

## **RULEBOUND REBELLION: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF HARDCORE**

By J. Eric Smith, © 2009

“Hardcore” is a fast-paced, high-volume, aggressive genre of American metal music that first emerged in the early 1980s. Its founding adherents positioned themselves as keepers of the original, contrarian, anti-authoritarian musical values that had been framed during the punk rock revolution of 1977, but had been quickly co-opted, tamed and marketed as “New Wave” within the popular, commercial culture of the day.

Key among the formative hardcore values was the concept of “DIY” (short for “do it yourself”), which proposed that anyone could pick up a guitar or a microphone and join a band if they wanted to, since rock stars are really only regular people, with more amplification. This amateur ethos created a chaotic, but often inspired, musical genre and culture, with greater value placed on passionate performance than technical expertise.

DIY also posited that artists and audiences did not need corporate record labels, management companies or booking agents to facilitate their shows. (Hardcore performances are rarely called “concerts,” since that implies a degree of formality and structure that is out of step with the DIY “hey gang, let’s put on a show” ethos). Under the hardcore DIY model, fans and bands could collectively function as regional, self-serving, self-perpetuating communities, gathering for shows in traditional music outlets (bars, clubs, coffee houses) where possible, and in nontraditional venues of opportunity (VFW halls, gyms, barns) where and when there were no willing public halls to host them.

The hardcore movement and its values spread quickly across the United States during the 1980s, carried by charismatic, cult bands that toured incessantly, leaving freshly-inspired audiences in their wake, the members of which, in turn, often built their own hometown scenes. This founding focus on communal experience placed more value on shows than on recordings, and hardcore remains, to this day, a culture largely defined by the gathering of the community to experience live music together at shows.

**WILLIAM S:** *Hardcore is pretty much its own society. Everybody knows everybody else, both locally and around the country. Everybody has their own set of rules and everybody knows the rules everywhere you go. And everybody's committed to the community in a different way than people are in other scenes. I mean, a show can happen on a Tuesday night and everyone goes, and that wouldn't happen in many other scenes, or in anything else outside of music that I can think of, really.*

I first experienced a hardcore show at the 930 Club in Washington, DC in 1982, pulled in by a friend whose musical taste I respected. It was a revelatory experience, in which traditional barriers (as I then understood them) between music providers and music consumers were destroyed. The dance area in front of the stage (now called the “moshpit,” though that term hadn’t yet been coined at the time) swirled with young males aggressively slamming into each other or “pogoing” up and down in place. Audience members who were familiar with the bands’ repertoires could climb up onto the stage to sing a few lines through a microphone set up expressly for that purpose, before diving back into the scrum on the floor below them. Band members often followed them down, playing solos or singing from deep within the heart of the pit. Security personnel posted at the corners of the stage weren’t there to stop this interaction, but rather to facilitate it, helping band and audience members alike as they moved between floor and stage.

My long-ago first hardcore show looked, felt, sounded and smelled virtually identical to any number of hardcore shows staged in and around Albany, New York in the autumn of 2009. As in 1982, crowds of short-haired, earnest, teenage males are still caroming off each other in the moshpit, driven by music crafted specially to feed their frenzy. The audiences dress in similarly low-key fashions, then and now, because the DIY focus on “musician as everyman” discourages ostentation in dress or demeanor. Occasionally, community members come “dressed up” to a show with such now-*passé* punk fashion choices as Mohawk haircuts, studded wrist-bracelets, dog collars or safety-pin piercings. These fashion offenders are openly scoffed at, and their wearers derided as “poseurs.” If they return, they generally fall back to the default hardcore uniform: blue jeans (often with pocket chains holding keys and wallets in place), boots or non-athletic sneakers, t-shirts and “hoodies” (pullover sweatshirts with drawstring hoods), with the latter items often emblazoned with band names and logos, usually purchased at earlier hardcore shows. Sameness seemingly sustains solidarity. The one glaring exception to the anti-ostentation rule is tattoo art, which is very widespread (far more now than in 1982), and becomes even more visible over the course of an evening as dancers in the moshpit shed garments to beat the nearly-unbearable heat they generate.

Because it is counter-intuitive, it is worth reiterating that the average hardcore audience has not aged over the past quarter century, with the moshpit still being almost exclusively filled with 14- to 20-year old males. Such a condition over such a long period of time clearly indicates that there is a progression of participation, in which young people enter the hardcore community, participate for some period of time, and then graduate, clearing room for the next generation. The providers (musicians, promoters, lighting and sound men, club owners, etc.) who serve the hardcore community, on the other hand, *have* gotten noticeably older over the years, a fact that frames one of the core contradictions of the contemporary hardcore scene: the clash between commerce and authenticity.

In the beginning, hardcore providers and consumers were close to the same age, and had many of the same aims. Today, the gaps between the aims and ages of providers and consumers are rapidly widening. Most of today’s providers are graduates of the moshpit themselves, and almost all of them are opportunistic businessmen who have recognized that there is money to be made from youthful idealism. The hardcore audience seems to be frozen in time not by accident, but by purposeful business decisions on the part of the providers to preserve a model that works. Hardcore is now the very type of business that its founders sought to undermine, with a revolving door of willing consumers, ready to embrace a ready-made culture that has been honed to near-perfection by skilled promotional practitioners.

This is not to deny that this culture is very real and very meaningful to the kids that participate in it. (And who are not in the least bit insulted at being called “kids,” since they use the term to refer to themselves in an endearing, self-deprecating fashion, as though they were the modern day heirs to Dickens’ waifs, ragamuffins and urchins). If hardcore culture wasn’t perceived as being real, then the kids wouldn’t buy the products presented, and the culture wouldn’t perpetuate. And if hardcore culture wasn’t perceived as being meaningful, then the kids wouldn’t be inspired to start their own bands or to book DIY shows in nontraditional venues.

**ALAN S:** *I first got involved through hearing the music and through a lifetime of feeling like a square peg in a round hole. It seemed like a safe release for a young man's very real anger, and it also was a long awaited chance to belong to something . . . it was the first community I ever joined of my own accord, and I felt very connected to the aggression and the anti-coolness of it.*

Most hardcore kids are oblivious to the more venal considerations of the scene during their early months (if not years) in the community, though moshpit graduates often eventually cite such profiteering among the factors that lead them to ultimately leave the scene. Many of them feel sullied, compromised or embarrassed once they finally understand and internalize the fact that venue owners and promoters earn far more money than the bands that they book, all on the backs of the guileless kids who espoused the slogans and made the moshpits move. Some kids respond to these feelings of betrayal by turning to the sorts of nontraditional venue, DIY-style shows that defined the movement's early years, chasing a more authentic, altruistic experience. "Keeping it real," as the hardcore kids would say, reminiscing about how things were "back in the day," even though for most of them, "the day" occurred before they born.

**KENNY T:** *DIY shows are just really cool to play. It's usually just a group of kids putting on the shows, so everybody has fun: there's not any stress, you play whenever you're ready, there's no strict order or rules or anything. And no one really cares about money 'cause it's all just for fun, plus you get a different crowd than you would at a club because a lot of kids can't go to those shows. So it's cool that those kids can see their bands at places like this.*

Unfortunately, such cool DIY shows require bands to play for free or for chump change, and someone has to rent or donate the PA equipment, and someone else has to contract with the VFW hall, and when something goes wrong or someone gets hurt, someone else has to step up and pay for it all. These things are hassles and, eventually and inevitably, the kids booking the nontraditional hardcore venue shows either get tired of the hassles and move on with their lives, or they decide that they're good enough at creating music or promoting shows to want to see something in return beyond the good will of the next generation of kids, at which point they return to the core, now-commercialized hardcore community as providers.

This is the reason why hardcore bands that play for free are typically not the ones that make lasting impressions on their scenes. It takes time and money to be in a band, especially if its members want to tour. And it is only by touring that hardcore bands develop names for themselves with consumers and providers alike. Some of the biggest show draws on the Northeastern hardcore circuit today are, in fact, bands comprised of balding, portly, heavily-tattooed, middle-aged men who have been professionally whipping hardcore kids into frenzies since the days before moshpits had names. These bands make good money in return for their drawing powers, as do the booking agents and club owners who hire them.

Despite the distaste that hardcore kids express for profiteering providers, these money-earning greybeards have come to serve as the *de facto* keepers of the rules of hardcore, passing them on to new generations of kids in a variety of explicit and implicit ways, ably stoking the idealism that makes the hardcore money machine run. This is not immediately obvious upon observation, as in the short term, it is the freshly-inspired hardcore kids who typically bring in friends, neighbors or siblings during their first enthusiastic blushes within the scene. Newcomers either "get it" right away and return for more, or are overwhelmed or disinterested, and never come back. There is very little middle ground in the initial response to a hardcore show. Over the long term, the percentage of kids who "get it" is relatively small, and the turnover rate among them is high, so it's the graduate providers who set the tone and call the shots, typically by co-opting the most dogmatic and passionate kids to serve as recruiters and scene advocates. The kids

are often unwittingly performing or parroting lines from scripts written by the providers, who turn on a profit on every head in the hall, regardless of how it gets there.

Given the predatory nature of the provider-consumer relationship in the hardcore community, it is somewhat ironic to discover that the concepts of family, unity, community and solidarity are rich in the language that consumers use at shows, as well as in the lyrics and other on-stage proclamations and exhortations offered by the providers. Public expressions of loyalty to scene and scene-mates is of paramount concern, and each regional hardcore community is quick to define the cultural and artistic terms and conditions that make it different (and, inevitably, better) than all of the other hardcore communities. Given the largely monochrome nature of hardcore music on a national basis, these distinctions tend to be very subtle and precise, with a high degree of comparative experience required before one can discern the differences, many of which hinge less on music, and more on the specific local rules of how the music should be viewed, discussed or appreciated.

**PROMOTIONAL FLYER FOR THE BAND “AGNOSTIC FRONT:”** *In today’s civilization, people continue to suffer, undergoing the grief, corruption, oppression and exploitation without a way to elude their troubles. Many have lived through these problems for ages, and the moment one tries to fight for what they believe is right, the elite brings them down and their voices are disregarded. For over two decades, the New York City band Agnostic Front has helped get these messages across to the populace to help solve these problems through socially driven music known as hardcore. In their latest offering, the band gives power and strength to these ignored voices.*

The rigid organization of the minutia of show-going sits at one side of another key contradiction in contemporary hardcore culture, wherein personal situations and experiences are framed and perceived in sweeping, global terms. While rules of conduct in Albany may be different from rules of conduct in Syracuse, both the Albany and Syracuse hardcore kids will confidently state that their rules are the best ones, because they are grounded in what they perceive as objective, universal truths. The very deeply-felt, intimate struggles that kids (especially teenage boys) face as they begin to assert their autonomy from family, church and school are recast in the hardcore crucible into global conflicts, with oppressed and oppressor locked into eternal struggles not just for survival, but for dignity, pride and meaning—all of which can be achieved through adherence to the local cultural rules.

Hardcore speaks to susceptible teenage boys in much the same ways that the books of Ayn Rand might, convincing them that they are destined for greatness, which they can achieve only by wriggling free of the shackles placed on them by dullard authoritarians, who clearly do not understand the unique brilliance of the individuals they oppress. By reframing kids’ personal problems into universal ones, hardcore makes the kids feel like they are part of something big, meaningful and empowering, as a result of active, conscious choices that each of them have made. Hardcore is marketed by its providers and embraced by its consumers as a positive, uplifting outlet for lost or struggling youth, filling time that might otherwise be spent on more nefarious activities, and allowing restless, rebellious kids to join families of their own choosing, outside of the ones that they belong to by accidents of birth.

**VINCENT T:** *Being in a band kept us from going astray when we were kids. People are always talking about having a place for kids to go so they're not out on*

*the street, and we would say that the band was what helped keep our heads together and helped keep us off the streets when we could have been out there causing a lot more trouble. This was always something positive for us to look forward to, and the time that was put into it was positive time off the street.*

Kids often view hardcore as a statement of rebellion against the rules, values and customs of their elders, but contemporary hardcore is actually built around shockingly conservative, law-abiding rules and structures. It openly espouses the sorts of Middle American family and community values that few parents would find objectionable, were they not being offered at 120 decibels by men covered in full-body tattoos. Hardcore is, at its heart, a form of rebellion for the rule-abiding. Hardcore kids don't really want anomie or anarchy, they just want someone to clearly tell them what's expected, and then fairly and consistently enforce those expectations. Joining the hardcore family is like joining a street gang that doesn't break the law. Hardcore is legal, simple, predictable, and usually delivers the desired results: affinity, euphoria, validation.

Hardcore allows kids to express their individuality by spending time with other kids who just so happen to be expressing their individuality in exactly the same ways. It's relatively safe and independent from their day-to-day lives, as kids are not likely to run into parents, teachers, or the popular kids from school at the shows they attend. In fact, hardcore kids are generally dismissive of the sorts of popular peers who engage in rule-bound, organized violence on the football field, and will freely discuss their distaste for such "jocks" while engaging in rule-bound, organized violence in the moshpit. Few, if any, of them see the irony (at best) or hypocrisy (more likely) at play here. They just know that they feel powerless and alone at home or at school, where no one understands them, and powerful and fully supported at the shows, where everybody "gets it."

**DARIUS K:** *Well, I guess the grim, grey reality of it all to me is that we recognize that we're all surrounded by violence and we're all surrounded by confusion and we're all surrounded by suffering. So we do what we do to get release from that reality and I think a lot of other people who are dealing with a lot of the same issues appreciate us doing that. Frankly, I'd rather see some 13-year old kid who's having problems at home or getting beat up at school or God knows what else, I'd rather see him come to one of our shows and vent that stuff out with us instead of going out and hurting himself or hurting someone else or turning to drugs or whatever. So I'm not necessarily saying "Turn to us" but I am saying "Turn to something like us."*

It is only through consistent and persistent promulgation and reiteration of the rules and values of hardcore that this inherently conflicted community of consumers and providers continues to function so effectively. Venue owners and promoters often lay out rules directly to the hardcore audiences from the stage, exhorting their consumers to take care of each other in the moshpit, and explicitly informing them whether certain behaviors (e.g. stage diving) will be tolerated at the show or not. Bands will often stop performing mid-song to point out noncompliant behaviors and the individuals perpetuating them, shaming those audience members in front of their peers. Rule-breakers will also frequently be removed from the premises by security staff, and then be banned from entry to future shows by door staff. It is considered deeply humiliating to be taken out by security, although hardcore kids are also quick to take security personnel to task if they enter the pit too quickly or with too heavy a hand. A good hardcore crowd is essentially self-policing, and the community takes pride in that fact.

**CHRIS K:** *I used to dance a lot. The music has energy, lots of it, and it was a way to release it and have some expression and get attention. I'd swing my arms and stuff but always in a considerate way. No tough guy dancing for me, ever. If I hit someone, I'd say sorry. The scenes I was in were really positive, though. When I travelled to different ones, I could never handle the tough guy dance bullshit.*

Some of the most critical hardcore rules are those associated with the defining, central ritual of the hardcore show: the moshpit. A well-functioning, rule-abiding pit looks disordered from the outside, but is actually governed by predictable forces and conditions, and will typically invoke surprisingly little physical damage if each member is playing his role properly. Aggression is encouraged in the pit, but violence is forbidden. The difference hinges on whether willful intent to injure is involved. Accidentally hitting someone in the face with your elbow is unfortunate but acceptable, especially if you apologize. Unloading a punch in retaliation, on the other hand, is not. That's tough guy dance bullshit.

Moshpits are textbook examples of the ways in which structure can emerge from chaos. No one manages or directs them, but they have direction and management. There is a measurable density level, in terms of people per square foot of dance floor, below and above which they will not function well. They usually don't emerge right at the beginning of a band's set, as the audience has to get a sense of the tempo and delivery to which they're expected to respond before movement begins in earnest, generally with people doing a two-step, head-bang, or pogo move in place, rather than moving laterally around the dance floor. Much of the time, hardcore music is played at tempos that are too fast for most human beings to actually dance to, which has led most hardcore bands to inject slower, simpler segments known as "breakdowns" into their songs, during which the audience can better keep pace and move with the rhythms. Singers usually announce or foreshadow upcoming breakdowns by shouting such phrases as "Okay, here it comes!" or "Let's do this!" or "Are you ready?"

Once the breakdown begins, and if the music is sitting well with the audience, one or more people among the amorphous distribution of bodies on the floor will begin to clear space around them by dancing in more lateral fashions, or by swinging their arms and legs in increasingly wide circles. Eventually, these lead dancers clear a circle, the borders of which are defined by other audience members who stand with their feet braced, and with their hands or forearms facing into the circle, to push back against the dancers when they careen into the circle's circumference. The remaining audience members on the floor press tightly and densely against the backs of their peers on the circle barrier, so that as more and more dancers move into the circle, the collective weight of the whole provides the inertia necessary to keep the circle from collapsing against the forces being thrown at it from within.

Inside the circle, the more motile dancers display their best moves, while seeking as much contact as possible with each other and the circle barrier around them. As they tire, they push through the circle into the more tightly packed areas, while members of the barrier or the backing crowd replace them. People often fall within the circle, and another key rule of the moshpit requires dancers around them to stop what they are doing, brace themselves with feet spread wide, and help their fallen comrades up before they are stomped by other oblivious dancers. It is rare to see female hardcore kids within the circle, although the ones that do attend hardcore shows often may be found on the circle perimeter, allowing them to experience the thrill of contact and chaos without putting themselves at undue risk with the larger, more aggressive males within the circle. (The boys around them on the circle will generally make an effort to provide protective spheres for

them, since their shorter stature makes them more vulnerable to elbows). As the moshpit churns, other audience members will face the stage to watch for stage divers (if the venue's rules allow for them), or to grab the microphones that are often passed down into the audience for crowd sing-alongs. Those who are most familiar with a given band's *oeuvre* often form the front line at the foot of stage, and are able to sing long, detailed, and complete segments of their favorite songs, while the singers they are emulating watch down encouragingly from above.

A typical hardcore show will have three to five bands, and if they're all connecting with the audience, dancers may spend upwards of four hours in the pit over the course of an evening, leaving them drenched, bruised and breathless by event's end. The surprising after-effect of this exhausting activity is open euphoria, as the cocktail of adrenaline and endorphins that the intense, aggressive physical activity has unleashed continues to course through their bodies long after the discomfort and duress of the moshpit pass. As the last moshpit circles finally break down, this euphoria typically results in intense and cathartic bursts of physical intimacy between young men who would normally be abashed to publicly engage in the hugs, backslaps, chest bumps and head rubs that celebrate the successful completion of another evening of hardcore.

At bottom line, then, most hardcore kids don't leap into the moshpit because they are angry. They enter the moshpit because it feels very good to have moshed. And the more the kids punish themselves as they mosh, the better they feel when they're done. "Brutal," "intense," "insane," "crazy," "tough," "rough" and "sick" are all common adjectives used by hardcore kids after an evening in the pit, and they're all considered positive, appealing descriptions of the exercise. There may, in fact, be few places in contemporary American society where the pleasurable aspects of aggression and pain are as openly embraced as they are within the hardcore community. It is only through the ancient rite of self-flagellation, made modern in the moshpit, that many hardcore kids achieve transcendence within the community. And once they do achieve that state of euphoria, they are typically willing to pay whatever it costs to repeat the experience, much to the providers' ongoing delight and financial gain.

As is the case with most highs, however, most hardcore kids will eventually begin to crave more stimulation than the moshpit can actually deliver, as it takes an ever-more intense experience to overcome increased tolerance for the discomforts of the pit. Spending four hours trying to achieve a transcendent state at a show, and failing to do so, is a disappointing and disillusioning experience. When that happens (as it inevitably does, eventually), hardcore kids generally won't look for internal, self-aware explanations of their changed perceptions of the scene around them, but rather will attribute their growing disappointment to changes that others have inflicted upon the scene.

Disillusioned hardcore kids near the end of their runs within the scene will blame bands and other providers for "selling out," accuse security staff of compromising community spirit, judge the kids that come up behind them as being inadequate keepers of the flame, or claim that the community has been undermined by jocks, "emo" kids, goths, punks, or other labeled subgroups deemed lacking in understanding of hardcore's fundamental rules and truths. Some hardcore kids will also admit to simple physical fatigue, recognizing that their 22-year old bodies aren't as resilient as their 15-year old ones once were, and that they can only get hit in the face so many times before intent to injure, or the lack thereof, stops mattering to them. Once the sense of novelty, the thrill of the communal experience, and the ability to achieve euphoria through suffering dissipate, then a black eye stops being a badge of honor and simply becomes a black eye. And once the adrenaline and endorphin buzz wears off, that black eye starts to *hurt*.

**ALAN S:** *I stopped going to shows because I felt like hardcore had become a kind of Petrified Forest and I wanted to explore other music. As I got older, I also got tired of the “us versus them” mentality, the alpha male posturing, and all the rules and regulations . . . I always felt like some of the hardcore crews were no different than the armies of jock assholes in school, only they wore Doc Marten [boots] as they beat on people instead of Nikes and Izod shirts.*

At a typical, contemporary hardcore show, the consumers outnumber the providers by at least an order of magnitude, and since the average age of the audience always remains the same, this means that the vast majority of moshpit graduates don't remain within the scene as providers, but instead leave the community for good, never (or rarely) to return. As noted above, some kids leave because they discover the provider machinery behind the scene, and some leave because the scene no longer provides them with the visceral, physical thrill that it once did. But the most commonly cited factor among hardcore graduates is the growing realization that rebellion cannot ultimately be consummated through strict adherence to rules, and that individuality cannot ultimately be achieved within a community built upon centralized, rigid commitments to unity, solidarity and family.

The rules that give structure, meaning and power to 15-year old boys living with their parents eventually become limiting, restrictive and disempowering to 20-year old men setting off into the world on their own, and discovering that the fervent idealism of hardcore is largely meaningless outside of the moshpit. There is something vaguely pathetic about older people dancing in the moshpit at an all-ages show, a fact which the kids themselves recognize. None of them want to grow up to be the sorts of adults that still hang out with or seek approval from high school kids. And in recognizing this fact, the hardcore kids demonstrate some degree of self-awareness about hardcore being “just a phase” that they're going through. They know that their time on the scene is likely date-stamped upon arrival. It's not a matter of whether or not they will leave the scene, but rather a matter of when and why. Once they leave, they are quick to dismiss and assign blame to those who remain, because that is more intellectually and emotionally comforting than the simple admission that hardcore is a kids' game, and once you outgrow it, the rules, ideologies and codes of conduct seem quaint, silly and slightly embarrassing.

It is in this general dismissal of hardcore by the vast majority of its graduates that the centrality of the providers' role as keepers of the culture and the rules becomes so apparently, inherently clear. Hardcore wouldn't have passed from one generation to another had the first generation reached its moment of disillusionment and clearly and directly shared those feelings with the kids coming up behind them. What preserved hardcore through its first generational jump, and sustains it to this day, is the small cohort of market-savvy graduates who stayed on as providers, packaging and promulgating an idealized version of the original hardcore experience to the target audience of restless and disaffected teenage boys who are most susceptible to its charms. The providers, in fact, have an active interest in having disillusioned graduates leave quickly and stay as far away as possible from the ongoing scene, lest they contaminate or diminish the enthusiasm the next generation feels for hardcore.

**MARY K:** *Some of the hardcore purists have that uptight, self-righteous attitude, which always turns me off. They seem kind of intolerant, but I know kids can put up a front. I don't like anything that's too fundamentalist. It starts to feel like a cult.*

To preserve their control of the hardcore scene, providers must keep their messages simple and consistent, and must also discourage dissent from those who have outgrown or have little use for the intellectual naivety in which hardcore trades. This has directly stifled the creative growth of hardcore as a viable and valuable genre of music in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, as those few young musicians interested in exploring different formulas and approaches to hardcore typically need to leave the scene to do so, lest they rock the apple carts that the providers have so carefully stacked with lucrative products of their own choosing.

The providers themselves often play an active role in encouraging intolerance within the scene by enlisting and co-opting the most fervent hardcore teenage acolytes through low-paying set-up, security or other lackey jobs, above and beyond the recruiting work that most of them do for free. Such kids feel empowered to serve as bulldogs for the scene, sniffing out and reporting noncompliant behavior in the community back to their paying masters, who then encourage them to censure it. This feedback mechanism directly reinforces the lowest common denominator elements that bind the scene together and define the music that moves it. You will rarely, if ever, find any hardcore recordings on any commercial music magazine or critic's "best of year" lists accordingly, as the music doesn't function anymore as a valid, original art form, but rather serves most simply as a construct for control and commerce.

Ultimately, hardcore culture today is defined by its core contradictions: profiteering providers serving idealistic consumers, young people rebelling against one set of rules by embracing another set of rules, individuality being sought through group experience, and pleasure being pursued through pain. Hardcore is a petrified forest that thrills successive generations of young men as they enter it, only to have itself debased, devalued and dismissed when those same young men pass through its far side, some years later. It is artistically impotent, but highly lucrative to those graduate providers who promulgate it, frozen in time, but timeless.

Hardcore in 2009 is a manufactured, cultivated, commercial artifice, but it's an artifice that still feels real and has meaning to those inside it.