

Defining all that is emo: The history of a massively misunderstood culture

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OTTAWA (CUP) - Emo is a three-letter word that means more than most poly-syllabic contrivances. It started as a music scene, became a fashion statement and is now shorthand for everything from teen angst to Weezer.

Emo is many things to many people, including the good folks of Emo, Ontario. Part fad, part movement, but mostly misunderstood, emo is an idea that has had a huge impact on youth culture.

The Economist, the most upper crust of financial magazines, referred to emo culture—with tongue firmly in cheek—as "young people afflicted with melancholia". A more pithy description may be hard to find, but emo is much more complicated than a bunch of sad teenagers getting asymmetrical haircuts and wearing tight pants.

Emo music was born in Washington D.C. in 1985, when the political-hardcore punk scene of the era matured, creating songs with more personal and introspective lyrics. Early emo bands that helped pave the way — like Rites of Spring, Fire Party, and Hüsker Dü — were chaotic and harsh, closer to the Dead Kennedys than Death Cab for Cutie.

The central figure in the creation and popularization of early emo was Ian MacKaye, founder of the straight-edge movement, which rejected the debauchery of drugs and sex so prevalent in rock and roll. As part of this clean lifestyle of abstinence, MacKaye inked Xs on the back of his hands to show others what he believed. This is still in vogue among straight-edge practitioners and some clueless teenagers today.

After a short-lived but successful stint with the band Embrace, MacKaye formed Fugazi in 1987, which became the most influential band in the early history of emo.

MacKaye combined his hardcore-punk roots with a new style of songwriting that involved his personal do-it-yourself ethics and a far more nuanced approach to the human condition. MacKaye's straight-edge dogma and the band's fondness for playing shows in unconventional venues added to Fugazi's mystique. They hated moshing and would often kick people out of shows for being violent. This was a far cry from the bloody, angry image of punk rock, and many people responded positively to the new direction.

The late 80s and early 90s saw emo travel outside of Washington.

California gave emo its own spin with poppier melodies, eventually replacing the hard D.C. sound.

By the 1990s, even though the seeds of many different sub-genres and bands had been sown, the huge influence of Seattle grunge-rock overshadowed all other post-hardcore movements. Only with the death of Kurt Cobain in 1994 did the genre move out from under

try to emulate the anti-corporate, straight-edge lifestyle of MacKaye, his unassuming fashion sense did not lend itself to imitation. When Weezer came along, they created their own fashion trend. Lead singer Rivers Cuomo's box-frame glasses and nerdy polo shirts became the new uniform for musically dorky introverts. Geek chic became cool. Many identified with

tised the wearers' musical taste and were cheaply available at shows. The culture reveled in its fey androgyny, with males wearing tight jeans and sometimes makeup. The fashion has taken on a life of its own and no longer marks the wearer as a follower of the music, to the great chagrin of many who helped start the trend.

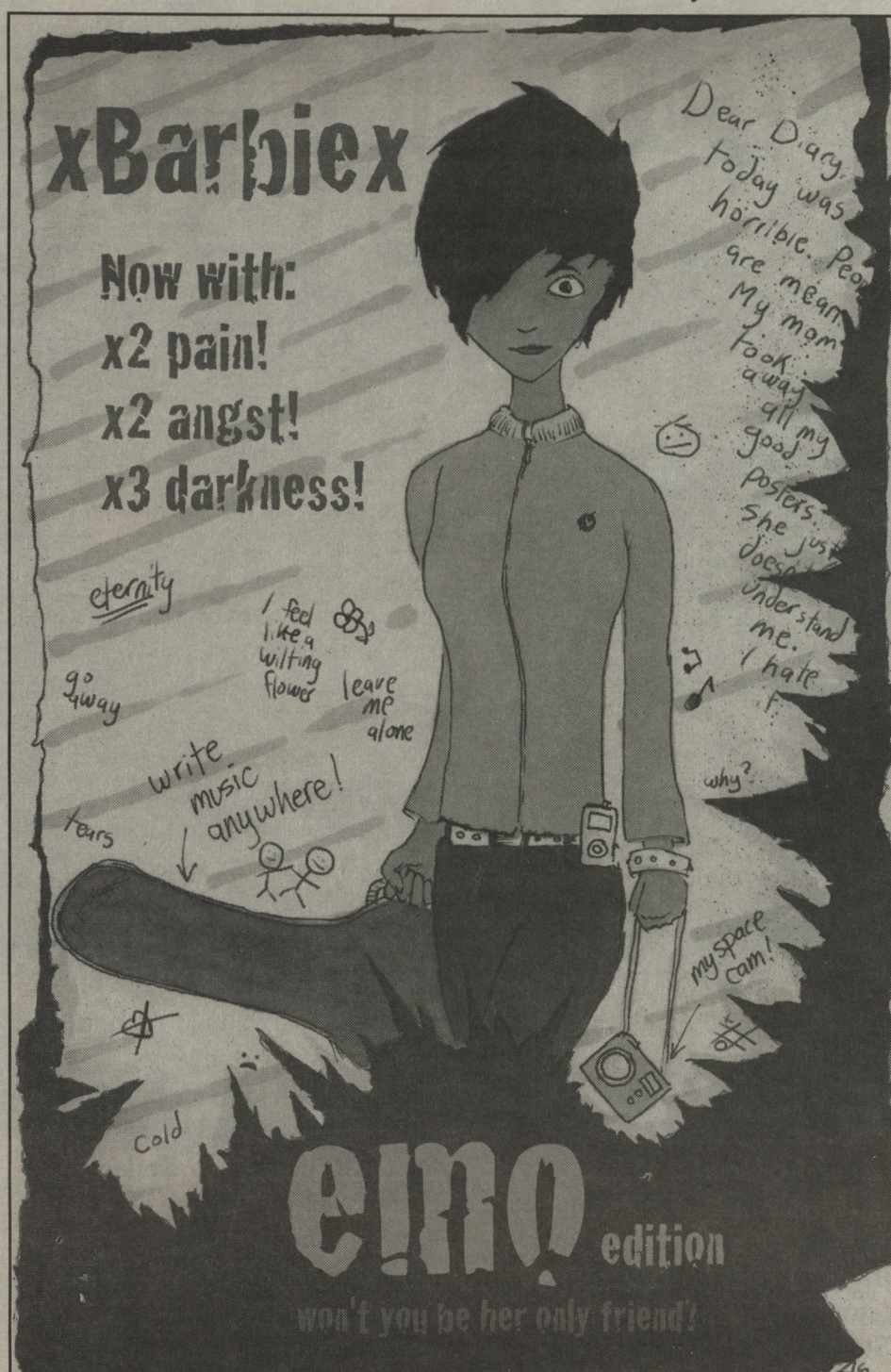
Around the mid-90s, any band that showed the slightest hint of sensitivity was labeled emo, greatly diluting the term.

Nowadays people lump together bands as diverse as Boxcar Racer, Bright Eyes, and My Chemical Romance as "emo" simply because of their look. Emo itself is no longer the alternative style it once was, and major record companies and fashion chains have hopped on the bandwagon.

The term "emo kid" has become something of an insult, aimed at the sensitive and effeminate. Those who dress in the emo style are stereotyped as being depressed and suicidal, tied to the alienation that many bands sing about. Emo has even become shorthand for depression itself, as friends tell each other to cheer up by saying "don't be so emo".

The word has changed so much over the years that it has become truly undefinable. Perhaps Fugazi guitarist and Rites of Spring singer Guy Picciotto said it best in 2005 when, in response to a question about his founding of emo, he retorted: "Every band that gets labeled with that term hates it. They feel scandalized by it ... The reason I think it's so stupid is that — what, like the Bad Brains weren't emotional?"

Passing fad or not, emo is widely misunderstood. British publication The Daily Mail ran a piece in 2006 condemning emo as a "subset of the Goths" that revolves around the "celebration of self-harm". Though the idea is completely absurd, the article reflects the complete lack of understanding many people have about emo and the sheer number of meanings the word has taken on. How long emo survives since being absorbed by the mainstream remains to be seen, but the term has been so misused it is no longer relevant as a tangible music genre. Perhaps in 20 years "emo" fashion will make a comeback, only it will be considered an ironic statement. Or maybe future musicians — uninspired by their generation's musical influences — will look to the original hardcore acts of the 80s and try to revive the original "emo", to the bewilderment of the older generation. Who knows? Such is the life of a recycled cultural trend.



the shadow of bands like Nirvana and Soundgarden. The first true 90s emo album was Sunny Day Real Estate's *Diary* in 1994. Widely hailed as a masterpiece, *Diary* was far softer and more melodic than Fugazi and their contemporaries, marking a divide between old and new emo.

The mid-90s were a productive time for this new direction, especially in the American Midwest. As emo began to stake out its own territory as a genre, certain bands on the pop end of the scale, like Jimmy Eat World, began to be lumped in with emo. Weezer's 1994 self-titled debut album was often referred to as emo years after its release, even though it was their sophomore album, *Pinkerton*, released in 1996, that featured typical conventions of emo, like emotional, personal lyrics.

Though Fugazi fans would often

the passionate lyrics of longing for something better and pining over girls out of your league.

Being a loner became popular. This helped give birth to the thin look of emo for men in particular, as the boys whose physiques singled them out for bullying found a place in this new subculture. The popularity of veganism as a part of the emo-alternative lifestyle also helped popularize the thin look.

Strangely enough, *Star Trek* seemed to have unintentionally influenced modern emo haircuts, as kids started getting their hair cut like Romulans and Vulcans. Certain journalists even began calling the new trend "Spock Rock" in the late 90s. These futuristic haircuts became an emo badge; easily identifiable and a supposedly unique statement.

Black hair came to reflect tortured souls. Band T-shirts adver-