

Style Report: Another Nail in the Coffin of Accessible Discourse or: Quick, Where's My Jargon? I Have a Public to Alienate — Part 2

by Jonah CAMPBELL

Having more or less adequately described the hardcore fashion phenomenon, I would now like to undertake some analysis of the parallels between hardcore subculture and mainstream attire. What with the omnipresent concerns within any subculture about its co-option by "the mainstream," the first question one must ask is whether this is an example of the mainstream being informed by, and profiting from a style pioneered in the underground, or whether it indicates more generally the commercialization of this particular musical subculture. Whether or not this question is even answerable short of an (essentially impossible) empirical study of the time-line to trace the emergence of the trends in each arena, it is important to recognize that, like many 20th century (and perhaps, foreseeably, 21st century) fashion trends, hardcore chic borrows liberally from a number of different eras and areas of fashion (punk, metal, rockabilly, 60's mod, 50's nerd attire, even goth to a certain extent), and in this respect it represents a sort of pastiche of different styles, perhaps in the process of congealing into an accessible, easily packaged format for the mainstream.

It seems most likely that, rather than one necessarily prefacing and informing the other, this style is the result of a feedback loop of sorts, illustrating the give and take which occurs as underground fashion sensibilities inevitably find their way into the mainstream, and likewise, more "mainstream" individuals and aspects of identity enter into the subculture. This might simply be a matter of the increasing permeability and transience of the boundaries which define the subculture and separate it from the dominant culture, for, especially in the case of subcultures that do not explicitly define themselves in contrast to or defiance of the dominant culture, the shared participation of individuals in

the underground and mainstream eventually leads to the blurring of such distinctions, and some would say, the complete absorption (if not total assimilation, in that the subculture has also influenced the constitution or appearance of the mainstream in the process of its own consumption) of the subculture into the dominant culture.

Accordingly, I would suggest that the hardcore scene, as it currently stands (as a home to hardcore chic) is such a subculture that does not attempt to define itself against or in rejection of the mainstream. As such, it is not a counter-culture, and so, returning to the beginning of this article, I would not deem the term co-option as appropriate to describe this adoption of some elements of hardcore style by the mainstream.

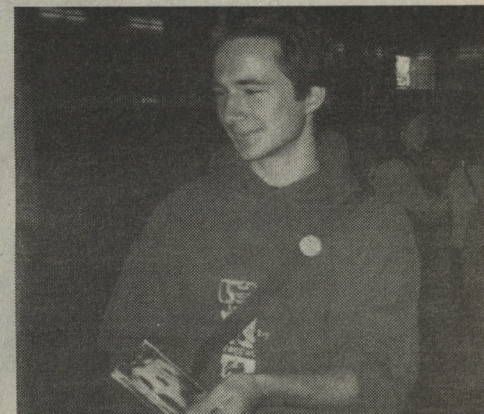
Some explanation of terms is needed in order to clarify this. Co-option, as it is commonly used, refers to the appropriation of something (be it imagery, language, etc.) and subsequent draining of its original message, meaning, or radicalizing potential, for use by and integration into another body (usually one which stands in non-accordance with the original message of whatever has been subjected to co-option). Since hardcore does not feature as one of its essential characteristics this radical or anti-mainstream perspective, its association with the mainstream is less an example of co-option as it is one of integration, or even co-operation.

Some individuals, (perhaps myself included) might argue that the existence of hardcore as an apolitical subculture is testament to the ongoing co-option and assimilation of the culture by the mainstream which has already been occurring for quite some time. While this is entirely possible, it seems to rely on a definition of hardcore which is not amenable to the hardcore subculture which is being

dealt with here, ie: that which accompanies the style of dress described above (the very fact that I am defining a subculture in terms of what accords to its fashion is probably questionable in itself, as opposed to focussing on the fundamentals of the culture and considering fashion only as it is represented as an essential part of this, but dammit, this is a fashion column after all, Jesus Christ).

This might be made clearer by contrasting it with the example of punk fashion and its relationship to the mainstream. In the case of mainstream fashion adopting elements of punk attire, I would suggest that the concept of co-option is applicable. This is defensible even avoiding entirely the political rhetoric and ideals of punk (the uniformity and even existence of which are debatable in the first place) and focussing entirely on the fashion element. Punk rock had an undeniably significant fashion component, which, both implicitly and explicitly, through its rips and tears, patches, pins and spikes and generally fearsome (or to many, loathsome) appearance, constituted an attack upon conventional norms of beauty, propriety and order. Even if the style was adopted for shock appeal alone, or worse, trendiness alone, the shock was effected, and the rebellion against contemporary mores was successful, so long as the offence was made.

The repugnance with which the mainstream viewed punk fashion makes its eventual appropriation thereof all the more frustrating to punk rockers, and further illustrates how this constitutes an instance of co-option, rather than integration. The punk appearance was intended to shock and offend, and ultimately the particulars of the style were articulated less in pursuit of a certain ideal than they were engineered to operate as the antithesis of British conservatism. As such, when a fashion such



The author in his salad days.

as this is employed as a part of, or in support of the system which it originally sought to disrupt, it has been effectively co-opted.

As a closing note, it might be said that any fashion which seeks as its primary aim to offend against order and mainstream sensibilities, must necessarily be flexible enough to change and adapt as the mainstream becomes more familiar with, and hence is less shocked by the counter-culture's appearance. Essentially, the spirit of rebellion residing in the style must be able to separate itself from preoccupation with aesthetics if it wishes to continue to be cutting-edge and upsetting, for if there is too much connection to, or fondness for, the clothes themselves, then it will be difficult to separate the essence from the artifice when fashion loses its shock appeal.

Thus, any stylistic expression of resistance must constantly renew itself, lest it become too concerned with the material and fall into obsolescence. It seems strange that rebellion must then, in a sense, strive to be like the mainstream, which constructs itself in service of the popular or trendy, donning and doffing outfits as they go in and out of favour, for if the mainstream dwells too long on particular styles, it too eventually grows unpopular and recedes into obsolescence.

Boy, am I pretentious.