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What is Straight Edge?

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What is

EDGE?

A subcultural mystery

*By Anthony Robert Signoracci
Illustrations by Sarah Hudkins*

Rock stars often live fast and die young, while others live long enough to become notorious for their substance abuse.



Rock stars often live fast and die young, while others live just long enough to become notorious for their substance abuse. But straight edgers like Joel Capolongo defy this common perception. A restaurant owner and animal rights activist, he considers music to be the nourishment that has sustained his straight edge lifestyle for nearly two decades. It opens him up to new ideas while at the same time reflects who he is. The movement began as a rebellion against the hard partying youth hardcore punk lifestyle and transformed into an all out assault on various social norms—a rebellion against a rebellion. Straight edgers like Capolongo condemn the use of drugs and alcohol. Guided by their pledge to refrain from these substances, straight edgers—also known as sXers—seek out their own ideal of a positive lifestyle. Members share several core principles of behavior, but outside of that it is difficult to say who straight edgers really are, as the subculture itself is very open and malleable. This diverse structure, coupled with the soul searching that many members do, facilitates the adoption of new beliefs to the sXe culture. All members wish to lead a positive lifestyle but each member has a different vision of this goal. Some members choose to live a vegan lifestyle, practice abstinence or to protect the environment in order to lead their own positive lifestyle.

This incredible freedom and encouragement allows members like Joel to blossom their great love for the environment or towards other issues. These beliefs are then injected back into the subculture by the member, altering

it on a local scale. There are no leaders that mandate beliefs; there is only the constant give and take between members, their world view and the subculture itself. This makes the question “what is straight edge?” a difficult one to answer because there are many conflicting beliefs held by those who associate themselves with the subculture.

The term straight edge was coined by the band Minor Threat, which formed in 1980 in Washington D.C. and soon developed a cult following. Their short, fast aggressive music matched other punk bands blow for blow, but one thing changed: the meaning. With their aptly titled “Straight Edge,” the band established the core values held by each member of the subculture. Gone were the messages of excess and abuse. In their place, Minor Threat advocated something completely contradictory to what the punk subculture was lauding: “a lifestyle that started within the hardcore punk subculture whose adherents make a commitment to refrain from using alcohol, tobacco, and recreational drugs” (Minor Threat, 1984). “Straight Edge” promoted this lifestyle, creating a radically new spin on the punk subculture with powerful language that expressed the core values held by straight edgers:

***I've got the straight edge
I'm a person just like you
But I've got better things to do
Than sit around and fuck my head
Than sit around and smoke dope
'Cause I know I can cope
Laugh at the thought of eating 'ludes
Laugh at the thought of sniffing glue
Always gonna keep in touch
Never want to use a crutch***

The message behind these lyrics is clear: someone who has adopted the straight edge lifestyle has “better things to do” than taking part in the use of drugs. They realize that there is more to life than partying and drug use. While rejecting these things might make them stand out from the normal teen culture, they are quick to point out that it certainly does not make them weird—they are people just like you, me or any punk rocker, but they have a set of values that differentiates them from many individuals in society. Straight edgers place both drugs and drug users under incredible scrutiny. Drug users quickly transform into drug addicts, stripping them of self control. Once that happens, they begin to use drugs as a form of escapism. Drugs become a crutch that users come to rely on because they are not strong enough to endure life’s chal-

lenges alone. Freedom from the poisonous taint of drugs is the main goal for straight edgers.

Capolongo doesn't try to candy coat the issue. "Straight edge means a complete abstinence from drugs and alcohol," he says. "It is meant to be a means of self-liberation and a rejection of our culture's disgusting excess...if you don't follow them closely, then you're not straight edge" (J. Capolongo, personal communication, March 24, 2009). Any other causes or crusades against the status quo, such as Capolongo's animal rights activism, are secondary and are taken up on a voluntary basis.

Capolongo does not want to be part of the problem. He established a chapter of the Animal Defense League and a chapter of the Coalition to Abolish the Fur Trade, both in Atlanta. He spent 45 days off the coast of Antarctica trying to put an end to controversial Japanese whaling practices, becoming the subject of a documentary in the process. As a straight edge believer, he realized that he couldn't possibly support policies that had destructive effects. With moral compass in hand, he then acted according to his beliefs. According to Joel, the lifestyle "just feels right" (J. Capolongo, personal communication, March 24, 2009).

In a world full of such "disgusting excess," few individuals violated Minor Threat's values more than members of the larger punk subculture. With hedonism as their reigning philosophy, many punk music fans "live for the moment, reject conventional forms of work and excessively use alcohol and drugs," according to Dr. Ross Haen er, a scholarly expert on straight edge (2004, p. 786).

Most of Haen er's (2004) clout comes from his position as assistant professor of Sociology at the University of Mississippi, with four books and a variety of articles written about the straight edge subculture. But perhaps more importantly, Haen er remains an active member of the subculture. He attended over three hundred hardcore punk rock shows and his research draws from both his own experiences and also from his firsthand connection with young straight edgers. And he gave up his own hard partying youth lifestyle in favor of "a clean living movement whose members abstain from alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs in an effort to resist peer pressure and create a better world" (Haen er, 2004, p. 786).

Notice that this definition highlights the same core values that Capolongo and Minor Threat did: the consistency shows that the core principles form an unshakable foundation that everything else is built on. Capolongo was correct: you can't be straight edge if you don't follow



these core beliefs. And, as Haen er's (2004) research suggests, you can't be straight edge without at least irting with the music scene.

Music lies at the very heart and soul of the straight edge movement. It was responsible for founding the movement, connecting sXes, and continues to sustain it to this day. In fact, the nature of the punk rock scene can be credited with opening sXes up and making them question societal norms. "The punk rock scene of the late 1970s encouraged youth to be individuals, become creators of music rather than simply consumers," says Haen er (2004, p. 786).

Music shapes and reflects the mindset of both punk rockers and straight edgers. As the music changes, the members change as well. The 1990s saw another metamorphosis as the music became more and more influenced by metal. The more aggressive and violent tone produced militant straight edgers who showed, according to Minor Threat's website, "less tolerance for non-straight edge people, more outward pride in being straight edge, more outspokenness, and [held] the belief that violence was a necessary method to promote clean living" (Minor Threat, 1984). During the early 1980's, music club owners marked an X on the hands of concert goers to alert bartenders that they were underage. As the straight edge subculture took root, many of the early members began to mark themselves with an X to avoid being served alcohol. The X was once seen as a negative symbol, a roadblock to fun, because it essentially prohibited a minor's ability to drink at a concert or club, but straight edgers transformed

the symbol and gave it a new, positive meaning: they placed it on their backpacks, shirts, and necklaces, tattooed it on their bodies, and drew it on their notebooks, skateboards and cars (Rethinking subcultural resistance, 2004, p. 415). The X became a badge that gave the public a glimpse at their beliefs. Members that use the X are making their involvement with the subculture clear.

They proudly display the symbol not just to other sXes but openly, in potentially hostile environments: their clear mind and personal control have given them enough strength to resist any pressures that can be inflicted on them.

sXes attend no meetings, collect no dues and (for the most part) have no real organizational structure. The members are loosely bound by a collective identity and united in their commitments. This lack of structure is responsible for the variation within various sects of the subculture. It is also responsible for the lack of a definitive set of straight edge principles beyond the founding principles. Members draw from their experiences. "Participation in less structured movements, based upon commitment to an identity, is more individualized than participation in a social movement organization," says Haen er (2004, p. 786). Core principles such as drug avoidance must be upheld as the basis of the group identity, but diffusion takes place between individual members as well as members and the subculture as a whole.

The end result of this tempers straight edge with other activist or social movements and causes. Society is placed under a microscope to identify various soci-

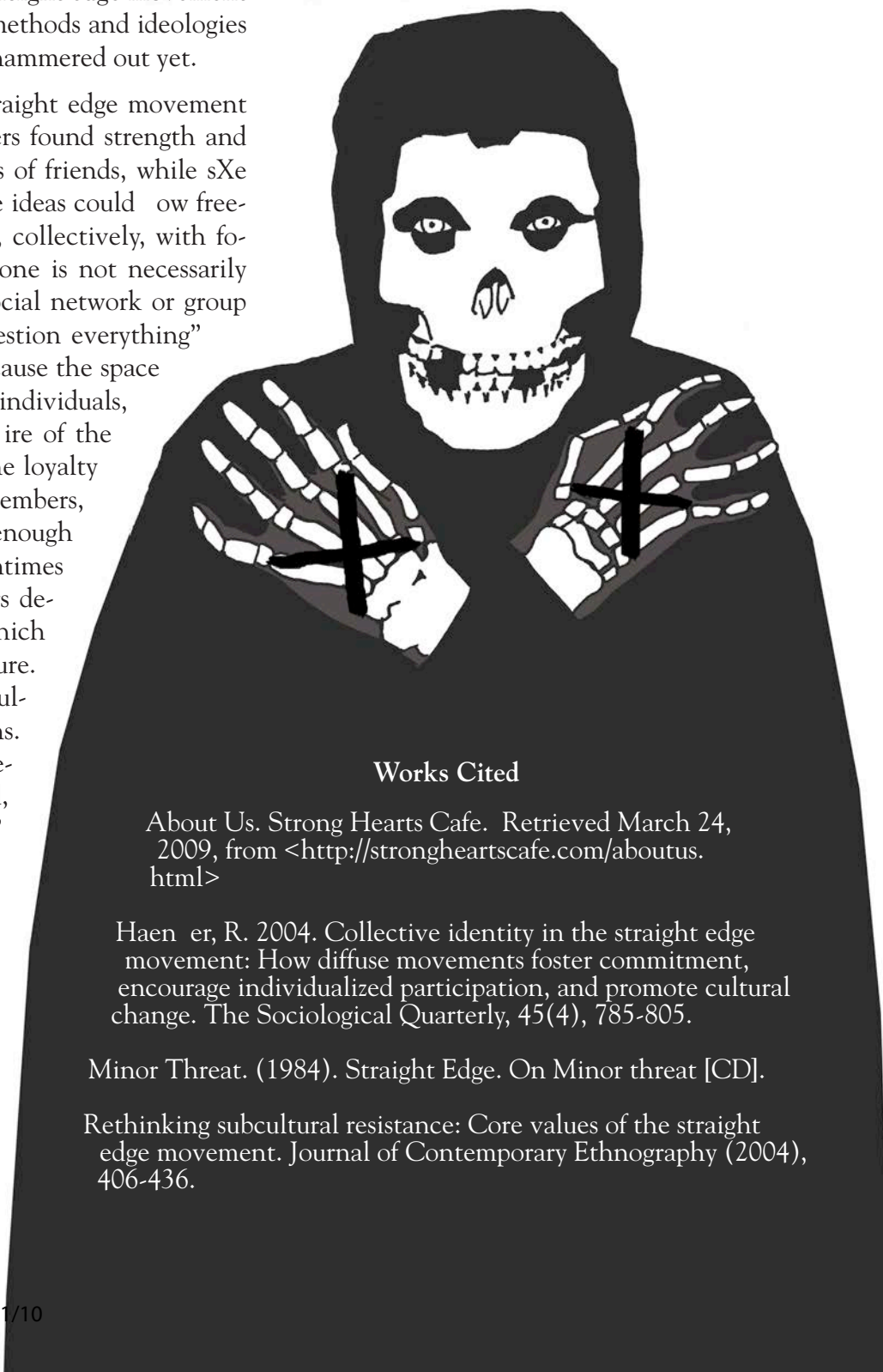


etal issues, such as meat eating and a lack of respect for the environment. Capolongo's greatest concerns with society are reflected in the lyrics of his favorite band Earth Crisis, which uses music to spread awareness about environmental causes and animal rights issues. As they questioned society, straight edgers became not only creators of new types of music, but of a subculture that finds itself at odds with various social norms. They distilled all of their conclusions into music aimed at a wider audience. The activism serves to distinguish and divide certain sects of the straight edge movement while proving that the means, methods and ideologies of the movement are not quite hammered out yet.

Many members view the straight edge movement as a brotherhood. Straight edgers found strength and camaraderie within their groups of friends, while sXe developed a comfort zone where ideas could flow freely and passions would manifest, collectively, with focus on particular causes. The zone is not necessarily a physical one; rather, it is a social network or group of contacts, preserving the "question everything" mentality of the subculture. Because the space is surrounded by like-minded individuals, it is free from the ridicule and ire of the unwashed masses. Spurred by the loyalty and encouragement of fellow members, an sXe will feel comfortable enough to expose their true—and oftentimes more vulnerable—self. Members develop more secondary beliefs which will be added into the subculture. There is no leader of the subculture that can veto their decisions. A new concept of a positive lifestyle can be quickly developed, because definitions of "good" or "bad" differ from member to member and can be tweaked in different ways. The deeply personalized and organic nature of the straight edge subculture makes it hard to define. The movement has questioned societal norms for decades, morphing to respond to whatever ills it identified. Likewise, the future of the subculture is also difficult to predict. Its members may react to the

dangers of consumerism as exemplified by the current credit crunch, our dependence on foreign oil, and its impact on the environment. Whatever the cause may be, straight edgers are certain to expand their secondary belief set to incorporate their personal solutions to society's problems.

Time tested and battle scarred, the straight edge subculture will continue to challenge the norm as it endeavors to create its vision of an ideal society.



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