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Notes on the Peruvian Underground: Part II

BY SHANE "GANG" GREENE*

IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT THE MUSIC MOTHERFUCKER

It's about the scrawny guys who love to mosh, but can't get laid; the plump chicks with blue hair; the rich-white-black-sheep-dip-shit lookin' for a way to piss off daddy-the-banker; the middle-class-black-freak who likes the feedback instead of the bling; the introverted homo ass-lickers and the outed lesbo butt-kickers; the ideologically discontent; the socially disabled; the mentally unstable and materially unkempt; the ungodly but not exactly geeky. Freaks, queers, drunks and junkies. Well-formulated Dr. Allin, well-formulated indeed. And let's not forget the bored art students and future intellectuals.

We know punk's not just about the music. It's about these unlikely gatherings of unlikable people that the music likes to bring together. It's about the misfits—with a small 'm'. Punk finds a way to disrespect borders, even when—or maybe especially when—particular punks start to regulate non-conformity by imposing it on unsuspecting newcomers. Punk goes in search of disrupted homes and perfectly well-adjusted families at the same time; it seeks out personalities pitched on the precipice of anti-sociality and places them in the same room with the nicest, most generous of human beings with nothing but unreciprocated love to offer. There's nowhere you can go where there are no misfits. Oddly, there's also no necessary place you go to find one. They just appear; and punk offers them a language, a context, and a friend or two, another misfit who may or may not be trustworthy but might be cool to hang with for a little while. It's all a little Bartleby-esque, isn't it? I prefer not to motherfucker...

Such is also true of the punks growing up in the shithole of Lima during Peru's tumultuous decades of the '80s and '90s where being a misfit could get you killed, arrested, detained, or imprisoned. Or force you to keep your head down. Or make you wonder if you should talk about peace in the middle of a fucking war. Or just take refuge in your relatively safe upper-class residential district far away from the massacre of thousands of poor and provincial Indians in the countryside. Lots of choices to be made and lived with. Decisions to be unsure of or maybe get dead with. Lots of choices that weren't really choices at all.

It's impossible to locate a single, much less a simple profile of who or what a "Peruvian punk" is. Yes, big structural patterns emerge. More middle- and upper-class than not; more white or mestizo than Indian; way more guys than girls. And there's no question that punk was and still is almost entirely urban; or that, musically speaking, it is deeply Euro-American in most of its past and present manifestations. In fact, only a select few bands (Del Pueblo or Seres Van from the 1980s era) were inspired enough to create other musical texture by using Andean or Afro-Peruvian instruments (flutes, panpipes, charango, cajón) into the emergent genre called "underground rock." Drums, guitar, bass and a dude singing into a mic. That's still the basic 1-2-3-4 of rock'n'roll almost everywhere you go.

Yet, despite all these structuring factors, the punk personalities really are fascinatingly hard to pin down. Like "a garment that does not fit the person for whom it was intended" (the etymology of 'misfit' attested from the 1800s) Peruvian punks don't fit well into our neatly shaped social scientific variables. Their thoughts are too irruptive, their attitudes too disruptive. The best we can do is approximate their misfittingness, perhaps by paying attention to the polysemic possibilities of their inglorious nicknames.

There's Leo Escoria, because he's scum, and there was Leo Bacteria,

because he was infectiously funny right up until he killed himself (Rage In Peace Leo). There's Daniel F, because he's feo (ugly). There's Chiki because when he was an adolescent he looked like that Chiquidracula character from '80s Mexican TV. There's Loquillo because, they say, he's fucking crazy, and El Negro Brunce because he's black and 'Brunce' may or may not be the weirdest Peruvian last name ever. There's María T-ta because she likes her tits to hang out and Támara because she's kinda shy and artsy—hence needs no nickname. There's Mono Blanco but I have no idea why he is a white monkey, and Chancho Viejo because, I assume, he's an old pig. There's Sandro Dogma, more unassuming than dogmatic, but rather bold to have made it all the way from Lima to NYC without a stamp in his passport. There's Chato Victor and El Chato (Inchaústegui), because they're both short. There's El Gordo Gabriel and El Gordo Memo because, well, they're both pretty fat. There's Pedro Tóxico because he's a really nice guy who wrote those beautifully poisonous lyrics for Sociedad de Mierda's classic "Púdrete Pituco." There's Boui (not Bowie) cause he's tall, thin and light-skinned, dies his hair white, and does a lot of cocaine. There's Miguel Det (not Death) because he's one part metal, one part punk, and all parts gloomy. And because frankly there are enticing words in English that make no phonetic sense *desde otro punto de vista lingüístico*.

It's true. There's fuckin' misfits a plenty in the Country of the Incas. Schedule a visit; arrange a tour; snap a few pictures of these restless natives living in the Shitty City of Kings.



IT'S ALSO ABOUT THE ART AND IDEAS

If music is artistic, and art requires ideas, then artistic ideas are also musical. Influential images sorta sing to you. Memorable music walks directly into your field of vision, trying to make a scene. Excellent ideas don't bother to raise their hands to be heard. None of this transitive reasoning should be taken to imply that artists, intellectuals and musicians always get along. Sometimes they do; sometimes they don't. But the nature of the punk aesthetic is to tie together sight, sound and insight. Leo Escoria is a good example of a Peruvian punk unleashing such an aesthetic. Bassist for Leusemia and idea-man for some of their snottiest songs (e.g. "Rata Sucia"), he also designed the flyer art for the early "Underground Rock Attacks Lima" shows. Simple, primitive hand-drawings reflecting the gloom of Lima's white skies and offering a dystopic outlook on a society about to implode: This was the aesthetic message that brought Lima its "underground rock" sensibility and gave Lima "subtes" (unders) their name. But one could be equally enamored of the flyer art of Guillermo Figueroa of Gx3, more comic-bookish than desperate-and-cynical in design, but still visually striking. Figueroa's flyers, along with a few others, were crucial to creating a distinct aesthetic vibe for the short life (1988-1989) of the Hardcore House in Barranco district. More playful than petrified, more positive than pessimistic, the flyer art of the Hardcore House combined with the music to create a distinct Lima Hardcore sensibility. Or, according to the Hardcore House's *cholo-punk* critics, to reflect an upper-middle class refuge mentality in the middle of a war that was raging, literally and figuratively, far away from their weekend concerts.

There are also those moments when the artists and the musicians and the idea guys want to rip each other apart, maybe even tear each others' heads off and piss down the respective dangling necks. The Beasts—the art collective of disgruntled architecture students that emerged at Lima's Ricardo Palma University and attached its mission to the underground bands—put on a series of famous shows called Bestiaries between 1984 and 1986. They were complete with ephemeral, trashy art installations and memorable performances by virtually all the notable underground rock bands of the time. Everyone seemed in a celebratory mood, or, at least, that's the way the organizing artists like to think about it.

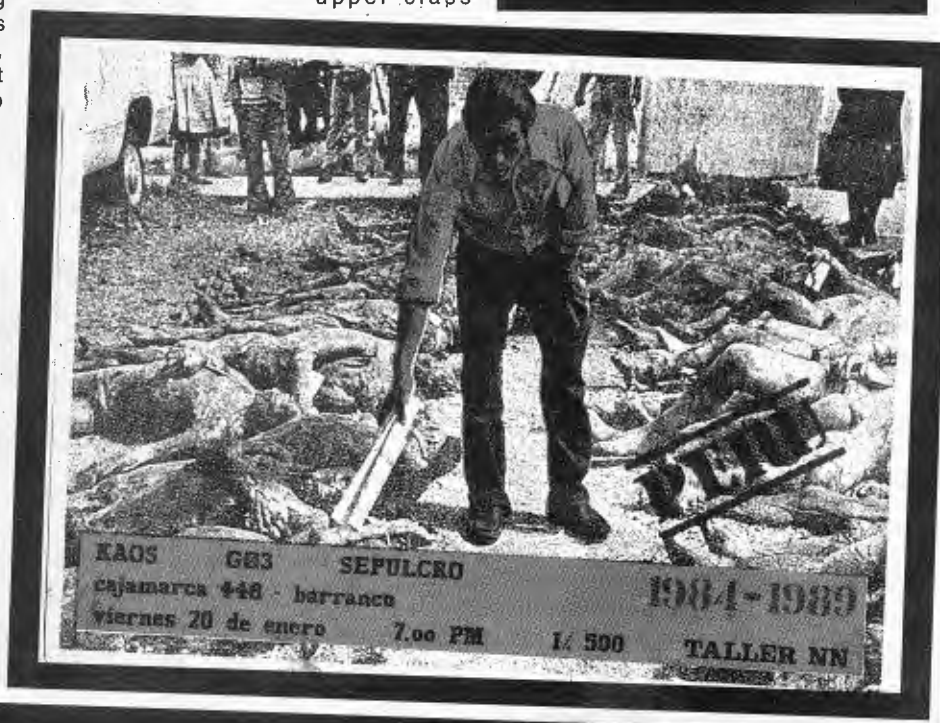
Truth be told, several of the Beasts sought to engage with Lima's subtle movement as a space of deep intellectual introspection and some emerged from it compelled by Peru's atmosphere of political radicalization. All of this started to piss off some of the this-is-just-fuckin-rock-n-roll musician types; the ones who thought the visual guys were just a bunch of artsy-fartsy, lefty-bourgeois-bullshitters. But, surely, bullshit is in the eye of the beholder. No punk can release a demo or have a show or produce a fanzine without thinking in terms of the visual. So, let's face it. There was formidable punk art produced for covers, flyers, and fanzines. And there was forgettable punk art produced by dudes who, visually speaking, had no fucking idea what they were doing. Being visually influential instead of inconsequential takes ideas...motherfucker.

Amid all the random magazine cutouts, crappy

drawings, and thrown-together collages, I can identify my three personal favorites of unforgettable images that circulated in and around the subtle movement in the 1980s. In no particular order except the chronological one here they are:

NUMBER ONE: Herbert Rodriguez' 1985 punked-up, painted-over version of the famous facial profile picture of José Carlos Mariátegui (greatest Latin American Marxist ever) simply rocks. Nothing more Peruvian or more punk to define what was happening in these Peruvian punks' heads. This, for me, is a crucial moment at which punk became part of what Mariátegui himself liked to call "Peruvian reality"—this idea that Peru is a place where global processes are happening everyday but must also be appreciated from the point of view of their Peruvian particularities. This, for me, is the moment that Rodriguez provokes us to consider the idea that Mariátegui, in his own Peruvian Marxist way, was punk as all fuck.

NUMBER TWO: I also admire Ataque Frontal's use of an image by visual artist Jaime Higa for their self-titled EP (released in 1987 by France's New Wave label). The directness; the minimalist retouching; the use of red to exaggerate the blood: all these elements attach to one of the most loaded images in Peru's war. The appropriation of a famous photo of the discovery of eight murdered journalists and one executed guide in the Andean village of Uchuraccay (presumably killed by villagers fearful that they were Shining Path militants) relies on a crucial disconnect that the artist and the band were trying to comment on critically. The incredible divide between "deep Peru," long a euphemism for the large native Andean population living in impoverished racial marginality, and "legal Peru," the exclusionary state that protects coastal, middle- and upper-class





Peruvians who routinely think of Peru's indigenous population as dirty, stupid Indians. This social schism, one that defines Peruvian history from the colonial period up to the present, becomes deeply ironic once one opens the EP. The critical political

awareness contained in Higa's cover image is suddenly contradicted by the ridiculous stereotyped images of contented Andean Indians—playing flutes, wearing wool hats, and walking their llamas—that some ignorant French punk in charge of production decided to include on the insert. Wake the fuck up Frenchie! The whole point was about violent historical contradictions playing out in the Peruvian Andes.

NUMBER THREE: By 1986 the art experiments of the Beasts were dead. Soon after, several core members of that group (Alfredo Márquez, Alex Ángeles, Enrique Wong, José Luis García) formed a smaller collective known as Taller NN, "Workshop of the Unidentified." Yes, as in unidentified bodies to go along with the pseudonyms they used in their works. Some of the "Unidentified" artists, like Márquez, were dedicated subterfuges, others less so. But the core group, along with others like Herbert Rodríguez that came and went from the workshop, retained ties to the punk underground as the decade came to an end and the war escalated to a boiling point. NN embarked on a series of projects that proved deeply dangerous due to the political ambiguities surrounding them. The simultaneously political, pop, and punk aesthetics of NN's major works—most of which circulated completely underground with the notable exception of a couple of pieces exhibited at the 1989 Havana Biennial in Cuba—contributed to several NN members either going to prison, fleeing to foreign countries, or adopting super low profiles to survive the Fuehrer Fujimori's witch-hunt approach to defeating the Shining Path during the 1990s. My favorite example of NN's work comes not from their various Warholian appropriations of Marxist icons—although it was an artistic reinterpretation of Warhol's famous Mao in the context of the Shining Path's militant Maoism that was later used to persecute Márquez on charges of "sympathy for terrorism" and then send him to prison for four years in 1994. The one I like the most is a flyer NN designed for the final gig of the band Kaos in January of '89. It presents a stunning juxtaposition of Peruvian punk and Peru's reality of political violence. Atop a grotesque press image of corpses found in a mass grave near Pucayacu (in Ayacucho province) NN used neon colors and banners to advertise a cheap, underground punk show to take place at their workshop. Studying the image the viewer is forced to confront discordant realities: the man caught on camera identifying a decaying body, representative of Peru's descent into political chaos, is now being used to "market" the chaotic hardcore of Kaos' last show.

Brilliantly sonic. Visually sordid. Intellectually solid. This too is Peru.

IT'S ABOUT THE MOMENTS

Finally—or at least until next time—let me argue this idea about the "It's not about..." a wee bit further. I think it's not about the shows per se (motherfucker) and more about the moments before, during, and after. Not that there weren't kick-ass shows with cool names: Metal-Core (I and II); Rock en Río Rimac (ironically intended to be not nearly as sexy as Rock en Río de Janeiro given the bleakness of the River Rimac). The point is that Peruvian punk's memorable moments are always too many to ever name. These moments are even harder to document, working with so many fried brains, bad memories, and fading photocopies. But let me mention at least a couple that everybody, more or less, likes to remember.

Remember when Narcosis shut down Rock en Río Rimac in February of 1985 with the song "Sucio Policía"? They were one of many bands that played this open-air concert in downtown Lima—most of the others

with much more commercial sounds and intentions. Initially nervous about the large police presence at the concert, the trio was not sure a song titled "Dirty Policeman" would go over well. But two or three songs into the set and they decided, well, they were punks, so fuck it. The pigs, without the requisite humorous self-deprecation necessary I guess, didn't appreciate the opening lines at all: "Dirty policeman dressed in green / You act out of convenience / Dirty policeman dressed in green / You defend decadence." The cops surrounded the audience, fired shots in the air, and swarmed the stage. And then the naughty trio Narcosis fled down the streets of Lima like the snotty provocateurs they were.

Remember when Miguel Angel Vidal of the post-punk band Voz Propia threw a dead dove into the crowd and ripped apart a US flag on stage at La Feria del Hogar ("The Homes Fair") in July of 1988? Somehow a few underground bands wiggled their way into the music venues created for this otherwise totally homes-gardens-and-families-with-children type fair, held annually in the middle-class San Miguel district of Lima. Voz Propia, one of Lima's darkest, most brooding (and I think most musically interesting) bands was among them. Back then, and in the midst of a tense political atmosphere, Miguel Angel frequently used his place as frontman to offer public statements that leaned him, and the band as a whole, to the far left. His performance gestures at this mainstream venue were in fact reflective of a broader strategy—Vidal also routinely distributed leftist political flyers he designed at Voz Propia shows.

That said, the provocation of the performance at La Feria del Hogar not only caused the fair organizers to ban the performances by the remaining underground bands. It really pissed off the guys in Eutanasia who were due to play next, and instead found themselves shut out of their own opportunity to be punk, provocative and politically pissed amid this ordinary, every-day kind of Peruvian public.

To be concluded...

**Shane likes multi-grain cheerios, minor chords and having sex behind dumpsters in poorly lit alleyways (but can't get enough of two out of the three).*

