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John Bartholomew
Denison University

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If There's Nothing Here Then It's Probably Yours:
Selling "Emo" to the Rx Generation

John Bartholomew 04'

*They'll trust you to be young
Like they wish they were.
'Cause they've been there, they know you
They like your kind.
They'll teach you who you are
And they'll sell you to yourself.
- Polvo -*

The last few years have revealed an explosion in American mainstream awareness about two rather peculiar and apparently unrelated phenomena. The first and most disquieting trend rising to the top of the American consciousness is the fact that more adolescents are being diagnosed with depression, being placed upon anti-depressants, and killing themselves than in previous decades. A plethora of studies, articles, and a hysterical mass-media trumpeting of doom states that we are now raising a generation of emotional zombie-teens who seem peculiarly obsessed with their own sadness, and whose parents are increasingly concerned with the delicacy of their psyches. The other incident is the rather new popularization of the rock music sub-genre known as "Emo-core" or, more succinctly, "emo." The term emo is short for "emotional" and is most often used to describe a type of music spawned from punk and hardcore that deals most often with more personal issues, and often contains more musically dynamic compositions than the straight-ahead three-chord jaunts that dominated hardcore in the 80s. Popular music history asserts that the term "emo" was coined to describe several Washington, D.C., based bands that existed during the mid to late-80s, among them Rites of Spring and Embrace (Sarik 255). As with all subjectively defined genres, emo quickly mutated and soon was used to cover everything from catchy pop-punk bands singing about broken hearts to extremely inaccessible and obscure groups that included as essential components of their sound extreme loud-soft dynamics, throat-shredding screaming, and compositions often several minutes long. Over the last few years, interestingly concurrent with the spate of articles regarding adolescent depression and medication, the term emo has grown in popularity and the bands it has been applied to have increased their viability as a commercial music form. In its current form, emo is widely seen in popular culture as punk-influenced music with lyrics about being really sad or really angry, but in a sensitive way (Busch & Johnson 1). This is the

(still vague) categorization that I will be dealing with. It should come as no surprise, then, that this feelings-and-internalization-fixated form of the genre that morphed its way into a profitable form of rock would begin approaching its zenith of popularity in an era that was becoming gradually aware of and obsessed with depression in its teenagers. I will first establish the evidence that perceptions of adolescent depression occurred alongside real statistical increases in adolescent suicide and consumption of anti-depressants. Given this climate, I will demonstrate that the entrance of emo into the market has been accompanied by a focus on who the music is for, namely adolescents in the throes of emotional pain. The exhaustion of every possible synonym for "sad" in conjunction with descriptions found in mainstream publications allows us to peer into the dining rooms of various media conglomerates, sharpening their knives in anticipation of yet another feast of consumption. Reviews and articles galore all shunt the focus on the popular emo movement to towards a point where style and supposed substance indicated by emotional pain meet. A new trend is born, conveniently defined by cultural tastemakers, replete with directions on who it is for and what fashion it is associated with, and only fifteen years late this time.

It is all too easy to establish that there is at the very least a dramatically increased perception of the problem of childhood and adolescent depression, even if there has not actually been an increase in real rates. As early as 1989 the *Journal of the American Medical Association* began publishing findings that stated that rates of depression had risen in adolescents and young adults since the 1940s and 1950s. A study entitled "Increasing Rates of Depression" noted that, "Several recent, large epidemiologic and family studies suggest important temporal changes in the rates of major depression: an increase in the rates in the cohorts born after World War II; a decrease in the age of onset with an increase in the late teenaged and early adult years" (2229). The *Newsweek* story "Young and Depressed" stated that,

The National Institutes of Mental Health (NIMH) estimates that 8 percent of adolescents and 2 percent of children (some as young as 4) have symptoms of depression. Scientists also say that early onset of depression in children and teenagers has become increasingly common; some even use the word "epidemic" (52).

The *New England Journal of Medicine* offers a smaller but still important statistic that, "Depression is present in about...5 percent of adolescents at any given time" (667).

The number of prescriptions of anti-depressants has likewise increased, lending itself to the popularization of the term "Generation Rx." Oh, those pundits. *Time*, in its November 3rd, 2003, cover story entitled "Medicating Young Minds," states, "some people have justifiably begun to ask, Are we raising Generation Rx?" (48). The article reveals that, "According to a study by Professor Julie Zito of the University of Maryland School of Pharmacy, use of anti-depressants among children and teens increased threefold between 1987 and 1996. And that use continues to climb" (49). In an article on Salon.com which also uses the term "Gen Rx," Jenn Shreve states, "According to a pharmacist at a large university (who asked that his name and affiliation not be used), anti-depressants top the list of drugs prescribed to college students, next to oral contraception, antibiotics, and allergy medication" (2-3). An article by Rob Waters entitled "Generation Rx" states that, "According to IMS Health, a research firm that tracks prescription drug sales, nearly 2.98 million prescriptions for anti-depressants were written for children and adolescents in 1999 - more than 11,000 new prescriptions for children every weekday" (2). In "Generation Rx" (notice a trend here?) by Amy Bloom, which appeared in the March 12, 2000, issue of the *New York Times Magazine*, Bloom estimates that, "2.5 million [children] are on antidepressants" (24).

Adolescent suicide statistics corroborate the assumption that teen depression is actually on the rise. The Centers for Disease Control report that suicide is the third leading cause of death for people aged fifteen to twenty-four (Sullivan 6). The *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* reports that, "The suicide rate among teenagers has increased approximately 200% since 1960" (155). The *American Journal of Public Health* article, "Trends in Adolescent Suicide: Misclassification Bias?" backs up these findings, stating that,

Reports on suicide rates in the United States show a dramatic increase in rates for teenagers and young adults between 1950 and 1990...This escalation is especially significant given the overall decrease in adolescent mortality since 1968, mainly due to reductions in adolescent deaths (1).

Adolescent Depression and Suicide by Dr.'s John and Lois Wodarski and Dr. Catherine Dulmus finds that suicide increased, "among persons aged 10 to 14 years by 109% between 1980 and 1997" (3).

Besides the massive amount of statistical data

suggesting an increase in teen depression or at least an increase in awareness, along with data concluding that adolescent anti-depressant prescriptions and suicides are up, numerous other events lend the impression of an increasing cohort of depressed youth. Elizabeth Wurtzel is an example of one of many youthful writers publicizing depression in young people. In her book, *Prozac Nation*, she states, "it seemed like this was one big Prozac Nation, one big mess of malaise" (297). She continues by postulating that, "It almost seemed as if, perhaps, the next time half a million people gather for a protest march on the White House green it will not be for abortion rights or gay liberation, but because we're all so bummed out" (298). The film version of *Prozac Nation* is slated for release next year. Numerous white, middle class school shooters in the late 90s were on anti-depressants as well, and the media frenzy and subsequent jocks versus nerds features that issued forth from the loins of these stories further projected an image of a large, distressed, and sad segment of the young population.

Thus the niche market was established. Huge amounts of publicity over adolescent depression, suicide, and medication, with figures in the millions, allowed for the creation of a population that obviously needed some marketing to fill the gaping void in their lives. When awareness of emo began bubbling up into the upper reaches of media consciousness, the idea of what to market became more crystallized. Beginning in 2001 and moving into today, emo has exploded into the mainstream consciousness, with numerous features in *Rolling Stone*, *Spin*, *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Seventeen*, and other massively mainstream publications. In virtually every mainstream publication that did a feature on emo, the emphasis of the piece was clearly upon the emotional pain of both the musical acts and the listeners, along with the expanding commercial possibilities granted by the opening of a new market. Obviously sad nerds buy stuff too. *Time* published the piece "Emotional Rescue" in its May 27th, 2002, issue, and conveniently sorted teenagers into demographics for the brain-dead suits at record companies. The author, Tyrangiel, declared (in a very professional, bulleted list, no less) that, "Sensitive Kids love emo: Adolescents can be divided up into two categories: those who pretend to feel nothing and those who aspire to feel everything. The latter makes up the emo demographic" (59). He continued his amusing generalizations by stating at the end of the piece that, "It's tough to avoid the conclusion that the emo faithful, like Red Sox fans, are only happy when they're sad" (60). Tyrangiel also helped lay out a basic blueprint for any record companies seeking to snap up an emo act by sagely asserting that, "Emo is the antipop. It shuns abstraction to drive home a single point: woe is me" (60). The article's

emphasis upon feelings of sadness and self-obsession, hallmarks of depression is obvious, and the division of kids into those who have no feelings and those who have too many feelings is as disturbing as it is untrue. However, given the media carnival tent erected on the prone bodies of Zolof-popping sensitive white kids, the categorization is ultimately unsurprising. Gavin Edwards wrote in *Rolling Stone's* July 25th, 2002, feature on Dashboard Confessional's Chris Carrabba entitled "King of Pain" that, "the emo tag helped Dashboard Confessional catch on with a growing underground of like-minded young fans who want more emotional depth and complexity from their music than the machine-tooled sounds of teen pop or hip-hop can provide." (39). The *New York Times* jumped in to assist record companies in defining who would want emo in its idiotically titled article, "Como [as in Commotion] Over Emo [as in Emotion]." Kelefa Sanneh writes, "For kids who take their music (and perhaps themselves) more seriously, there's a punk subgenre called emo, which is a bit slower and a whole lot less funny" (E3). Again there is the implication that emo is for the "serious" kids; the ones inclined to self-reflection, which often manifests itself to an unhealthy degree in depression.

However, like most of the other early articles on emo, "Como over Emo" eventually (and justifiably) poked fun at the rather mediocre and formulaic bands breaking into the mainstream. Sanneh relates that, "it's hard to figure out why the [band The Get Up Kids] inspires such passion. Matthew Pryor isn't a very distinctive singer and his lyrics are filled with vague complaints about failed relationships" (E3). She summarizes the article by making a statement about seminal independent rock band Superchunk, who opened for The Get Up Kids at the concert she reviewed, when she writes, "Nevertheless it was a relief to be reminded of all the adventurous music that exists beyond the narrow confines of emo" (E3).

As exemplified by the *Time* and *New York Times* quotes above, a rather disdainful approach was taken towards the beams of mediocrity being emitted from the underground. That is, until albums started selling 500,000 copies with no major label support or videos, like Dashboard Confessional's "The Places You Have Come to Fear the Most" (Gordon 62). An abrupt about-face was almost immediately visible, probably for two reasons. First, young people obviously liked the music, and youth rules today's cultural landscape, and secondly, the possibility for an obscene amount of cash to be made by everyone involved emerged. Kalefa Sanneh vigorously backtracked when writing the *New York Times* article "Sweet, Sentimental, and Punk" approximately a year later. In it she states of the current wave of emo that, "From the three-chord laments of Alkaline Trio to the folky rants of Bright Eyes, from the erudite pop-punk of Brand New to the entropic anthems of Thursday, much of the most exciting

rock music is coming from this loose-knit scene" (23). Your seeing the light (glowing from advertising accounts, no doubt) does not improve the quality of the music, Kalefa.

Her use of the term "loose-knit" is important because, besides the fact that most of the bands she mentioned have little in common musically, the increasingly vague definition of emo allowed for publications and record companies to force bands into the genre umbrella and thus capitalize upon a growing trend. *Rolling Stone*, the music magazine with perhaps the least integrity ever encountered on this planet, states of band Jimmy Eat World, "any emo kid will tell you that Jimmy Eat World aren't emo, if only because [their platinum selling] *Bleed American* is their third major-label album. But *Bleed American* sports the tender turbulence that insular emo kids have been enjoying in private for years, presented in a sure-shot package ready for Creed and Blink [182] buyers, as well as anyone old or savvy enough to know New Wave's hooky delights" (102). The publication might as well have taken it a step further and suggested some of the rhyming couplets resembled hip-hop, so as to nail every single market possible. Needless to say, Dreamworks, the company that released *Bleed American*, is a major advertiser in *Rolling Stone*. In the March 2003 issue (one of two to feature Dashboard Confessional's Chris Carrabba on the cover this year alone), *Spin* unabashedly trumpets the connection of a formerly underground genre to a commercial aesthetic when Andy Greenwald preens, "Labeled 'emo' in an attempt to link it to a particularly heartfelt strain of 80s hardcore...the Dashboard phenomenon is a 21st century moment all its own. It brings hardcore's extreme emotional purges into suburban bedrooms and major concert venues" (72). The constant references to sadness and authenticity of emotions in emo (reassurance almost certainly needed by consumers of antidepressants) were no longer laughed at but embraced. They were no longer "happy being sad," they were experiencing "emotional purges." Evelyn McDonnell's *Miami Herald* article titled "The Bard of Boca" notes that Chris Carrabba is now considered, "the bard of tropical depression" (1), but only after stating that, "he's taken Dashboard Confessional to No. 2 on Billboard's top album chart, and landed himself on the cover of *Spin* magazine not once, but twice this year" (1). *Time* magazine was perhaps the crassest offender in linking the supposed emotional content of emo to record sales when it used the sub-header "Emo is about feelings, the sad kind, but it makes teens and record labels happy" (1) underneath its "Emotional Rescue" article. It reveals that, "Major labels are scurrying to land emo talent, just as they once pillaged Seattle for grunge. Emo is heavier music for heavier times, and it's starting to sell too" (59). The smirk on the face of the mechanisms of mass culture slowly liquefied into a slavering grin as the commercial viability increased. The detailing of emo as a musical genre

(and eventually style) for sad, serious kids remains, but now it is taken (almost) seriously.

As with most movements towards the mainstream, the bands themselves varied on whether or not they accepted the attention or even the term. The label emo has traditionally been disparaged by just about every band it has been tagged on to, probably because it is so moronic sounding. In the September 19th, 2002, *Rolling Stone* interview with vocalist Geoff Rickly of Thursday, he states of the term, "It sort of implies that music isn't emotional unless you're using the term to market your angst and emotions. It's a false genre" (46). However, others decided to capitalize upon the term. In the *Rolling Stone* "King of Pain" article, Gavin Edwards says, "Some called Dashboard Confessional emo, a tag Carrabba resists" (39). Carrabba also refers to the term as "kind of stupid" (39). However, he is apparently not resistant to changing directions in step with the mainstream attitude change about emo. In the "Sweet, Sentimental, and Punk" article, Sanneh states that,

In person, as on record, he presents a disarming mix of sincerity and sophistication—he loves his fans like old friends, but he's also comfortable talking about marketing plans.

"There's a difference between being a successful songwriter and being a respected songwriter," he said, "I would like to be both" (23).

His pandering to his audience is obvious too. In the *Newsweek* article, "Confessions of an Emo Punk," Carrabba states, "When you're 16 or 17, that's about the last age when you can get that passionate about a band" (62). He also declares of a past relationship, "I was incredibly in love with this girl, like you can only be when you're 16" (Sanneh 23). Did the Backstreet Boys ever stoop this low? He finally abandoned his resistance to the convenient label stapled to his forehead when, in the *Miami Herald*, he sighs (in an oh-so-deep and profound way), "Some day we won't be emo anymore" (3). Of course not, because the term and genre will be killed off by overexposure, exhumed by record companies late to the party, dressed in a thrift store tuxedo (or slightly different packaging), killed off again, and then probably resurrected twenty years from now when the nostalgia factor kicks in.

But in the meantime, buy it while you can. The success of various "emo" bands cannot be denied. As mentioned above, Dashboard Confessional hit number 2 on the Billboard Top 100, and Jimmy Eat World is platinum certified. Numerous acts have gone gold, the point at which record companies start making money and when musicians start starving due to debt. Which is actually probably a positive thing since being insanely skinny is all part of the style. The September 13th, 2003, issue of *Billboard* noted that, "Following a bidding war, emo-alternative band Brand New has inked a deal with DreamWorks Records. The group's cur-

rent title, "Deja Entendu,"...has sold 104,000 since its June release, according to Nielsen Soundscan" (13). A *PR Newswire* article noted that, "Thursday's new release 'War All The Time' debuted at #7 in Billboard's Top 200" (1) in an article mentioning how the band played at select Apple computer retail stores in New York as part of a promotion. A July 2003 *PR Newswire* article, "Thrice New Release 'The Artist In The Ambulance' Debuts in Billboard's Top 20! Hit Single 'All That's Left' Embraced at Radio and Video," noted that the band Thrice's, "Island Debut, The Artist In The Ambulance...debuted at #16 on the Billboard's Top 200 today...In the key market of Los Angeles, the release was the #3 seller, beating top acts such as Jane's Addiction and 311" (1). Numerous labels with coveted acts were snatched up. A *Billboard* article, "Rockin' Indies," by Chris Morris notes that "25% of Victory [Records] was acquired by MCA Records" (26). Victory was home to the gold-selling band Thursday. Interscope Records acquired part of Vagrant Records, home to Dashboard Confessional, The Get Up Kids, Alkaline Trio, and Saves the Day. Every single one of those bands has sold at least 100,000 copies of a single album.

The independent music scene is often fashion-conscious, which is embraced or spat upon to varying degrees, as evidenced by Orchid's "Aesthetic Dialectic":

This should mean more but it can't.

So dance, dance, dance

To the sounds of America's best dressed fake out.

Since current culture seems to accept the notion that consumption cures anomie, along with the sales boom of actual records, more and more publications began focusing on the fashion sense and products involved with emo. The impetus to sucker as many sad kids as possible into wearing a semi-designer uniform must be too much to resist. The *Honolulu Advertiser* noted that, "There's a new style emerging in Hawaii high schools and colleges...It's underground, independent, and elite, they say. It's called 'emo'—and, like most youth fashion movements, it's an outgrowth of a musical style" (1). They even detailed the style by stating that,

Emo is a look a mother could love. Wholesome, clean-cut and, well, almost nerdy. These folks shop at The Gap, Diesel, and second-hand or thrift stores...Jeans are fitted, flat-front, and often cuffed. [Shoe brands are] Converse All Stars or high-top sneakers, and Adidas Sambas (2).

Seventeen did all insecure thirteen year olds a favor with their "Am I Emo?" fashion spread in its August 2002 issue (see Appendix A). In it, *Seventeen* takes two attractive kids probably just out of the Youth for Fascism day camp and give them an "emo" make over. They detail that one should

wear "Converse or Vans" for shoes, along with a plethora of other brand names conveniently side-barred: Lucky Brand jeans, Jansport backpacks, cK jeans, a Sony Discman, Doc Martens, and so on (176). It is eerily reminiscent of a decade prior, when fashion magnates declared grunge to be the new "it" style and tried incorporating flannel into three hundred dollar skirts. In both cases, the supposed articulated angst of a generation has been eventually packaged and sold as a clothing line. Since the genre was born from a non-commercial aesthetic, this appropriating of the music, history, and style has of course been met with resistance, expressed in Sunny Day Real Estate's "The Shark's Own Private Fuck":

Believing the fear that drives your greed
When you discover the empty place
A hollow world of instant pleasures
The way you were so disturbed
What's your worth? What is it you heard?
Try to smile as they devour our youth.

Resistance, however, is past futile, until the next pop culture trend with marketplace potential comes along.

The burgeoning popularity of "emo" both as a popular music genre and as a fashion-based lifestyle is undeniable given its proliferation in the past few years. Similarly undeniable is the preponderance of evidence suggesting a rise in adolescent depression and asserting an increase in adolescent suicide and anti-depressant use. The coinciding time frames of increased mainstream perception of these trends would not suggest a correlation if it were not for the constant, unabashed advertising of "emo" as music for the emotionally downtrodden or authenticity obsessed. A barrage of articles, features, and reviews all triumphantly declared that the next big thing in rock had arrived, and that it was for kids that were "real" and "deep" and, yes, "depressed." The self-obsession of most of the music and its focus on the darker side of life, like not getting a date to the Sadie Hawkins dance, appeals perfectly to a demographic similarly fixated on the self in negative format. The popularization process of the genre practically encourages mental illness, and at the same time offers a consumption alternative to alleviate their condition, real or imagined. In the end, the disease becomes as stylized as the trend. With billowing clouds of smoke rising from the wreckage of the rising medication of adolescents and teen suicide, it is only natural that some of the less savory members of the media and record industry would swoop down to see if their were any survivors they could sell their own limbs back to.

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