

Against celebrity, ladder climbers, clout chasers and influencers.
Against the algorithmic flattening of our subculture.
Against the capitalist death machine and the corporate capture of hardcore punk.

For expanding the hardcore punk mutual aid autonomous zone.
For facilitating human curation and recommendation.
For hardcore punk with context and politics.



THE COUNTERFORCE IS A DISTRIBUTED AND COMMUNITY PROJECT

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MANIFESTO FOR

THE COUNTERFORCE

hardcore punk
underground



MANIFESTO FOR THE COUNTERFORCE

HARDCORE PUNK AS A MUTUAL AID-BASED AUTONOMOUS ZONE

The hardcore punk subculture consists of people, bands, spaces and projects that perpetuate an internationally distributed **autonomous zone**. It is *underground*, existing outside the media mainstream of capitalism. Entities within this zone — bands, zines, distributors, promoters, labels, etc. — follow a largely not-for-profit, DIY (Do It Yourself) ethic to achieve common goals, either on the micro level (pulling off a show) or a macro level (the perpetuation of the subculture itself). Individual participants voluntarily contribute what they can in a cooperative and reciprocal way. This subculture is a manifestation of **mutual aid**, and it exists, to a great extent, as a radical alternative to the dominant capitalist culture.

The term “mutual aid” gets thrown around a lot these days, often to describe an anarchist-informed organizing model used by projects like Food Not Bombs or disaster relief community groups. But mutual aid is a relatively simple, anarchist concept that is observed throughout human and non-human-animal history. Mutual aid is the practice of individuals voluntarily coming together to meet common needs of their community in cooperative and reciprocal ways. This practice is powerful and liberatory, because it is non-hierarchical, non-transactional, and doesn't involve authorities or states.



Mutual Aid by N.O. BONZO

THE CAPTURE OF HARDCORE PUNK BY CORPORATE PLATFORMS

Corporate social media, streaming platforms, and similar apps have steadily increased their capture of hardcore punk subculture to the point where they now mediate much of our social lives and interactions.

These corporate platforms are profit-driven. They collect your data and attention to sell, or charge you subscription fees, or both. To maximize profit, they are intentionally designed to be frictionless, slick, and addictive. They build monopolies so that when no viable competition or alternatives exist, they can change the deal by increasing their fees and degrading their “services.”

They use opaque recommendation algorithms to feed us content, and this too is done solely to maximize profit — not to curate a vibrant, diverse, and challenging hardcore punk subculture. As an extreme side effect, we see bands orienting their image, song writing, and production (either consciously or subconsciously) to appease these algorithms. Behold: *Spotify Hardcore*. Algorithmic recommendation flattens out the sound of hardcore punk into just another easy-to-digest pop sub-genre.

To build their user bases towards monopoly, these platforms are walled gardens. Instagram hits non-users trying to view a post with a login wall, while Spotify playlists can only include songs on Spotify and can only be enjoyed by someone with a Spotify account. They leverage the *network* effect into a positive feedback loop to solidify their dominance: “everyone” is there, so everyone else wants to be there. Obviously they are hostile to anyone who doesn't want to sell out and sign up. The more tricks they can use to lure and trap new users inside their isolated silos, the more profit they can extract.

other hobbies and interests and identities. This is uncontroversial.

Overzealous purity fanatics who are quick to call someone out for a single transgression should be ignored. Rather than focus on individual “purity,” this is a mutual effort to keep hardcore punk a transgressive and progressive force in the world, and a place where we experiment with better ways to do things. We are not trying to kick someone out of punk for playing one Live Nation show or one Vans-sponsored fest. We just need to tip the scales against the trend of selling out.

EXPAND THE ZONE

By simply building and maintaining an alternative culture based on better ideals and principles, we are contributing to positive change in the world by being a proving ground for potential *new* worlds. But we *must go further* — our network and subculture is not just a prototype, but a source of power from which we can act politically for change in the broader world right now. We can raise awareness, we can raise money, we can move people. When shit goes down, our friend networks can become organizing networks. We're learning how to operate a music scene on principles of mutual aid and in resistance to capitalism, and we can apply this knowledge to how we organize with our neighbors and communities. Rather than bring capitalism in, turning our little roles in hardcore punk into more jobs, we should expand out and push to dismantle the system that requires us all to slave in shitty jobs in the first place.

PUNK NEVER DIED, YOU JUST SOLD OUT

There are lots of podcasts hosted by older punks in their 40s or 50s. They often end up remarking how “different” things are in the scene now, compared to when they came up. From their perspective, hardcore punk used to be DIY and underground: everyone booked their own shows and put out their own records. It was all done for fun and gas money with little ambition to sign to a major label or do music “professionally.” Nowadays, according to them, it's a totally different world. The underground is gone and hardcore punk is just another mainstream genre of Heavy Music. Everyone works within the industry, has booking agents, regularly plays big sponsored fests, runs

a business, wins music awards, and hustles for streams. Hardcore punk is a career choice.

These podcast hosts are really talking about how *they've* changed, without any self-awareness. Overtime, their bands became indie rock bands and they sold out. They exited the underground and stopped paying attention to it. Despite often being prolific record collectors and self-proclaimed punk “historians” they are completely clueless about the state of current underground hardcore punk. They are unaware that incredible bands are still booking their own tours, self-releasing demo tapes and objectively good records, and playing in basements and small venues for gas money. These guys assume hardcore punk stopped when they stopped doing it.

It seems like willful ignorance. Rather than admit they compromised their values and sold out, they prefer to pretend that “the world changed, man” and that a vibrant underground hardcore punk scene no longer exists. What a cop out!

Perspectives like this also come from people who aren't as disconnected as dusty old podcast dudes. People who should know better will say things like “the underground doesn't exist anymore.” More common is a middling, defeatist attitude: the underground still exists, but there's no point in trying to resist corporate capture. Corporate platforms are already too dominant, it's too late to resist them, and there are no alternatives. This is also a cop out, a narrative that makes it easy for people to accept the inevitability of dystopia rather than try to personally hold onto values that could bring us to a better world.

The world *has* changed, it's true. Streaming and social media have both grown as technologies and “heavy music” is in fashion again as a marketable product. But true underground hardcore punk still exists today, and it *always will* to some extent. There will always be punks hiding from the mainstream in basements, on cassettes, in the pages of photocopied zines, and in the hidden corners of the Internet. The Counterforce is everywhere.

What isn't certain is how expansive and radical this underground will be. We can accept the increasing corporate capture and recuperation of hardcore punk as inevitable and, like the podcasters, tell ourselves that “the underground is dead” so we don't feel as bad about selling out. Or... 🌀

5. HUMAN CURATION OVER ALGORITHMIC RECOMMENDATION

Fuck the algorithms! We have to stop accepting so much profit-maximizing recommendation that flattens our culture. We need more human-curated recommendation and accessible spaces where it can happen: more blogs, zines, reviews, scene reports, interviews, and radio shows/podcasts. And we need social media that is an actual *social* network instead of a login-walled algorithm-mediated advertising machine, so we can openly share music we are making and digging with each other.

MONEY CHANGES EVERYTHING

The rise in popularity of corporate social media and streaming in hardcore punk has been accompanied by an increasing acceptance of more general capitalist tendencies. There are more unquestioned sponsorships, bands playing massive festivals with corporate backers, major label behavior, a proliferation of managers, agents, and middlemen, and more unchallenged grabs for profit. This is a bad trend! We should continue to practice the long tradition of defending hardcore punk against those who seek to recuperate our culture into the capitalist system.

STOP SELLING OUT

Participation in hardcore punk, whether it's playing in a band, booking shows, running a space, taking photos, or making zines, is always met with awesome support. The temptation to transfer that success into a paying job is understandable and it makes sense to seek out a job based on skills or talents you've developed here. We all have to survive under capitalism, we all need a job. The problem is when people try to turn hardcore punk itself *into a job*, degrading our mutual aid-based relationships into transactional ones.

This erodes the radical spaces and networks (the *autonomous zone*) we've built by helping it all be absorbed by capitalism. We will not defeat capitalism with *more capitalism*. Even if you have a cool "punk job," nothing stops you from continuing to participate and contribute to hardcore punk on the mutual aid, not-for-profit level. Fuck running your band like a business, fuck people who use hardcore punk as a stepping stone for their career, and fuck corporate venues, corporate sponsors,

professional promoters and all intermediary agents who take a cut.

A BALANCE OF GATEKEEPING IS NECESSARY

Gatekeeping is not a dirty word. Some gatekeeping is OK and good, actually; it's a balance. Singers on stage have been heard to say things like: "Everyone is welcome at this show" — actually no. The following people are *not welcome*: cops, landlords, racists, rapists, grifters, profit-seekers, sellouts, exploiters, and posers. Those who prove themselves time and time again to be more interested in profiting, selling out, or collaborating with corporate interests, should be mocked, shamed, and excluded. A little gatekeeping insulates us from this corruption.

And yes, if something is truly underground and against the dominant culture, it will be inherently a little harder to find. This is a feature, not a bug. That said, our shows should **not** be private parties — fuck that. Our subculture should be *obscure*, but *accessible*. We shouldn't close the gate to those who are already marginalized by prevalent systems of domination and hierarchy. To do this effectively, we have to understand and counteract the systems of oppression and domination in the mainstream world. We have to ensure we are working against forces like gentrification and colonialism, not perpetuating them. Keep punk from becoming a rich white boys club. Strive to make shows affordable, PWYC, NOTAFLOF. Encourage and provide opportunities for those who can't pay to contribute in other ways, like helping out with the show. If they can't contribute at all, then still *let them in*. Try to keep show spaces physically accessible to wheelchair users. Try to keep shows on-time and early to accommodate people who are stuck with a shitty job in the morning they can't afford to miss. Shows don't have to be listed in the newspaper, but they should be promoted to anyone who knows where to look, not exclusively to anyone with a fucking *Instagram account*.

NO PURITY CULTURE

Gatekeeping and sellout-shaming is needed, but this isn't all about cultivating a purity culture. It's ok to enjoy and participate in things besides hardcore punk. Enjoy pop radio (we do). Start a rock band to get signed and pay your bills (just stay in your lane). Being part of this subculture should not mean being 100% "pure" in all parts of life. We all make compromises under capitalism and have



The ongoing Rohingya genocide, greatly driven by Facebook

Where do all their profits go? To Joe Rogan, to Swedish billionaires who invest in defense companies, to Mark Zuckerberg and Meta to facilitate genocides. These companies and the people who own them are among the richest in the world. They fund wars, they degrade the information ecosystem, they lobby governments to promote their own interests. Not only are their products bad for us, they profit off us and direct those profits to actively making our world worse.

They also work hand in hand with governments, police, and warmongers: they censor and remove content, they happily hand over user information to police, and they contribute to the expanding surveillance of populations. It's foolish to think any meaningful social change will come from organizing on the platforms operated and controlled by the corrupt people and institutions in power.

It is understandable why these platforms are so popular. They are slick, addictive, and often "free" (when your data and attention are the real products). They provide an easy way to share and listen to music... and maybe your song will even get added to a hype playlist. All your friends and social activity is happening there... and maybe you can go viral and gain thousands of followers.

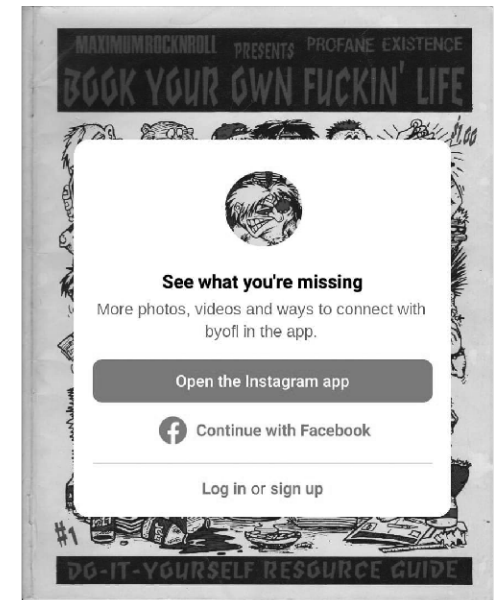
Many participants of the hardcore punk subculture have completely bought into these platforms. They are the highly prioritized, if not exclusive, means to chat, share music, post flyers, talk about shows, find new bands, and meet new friends. Forget trying to book a tour without an account — the modern-day "Book Your Own Fuckin' Life" is a list of Instagram handles.

The more we prioritize these platforms, the more we strengthen their monopolies and erode our autonomous zone, our ability to build alternatives and survive the coming struggles. The more we

buy into corporate walled gardens, the more we exclude anyone who isn't willing to use corporate media on principle, anyone who doesn't want to trade their data and attention for an account, or anyone who just can't for the sake of their mental health.

Our increased use of and dependence on these platforms has been accompanied by a broader corporate capture of our subculture. It's not surprising that normalized use of algorithm-directed profit-driven advertising platforms has normalized more capitalist behaviour in general. It has drawn us all away from the principle of mutual aid and further into the machinery of capitalism.

This corporate capture of hardcore punk defangs it. Working towards individual profit in a system of domination and exploitation undermines the principles this subculture is based on. This is why *selling out* has always garnered shame and mockery. The best hardcore punk has always been underground. It cannot thrive when it has been captured and recuperated as mainstream "heavy music." An underground, illegal generator show is *always* going to be more transgressive, more politically interesting and more **fun** than a sterilized, sponsored, corporate show at a legitimate venue. Anyone who believes otherwise is lying to themselves, or has forgotten what true underground hardcore punk is like (or just never really knew).



THE COUNTERFORCE

We need to stop prioritizing corporate social media as the online hub of our subculture. We need to reverse the trend of sharing our music on corporate streaming sites. Many of us are seeking relief from the endless doomscroll and attention-hogging of apps like Instagram and TikTok, or are frustrated with the cost, restrictions and algorithmic whims of Spotify. We need to reconfigure our subculture so these corporate platforms are not so central.

We should promote tried-and-true offline practices, like print zines, cassette demos, and paper flyers, but we also have to accept that the Internet has irreversibly changed how people connect. How many “print-only” zines still have an account on corporate social media? We can’t simply revive offline strategies of spreading hardcore punk without addressing today’s internet-connected world. We must intervene in both on- and offline spaces.

Anyone who tries to participate in hardcore punk without resorting to using online corporate platforms knows it is both isolating and extremely challenging. FOMO is real. We can’t just complain, we need to provide and promote alternatives to encourage and support anyone trying to resist their dominance. The more of us who refuse to prioritize them, the less powerful they are.

In the service of these goals, The Counterforce pursues the following strategies:

1. DE-CENTER CORPORATE STREAMING

MAXIMUM ROCKNROLL’s print magazine ended in 2019. They had a longstanding editorial policy to not cover music released on major labels:

“No major labels or labels exclusively distributed by major-owned distros.”

This was a good thing! MRR was influential and widely read, and their policy on major-label releases held back corporate encroachment for a long time. In response to the changing music distribution landscape, one of their last issues (#419) featured a provocative April Fool’s joke on the back cover:



This was a prank, but... what if it had been serious? It’s kind of inspirational. What if there really was a huge international hardcore punk zine that only covers bands who refuse to put their music on corporate streaming platforms? Sure, some good bands would be overlooked, but all the posers, grifters and wannabe sell-outs would be omitted. If this had been a real change in MRR policy rather than a prank, who knows where we’d be today.

Corporate streaming platforms like Spotify are equivalent to major-owned distros. They are fully integrated into the capitalist industrial media complex. For the most part, the only way to get your music onto these platforms is to sign a licensing agreement with a digital distributor who charges a fee and/or takes a cut of the royalties (and it’s well known that this is at worst basically nothing, and at best a shitty deal for you). Putting your band through this process draws you into business as usual, just like signing with a major label used to: legal legitimacy, government taxes, fees, licensing agreements, your legal names on everything, etc. It encourages bands to move forward running things like a business, and businesses care about profits.

MRR had the right idea. We should point the spotlight away from bands that have bought into the major labels’ system and recognize that platforms like Spotify are now part of this system. We don’t have to embargo every release that happens to be on Spotify, but we should strive to prioritize other ways of sharing and listening to our music online

that are less evil and corrupt. Doing so will help us maintain our autonomy so companies like Spotify can’t just pull the rug out from under us when they are the only option left to share music online.

2. EXPLORE AND BUILD ONLINE ALTERNATIVES

Rather than being reactionary, advocating for some nostalgic return to “the ways things used to be,” we *should* explore new technology and changes in digital culture. Social media and the Internet can be great, liberating tools that connect us over long distances, across borders and in spite of physical or mental barriers to accessibility. We just have to find and build alternatives that are divorced from corporate interests and control.

Much like hardcore punk, the Internet itself has a liberatory subculture that has been eroded by corporate capture. And it also has a counterforce pushing back against this erosion. There is a sprawling underground of open-source, non-profit, community-driven tools, protocols, and networks that provide alternatives to corporate social media and streaming platforms. These alternatives are free and open instead of closed and profit-driven. They are not addictive-by-design, nor riddled with ads, nor spying on us and selling our data.

Federated social media (e.g. Mastodon, Pixelfed and the Fediverse), public show calendars (Gancio), small websites and blogs (e.g. neocities.org, blogspot.com — yes Blogspot still exists!), RSS feeds and podcasts, self-hosted and alternative music sharing (e.g. Faircamp, PeerTube, Mirlo), and free, open libraries and archives (e.g. The Internet Archive)... these are just a few examples!

Some of these are old and familiar and could do with a revival. Some are novel and breaking new ground online. All of them DIY, requiring some knowledge and effort, but in the long term they help fortify our autonomy and independence. With a little bit of work, we can have social media without addictive algorithms and advertising, accessible online show listings, and online music streaming that we control.

3. MORE PAPER AT SHOWS

We advocate for online alternatives because we recognize the Internet and smart phones and digital media aren’t going away. But the online world

will always be easier for corporations to capture and control so we make a plea for offline culture as well. Hasn’t punk always been a little Luddite and nostalgic?

We want more paper at shows. Make physical handbills and hand them out. Start or contribute to a local fanzine. Bring a zine distro to shows, and check one out if it already exists in your town. When a stranger hands you a flyer at a show it is a blessing. Cherish it.

Distribution and reach of paper zines has been crippled by increased shipping and printing costs. If our goal in making fanzines is primarily to spread our ideas, opinions and recommendations, we should make them freely available. Anyone should be able to get the master files for punk fanzines, print them out, and distribute them locally. Anarchists already employ this Print-It-Yourself approach to facilitate the proliferation of zine distros everywhere. We should adopt this strategy to help our zines spread, and encourage offline interaction and engagement with our music and ideas.

4. YOU CAN STILL LOOK AT INSTAGRAM, OK?

We don’t all need to quit overnight. It’s fine to keep listening to Spotify and posting on Instagram. But we should shift the center of our focus away from these corporate platforms: invest in and **prioritize** alternatives! Share your show on the local punk calendar *before* posting it on Instagram. Make sure your demo is available somewhere online besides Spotify. Every action helps, big or small.

People are more willing to use and build alternatives once they are demystified. We need to proliferate knowledge and guides about these alternatives — the DIY ethic will take care of the rest. We also need to be encouraging and persistent. There can be a hump to overcome in trying alternatives because they lack the massive resources and addictive design of corporate platforms. Anything new and different can seem a lot more complicated, and sometimes it is (although corporate social media can have a steep learning curve too, it’s just easy to forget). It takes some enthusiasm and dedication to overcome this hump. We need to be understanding and patient with our friends.