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Alone in a Crowd

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Alone in a Crowd

— Alexander Poirier

Alone in a Crowd

*Alone in a Crowd,
but we're still standing strong
with X'd up fists
and sing alongs.*

— Champion, "Promises Kept"

Straight Edge: a life style primarily focused on maintaining a pure body and conscience by abstaining from drugs and alcohol...

It's the summer of 1980. Hidden somewhere amidst the crumbling bricks and fading paint, the smog-drenched air that sticks to your lungs like taffy; somewhere in between the grey bricks and gaping mouths of the North Shore of San Francisco, California there stands a monument, bold and blushing against its hazy backdrop. Its thick, pink paint looks as if a bottle of Pepto Bismol was dripped over its walls to soothe the pains of spray-paint and the heartache of piss stains. Above a weather-beaten awning that protects the bouncer from getting too much sun on his beer-belly and glistening head hangs a sign that brings order to the decay in disgustingly clean white block letters. It reads simply: MABUHAY.

Inside, bodies are stacked like inventory in a storeroom: sweating, breathing, waiting—waiting for the whine of the P. A. and the screech of old strings to remind them why they woke up this morning. Outside, a boy from D. C., freshly unloaded from his

Greyhound bus stares down at his hand, at the peculiar X that now divides it. The fresh stink of permanent marker burns his nostrils.

The club is 21 and over and he's only 17. But he doesn't want to drink, he just wants to play the show and have fun. Back home this would have meant he was shit out of luck, kicked to the curb because the club served alcohol and he couldn't buy it. But here, this X on his hand said differently. It said he was not going to drink. It said he was free from the tyranny of alcohol. Little did the bouncer know that when he drew that X on that boy's hand, he would start a revolution that would come to define hundreds of thousands of people around the world.

Sometime during the next year of incessant touring, this boy would sit down and scribble in his notepad the words that would put a name to this revolution:

*I'm a person just like you
But I've got better things to do
Than sit around and fuck my head
Hang out with the living dead
Snort white shit up my nose
Pass out at the shows
I don't even think about speed
That's something I just don't need*
I'VE GOT THE STRAIGHT EDGE.
— Ian Mackaye, "Straight Edge"

Fast-forward to March 1st 2008. Mabuhay Gardens is long gone, so is The Pound and the Blackwater, Seifert Center and the F. O. E. I stand inside the crumbling 924 Gilman Street, one of the last legitimate punk venues in Northern California. It is the last day of the Rivalry Showcase, one of the premier hardcore-punk showcases on the West Coast. We are packed into that room very much like kids were that summer in 1980 at Mabuhay. On the dilapidated stage beneath the sagging rafters of 924 Gilman Street stands the Ian Mackaye of my generation, Aram Arslanian. His band, Betrayed, has decided to play a reunion tonight, probably my last chance to see one of the best straight edge bands in the world. It's been four years since I started drawing those X's on my fists. Since then, I've always been known as "the Straight Edge kid," for better or for worse.

I can't help but look around me as Aram starts what is sure to be one of many speeches of the night. From gutter punks with jean jackets and nose rings to tough guys in basketball shorts, from normal looking kids in band-tees to the sickening breed of "gangster hardcore kids" that developed somewhere in the suburbs of Sacramento County, the human landscape that surrounds me is as varied as the California coast. Close by, the fifteen or twenty straight edge kids are gathered around the stage listening intently to their idol, waiting to absorb every word the prophet spills from his pedestal.

But I find myself wondering why.

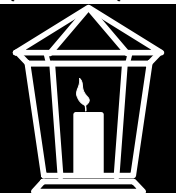
Why don't I drink? Why do I put up with the ridicule, the awkward looks and "no ways" when I tell

people I'll pass on the vodka/whiskey/rum. Why am I a "freak?" Even in my own subculture of hardcore, the one place I feel the most at home, I am alienated. No matter where I go, whether it's to a party or to a show, I am the kid that "doesn't drink," that "needs to lighten up" and "have a good time." Ian MacKaye explained his frustration with this alienation in an interview he gave in 1996:

In the real world, the big world, we were out there pissing them off because we were non-conformist punk rock kids. In the punk world, we were pissing them off because we were straight [edge] kids... I thought the punk world would embrace us.

But it didn't. Too many times, I've walked away from a show with busted knuckles or a swollen eye because some prick thought it would be funny to throw beer at the straight edge kids. Too many times, I've had to pry a friend off of some dumbass and get the fuck out of there before the cops came. Too many times, I've been backed into a corner with no way out but through "them"—and for what? For pride? For some sense of dignity? I was raised on the broken windows and bursting veins of alcoholism, so I know what "a few beers here and there" can do. But the fear of this monster from my childhood can't be my sole motivating force. It just can't.

Aram's words stir the crowd into frenzy as the guitars mark the beginning of Betrayed's first song. As a circle pit whirls behind me, tearing up the human landscape like a tornado and I watch the pile-ons begin, I recall every show I've ever been to, every line of lyrics



that I've screamed at the top of my lungs as I climbed desperately over the bodies of my peers to the mic on the stage. The lyrics and shows of The Gorilla Biscuits, Have Heart, Verse, Champion and more played through my head as this one played out before me.

When the song was over and the dust of whatever fight had started this time had settled, Aram embarked on yet another speech. This one, however, I could not ignore. The sweat dripped from the top of his biced head, between his thick-rimmed glasses and down his hooking beak of a nose as he began to tell the story of how he had helped a friend in need. Aram, you see, is a therapist who works with individuals who are rehabilitating from drug and alcohol addiction. When a man walked into the clinic one day, strung out on whatever his poison was, having lost everything and looking for help, Aram was there to get him through it. The man told him how his wife had left him and taken the kids, how he had lost his job and his house and his family because of his addiction. Aram listened and, over the next few months, helped this man break his addiction and slowly earn back everything he had lost. Then, one day, he didn't show up to his session. The next day, the police found him, hanging in his closet by a thin nylon chord.

Just when this man had begun to gain his life back, he slipped back into addiction. Seeing everything he had worked so hard for in the past few months fall to pieces once again, he couldn't face Aram or the rest of the world, so he ended his own life.

"Now, I didn't tell this story to scare you all away from drinking and smoking pot," he said, "some of

my best friends do. I told it to remind you to always remember the people you care about. In the end, they will be there and that bottle won't."

With this, Betrayed went on to play one of the best sets I have ever been a part of and I began to realize just why I put those X's on my fists. As I left 924 Gilman Street, sweatshirt in hand, sweat dripping down my face and went out into the cold Berkeley night air, I looked at my friends and thought of the times we've had: road trips across California, random nights wandering the streets after a show, 4 am skinny-dipping in Santa Barbara. I don't need to drink to have a good time. When it all comes down to it, even though I'm straight edge, "I'm a person, just like you. But I've got better things to do."

