenticity and Deconstruction," *Communications Review*, 7 (Issue 3, 2004): 307.

<sup>13</sup> See Benjamin Filene's *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music* for deeper analysis of the fluid definition of 'authenticity' and nostalgia in popular music over the course of the twentieth century. Also see Richard A. Peterson's *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* for scholarship relative to constructing the cult

For example, to a younger generation of listeners Garth Brooks is authentic country music. To others, he was an industry product of the early 1990s country mainstream. To some, the blues revival of the 1960s was an authentic representation of American music. It was somehow more *real* and *raw*. To others, it was a romanticized reinterpretation of an African-American style that worked to the benefit of young white audiences who controlled buying power in record stores.

The common denominator in the problematic equation to finding authenticity always relates back to the commercialization of performance. Commercialism usually denotes a lack of cultural realness in terms of subcultural acceptance, however, it's an element of the music industry that we can hardly escape. At some point, culture will become a commodity. For example, a visit to almost any department store will yield a hoard of music t-shirts from such pioneers as Nirvana or Tupac, both relics of the cultural defiance and societal disenchantment of their time. It is just that now they represent a commodified retro typing and a collective feeling of nostalgia. In the realm of punk subculture, this phenomenon is begrudgingly known as a 'punksploitation.'<sup>14</sup>

With this as the basis for understanding authenticity as a construct, it is natural, then, to follow the punk's quest for authenticity in the same framework. Punk subcultures define their autonomy as an "independence from the culture industry, thus altogether

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of authenticity through popular sound. Also notable to the notion of authenticity is the work of American folklorists Francis James Child and John Lomax on the ways in which the perception of American music historiography and its supposed uniqueness is understood over time.

<sup>14</sup> See Kevin Mattson's 2001 work, "Did Punk Matter?: Analyzing the Practices of a Youth Subculture of the 1980s," that analyzes the commercialization and exploitation of punk archetypes in mass media. He argues that mass media attempted to confine the genre to finite definitions portrayed by popular culture.

renouncing the prevailing culture of media, image, and hypercommercialism.”<sup>15</sup> Their subculture is one forged in opposition to all that is industry-driven and rejects pre-packaged popular trends. This idea is not new and by no means unique. In fact, most underground subcultures are united in their rejection of the mainstream, but punk is unique in that its “spirit of negation lack a utopian counterpart.”<sup>16</sup> There is no defined or enlightened way of life pushed from the margins of punk subculture. It is, in itself, solely a rejection of the societal norm.

With all this theory in mind, it begs the overarching question as to why punk rock found such an unlikely intersection with country music? The answer is simple. Looking back at many of the foundational tenets of what makes a punk a *real* punk, the quest for authenticity brought many musicians to older forms of roots music and, specifically, to older iterations of American country music. The urge to reuse and recycle the sounds of early Americana also came directly as a reaction to the mainstream country music industry of the 1980s. Centered in Nashville, radio-friendly country music of this period was part of a hit-making machine stuck in a rut of “conservatism and complacency.”<sup>17</sup> The industry demand for *Billboard* chart-toppers stifled the process of creative expression in country music. Those punks who felt personally invested in such music-making traditions and whose generational influences dictated a reverence for early American forms, utilized their inherent opposition to mass industry and irreverent attitudes towards to status quo to birth the stylistic ethos of cowpunk.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Moore, “Postmodernism and Punk Subculture,” 308.

<sup>17</sup> Patterson, “Cowpunk Deluxe,” 1.

Tense Music Relationships: From International Scene to Regional Hybrid

As a comparison, the regional relationships between punk and mainstream country of the 1980s are crucial to understanding its narrative. Furthermore, exploring the recording ethos of Nashville reveals how alternative styles of country music failed to thrive in Music City as a direct consequence of the city's traditional conventions of country expression. In a 2002 interview with the *Houston Press*, Jason Ringenberg exclaims that, while the Scorchers' had bold ambitions of being "one of the greatest rock and roll bands ever," they also sought to "rouse Music City from its conservatism and complacency."<sup>18</sup> Ringenberg was not only referring to the traditional styles popularized on the Grand Ole Opry show or the tunes radiating from the WSM Radio towers, but he was alluding to the process of music making and expression in the Nashville mainstream. Luckily, the Scorchers considered themselves a performance-driven band and "didn't have to rely on the industry quite as much."<sup>19</sup> Their eagerness to tour on the road played to their advantage.

For the latter half of the twentieth century, Nashville served as the dominant regional choice for country music production. The recording process is characterized by "quick-paced time-oriented" approaches that favor "the disciplined and well-defined production values of country music" for the industry.<sup>20</sup> The Nashville style of recording was a fast-paced machine where pre-conceived expectations of recording outcomes overshadowed creative agency. Musicians in Nashville learn, play, and record quickly.

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<sup>18</sup> Patterson, "Cowpunk Deluxe," 1.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Goldsmith, "Scorchers still standing tall," *Tennessean*, Oct 22, 1986, p. 39.

<sup>20</sup> Ross Rice, "An Analysis and Contrast Between The Music Recording Ethos of Memphis and Nashville: Two American Cities That Defined Rock 'n' Roll, Country, and Soul," M.A. Thesis, Middle Tennessee State University, Summer 2019, 2.

Time-efficient recording practices coupled with the domination of the Grand Ole Opry and live radio make up the bulk of the city's forward-facing sound. This mechanized style of music-making did not leave room for alternative or blended styles to thrive. On top of that, by the end of the 1970s mainstream country music and "Nashville sought to distance itself from" rock music, "purposefully skewing their demographic away from the youth market, steering towards the middle of the road."<sup>21</sup> The late Jim Ridley, a regular music writer for the *Nashville Scene*, brilliantly described the Nashville mainstream as "forever setting parameters, dictating boundaries as to what does and does not belong."<sup>22</sup>

Outside of the Nashville machine other alternative country and cowboy subcultures seemed to blossom into popular fandom. In the summer of 1980 Paramount released the film *Urban Cowboy*. The film details young love predominantly from the confines of a Houston honky-tonk call Gilley's. The film catapulted metropolitan cowboy culture beyond the shores of the Texas coast and into American nightlife. In bars across the nation, "mechanical bulls, feathered cowboy hats, and sexy tank tops" were common occurrences.<sup>23</sup> The soundtrack of *Urban Cowboy*, which featured Charlie Daniels, Bonnie Raitt, The Eagles, Linda Ronstadt, and Jimmy Buffett, artists who had all performed at Nashville's Exit/In music club earlier in the decade, introduced regional and alternative forms of country music, specifically forms native to Texas and California, to newer generations of music consumers. For the next four years the "sales of country music at

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 29-30.

<sup>22</sup> Jim Ridley, "Tangled Roots: The Would-Be Revolution of Alternative Country," *Nashville Scene*, February 27, 1997, Accessed April 2019, <https://www.nashvillescene.com/news/article/13001259/tangled-roots>.

<sup>23</sup> Gerald Haslam, "1980s," in *Workin' Man Blues: Country Music in California*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 259.

record stores rocketed to \$250 million” and “900 radio stations nationwide joined the ranks of full-time country or neocountry pop programmers.”<sup>24</sup> While Nashville shifted away from younger audiences, southwestern regional scenes picked up where Music City left off.

For example, the first mention of cowpunk in print media came out of the *Times-Advocate* in Escondido, California in 1981 when the publication covered female-led band Calamity Jayne & the Cowpunks during their stint at the Bahia Hotel’s Mercedes Lounge.<sup>25</sup> Later the same year, the *San Francisco Examiner* doubled down on Calamity’s coverage and called her a “cigar-smokin’ country heroine from the beaches of California” who “writes tunes that blend country sounds with punk, rock, and funk.”<sup>26</sup> Elsewhere in Canada, Laura Vinson and Red Wyng brought “gospel, folk, blues, rock, and more to country music” with an “earthy, down-home reverence.”<sup>27</sup> Evelyn Erskine of the *Ottawa Citizen* called Vinson’s music “gutsy and a little wild around the edges,” and emphasizes how the singer “never pretties it up.”<sup>28</sup> The role of gender in the thread of cowpunk underscores a lack of female representation in particular regions, specifically Austin and Nashville. It is worth noting that many pioneering acts in the genre hybrid such as Calamity Jane, Laura Vinson, and Rosie Flores & the Screamin’ Sirens did not experience the same level of media coverage as others. While some bands achieved rotation on MTV, others lived out their performative histories on tour and in the small clubs that made up the underground.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 259.

<sup>25</sup> Special Events, *Times-Advocate*, Thu, Jan 22, 1981, p. 20.

<sup>26</sup> *The San Francisco Examiner*, Sun, Jul 26, 1982, p. 288.

<sup>27</sup> Evelyn Erskine, “Nights Out,” *The Ottawa Citizen*, Fri Jul 30, 1982, p. 45.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.



*Figure 2: Calamity Jayne during a 1981 residency in Las Vegas. Photo Courtesy of Las Vegas Weekly.*

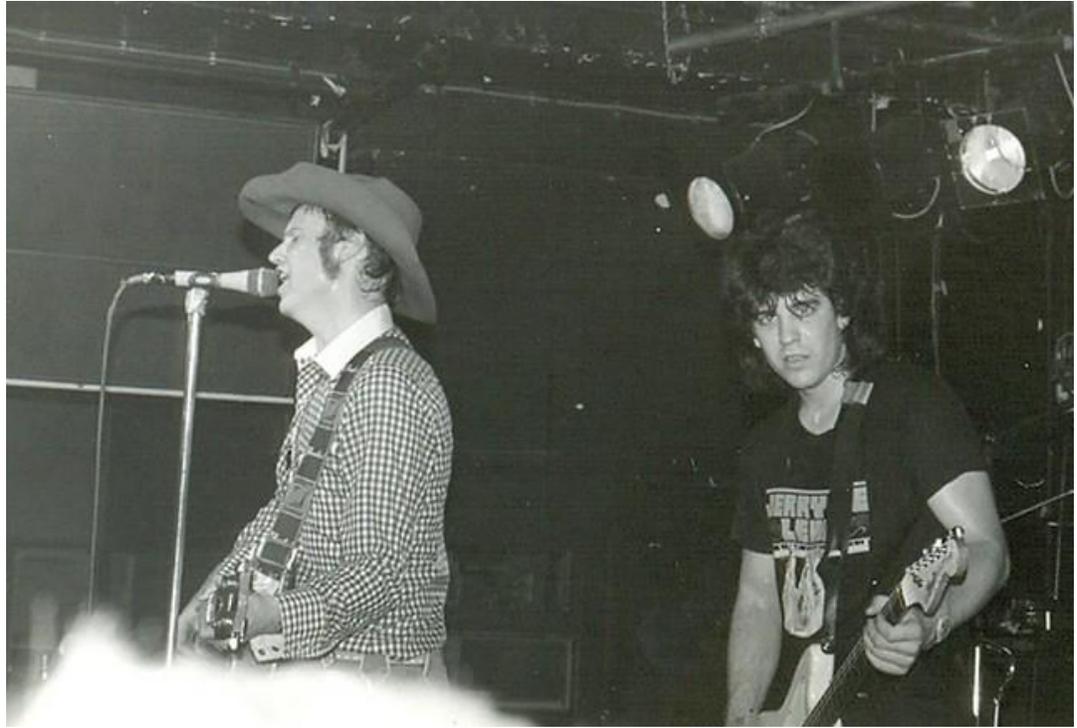
The proliferation of alternative country in the mid 1980s proved that, while traditional forms were certainly considered old among younger musicians and listeners, that “didn’t have to mean out of date when it came to musical presentations.”<sup>29</sup> Alongside alternative country and rock groups, artists such as Roseanne Cash and Elvis Costello championed the ideology that a “small but powerful movement” could “liberate country music from pop style limitations.”<sup>30</sup> Alternative country “exists in a sort of musical no-man’s-land,” thriving on a “vaguely rustic spirit” and is not “comfortable being pinned down to a single name.”<sup>31</sup> That being said, alternative country embraced a wide array of styles in order to portray different attitudes, motifs, and historically serves the musically disenfranchised. In a similar vein, punk rock embodied the outcasts and the misfits. The irreverent performative styles of both alternative country and punk rock would ultimately align to form the cowpunk style.

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<sup>29</sup> Haslam, 260.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 259.

<sup>31</sup> Ridley, “Tangled Roots,” 3.



*Figure 3: Jason Ringenberg & Warner Hodges, Jason & The Scorchers, Marquee Club, London, Circa 1984. Photo Courtesy of Robert Ian Hawdon Archive.*

The late 1970s and early 1980s wave of punk rock developed internationally, with its regional hub rooted in the industrial sectors of an economically crippled London. The scene's musicians and subculture mainly consisted of disillusioned youth. Both abroad and in the United States, the style of punk rock illustrated defiance both performatively and aesthetically. Typical descriptors of punk include leather, colored or spiked hair, dramatic makeup, and obscene behavior both on stage and off. The feeling of “alienation coalesced musically” with the club scene in Los Angeles.<sup>32</sup> The country and punk scenes of Los Angeles merged and gave birth to cowpunk, which “produced one of California’s most interesting musical scenes, highlighting young performers who ignored labels” and regularly blended music.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Haslam, *Workin’ Man Blues*, 267.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 267.

Not all of the major cowpunk musicians resided in California. The aforementioned Jason & the Scorchers came from Nashville, Dash Rip from Baton Rouge, the Meat Puppets from Arizona, Rank & File from to Austin, The Mekons from Leeds in the United Kingdom, and D-A-D (Disneyland After Dark) from Copenhagen. Notable acts from the Los Angeles and surrounding area included Social Distortion, X, Lone Justice, The Beat Farmers, Blood on the Saddle, Tex & the Horseheads, The Knitters, The Gun Club, The Blasters, and the Long Ryders. On the extreme end of punk and country blends were Boston's Ruber Rodeo, who worked "country into the technopop sound of synthesizers," with singer Pat Milliken donning "blonde wigs, because they're so much a part of country and western tradition."<sup>34</sup>



*Figure 4: Press release photo of Rubber Rodeo, Circa early 1980s, Photo courtesy of Eat Records.*

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<sup>34</sup> Robert K. Oermann, "Has Punkabilly Become the Latest Rock Trend?" *The Tennessean*, Jun 10, 1984, p. 151.

Their repertoires drew direct influence from the catalogues of Hank Williams, Merle Haggard, Johnny Cash, Loretta Lynn, Roy Acuff, and George Jones. Dave Alvin, a cowpunk musician turned music producer, recalls his delight in looking “out at an audience of punk kids, who had little or no positive experience of country music, being hypnotized by John Doe (X) singing Haggard’s ‘Silver Wings’.”<sup>35</sup> Cowpunk musicians asserted dominance over their style: a high octane hybrid of traditional country music that embraced the rebellious spirit of punk’s alienation and social discontentment.

Susan Hayden, a seasoned writer and long-time Los Angeles resident, remembers the vibrant diversity of the 1980s club scene as one that embraced a “general disillusionment with the dullness of most radio music and with rock’s continuing slide toward pop blandness” and that “those things led bands to seek cultural autonomy from earlier generations.”<sup>36</sup> Cowpunk acts recognized the opportunity to repackage and individualize the country music of their parents alongside the contemporary subculture of regional punk. Many of the groups used the darker motifs common to punk rock to mine a “subterranean mother lode of apocalyptic religion, murder, and madness that had lurked just under the surface of hillbilly music and blues since the nineteenth century.”<sup>37</sup> The uniting approach to both alternative country and punk in Southern California is “a similar attitude: an irreverent form of reverence,” that “suggests the inspired amateurism of punk and the mid-‘80s indie rock-not the sleep, smoothly produced mass market country packaged by Music Row.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Haslam, 267.

<sup>36</sup> Haslam, 269.

<sup>37</sup> Robert Palmer, “The Pop Life” *New York Times*, Aug 11, 1982, p. 19.

<sup>38</sup> Ridley, “Tangled Roots,” 4.

Nashville's initial reaction to the development of cowpunk was neglect. The music playing on Country Music Television did not look anything like what was going on in California and Texas, and participants in these alternative scenes liked it that way. Cowpunk groups outside of Nashville maintained the creative freedom that came with their general anti-commercial attitudes. Nashville moved away the cowpunk generation and, in doing so, allowed them to create and perform "uninhibited by Nashville conventions."<sup>39</sup> A sense of regional distain also saturated the relationship between Nashville and California. Gerald Haslam, author and historian of Southern California, highlighted Nashville's feelings of "lingering fear that country music might once again be lost to the complex, amorphous, and heterogenous West."<sup>40</sup> Nashville framed Los Angeles as "the enemy," portraying the City of Angels as "Gomorrah in more than one Nashville song."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Haslam, 279.

<sup>40</sup> Haslam, 280.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 280.



Figure 5: Painting by John Langford of the band The Mekons, Example of Cowpunk visual art.

A small handful of mainstream country artists understood and appreciated the sounds and styles of the Los Angeles cowpunk style. One interesting perspective comes from artist Dwight Yoakam. While it is important to note that Yoakam was not one of the most vibrant purveyors of the cowpunk style, his experience in both localities speaks volumes for the tumultuous creative relationships in Nashville and Los Angeles. A Kentucky native, he admired the Appalachian styles of country music associated with his parents and grandparents. However, Yoakam also realized that the state of Nashville

country in the 1980s had problems of geography, class, and generation. Yoakam told Gerald Haslam that, upon this realization, he admired how the alternative country and rock scenes cultivated a “grassroots movement” in which the musical experience in music production, creative agency, and performative ethos was far more free range than if he had “just gone up to Nashville and garnered a record deal via exclusively a studio route.”<sup>42</sup> As one of the very few to dabble in the Los Angeles cowpunk scene to crossover into mainstream country success, Yoakam used his experience in Southern California to push a “political dimension” in his musical approach, one that existed as a “reclamation of traditional country as the populist voice of the working class, the sound of a hardscrabble South rather than the smoother sound of the suburbia that turned “hat acts” into chart toppers.”<sup>43</sup>

In Yoakam’s reverence for the honky-tonk style, he also saw an uncanny resemblance in the way he and other cowpunk groups delivered their performances as edgy, spirited, and dynamic embodiments of punk rock. In Don McLeese’s biography of the self-professed “Honky Tonk Man,” he details at length the generational disconnect of country music with its younger audiences. The genre “had developed a bad reputation among the rock generation—his generation—and that even the ‘70s surge of country rock hadn’t redeemed the genre.”<sup>44</sup> Ultimately, Yoakam knew that mainstream Nashville country music had a problematic image problem among rock listeners, however, he also believed that cowpunk pushed back against that image in an effort to demonstrate not

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<sup>42</sup> Haslam, 273.

<sup>43</sup> Don McLeese, “Who You Callin’ Cowpunk?” in *Dwight Yoakam: A Thousand Miles From Nowhere*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012, 64.

<sup>44</sup> Mcleese, 64.

only genre inclusivity but bridge sometimes hostile generational gaps. In an interview for the Country Music Hall of Fame's ongoing oral history project, Yoakam explains how there "was such a stratification of the youth and the older generation that there was a period, a whole generation, where we did not pass the baton, so to speak, from one to the next, in terms of honky-tonk music, especially" and emphasizes the importance of their involvement in order to bring wider cultural and generational relevance to the style.<sup>45</sup>

Because of this communicative divide, Yoakam found the club scene of Los Angeles in the early 1980s far more comfortable. He found that "between conservative politics and commercial polish, country music had lost its connection to the hillbilly exuberance of its youth, a spirit" that Yoakam "found more prevalent in the rock clubs of Los Angeles than the recording studios of Nashville."<sup>46</sup> Yoakam is unique in that he successfully crossed the threshold of country music stardom by the end of the decade and, while he did not formally play in the cowpunk style, he is primary evidence of a participant in the Los Angeles scene that embraced traditional music shoulder to shoulder with the punk performative spirit. This overview is an introductory look at the cowpunk style as a musical and cultural hybrid, but the forthcoming chapters will dive deeper into its material culture, cultural memory, and its role as a marker of regional identity.

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<sup>45</sup> Dwight Yoakam, interview OHC336, in the Country Music Foundation Oral History Project, Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, Nashville, Tennessee.

<sup>46</sup> McLeese, 65.

## CHAPTER II: THE MATERIAL CULTURE OF PUNK: A STUDY OF AESTHETIC ETHOS IN ALTERNATIVE PERFORMANCE

To study the material culture of popular music is to examine the primary evidence of subcultures and the individuals who participated in them. Similarly, the study of American music history demands an academic intersection between historical research and public history methodology. The state of popular music and its objects in contemporary terms of interpretation often lack the depth that material culture studies provide, however, it is a growing trend among practitioners of museum collections and scholars of popular music to utilize the tangible materials of music subculture to cultivate a more comprehensive understanding of music narratives. The traditional disregard of music material is “a rupture that has long been ignored by popular music histories that privilege artists and genre over material culture.”<sup>47</sup> Historians of traditional music theory cling to “the more standard vision of music as a transcendental artform” rather than acknowledging the materiality of popular music.<sup>48</sup> This attitude pushes the collective and institutional memory of subcultural material to the periphery of contemporary interpretation. This study is an attempt to excavate those supposedly forgotten pathways.

This research explores the early 1980s intersection of punk rock and alternative subsets of American roots music, often referred to as cowpunk. This study casts a wider net of coverage due to the fact that this subcultural phenomenon defied regional

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<sup>47</sup> Tim J. Anderson, *Making Easy Listening*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xvii.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, xxiv.

strictures, however, the styles and aesthetic markers of cowpunk are markedly steeped in the tradition of the Southern, Southwestern, and Western motifs natural to American roots music. It is impossible to understand cowpunk's moment in cultural history without paying close attention to its material evidence. Typical iconography, visual aesthetics, and the print media and art of the punk underground are valuable sources for analyzing the material evidence of cowpunk style.

The methodology for this analysis comes directly out of Bernard L. Herman's approach to material culture. Herman's body of research focuses mostly on early American southern life in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, but his technique is one that works to include vernacular objects of the everyday. The ultimate goal for any material culture analysis is one that "peels off past layers of means around objects" to "find out things about the people that made, used, and lived with those objects."<sup>49</sup> A two-pronged approach, Herman's material culture method is open-ended in that it does not abide by strict step-by-step application. Instead, he encourages practitioners to examine material evidence either from the "object-centered" or "object-driven" point of view in order to extract the "internal evidence" of objects.<sup>50</sup> The "object-driven" application better suits the needs of cowpunk analysis because it challenges our need to "view material objects as evidence of other complex social relationships."<sup>51</sup> Applying this method to the material of cowpunk facilitates a more comprehensive understanding of genre hybrids and,

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<sup>49</sup> Karen Harvey, "Introduction: Practical Matters," in *History and Material Culture: A Student's Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources*, London & New York: Routledge, 2009, pp. 2

<sup>50</sup> Bernard L. Herman, *Stolen House*, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1992, pp. 11.

<sup>51</sup> Harvey, "Introduction: Practical Matter," 2.

additionally, informs a more general understanding of cross-subcultural behaviors and regional manifestations of punk and country.

Section one will provide a brief history and context to the cowpunk style and, hopefully, clearly define this subcultural moment as a unique cross-sectional exhibition of musical hybridity. Section two will shift focus to the aesthetics of cowpunk and will pay special attention to personal style, clothing choices, and how the adoption of American roots music bled into the personal physicality of punk rock. The final section is an analysis of album artwork, performance posters, and DIY fanzines. These pieces of material evidence inform the ways roots music manifested itself in underground visual culture. The performative ethos of cowpunk dictates heavy reliance on visual cues and the study of those material remnants are crucial to any real understanding of this moment in American music history.

The general aesthetic of punk is centrally rooted in the do-it-yourself ethic of personal expression. Individual aesthetic choices are largely comprised of fashioning objects of the everyday. Muggleton notes that punks purposefully choose to accessorize with “mundane objects- a safety pin, a pointed shoe, a motor cycle” which “take on a symbolic dimension, becoming a form of stigmata, tokens of self-imposed exile.”<sup>52</sup> Cowpunks definitely took on the prototypical aesthetic features of the punk subculture, but they infused their look with motifs commonly synonymous with the South, Southwest, and Western culture. Instead of a dog collar or a choker necklace, cowpunks select bolo ties and a ten-gallon cowboy hat, yet still exhibit punk clothing such as a leather jacket with handsewn patches and DIY distressing.

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<sup>52</sup> Muggleton, “Inside Subculture,” 177.

This section is designed to showcase the clothing aesthetic of the cowpunk style and the ways in which musicians consciously chose to wear accents and clothing steeped in the tradition of country music performance. Cross-blending the aesthetic styles of punk and country music not only sends symbolic messages of reverence for American roots music and alternative performance, but it indicates a regional and generational assertion of identity. In both the genres of punk rock and country, a firm sense of identity and authentic artistic expression are of the utmost importance. By manifesting the aesthetics of this musical hybrid, musicians push the “notion that genuine subcultural members should have some elements of personal moral investment in their chosen group.”<sup>53</sup> The adoption of a style of dress is a physical marker of that committed investment. Since this work is part of a larger project, the full narrative of the bands or artists selected for analysis is absent in this particular chapter. Their story plays out in the forthcoming work of this dissertation. Instead, the focus shifts to their clothing choices and the analysis of those motivations.

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<sup>53</sup> Sue Widdicombe & Rob Wooffitt, “Being Versus Doing Punk: On Achieving Authenticity as a Members,” *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 1990, Pp. 263.



Figure 6: Jason & the Scorchers album cover for *Golden Ball & Chain*, circa 1986. Photo courtesy of [discogs.com](http://discogs.com).

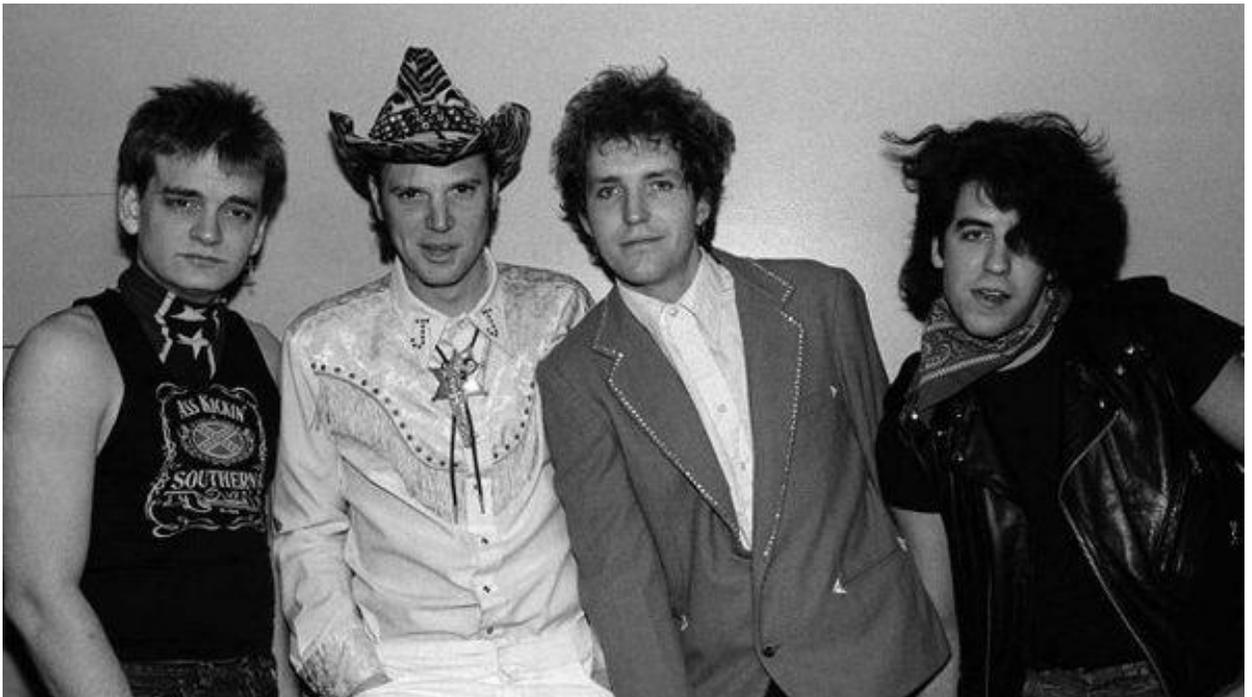


Figure 7: Jason & The Scorchers in typical cowpunk dress, Circa 1984, Photo by Tony Mottram.

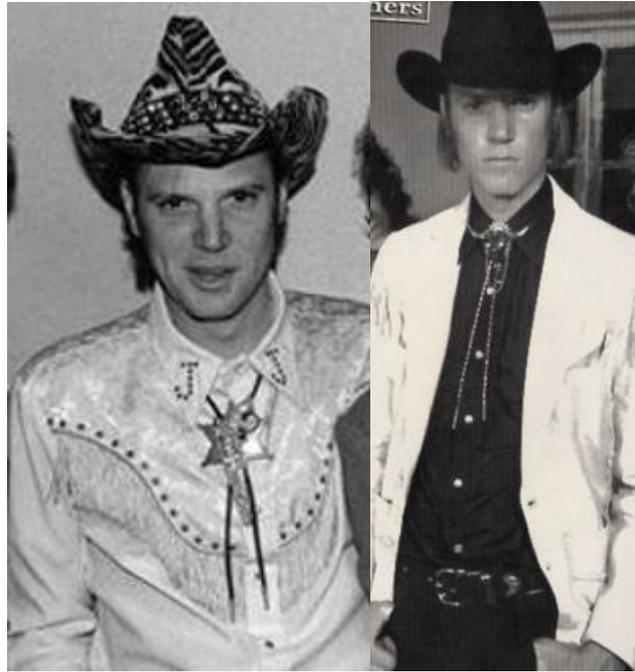
Pictured in Figures 6 and 7 are Jason & The Scorchers (formerly Jason & the Nashville Scorchers) in 1984. Their dress reveals a world of cross-genre blending and expression of double meaning. On the left in both photographs is the late Perry Baggs donning a tight t-shirt lovingly ripped at the sleeves and the image of the Confederate flag.



*Figure 8: Perry Baggs closeup, circa '84 and '86.*

Around his neck is a bandana of the same design, although it is hard to tell if its design is a direct reference to the Tennessee state flag or the Confederate flag. Upon closer observation Baggs dons a small dangling earring in his left lobe. The selection of iconography synonymous with Southern, Outlaw, and Dixie-centric country music of the late 1970s and early to mid 1980s. On the right, Baggs chooses a Brighton style Western belt along with a Southwestern bracelet. To add punk flare, his hair is teased and mangled on top for volume. Just as his articles of clothing call upon the aesthetic culture of

country music, Baggs applies the punk DIY ethic of irreverent expression by tearing off the sleeves of his t-shirt and sporting a lone earring.



*Figure 9: Ringenberg closeups, circa '84 & '86.*

From top to bottom, Ringenberg complicates and challenges the traditional dress of punk and country music. He wears a distressed and curled straw hat with metal studs on a leather strip of material that act as an edgy DIY accent. While he is clean shaven, Ringenberg usually wore his sideburns rather thick and pronounced on the side of his face, a choice that clearly calls upon 1950s rock 'n' roll influences. His shirts are probably the most interesting point of analysis. Ringenberg wears Western shirts with crushed velvet inlays complete with soft fringe. On the collar of his shirt, in rhinestone embellishment, are the initials of his first name. Tying the entire look together is a traditional bolo tie, typical to Western and Southwestern styles. Ringenberg complicates this style by adding punk parody and cultural juxtaposition to the articles of clothing he chooses. For example, his rhinestone initials resemble many of the rhinestone adorned

suits, blouses, and Western shirts worn by popular country music acts of the 1980s.

Artists such as Porter Wagoner and Little Jimmy Dickens regularly wore this glitzy style of dress. While it is not clear whether Ringenberg wears this style out of reverence for older forms of country music or does so as a kind of playful parody, the blending of leather, studs, rhinestones, and bolo ties works to complicate uniform traditions of genre aesthetics.



*Figure 10: Jeff Johnson (left), Warner Hodges (right), closeup, circa 1984.*

The other two members of the band pictured above, Al Collins and Warner Hodges, select clothing that still subtly speaks to the cowpunk mutation of style. At first glance, Al's suit does not seem entirely punk or entirely country driven, however, the small stitching details and design on his jacket pocket are indicative of Western styles of dress. Additionally, the lapels on Al's jacket are strategically embellished with metallic stones and studs, a hallmark of the punk DIY textile ethic. Finally, Warner Hodges couples a Western bandana with paisley print around his neck with a black leather vest and black t-shirt. His clothing choices are not as bold or as parodied as Ringenberg, but

Hodges's outfit makes a subtler nod to the ways he personally and physically blends the two genres.

Now, in order to fully understand the aesthetic connections to country music and its traditions, it is necessary to look at an example of Western dress that directly connects to the cowpunk aesthetic. There are few styles as recognizable and adaptable as the rhinestone suit made popular around the 1940s and 1950s. Peter La Chapelle's work informs the material culture analysis of mainstream country music and its performative aesthetic. Chapelle studies the history and politics of mid-century country music, and he also extensively researched the political roots of the Nudie suit. This style of suit became a source of personal, artistic, and political expression for many country artists, and its vibrant iconography has reached a level of mythological reverence in some arenas of country performance. In Chapelle's work, he carefully strips down the history of this aesthetic and argues that "the outfits with blue-collar leisure" and "presented a way to attract fan attention and display a novel honky-tonk masculinity."<sup>54</sup> It is also important to note that, in terms of personal expression, the rhinestone suit "presented a canvas upon which audiences could vicariously engage in forms of cultural and gendered cross-dressing."<sup>55</sup>

Similar to La Chapelle's work is that of Brenda Colloday's material culture study and master's thesis, "Goin' Uptown: Hillbilly Music Becomes Country Music, 1922-1965." She traces the history of country music costuming through the mid-twentieth

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<sup>54</sup> Peter La Chapelle, "All That Glitters: Country Music, Taste, and the Politics of the Rhinestone "Nudie" suit," *Journal of the Costume Society of America*, Vol. 28, No. 1, Pp. 3.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

century and calls the “razzle-dazzle” style a product of the “booming country business a way to celebrate their success, create a personal identity, and display in a visual way, the authority they possessed to perform country music.”<sup>56</sup> She argues that the next generation of country stars following Hank Williams sought alternative ways to assert themselves “as individuals and to justify their right to follow in the masters’ footsteps.”<sup>57</sup> This need drove the demand for flashier garments that also suited the highly visual culture of the 1950s and 1960s.

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<sup>56</sup> Brenda Colladay, “Goin’ Uptown: Hillbilly Music Becomes Country Music, 1922-1965,” M.A. Thesis, Middle Tennessee State University, 2001, p. 93.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*



*Figure 11: Nudie Cohn pictured with Gram Parsons in Nudie suits, circa mid 1970s, courtesy Collectors Weekly.*

Popularized by clothier Nudie Cohn, the embellished rhinestone suit also represents tangible evidence of genre crossing, as the fashion statement was embraced wholeheartedly by American music icons such as Keith Richards, Elton John, Gram Parsons, and Elvis Presley. With that in mind, it is less of a surprise that purveyors of punk and alternative streams of country music would borrow this style from the canon of country music fashion. Colladay insists that “Nudie’s creations, embellished by his protégé, Viola Grae’s skillful embroidery work,

gave artists a way to express both their success and their “country” identity at the same time.”<sup>58</sup>



Figure 12: Dolly Parton in a Nudie Cohn Creation, circa 1975. Photo Courtesy of Billboard Magazine.

Just as the Nudie suit came to represent an assertion of personal and iconographic identity for country musicians, its adoption as part of rock and alternative country aesthetic provides a unique commentary for the way Western and Southwestern motifs add to the constructed subcultural ethic of authenticity.

Another group that embodied Southwestern iconography and aesthetics was the all-female Los Angeles alternative rock band Screamin’ Sirens. The band took on a hybrid look that borrowed heavily from Mexican, Southern Californian, and Tejana styles

<sup>58</sup> Colladay, “Goin’ Uptown,” 94.

of dress. Traditional Sombreros, cowboy hats, vaquero chaps, pistol holsters, Mexican floral embroidery, and serapes are just a few elements the women of Screamin' Sirens employed to showcase regional hybridity.



*Figure 13: Screamin' Sirens, Circa 1984. Photo by Vanessa Adams.*

However, the band also exhibited traditional archetypes of punk through spikey, voluminous hairstyles, bulky metal accessories, leather, and the use of dramatic eye makeup. Their hybrid presentation is primary evidence of punk rockers calling upon regional fashion to express identity and heritage through material culture.

### Cowpunk Print Media

Print media found the cowpunk aesthetic fascinating. In many instances, cowpunk aesthetic in album artwork and visual art is a vital instrument for the ways older generations of punks both see themselves and the ways they would like others to see them. The study of print media is visual and tangible evidence of the punk spirit of

defiance, parody, rebellion, while also reinforcing the iconography of traditional forms of American roots music. Just as Dick Hebdige emphasized in his theories of subculture, the print media of a musical hybrid such as cowpunk serves as vibrant manifestation of “style as a form of refusal” to adhere to standards genre uniformity.<sup>59</sup>

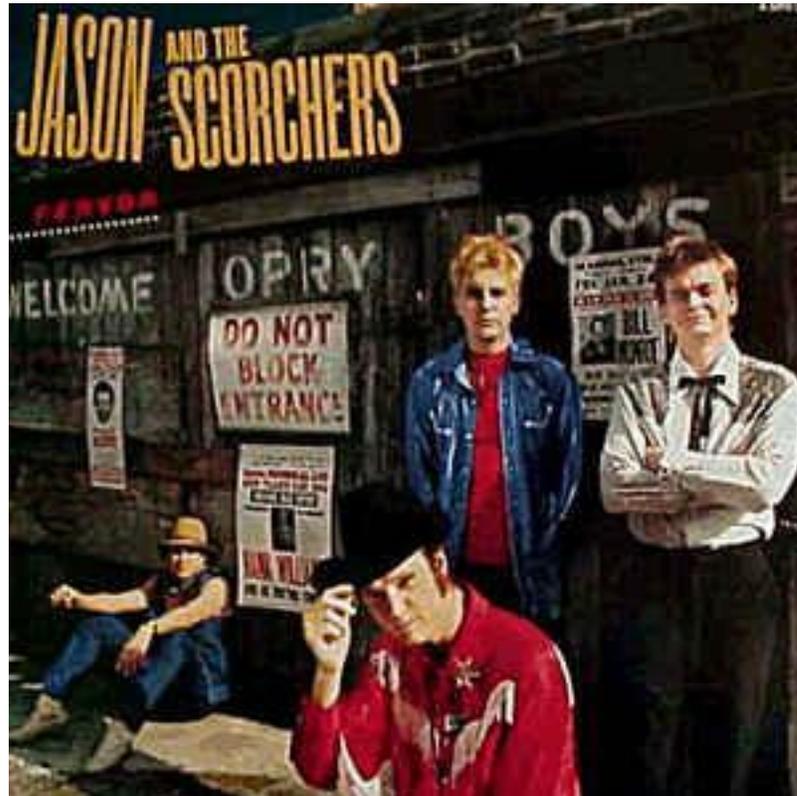


Figure 14: *Fervor* album cover for Jason & the Scorchers, circa 1984, courtesy of Stock Discographies.

Many times, the album artwork of cowpunk presents double meaning as both a parody of the mainstream country music industry of Nashville in the 1980s and, dually, a nostalgic nod to some of the pioneering early forces in the twentieth-century country music tradition.<sup>60</sup> The visual messages in cowpunk art are valuable evidence of a punk’s

<sup>59</sup> Hebdige, 3.

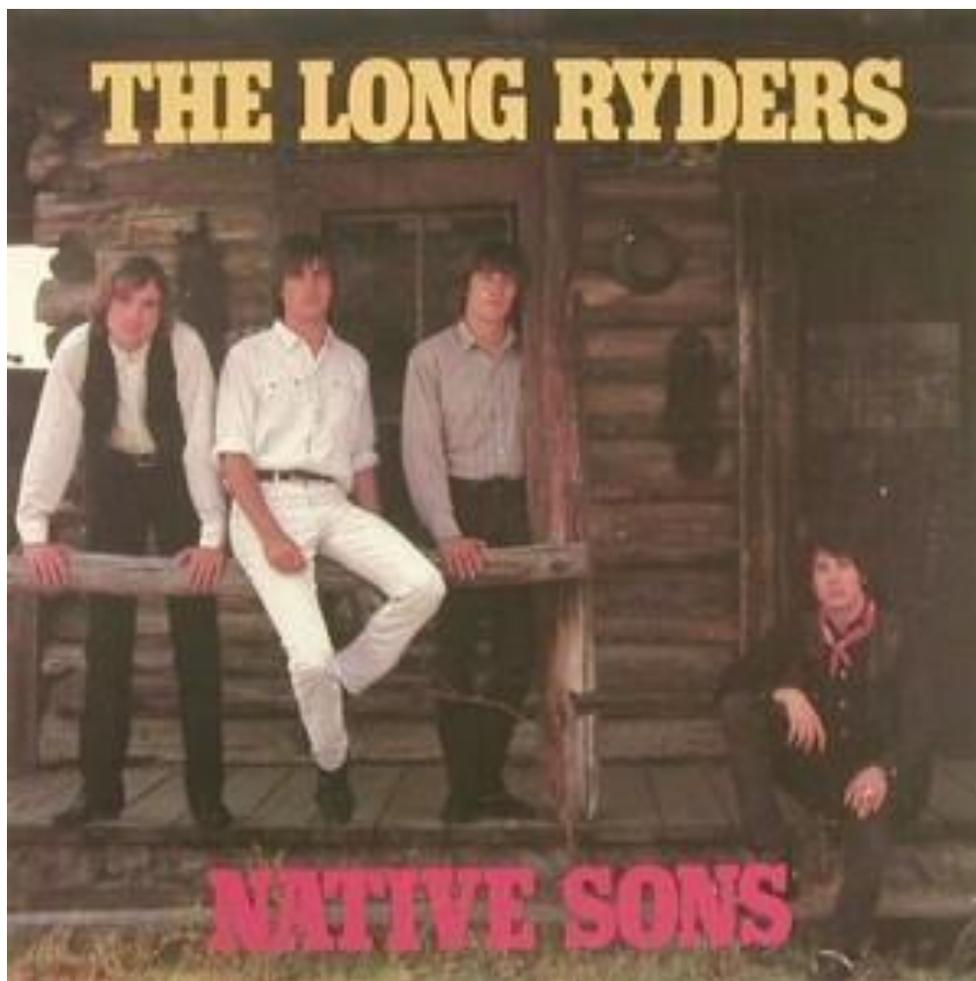
<sup>60</sup> Johan Kugelberg, “On Punk: An Aesthetic,” in *Punk: An Aesthetic*, Rizzoli, 2012, Preface.

power to express creative authority and assert personal control over their musical status. Jason & the Scorchers' 1983 album *Fervor* is a distinct example of this. The band members stand in front of a large fence with the words "Welcome Opry Boys" stamped across the panels. Ringenberg, Hodges, Collins, and Baggs all exhibit their genre blurring fashion choices in Western shirts, bolo ties, leather, fringe, Beatle boots, cowboy hats, and denim.

The fence, however, is the focal point of this analysis. Posted on the left, middle, and right panels of the posts are Hatch Show Prints of three legendary Opry members, Roy Acuff, Hank Williams Senior, and Bill Monroe. The Hatch Show print shop is a staple of Nashville performance spaces and of the weekly Grand Ole Opry Show. At every live performance, guests have the option to purchase a Hatch Print with that night's lineup as both a keepsake and a personal archive of Opry performances over the years. As Nashville natives, they made strategic decisions about the use of these symbols in their album artwork. It is also worth noting that Jason & the Scorchers never played the Opry stage, and, to many, their music marked an unprecedented shift in sound for Music City. The Scorchers' stage presence far outpaced the "countryopolitan" politics of the conservative Nashville stages throughout the 1980s, so it would make more sense to say that the double meaning of this album artwork is a parody of contemporary industry while also paying tribute to some of their revered musical influences.



*Figure 15: Rank & File's album artwork for 1984 album Long Gone Dead with Southwestern motifs of an animal skull and a rattlesnake. Photo courtesy of KXAN Austin.*



*Figure 16: The Long Ryders of Southern California, Album artwork for their 1984 Album Native Sons. Group is dressed in tradition Western wear in front of a log cabin. Photo Courtesy of Rock & Roll Archives.*



*Figure 17: Rosie Flores Debut LP Same, Circa 1987. She wears Western leather fringe with a desert backdrop. Photo courtesy of the Austin Chronicle.*

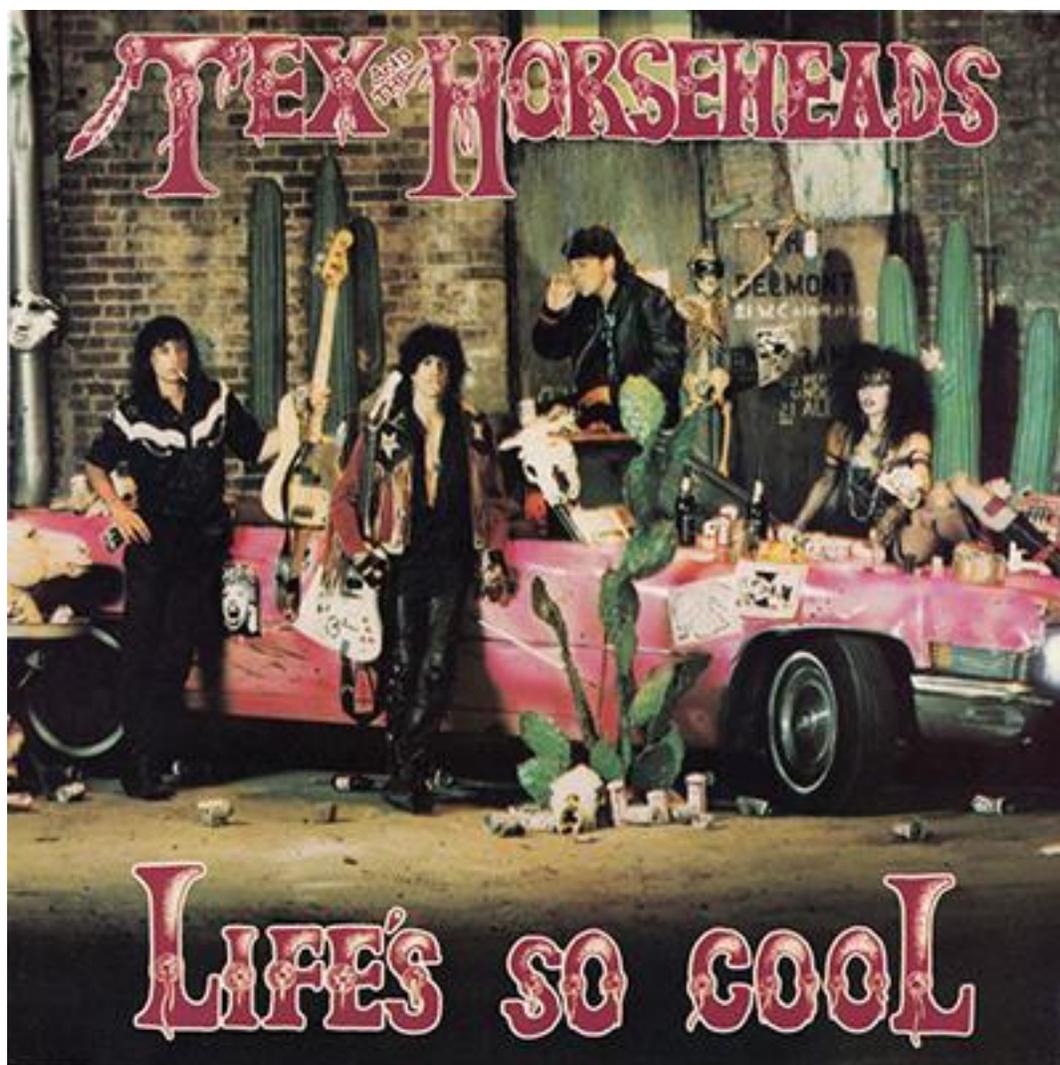
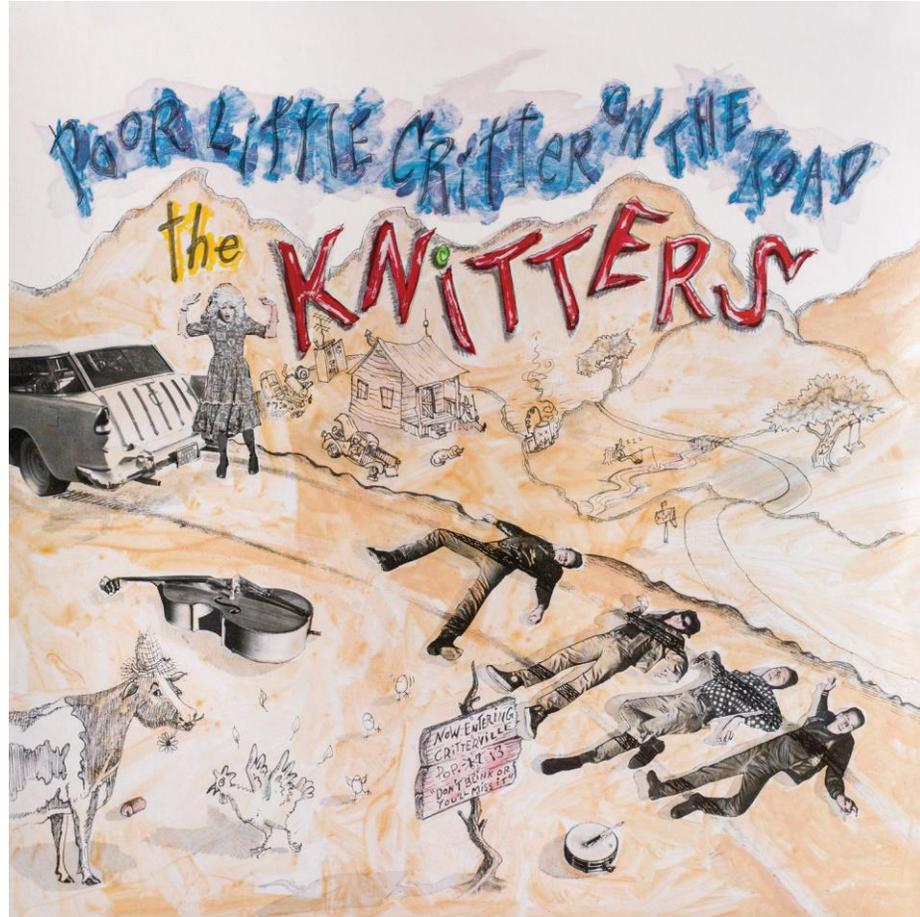


Figure 18: Los Angeles country punk band Tex & The Horseheads pose for their 1985 Album *Life's So Cool*. Photo Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution Rock & Roll.



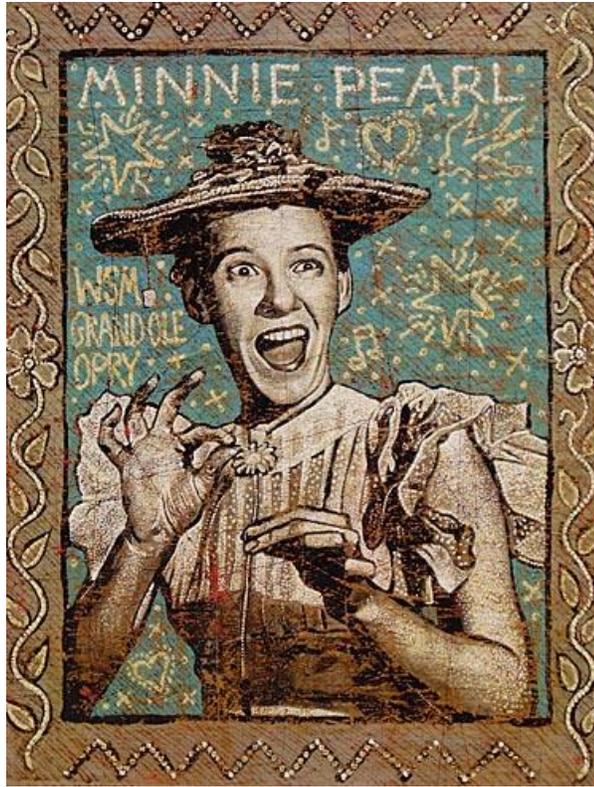
*Figure 19: Album artwork for The Knitters' 1985 album Poor Little Critter in the Road featuring desert and Western iconography. Photo courtesy of Fat Possum Records.*

The last analysis is of visual art by musician Jon Langford. A native of Wales, Langford is one of the founding members of the Mekons, a post-punk band that formed in the 1970s. Langford's career is one that demonstrates the many pathways punk musicians took to explore country music and its alternative subsets. The Mekons subtly dabbled in strains of folk, traditional country, and bluegrass styles, however, they did not explicitly or consistently demonstrate cowpunk aesthetic in the way that bands like Jason & the Scorchers did. Again, this fact reinforces the idea that there is no one monolithic experience for the style of cowpunk and, furthermore, there does not exist any one collective experience for underground subcultures.



*Figure 20: "Going Down in History" by Jon Langford, former member of The Mekons.*

Langford's art regularly utilizes relics of morbidity and death juxtaposed with depictions of country music legends and skeletal caricatures of Western and Southwestern mythology. In "Going Down in History," Langford paints an unidentifiable cowboy in the throes of a gun battle. He wears traditional cowboy garb including chaps, boots, spurs, a Western style shirt, and a cowboy hat that is flung off into the background. Scattered across the canvas are the words "Neglect," "History," and "No!" Fully formed sentences include "bite the hand that feeds you," and "commit to something drastic."



*Figure 21: "Minnie Pearl" by Jon Langford.*

Langford challenges the status quo with fine art forged in the lowbrow ethic of punk and does so in the aesthetic spirit of cowpunk. Even his rendering of Minnie Pearl maintains a resemblance to horror art in the punk underground. There is no specific reference for interpreting the words and phrases that saturate most of his pieces, but this language of defiance is startlingly similar to the raw “cut and paste” style of DIY punk fanzines made popular throughout the late 1970s and 1980s. Figure 22 offers a comparative look at the punk practice of “cut and paste” linguistics. The caricature of Queen Elizabeth II also lends itself to the common practice of artistic parody.

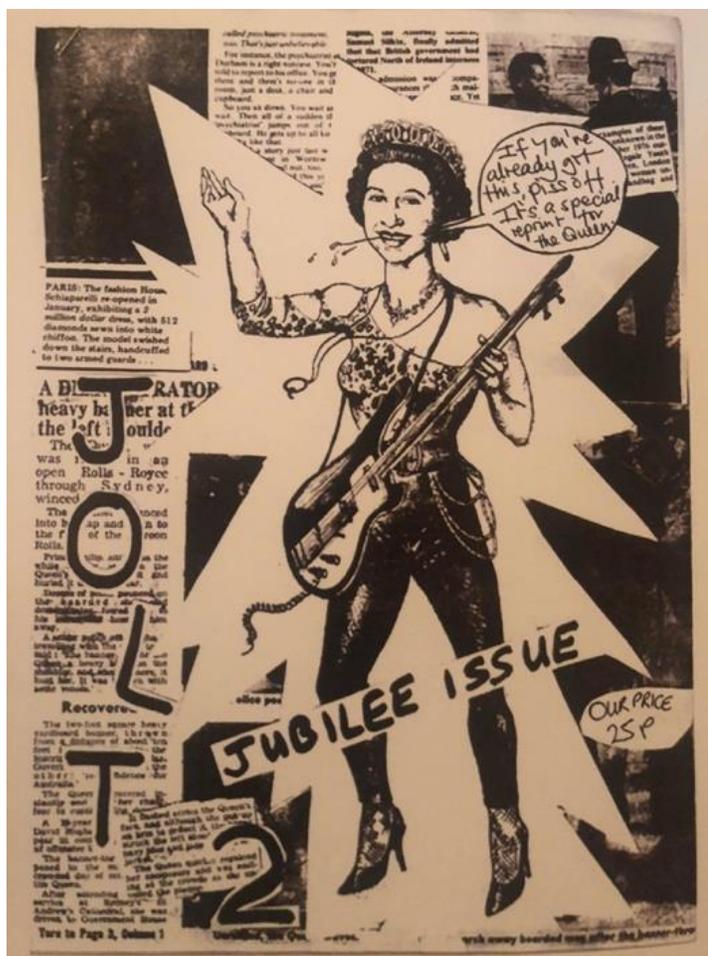


Figure 22: London Fanzine for comparative reference, created by Lucy Toothpaste, Summer 1977, Courtesy of Punk: An Aesthetic.

The study of music material evidence undoubtedly opens a broader range of comprehensive research into regional cross sections of popular music. In the case of cowpunk, it is absolutely mandatory to consider its material as part of its historical narrative. As a means through which to maintain collective and personal identity, alternative forms of punk and country style also manipulates our current understanding of tradition mobilization. This study of cowpunk material culture broadens existing understanding of what constitutes the social strictures of genre blending and works to help formulate a comprehensive argument for the study of subcultural moments like

these. Examining the tangible historiography of punk and country music places a special emphasis on the cultural construction of authenticity that helps purveyors of regional sound deconstruct and dissect the opaque boundaries of musical hybrids.

### CHAPTER III: REGIONALISM & PUNK: A DEEP DIVE INTO ICONOGRAPHY & CULTURAL MEMORY

With authenticity and materiality in mind, the subculture of cowpunk and other blends of American roots music abide by unique forms of cultural identity. That sense of identity is formed deliberately as a product of regional attitudes and constructed cultural memories. This chapter closely examines and argues the multiple meanings of memory construction as it applies to punk and country hybrids. Regional hybrids employ elements of localized iconography to assert identity, and cowpunk is a prime example of selective identity making practices.

At the heart of cowpunk expression is the cross between punk and elements of southern, western, and southwestern aesthetic. Musicians and participants in the scene made selective choices about which symbols and icons to employ in their way of self-expression. For example, Tony Kinman of Rank & File often wore an oversized flat-brimmed cowboy hat or suede fringe jacket. Jason Ringenberg hyper-stylized rendering of the Nashville scene included rhinestone hats and bright western shirts to match his high energy performances. These decisions have more to do with stage presence and fashion alone. Instead, they are representative of several concepts related to the mobilization of tradition, constructed memory, and nostalgia.

Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison introduce the idea of mobilization of tradition in their work, *Music and Social Movements*, as a social phenomenon where musicians and listeners utilize personal historical experiences to delineate recycled forms of tradition.<sup>61</sup> Their work insinuates a cultural “process of diffusion” where selective

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<sup>61</sup> Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, *Music and Social Movements: Mobilizing Traditions in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 27.

memories, aesthetics, and attitudes are repackaged in order to suit the contemporary social needs and attitudes of the modern day.<sup>62</sup> This process of diffusion, explained in Eyerman and Jamison's work, is evident in the overall style of cowpunk, where punk aesthetic represents the postmodern expression of irreverent style, and the adoption of western wear denotes a reverence for older forms of American music.



*Figure 23: Tony Kinman of the cowpunk band Rank & File, circa 1980s, photo courtesy of the L.A. Times.*

Cowpunk artists collected images and symbols associated with inherited cultural codes that assign and repackage the meaning, authenticity, and value of regional identifiers such as Southern, Western, and Southwestern fashion. It is also imperative to note that the country and punk aesthetic should not be understood merely in terms of its link to the popular past, or to iconography that is most familiar to the passive consumer,

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

but rather the amalgam and its “perceived cultural authenticity is often attributed to” its “association with “the here and now.”<sup>63</sup>

While the previous chapter argued that the material evidence of cowpunk acts as a tangible, regional identifier, this chapter acts as another layer that takes personal and cultural memory into account. Tangibility in the way of musical scenes are a crucial element of any hybridized subculture, but the intangible nature of memory reinforces the ways in which listeners and artists personalize and internalize historical pathways. Jose Van Dijk, a professor of media and culture at the University of Amsterdam, considers music of the twentieth century a “vital component of people’s personal memory” and a “constitutive element in the construction of collective identity and cultural heritage.”<sup>64</sup>

Cultural memory in this study refers to a shared understanding of the collective past amongst consumers of music and popular culture. Cultural memory as it relates to popular music is comprised of benchmark moments throughout the twentieth century that have been popularized in mass and mainstream media. The ways in which the general public recall the musical past is, over time, packaged neatly into categories of time, aesthetic, and sound. For example, the cultural memory of 1970s mainstream country music is recalled collectively as a decade where sonic artistry abided by the Nashville industry standards of steady production. Aesthetics included the rhinestone cowboy caricature, dazzling suits, fitted chiffon dresses, and a saturation of sparkle. This narrative is only part of an extensive and complex period where regional attitudes and styles mark

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<sup>63</sup> Andy Bennett and Ian Roger, “Popular Music and Materiality: Memorabilia, and Memory Traces,” *Popular Music and Society*, Vol. 39, No. 1, 2016, p. 32.

<sup>64</sup> Jose Van Dijk, “Record and Hold: Popular Music between Personal and Collective Memory,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, Vol. 23, No. 5, December 2006, pp. 357.

major shifts for the sound of country music. However, the cultural memory of the mainstream is often the first point of remembrance on the collective scale. Scholars, artists, and listeners know that subculture and regional scenes existed within this framework. A counter example to mainstream country music of the 1970s is the progressive scene that acted independently in the hills of Texas. Aesthetics borrowed from working class culture with items such as denim, graphic t-shirts, bandanas used as headbands or blouses, and worn-out boots. The sonic trajectory of this regional scene placed most of its value on performance rather than industry, cultivating a scene devoted to artistic authority and an organic embrace of the region's past situated in the present.



*Figure 24: Rosie Flores, far left, circa 1984. Photo by Vanessa Adams.*

San Antonio Native Rosie Flores, formerly of the Screamin' Sirens, is a prime example of borrowed aesthetics, personal identity, and regional heritage all at play in alternative rock. Today, she is a fixture of the central Texas scene and its eclectic history. Her early work was rooted in the Los Angeles Hardcore scene in the early 80s. The Screamin'

Sirens performed “thrashing versions of hillbilly hits like Tammy Wynette’s *Your Good Girl’s Gonna Go Bad*, beer-soaked Patsy Cline tunes, Latino melodies” and were always known for its “wildly-original onstage antics and frisky “ultimate fiesta” music style.”<sup>65</sup>

Their aesthetic style coupled Southwestern working class with L.A. punk contrast.

Oermann describes their outfits made them look like they were “costumed Miss Kitty and the Pointer Sisters during a barroom brawl, they mix and match brass, flash, and trash for a veritable definition of cowpunk chic.”<sup>66</sup>

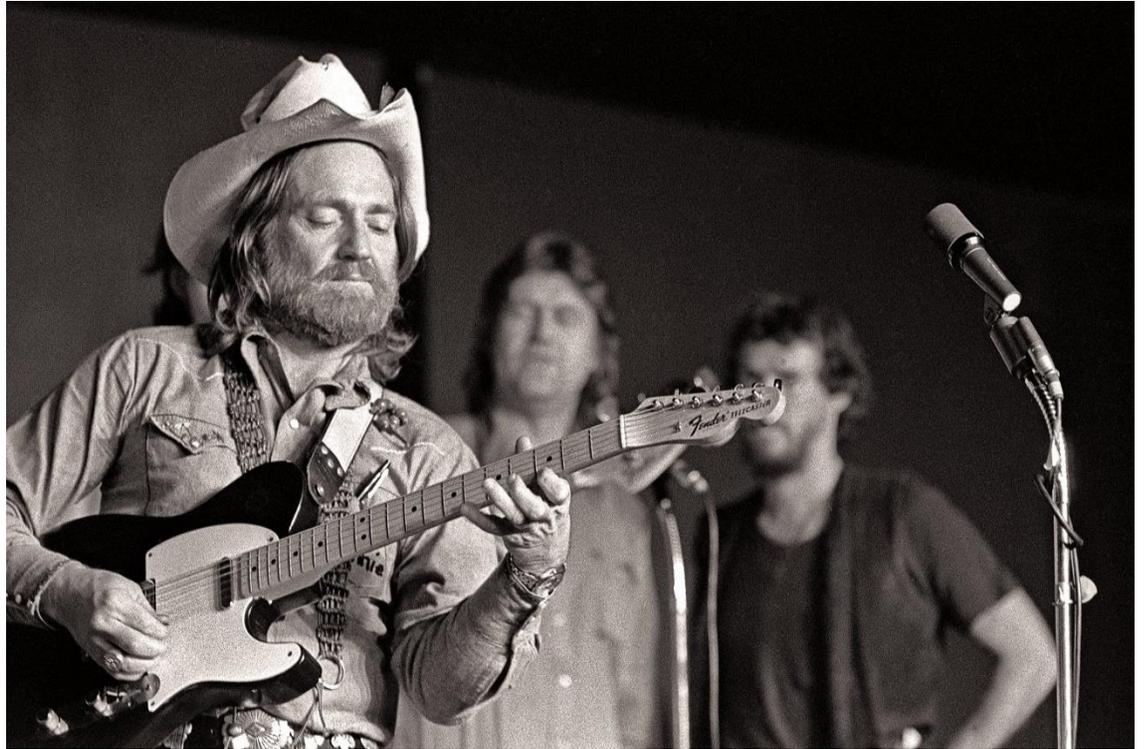
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<sup>65</sup> Robert K. Oermann, “Rosie Flores sings a siren song,” *Tennessean*, Jul 27, 1986, p. 127.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*



*Figure 25: Porter Wagoner wearing his iconic rhinestone suit popularized in the mainstream country music scene of the 1970s, photo courtesy of Smithsonian Music.*



*Figure 26: Willie Nelson, circa 1976, at the height of the Progressive scene in denim shirt, worn out cowboy hat, unshaven with grown out hair. Photo courtesy of Texas Monthly.*

That said, memory plays a critical role in the construction of regional musical hybrids. While cultural memory frames our historical and collective understanding of the musical past, hybrids refine and illuminate the ways in which subcultures work to recycle and redefine regional propensities and relate them to contemporary attitudes. Cowpunk is a prime example of this phenomenon. As discussed in the introduction, punk rock and its forms of expression play on the contemporary need to push back against mainstream society. From performative styles characterized by high octane antics to aesthetic choices meant to provoke shock value, punk as a lifestyle challenged the status quo. Punk rock served as a counternarrative to the mass culture of the late twentieth century. Artists in the early 1980s who exhibited sensibilities of punk and threaded elements of traditional country into their sound reflect this cultural recycling.

Although defining cultural memory as it relates to this work sets a foundation of understanding mere terms, most important to this chapter is the use of Alison Landsberg's trailblazing methodological approach of prosthetic memory to frame cowpunk as a moment steeped in memory construction. Landsberg, a professor of history at George Mason University, specializes in memory studies and the ways in which people construct memory of non-lived historical events. She explains that "taking on memories of events through which one did not live is not in itself a new phenomenon," rather, "like all other modalities, memory is historically and culturally specific; it has meant different things to people and cultures at different times and has been instrumentalized in the service of diverse cultural practices."<sup>67</sup> She specifically applies her framework to mass culture and politically charged historical threads, but prosthetic memory is just as applicable to regional hybrids of popular music.

If the cultural attitudes of punk rock challenged the societal norms of the postmodern, then the amalgam of this style with traditional elements of country music denotes a yearning for the past through the lens of cultural memory. Landsberg illuminates the "unreliability of memory in the modern age, combined with the ruthlessness of the present, compels people to engage" in memory making practices "that make the past recognizable and potentially interpellative."<sup>68</sup> Cowpunk as a style utilized the non-lived past to express its own personalized form of regional identity. Whether or not those aesthetic choices were emotionally driven or motivated by a cycle of retotyping or parody is a layered question to decipher. Examples of this hybridity

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<sup>67</sup> Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*, New York: Columbia, 2004, pp. 3.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

playing out surpass fashion aesthetics alone. Cowpunk performance employed tropes of traditional country. Audible examples of prosthetic memory engagement are evident in the recorded history of cowpunk.

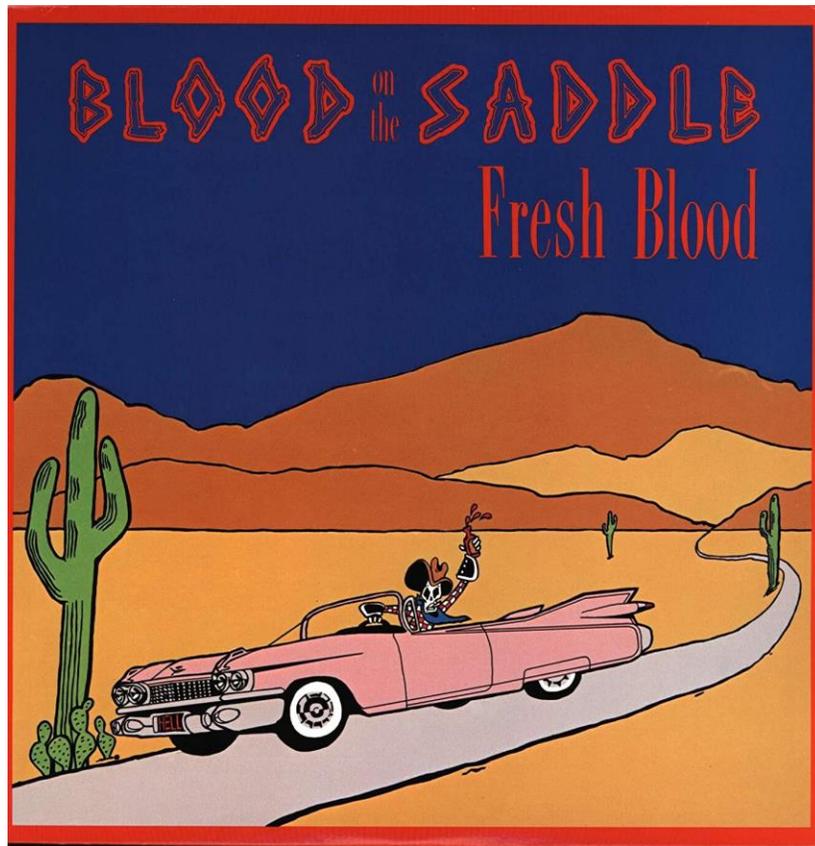
Social Distortion, a punk band with cowpunk flare from Fullerton, California, regularly called upon non-lived memory and thematic tropes of Wild West culture and country music. Their 1988 single off the *L.A. Prison Bound* album, “Like an Outlaw (for You),” sounds almost like an amplified and angsty version of Frankie Lane’s 1958 recording of cowboy anthem “Rawhide.” Within the minute of the track listeners hear ranch calls and cattle whistles accompanied by a beat and melody that closely resembles a train moving vigorously on its tracks. The song directly references Western outlaw culture throughout its lyrics. On the same album, the song “Prison Bound” references Johnny Cash with the lyric “and Johnny says I’ll walk the line.”<sup>69</sup> Mike Ness, lead vocalist, and bandmates had no lived experience of 19<sup>th</sup> century Western culture, but instead chose to express these tropes throughout the album as a form of prosthetic memory. Western movies and cowboy songs are major elements of 1950s and early 1960s popular culture. It makes sense, then, that cowpunk artists extract deep memory from the mass culture they consumed and projected those constructions alongside their reverence for older forms of roots music.

Rank & File recorded a 1982 cover of “Wabash Cannonball,” a traditional country music standard originally performed by famed Carter family and released in 1932. Roy Acuff later recorded the most popular version of the song. Acuff was a loyal and long-time member of the Grand Ole Opry who was eager to preserve the legacy of

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<sup>69</sup> Mike Ness, “Prison Bound,” *L.A. Prison Bound*, Restless Records, 1988.

the radio show's now century-long legacy. Rank & File's rendition still maintained the vigor of cowpunk performance, but the track also remains true to the stripped down, traditional style of country performance that Acuff was known for. In covering the song, the band employed elements of cultural memory while also engaging their own personalized affinity for roots music. Adopting traditional country styles are evidence of cowpunk artists and listeners need to "connect a person's sense of self to a larger community and generation."<sup>70</sup> Similar covers include the Dead Kennedy's rugged rendition of "Rawhide" and Blood on the Saddle's fast paced version of "Folsom Prison Blues."



*Figure 27: Album artwork for Blood on the Saddle's 1988 record Fresh Blood. Chosen artwork depicts skeletal figure driving a 1950s Chevrolet convertible through the desert. Circa 1988. Photo Courtesy*

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<sup>70</sup> Van Dijck, pp. 357.

*of band discography.*

The Dead Milkmen, a punk group from the Northeast, even attained rotation on MTV with their 1988 song “Punk Rock Girl,” which makes specific reference to mosh pit style dancing in the aesthetic of Minnie Pearl. While it seems to be a wild juxtaposition, these are just a few instances of cultural memory remembrance and recycling through the lens of contemporary mass culture.

Nine Pound Hammer, an Owensboro, Kentucky band, act as a interesting counterpoint to the angle of cultural remembrance and mass culture. The band is unique its literal adoption of rural and working class motifs rather than employing them as secondary influences in their music. While many cowpunk acts merely imitated the aesthetics of Western and Southwestern culture and subtly nodded to the performative style in their music, Nine Pound Hammer commits to a musical repertoire representative of economic instability in the American south. The band has a heavy, yet minimalistic sound. Lead singer Scott Luallen’s voice exhibit’s inflections derived from a southern accent, but his vocal delivery is guttural and abrasive. The band’s name derives from Merle Travis’s song “Nine Pound Hammer,” which has been recorded by The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, John Prine, and, in its earlier folkloric iteration, by Leadbelly at Angola State Prison.<sup>71</sup>

At the heart of cowpunks relationship with deep cultural memory is the motive to recall the recent past. Landsberg expresses the distinction between the “validation of the past without question” and the “desire to experience or reexperience history” as an

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<sup>71</sup> Bruce Jackson, *Wake Up Dead Man: Hard Labor and Southern Blues* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999), p. 237.

experiential form of self-expression.<sup>72</sup> It is not that cowpunk artists and listeners employed hybrid elements to validate collective historical narratives as fact or as an objective past, rather they acted on the regional and personal desire to produce historical simulations that emotionally linked them to the present. Both the material and the immaterial of cowpunk evoke an array of cultural pathways in the history of country and punk music, but neither could have survived without the subcultural infrastructure to sustain the music and the scene. Still, cowpunk and its popular memory fell victim to a disintegrating thread of popular cultural memory. While the genre had an impactful stake in the regional expression of cultural attitudes, its coverage by media in the age of MTV and mass music consumption, or lack thereof, placed its long-range memory at the periphery of popular thought over time. The next chapter explores the ways in which cowpunk physically and regionally manifested itself across the country.

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<sup>72</sup> Landsberg, pp. 47.

## CHAPTER IV: REGIONAL CASE STUDIES: WHERE PUNK AND COUNTRY COLLIDE

Just as iconography and regional identity play key roles in the physical manifestation of cowpunk, so does the built environment in which genre hybrids exist. To have a music scene, artists need audience, certainly, but also performance venues and other structural havens such as record shops, bars, and other hangouts that serve the subculture. It is, then, crucial to look at regional case studies where country and punk collided to form subcultural havens for alternative performance. This chapter examines the alternative scenes of Nashville, Austin, and Los Angeles in the early 1980s. Each of these localities presents a unique twist on regional tropes in the form of performative style and aesthetic presence. While this chapter will work to illustrate the subcultural terrains of each city, it is important to note that this research does not represent an exhaustive list of bands or recordings. Rather, this work is meant to present readers an overarching, bird's eye view of cowpunk infrastructure and the ways in which each locality revealed its regional proclivities.

### NASHVILLE

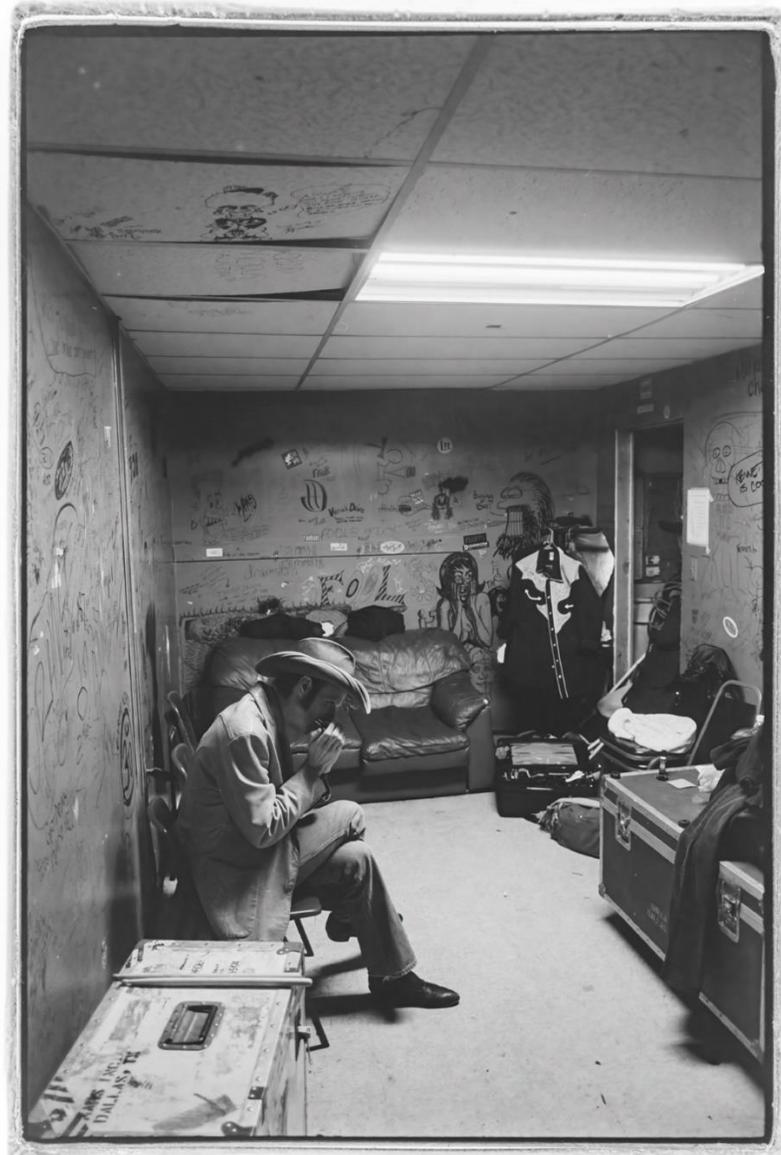
While it is a glaring truth that mainstream country music makes up the majority musical terrain of modern-day Music City, Nashvillians who consumed music on the periphery of country music culture also created their own spaces to enjoy the amalgam of country and punk. The 1970s marked a dynamic shift in the physical terrain of country music tourism in Nashville. The downtown area of the city gave way to adult bookstores

and a general decline in business. The city's "Mother Church," Ryman Auditorium, was in disrepair. By 1974 WSM had moved the Grand Ole Opry Show away from the downtown area to a new Grand Ole Opry House on Cumberland River. With "country music moving to the suburbs, different forms of music took charge in Nashville."<sup>73</sup> What stayed in the downtown catered to alternative performances. The Exit/In opened its doors in 1971 on Elliston Place near Vanderbilt University. It began as a listening room where songwriters could test their material, and industry labels could showcase new artists. It would be another decade before the venue took on a new life as one of the central hubs for rock performance in the Nashville.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Matt Tate, "Nashville Music Venues," Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture Online Edition, *Tennessee Historical Society*, <https://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entries/nashville-music-venues/>, accessed April 29<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

<sup>74</sup> The Exit/In serves as one of the prolific spaces for alternative performance in Nashville since 1971. The venue holds national and local significance as a hotbed for rock performance. Historically, Nashville's musical terrain is characterized by mainstream country music, industry, and recording. The Exit/In stands as a beacon for performance driven culture and community in Music City. The history of performers is broad, and the venue welcomes nontraditional styles and attitudes in a conservative political geography.



*Figure 28: Jason Ringenberg backstage at the Exit/In, Circa 1997, Photo by C. Taylor Crothers.*

In an interview with Scorchers front man Jason Ringenberg in April 2022, he painted a vibrant picture of the Nashville underground. He immediately recalled the Phrank and Steins club as one of the earliest venues for punk in the city. By day, Phrank's operated as a hot dog eatery with German beer options. The space operated through the late 70s, advertising smaller music showcases from time to time in the

Tennessean. Located off Broadway downtown, Phrank's exited in the "basement of what is now St. Mary's Booksore."<sup>75</sup>



*Figure 29: Phrank and Stein's operated in the basement of what is now St. Mary's Bookstore, located in the West End of Nashville. Photo courtesy of Yelp.*

By the close of the 1970s, however, a younger crowd of musicians in Nashville did not see themselves in the musical terrain of Nashville. Johnny Hollywood, bassist for the Nashville punk band Cloverbottom (named for a local mental hospital), exclaimed "there was no place to hear the kind of music we wanted to hear."<sup>76</sup> Owned by Rick Champion, a former warehouse employee for Gusto Records, the venue's tenure as a

<sup>75</sup> Tracy Moore, "Hot bands, big deals, a buzzing scene – Nashville's 80s rock scene had it all," *The Nashville Scene*, [https://www.nashvillescene.com/news/hot-bands-big-deals-a-buzzing-music-scene-nashvilles-80s-rock-scene-had-it-all/article\\_82b25deb-9626-582f-b8fe-cd96baff0db0.html](https://www.nashvillescene.com/news/hot-bands-big-deals-a-buzzing-music-scene-nashvilles-80s-rock-scene-had-it-all/article_82b25deb-9626-582f-b8fe-cd96baff0db0.html), August 2005, accessed March 2021.

<sup>76</sup> Walter Carter, "New Wave Lives on Despite Uphill Struggle," *The Tennessean*, August 1, 1980.

hotspot for punk rock only lasted a few years, but it acted as a space for newer bands to try out new material and find their sound. “At night the place would open up the doors and punk rock bands would play. They would charge \$1 a head. I’m pretty sure R.E.M. played one of their first shows there when they first came to town,” recalled Jason Ringenberg.<sup>77</sup> Tracy Moore of the *Nashville Scene* describes the role of Phrank’s as offering a “place and a sound for this growing scene of hungry kids for anything with three wee chords a whole lot of range.”<sup>78</sup> Just as soon as Phrank’s became a haven for punk in Music City, it closed its doors in 1982 due to financial issues.

Conveniently, another club down the street at Nineteenth Ave. and Broadway would pave the way for cowpunk in Nashville. Cantrell’s, named after its owner Terry Cantrell, once home to a Big Boy restaurant where, rumor has it, that “Kris Kristofferson once worked.”<sup>79</sup> Cantrell’s is credited with giving acts such as the Circle Jerks and Black Flag their first exposure to audiences in Music City.<sup>80</sup> Moore details the unlikeliness of Cantrell’s punk trajectory in Nashville with special notes on the owner’s background:

Terry Cantrell was an unlikely candidate to serve as godfather to Nashville’s rock scene. In 1978, he was a season ticket-holder to the Nashville Symphony. He attended Chaffin’s Barn Dinner Theater regularly and rarely consumed alcohol. A Department of Transportation engineer by day, he embarked on a series of entrepreneurial ventures by night—among them Springwater, the Centennial Park dive he’s run since May 1978 on a handshake.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Jason Ringenberg, Oral Interview, Conducted by Jennifer E. Ruch Young, April 14, 2022.

<sup>78</sup> Moore, “Hot Bands, Big Deals,” *Nashville Scene*.

<sup>79</sup> Tate, *Nashville Music Venues*.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> Moore, “Hot Bands, Big Deals,” *Nashville Scene*.

It did not take long for the club to become a hub for Nashville's underground. Whereas Phrank's opened the door for punk and other alternative subsets of rock and country to unfold, Cantrell's took the proverbial torch from Rick Goldman and added fuel to the flame.



*Figure 30: Cantrell's, Circa early 1980s, Photo Courtesy of Cantrell's Inn Nashville Social Group.*

Ringenberg remembers Cantrell's as a true intersection of subculture and performance, where the Scorchers and other bands would play and hangout in their spare time. He remembers the space fondly as a venue where “we could develop our audience and develop our sound.”<sup>82</sup> Besides Cantrell's having been credited for the exposure of

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<sup>82</sup> Ringenberg, Oral Interview.

punk acts to larger audiences, the venue “facilitated the emergence” of Jason & the Scorchers.<sup>83</sup> Early on, Ringenberg remembers the Nashville underground as a group of “a couple hundred kids” who shared an interest in non-mainstream music and, with the help of Cantrell’s, the Scorchers garnered major support from audiences in such spaces.<sup>84</sup> Their style of “screeching punk” and “country swing” posed a unique juxtaposition to the traditional stylings of Nashville sound.<sup>85</sup>



*Figure 31: Jason Ringenberg, Right. Perry Baggs, Right. Playing under an outdoor tent at Cantrell’s, Circle early 1980s, Photo courtesy of Cantrell’s Inn Nashville Social Group.*

<sup>83</sup> Tate, “Nashville Music Venues.”

<sup>84</sup> Ringenberg, Oral Interview.

<sup>85</sup> Tate, “Nashville Music Venues.”

Speaking to the parallels and oppositional forces at play in the Nashville underground and with respect to cowpunk blossoming in a city so married to the conventional presentation of country music, Ringenberg carefully explains “Folks thought there was an incredible dissimilarity between those two genres, but I think if you look at it with some depth you’ll see more similarity than difference.”<sup>86</sup> He goes on to detail the parallels in punk and country music structures and the ways in which they share thematic interchangeability. Just as in country music listeners embrace notions of heartbreak and loss, punk also represents similar attitudes of yearning. Ringenberg says both styles are expressive of “the little guy trying to get a head in life in a world that doesn’t want him to.”<sup>87</sup>

The growth of the Nashville underground and of cowpunk in general did not come without pushback from the mainstream country machine, however. He claims there was “certainly a pushback from all the Nashville misfits against the mainstream country world, and there was certainly a scene of people interested in that kind of music that didn’t feel any sort of affinity to the country music establishment.”<sup>88</sup> That chasm between Nashville’s burgeoning underground and reverence for regional identity and older forms of American roots music was the opportunity that Ringenberg & the Scorchers sought to meld. Their “unique hijacking of country’s traditional blaze with punk’s attitude had the shock of the new,” however, the group also “encouraged local rock fans to take pride in

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<sup>86</sup> Ringenberg, Oral Interview.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

their regional roots, playing Hank Williams covers with a speed that Black Flag couldn't touch."<sup>89</sup>

## AUSTIN

Just as Nashville's punk underground existed in tandem with the mainstream musical terrain of the growing city, Austin, Texas also underwent a similar iteration of underground subculture. While Austin has always garnered a reputation for eclectic musical expression dating back to the early 1960s with the folk resurgence, the psychedelic subculture of the late 1960s, and the progressive country of the 1970s, the emergence of punk was an altogether oppositional cultural reaction to the politics and mainstream of Texan life in the early 1980s. While Nashville punk was embracive of regional markers of Southern identity, Austin punk seemed to reject or poke fun at regionalism. Ironically, the very first major punk shows to tour through Texas played at traditional country venues. The Sex Pistols drew punk rocker crowds to both Randy's Rodeo in San Antonio and the Longhorn Ballroom in Dallas.<sup>90</sup> Both shows undoubtedly facilitated the growth of the punk scene in the Lone Star State.

Pat Blashill, a photojournalist and native Texas, immersed himself in the Austin punk scene over the course of the late 1970s and early 1980s. In an interview with the *The Texas Standard*, Blashill explained that the "scene emerged in the university town" and was an intentional "rebuke of the racism, religious conservatism, and conservative Greek culture dominant on the University of Texas campus at the time."<sup>91</sup> This note is an

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<sup>89</sup> Moore, "Hot Bands, Big Deals."

<sup>90</sup> John H. Slate, "Punk Rock," Handbook of Texas, *Texas State Historical Association*, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/punk-rock>, accessed February 8, 2022.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

interesting juxtaposition of the city's earlier subcultural scenes that directly called upon regional tropes and iconography to denote identity. For example, the progressive country scene saw young listeners adopt the symbol of the armadillo, the state's animal, as a regional marker of identity and local subculture. Others in the scene saw the rebranding of several Texas made beer companies such as Pearl, Schlitz, or Lonestar. These were beers synonymous with your grandparents, but participants in the scene eagerly latched on to the branding because it symbolized everything it meant to be uniquely Texan.



*Figure 32: The Big Boys of Austin, Texas, location unknown, photo courtesy of Texas State Historical Association.*

The Austin punk scene saw this earlier regional framework turned on its head by acting as a “collection of artists looking for creative ways to express angst and

dissatisfaction toward mainstream culture.”<sup>92</sup> It just so happened that the Austin scene was able to thrive in a wave of conservatism mainly based on the fact that the city had always maintained itself as a liberal leaning blue county in a sea of red politics. Blashill explains:

But Lone Star punk in the 1980s was queer, feminist, and more Texican than Texas. We were furious, but what were we raging against? For me, the golden age of Austin punk began with the most woke blast of anti-racism ever recorded, the Dick’s first single, “Hate the Police.” By drawing a bead on the police racism and murder, our most pissed off band put it all on the table—our self-loathing, our complicity, and our identity as Texas.”<sup>93</sup>

The central hotspot for the Austin punk scene existed at Raul’s, a small bar that originally catered to Tejano music. When musicians such as Jesse Sublett of the Skunks and Kathy Valentine of the Go-Go’s approached the owners of Raul’s in hopes of a venue to frequent, the trajectory of Raul’s changed drastically.

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<sup>92</sup> Caroline Covington, “Austin’s Rule-Breaking ‘80s Punk Scene on Full Display in ‘Texas is the Reason’, *The Texas Standard*, October 23, 2020.

<sup>93</sup> Pat Blashill, *White Rage: An Oral History of Texas Punk, 1979-1986*, *Southwest Review*, Vol. 4 (Number 105, 2020).



*Figure 33: Raul's weekly lineup that includes disco, salsa, tejano, and punk acts. Circa early 1980s. Photo courtesy of the Austin American Statesman.*

One of the more controversial events that unfolded at Raul's was a dispute that erupted between the lead singer of The Huns, Phil Tolstead, who “verbally abused a police officer” while he was “investigating a noise complaint.”<sup>94</sup> This exchange incited “a small riot” with “six arrests” in total. Many describe this altercation, and its national attention

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<sup>94</sup> John H. Slate, *Punk Rock*.

from *Rolling Stone Magazine*, to be a defining moment for the reputation of Texas punk.



*Figure 34: Raul's club, located near the University of Texas Campus. Circa 1981. Photo courtesy of the Texas State Historical Association.*

Other important sites of punk performance include Voltaire's Basement and Liberty Lunch. Voltaire's existed in the basement of a former bookstore on Lavaca Street. The space was unassuming, with concrete walls and steel beams making up the whole of the performance venue. The venue played host to major names in Texas punk including The Big Boys, the Dicks, the Offenders, and many more until it closed in 1984. Liberty lunch opened in the late seventies as the tide of progressive country began to wane. In fact, several of the beams from the Armadillo World Headquarters, a haven for Austin subcultural performance, were purchased and used in the construction of the venue. It seems to be an interesting nod to Austin's nostalgia laden tendencies, finding

ways to remember the musical past in the never-ending face of development. The infrastructure of Austin punk developed quickly despite the lack of media coverage. Blashill credits the Texas punk scene as being “much more unusual” because it had the chance to “kind of fester and grow on its own.”<sup>95</sup>



*Figure 35: The Big Boys perform at Voltaire's Basement. Circa 1984. Photo courtesy of the Texas Standard.*

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<sup>95</sup> Pat Blashill, “White Rage.”



*Figure 36: Biscuit performs with the Big Boys at Liberty Lunch, Circa 1984, photo by Pat Blashill.*

After a slew of violent occurrences surfaced at performances alongside the fact that many had begun to accept punk in the mainstream of American music culture, the Austin punk scene slowly faded by the mid 1980s. Despite waning popularity later in the decade, the pulse of the Austin underground illuminated many important identity struggles for those intertwined in the music. “The ideological gap between the scene’s characters and their conservative state” accentuates the complexities of regional heritage and coming of age subcultures born out of resistance to the old guard.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

## LOS ANGELES

On the West Coast, purveyors of punk rock took on an altogether Californian personification of cowpunk style. Trailblazing bands such as the Dils, who became Rank & File, X, the Blasters, Calamity Jayne & the Cowpunks, and the Long Ryders presented listeners an angle of generational and regional identity. While the structural terrain of L.A. punk was far more sprawling than that of its Austin and Nashville counterparts, its faction of artists who adopted tenants of Western and Southwestern culture speaks directly to this study of punk regionalism. Some artists were outwardly expressive of cowboy culture in their stage presence and album art, while others adopted elements of the area's psychedelic rock and country of yesteryear. Thematic parallels of the lawless Wild West rang true for generations of artists and listeners alike, and L.A. created a playground where traditional country stylings and the amped up antics of punk seemed to coalesce naturally.

Dwight Yoakam is quoted as saying “Merle Haggard said that the difference between country music from Nashville and the country music from the West coast was that country music in Nashville came from churches, and the country music in the West Coast came from honkytonks and bars.”<sup>97</sup> He poses an interesting angle for the ways in which the California scene cultivated a less constrictive environment of musical creativity for country and punk music. To many in this scene, these genre hybrids were

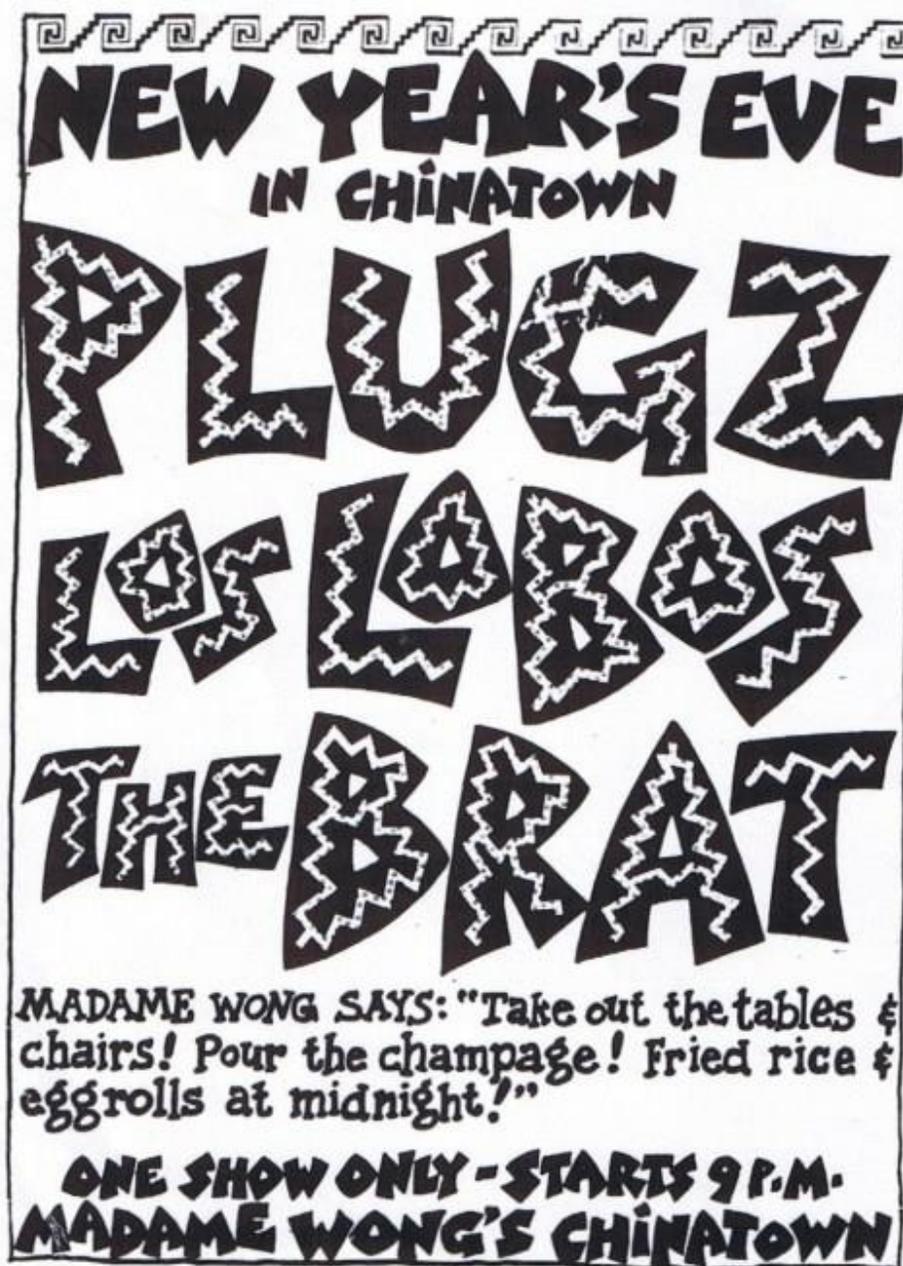
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<sup>97</sup> Drew Tewksbury, “Dwight Yoakum on his early cowpunk years in Los Angeles,” *PBS So Cal*, <https://www.pbssocal.org/country-music/dwight-yoakam-on-his-early-cowpunk-years-in-los-angeles>, accessed January 2019.

hardly hybrids at all. Instead, they viewed the sound of the L.A. scene as a form of Americana and the “next generation of country-rock.”<sup>98</sup> Calling upon the Bakersfield sound of the 1970s and the psychedelic movement of the late 1960s, cowpunk in L.A. in the 1980s became a form of selective heritage, where artists made conscious decisions to employ iconography, aesthetics, and sounds of older regional musical styles.

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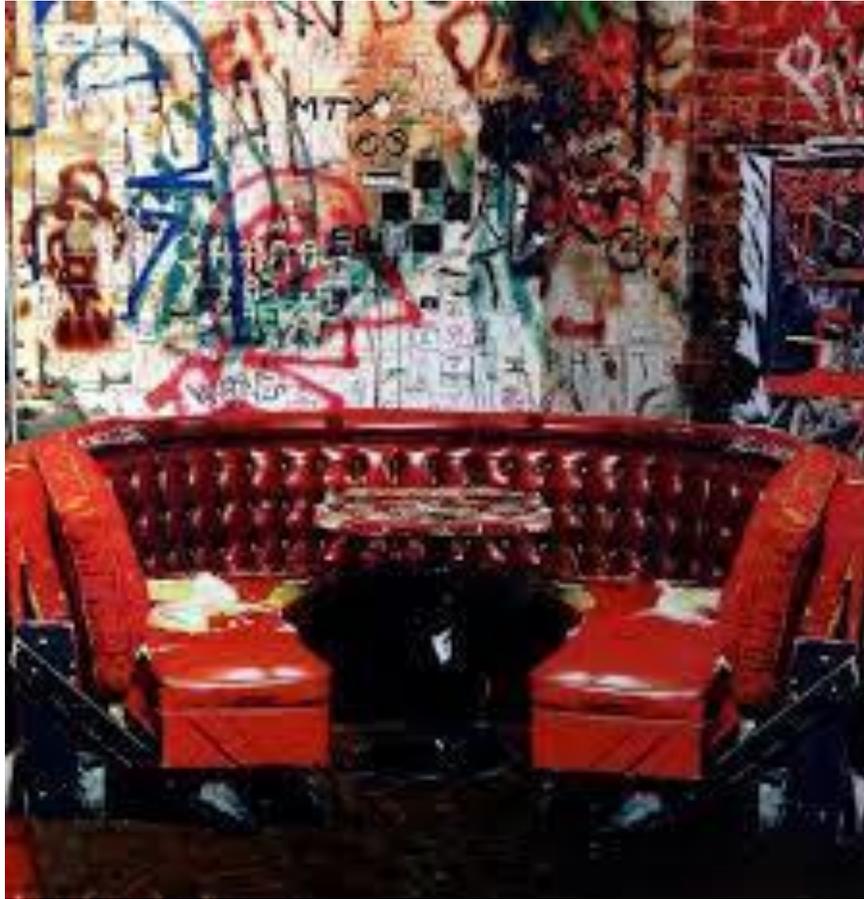
<sup>98</sup> Ibid.



*Figure 37: Madame Wong's flyer, circa early 1980s, courtesy of Los Angeles Hardcore & Punk Archive.*

Madame Wong's, owned and operated by Esther Wong, was situated in the Chinatown area of L.A.. In the late 1970s, and after an attitude of initial opposition to the idea, Esther decided to broaden the scope of performance at her business to include a wide array of punk rockers. Of all the hardcore bands she booked, it is interesting that

Wong had a particularly difficult time deciding whether to book Dwight Yoakam. He explains that “she didn’t like what she saw,” so she decided to book him in a different venue away from her main space at Madame Wong’s.<sup>99</sup>



*Figure 38: Al's Bar, Arts District in L.A., Circa late 1980s, photo courtesy of the American Hotel.*

Another important space for L.A. country punkers was Al’s Bar. Open for almost two decades, the small bar was located in the Arts District in a rundown hotel.<sup>100</sup> Jim Freek of *Glue Magazine* lovingly described the space as a “cross between CBGB’s and Cheers.”<sup>101</sup> Groups such as Social Distortion, Los Lobos, X, NOFX, and many more

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Andy Furillo. "Al's Bar: It's Not Just Blue-Collar Anymore," *The Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, December 6, 1981.

<sup>101</sup> Jim Freek, "Al's Bar Hits the Big 2-0," *Glue Magazine*, Mar/Apr 1999.

played there. The entirety of the venue truly mirrored a living art project, with graffiti tagged across every inch of the interior walls. Many of the booths, once upholstered with leather, were split and dirty.

Aside from the dives and clubs where punk rock gave way to twangier sounds, another alternative to mainstream rock and country developed in Southern California, dubbed the Paisley Underground, which was an umbrella term came to represent a diverse offering of alternative rock, country, psychedelia, and pop, many initially rejected the label. Stephen McCarthy, a member of the Long Ryders, explained in a 1984 *Billboard* interview that “we consider ourselves to be a country band that just had a large rock’n’roll influence.”<sup>102</sup> In fact, “those involved in the scene also agree on something else: the umbrella label failed to take into account the diverse bands that made up the Paisley Underground.”<sup>103</sup>

The very core of the issue speaks to the complexities of labeling cowpunk, its relative performative styles, and separating the moniker from the regional mannerisms that bind the style together. Steven Roback, co-founder of Rain Parade, beautifully articulates the algorithm of genre hybrids in the twentieth century as a “spontaneous resynthesis of many influences, which happens periodically, colored by the personalities of the people and the times.”<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Jeff Tamarkin, “Long Ryders: Don’t Call us Country Rock,” *Billboard Magazine*, January 1984, p. 1.

<sup>103</sup> “Tell Me When Its Over: The Paisley Underground Reconsidered,” *PopMatters*, April 2002.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

**CHAPTER V: THE STRUCTURAL LEGACY OF ALTERNATIVE  
PERFORMANCE: PROBLEMS OF PRESERVATION IN THE MUSICAL  
UNDERGROUND**

In the larger, overarching narrative of popular music culture throughout the twentieth century, sites of the musical past encounter difficulty in the way of preservation and remembrance. Only in the last few decades has the field of popular music studies gained veritable traction within the academic realm as a reputable source of social and cultural history. Alongside the academic struggle to acknowledge and interpret popular music as a crucial part of American history is the ongoing effort to find preservation routes for spaces and places of music history.

To prove worthiness in the way of preservation also means proving that sites of popular music and, specifically, of the underground, are vital remnants of subcultural heritage. Definitions of heritage are highly subjective, however, it is important to note that, historically, heritage and its value is assigned by those in power and usually alongside federal support. In opposition to this idea, popular music as a subfield of academic study is relatively infant in the scope of practice, whose mass consumption reads as a form of finite consumer culture and, therefore, deemed unworthy of heritage designation. Amanda Brandellero and Susanne Janssen, sociologists with special interests in media, culture, and the application of heritage frameworks to popular music, argue that subcultures associated with popular music are “constructed in opposition” and treated as “commercial, inauthentic” and ultimately fall victim to a lack of institutionalized support.<sup>105</sup> Now, this take seems dated, but their work pushes practitioners of public

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<sup>105</sup> Amanda Brandellero and Susanne Janssen, “Popular Music as Cultural Heritage:

history and popular music to approach heritage from an angle that is multi-vocal and inclusive in its delineation of power and practice. As such, the wide array of popular music heritage practices, whether federal, state, or privately established, showcase the wide public appeal and potential for public engagement. Their work illustrates the fluidity and mobility of heritage as a term and as an integral practice of preservation in the field of popular music.

These boundaries in heritage definitions create major obstacles for present day efforts in the preservation of popular music. How, then, do public historians go about finding routes of preservation for regional genre hybrids and the spaces in which they existed? A harsh truth for the structural history of cowpunk is that majority of its infrastructure no longer exists. For many of the regional scenes noted in this work, their venues, performance spaces, and hangouts underwent several cycles of use or abandonment. For example, Phrank's in Nashville is now the basement of a bookstore, while Raul's in Austin no longer stands and Cantrell's in Nashville was demolished. Al's Bar in Los Angeles is now part of a renovated hotel, while Liberty Lunch in Austin was forced to shut its doors to make way for major redevelopment in the downtown area.

One current example that speaks to this trend is the ongoing effort to preserve and protect Nashville's own Exit/In on Elliston Place. It operated early on as a listening room and, over the course of the next decade, the Exit/In acted as a haven for alternative performance in Music City. It catered to the subcultural undercurrents and welcomed out of town acts that might not find another performance avenue in a city devoted to

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Scoping out the Field of Practice," *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, Vol. 20, (No. 3, 2014): 225.

mainstream country music. In my interview with Jason Ringenberg of the Scorchers, he referred to the Exit/In as a place, in the 1980s, that cowpunks and other alternative local acts would “graduate to.”<sup>106</sup> While the venue started out as a space where singers and songwriters could test new material, by the early 1980s, the Exit/In was, in the words of Ringenberg, “a real proper music venue.”<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Jason Ringenberg, Oral Interview.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.



*Figure 39: The Exit/In, Circa 2021, photo by Jennifer Ruch Young.*

When the Scorchers and other Nashville underground artists finally graced the stage of the Exit/In, they knew they had made it big in Music City. For over five decades, the space has acted as a mecca for alternative performance and traveling rock acts. It is a veritable center of community for music fans in Nashville, and efforts to gain federal

protection of the space began in 2020. Below is an excerpt from the National Register of Historic Places nomination written co-written by Dr. Carroll Van West and myself:

The Exit/In at 2208 Elliston Place, Nashville, Davidson County, Tennessee is being nominated to the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A for its local significance in Performing Arts and Entertainment/Recreation. Under criterion A, the Exit/In's significance spans from its early roots from 1971 to 1979 when its national reputation was first established as one of the nation's premier artist showcase venues, then continuing to its transformation into a modern rock hall from 1980 to c. 1988. During this period of significance, 1971 to 1988, the Exit/In has exhibited a number of performative styles of alternative American music and survives today as a rock performance venue in the heart of mainstream country music's proverbial Mecca. The list of performers who passed through the doors is broad and the breadth of the Exit/In's performance history speaks to a more important moment for alternative performance styles and the acceptance of nontraditional attitudes in the nationally recognized Nashville music scene. According to contemporary observers and later popular music historians, the Exit/In ranks with the Troubadour in Los Angeles and the Bottom Line in New York City as pivotal popular music clubs in the United States during the 1970s and 1980s.

The Exit/In is an example of an historic, community music venue and "gathering place," as outlined in the *Historic Music Industry Resources of Nashville, Davidson County* National Register Multiple Property Documentation Form (NR 11/1/2016). The Exit/In is eligible for listing in the NRHP under Criterion A in the area of Performing Arts, during the MPDF period of significance from 1954-1989, as a "place where singers and musicians created music and performed to local audiences." Exit/In also meets Criteria Consideration G for its "exceptional impact...on the creation and spread of music during the late twentieth century." As a fundamental component of Nashville's modern music industry, Exit/In is exceptionally significant due to its association with a "copious number of artists, musicians, singers and songwriters... who have had extraordinary impacts on music" from within its performance spaces.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>108</sup>Jennifer Ruch Young & Carroll Van West, Exit/In National Register of Historic Places Nomination, Statement of Significance, submitted April 2021.

The reality and potential of adding a space of performance from the underground of Nashville's music scene garnered major local support. However, just as the draft for this nomination was reaching completion, a major shift in ownership threatened the fate of the Exit/In. In early spring of 2021, AJ Capital Partners unfolded plans to acquire the Exit/In. The firm, originally from Chicago, is known for redevelopment and boutique hotel construction. Almost immediately, the Nashville music community expressed heightened concern. Jeff Syracuse, a member of Metro Council, explained that "The situation with Exit/In is an example of how we are losing a critical aspect of our culture in this city."<sup>109</sup> Chris Cobb, longtime operator of the venue, also expressed his concerns, that "My fear is that corner, that neighborhood, it's currently being transitioned from a local neighborhood to just another spot for tourists."<sup>110</sup> AJ Capital Partners did release a statement aimed at squelching concerns over the building's fate that noted their intention to file for historic landmark status.

In November of 2021, the firm filed with the Metro Historic Zoning Commission seeking "Historic Landmark Overlay" designation.<sup>111</sup> This request came after Chris Cobb and other organizers attempted to raise funds to buy out AJ Capital. Close to a quarter of a million was raised by supporters from all corners of the globe, however, AJ Capital closed on the space for a whopping seven million dollars. The designation of historic landmark overlay would make any amendments or further renovations to the space all the more difficult and, therefore, offer a level of historic protection to the venue. This

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<sup>109</sup> Arcelia Martin, The Exit/In, a local music venue, is one step closer to historical protections,"*The Tennessean*, February 2022.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

protection would also eliminate the fear of demolition or any of “its character defining feature,” which was a real point of concern for many after the shift in ownership.<sup>112</sup> As of Spring of 2022, Metro had approved the protection.

In the four years of research it took to outline this work, to see a major issue in the preservation of popular music play out in real time accentuated the reality of this obstacle in the field. It is important to note that the preservation of alternative performance can exist as both material and immaterial. For example, outside of the structural terrain, much of the cowpunk legacy survives through oral account and in interpretive exhibitions of material culture in online archives and museums. The preservation of the underground’s legacy, while ideally would include sites of performance, also gives way to intangible and smaller tokens of tangible remembrance.

Another key concept is to collect oral accounts of the cowpunk movement. The most recent example of this comes in the form of podcasting. Jonathon Bright and Frank Sass began the “Rock Block” podcast to chart the “incomplete oral history of Nashville Rock n Roll.”<sup>113</sup> Both sat down with Jason Ringenberg, Warner Hodges, and Jeff Johnson of the Scorchers for in-depth recollections of the Nashville scene throughout the late 1970s and 1980s. The Country Music Hall of Fame & Museum also took time to celebrate the Exit/In’s fiftieth anniversary in April of 2022 with special talks and performances at the Hall that included Jason Ringenberg, Dianne Davidson, and Webb

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<sup>112</sup> Historic Landmark Zoning Overlays, *Metropolitan Historic Zoning Commission*, [https://www.nashville.gov/sites/default/files/2022-01/Landmark\\_2022.pdf](https://www.nashville.gov/sites/default/files/2022-01/Landmark_2022.pdf), accessed December 2021, p. 8.

<sup>113</sup> Rock Block Podcast, Description, Spotify, <https://open.spotify.com/show/5GsE0fdH5ieQkvBpTbkC6r>, Accessed November 2021.

Wilder. The museum's Peter Cooper led the panel in conversations surrounding their time at the Exit/in and their shared experiences as artists in the Nashville underground.<sup>114</sup>



*Figure 40: Live at the Hall Panel with Peter Cooper, Webb Wilder, Jason Ringenberg, and Dianne Davidson, April 2022, Photo Courtesy of the Country Music Hall of Fame & Museum.*

Other recent podcast ventures include the Lucy's Record Shop Podcast that debuted in the Spring of 2022. It chronicles the subcultural infrastructure at the iconic all ages punk club and record shop from its opening in 1992 to 1998. Although this site of

<sup>114</sup> "Online Program: Live at the Hall: Exit/In: 50 Years and Counting," Country Music Hall of Fame & Museum, <https://countrymusichalloffame.org/events/online-program-live-at-the-hall-exit-in-fifty-years-and-counting-featuring-dianne-davidson-jason-ringenberg-and-webb-wilder/>, Accessed April 29, 2022.

remembrance falls outside the crucial timeline of cowpunk in the Nashville underground, it is still a prime example of cultural preservation via oral account and recollection. At the helm of the podcast is Lucy's former owner, Mary Mancini. She hopes to elaborate on the venues history and the "kids that made Lucy's so special, and whose DIY ethic and unfettered creativity not only left a lasting mark on the Nashville underground music scene and continues to this day."<sup>115</sup>

Finally, in the form of tangible preservation efforts comes regional exhibitions of the cowpunk style. One of the most recent examples of this is housed at the Country Music Hall of Fame & Museum. Recently, the museum has made special efforts to celebrate underground music movements such as the progressive country scene of the 1970s with their temporary exhibit that ran from 2018 to 2021, titled, "Armadillos & Outlaws." Now, a stroll through the main floor of exhibit space brings visitors to an exhibit case devoted to the New Wave of country. Inside are tributes to artists such as Steve Early, Dwight Yoakum, and Jason & the Scorchers. The material culture of cowpunk is on dull display as Jason Ringenberg's bight red, Western style suit jacket, sheriff's badge, and black, rhinestone hat are front and center. The exhibit credits the scorchers with "wedding traditional country music with the rebellious attitude of punk rock."<sup>116</sup>

These practices of remembrance broaden the definition of music as a meaningful part of heritage. Oral account and material culture interpretation move beyond the

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<sup>115</sup> Dave Paulson, Lucy's Record Shop Podcast Will Revisit Nashville's Legendary All-Ages Punk Club," *The Tennessean*, April 2022.

<sup>116</sup> Jason & The Scorchers, Exhibit Panel, New Wave Section, Country Music Hall of Fame & Museum.

practice of spatial commemoration because structural sites of cowpunk performance are almost nonexistent. Broadening the scope of preservation goals “illustrates the ways in which music heritage increasingly encompasses a range of practices that are not reductable to music itself, but linked to the wider social, cultural, and economic processes surrounding the production and consumption of popular music histories and music heritage canons.”<sup>117</sup> Engaging in the “diffuse theoretical terrain” of musical hybrids charges public historians with the responsibility to thread and connect the comprehensive value of subculture as historical perspective.

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<sup>117</sup> Les Roberts and Sarah Cohen, “Unauthorizing Popular Music Heritage: Outline of a Critical Framework,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, Vol. 20 (No. 3, 2014), p. 242.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Cowpunk is representative of the fluidity of American genres of popular sound, but also serves as crucial evidence for the ways in which artists, listeners, and consumers of music rework definitions of personal, collective, and regional identity. This performative style emerged during a pivotal shift for the ways people understood popular music and visual culture. The age of MTV ushered in a massive wave of homogenized sound and access to popular culture changed our perception of regional sound. Cowpunk abided by no strict confines of performative style, sound, or aesthetic, rather it came to represent a generation of rockers whose reverence for American roots music and the American West and Southwest became a centerpiece for expressing regional punk and cultural attitudes.

Throughout this research, evidence points to the nomadic nature of cowpunk and the ways in which it manifested across the country, really in spite of mass culture. When in fact, the genre is a product of generational mass culture handed down and repackaged to make sense for the postmodern rocker. While the style is most definitely a regional case study, it is one that defies historiographical modes of cultural heritage making.

While other regional iterations of rock that developed out of San Francisco in the 1960s, Austin and Southern California in the 1970s, New York City in the 1980s, or Seattle in the 1990s, the popular and collective memory of Cowpunk in the mainstream remains a disintegrated thread of cultural discourse. It is one of many regional music histories that could benefit from the methodological approach of public historians.

The framework for this study aids practitioners of public history in addressing the current issues facing music history and structural preservation. Beginning with the

theoretical roots of cowpunk and dissecting its postmodern psychology, the distinct and conscious choices and stylistic intention inform how consumers of music subculture to repackaged cultural modes of nostalgia to fit contemporary needs of expression. For cowpunk, that meant a heavy emphasis on material culture and regional aesthetics to convey personal and collective identity all at once. The material evidence of cowpunk accentuates how genre subcultures blend to form hybridized exhibitions of musical trend. The stylistic choices of cowpunks relied on both popular cultural memory and Western and Southwestern motifs and iconography to construct new versions of identity.

Finally, the regional case studies in this work reveal the ways this framework play out in the built environment. Nashville, Austin, and Los Angeles punk scenes all maintained distinct displays of Southern, Western, and Southwestern culture over the course of the early 1980s. Similarly, this approach reveals current problems of structural preservation for spaces of alternative performance. When subcultural landscapes no longer physically exist, other fields of public history, such as memory studies, oral history, and digital history, and other means of community engagement and support can revive the historical legacy of regional musical micronarratives such as cowpunk.

In recent years there has been a push to commemorate spaces of rock performance in these localities. Nashville's Rock Block continues to garner support from many across the country with the Exit/In's National Register Nomination the most recent push for structural preservation and protection.



*Figure 41: Rock Block Plaque near the Exit/in on Elliston Place. Photo courtesy of the Tennessean.*

In Austin, several organizations, such as Preservation Austin and the Austin Museum of Popular Culture, formerly known and SouthPop, continue to push forward with music preservation efforts as the city faces the same onslaught of real estate and corporate development that Music City experiences today. In Los Angeles, groups such as the West Hollywood Historic Preservation Commission and the Los Angeles Conservancy continue to work towards the preservation of music venues and record studios that shape the musical terrain of the city.

While there is evidence of organized efforts to protect and interpret the musical legacy of regional popular music, public historians are charged with the unique responsibility to mediate a middle ground between performative spaces that either no longer exist or that are living, breathing cultural entities with, many times, pressing economic needs. This framework, with cowpunk as the regional case study, provides us with a distinct set of interpretive tools that facilitate the dissection of a subcultural scene

and, ultimately, prove the worth of regional subsets of American music as vital elements of the historical past.

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