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Academic Autobiography

My first visceral experience with music came at the age of 10. It had been a few months since Britney Spears released her album *In the Zone*, and I finally got my hands on the CD. Driving down the highway in my family's old red minivan, I put the disc in my portable player and zoned out from the rest of the world as the first notes filled my ears. It was all fun and pop songs until $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way through the album, when the utterly depressing piano ballad called "Everytime" came on, shattered my fragile world, and made me cry. My mom saw the pathetic sight in the rear view mirror and asked me what was wrong. To be honest, I was probably just as confused as she was, because I couldn't believe how easily I was overcome with emotion just by listening to a song. Little did I know, that would be the first of many similar experiences, and I would soon come to embrace the feelings of sadness that music gave me just as much as I did the rush of happiness.

No matter how much or how quickly my music taste evolved over the years, my passion for it only strengthened, particularly as I gained independence throughout high school. Although I attended my first concert in 8th grade (it was My Chemical Romance and Rise Against at the now-demolished Nassau Coliseum... I wasn't kidding when I said my tastes changed quickly), one of my friends' parents was forced to sit out in the parking lot while we screamed our hearts out to the angsty lyrics of their newest album, *The Black Parade*, which was played in full before the band changed clothes and performed an equally long set of their greatest hits. In high school, though, my friends and I started taking public

transportation to much further venues without any begrudging obligation by our parents to coordinate rides back and forth. We frequently attended concerts—which, by the way, we now called “shows” because it sounded cooler—in venues like the Crazy Donkey in nearby Farmingdale, the main hangout to see local, often unsigned bands; Radio City Music Hall and the Beacon Theater in Manhattan, which both seemed excessively extravagant in comparison; and even First Unitarian in Philadelphia, the church basement where I saw Tame Impala after catching a Megabus from Manhattan for \$10.

It was also around this time that a family tragedy sparked a new music-related obsession: record collecting. After my uncle passed away suddenly during my freshman year of high school, my grandma offered his entire record collection to me, saying simply that she knew he would want me to have it. I guess I wasn’t surprised, because in my many afternoons spent hanging out with him after school, his affinity for Brian Eno, The Ramones, The Beatles had rubbed off on me, but in a time of immense grief and processing, this gesture meant more to me than I could have imagined. As I write this almost 8 years later, surrounded by the last tangible reminders of his presence mixed in with my many new additions, I realize that for me, record collecting is more than the ability to hold a piece of music in my hands or hear it through better speakers than my laptop could provide; it is a shared honor to both myself and my love of music, and to my uncle and his.

Using babysitting and chore money to build on my record collection, attend shows, meet-and-greets, and festivals with increasing frequency added fuel my ever-present, fiery dream of being part of the music industry, but my lack of ability to even play the recorder with any semblance of talent kept me well aware that I’d never make it as an artist. I

became resigned to the idea of living out my life as a merch girl, travelling around the world with my favorite bands and slinging t-shirts for just enough money to buy some snacks at rest stops and grab meals before shows, but even that never happened. In fact, it wasn't until my first year at NYU that I became involved in the music industry in any capacity apart from as a fan and consumer.

The decision to spend my freshman year abroad in London rather than at NYU's main campus was essentially a decision to throw myself into an entirely new academic, cultural, political, and social setting, but I was surprisingly unafraid of this. When I arrived, I immediately joined the Student Council, started organizing campaigns for the local branch of Amnesty International and explored the city at every possible opportunity. Once I figured out where all of the best venues were, I fell back into a routine of frequently attending concerts, where I began to familiarize myself with the British music scene and make friends outside of the highly Americanized NYUL bubble. At school, the interdisciplinary nature of my classes allowed me to explore parts of myself as a thinker and writer that I'd never been able to before, given my secondary educational experiences.

I'd spent 9th, 10th, and half of 11th grade at a public high school in my hometown on Long Island, and the rest of 11th and half of 12th at a charter school in California before graduating early. Changing school systems eliminated most of the pointless worksheets, irrelevant videos that would be shown by substitutes when the regular teacher was absent, and tests that judged only how much information you could regurgitate onto the page in 40 minutes, and gave me more subject options, but it didn't free me from the sometimes boring lectures, rigid essay prompts, or chemistry experiments. Instead, it simply brought

those things to my bedroom, or, in the case of chemistry, to the dining room, where an experiment with acidic liquids went terribly awry and resulted in a large, dark hole seared into our handmade wooden table. From that point on, the beginning of every chemistry lesson involved placing a box of baking soda prominently in the middle of the table.

I found that my courses at NYU even allowed me to combine what I call my “student self” with my “weekend self” in new and creative ways. The first and most notable instance of this was in my Writing I class, where we were tasked with writing a 10-page research paper on any topic of our choosing, so long as it pertained to British culture in some way. Those guidelines were easy enough to abide by, and I decided to write about the emergence of the punk scene in London, focusing on the fashion (and managerial) pursuits of Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood, and, of course, the raucous sounds of the Sex Pistols. I credit this paper with marking the start of my intellectual obsession with youth subcultures and other marginalized groups, which likely wouldn’t have come about had I not formed such a strong relationship with music and a fascination with the culture that surrounds it.

Not only did this paper help me to define myself as a student early on, but it also pushed me to explore writing about music in other ways, which resulted in starting a music blog called Audio Progression with a couple of my flatmates and friends. Writing weekly album reviews, show reviews, “throwbacks” to favorite albums of the past, and creating playlists of my top daily, monthly, and yearly picks gave me a new sense of purpose as a music fan; it instilled in me the confidence to continue expressing my unique connection to

culture through writing, and the drive to constantly seek out new bands, new experiences, and new ideas.

In the years that followed, I honed in on my distinct interests and managed to gear most of my larger assignments towards them, regardless of the course's subject. Aside from punks, I wrote about mods, motorcycle clubs, pirates, hippies, youth activists, and post-war immigrant communities. I also started to take a more in-depth look at the theoretical literature surrounding cultural studies, from the Birmingham School's Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies darling Dick Hebdige, to more modern works by David Muggleton, Ross Haenfler, and Ken Gelder.

This diverse yet focused body of research culminated in my senior thesis, which I had initially envisioned as a survey of the subcultural groups that I had the strongest connection to throughout my life, but ended up being a thorough analysis of just one. Over the course of my senior year, I poured my heart and soul into my thesis, *From Southbank to 3rd & Army: Skateboarding, Subculture, and the Politics of Space*, a 93-page document and accompanying multimedia installation that investigated the cultural, economic, visual, physical, and spatial practices of skateboarding, and allowed me to collaborate with some of my favorite names in the industry. Although music played a minimal role in the project's contents, I created *plenty* of playlists to keep me sane through it all.

In the near future, I hope to expand upon the work I started in my thesis. To start, I will be dialoguing my methodology with existing arts-based research literature and pedagogy, a process which has been greatly aided by my position as a Teaching Assistant for this year's diverse and creative group of CCCP seniors. In other ways, it may involve

developing some of the themes—including the relationship between gender and community participation, and skate culture and related initiatives in non-Western countries—that needed to be left on the proverbial cutting-room floor. On a creative level, it would mean expanding my deck project to include participants from unrepresented locations, or applying my video montage method to other subjects. I have also been feeling inspired to comparatively analyze several of the subcultural groups that I have studied and written about separately in the past. Admittedly, I'm still uncomfortable with the idea of calling myself an "intellectual", "academic", or even "researcher", but after reflecting upon my time at NYU and the journey of personal and scholastic growth that it has taken me on, I feel confident in the fact that I've produced some pretty thoughtful and interesting pieces of work, and that I have much, much more left to share.