HARD-CORE KIDS
REBELLION IN THE AGE OF REAGAN
BY PETER BLAUNER
In a cold Saturday night in February, Becca Levine walks onto the dance floor at the Ritz, a ballroom-size club on East 11th Street. She is a small, awkward sixteen-year-old on the verge of becoming an attractive young woman, even though she does not seem to know it. She has a slight overbite that somehow makes her look chic and unself-conscious at the same time.

She says people sometimes mistake her for a boy because of her short, bushy hair, but she is starting to develop a womanly figure. At the Ritz, she is a little out of place among the 1,500 other kids showing up for the night's hard-core show.

Hard core is a branch of the punk movement that is flourishing in cities and small towns across the country. Many of the kids at tonight's show wear leather jackets and heavy jackboots; others have high, stiff Mohawk haircuts. Quite a few have shaved heads and faces like clenched fists. The relentless scream of a song comes from the loudspeakers, but nobody dances. Instead, the assorted punks sit quietly on the floor, as if conserving their energies for an impending riot. With her faded jeans, tweed overcoat, and bony shoulders, Becca looks tame and vulnerable in comparison. She moves on.

"I'm from Long Island," says Becca, a high-school senior. "And in my hometown, people think I look weird."

Becca, whose parents are divorced, has not enjoyed growing up in Garden City, which has a Bloomingdale's and a Saks but no place for young people to hang out. More intellectual than most of her peers, she stopped going to beer-keg parties last year and wound up spending much of her time alone in her room. "I wasn't doing much," she admits. "Just crying a lot and listening to Agnostic Front records."

Hard core was one of the things that connected Becca to life again. The music caught some of her own frustration about the suburbs. And when, recently, she began going to the city...
regularly to see hard-core shows, she found kids with whom she had something in common. “I wasn’t so alone anymore,” she says. “I was ready to start again.”

At the Ritz, Becca hooks up with her new friend Todd Zimmer, a pink-cheeked fourteen-year-old from New Jersey. Around the club, tension is starting to build, and a few shoving matches break out at the bars. Though friendships can be struck up easily at shows, there is a very real undercurrent of violence: Fights are not unusual, and a boy had a finger bitten off outside CBGB’s, the legendary club on the Bowery, earlier this year. Becca and Todd walk through the crowd on the dance floor, sipping cups of water and talking. Sometimes they discuss school, other times they talk about life at home—like Becca, Todd is the child of divorced parents—but tonight, the subject is the band about to play: Murphy’s Law. In a scene known for wild, volatile groups, Murphy’s Law (“Anything that can go wrong will go wrong”) has a reputation for being one of the most extreme. When Becca went to see them at CBGB’s, the group whipped the audience into such a frenzy that people actually tried to climb the walls, and she had to sit at the back to avoid getting knocked down. “This time I decided I’d move closer,” Becca says. “I was curious about what they’d do.”

At eleven, the group hits its first harsh, buzzing chord, and the dance floor begins to look like a giant pinball machine.

Becca moves off to the side as the slamming begins a few yards from the stage. Dozens of boys and girls seem to be caught up in a sudden whirlwind, flinging themselves hard into one another and then careening away, only to be jolted back by more oncoming bodies. Slamming is supposed to be friendly athleticism, but it can turn vicious. “I’d like to do it anyway,” says Becca. “But I don’t even know how to dance.”

When the singer, Jimmy Gestapo, a thin young man with off-center good looks, comes onstage, more hell breaks loose. Jimmy grabs the mike stand as if he’d like to strangle it, and then he loses his senses: “YOOOOOoowww!!!” He roars. He drops to the floor, and his legs jerk straight up. He rocks himself back up to his feet and reaches for the mike as the rest of the group rev up to near-skull-shattering volume and the crowd turns into a sea of flailing arms and legs. Murphy’s Law’s songs, like “Skinhead Rebel” and “The Care Bear Song,” mix laughter and rage as if Jimmy Gestapo sees no distinction between the two. A hint of melody occasionally rises out of the mayhem, and so do other subjects.

“Ronnie Reagan, he’s our man! If he can’t do it, no one can,” Jimmy chants without irony as he showers beer and ice cubes on the audience.

“Oooh, he’s hot,” Becca Levine says. As the music grows even more intense, a small, round-faced girl named Alexa, who has a shaved head, clammers up onto the stage and stands there for a moment, squinting into the overhead lights; the band ignores her as studiously as passengers ignore a madman on the subway. Then, suddenly, she steps to the edge and dives headfirst. The crowd around Becca surges forward.

Without much notice from the adults, the hard-core scene has been growing and drawing in bright teenagers like Becca for a few years now. Though numbers aren’t easy to come by, it seems likely that hard core is one of the largest underground musical movements in the country. Clubs in almost every major city have presented shows by groups like Black Flag, the Circle Jerks, and D.O.A. In Los Angeles, hard-core shows are held in 10,000-seat arenas, and in New York, the Ritz draws more than 2,000 fans for monthly “Rock Hotel” nights. CBGB’s still brings in up to 500 customers every week for its Sunday-afternoon hard-core matinees, which end in time for fans from the suburbs to get home for dinner with their parents.

Unlike its immediate antecedent, punk, which never caught on commercially here, hard core is a grass-roots movement. Its followers do not depend on radio or MTV to play their favorite groups; most hard-core bands are too crude for those mediums. Instead, fans get their news and communicate with each other through an underground network of roughly 500 “fanzines” across the country, most of them put out by the kids themselves, with circulations ranging from 50 to 10,000. Without a single hero or even a best-selling group, the scene has attracted a steady stream of disaffected kids since it began, around 1980, making it the closest thing to a counterculture in the Reagan era. Now, after years of near-invisibility, hard core is beginning to get some attention, and record labels with widespread distribution have signed some of the bands.

The kids involved in the scene are a diverse group. They are between 13 and 21 and come
from sophisticated Manhattan, blue-collar Queens, suburbia, and the streets. They share a desire to break away, at least for now, from their homes and mainstream culture, yet they also feel a need to belong. So the outlandish haircuts and the abrasive music serve to drive parents nuts and give the kids a chance to be part of a group.

In many ways, hard-core kids are not all that different from their peers. They tend to be apolitical or conservative, and proudly admit that they want to make a lot of money. But they've been driven to show their independence in an extreme way because other forms of rebellion have lost their sting. Most of the kids' parents were young during the fifties and sixties and are not so shocked by loud music, or odd clothing, or even light drug use. "Until my generation, moans one young woman from the scene, "parents were squares."

N THE RITZ, ALEXA, THE STAGE DIVER,

She is flying into a tightly packed group near the front, who catch her and pass
her aloft toward the back as if she were Cleopatra. Within a few seconds,
she scrambles back onto the stage and does a backflip into the crowd. "It's
like diving onto a human carpet," Alexa says. "Something like the old kids' trust game. Just
my way of getting into it. Gospel people got their thing. I got mine."

More divers follow, in groups of five and six, and soon the stage begins to resemble a lemming colony. After a few songs, Jimmy has caught the spirit, and he throws himself off the stage while still singing. "I like to feel close with the audience," he says later.

"I think he's really cute," Becca says.

Once he makes it back to the stage, Jimmy brings the show to its climax. "The next song is called 'I'ma She-Wolf of the SS,' " he announces, flashing a broken grin to his left. "It goes out to the woman who likes to hurt me."

As the musicians play a menacing vamp, a girl with long platinum hair and tight black clothes steps out of the wings and sashays toward the center of the stage. She is pretty and knows it. She wears a thick black belt with silver spikes and has a purposeful look. She takes hold of Jimmy as if he were her rightful property and entwines her body around his. Slowly at first, and then with increasing intensity, she grinds her hips against his.

"Who's she?" Becca asks. "She's scary."

"I don't know," says her friend Todd. "I just wish she were wearing less clothes."

"Shut up, Todd."

Through the rest of the evening, Becca tries to forget the image of the older girl up on the stage. But she continues to ask about her.

T HE SHOW ALSO HAUNTS THE WOMAN IN QUESTION,

whose name is Natalie Jacobson, but for different reasons. "Sometimes I see the faces of the kids out there who are sixteen and seventeen, just getting into the scene, and they're so young and fresh and full of hope and energy," says Natalie, who turned twenty this year.

"What I feel is old."

By three in the morning, Natalie, who is as much a veteran of the scene as Becca is a newcomer, is ready to go home. Natalie graduated from Hewitt, the Upper East Side school for girls, in 1984, but she's been going to the clubs and hanging out for more than five years. She has had the blue crew cuts and the Mohawks. She has been through her share of drugs and fights with her parents. By now, she has made it to the top of the scene, and Jimmy Gestapo is her boyfriend. Usually, she stays out even later with Jimmy and the others, but tonight is different. "I have an accounting exam coming up," she says.

Even as younger people like Becca are struggling to break away from the suburbs and make their way into the hard-core scene, Natalie seems to be taking steps toward a more settled, adult life. She has been taking business classes at New York University, where she is a sophomore, in order to prepare for a career in the music business. "I don't know if I want to be in management or promotion," she says. "But I do want to make a lot of money."

By 4 A.M., Natalie has been given a ride home to her parents' Upper West Side building by Jimmy and the rest of the group. Even though Natalie's mother, a psychiatrist, and her father, a gynecologist, are on vacation in Switzerland, Jimmy doesn't come upstairs. Natalie wants to get some sleep so she can study the next day. Upstairs in the well-lit apartment, she looks somewhat ill at ease standing near the oak furniture, the grand piano, and the Oriental prints. After years of turmoil, Natalie has made a kind of peace with her parents and is living at
home for now. There is a certain amount of tension, though, when Jimmy Gestapo drops by. “I even had trouble with the name at first,” Natalie says. “My parents are Yugoslavian, not Jewish, but my mother’s family lost everything because of the Nazis in World War II.”

Jimmy, twenty, who was born James Drescher to a window washer and a secretary in Astoria, is not quite the complete parents’ nightmare. In spite of his stage name, he says he isn’t a Nazi: “Fascists would lock up punks if they were around,” he says. (The Nazi iconography is invoked mainly for shock value; many kids are unaware of its full historical meaning.) Jimmy can be warm and engaging—the kind of guy who’ll slap you on the back and buy you a domestic beer without knowing your name—or he can be fearsome. Even though he has a head of spiky, dark hair at the moment, he is considered to be one of the leaders of the New York skinheads—a group of a few hundred kids with shaved heads who go in for right-wing rhetoric and occasional street violence. When his name comes up another time, Natalie’s mother, a thin blonde woman in her early forties, purses her lips and pauses. “I’ve always found him to be...polite,” she says.

Natalie spends most of Sunday doing her homework while Jimmy goes off to Providence to preside over a bunch of slamming New England skinheads. “Some really cool kids,” he says. “It was crucial”—meaning terrific. On Monday and Tuesday, Natalie goes to her classes at NYU, where she is a B student. The other students in her accounting classes often stare at her blinding hair and her bondage pants. “They should have seen me when I had the pink hair,” she says. “I don’t get along with a lot of my teachers. They usually ignore me in class to call on some dummy in a Laura Ashley skirt.”

By Tuesday night, Natalie has had enough of working, and she heads downtown to the hard-core crowd again. At ten, she enters the Pyramid club, a narrow, smoky punk place, near 6th Street on Avenue A, that looks like the kind of room the late Rainer Werner Fassbinder might have had in his basement. Natalie goes downstairs to see her hard-core friends, including Alexa, the stage diver from the Ritz, and a couple of skinny girls with stubbly hair. They sit around smoking Marlboros and gossiping while Jimmy and his group get ready to play.

Many of Natalie’s friends on the scene do not share her family background; some are working-class kids, and others have unemployed parents who are drug addicts. “What we all have in common is some kind of anger,” she says. “You can hear it in hard core. The music is almost like the sound you hear in your head when you’re getting mad. A lot of the lyrics are the things any kid might say to himself when he’s upset in his room. I know people say that if you come from a rich family, you don’t have a right to be angry. But the anger is there in a different way. There’s a whole set of expectations that are thrust on you, along with all the advantages. You’re expected to have a certain kind of friends, and dress a certain way, and talk in a certain way, and live in a certain place. If you don’t want to see all those things, people say there’s something wrong with you. And that just makes you angrier.”

After Murphy’s Law finishes another set—the way other young men would finish a barroom brawl—it’s nearly three in the morning, and Natalie begins to worry about her classes the next day and about the upcoming accounting exam. She wants Jimmy to take her home, but he’s busy talking to two bearded, mean-looking bikers about the $4,000 Harley-Davidson he yearns for. “I talk about it all the time,” he tells them. “My girlfriend is jealous. She thinks I care more about the bike than I do about her.”

“I don’t want to be number two to a motorcycle,” Natalie says. “But he’s saving his money for it. I don’t need to be taken to Top of the Park every night. I’m happy with a McDonald’s cheeseburger.”

Later, Natalie and Jimmy have a fight when she lays hands on one of the bikers’ motorcycles. Jimmy is appalled. “Our backgrounds are so different,” he says. “She doesn’t understand that a man’s motorcycle is like an extension of his...” Natalie is out of patience. “Jimmy, I’m going,” she says. “Hey, wait up.” Jimmy says. “I’ll get you home.”

“Yeah, sure, on the bus,” she sneers.

Jimmy takes Natalie aside for a talk. As he turns more tender and puts an arm around her, Budweisers are passed around the rest of the club, and in a quiet corner two skinheads, a boy and a girl, sit gently rubbing their bare calves together. A few minutes later, both Jimmy and Natalie are in a much better mood.

“Jimmy can be very persuasive,” Natalie says with a sly smile. “So I’m going to be bad and stay out and cut classes tomorrow. I’ll probably get thrown out of school and my parents will disown me, and anybody who’s in a position of authority will kill me. I’ll probably end up being a bartender at the Pyramid for the rest of my life.” She pauses as if amused by her dilemma. “But Jimmy says it’ll be worth it.”

She does stay out until daylight breaks and does miss her classes the next day. She does not do particularly well on the accounting exam about a week later. “I failed,” she says. “But nobody else in the class did that well. And I don’t know what they were up to at night.” By then, Natalie’s parents have returned from their vacation. “I’m getting used to her staying out all night at the clubs,” her mother says wearily. Natalie’s mother tries to understand her daughter, as a psychiatrist and from her own experience as a young woman entranced by Elvis and..."
the Beatles. But sometimes she says of Natalie’s late nights, “I do wish she would take up a sport instead.”

**In a bright Saturday afternoon, Becca**

Levine and another one of her new hard-core friends, Frank Gold (not his real name), are driving in his red Honda Civic through Garden City. As they roll past the immaculate pharmacies, groceries, and opticians' stores, she points out the Bloomingdale’s up ahead. “We also have a Lord & Taylor and an A&S,” she says. “But to give you an idea how boring this place is, Baskin-Robbins is the only franchise in town. There’s not even a McDonald’s to hang out in.”

On the car radio, a Minnesota group, the Replacements, is singing a lovely, chiming song called “Kiss Me on the Bus,” and Becca begins to frown. “These guys used to be good,” she says of the band, who once did songs like “Gary’s Got a Boner.” “Now they just sound like every other American group.” Frank, seventeen, a stocky boy with a punky DA haircut and good manners, nods and gazes at her.

Becca now has punky reddish-brown hair, cropped close on the sides, but she’s let the hair on top grow and fluff out. She’s the kind of girl classmates consider somewhat odd for reading Henry James and listening to the Cramps in her spare time. With her intelligence and looks, Becca could be breaking hearts throughout the school system if she lived in Manhattan.

But not at Garden City high school. “It’s real Leave it to Beaver,” Becca says bluntly. “Except I can’t watch Leave It to Beaver anymore because I think the Cleavers would hate me.” An episode in which Ward and June become concerned about the Beaver spending too much time with the child of divorced parents particularly bothers her. “Parents around here treat me like I’m kind of weird,” says Becca, whose mother and father have been divorced for about six years.

Once a week, Becca goes into the city to see her father, who owns a company that makes the machines that punch holes in the sides of loose-leaf paper. “Sometimes I wish I’d grown up in Manhattan,” says Becca. “Because there might have been more people like me at school.” Instead, she lives with her mother and her fourteen-year-old sister in a three-story brown house near the Garden City railroad station; at night, she can sometimes hear the trains going to Manhattan. “The worst thing about living out here,” she says, “is the isolation.”

By last year, Becca had started to feel she had little in common with the local school-party circuit. When she dropped out of the social life and hid in her room, her mother tried not to worry. “Becca has always had her own drummer,” says Doris Levine, a schoolteacher in her early forties who still wears jeans and sometimes listens to Bob Dylan and John Cougar Mellencamp, making her “cool” by her daughter’s standards. “I knew she’d come out of it.”

Eventually, Becca did emerge from her gloom. She met her new friend Frank through a personal ad in the back of a hardcore fanzine called Flipside. Frank placed the ad because, like Becca, he was bored with his hometown, Plainview, about twenty minutes away from Garden City. What he wrote was
simple and direct: "17-year-old male punk looking for correspondence with other punks. Fave bands: 7 Seconds, Agnostic Front, Numskulls, M.D.C.," and then his address.

The response was somewhat overwhelming. Within a week, he got more than twenty letters from all over the country. Most of them had stories more or less like his own: kids fed up with the suburbs and alienated from their parents, with few friends at school and an intense attachment to hard-core music. Some letters were strange but poignant. "I hope you don't mind my asking, but I thought it would be easier to ask the advice of someone I never met," one sixteen-year-old girl wrote him from the West Coast. "I am pregnant two months and one week and I am very scared. What would you do if you were me? Keep it? Kill it? I like 7 Seconds, Dead Kennedys."

"I was like, 'Whoa,' when I got that," Frank says. "I sat down and wrote back to her, explaining all the options of what she could do as fully and clearly as I could, and tried to leave the decision to her."

When Frank got Becca's letter, he called her right away. "I couldn't believe somebody else wrote to me from the Island," Frank recalls. "It was like I wasn't alone. So we talked on the phone for a while, and we hit it off."

Soon, they were spending much of their free time together, visiting the store in Valley Stream that carries hard-core albums and sometimes even taking in a basketball game at Becca's high school. Though they weren't really "going out," they dropped by each other's houses to listen to records and watch movies like Plan 9 From Outer Space on television. They also started going to hard-core shows in the city together.

**FRANK, FRANK,** **BECCA CALLS OUT.** **"I HAD PIZZA WITH DOGGY STYLE."**

"Congratulations," Frank says.

"They were really nice guys," says Becca, referring to the members of a California group that will be opening the show upstairs in a few minutes. Becca interviewed the band for a college radio station earlier in the day.

"The guitar player is going to give me one of their T-shirts.

Francisco, It's just before ten on a rainy Sunday night; Frank and Becca have just found each other amid the parade of skinheads, peacock-heads, and "astarisk-heads" (whose hair sticks out in all directions) in the lobby of the Ritz. Talking to Frank cheers Becca up. She seemed a little nervous before he arrived. A sloppy, adoring look breaks across his face as they head upstairs together and push through the crowd of about 1,000 to reach the front of the stage.

At ten, Doggy Style begins to play. They are four or five energetic young men dressed in green—it's hard to tell exactly how many are members, since one man, who may or may not be, stands near the center of the stage just lighting one match after another for the whole set. Their songs are fast and jerky, and up to their last number, Becca is one of the few people in the audience who like them. She bows up and down staring at Ed, the guitar player, who has a matinee idol's face and a sweet smile. The rest of the crowd stand still, arms folded across chests.

But then the group breaks through. They encourage the audience to join in a new dance called the Doggy-Style Hop, which involves forming a conga line and performing something that looks like the Heimlich maneuver. The crowd howls with laughter as kids climb on the stage to take part in the dance. Becca giggles and, after a brief hesitation, gets up onto the stage. As she grabs the waist of the skinny boy with a Mohawk in front of her and starts to hop, she looks completely free for a moment, and her nervousness seems far away. From the crowd below, Frank smiles up at her.

Later, Ed invites Becca into a crowded booth in the balcony. Frank tags along. Through a window, they look down at the stage, some twenty feet below. Another hard-core group, Toy Dolls, is playing. As they bang out a punky eight-to-the-bar, kids on the dance floor slam into one another and bodies go flying every which way. A fistfight erupts, and boys and girls end up in piles on the floor, trying to slug each other. Up in the booth, Ed, Becca, and Frank are watching.

"Wanna go down and watch from backstage?" Ed asks her.

"Sure," Becca says excitedly. "We'll be right back," she tells Frank, who nods silently and clings to curtain.

Within a few seconds, Frank can see her from the booth, without his wings with Ed. The Toy Dolls, three blade-thin young men with wraparound shades and spiky hair, lash into a medley of Christmas classics, and at one point their guitarist strips down to his boxer shorts and climbs onto the bass player's shoulders. At the side, Ed, who has slicked-back dark hair and wears green bike gloves, begins to make his move. First, one green bike glove appears on Becca's shoulder. She squirms a bit, but Ed pulls her closer. Soon, his hand is on her leg, and he's whispering into her ear. Twenty feet above, Frank is watching the scene unfold like something from a silent horror movie. He grimaces for a moment and tries to concentrate on watching the hand, but his eyes keep wandering back to the side of the stage.

"Hey, dudes, Ed's reachin' for it!" says a member of Doggy Style who's standing next to Frank. Frank doesn't answer.

Eventually, Ed and Becca return to the booth, and Frank gives them a wary look. While Ed chats with his bandmates, Becca, now wearing a green Doggy Style T-shirt, sits down and takes a deep breath. "What a bizarre night!" she exclaims.

"First I have dinner with Doggy Style, then Ed the guitar player gives me three Doggy Style T-shirts and his arm for the night... I'm in the scene now. I'm really in the scene! People actually come up and talk to me. It's so weird. I've always been the ugly duckling at school. Now I'm somebody. Look at us, Frank. The two suburban kids! We've made it in the New York hard-core scene."

"Congratulations," Frank says.

By three in the morning, Frank's discomfort is growing as he and Becca move on to a side room that has blue-tiled walls, video monitors, and people drinking beer and smoking cigarettes. Ed, who is twenty, gets into a big easy chair and pulls Becca onto his lap. She puts up only a mild struggle, and then Ed spins the chair around so only its back is visible. Frank stares at one of the video monitors, which shows Toy Dolls playing their last song onstage and then is switched to Mel Gibson, who, as Mad Max, is involved in a high-speed chase on a lonely highway. Frank tries not to look over at the chair.

"She's not really my girlfriend," Frank says as the make-out session goes on across the room. "We just like to hang out."

Some time later, Becca peaks over the back of the easy chair. "Did I miss the encore?" she asks.

**BECCA TAKES ED BACK TO HER MOTHER'S HOUSE IN Garden City. Frank catches a different train. "I was sort of upset," Frank says later. "I didn't get much sleep on the train home. There was this half-empty wine bottle that kept rolling up and down the aisle, making a racket. It was like 6:30 when I got into the station, and all these businessmen were standing there in suits, ready to take the train into work. I got in a cab and went home, but I still couldn't sleep."**
Becca, on the other hand, is positively giddy the next day. "It was so much fun. Like a once-in-a-lifetime thing. Something like that will never happen again. I mean, it would have been okay if I just took the train home with Frank, but then I would have spent years being frustrated and asking myself what would have happened if I went with Ed. I mean, here's this guy who's in a group I've been into for years. Okay, just a year. It's no big deal... No, I'm lying. It was a big deal. Nothing major happened—I didn't sleep with him—but I think I'm in love. He said he'd write to me.

"When my mother saw us in the morning, she goes, 'You're in big trouble.' And I said, 'No, I'm not in trouble. He's just a guy from a group who needed a place to stay.'"

"I think I liked it better last year when you were a wallflower," her mother says.

As Natalie remembers it, her mother reacted somewhat less calmly to her entrance into the scene. "I was about fourteen the first time I came home with purple hair," Natalie says. "My father barely looked up from his newspaper, but my mother went nuts. She started screaming and chasing me around the apartment. I thought she was going to kill me. When she finally calmed down, she stayed up all night washing the dye out of my hair so I'd be ready for school in the morning."

"I was not prepared for this," says her mother, who adds that she wasn't all that upset.

Up until then, Natalie had seemed like a fairly typical Hewitt girl. "I was Miss Straight-A Preppy with the perfectly pressed Lacoste shirts and the guys who would take me to Trader Vic's and all that," she says. "But then when I was around fourteen, I was in line to see The Rocky Horror Picture Show, and this guy walked by—a real 1970s punk, the first one I'd ever seen. Real thin with chewed-off hair, the leather jacket, and the bad teeth. I said, 'Oh, so that's what punk is!' So I decided to find out more."

She began going to downtown parties and shows at CBGB's and Max's Kansas City, where the old punk scene was dying out. Still, she was drawn in. "Even then, it was like the ultimate 'F--- you' to everyone," she says.

By 1981, Natalie was spending more and more time on the Lower East Side, where things were changing. The older, more artistically inclined bands associated with the earlier punk phase—Talking Heads, Blondie, the Patti Smith Group, Television—had either moved on to commercial success or had disbanded. Much of the older punk audience had disappeared. In its place, a group of working-class kids between the ages of thirteen and fifteen, mostly from Queens, began showing up as skinheads around the punk clubs. On the street, Natalie developed a running feud with one of them, a skinny, obnoxious boy who was smaller than she was at the time. "I used to taunt him, like 'Hey, Cuckball-head!'" Natalie recalls. "He used to get mad and chase me from Avenue A to the cube on Astor Place without catching me. Years later, he turned out to be Jimmy."

As more and more skinheads like Jimmy came in from New Jersey, Long Island, and Queens, the punk scene evolved into hard core. The skinheads modeled their look (shaved heads and Doc Marten's combat boots), their brutalizing music, and their fondness for street fighting after the British skinheads, a racist group that emerged in the sixties. The American skinheads' political attitudes were in line with the shift toward conservatism around the rest of the country.


Natalie met Jimmy formally, at a party at a club called Pizza-A-Go-Go, early last year. At the time, Natalie was fighting with another boyfriend and decided to be unfaithful to make him jealous. She was drunk, and she approached Jimmy boldly. He suggested they go out to a van on the street, but then realized he was drunk himself. "I was like, 'I'm gonna rock your world, and you can't remember what your van looks like?"' Natalie says.

They retired to the club's bathroom instead.

A few nights later, Natalie ran into Jimmy with several of his skinhead friends outside another club. "He goes, 'How come I haven't seen you?' I told him, 'Look, I was really drunk, and you were just a one-night stand.' But Jimmy was not discouraged. He finally got Natalie's number and called her.

"We went parking under the Brooklyn Bridge," Natalie re-
Natalie has decided to study and to get along with her parents: “It’s not like la bohème. It’s not cool to die young in a filthy garret.”

members. “I said, ‘What is this suburban-high-school bullshit?’”

“Why are you such a snot rag?” Jimmy asked.

Natalie explained. She didn’t like skinheads. She didn’t like their reactionary talk and the way they tended to beat up her friends. “Jimmy said, ‘Maybe if you were my girlfriend, your friends wouldn’t get beat up anymore.’” Natalie says.

That made her stop and think. With Jimmy as her boyfriend, she would have many of the skinheads on her side, and that meant power. It meant she would have the respect of everyone on the scene, with no more sniping about the rich girl slumming it, and it meant free admission to any hard-core show she wanted to go to.

She began to find the power useful. “There was a guy I was having some problems with in my English class at NYU,” she says, recalling a dispute with another student. “He thought he was Ernest Hemingway or something and women were worth nothing. We started having fights in class, and it just got worse and worse, until we were calling each other names. Finally, I had enough. One day, he got out of class and a few of my friends were waiting for him. After that, he didn’t give me a hard time.”

But there have been times around the scene when Natalie wasn’t so much in control. For a while, it looked like she might end up being just another self-destructive kid from a privileged home. Natalie ran away several times over the years, used hard drugs, and lived in desolate Lower East Side squats. There were week-long drinking binges, afternoons at the Central Park band shell, nights that she can’t recall, and one morning of waking up among naked bodies and finding herself covered in honey. “I don’t really remember what happened there,” she says.

Sometime last year, her doctor told her she had an ulcer, and she realized she was standing at the edge. “I couldn’t believe I had burned myself out so fast,” she says. “I didn’t want to give 100 percent of myself to the scene and not get anything in return. I found that poverty is not very romantic. It’s not like some nineteenth-century novel or La Bohème. It’s not so cool to die young in a filthy garret.”

Instead, she started to take advantage of her background. She moved back in with her parents and started to get along with them again for the first time in years.

As winter turned into spring this year, Natalie continued to try to reconcile her life in the scene with her impending adulthood. She sometimes stayed in at night, doing homework for her computer and accounting classes instead of beginning her traditional weekend wootoot at the Pyramid. She even got an internship at a publicity firm called the Press Office, which has represented the likes of Paul McCartney, Kiss, Burt Bacharach, and Carole Bayer Sager. “I’m pleased that she seems to have a direction now,” her mother says.

Becca, on the other hand, got more involved in the scene as she turned seventeen. She became a regular at the Saturday-night shows at the Ritz and the Sunday-afternoon shows at CBGB’s. She stopped seeing Frank, her friend from the Island, but she kept in touch with Ed, the guitarist from Doggy Style. She met various fanzine editors and began to do some writing. At the shows, she found herself moving nearer to the pit, and sometimes did slamming, albeit a little tentatively. She had most of the hair shaved from the back of her head, and her circle of friends grew. The bouncers at the clubs, among others, began to make plays for her. “Now I know I’ve made it,” she says.

“Great,” says Becca’s mother. “A crew cut and a boyfriend in Doggy Style.”

But even as Becca continues her rise, Natalie doesn’t relinquish her place in the scene. A month after the Murphy’s Law show at the Ritz, the two girls meet briefly for the first time at a CBGB’s Sunday-afternoon show. A photographer has asked Becca to pose for a picture with Jimmy Gestapo outside the club. The sun is out, and Jimmy is obliging. He puts his arm around Becca.

Natalie, sitting nearby, is not pleased. “Who is she?” Natalie snarls, echoing a question Becca asked about her the month before. “What is she doing?”

“I thought she might try to do something to me,” Becca says later. “Her claws were out.”

When the photographer tries to explain that Becca is a fan posing for a picture with Jimmy, Becca just feels embarrassed. Natalie turns from her and laughs. “Nobody touches my man unless they have a good reason,” she says.

Natalie then goes back inside the club. When Jimmy and his group come onstage to incite chaos once again, she is standing there beside him as the ferocious crowd, including a few brand-new hard-core kids, detonates around them. Now, Natalie says, she doesn’t really see herself severing her connection to hard core in the future. She believes her career in the music business (she’s now thinking of becoming a rock journalist) will let her stay around the scene even as she gets older, rather than force her to move on to a completely different field. “She does not like to separate,” her mother says. “Not long ago, Natalie arranged for Murphy’s Law to meet with a prominent entertainment lawyer she had found. ‘Don’t spit on the floor or his desk,’” Natalie warned Jimmy.

“Whaddya think, I never been to see a lawyer before?” Jimmy says.

“Not on purpose,” Natalie said.

The group is also about to sign a contract with a successful independent company that has a distribution deal with CBS Records. Natalie thinks there will always be some form of hard core, because “there’ll always be angry kids. And I don’t think all that anger always goes away when you’re older. If it did, people wouldn’t still go to psychiatrists like my mother.”

“I do want to get married, maybe to Jimmy, and live in a new place and have kids,” she says. “I’ll probably even have a few standard rules I’ll want them to follow to be safe. But other than that, if they want to rebel, fine. I’d worry if they didn’t.”

In Garden City, Becca is having lunch with her mother in a quiet Italian restaurant. The lighting is indirect, and so is most of the conversation, until her mother says gently, “Becca, where are you going to be in fifteen years? Punk is probably not a style that will age gracefully.”

Becca stares at her house salad and doesn’t answer right away. She has fewer definite ideas about her future than does Natalie. She has been accepted by a college in Washington, D.C., and she’d like to major in English, since she has thought about becoming a writer. There’s a hard-core scene there, but she isn’t sure how much hanging out she’ll do. During her months around the New York scene, she has become happier, more confident and adventurous, but she is not sure how much further she wants to pursue it.

“I don’t know how I’ll feel about all of it years from now,” Becca says. “I can’t see myself turning to my husband and saying, ‘Darling, let’s have one more slam-dance for old times’ sake.’”

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