

# COMMON SENSE

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- *NOIZE MUSIC INSURGENCY*
- *THE POWER OF MONEY*
- *MAYDAY*
- *MYTHOLOGY OF NEW TIMES*
- *MARX ON MONEY AND CRISIS*

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Cover from "Book Your Own Fucking Life"

Front cover: The Dead Kennedy's

# Noize Music:

## The Hypostatic Insurgency

*Robert Ovetz*

Nirvana is the new hype sensation on nearly every radio station, the cover of every commercial industry rag, and has its' song "Smells Like Teen Spirit" ranked number one and as the MTV theme song. No doubt, as they have exploded from "obscurity" into the realm of the everyday so has the question of state of the independent music scene from hence they came. Unfortunately, the discussion about the alternative/college/independent/underground scenes have been long restricted to two narrow shallow propositions: whether they are the minor leagues of the music industry or whether they should remain pure from the infections of money, hype, and all the other trappings of the industry. In many ways, both positions are accurate -- many times concurrently. Yet, these propositions completely fail to ask or answer the questions of how these scenes came about and whether they demonstrate one of many possible new ways of organizing life other than around work. Instead of bemoaning the "coopting" of the scenes, we need to look at the substance of its still vibrant autonomous form of organization.

### Noize with a History

Instead of the array of labels used to categorize and define these scenes, let's just use a word that is indigenous to the music itself: noize. The noize scenes grew from and against the formula music of the industry in the late 1960s and early 1970s with the Sonics, the Stooges, New York Dolls, Ramones, 13th Floor Elevator, MC5, Black Sabbath, Quicksilver Messenger Service, Blue Cheer, and others. However, it was not until the late 1970s that its growth was consolidated and communalized with the punk movement that brought with it many innovative elements -- clubs, zines, do-it-yourself labels, touring, distribution, college radio and record stores -- that not only are still with us but are facing potential institutionalization.

Not only is punk *not dead*, as many would like to claim, but it lives on in a multitude of sounds and scenes. If punk can be understood as playing the music you

want to hear and establishing your own means to circulate and enjoy it, while disrupting the rules and institutions of rock, then it is actually the dominant form of music in the US today. With Nirvana's success, punk is beginning to overwhelm pop music on commercial radio. This overwhelming raises the need to understand the antagonism between the autonomy of the scenes, where the music originated, and capital's attempt to institutionalize it as a means of making money, thus finding a new means of control by making us work to buy it.

Punk means less drums and guitar led music than being characterized by its ability to make noise and demand autonomy. Rap, industrial, experimental, grunge, grind-core, speed metal, anti-folk, et al each define and redefine their own scene and are beginning to overlap, share and communicate with each other. Rappers like Paris, Public Enemy, Ice T share the feedback of grunge and metal, while the Butthole Surfers, Godbullies, Mercury Rev, Steelpole Bathub and the Flaming Lips to name only a few are adopting sampling. Ice T has made the journey both ways by doing grunge on his rap albums and forming the grunge/metal band Body Count. Sonic Youth's *Goo* album features Chuck D of Public Enemy as does Anthrax who covers PE's "Bring the Noise." Sonic Youth even invited Ian McKaye of Fugazi as a guest on their recent album *Dirty*, making the relationship between "punk" and grunge even more cooperative. Modred even added a DJ to scratch records. Head of David, Godflesh and Loop cross grunge with industrial reverb. Even folk is getting into the act as Rebbly Sharp, Azalia Snail, Roger Manning, Kramer, John S. Hall of King Missile, and many on the *Guiterrorists* compilation are using heavy sampling and distortion effects. While each of these offspring of punk are distinct, they are also complementary.

These noise scenes are realizing the goals of a punk mythos that sought whether explicitly or inexplicitly, autonomy and collective relationships. By sharing their musical styles they are opening independent avenues of communication and discourse that is more meaningful than just singing about their mutual support, which is also being done. It entails an interaction that crosses class, racial and gender boundaries, not only weakening them in the process but reinforcing each other's power to fight their own battles within their own communities. Within the grunge scene, bands are crossing the so-called impenetrable line of race both ways by appropriating rhythms and techniques of rap while rappers cross for the solid pounding of grunge. Sexism is also under attack by women asserting their desire to do more than listen but to also play. And when men attempt to derail their participation, all-women groups like L7, Frightwig, Babes in Toyland, Dickless, Snatch, and the Lunachicks or groups whose members are mainly women like Hole, Honeymoon Killers, and Fastbacks are formed. In rap, Bitches With Problems, Hos With Attitude, Queen Latifah, Sista Souljah, and Yo-Yo are doing the same. These bands are creating new spaces for women and thus reorganizing the social relations of men and women whether or not they take on sexism in their lyrics. We should not see them as just reactions to sexism, but a creation of something new; a space within a community where women are discovering their own power, identities and histories while reorganizing the



relationships between men and women.

Much of grunge is off-handedly dismissed as "unpolitical" because of the lack of overt socially or politically relevant lyrics, found in classically defined punk. In fact, at the Epicenter record exchange in San Francisco or in *Maximum Rock N'Roll (MRR)* many groups are written off as "subpop" only because they have long hair or are on the Subpop label, oblivious to their inherent relationship to punk. For example, Seattle-based Mudhoney is often degraded and chastised without so much as an explanation of why their music isn't punk. Although their sound is distorted, has short or no solos, and rough furious vocals, they are written off as a "hair band." Until the *Every Good Boy Deserves Fudge* LP (Subpop 1991) few of their lyrics were about "issues" (except for their cover of the Dick's "I hate the police"). Yet, because their lyrics are becoming more "relevant" they may soon be admitted into the royal court of punk.

The Mudhoney issue underlies the trouble many have seeing how a band whose lyrics appear apolitical can be just as subversive in a different way as a band who reels off songs about revolution and sexism. We find labels of "political" used for bands like Bad Religion but not those without overt lyrics but with a similar sound. Yet, sometimes the "apolitical" bands are more subversive because they are creating new ways of living rather than just talking about it. This is especially the case with K records run by the Beat Happening folks who organize the annual International Pop Underground festival that warns industry types that they are to stay away. K is explicit about rejecting the subordination of music to profit and commercialism and yet few of the bands they circulate even mention this. K stands up much better than Bad Religion's label Epitaph which is an explicit business with overpriced "import" LPs, full media blitz's for their bands, and other commercial tactics. And yet Bad Religion is seen as the example for "political" bands to follow.

When these scenes are analyzed (if they are at all) they are seen as evolving as a *reaction to something* rather than as the *creation of something new*. The idea that the independent scenes are being coopted by the industry (epitomized by Nirvana's success) is based on the idea that noize grew as a *reaction* to the sterility of commercial music and has no identifiable character as a community or autonomous network. Noize is perceived as a miniature model of the industry: small labels are small businesses, record hoarders make money by taking records out of circulation to make money off their soon inflated prices, clubs and distributors are exploitative. No doubt each of these exist to some degree but the question is whether this defines the noize scene or if something more akin to cooperation, networking, sharing, independent production and circulation does also.

Seen as a reaction to the commercialized pap passing for music, noize is assumed to be vulnerable to the more powerful forces of commercialization or institutionalization. With L7, the Flaming Lips, Janes Addiction, Loop, Thee

Hypnotics, Sonic Youth, Head of David, and Nirvana on the big labels the question of whether they've sold out is answered even before it is asked in endless reams of interviews. Seeing noise as passive and powerless is to overlook the vibrancy of the scene founded on the social networks that built and sustain it. It assumes that the industry is on the offensive and in control and acts only from a position of power. The flipside is a sterile and defensive noise scene bowing to the unpenetrable strength of commercialization. This is why we hear "punk is dead" so often and "noise has sold out."

Yet, it seems that the industry's move to sign all these bands is a *reaction to our own power*. No doubt the music industry is in crisis; sales are falling, albums sit on the shelf, commercial radio is challenged by student run radio, and countless prospective bands never receive any following. Meanwhile, the independent scenes have been growing since the late 1970s even while they have been completely censored from the mainstream media. Rap has grown as big if not more than most big label bands without the news coverage, airplay and video access. NWA, Ice Cube and other hard core rappers sell their first million records in only a matter of weeks after their release through their own networks that operate independantly of the industry. Without airplay or videoplay, Public Enemy has become a household name in white, black and brown homes. Metal bands do covers of their songs, grunge bands wear their shirts, rap bands sample their sounds. With the attempt to institutionalize rap as theme music for commercials or reduce it to its least common denominator through Vanilla Ice, just as the industry is now trying to do to noise with Nirvana, the scene not only survives but is vibrant and growing. For every band that "sells out" there are at least a dozen more pounding away, experimenting and creating sonic chaos. And even the "sell outs" are keeping their roots strong: Boogie Down Production's KRS One and Sonic Youth's Thurston Moore are busy performing on a lot of independent albums, doing side projects on other bands, starting their own labels, and even assisting others to get their music out.

Even the industry's attempt to institutionalize rap and noise are unsure, unmanageable and proving unsuccessful. The *New York Times* reported in a January 1992 story that industry "intelligence" has no idea why Nirvana has become so popular. They put in very little money (as much as for Sonic Youth's *Goo* which is relatively little for the big labels) and little attention and yet they sold ten million albums worldwide by early 1992.<sup>1</sup> To describe this process as an invincible concerted effort at cooptation is to overstate and mystify the power of the industry. With the multinational, multidimensional growth of the noise scenes, *the industry has been forced to respond to us*. It is being forced to deal with millions of people's demands for not only new, more sonically disorienting and challenging music, but new ways to play, listen to and circulate it.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Lev, "Is hit album a fluke or marketing coup?," *The New York Times*, January 13, 1992, p. D1. This appeared in the Business section.

This is being demonstrated in the new way the industry is handling newly signed independent bands. Unlike bands incubated artificially by big labels, these new bands are being given a relatively hands off approach: let them choose their style, image and album cuts. The why is simple. The industry only wants these bands so they can cash in. But if they changed them they would automatically be cutting off an already created audience of listeners, zines, record stores, and clubs who like them and who would never give any heed to either an unheard band without any real history or home or one reorganized to sell CDs. They're playing it very safe by signing only proven bands and selling to an established audience. Such a strategy should alert us to a crisis running rampant throughout music capital. Even with MTV, *Spin*, and CDs the industry's laboratory bands are too unsure. Noize bands come ready with audience. This should demonstrate that the industry is on the defensive responding to our initiative.

Of course the threat of becoming institutionalized is real but the outcome is not as clear cut as many would have us believe. When Columbia attempted to buy out Subpop, which grew from a home-made operation to the noize scene's most successful label and possibly biggest business, many cried tears. Yet the potential that comes along with the threat was ignored. Under Columbia, Subpop would have had access to more resources to get out the music of even more bands to many more people than ever before possible. And even if it had died as we know it, there are innumerable other labels who could have easily filled the void. The vibrancy of the scene is strong enough to overcome and account for these types of threats or losses.

But what is the content of this vibrancy? What makes the noize scene (from here on I am talking mainly about grunge, industrial, grindcore and "punk") flexible, regenerative, subversive and collective? We would need to examine the noize scene in particular and the various ways in which it organizes itself.



## The Music is the Movement

*Hey - gold connections  
Analog soul waving yr hair  
She's talking blue streaks everywhere*

*Your spirit is time reversed to your body  
Stereo-graphic mix-up field on field  
It started growing the day your body dies  
Only apparently, real to unreal*

*Hey - stereo stations  
Perfect image, kneel down  
Hey - hypostatic information  
Come on let's hear you turn it around  
--from Sonic Youth "Stereo Sanctity"*

Sonic Youth has sped the transition from classically defined punk to noize, hinting as their name seems to suggest, that the source of our youthful rebellion lies with the music and need not be explicit in the lyrics. They provide a sonic assault alongside a violation of the concept of "song" which we understand to have a beginning, end, climax, verse or even chord. Much of their music could be understood more as if they were tuning their instruments or experimenting than actually playing as we have come to know it. And yet, even on *Goo*, which many describe as a "big label sell out", they continue in this vein with the chaotic, formless "Margaret Pierce," and by beginning a song with the same chord as they ended the previous one, as if to alert us to how the break is used to make us accept the idea of the boundaries that indicate the start and finish of music in the form of songs. The Flaming Lips, Loop, Godflesh and the Melvins are sympathetic to much of the same unmanageable sound that weaves from the same electronic instruments but still somehow refuses to be heard as a "song". Many times, they repeat rhythms endlessly, and amplifiers and distortion pedals are used to create static and feedback that becomes like any other instrument, not only by pushing their equipment to its maximum electronic capacity, but by purposely eliciting a questioning of what can make music, as rap has done with prerecorded music.

The music itself exhibits a vibrancy and body that not only slams up against our preconceptions of what music, songs, and noise is but does so within a social context much the way rap uses sampling as historical reference to slavery, black struggles, other black musicians and racism. Besides performing covers, many rap and noize bands alike lift and recuperate riffs, rhythms and other methods of existing and no



















































































































































































